



Project Insights Report

Scoping a PIAAC Research Agenda: Programme for the International Assessments of Adult Competencies



PARTNERS

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☰ Executive Summary

Canada's productivity and economic growth are being impeded by a mismatch in the distribution and utilization of adult skills, despite the country's high levels of educational attainment. The release of the second cycle of the PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) data in late 2024 presents a unique opportunity to address this challenge. This project was initiated to develop a Canadian PIAAC research agenda that can guide policymakers, researchers and practitioners in using these new data to close knowledge gaps, enhance policy decisions and improve national performance in skills development. Through a systematic literature review, stakeholder consultations and data framework evaluations, the project explored how PIAAC has been used in Canada, where knowledge gaps exist and what infrastructure is needed to support a robust research ecosystem. The resulting research agenda is organized around three pillars: *skills as drivers* of economic and social outcomes, *infrastructure and enabling conditions* to support effective research, and *skills as outcomes* that inform how skills are distributed and developed.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Despite Canada being one of the most highly educated countries, there is a skills mismatch among the adult population.
- 2 Researchers need accessible, user-friendly data that are linked with complementary data sets, such as census and tax records. Strengthening the infrastructure of PIAAC data will enable wider use.
- 3 Understanding how adults perform on key competencies, what factors shape these outcomes and how to improve them is critical.

▶ The Issue

Canada is facing a significant challenge relating to productivity and economic growth. A key contributor to this challenge is the mismatch and uneven distribution of skills among the adult population, despite Canada being one of the most highly educated countries.

The recent release of the second cycle of the PIAAC data in late 2024 offers a timely opportunity to deepen our understanding of how adult skills relate to productivity, prosperity and overall well-being. These data allow Canada to revisit and expand on earlier research by exploring critical yet under-examined questions, such as:

- How do adult skills impact individual and societal outcomes?
- What role do they play in labour market success and broader economic performance?

Given resource constraints, it is essential to strategically prioritize areas of research that can yield the most impact. Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure that the PIAAC data are accessible, interpretable and usable for users.



What We Investigated

To inform a research agenda, a comprehensive examination of how PIAAC data have been used in Canada and where future efforts should focus was completed. This research included:

reviewing existing research: A systematic review of Canadian studies that utilized PIAAC data, noting recurring themes, important findings and research gaps;

evaluating the PIAAC framework: Created an overview of the PIAAC survey and data, including an assessment of its strengths and limitations to help potential users understand its abilities and constraints;

engaging the skills community: Conducted interviews with researchers and practitioners across Canada's skills ecosystem to gain insights on how PIAAC is currently used and how it could be improved;**developing a research agenda:** Based on the literature review, stakeholder insights and a gap analysis, a Canadian PIAAC research agenda was developed. This agenda outlines key research topics and identifies the enabling conditions necessary to support effective data use and knowledge mobilization.

What We're Learning

The development of a Canadian PIAAC research agenda yielded several key insights across three key pillars.

Pillar 1. Skills as Drivers

A top priority is the recognition that skills are not only individual assets but drivers of productivity, economic growth and overall societal outcomes. The literature review identified areas where deeper understanding is needed, including the relationship between skill levels and labour market outcomes, as well as the broader social implications of skills on overall well-being. The research also identified a demand for evidence-based best practices to inform policies and interventions.

Pillar 2. Infrastructure and Enabling Conditions for Research

Another major insight is the importance of robust data infrastructure. For researchers to effectively explore PIAAC data, the information must be not only accessible but also user-friendly and well-integrated with other data sources like census and administrative tax records. However, data availability alone is insufficient, as many researchers would benefit from training on how to use and interpret PIAAC data. This includes understanding the linked data sets, applying appropriate methodologies and acknowledging the limitations of the data. To address these gaps, the development of a community of practice, active calls for papers, and dissemination strategies were identified as essential to supporting an inclusive research ecosystem.

Pillar 3. Skills as Outcomes

The agenda highlights the value of examining skills as outcomes. Three key topics should be explored: how Canadian adults perform on skills, the factors impacting their performance, and what can be done to improve overall skill levels.

★ Why It Matters

PIAAC provides Canada with a valuable opportunity to improve national strategies for productivity, economic growth and social well-being. With the release of new PIAAC data, Canada has the opportunity to launch a focused research agenda that addresses key knowledge gaps in Canada's skills ecosystem. PIAAC data can reveal insights into how and why skills influence a wide range of economic and social outcomes.



**State of Skills:
Working Collaboratively to Close
Skills-Related LMI Gaps**

Labour market information (LMI) is a key pillar of a well-functioning workforce development system, yet considerable gaps remain in the generation, dissemination and uptake of skills-related LMI in Canada.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

► What's Next

Shift Insights has recommended a phased and strategic approach to successfully implement the Canadian PIAAC Research Agenda:

Prioritize work on **Pillar 1 (Skills as Drivers)** and **Pillar 2 (Infrastructure and Enabling Conditions)**. Timely research under Pillar 1 should draw insights on the link between skills and outcomes like productivity and well-being. At the same time, Pillar 2 efforts should focus on organizing the data and building user capacity, ideally within the first 12–18 months of release. Eventually the focus can shift to **Pillar 3 (Skills as Outcomes)** to explore how skills are distributed and developed across Canada. This will support informed policy design based on a new understanding of skill outcomes.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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