

Unequal Skills, Unequal Lives

Lessons from the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)

Anja Meierkord

Analyst, Directorate for Education and Skills

OECD

Thursday, 19 June 2025



Outline of my talk

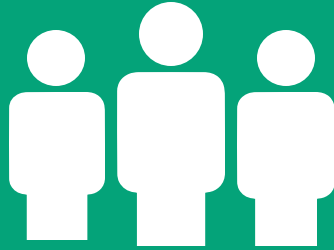
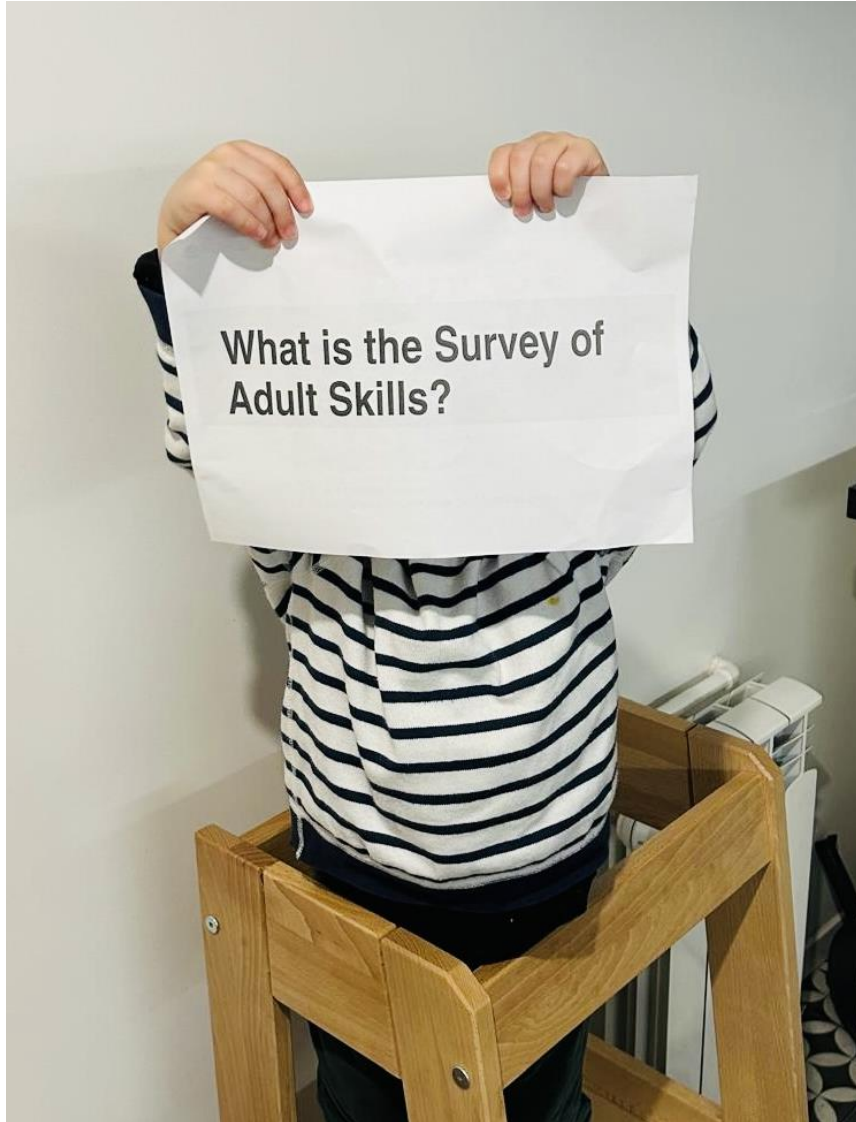
- 1 What is the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)?
- 2 What does it tell you about inequalities within and across countries?
- 3 Why should we care?

What is PIAAC?





2023 Survey of Adult Skills – in brief



160 000 participants...
representing 673 million 16–65-year-olds
in 31 countries and economies

Assessment of literacy, numeracy
and adaptive problem solving



Collects data on initial education, social and
emotional skills, skill use and adult learning



2-hour CAPI assessment (tablets)





2023 Survey of Adult Skills - Objectives



Essential skills regarded as being important for social functioning in the societies of the 21st century

Provide a picture of the distribution of the skills deemed essential for adults to effectively function in modern societies



Individual and contextual factors that contribute to the development-maintenance-loss of skills

Understand how skills are developed and maintained over the life-cycle

Provide evidence of how skills are used in the workplace

Help policymakers to design more effective skills policies



Economic, educational and social outcomes to which these skills contribute

Examine relationship between skills and economic and social outcomes

What does it tell us about inequalities?

