



Report summary
Essential Skills in Canada

2026



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Official title: Essential Skills in Canada – New Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies 2023

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Why this study

This study looks at the essential skills of Canadian adults. These skills include reading (literacy), math (numeracy), and problem-solving skills. They serve as the foundation needed to learn, adapt to change and perform more complex tasks. Therefore, these skills help people get good jobs, manage daily tasks, and improve overall wellbeing. Past research shows that these skills are also linked to better labour market outcomes.

Results from this study help us see who needs support and plan programs to build skills.

What we did

This study looked at 3 essential adult skills across Canada. It also explored the relationship between skills, background characteristics, and labour market outcomes. This study also looked at how Canada compares with other countries.

This study used the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2023. Adults in 31 countries, including Canada, took the same test in reading, math and problem-solving. Test results were grouped into skill levels that show what people can do in everyday life.

- For example, those with low reading levels can only understand short texts and organized lists. Those with low math levels can only do basic calculations and find single pieces of information in tables or charts.

This study used this information to see:

- how skills compare between groups in Canada
- how skills affect outcomes like employment and earnings
- how Canada compares with other countries

What we found

General results

Canada scores above the OECD average in all 3 skills. Among these countries:

- Canada, Finland, Japan, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands do better than other countries.

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- However, Canada performs similarly or better than the other G7 countries, except Japan, in each skill.

Canada also has smaller shares of adults with low scores than the OECD average. However, about one in 5 adults has low skills in reading, math, or problem solving. These adults may struggle with basic tasks.

Since 2012, reading skills have stayed about the same. Math skills have improved slightly.

Results by province

All provinces are at or above the OECD average in reading. Most provinces are at or above the OECD average in math and problem solving.

Effect of background and education

There are also differences between groups:

- men score higher in math. There is no difference in the other skills
- recent immigrants have lower reading and math scores than those born in Canada. Skills improve the longer they live here
- people with more education usually have higher skill levels
- average skill scores are highest among those aged 25-34 and tend to decrease as people get older. However, there is less of a decline in skills by age among those with a postsecondary education

Skills and outcomes

People with stronger skills tend to do better in the labour market. In fact, those with higher skill levels are more likely to participate in the labour market, more likely to be employed, and less likely to be unemployed. They also have higher wages.

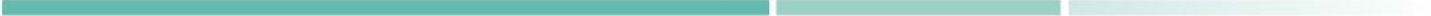
What it means

Canada does well in comparison to other countries. Despite this, many adults still have low reading, math, and problem-solving skills. Low skills can affect their jobs, earnings, and ability to adapt to change.

The results show why it is important to invest in adult learning and training. This matters most for recent immigrants, older adults, and people with less education. By building stronger skills, adults are more able to succeed-in and support Canada's economy. These results can guide policy and help target support for those who need it most.

Contact us

For access to the full report, please contact us using the email address below.



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