Literacy skills in the adult population

For New Zealand adults between 1996 and 2006, there have been significant increases in the percentages achieving above the lowest level of proficiency for both prose and document literacy.

Indicator Description
Literacy and essential life skills in the adult population.

Why This Is Important
Strong evidence exists internationally that, for the populations of developed countries, full participation in society and the labour market is linked to the capacity to accumulate knowledge and to develop and maintain a broad range of skills.

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) survey is an investigation of the distribution of literacy and essential life skills among the adult population. ALL measures the numeracy, document literacy, prose literacy, and problem-solving skills of adults. These skills are essential for continued learning and active participation in society and family/whanau roles, as well as employment.

How We Are Going
For the following four measures, New Zealand can be compared with Australia, Canada and the United States. A comparison of prose and document literacy scores with the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) conducted in 1996 can also be made.
The 2006 survey showed that for prose literacy (the ability to read and understand continuous texts - such as news stories, editorials, brochures and instruction manuals), New Zealand adults had a mean score significantly above that of the United States, but significantly below Canada. Between 1996 and 2006, there was no significant change in the mean prose literacy score for New Zealand adults. There were also no statistical changes in the mean scores for both Canada and the United States over the same period.

For New Zealand in 2006, the 5th-to-95th percentile range of scores was narrower than it was in 1996, as was the 25th-to-75th percentile range, implying that the spread of prose literacy skills among New Zealand adults has narrowed over the last ten years. This trend mirrors that which has occurred in both Canada and the United States.

Fifteen percent of New Zealand adults achieved at the top two proficiency levels for prose literacy, which represents a significant reduction from 1996 when 19% reached these levels. However, significantly more New Zealanders were achieving above the lowest level of proficiency for prose literacy than was the case in 1996 (87% in 2006 compared to 81% in 1996). The proportion of New Zealand adults achieving above the lowest level of proficiency for prose literacy was significantly better than in the United States.

In 2006, ALL found that for document literacy (relating to interpreting discontinuous text – such as graphs, charts and tables), New Zealand adults had a mean score significantly above that of the United States, but significantly below that for Canada.

Between 1996 and 2006, there has been a significant increase in the mean document literacy score for New Zealand adults, moving from 269 to 279. In contrast there was no statistical change in the mean scores for both Canada and the United States over the same period.
For New Zealand in 2006, the 5th- to 95th percentile range of scores was narrower than it was in 1996. This is entirely due to a significant increase in the 5th percentile score, implying that fewer adults are getting lower literacy scores compared to ten years ago.

Just under 20% of New Zealand adults achieved at the top proficiency levels for document literacy, which represents no significant change from 1996. Significantly more New Zealanders were achieving above the lowest level of proficiency for document literacy than was the case in 1996 (86% in 1996 compared to 79% in 2006). The proportion of New Zealand adults achieving at both the highest and above the lowest levels of proficiency for document literacy were significantly better than in the United States.

Since 1996, there have been increases in the number of people participating in tertiary education, with the age-standardised participation rate increasing from 9% in 1996 to 14% in 2006. Over the same period, there has been a 5-fold increase in the number of learners in workplace training, with 176,000 industry trainees in 2006, while the percentage of school leavers with little or no formal attainment has decreased from 19% to 11%. These positive education results will all have aided in the increase in the proportions of New Zealand adults above the lowest level of proficiency for both prose and document literacy since 1996.

In 2006, ALL showed that for numeracy (relating to addressing mathematical and numerical information), New Zealand adults had a mean score significantly above that for the United States, and no different to that for Canada. The range of scores for New Zealand was similar to that for Canada.

Seventeen percent of New Zealand adults were at the highest levels of proficiency for numeracy, while 80% were above the lowest level of proficiency. These results were statistically similar to both Australia and Canada but significantly better than the United States.

The 2006 survey found that for problem-solving (relating to the ability to reason and think analytically in situations where no routine procedure exists), New Zealand adults had a mean score no different to that for Canada. The range of scores for New Zealand was also similar to that for Canada.

Six percent of New Zealand adults were at the highest levels of proficiency for problem-solving, while 71% were above the lowest level of proficiency. These results were
The following outcome and participation indicators should be considered in conjunction with Literacy skills in the adult population:

- Completion of tertiary education
- Tertiary student progression
- Tertiary student attrition
- Educational attainment in the adult population
- Education expectancy

This indicator is also linked to some of the literacy indicators for senior secondary school students, namely:

- Reading literacy achievement: senior secondary schooling
- Mathematics literacy achievement: senior secondary schooling.

In 2006 European/Pākehā clearly had the largest proportions of adults occupying the three highest proficiency levels, with Māori and Asian next highest with roughly similar percentages. Over all four measures, Pasifika had the smallest proportions of adults occupying the three highest proficiency levels.

The Ministry of Education has established an Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis Programme to systematically identify, evaluate, analyse, synthesise and make accessible, relevant evidence linked to a range of learner outcomes. Evidence about what works for this indicator can be found in:

- Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis.
References

- www.educationcounts.govt.nz/themes/research/all