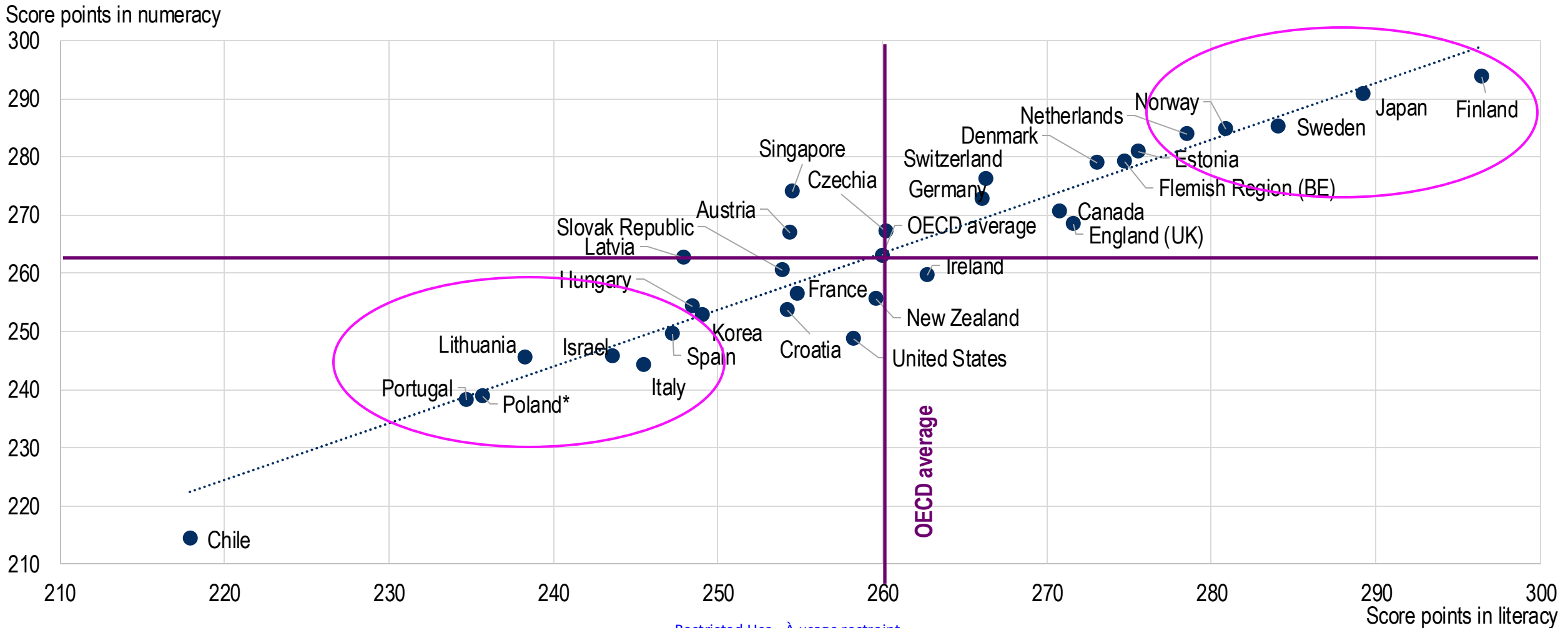




Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden are the best-performing countries in all three domains...

Figure 2.1

Comparison of countries' and economies' average proficiency in literacy and numeracy

