

THE EssentialSKILLS Bulletin

About the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

In October 2013, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) will release findings from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), a new international study of adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills. The survey was conducted in 2011 and 2012 in 26 countries, including Canada. Over 25,000 Canadians participated in the PIAAC survey.

Administered through computers, PIAAC surveyed adults between the ages of 16 and 65 and built on the work of two previous international surveys: the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), administered between 1994 and 1996, and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) Survey, conducted in 2003 and 2006 to 2008. PIAAC is intended to measure the skills and competencies needed by adults in the 21st century, including literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

PIAAC will enhance the understanding of the effectiveness of education and training

systems in developing fundamental skills and key generic work skills. For younger populations, PIAAC will complement the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by providing measures of skills following completion of initial education. PIAAC will also examine and analyze what conditions and factors impact skills growth, maintenance or loss over a working-age life cycle, as well as point to which adult education and training systems are most effective in supporting adult populations in their skills development.

The survey is ambitious in its objectives. It not only measures skill levels, but also assesses how skills are associated with the success of individuals and countries. The survey also examines how well education and training systems succeed in generating these competencies, and how public policy might improve their effectiveness. PIAAC data will be used by governments to inform policy decisions, help allocate resources effectively and inform decisions on the composition and content of remedial skills development courses and adult education.

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What will PIAAC Do?

- Provide a sound basis for international benchmarking and analysis of adult competencies.
- Assess adults' literacy and numeracy skills and ability to solve problems in a technology-rich environment in a coherent and consistent way across 26 countries.
- Focus on the key cognitive and workplace skills that are required for successful participation in the economy and in society.
- Provide Ontario with a broader understanding of where we, as a province, stand in terms of skills and human capital development.

Why is PIAAC Important?

Although there is a significant amount of data available on Canadians' levels of educational attainment, there is not always a direct correlation between levels of educational attainment and actual skill levels. This can be attributed to the fact that while diplomas, certificates and degrees may vary based on institution, they are also based on static credentials earned at a particular point in time; while cognitive skills and capacities that an individual possesses are dynamic and evolve over time.

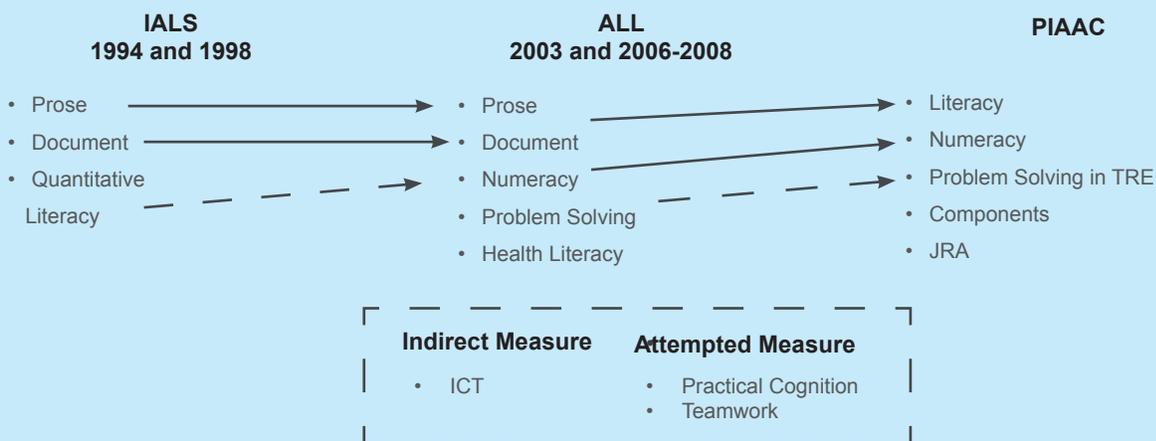
What is true for an individual is also true for whole populations: the skills that provide opportunities and enhance an individuals' life are the same types of skills that help create a strong society. In order to paint a comprehensive picture of how skills are distributed and used amongst different jurisdictions and populations, it is necessary to have a tool that summarizes this type of data in a coherent, consistent and reliable manner.

