



# Investing in the skills of adult immigrants

Adult Skills  
in Focus #11

- Foreign-born adults participate less than native-born adults in lifelong learning activities. The differences are small, however, and are largely explained by socio-demographic factors such as age, level of education and literacy skills.
- Immigrants often want more adult training than they get: they face higher barriers to undertaking training, but when they do manage to access training, they spend more time on it.
- Immigrants are less likely to have the opportunity to practise their literacy skills at work, even after accounting for differences in individual characteristics and occupations.

Lifelong learning is a crucial element of skills and labour-market policies. Rapid technological progress changes the demand for skills, requiring individuals to update their skills increasingly frequently. Longer careers leave workers more exposed to the risk of their skills becoming obsolete, either because they are more likely to face changes in the demand for skills, or because they are more subject to age-related declines in their cognitive abilities.

The need to participate in adult training is even more compelling for immigrants. On average, foreign-born adults have lower literacy and numeracy proficiency than native-born ones (see “Why are immigrants less proficient in literacy than native-born adults?”, *Adult Skills in Focus*, No. 6), and their successful integration into the host country largely relies on the acquisition of the host country’s language. Moreover, the skills foreign-born adults acquired in their home country are often a poor match for those required in the host-country labour market.

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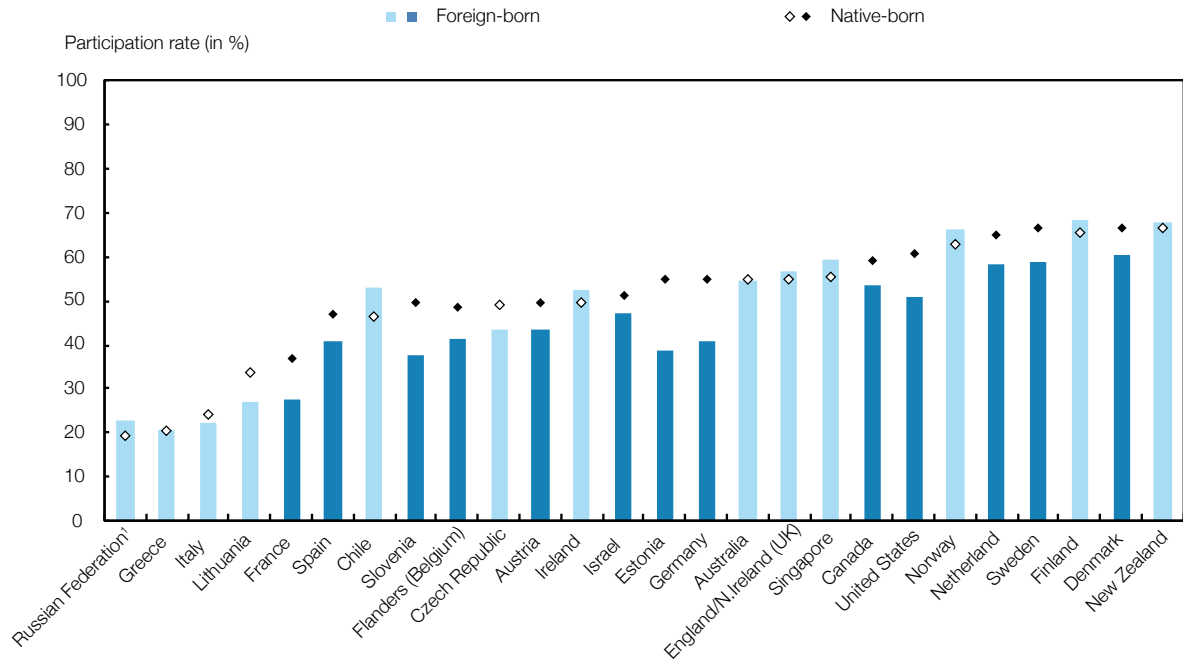
## Foreign- and native-born adults do not differ much in their participation in lifelong learning

In spite of these considerations, data from the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) show that foreign-born adults were less likely than native-born adults to have participated in formal and non-formal education and training activities in the 12 months prior to the survey. The gap in participation rates is 4 percentage points on average, and is more pronounced in Estonia (16 percentage points), Germany (14 percentage points) and Slovenia (12 percentage points) (Figure 1). However, in about half of the countries and economies taking part in PIAAC the differences are not statistically significant. Most of the gap is due to differing socio-demographic characteristics (such as age, gender,

employment status and literacy proficiency) which are themselves strong predictors of participation in adult training. Furthermore, the differences in participation rates between foreign- and native-born adults within countries are extremely small compared to the differences across countries: overall rates of participation were as low as 20% in Greece and as high as 67% in New Zealand. The cross-country correlation between the participation rates among native-born and foreign-born adults is 91%, suggesting that country of residence is a much stronger determinant of participation than migration status.



