

---

## Press release: Building skills for all in Australia

### Strengthening focus on basic skills would improve the prosperity and well-being of Australians, says OECD

Australia could achieve better economic and social outcomes by improving the basic skills of its population, according to a new OECD report.

Australia's overall performance in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) ranges from average to very good. However, three million adults, representing one-fifth of the working age population, have low literacy and/or numeracy skills.

According to [Building Skills for All in Australia: Policy Insights from the Survey of Adult Skills](#), issues that need to be addressed include:

- Improving numeracy skills
- Ensuring that post-secondary vocational education and training (VET) leads to strong basic skills
- Helping young people, particularly women, not in education, employment or training (NEET) to re-enter learning or work

The review also examines the strengths of the Australian skills system, highlighting the strong basic skills of the migrant population, widespread proficiency in use of ICT and the positive role of workplaces in skills development.

The OECD's Director for Education and Skills, Andreas Schleicher, said: "Three million Australians lack the literacy and numeracy necessary to thrive in modern life. The penalty for such poor basic skills is significant both for individuals and for societies. This review highlights policy approaches which can help alleviate the problem in Australia."

### Key messages

#### 1. Three million adults in Australia are low skilled, says OECD:

- Australia has a similar share of low-skilled adults as New Zealand; a smaller proportion than the United States, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland) and most European Mediterranean countries; and a larger share than Nordic countries, Japan, and the Netherlands.
- On a PIAAC scale that goes from level 1 to level 5, low skilled are defined as adults with literacy and/or numeracy skills below level 2.

#### 2. Australia should ensure that post-secondary vocational education and training (VET) leads to strong basic skills:

- Some 15% of all post-secondary VET graduates lack basic numeracy or literacy skills. While the percentage of post-secondary VET graduates with low skills in Australia is similar to the average of participating countries, it is above the share of low-skilled adults with equivalent qualifications in some other countries, such as Austria, Denmark, Germany and Sweden.
- While the majority of low-skilled VET graduates work, their situation in the labour market is more precarious.
- Poor performance of the post-secondary vocational education and training (VET) system very likely reflects a selection effect since those with lower basic skills are more likely to enter VET pathways.

### 3. Australia should improve numeracy skills:

- Australians have stronger literacy skills, on average, than adults in many other OECD countries participating in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC). At the same time, their performance in numeracy is only average and there is evidence suggesting that numeracy skills have been declining in recent years.
- Mathematics performances among students in secondary education could usefully be improved.
- Around 93% of Australian adults with low literacy and/or numeracy skills perform poorly in numeracy. However, around 42% of adults with low skills can reach at least Level 2 in literacy. In contrast, only 7% of adults have low literacy skills but reach at least Level 2 in numeracy.

For comments or further information, journalists should contact Andreas Schleicher ([Andreas.Schleicher@oecd.org](mailto:Andreas.Schleicher@oecd.org)) who is currently in Australia, or the OECD's VET and Adult Learning Project Lead Anthony Mann ([Anthony.Mann@oecd.org](mailto:Anthony.Mann@oecd.org)).

For more information on the OECD's VET and Adult Learning team, see: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/adult-learning-and-skills.htm>