Who Administered PIAAC in Canada?

PIAAC in Canada is a collaborative undertaking of the following partners:

- Statistics Canada [National Project Manager]
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) [Project Lead in Canada]
- The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) representing all provinces and territories [Project Lead in Canada]
- Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada
- Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada
- Public Health Agency of Canada

IALS, ALL and PIAAC: An Evolution



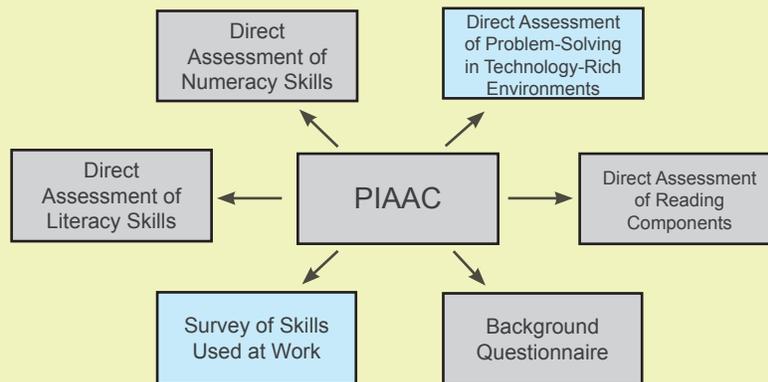
Adapted from: OECD, Statistics Canada. 2011, *Literacy for Life: Further Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*.

What are the New Components of PIAAC?

Central to PIAAC are the new components of Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments (PS-TRE) and the *Survey of Skills Used at Work*. These new elements capture aggregate data specifically on how skills are used in the information age.



Components of PIAAC



Adapted from: OECD. 2010. *The OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)*.

What is Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments (PS-TRE)?

Simply put, PS-TRE is the ability to use technology to solve problems and accomplish complex tasks. It is not a measurement of computer or digital literacy, but rather the cognitive skills that are used and are necessary to function successfully at work or home in the 21st century (OECD, 2010). Unlike some traditional problem solving assessments, the emphasis of PIAAC is on information access, evaluation, retrieval and processing. Of particular interest in the PS-TRE component are the varying levels of difficulty of tasks that are demanding from both a technological and cognitive point of view (OECD, 2010). These tasks are used in PIAAC to provide further insight into how adults apply their cognitive skills using digital technology.

What does the Survey of Skills Used at Work Assess?

In addition to PS-TRE, PIAAC incorporates the *Survey of Skills Used at Work*, which assesses the relationships between the skills an individual possesses and their level of utilization at work. Based on a Job Requirements Approach (JRA), the *Survey of Skills Used at Work* will provide data on the types and levels of a number of generic skills used in the workplace (OECD, 2010). This component of the survey is based on self-assessments and asked participants questions on their use of reading, numeracy, information technology, communication and team-working skills on the job. It also asked respondents about what the job requirements were in terms of the intensity and frequency of skills used, and whether they have a skills surplus or deficiency in relation to the activities they perform at work (Bussiere, 2011).

What does PIAAC mean for Ontario?

Results from PIAAC will provide Ontario with a broader understanding of where the province stands in terms of skills and human capital development. As skills increasingly become the basis of the information age, data from instruments like PIAAC have the ability to aid in the development of informed policy and programming decisions in the employment and training field.



What does PIAAC mean for Literacy and Basic Skills Programs?

Behind the PIAAC survey is a theoretical framework of literacy, numeracy and problem solving in the 21st century. This framework offers practitioners a broader understanding of what literacy and numeracy encompass and the factors that make higher level skills and tasks difficult. The PIAAC framework will allow instructors to help students develop stronger strategies for accessing and identifying information, integrating and interpreting (relating parts of text to each other), as well as evaluating and reflecting (draw on knowledge, ideas and values external to the text). In the coming months, Essential Skills Ontario will explore, discuss and investigate the interconnections between literacy and essential skills (LES), PS-TRE, job-specific skills, quality programming and their connection to geographical location (place), labour market outcomes and economic development.

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