

Aotearoa New Zealand's adult literacy and numeracy decline: Urgent policy considerations

Literacy and numeracy are significant parts of the Manako programme provided by Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence. The Manako programme, formerly known as the Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Cultural Capability (ALNACC) programme, continues our partnership with the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) to embrace educational capability across Aotearoa New Zealand. Embracing our roots and expertise in literacy, numeracy, and both Māori and Pacific cultural capability, Manako expands our commitment to delivering inclusive and effective education, informed by the values and needs of all New Zealanders.

Executive summary

The recent [2024 OECD PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills](#) report suggests that the literacy and numeracy skills of adults in Aotearoa New Zealand have declined significantly since the previous survey was conducted in 2014. While the Ministry of Education suggest the results be [interpreted cautiously](#), the results are concerning. According to the OECD PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills, Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced one of the most pronounced declines in adult literacy and numeracy across OECD nations, with Māori and Pacific learners disproportionately impacted. This briefing paper analyses the issue, identifies key causes, and provides policy recommendations. A key priority is increased investment in professional development for tertiary educators, with a focus on culturally responsive approaches.

Understanding Aotearoa New Zealand's literacy and numeracy decline

Key findings from the 2023 OECD Survey of Adult Skills

- » **Literacy:** Mean score of 260 (OECD average), with 26% of adults scoring at Level 1 or below and over half the adult population (51%) scoring below level 3.
- » **Numeracy:** Mean score of 256 (below OECD average), with 28% scoring at Level 1 or below and 60% of the adult population scoring below level 3.
- » **Adaptive problem-solving:** 29% scored at or below Level 1, with 65% of the adult population scoring below Level 3.
- » **Comparative declines (2014–2023):** Literacy fell by 21 points, numeracy by 15 points, exceeding the OECD average decline of six points. However, most concerning is the continuing decrease among priority groups.



Impact on key demographics

- » **Māori learners:** The results also show that the positive increases Māori were experiencing in the 2014 PIAAC, compared to the general population, have reversed and Māori learners are now overrepresented within the broader decline.
- » **Pacific learners:** Pacific adults were disproportionately represented among those with lower scores in the 2023 PIAAC.
- » **Young adults (16–24)** scored below the OECD average, raising concerns about workforce readiness.
- » **Older adults (55–65)** showed skill attrition over time.
- » **Foreign-born adults** scored lower than native-born peers, with the proficiency gap widening. However, there is a lack of clarity surrounding the interpretation of what the OECD means by the term ‘foreign-born’ and whether it infers that English is a second or other language.

Decreasing skills among priority groups exacerbates social inequalities and has serious ramifications for life outcomes, such as employment, finance, health and wellbeing.

Policy recommendations

1. Language, Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Strategy

- » Set clear objectives for improving the Language, Literacy and Numeracy skills of adults in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- » Identify targets.
- » Create actions to achieve targets and key success indicators.

2. Strengthen adult language, literacy and numeracy programmes

- » Increase funding for workplace and intensive language, literacy and numeracy initiatives.
- » Embed Māori-led and Pacific-led initiatives for a deep and essential inclusion of indigenous knowledge and insights.
- » Expand co-designed bilingual and culturally embedded language, literacy and numeracy programmes.

3. Invest in professional learning and development for tertiary educators

- » Invest in professional development in adult language, literacy and numeracy education for adult educators with evidence-based teaching methods.
- » Invest in training in culturally responsive teaching approaches for adult educators with evidence-based teaching methods.
- » Invest in professional development resources for adult educators. For example, a refresh of the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy and supporting resources.
- » Fund Māori-led and Pacific-led professional development programmes.

4. Support Māori learners through targeted initiatives

- » Strengthen whānau-based learning programmes.
- » Increase funding for kaupapa Māori education models.
- » Partner with iwi and Māori organisations for community-led education.



5. Support Pacific learners through community-centred approaches

- » Expand church- and community-led education programmes.
- » Strengthen Pacific bilingual education.
- » Provide financial incentives for Pacific adults to engage in lifelong learning.

6. Align workplace training with skills development

- » Incentivise employers to offer language, literacy and numeracy training.
- » Recognise micro-credentials and digital badges for incremental skill-building.
- » Develop mentorship and apprenticeship models embedding language, literacy and numeracy.

7. Address structural barriers in education and policy

- » Commission an independent review of literacy and numeracy trends.
- » Introduce national adult skill assessments.
- » Reform tertiary education policies to prioritise foundational skills development, as discussed by Ako Aotearoa in their [White Paper](#) and [Manako Briefing Paper](#).

Conclusion: A call to action

The ongoing literacy and numeracy crisis threatens economic productivity, exacerbates social inequalities, and undermines global competitiveness. Urgent action is needed from policymakers, educators, and businesses to invest in lifelong learning and foundational skill development. A dedicated implementation strategy, educator capability building and evidence-based teaching approaches, inspired by high-performing countries, can equip New Zealanders with the skills needed to thrive.

