

**Why are immigrants
less proficient in literacy
than native-born adults?**



Adult Skills
in Focus #6

- Immigrants have weaker literacy skills than native-born adults on average and the gap is the equivalent of 3.5 years of schooling.
- On average, about two-thirds of the difference in literacy proficiency between foreign-born and native-born adults is explained by how well immigrants have mastered the host country's language and where they acquired their highest qualification.
- Long-settled immigrants and those who arrived in their host country as young children have better literacy proficiency than other groups of immigrants.

Why is it that, although immigrants tend to be over-represented among highly educated adults in OECD countries, their labour market outcomes tend to lag behind their native-born peers with similar levels of education? Several explanations have been suggested over the years. First, the quality of the education immigrants received in their country of origin may differ from that offered in OECD

countries, meaning that their educational qualifications may not represent the same set of skills as in their host countries. Second, immigrants may not have fully mastered the language spoken in their host country. Third, some skills may not transfer easily between countries of origin and destination. In addition, immigrants may face discrimination in the labour market of their host country.

Immigrants generally have lower literacy skills in the host-country language than native-born adults

The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) provides evidence of differences in literacy proficiency between immigrants and native-born adults that may partly explain disparities in labour market outcomes. The survey finds that, on average, foreign-born adults are less proficient in literacy than native-born adults. The gap between the two groups is 24 score points, the equivalent of about 3.5 years of schooling. However, the magnitude of this gap varies widely across countries. For example, foreign-born adults in the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden – are far less proficient in literacy than native-born adults, while the difference tends to be smaller in Australia, Greece, Ireland,

New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

This variation across countries could be related to several factors: differences in educational attainment among immigrants and native-born adults, the age at which immigrants arrived in the host country, the reasons why the immigrants moved to this country, whether immigrants' mother tongue is closely related to the language spoken in the host country, and the host country's immigration and integration policies. For example, in Sweden, the large gap in proficiency between the two groups is likely to reflect Sweden's tradition of welcoming



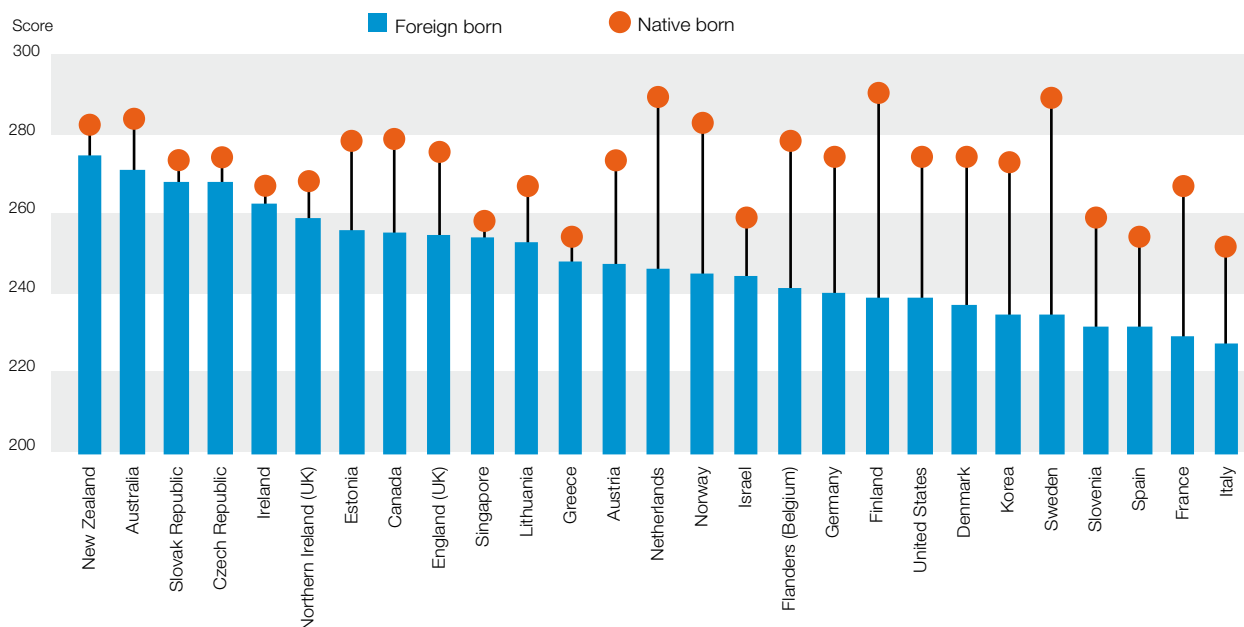
large numbers of refugees who have limited proficiency in Swedish and whose mother tongue differs considerably from Swedish. Australia, on the other hand, has highly selective criteria for immigration, including a high level of proficiency in English.

In almost all countries (except Austria, Estonia and Greece), immigrants who have lived in the host country for more than

five years are more proficient in literacy than those who have recently arrived.

The difference between the two groups is particularly marked in the Nordic countries, where many immigrants need time to acquire language skills, and where comprehensive integration policies will have helped immigrants who have stayed in the country for longer to overcome any initial difficulties.