Figure 1 / Rates of participation in lifelong learning



Notes: Those for which the difference in participation rates between foreign-born and native-born adults is not statistically different from zero are marked in a lighter tone.

<sup>1</sup>The sample for the Russian Federation does not include the population of the Moscow municipal area.

Countries and economies are ranked in ascending order of overall participation rates.

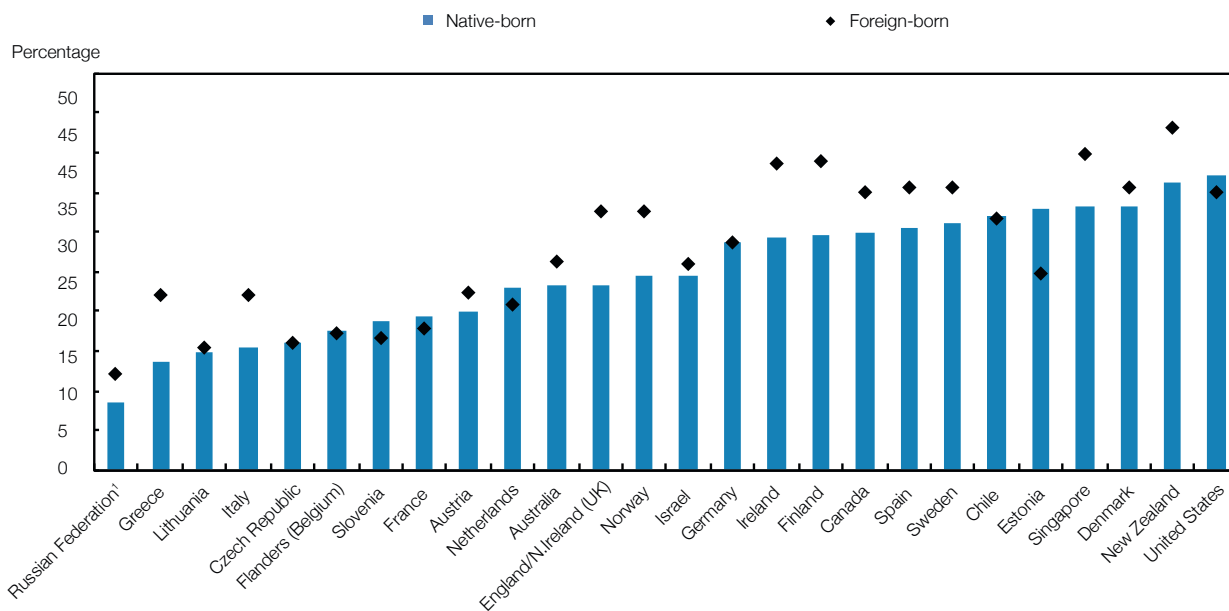
Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/data/](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/data/).

## Immigrants are not able to participate in training as much as they would like

Even though the rates of participation in adult training do not differ much between foreign-born and native-born adults, this does not imply that all workers get sufficient training. PIAAC asked participants whether they were prevented from participating in training they would have

liked to take, and for what reasons. In the vast majority of countries and economies, foreign-born adults were more likely than native-born ones to express an unmet demand for training (Figure 2).

Figure 2 / Constraints on participation in learning activities



Notes: The figure shows the percentage of adults who reported being willing to participate in any learning activity in the 12 months prior to the interview but who, in the end, did not start that learning activity (constrained adults).

<sup>1</sup> The sample for the Russian Federation does not include the population of the Moscow municipal area.

Countries and economies are ranked in ascending order of the percentage of constrained native-born adults.

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/data/](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/data/).

Even after controlling for a wide range of observable characteristics, immigrants are more likely to report barriers to participation in about half of the participating countries and economies. The adjusted gap is as high as 12 percentage points in Finland, and between 7 and 8 percentage points in England/Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Greece, Italy and Norway.

When asked about the reasons preventing them from participating in training, foreign-born adults were more likely than native-born adults to report family

responsibility and financial constraints as the main barriers they faced.

Data also show that foreign-born adults who do get access to training spend on average more hours in such activities than native-born adults. In countries such as Denmark, Finland, Flanders (Belgium), and the Netherlands, such differences are substantial, ranging from 40% to 60%. This indicates that foreign-born adults have a higher (latent) demand for training.

