

Adult Transitions to Learning in the USA: What Do PIAAC Survey Results Tell Us?

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The PIAAC *Survey of Adult Skills* assessed the literacy, numeracy, and technology-related skills of adults age 16 to 65 in 24 countries. An initial finding from the US PIAAC assessment data was that skill levels of US adults are well below the international average and vary substantially according to education background (Kis & Field, 2013). A question remains: do adults continue to learn purposefully – through formal or non-formal learning opportunities – and how does purposeful learning relate to their education levels?

The term purposeful learning is used to differentiate adult learning in formal or non-formal settings from learning which is informal and often self-directed (not collected in PIAAC). Formal learning is offered by an education or training institution, such as a college, and is structured in terms of learning time and objectives. Non-formal learning, refers to structured, organized learning activities outside formal education, such as in the workplace.

Learners were defined as those who reported formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months before PIAAC assessment; adults who reported participating in neither are described as Non-Learners. Adults were classified into 3 categories based on the highest education level they reported completing: Less than High School (LHS), High School (HS), and Postsecondary (PSE).

- **An estimated 80 million LHS and HS adults are in the pool for formal learning: 48.3 million LHS and HS adults were Non-Learners; an additional 31.2 million LHS and HS Learners pursued only non-formal learning**
- LHS and HS Non-Learners tended to have low incomes (< \$36,000 annually), and faced barriers associated with visual or hearing difficulties and learning disabilities at higher rates than Learners; overall, Non-Learners were older (median 45-49 years) than Learners
- The percentage of female Learners increased and the percentage of male Learners decreased with higher education levels
- **All Learners had substantially higher mean scores in Literacy, Numeracy, and Problem-Solving in Technology-Rich Environments than did Non-Learners**
- Non-Learners tended to have lower rates of employment, be out of the labor force more frequently, and to have higher rates of NEET (i.e., not employed nor in education) and permanent disability than Learners
- Both Non-Learners and Learners had similar rates of job satisfaction
- Learners experienced more job mobility within a five-year period than Non-Learners
- **Approximately 2/3 of Learners pursued non-formal learning**
- Learners pursuing non-formal learning participated in OJT most often, followed by seminars or workshops; the reason Learners most often gave for participating in non-formal learning was to do their job better or improve career prospects
- **Even though they have the most need for employer support for learning, especially formal learning, LHS and HS Learners received the least employer support**