Figure 1 / **Performance in literacy, by place of birth**
Literacy score points, 16-65 year-olds



Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the mean literacy score of foreign-born adults.

Note: Fifty score points in literacy correspond to about one level of proficiency.

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015).

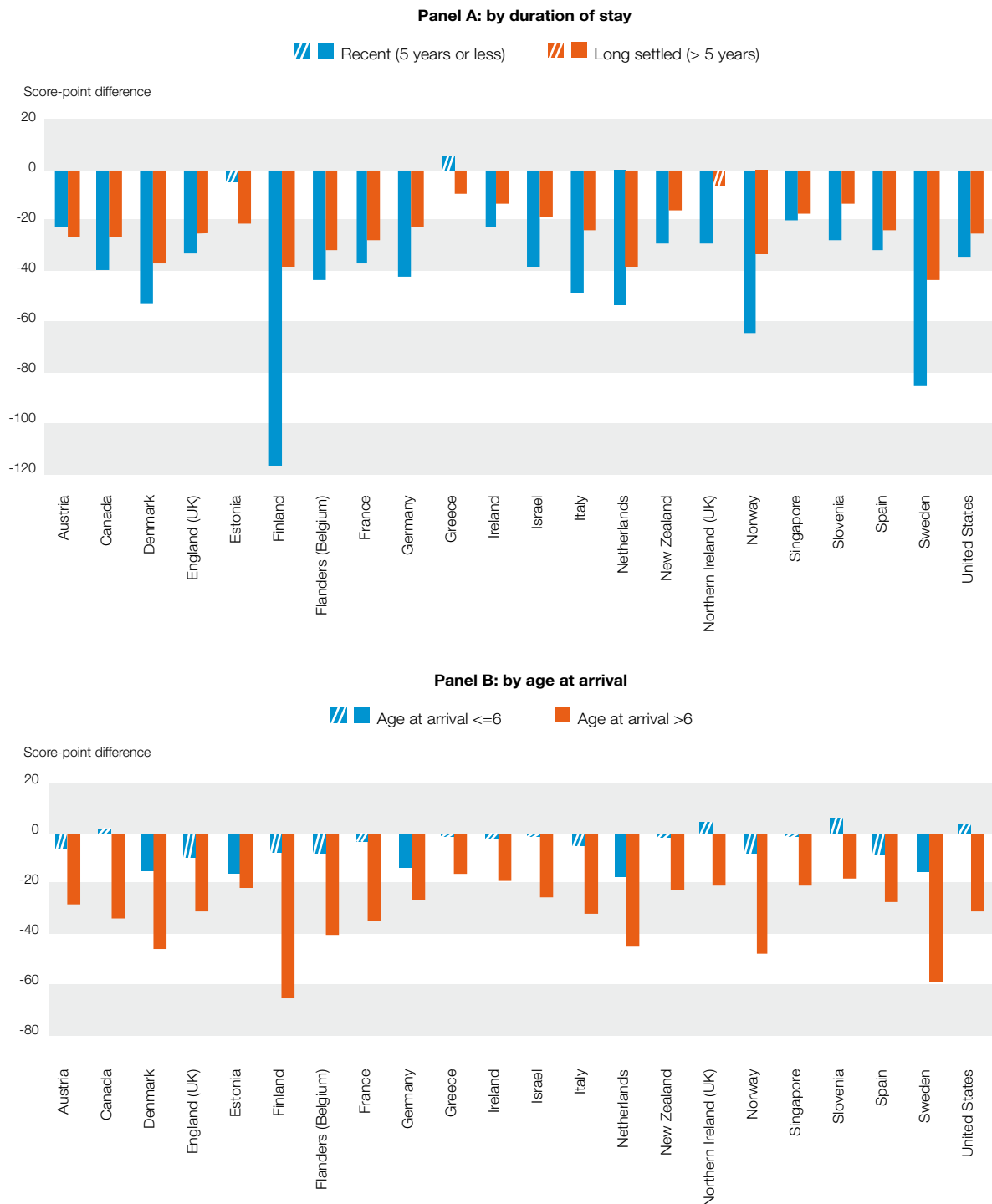
Mother tongue and age at arrival matter

Two out of three immigrant respondents to the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) took the test in a different language from their native tongue. For these immigrants, the results of the assessment inevitably reflect a combination of both their familiarity with and fluency in the test language, and their cognitive skills, such as interpreting and

understanding texts. On average, around one-third of the performance gap in literacy between immigrant and native-born adults can be explained by whether immigrants speak the host-country language at home or learned it as a child. On average, when the country in which the highest qualification was acquired is also accounted for, only

ADULT SKILLS IN FOCUS

Figure 2 / **Differences in literacy proficiency between immigrant and native-born adults**
Score-point difference, 16-65 year-olds





