



Report: Release of new research report: *Skills in New Zealand: Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (PIAAC)*

To:	Hon Penny Simmonds, Minister for Tertiary Education and Skills		
Cc:	Hon Erica Stanford, Minister of Education Hon David Seymour, Associate Minister of Education		
Date:	28/11/2024	Deadline:	6/12/2024
Security Level:	Confidential	Priority:	High
From:	Katrina Sutich, General Manager Tertiary Policy	Phone:	9(2)(a)
Drafter:	Paul Satherley	METIS No:	1338898

This report contains information that is under embargo from the OECD until 11 December. This report, and the attached report on New Zealand's results, must not be distributed beyond the intended recipients.

Why are we sending this to you?

- You are receiving this because New Zealand participated in the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills. The OECD will release its international report on 10 December 2024 at 11 am Paris time (11 pm NZ time). The OECD will then lift the embargo on the findings, and the Ministry of Education will release our New Zealand national report on 11 December 2024.
- The Survey shows that the measured literacy and numeracy skills of 16-65-year-old New Zealanders decreased between the 2014 Survey and 2023. However, our results must be treated cautiously because of difficulties with data collection in the post-COVID environment, and the OECD's 'low caution' designation on our data. Many other participating countries experienced similar issues.
- The Ministry of Education's view is that the Survey data still has high value for understanding factors currently associated with high or low skills, but international comparisons and comparisons over time may be less robust.

What action do we need, by when?

- We are asking you to note the Survey findings, the need for a cautious response and the Ministry's view about their value.
- We are also asking for your agreement to the Ministry's proposed approach to communications.

Key facts, issues and questions

- New Zealand's measured average literacy score decreased by 21 points from 281 in 2014 to 260 in 2023. New Zealand's average numeracy score decreased by 15 points from 271 in 2014 to 256 in 2023.
- The OECD is confident that these unexpected decreases were not due to differences in methods since the previous survey. Nor were they due to changes in the composition of the New Zealand 16-65-year-old population. The Ministry of Education's view is that they were substantially influenced by difficulties with surveying in the post-COVID environment of 2022-2023. These include difficulty in recruiting and retaining interviewers and respondents' greater reluctance to participate and engage with the assessment.
- However, the Ministry believes that the Survey data still has high value for understanding factors currently associated with high or low skills. Comparisons over time and with other countries may be less robust. A copy of the final draft of the New Zealand report is attached for your information.
- The Ministry is providing you with a paper on potential work on foundation education that draws on the Survey findings [METIS 1338879 refers].
- The Ministry will also publish the New Zealand findings of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) on 5 December 2024 [METIS 1340407 refers]. TIMSS assesses Year 5 and Year 9 students in science and mathematics. This may focus public attention on numeracy. TIMSS and other international assessment studies have experienced low response rates.

Alignment with Government priorities

1. Publishing these findings aligns with Government priorities by providing current information on the level of adults' literacy and numeracy skills together with how they use their skills for work and in everyday life. This helps to develop policy options for skill development where it is most needed.

Background

2. The 2023 Survey of Adult Skills directly measured the skills of New Zealand adults in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving. New Zealand was one of 31 countries participating in the survey. It is part of the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The 2023 Survey followed the previous survey where New Zealand participated in 2014.
3. The Survey measured skills by asking a representative sample of 16- to 65-year-olds to complete tasks to demonstrate how well they could use their literacy and numeracy skills in everyday life and work situations. They also answered a questionnaire covering education, employment, the use of skills at work and in everyday life, and people's migration and language backgrounds.
4. The survey results show the range of skill levels in the population, from achieving very simple literacy or numeracy tasks through to dealing with complex ideas and situations. In New Zealand, the survey measured people's skill proficiency when they were using English.

People who had other first languages may have been able to score higher if they had taken the assessment in their first or main language.

5. On 10 December at 11 am Paris time (11 pm NZ time), the OECD will publish its international report, *Do adults have the skills they need to thrive in a changing world? Survey of Adult Skills 2023*. The OECD will then lift the embargo. The OECD report will cover findings across the 31 participating countries, including New Zealand. On 11 December, the Ministry of Education will release the New Zealand report, *Skills in New Zealand: Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (PIAAC)*.
6. New Zealand, the Netherlands and the USA included supplementary samples of 66-75-year-olds in the Survey. The Netherlands will publish some findings for this age group for the three countries.

Communications

7. There is a risk that commentators may focus on the changes in scores without being aware of the cautions. The OECD is likely to forefront the results and only refer to the cautions on the data in supporting material. The Ministry's proposed communications plan about the survey results includes the following elements:
 - Having reactive communications materials ready for the release day that cover:
 - The Survey results must be treated cautiously because the apparent significant decreases in average literacy and numeracy scores are likely to have been influenced by the difficulties in surveying post-COVID and lower respondent engagement.
 - The OECD has applied a 'low caution' designation on the New Zealand data. Many other participating countries also have decreases or have cautions placed on their data.
 - However, the results are valid and useful for understanding the factors associated with New Zealand adults' skills and how they use them.
 - Comparisons with other countries and over time should be approached particularly cautiously.
 - Forwarding a copy of this briefing and the national report to Labour Market Ministers in advance of the release.
 - Providing embargoed versions of the report 24 hours in advance to selected, trusted leaders in adult literacy and numeracy who are likely to be asked to comment publicly.
 - Not providing any other proactive media releases from either the Ministry or your office.

Recommended Actions

The Ministry of Education recommends you:

a. **note** that

- i. on 11 December 2024, the Ministry of Education will publish a report on findings from the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills and the final draft of this report is attached,
- ii. a headline finding in the report is that average literacy and numeracy skills of adult New Zealanders have apparently decreased significantly since the previous survey in 2014,
- iii. the Ministry of Education's view is that the results must be treated cautiously because of difficulties with undertaking household survey interviewing in the post-COVID environment of 2022-2023,
- iv. the Ministry of Education will have reactive communications material ready for the release day.

Noted

b. **agree** that

- i. an embargoed copy of this briefing and the New Zealand report is forwarded to Labour Market Ministers in advance of the release,
- ii. the Ministry of Education provides an embargoed copy of the New Zealand report to trusted leaders in adult literacy and numeracy 24 hours ahead of its release,
- iii. no other proactive media releases will be made ahead of the international release date.

Agree / Disagree

Proactive Release:

- c. **agree** that the Ministry of Education release this paper in full once it has been considered by you. The paper is under embargo until 10 December 2024 11 am Paris time (11 pm New Zealand time).

Agree / Disagree

Katrina Sutich

**General Manager Tertiary Policy
Te Pou Kaupapahere**

Hon Penny Simmonds

Minister for Tertiary Education and Skills

28/11/2024

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