

Literacy and Numeracy Skills of Second-Generation Young Adults: A Comparative Study of Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States

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This paper employs data from the 2012 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) to examine the characteristics and competencies of young adults between ages 16 to 34 by immigrant generation. The analysis examines results in five countries that have received substantial numbers of immigrants over at least the last 50 years: Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. First- and second-generation young adults (i.e., those born abroad and those born in the host country to foreign-born parents, respectively) account for substantial shares of all young adults: ranging from roughly 30 percent in the United States and in the United Kingdom to about 40 percent in Canada. **We compare the first- and second generations' literacy and numeracy skills to those of the native-born young adults from native families**, defined here as the third/plus generation. We find that:

- Across all five study countries first-generation young adults substantially lagged behind the literacy and numeracy skills of the second and third/plus generations. Young immigrant adults in Canada had the highest literacy and numeracy scores; those in France and the United States had the lowest scores.
- A substantial share of young immigrants—more than a third in Germany, the U.S., and France—lack basic literacy skills, which means that they have only basic vocabulary knowledge and can only work with simple, short texts of written information. More than two in five immigrants in France, the U.K., and the U.S. are low proficient in numeracy and are only able to solve simple mathematical operations involving counting, sorting, and basic arithmetic.
- Literacy and numeracy scores are substantially higher among second-generation young adults across all five countries, with scores essentially equaling those of the third/plus generation for the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. While the second generation performs much better than the first, the second generation generally score only at or below “proficient.”
- Germany is the only country where second generation scores do not approximate the third; although there is notable intergenerational progress between the first and second generations there, as well as in the other four study countries.
- Numeracy scores in Germany are as high as literacy scores: All other countries' average numeracy scores are lower than their literacy scores. Numeracy is held to be a particularly good predictor of individual mobility.
- Comparatively strong average literacy and numeracy scores are broadly achieved across generations by Canada and by the third-generation young adults in Germany.

Viewed, somewhat speculatively, through a policy lens, one could hypothesize from these results that the five study countries have made strides along one or more of the three policy dimensions: successful immigrant admission, integration of immigrants and their children, and skills development. It appears that integration mechanisms are working rather smoothly in Canada, the United States, and France, but that skills development frameworks lag in the latter two countries. The U.K. may face both integration and skills development challenges. At the same time, skills development is more advanced in Canada and Germany. But it could be argued that integration lags in Germany. These hypotheses have to be tested by examining the contributions of gender, race and ethnicity, parental education, and host country's language skills to young adults' literacy and numeracy outcomes across generations.

In terms of future research questions, our findings point to the need to examine policies and programs across the five study countries as well as other countries to understand how governments and service providers can successfully improve skills and workforce readiness of immigrant-origin young adults to ensure their full integration and participation in the economy and society.