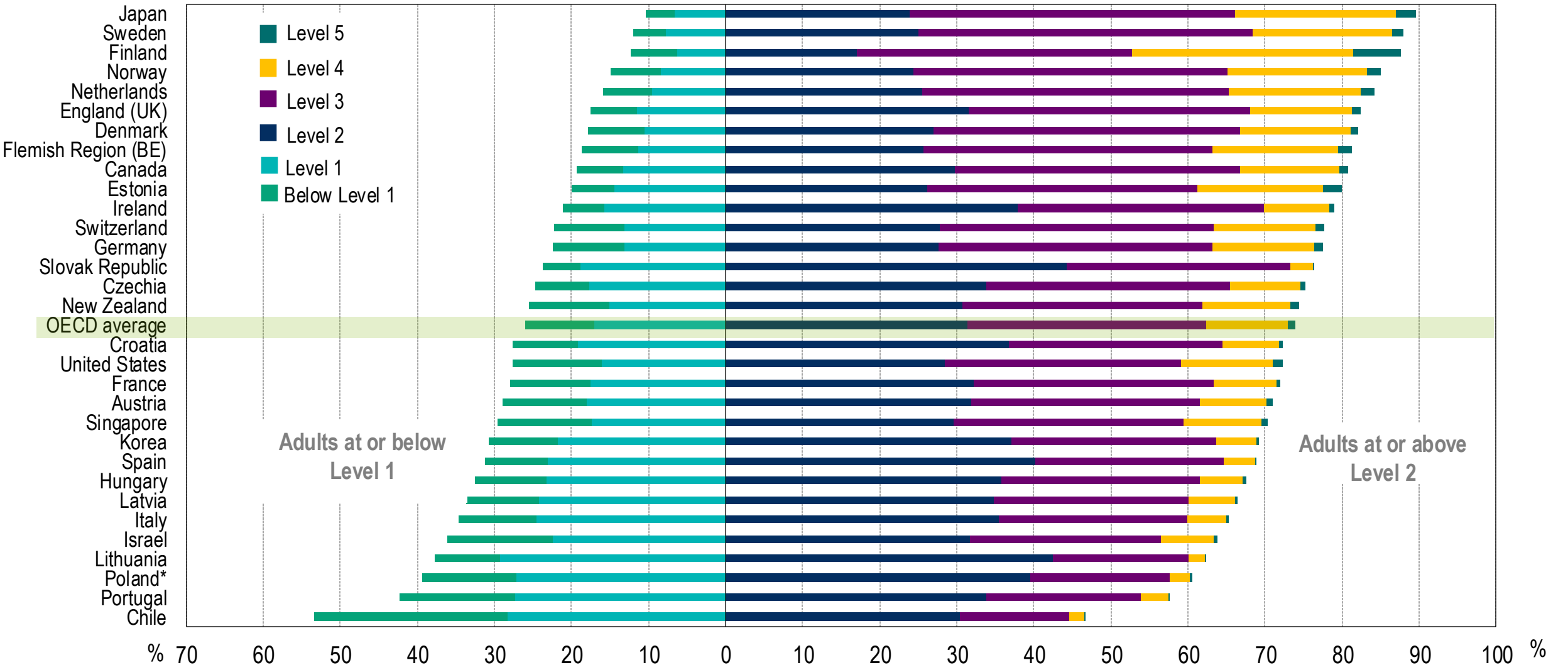




One in four adults across the OECD has low literacy skills

Figure 2.2

Share of 16-65 year-olds scoring at each proficiency level in literacy

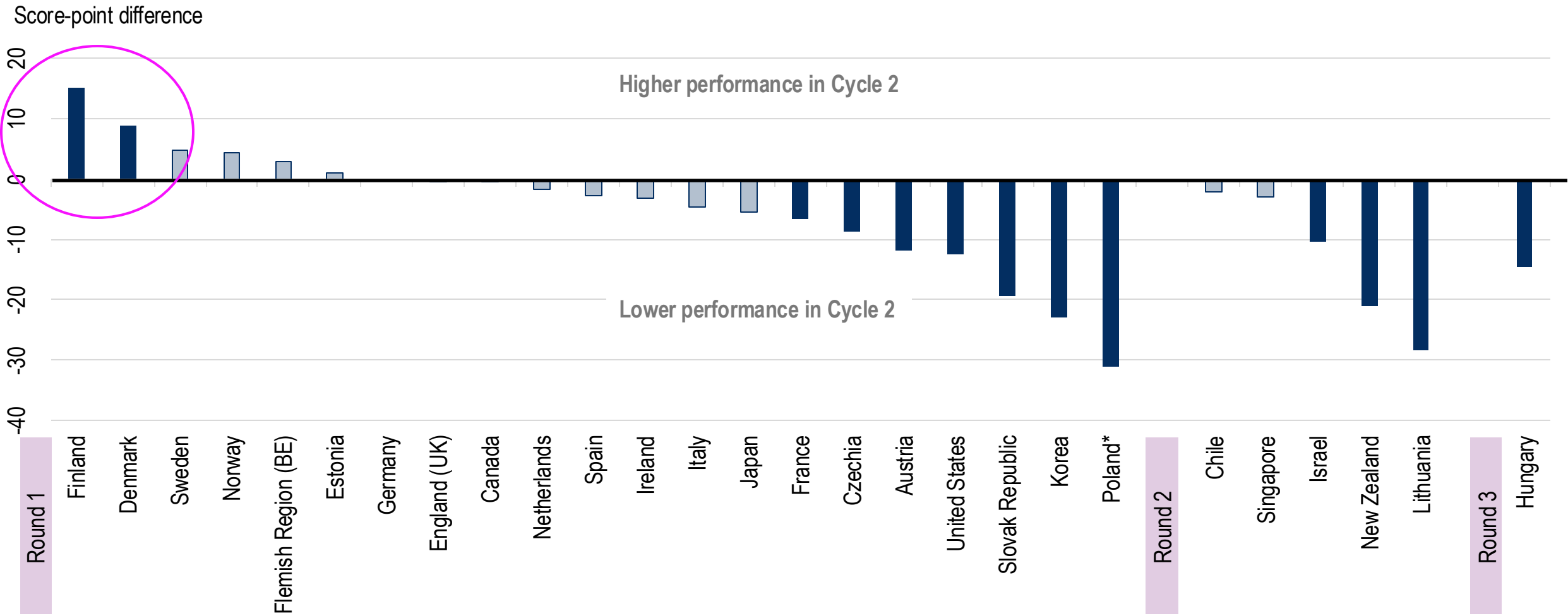




Average literacy proficiency has stagnated or declined in most countries....