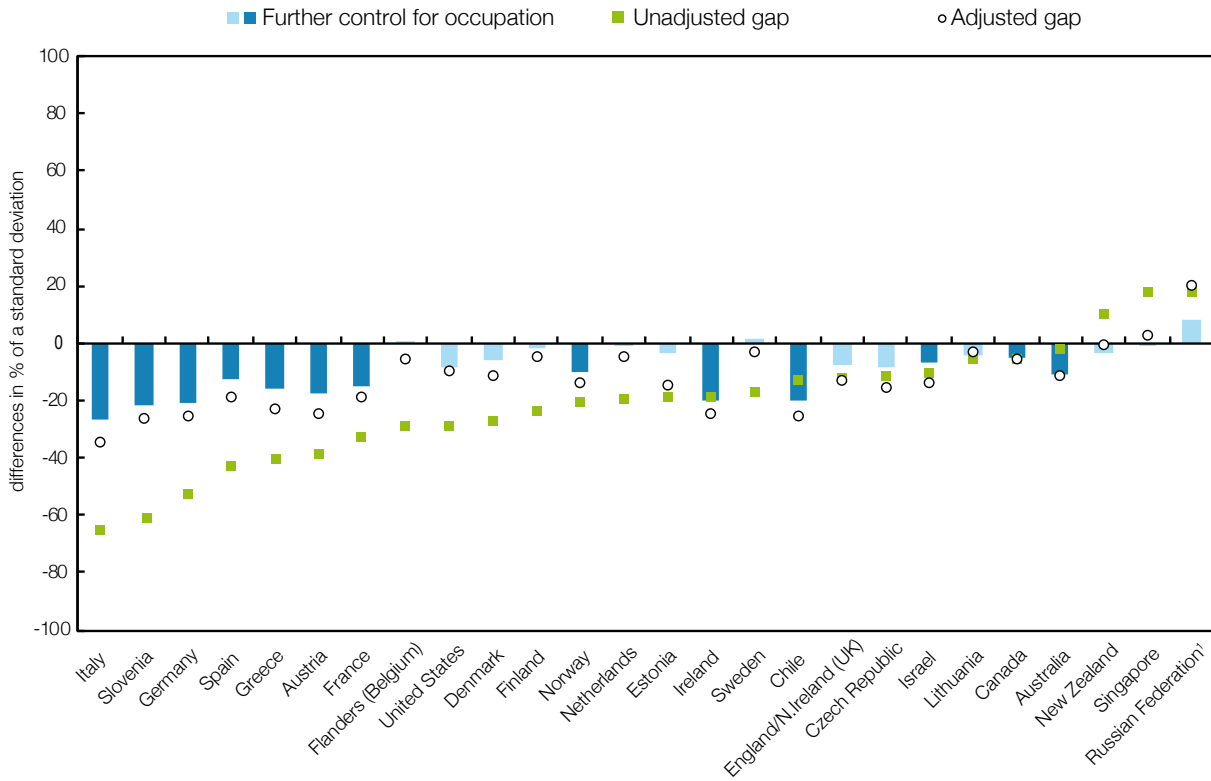
## Immigrants have fewer opportunities to practise their literacy skills

In order for adults to develop their skills, or prevent them from declining, they need not just formal or informal training but also the opportunity to put their skills into practice. PIAAC collects information on how often adults perform certain tasks at work, or engage in certain activities in everyday life, that require the use of reading, writing, numeracy, or information and communications technology (ICT) skills. The data show that foreign-born adults typically have fewer opportunities to practise their reading skills at work (Figure 3). To a large extent, this is due to differences in observable characteristics (like education or literacy proficiency), which cause foreign-

and native-born adults to go into different occupations, requiring different use of skills. However, even after controlling for these factors (including occupation), the gap remains sizeable, especially in countries like Austria, Germany, Italy and Slovenia. This could be due either to discriminatory practices (for instance where immigrant workers are systematically assigned to simpler tasks, even though they would be able to cope with more complex ones), or to aspects of the proficiency of foreign-born workers that are not captured in the data, but that employers can observe.



Figure 3 / Differences between foreign- and native-born adults in the use of reading skills at work



Notes: The graph reports the estimated difference between foreign- and native-born adults in the index of use of reading skills at work. Adjusted gaps control for differences in age, age squared, gender, educational attainment, literacy skills and employment status. The bars further control for occupation dummies at the 1-digit level (ISCO 2008). Statistically significant differences are marked in a lighter tone.

<sup>1</sup> The sample for the Russian Federation does not include the population of the Moscow municipal area.

Countries and economies are ranked according to the unadjusted gap.

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/data/](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/data/).

## The bottom line



Lifelong learning is especially important for immigrants, who are often at a disadvantage in terms of the languages and skills that are valued in the labour market of their host country. Yet foreign-born adults are less likely to participate in training than native-born ones, and face higher financial and non-financial barriers to training. Policy efforts should focus not only on providing more training opportunities, but also on removing barriers to participation.

> **CONTACT:**

Marco Paccagnella ([Marco.Paccagnella@oecd.org](mailto:Marco.Paccagnella@oecd.org)); ([edu.piaac@oecd.org](mailto:edu.piaac@oecd.org))

> **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

OECD (2018), *Skills on the Move: Migrants in the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264307353-en>.

OECD (2017), «Why are immigrants less proficient in literacy than native-born adults?», *Adult Skills in Focus*, No. 6, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/30b23d82-en>.

> **VISIT:**

[www.oecd.org/skills/piaac](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac)  
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