



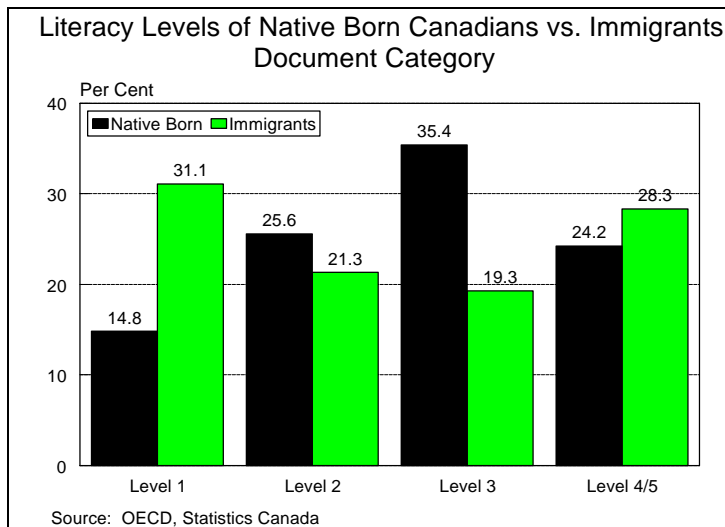
## Special Feature: Literacy Levels of Immigrants

...In Canada, there are higher proportions of immigrants at both the high and low ends of the literacy scale compared to those who are native born.

The results of an International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) were recently released in the publication *Literacy, Economy and Society*, a co-operative effort between Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The study includes some interesting observations relating to the literacy levels of immigrants.

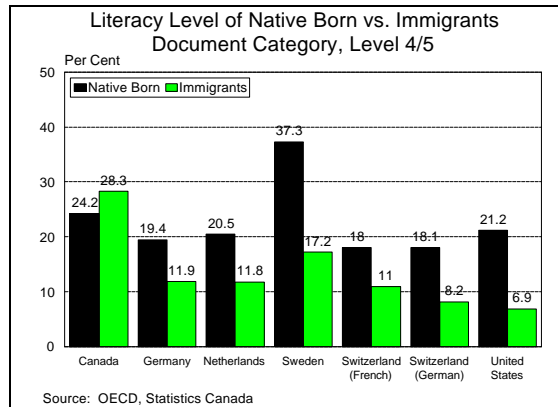
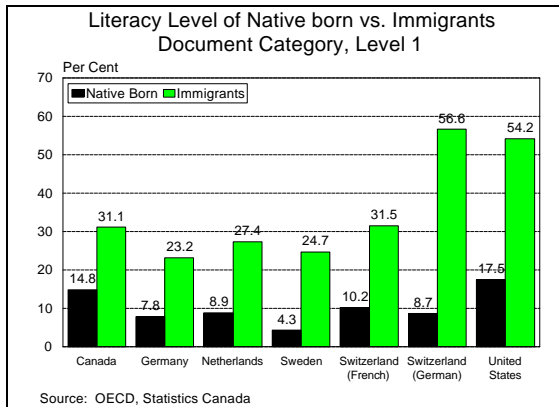
Rather than set a single international literacy standard, the IALS instead tried to define literacy in terms of the ability to use printed and written information in everyday societal functions. Literacy was grouped into three categories: *Prose Literacy*, or the ability to understand and use information from text; *Document Literacy*, or the ability to locate and use information from various sources (e.g., maps, schedules, graphs); and *Quantitative Literacy*, or the ability to apply arithmetical operations to numbers found in printed materials. People were given a score in each category and then grouped into five levels of literacy with Level 1 being the lowest and Level 5 highest.

Immigrants are likely to have different literacy skills than native born people for a variety of reasons. Since the majority of immigrants were educated in another country, they will likely have had different educational experiences and a different cultural influence than those who are Canadian born. In addition, many immigrants have learned either English or French only as a second language, and therefore, may not be as proficient in an official language as a Canadian born person; however, they may possess a greater literacy level in their native language.



Consequently, it is not surprising that the proportion of immigrants with only Level 1 literacy skills is much greater than the proportion of Canadian born in the same category. However, it is also the case that there are higher proportions of immigrants at Level 4/5 than there are Canadian born. This is in contrast to each of the other countries studied (Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and

the United States), where the proportion of immigrants at Level 4/5 was generally much smaller than that of the native born.



The explanation for this significant difference between Canada and the other countries in the study group can be attributed to Canada's unique immigration policy, which is dual in nature. In other words, it actively recruits immigrants with high skills, but at the same time accepts immigrants under refugee and family reunification programs. Canada is the only country in this group that has a policy of specifically seeking high-skilled immigrants. The dual nature of Canada's immigration policy is reflected in the IALS data through the large proportion of immigrants in both the Level 1 and Level 4/5 categories.

The proposed policy change with regard to skilled immigrants will likely increase the proportion of immigrants at the high end of the literacy scale as they will be more likely to be conversant in an official language, and therefore, more literate in that language. The policy places more emphasis on official language ability in the selection criteria for new immigrants. New immigrants who are already able to speak either French or English will have priority over others who lack such language ability (this applies to immigrants in the skilled worker or assisted relative classes only). The thought behind the policy is that these new immigrants will be better equipped to adapt to the Canadian labour market.

In Canada, the differences between the three literacy categories were relatively small, although this was not the case in some countries. In Germany, for example, there was a significant difference between Level 4/5 proportions in the prose category compared to the quantitative category. For native born and immigrants the proportion in the prose category was 14.2 and 4.5 respectively, and for the quantitative category it was 24.2 and 15.8 respectively. Switzerland had similar disparities.

Proportion of Native Born and Immigrants at Each Literacy Level, by Category

| Category     |                      | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 4/5 |
|--------------|----------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Document     | Born in Canada       | 14.8    | 25.6    | 35.4    | 24.2      |
|              | Immigrated to Canada | 31.1    | 21.3    | 19.3    | 28.3      |
| Prose        | Born in Canada       | 12.9    | 26.4    | 38.9    | 21.8      |
|              | Immigrated to Canada | 31.0    | 22.6    | 20.5    | 26.0      |
| Quantitative | Born in Canada       | 13.8    | 28.2    | 37.4    | 20.6      |
|              | Immigrated to Canada | 28.9    | 18.2    | 24.9    | 28.0      |

Source: *Literacy, Economy and Society*. OECD and Statistics Canada.