Figure 3.1 (L)

Change in average literacy proficiency between cycles

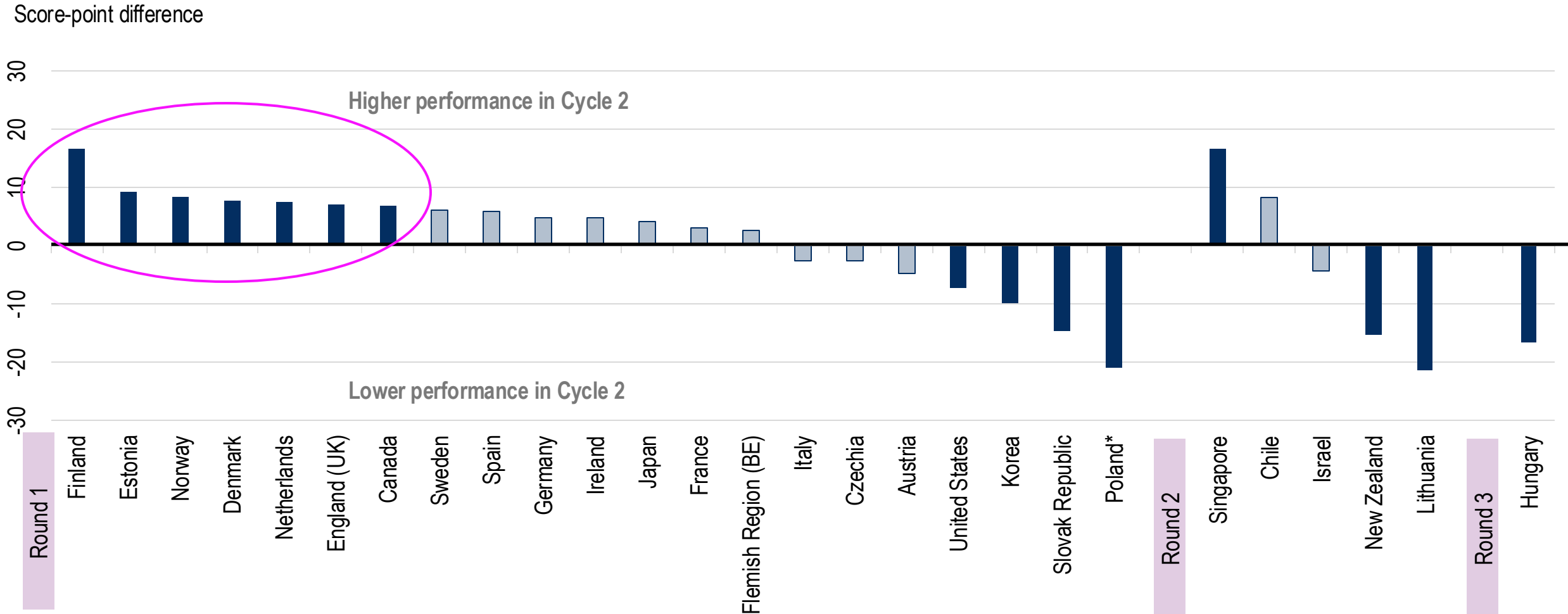




...but changes in numeracy proficiency over time have been more favourable

Figure 3.1 (N)

