

OECD Skills Studies

Navigating Life with Low Literacy and Numeracy

New Results from the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills



Foreword

For much of the twentieth century, the defining challenge for advanced economies was expanding access to education. Today, the challenge is different - and in many ways more difficult. It is what happens to the millions of adults who are left behind as the skill requirements of work, technology and daily life continue to rise.

The latest evidence from the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills delivers a stark message: nearly one in three adults across OECD economies lacks the foundational literacy or numeracy skills needed to adequately participate in modern economies and societies. Tasks that many take for granted - finding a specific piece of information in a written document, following straightforward instructions, completing a form, or carrying out simple calculations with everyday numbers and measurements - can become unsurmountable challenges for them.

These foundational skills are not specialised competencies reserved for high-skilled occupations. They are the skills needed to understand a payslip, complete an online application, follow workplace procedures, compare prices, manage household finances, or access public services. In a world that increasingly assumes a baseline level of literacy and numeracy, adults lacking these skills are not simply at a disadvantage – they are at risk of being excluded from opportunities that others routinely access.

More troubling still, the problem is not receding. Despite decades of investment in adult education and training, the share of adults with low foundational skills has grown over the past decade. At precisely the moment when economies are becoming more knowledge-intensive and technology-driven, a substantial segment of the adult population is falling further behind.

This is not a marginal issue affecting a small group on the fringes of society. It is a structural challenge that sits at the heart of economic performance, social cohesion and democratic resilience. In an era defined by digital transformation, artificial intelligence and rapid labour market change, foundational skills have become the essential infrastructure of opportunity. When large numbers of adults lack them, the consequences extend far beyond individual hardship. Productivity suffers, labour shortages become harder to address, social inequalities deepen, and democratic participation weakens.

This report examines the scale, nature and consequences of low foundational skills across OECD countries. Drawing on the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills, it moves beyond simple counts of who falls below proficiency thresholds to explore the depth and composition of skill deficits. It asks not only how many adults struggle, but how far behind they are, whether their challenges lie primarily in literacy or numeracy, and how these patterns vary across countries and population groups. By identifying distinct profiles among low-skilled adults, the report seeks to provide policymakers with a more precise map of the challenge - and a clearer guide to effective action.

The evidence leaves little doubt about the stakes. Adults with low foundational skills face substantial disadvantages in employment, earnings, health and civic engagement. These are not temporary setbacks that disappear with age; they persist throughout the life course, accumulating into significant economic and social costs. The analysis suggests that helping adults reach at least medium levels of proficiency could generate meaningful gains across all these dimensions.

Yet here lies the central paradox of adult learning policy. The adults who stand to gain the most from improving their skills are often the least likely to participate in education and training. Barriers of confidence, awareness, time, language and access mean that many remain beyond the reach of conventional provision. Left unaddressed, this dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which skills gaps translate into fewer opportunities to acquire new skills, widening inequalities over time.

The implication is clear: a one-size-fits-all approach will not succeed. Adults with low foundational skills are not a homogeneous population, and policy responses must reflect that reality. Effective strategies need to be differentiated according to the depth of skills deficits, the domains in which they occur, and the role that migration and language background may play. They must also be proactive, bringing learning opportunities into workplaces, communities and everyday settings rather than relying on individuals to seek them out. Above all, they must be sustained. For adults facing significant foundational challenges, lasting progress rarely comes from short courses or isolated interventions. Building foundational skills is not a quick fix; it is a long-term investment in people, productivity and social inclusion.



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Executive Summary

One in three adults has weak foundational skills

Nearly one in three adults across OECD economies has low foundational skills in literacy or numeracy, according to the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills. In 11 of the 27 countries that participated in both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 of the survey, the share of adults with low skills has increased significantly over the past decade. Only two countries recorded a reduction: Denmark and Finland.

Low foundational skills constrain employment opportunities, earnings, health, and participation in civic life. Adults with low foundational skills are around one-third less likely to be active in the labour market than those with medium proficiency. Among those in work, hourly earnings are around five dollars lower on average, with gaps exceeding ten dollars in Singapore and Switzerland. They report worse health, lower life satisfaction, and weaker trust in others and in institutions.

