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For immediate publication

Nordic and Baltic adults have high levels of skills, but how do we prevent decline over time?

On 10th December, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) II survey, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), was published. Results show that the Nordic and Baltic countries are among the countries with the highest skills levels, yet there are still important lessons to be learned. Lifelong learning seems to be part of the answer.

Finland, Japan, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Estonia, the Flemish Region and Denmark (in ranked order) are the OECD countries with the highest skills. Out of the six countries from the Nordic and Baltic regions, only in Latvia results are close to or below OECD averages. The selected examples in this press release highlight some of the trends in the Nordic-Baltic PIAAC countries (OECD rankings can be found in this [report](#)).

Over the past decade, average literacy proficiency has improved in Denmark and Finland and remained stable in Estonia, Norway and Sweden. In all other participating OECD countries average literacy proficiency remained stable or declined. Numeracy skills have improved in Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Norway, remaining stable in Sweden.

The PIAAC results indicate that access to high quality education across the Nordic and Baltic regions creates fruitful learning environments and ensures an adult population with high levels of skills. The Nordic and Baltic countries and their education systems provide inspiration to other PIAAC countries on how to foster rich learning environments that stimulate good skills among adult citizens.

Yet, in order to keep skills levels high and prevent skills from declining over time, a focus on lifelong learning is essential.

Skills levels across age groups

Across the Nordic – Baltic PIAAC countries, adults between 25–34 display some of the highest skills levels.

Finland: Adults between 20–49 years old show higher proficiency than other age groups in country.

Estonia: Adults between 25–34 years old excel, ranking 2nd worldwide in numeracy and 3rd in literacy, following Finland and Japan.

Latvia: Younger respondents (16–34) display higher proficiency levels in all parts of the test.

Norway: Among young adults, the improvement in skills have been more pronounced in Norway compared to other countries.

“For people with insufficient skills, there is a risk of weaker integration into the labour market and reduced ability to fully participate in society. Having insufficient skills can limit the capacity to make informed decisions in everyday life and navigate the complexities of a digitalised societies”

Jessica Baldgrim, an analyst at Statistics Sweden

Denmark: 31-year-olds are on average the best at reading and writing, while the level is lower among both younger and older generations. The 25-34-year-olds are also the age group that has experienced the greatest improvement in both reading and numeracy skills from 2011/12 to 2022/23.

Sweden: Average skills in literacy and numeracy are lowest among adults in the ages of 16-24 and 55-65, while average skills are highest among adults in the ages of 25-54 years.

How to improve skills and prevent decline?

Most of the participating countries that have experienced skill declines see literacy and numeracy proficiency decrease across different age groups. Declines in literacy and numeracy proficiency are particularly evident among the least educated segments of the population. In all Nordic and Baltic countries, adults with higher educational levels have significantly higher skills compared to adults with lower educational levels.

Estonia: Despite improvements, the proportion of adults with low literacy skills have increased (12%), though it remains below the OECD average (18%).

Sweden: About 780 000 individuals (aged 16-65) lack sufficient literacy skills. Adults with lower secondary education and foreign-born adults are more likely to lack sufficient literacy skills.

Within the Nordic-Baltic region, the PIAAC survey is an excellent resource for mutual and cross-country exchange and learning. The survey can be a helpful resource for policymaking and adjustments, as a tool to identify drivers for each skill top and the potential risks for skills decline.

A call for greater alignment between education and the labour market

About one-third of workers in OECD countries are mismatched for their jobs, whether in terms of their qualifications, skills or fields of study. According to the OECD, these findings underscore the urgent need for policymakers to focus on lifelong and life-wide learning, ensuring that education and training systems are more adaptive to evolving demands. In order to ensure the improvement of skills, it is crucial that policymakers focus on the continuous use and development of basic skills.

Finland: It is recognized that proficiency in key information processing skills gives solid basis for lifelong learning, which further impacts not only individuals' well-being and success but also development of society. This implies that investing in skills has substantial benefits both at individual and societal level.

Denmark: Improved skills are connected to increasing levels of education, still the survey shows that every third adult has not received the non-formal or continuing education that they wished for during the last year.

Correlation between skills levels, health and well-being

Across the Nordic and Baltic regions, as well as the rest of the participating countries, adults who score at the highest levels of the proficiency scale are significantly more

What is the PIAAC survey?

PIAAC is the largest mapping of adult skills ever conducted. The PIAAC I survey was conducted in three phases from 2011 to 2018, while PIAAC II took place between 2022 and 2023.

The second part of the survey (carried out in 31 countries) assesses basic skills – in literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem solving – among adults aged 16-65.

A total of over 150,000 people have taken part across all countries.

The PIAAC survey is planned and coordinated by the OECD.

likely to report high levels of life satisfaction and being in very good or excellent health than adults who score low.

Norway: Adults with high skills have better health, are more satisfied with life and have higher levels of trust in other people compared to adults with low skills.

Finland: Proficiency in key information processing skills was strongly and positively associated with self-reported health, social trust and wages.

A multitude of factors affect skills levels

Sweden:

- Relatively high numeracy skills, but there are differences between women and men (on average, men perform better than women in numeracy – 67% of men have good or very good numeracy skills, compared to 57% of women).
- In all three domains of skills, native-born adults score higher on average than foreign-born adults.
- In literacy, foreign-born women perform better than foreign-born men (this difference is not observed between native-born women and men).

Latvia:

- Women display a higher average proficiency than men in literacy; men display a higher average proficiency in numeracy; and no significant difference was observed in adaptive problem solving.
- However, native-born adults of native-born parents display similar proficiency in literacy to foreign-born adults of foreign-born parents.
- Differences in employment outcomes by skill level persist even when comparing adults with similar education attainment (and after accounting for other differences that might be associated with higher skills).
- The skills levels of the employed are better than those of the unemployed or economically inactive population.

Finland: Adults who have completed the matriculation examination excel in international comparison.

Links to national reports

Denmark: [Voksne er blevet bedre til at læse og regne – vive.dk](#)

Estonia: [Rahvusvaheline täiskasvanute oskuste uuring PIAAC | Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium](#)

Finland: [PIAAC II: Toisen Kansainvälisen aikuisten taitotutkimuksen ensituloksia](#)

Latvia: [Survey of Adults Skills 2023: Latvia | OECD](#)

Norway: [Adult skills in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving – SSB](#)

Sweden: [Vuxnas färdigheter står sig fortsatt väl internationellt](#)

For more information about the Nordic-Baltic PIAAC network: [PIAAC – NVL](#)