Change in average numeracy proficiency between cycles

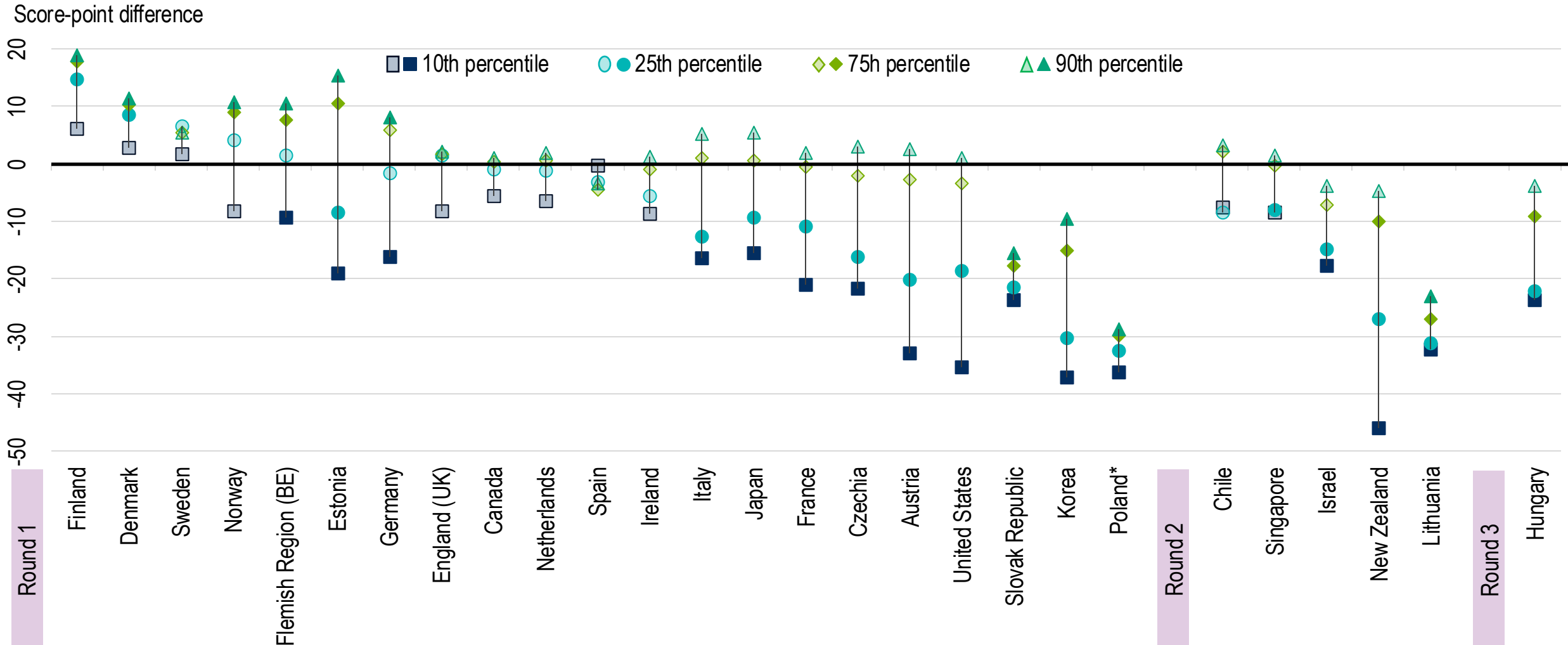




Declines in average proficiency are largely due to falls among the lowest-performing adults.

Figure 3.4 (L)

Change in the distribution of proficiency of literacy between cycles



Why should we care?

