

**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS
EDUCATION POLICY COMMITTEE**

OECD COUNTRY REVIEWS OF ADULT SKILLS

17-18 November 2015

As part of the programme of work for 2015-16, the OECD has been undertaking country studies linked to the OECDs Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), initially through a report on the United States followed by Finland and England (to be published towards the end of 2015), with further studies in planning. These studies link Survey data to national institutions and data, and draw policy conclusions both on effective adult learning and the role of literacy and numeracy in education and training systems and labour markets. This paper reports on this work, the issues raised, and invites other countries that took part in PIAAC round 1, or are participating in PIAAC round 2, to take part in these country studies.

The Committee is invited to:

- *DISCUSS the role of the country reviews in addressing the issues raised;*
- *CONSIDER participating in a country review of adult skills.*

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OECD COUNTRY REVIEWS OF ADULT SKILLS

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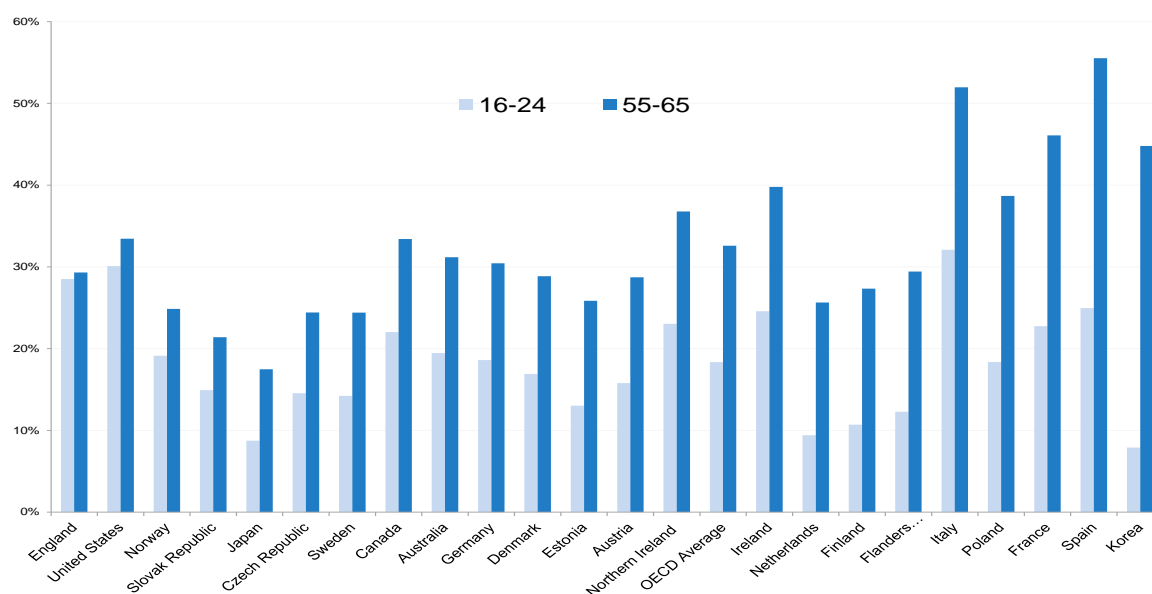
- DISCUSS the role of the country reviews in addressing the issues raised;
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3. In many OECD countries, a surprising and worrying proportion of adults have slipped through the net of universal basic education, and have weak literacy and numeracy. Helping this group means overcoming a sequence of obstacles: motivating the low-skilled, teaching basic skills effectively, encouraging persistence in learning, and sustaining the basic skills acquired through use, especially in good jobs. The literature, summed in an OECD review, suggests that persistence can be supported through clear learning goals, through the link of basic skills to occupational credentials. Formative assessment can make an important contribution, as can initiatives in the context of the family or the workplace. Contextualised learning, in which basic skills are conveyed through occupational skills (for example geometry in carpentry), can also play a very important role (Windisch, 2015). A further thematic report on low-skilled adults, exploiting the results of the Survey, is in preparation.

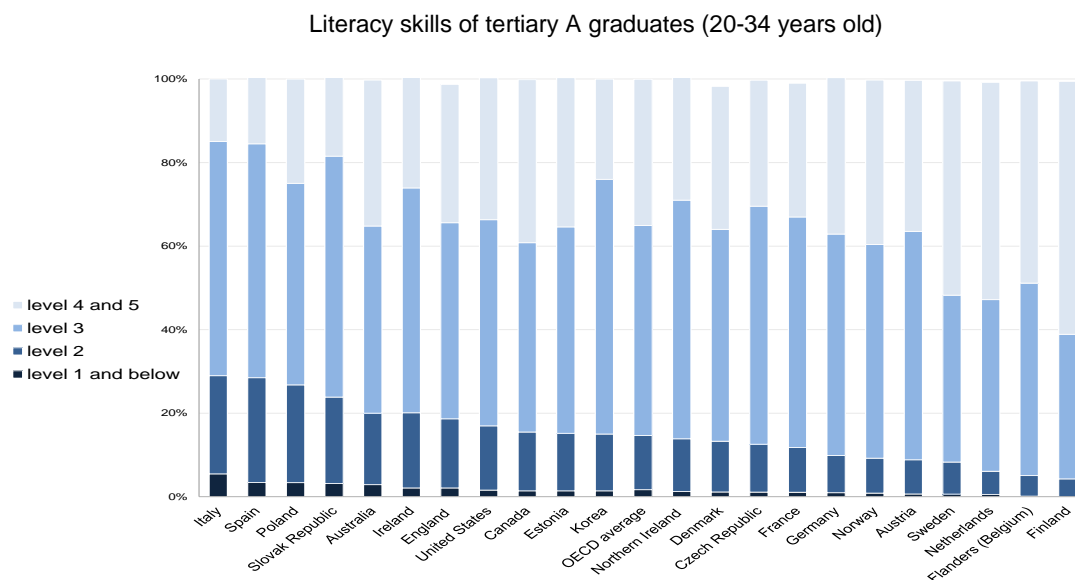
4. But the country reviews have also revealed how the Survey can be used as a tool to assess the performance of education and training systems, as well as the role of skills at work. While the range of the Survey is great, the potential can be illustrated in three charts.

