

# Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey: Impact and meaning through an ako, teaching and learning, lens

## Introduction

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

PIAAC is the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, and an initiative of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The OECD is an international, intergovernmental organisation with 38 Member countries, whose message is “Better policies for better lives”.

The Survey of Adults Skills report is a product of this programme and has been designed to be completed every ten years. The latest Survey of Adult Skills was completed in 2023, and the results were reported in December 2024, in the Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World? report.

This paper outlines how PIAAC relates to tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand, and what impact and meaning it has, when viewed through a Manako lens.

## PIAAC and Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary education

PIAAC is a survey of adults aged between 16- and 65-years-old. In Aotearoa New Zealand, that equates to about 3.3 million people who were living in Aotearoa New Zealand when the survey was being conducted. This included learners, young adults, parents, grandparents, migrants, people born in Aotearoa New Zealand, people caring for others in the community, unemployed people, and employed people. A whole spectrum of society.

Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary education spans this diversity through part-time and full-time programmes, community programmes, workshops, distance learning, in-person classes, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, flexible and self-directed learning. Working



in this space are Universities, Industry Training Organisations (ITO), Private Training Establishments, Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITP), Adult and Community Education (ACE), Rural Education Activities Programme (REAP), and Wānanga.

## Impact and meaning through a Manako lens

The Manako programme is committed to language, literacy, numeracy, and Māori and Pacific cultural capability. Neurodiversity, digital skills, Universal Design for Learning, and learner agency are also important parts of the Manako landscape.

PIAAC's assessment domains are:

- » **Literacy** – access, understand, evaluate and reflect on written texts.
- » **Numeracy** – access, use, reason critically with mathematical content, information and ideas represented in multiple ways.
- » **Adaptive problem solving** – achieve goals in a dynamic situation, in which a method for solution is not obvious.

In most areas, Aotearoa New Zealand adults' survey scores were close to the OECD average or below the OECD average in Literacy, Numeracy, and Adaptive Problem Solving.

“Across OECD countries, 18% of adults do not even have the most basic levels of proficiency in any of the domains” (OECD, 2025). Thirty-one countries took part.

Between 2013 and 2023, generally across the thirty-one countries, the survey showed declines in literacy and numeracy proficiency. In Aotearoa New Zealand the results showed a significant decline in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem-solving skills since 2013. There is a seriousness to this decline, as the future impacts of consistently below average Literacy, Numeracy, and Adaptive Problem Solving will be felt across education, business, and health sectors. The risk of inaction could leave our economy open to budgetary and financial risk, and individuals at risk of being disenfranchised.

The OECD reports that:

- » skills matter for economic and social outcomes
- » high-skilled adults report better health outcomes and feel more able to influence political processes
- » skills continue to be key drivers of wages
- » high-skilled adults are much more active in the labour market
- » the gap in literacy is impacted by education and the gap has widened.

The Manako programme supports the Government's intention to lift Language, Literacy, and Numeracy levels.

Improved policy settings and investment in educator capability building are sensible recommendations.



## **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.