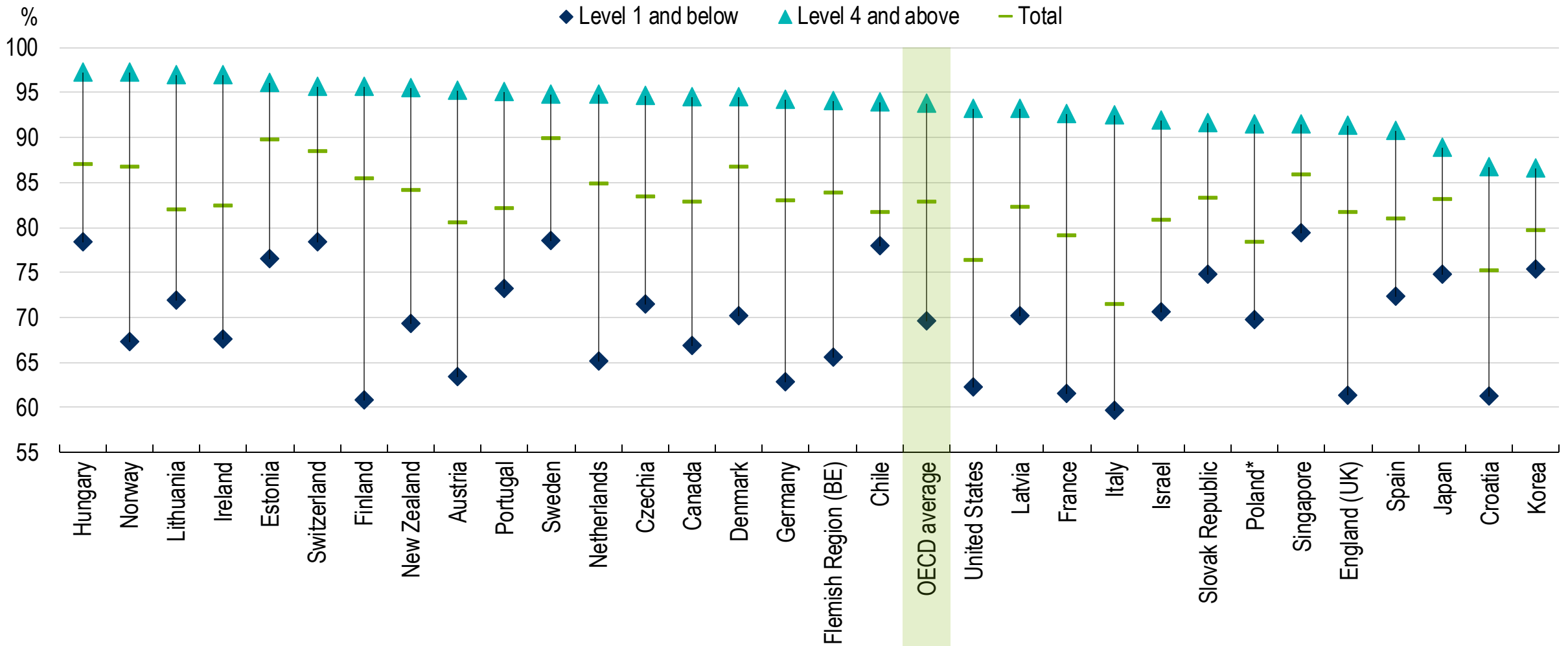




High-skilled adults are much more active in the labour market...

Figure 4.1

Labour force participation rate, by numeracy proficiency level

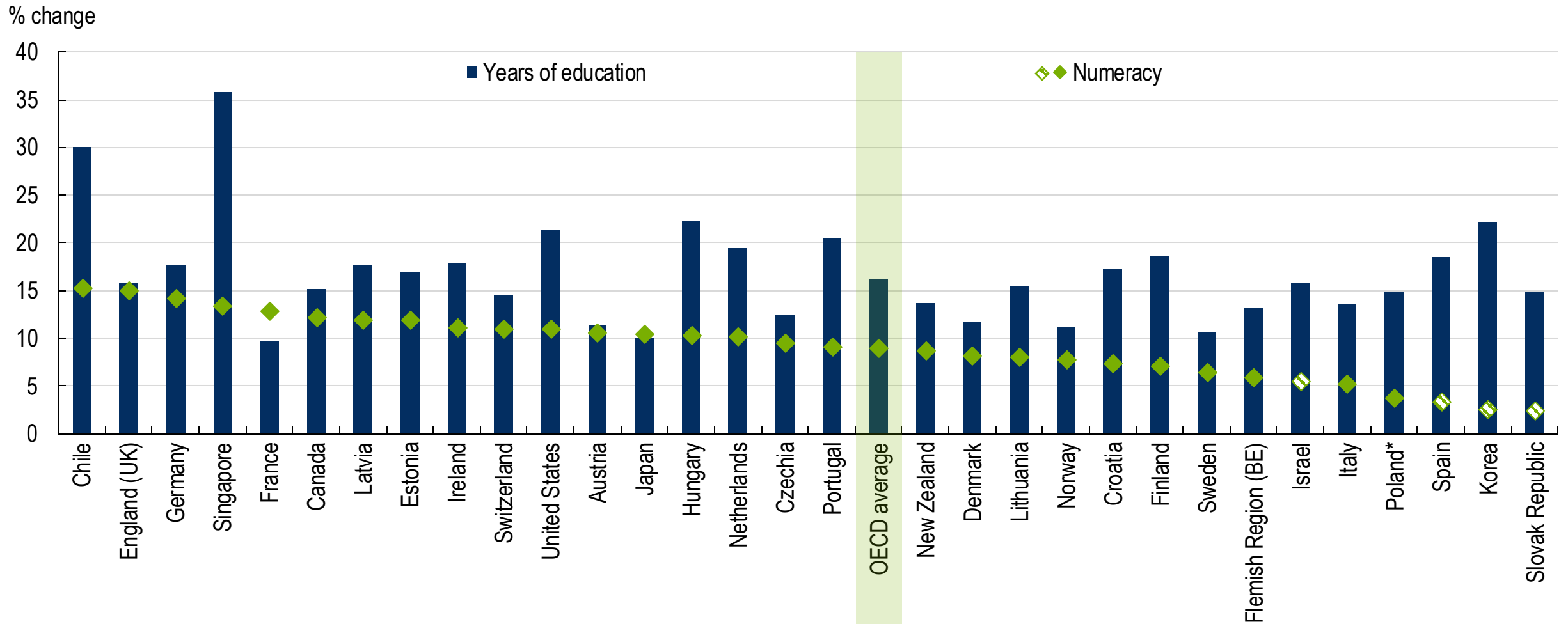




..and skills continue to be key drivers of wages over and above formal education.

