

8. Do students with immigrant backgrounds in Canada do as well in educational achievement as non-immigrants students?

Yes; Canada is one of only a very few countries that combines overall high achievement, a larger than average immigrant population, and no significant achievement gap between immigrants and non-immigrants.

One of the main reasons that explains Canada's good overall performance in education is that it is successful in ensuring the educational achievement of children with immigrant backgrounds. Given the comparatively large proportion of students in Canadian schools, colleges and universities that are first and second generation immigrants, the country simply could not post high overall achievements scores if there was a significant gap between these students and non-immigrants.

The PIRLS study of Grade Four students does not report data regarding immigrant students, but does examine results for those who did not speak the language of the test prior to starting school (in Canada, this would be those whose spoke a language other than English or French). While internationally the average gap between students who did and did not speak the language of the test prior to starting school was 37 points, Hong Kong, Australia and Canada all had gaps of 5 points or less (and in each case, the gap was not statistically significant). This demonstrates the ability of schools in high immigration countries such as Australia and Canada to quickly integrate students from immigrant families in the early years of schooling.

There is extensive data from PISA regarding students with immigrant backgrounds. The proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds in Canada is much higher than average, and indeed higher than in almost all other OECD countries.

- 29 percent of Canadian 15-year old students have an immigrant background (meaning they are either first or second generation immigrants), compared to the OECD average of 11 percent. Among OECD countries, only Luxembourg (46 percent) has a higher proportion. New Zealand (26 percent), Switzerland (24 percent), Australia (23 percent), and the US (22 percent) are the other OECD

countries where the proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds is greater than one in five.

- 13 percent of Canadian students are first-generation immigrants, compared with the OECD average of 5 percent. Among OECD countries, only Luxembourg and New Zealand (17 percent each) have a higher proportion.
- Among OECD countries, Canada (14 percent) has the second highest proportion of students who have an immigrant background (first or second generation) and who speak a language at home that is different from the language of the PISA assessment, after Luxembourg (32 percent). The average for the OECD is 6 percent.

There is no significant gap between the academic achievement of immigrant (first and second generation) and non-immigrant students in Canada, as measured by PISA 2012 (mean math scores).

- The two point gap in favour of non-immigrant students in Canada is not statistically significant, and compares with an average gap for all OECD countries of 34 points. New Zealand and Ireland resemble Canada in having no gap between immigrant and non-immigrant students, while in Australia there is a significant gap in favour of immigrant students.
- There is also no noticeable gap between students in Canada who are first-generation immigrants and non-immigrant students (in fact, the former group has a slight 6 point edge).
- Similarly, students in Canada who have both an immigrant background (first or second generation) and who speak a language at home that is different from the language of the PISA assessment perform about as well as non-immigrants with the same language as the assessment (again, the former group has a slight 7 point edge).

In fact, Canada is one of only a few OECD countries that combine a number of important attributes: high overall performance, a high proportion of students from immigrant

³⁵ See Mullis et al., PIRLS 2011, Exhibit 4.3, p. 188.

³⁶ Data in this section is taken from the tables for Volume II of the OECD's 2102 PISA report. See: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-ii.htm>

families, and a low or non-existent performance gap between immigrants and non-immigrants. This is illustrated in Table 6.³⁷

Canada's success in this area is also evident by the fact that even those first generation immigrant students who arrived in Canada after age 12 perform relatively well: in fact, the PISA math scores for this group are no different than those of non-immigrant students. As Chart 6 illustrates, there is no significant drop-off in scores for immigrants students based on how long they have been in the country, in marked contrast to the international average.

Immigrants in Canada have also been successful in postsecondary education.

- Of course, data on educational attainment for first-generation immigrants generally reflects the educational backgrounds that immigrants had before arriving in Canada

rather than their education experience in this country (immigrants to Canada on the whole are more likely to have a university degree than domestically born Canadians).

- The experience of second generation immigrants is more revealing. 84 percent of second generation immigrants in Canada enroll in a postsecondary education course by the age of 21, including 54 percent who pursue a university degree, compared with 72 percent for non-immigrants (38 percent for university).³⁸
- Not all immigrant groups are equally successful, however. While over 80 percent of second generation immigrants whose parents came from Africa or China pursue university studies by the age of 21, only 36 percent of those from central and southern America and the Caribbean do.³⁹

Table 6
Performance of Students from Immigrant Backgrounds in High Performing, High Immigration Countries And Economies

	PERCENT OF STUDENTS WITH IMMIGRANT BACKGROUNDS	PISA MATH SCORE – STUDENTS WITH IMMIGRANT BACKGROUNDS	DIFFERENCE IN MATHEMATICS PERFORMANCE BETWEEN NON-IMMIGRANT AND IMMIGRANT STUDENTS
<i>Macao-China</i>	65	545	-16
<i>Hong Kong-China</i>	35	559	8
<i>Liechtenstein</i>	33	504	50
Canada	29	520	2
New Zealand	26	503	0
Switzerland	24	484	63
Australia	23	528	-26
<i>Singapore</i>	18	596	-26
United Kingdom	13	489	9
Germany	13	475	54
OECD average	11	462	34

Table includes only those countries and economies whose mean math score for all students and proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds are both above the OECD average; countries and economies in italics are not OECD members; "immigrant background" includes both first and second generation immigrants. Source: OECD, PISA 2012 Results, Volume II, accessed at <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-ii.htm>

³⁷ "In Canada, New Zealand and Australia the size of the immigrant student population is well above the OECD average (29%, 26% and 23%), and both immigrant and non-immigrant students perform, on average, well above the OECD mean (more than 500 score points). In Australia immigrant students outperform non-immigrants by 29 score points, even after accounting for socio-economic differences. In Canada and New Zealand, both groups perform equally well. The same is true in Ireland, but the proportion of immigrant students (10%) in the country is closer to the OECD average (11%)." OECD, PISA 2012 Results: Excellence Through Equity: Giving Every Students the Change to Succeed (Volume II) (Paris: OECD, 2013), p. 72; see <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-ii.pdf>.