Figure 1. Have we made educational progress?

Percentage of those in different age groups who are low-skilled (below level 2 in either literacy or numeracy or both). Countries ordered according to the size of the difference between the two age groups.



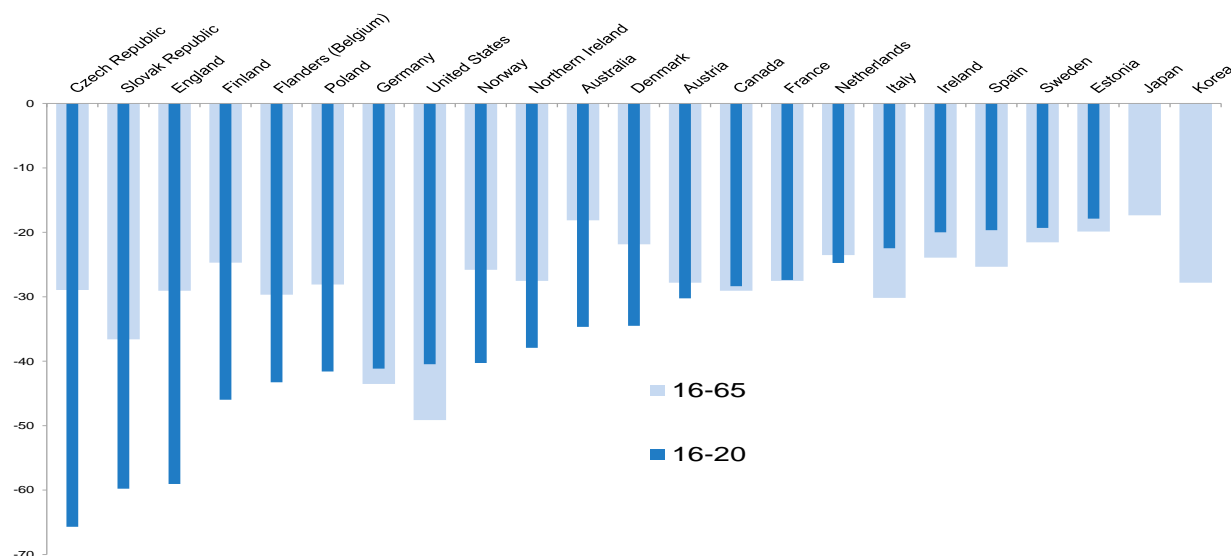
5. In most countries, low basic skills are usually more common among older people (see Figure 1) usually because more and better education has benefitted the young (although ageing brains and skill decay through disuse are also factors). In Finland, given strong basic schooling, the country study has therefore looked at the concentration of low skills among older Finns (where issues of labour market retention are significant), and among a new, small, but growing number of new migrants. But some countries are exceptions to the pattern: in the US, education attainment has not risen very much over recent decades; in England, more education for the young has not apparently translated into better literacy and numeracy. For all countries, *real* educational progress – meaning better knowledge and skills of all kinds, not just more qualifications and time in education – is critical to economic success.

Figure 2. Are university graduates as high-skilled as we think (or hope)?

6. So one issue for the country studies is the way in which some well-qualified people still have weak basic skills. Some university graduates have surprisingly low levels of literacy (see Figure 2); with numeracy showing a somewhat similar pattern. Results from the Survey offer one of the few standardised ways of comparing the skills of university graduates across countries. While university programmes do not often see themselves as having the job of teaching basic skills, a minimum set of these foundation skills is a requirement for critical thinking and study competences, and indeed for the jobs we think of as being university ‘graduate’ jobs, so perhaps universities need to think again about the needs of their student bodies, or about the way they select students, or both.

Figure 3. Is the effect of social background on skills rising or falling?

Score point difference on numeracy between those with at least one parent with upper secondary education and others.



7. In Figure 3, the length of the bars illustrates the association between social background, measured through parental education, and numeracy. In some countries, like the Czech and Slovak Republics, England and Finland, there are big differences between the young and other age groups. This leaves a puzzle: is inequity among young people increasing in countries displaying this kind of pattern, or does such inequity tend to fall as young people get older?

8. Of course, these simple comparisons tell only part of the story. Other skills, like occupational and 'soft' skills like teamwork are also critical. Younger migrants will have been educated in a different country, and comparing them with older people who are native-born tells us little about educational progress. Countries with high levels of university participation might opt to accept weaker basic skills in their students and graduates as a reasonable price to pay for widening access to higher education (although they vary in the extent to which they then also tackle these weaknesses within higher education programmes). And when parents without upper secondary education become a small and diminishing group, the impact of their status on their children may appear to increase, without implying any general increase in skills inequality. The country studies pursue these and many other questions, going behind the first order comparisons to probe the institutional and policy factors which may lie behind the observed results, and seeking out realistic and practical policy solutions in each country context.

9. Practically, the country studies are pursued through mission(s) to the country by an OECD expert team to agree key issues to be examined, linked to analysis of the PIAAC data. The issues to be examined, as indicated, can be quite diverse, and tailored to the interests of the country concerned. They include adult learning, but also the performance of the main parts of the education system in respect of basic skills, training and the use of skills at work. The outcome is a report which explores the issues and offers policy recommendations. The reviews involve a voluntary contribution of EUR 170K.

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