Figure 4.5

Effect of a one-standard-deviation increase on hourly wages

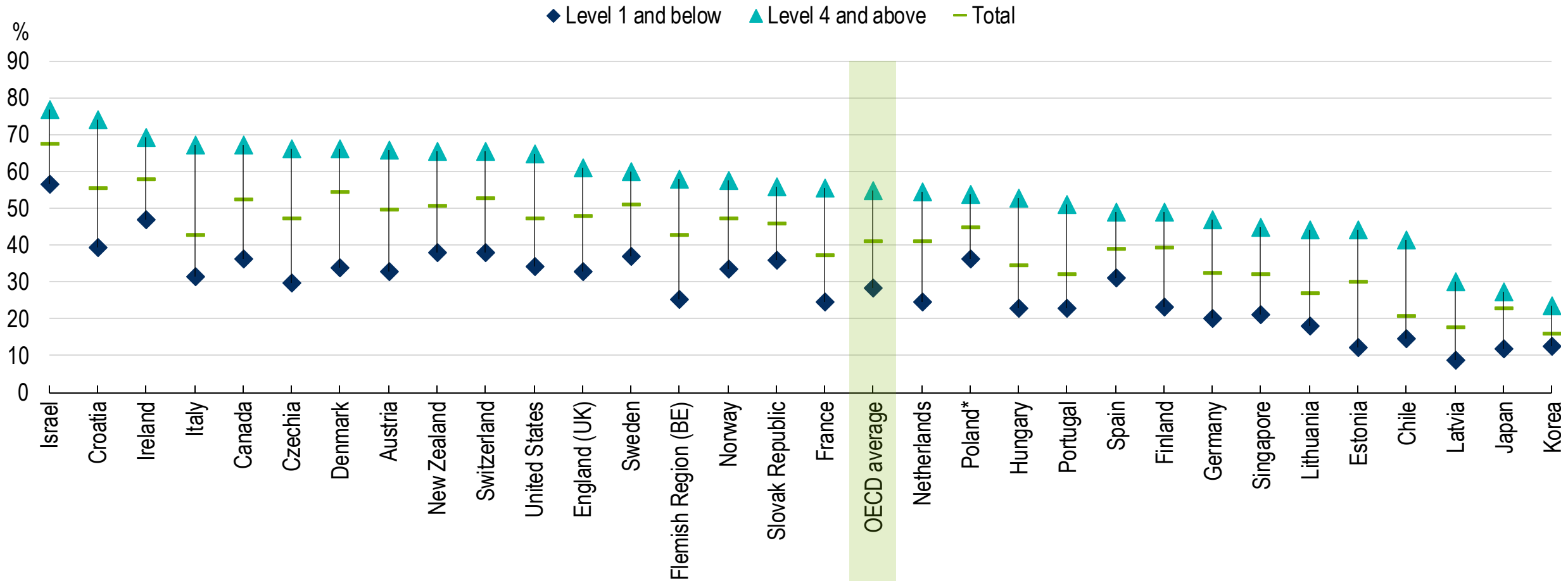




High-skilled adults report better health...