³⁸ See Berger et al., *The Price of Knowledge*, pp. 55-56.

³⁹ See Berger et al., *The Price of Knowledge*, p. 56, Figure 2.VI.13.

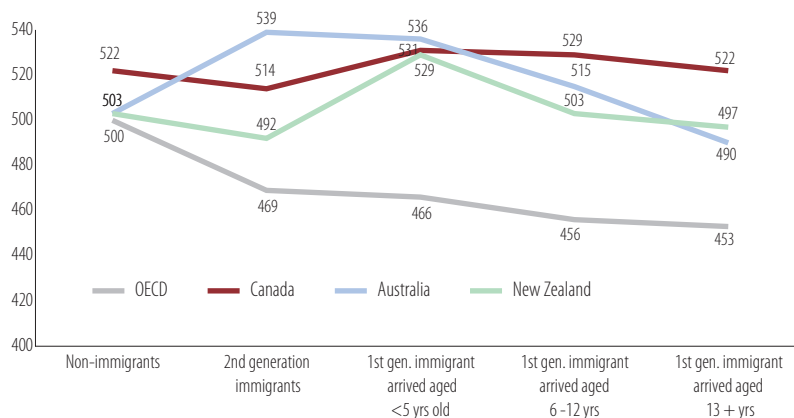
The impact of Canada's public education systems on the success of immigrants is perhaps best illustrated by the PIAAC data regarding adult competencies.⁴⁰

- The first result of note is that the literacy scores of second generation immigrants in Canada are above the average for all Canadians and, indeed above the score of those whose parents were born in Canada (whereas across the OECD as a whole, second generation immigrants do better than first generation immigrants, but worse than the average for the whole population or for those with no immigrant background). This suggests that, at the very least, children of immigrants are not disadvantaged by their educational experience in Canada.

- Second, first generation immigrants who arrive in Canada at a young age⁴¹ – before or during primary school – have literacy scores as adults that are either at or above the average for the whole population; what's more, this situation holds even for those who arrive speaking a language at home other than English or French. Again, this is contrary to the trend internationally, where adults who arrive in the country as school-age children have lower than average scores. The implication is the same: that children of immigrants are not disadvantaged by their educational experience in Canada (as they are in most industrialized countries).

Chart 6
PISA Math Scores

By Immigration Status and Age of Arrival in Host Country (1996-2011)



OECD, PISA 2012 Results: Excellence Through Equity: Giving Every Students the Change to Succeed, Volume II (Paris: OECD, 2013), Chapter 3, Tables II.3.4a, II.3.5, II.3.6a, II.3.8; accessed at <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-ii.htm>.

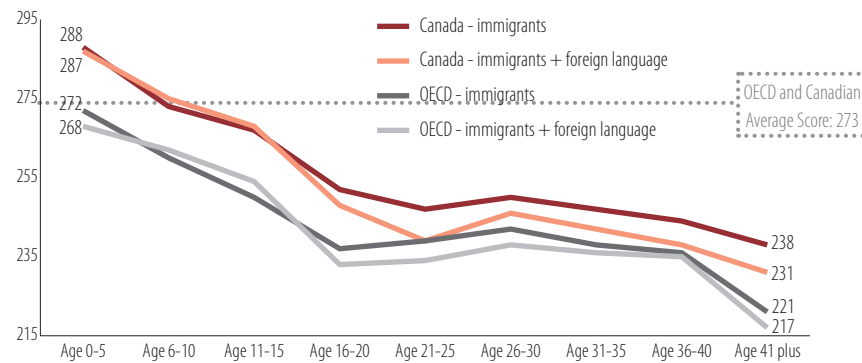
⁴⁰ As noted above, Canada has one of the most diverse populations in the OECD; among countries participating in the PIAAC study, Canada has the second highest proportion of adults (aged 16 to 65) who are foreign born, and the highest who are foreign born and whose first language is different from the language of the assessment.

⁴¹ This group of immigrants is often referred to as the 1.5 generation.

- This is illustrated in more detail in Chart 7. In both Canada and the OECD, the literacy scores of adult immigrants who arrived in the host country as children are much better than those who arrived after high school, suggesting that school systems everywhere help with integration. But while in the OECD, first generation immigrants never “catch up” to the national average, regardless of their age of arrival, in Canada those who arrive at primary school age either end up performing as well as, or even better than, the average. Again, this holds even for those for whom English or French is a second language.

In reflecting on these achievements, it should be recalled that Canada’s immigrant population is not only comparatively large, but also comparatively diverse. To illustrate, immigrants to Australia are twice as likely to originate from the the anglophone countries of UK, the US or New Zealand as are immigrants to Canada; but despite Australia’s geographic proximity to Asia, its immigrants are less likely to originate from major Asian source countries such as China, India and the Philippines than are immigrants to Canada.⁴²

Chart 7
PIAAC Literacy Scores of Immigrants/Immigrants with a Foreign Language
 By Age of Arrival in Host Country (1996-2011)



Source: Author’s calculations using the PIAAC international data explorer:
<http://piacdataexplorer.oecd.org/ide/idepiacc>

⁴² See, for example, the statistics reported by the Migration Policy Institute at: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/top-sending-countries-immigrants-australia-canada-and-united-states>