Adults with low foundational skills are not a homogeneous group

Two in three adults with low foundational skills perform poorly in both literacy and numeracy. However, a significant minority face deficits concentrated in one domain, highlighting the need for differentiated policy responses. In Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Singapore, more than one in four adults with low skills are classified as such based on their literacy proficiency alone. In these contexts, low literacy may not reflect generalised cognitive disadvantage but rather be shaped by linguistic factors. In Canada, England (UK), Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States, the pattern reverses: numeracy deficits are more common than literacy deficits.

Most adults with low foundational skills can understand basic sentences, but what they lack is automaticity. Reading remains effortful rather than fluent, affecting confidence and engagement with written material in daily life and work. Four types of readers – fluent, effortful, surface and struggling – can be distinguished. These profiles are associated with labour market participation: among native-born adults, inactivity is ten percentage points higher among struggling readers than among fluent readers. Migrants are heavily over-represented amongst struggling readers: they account for 38% of struggling readers on average across OECD countries, rising to over 80% in Norway and Sweden.

Adult learning systems fail the people who need them most

The defining challenge of adult learning systems is the Matthew effect. Adults with the lowest skills are the least likely to engage in learning. They are held back by a combination of limited awareness of their own skill gaps, poor prior experiences of formal education, financial pressure, and employment in jobs that offer neither the time nor the encouragement to develop skills. Rates of participation in adult learning among adults with low skills are about half those of the rest of the population.

Passive adult learning provision - making courses available and advertising them - consistently fails this group. Active outreach through trusted intermediaries is the approach that works. Employers, trade unions, community organisations, healthcare providers, and social services are the channels through which hard-to-reach adults can be identified and engaged. Integrating foundational skills support into workplace settings - delivered free, interwoven with job-specific tasks, and at least partially protected from the pressures of foregone income - is among the most promising routes to scale.

Programme design also matters. Contextualised, sufficiently intensive provision consistently outperforms short, abstract instruction for adults with low skills. Sustained engagement over time is the condition for any meaningful progress. Flexible modular pathways and recognition of prior learning can make that investment compatible with the demands of family and working life.

The profile of the low-skilled population matters for policy

The cross-country evidence points to four distinct country profiles, differentiated by the prevalence, depth and nature of low foundational skills, each with its own policy logic. In *near-threshold countries* (Canada, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden) the population of adults with low foundational skills is clustered just below medium proficiency and relatively homogeneous. The distance to travel is short, and well-targeted short-course upskilling is a viable primary lever. In *deep deficit* countries, the population is, on average, further from medium proficiency and more internally diverse (Chile, Denmark, Finland, the Flemish Region (Belgium), France, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Portugal). Chile faces both high prevalence and deep deficits; Finland, paradoxically, belongs to the same group, not because the problem is widespread, but because the small population with low skills faces severe disadvantage. In both cases, provision must be intensive, long-duration, and inseparable from a broader educational equity agenda.

Literacy gap countries - Austria, Latvia, Norway, Singapore and Switzerland - face what is in large part a language integration challenge. Rapid and sustained language acquisition support for newly arrived migrants and language minorities is the highest-return investment available. *Numeracy gap* countries, including England, New Zealand and the United States, face a different kind of challenge, one that appears to originate upstream in the quality and equity of compulsory mathematics education. Remedial adult provision can help at the margins, but no adult learning system can fully compensate for what initial schooling failed to deliver.

Independent of country profile, prevention is key. High-quality early childhood education and care is the highest long-run return investment available to most governments, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. Breaking the intergenerational transmission of low skills requires both reaching adults today and ensuring the next generation enters schooling with the preparation to succeed.

What the evidence requires from policymakers

Three conclusions follow from this evidence. First, the challenge of low foundational skills is large, growing, and consequential. It is a structural feature across modern economies. Second, the challenge differs fundamentally across countries and populations. Similar prevalence rates can mask entirely different problems, and generic policy responses are ill-equipped to address any of them well. Third, the principal failure of existing adult learning systems is the inability to reach those who would benefit most. Addressing this failure requires active outreach, provision designed around populations that will not reach the system on their own, and intensity matched to the scale of the deficit.