Figure 4.9

Share reporting very good or excellent health, by numeracy proficiency level

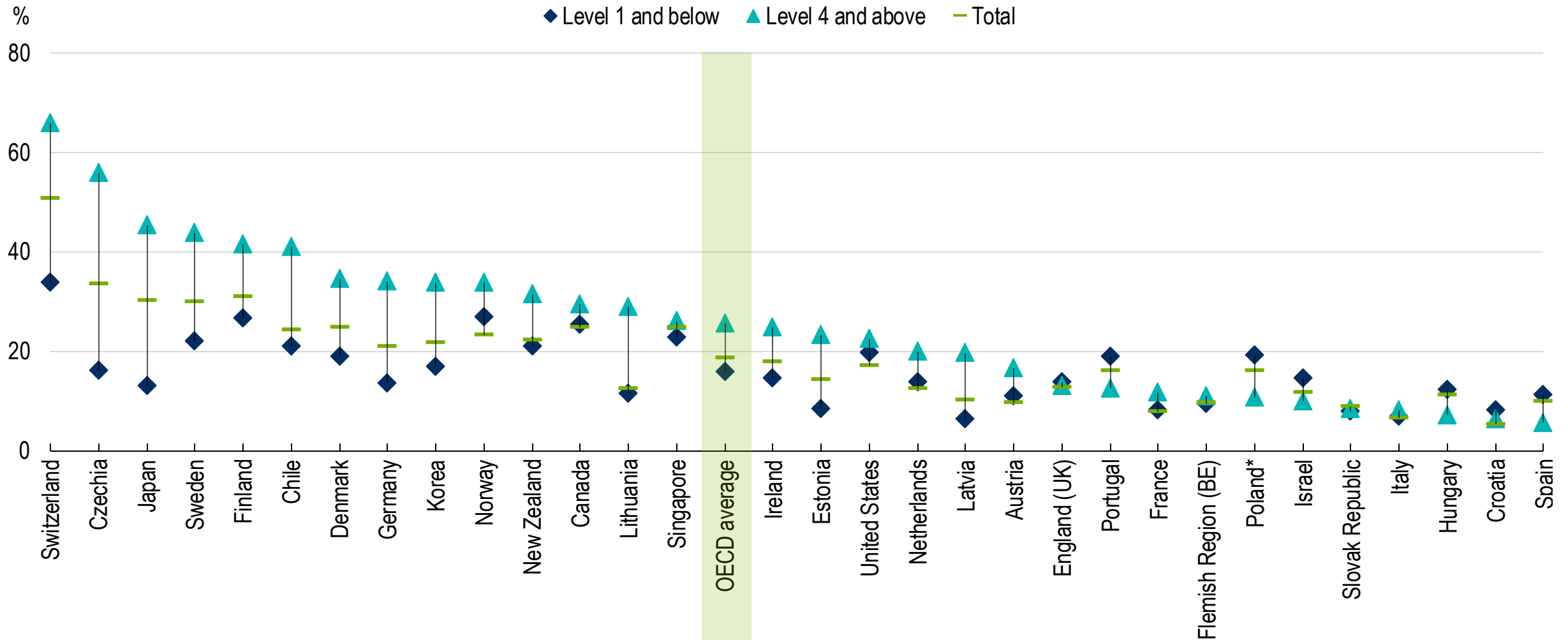




...and feel more able to influence political processes (but not everywhere)

Figure 4.11

Share reporting high political efficacy, by numeracy proficiency level

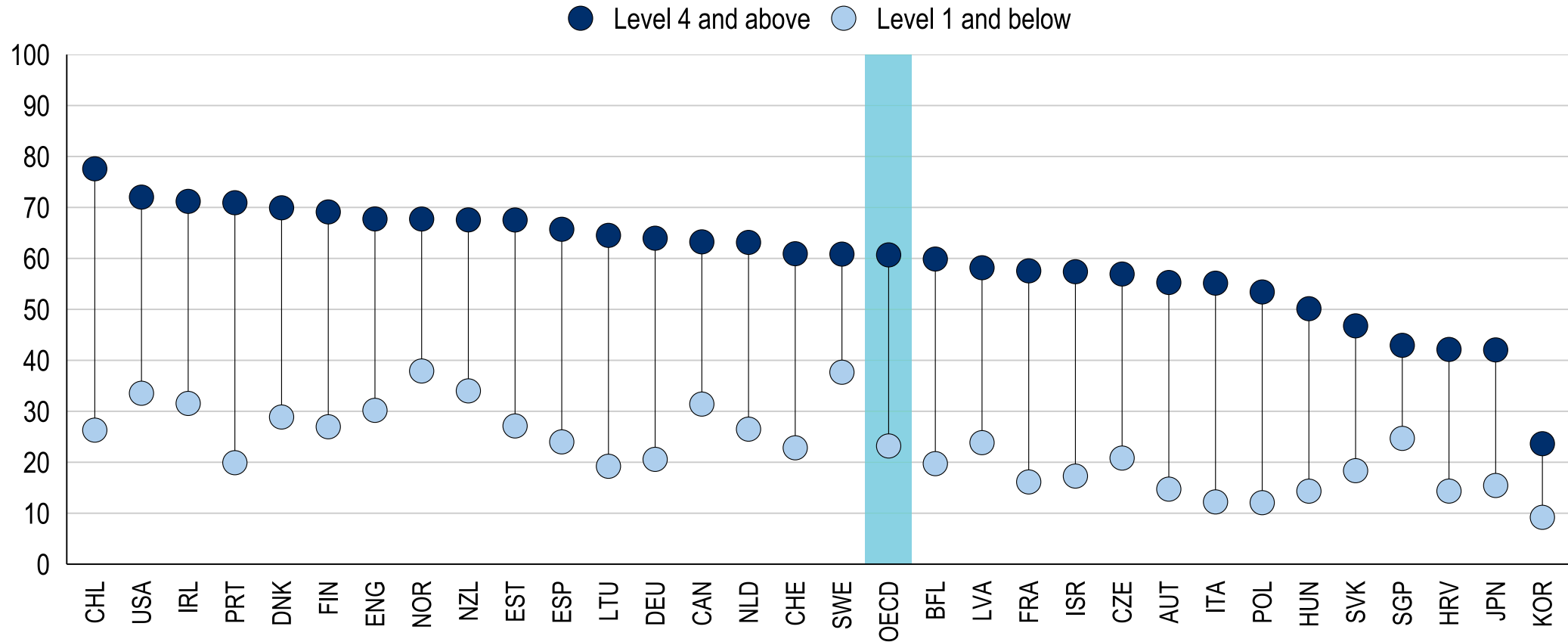




And participation gaps in adult learning remain large.

Figure 4.11

Adult learning participation rate by skill level, %



Note: Adults aged 25-65; formal and non-formal job-related learning in the 12 months prior to the survey.
OECD is an unweighted average of all participating member countries

Thank you

Anja Meierkord, Anja.Meierkord@oecd.org
Analyst, Directorate for Education and Skills

19.06.2025