

Backgrounder on PIAAC results in the North

October 10 -- The results of the most recent survey of literacy and numeracy skills in Canada demonstrated the diversity of populations, education levels, languages, and skill levels across Canada's northern territories.

The Canadian survey, part of the OECD's Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), was administered by Statistics Canada and supported by Ministers of Education in the provinces and territories. It used survey questions administered in 24 countries.

The Canadian results showed that in general, Aboriginal peoples had lower scores than non-Aboriginal Canadians. While 3% of the Canadian population is Aboriginal, the highest proportion is in the territories: 21% in Yukon, 46% in Northwest Territories (NWT), and 81% in Nunavut.

Lower rates of high school completion are also related to lower scores in the national results. In the northern territories, a significant proportion of Aboriginal people have not completed high school: one-third in Yukon, one-half NWT, and two-thirds in Nunavut.

The national results also show higher scores for survey participants who completed the survey in their native language. In Yukon, NWT and Nunavut, 14%, 19% and 41% of participants respectively completed the survey in a language other than their native language.

By international comparison, Canada achieved an average score in literacy and a below-average score in numeracy. The results across the territories varied: compared to national results for both literacy and numeracy, Yukon showed results at or above the average, NWT results were slightly below the national average, and results in Nunavut were well below average.

New to this survey was a computer-based assessment test for literacy and numeracy and for a third category: problem-solving in technology-rich environments (PS-TRE). Nationally, Canada scored higher than almost all other countries in participation in this form and in the scores for the technology-based component.

The national results also show that access to computers and the Internet, as well as the level of participation in the computer-based assessment are also proportional to the scores in all three categories. Across Canada,

81% of respondents used the computer-based assessment. In Yukon, more than 80% of survey respondents used this assessment tool, compared to 76% in NWT and 49% in Nunavut. The three territories also have the lowest proportion of Canadian households with access to the Internet and the lowest access to high-speed Internet connections.

“Mostly, we expected the results we saw,” said Kim Crockatt, Executive Director of the Ilitagsiniq-Nunavut Literacy Council. “All of us – governments, schools and colleges, and community-based organizations – have our work cut out for us. While living a rich life in family and community does not depend on high literacy levels, we know that these skills contribute not only to employment, but also to the Inuit language and culture that are so important to us in Nunavut.”

In the NWT, Helen Balanoff, Executive Director of the NWT Literacy Council, described the challenges that remain: “We put these results in a context of growing efforts in classrooms, community centres and homes across the territory to ensure that the people who live here benefit from the increased economic opportunities. Increased proficiency in literacy, numeracy and the use of technologies can only enhance their benefits to local individuals, families and communities throughout Northwest Territories.”

In Yukon, Beth Mulloy, Executive Director of the Yukon Literacy Coalition welcomed the positive results in the territory, but noted that significant portions of the population are still challenged to complete their education and get the jobs they want. “We will continue to work in the Yukon and with our Northern partners to create innovative learning programs and to encourage Northerners to pursue education that leads to rich and satisfying lives,” Mulloy said.

These community-based literacy organizations are recognized by their governments and the colleges in their territories as important partners in the effort to improve the skills of people in their territories. They have recently formed the Northern Alliance for Literacy and Essential Skills as a pan-northern network of those working in these areas.

“We look forward to getting more information about these results from the federal and our territorial governments, to sharing what we learn with each other through the Alliance, and to collaborating to develop and implement culturally appropriate and highly effective approaches to building strong literacy, numeracy and computer-based skills for all residents of the North,” concluded Crockatt.