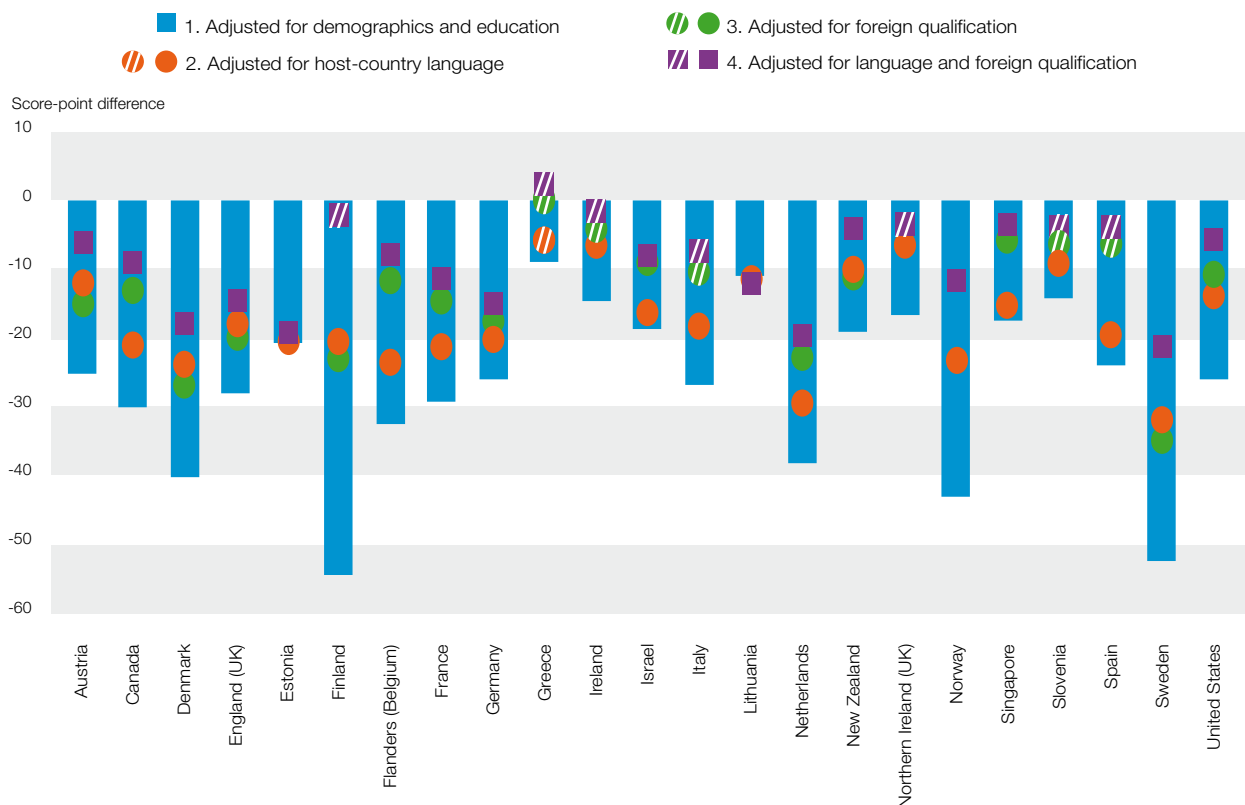
one third of the initial difference between immigrants and natives remains. In Finland, familiarity with the host-country language accounts for around two-thirds of this gap, while in Norway, it accounts for about half. By contrast, in Spain, a country that receives many immigrants who already speak Spanish, language differences explain only around 19% of the performance gap.

In Austria, Canada, Finland, Flanders (Belgium), France, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lithuania,

New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, immigrants who arrived in their host communities as young children, that is by the age of six, score similarly to native-born adults in literacy. Only in Denmark, Estonia, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden do these immigrants lag behind native-born adults in literacy proficiency, but less so than their immigrant peers who arrived in the host country at an older age.

Figure 3 / Differences in literacy proficiency between immigrants and native-born adults after accounting for various factors

Score-point difference, 16-65 year-olds



Countries and economies are listed in alphabetical order.

Note: The results in this figure are coefficients obtained from separate regressions with controls for level of education, age, gender and parental background. Parental educational background is defined as the highest educational level of either the mother or the father. Specification 1 only accounts for these basic characteristics, while specification 2 also controls for whether the migrant speaks the host-country language at home or has learned the host-country language as a child and still understands it. Specification 3, in addition to the basic characteristics, also accounts for the location where his/her qualification was acquired. Finally, Specification 4 controls for basic characteristics, as well as language (Specification 2) and the location where the highest qualification was acquired (Specification 3). The striped dots and squares indicate coefficients which are not statistically significant (at 10% level).

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015).

The bottom line



Results from the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) confirm that mastery of the host country's language is essential if immigrants are to integrate successfully into their new communities and into the host country's labour market. Given these findings, host countries could design and implement policies to provide language training to immigrants as soon as feasible after they arrive. This is particularly important for immigrant children, who can then attend school with their native-born peers.

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> FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Bonfanti S. and T. Xenogiani (2014), "Migrants' skills: Use, mismatch and labour market outcomes – A first exploration of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)" in *Matching Economic Migration with Labour Market Needs*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264216501-en>.

> VISIT:

www.oecd.org/skills/piaac

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The Survey of Adult Skills is a product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

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