

Bridging the Gap Between Formal Education and Functional Literacy

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Abstract

This paper addresses functional literacy as a key challenge in contemporary higher education, particularly within social science programmes. Functional literacy includes the ability to understand, interpret, critically evaluate, and apply information in academic, professional, and social contexts. Evidence from OECD PIAAC studies shows that formal education does not guarantee adequate levels of these competencies, as many adults, including tertiary graduates, do not reach the proficiency required for effective participation in complex environments.

The analysis focuses on Slovenia, where results indicate below-average performance compared to the OECD, with a significant share of adults at lower proficiency levels. Comparison with other countries confirms a broader regional pattern, while Finland represents a best-practice example with consistently high results. These findings highlight a persistent gap between formal qualifications and actual competencies, which is also reflected in higher education.

This gap is particularly relevant for social science graduates, whose work depends on text analysis, data interpretation, and critical thinking. However, higher education institutions often assume these skills rather than systematically developing them.

The paper proposes a systemic approach to embedding functional literacy across the curriculum, based on three pillars: early diagnostics, progressive development of skills within courses, and continuous institutional support. The model offers a structured framework for integrating functional literacy into teaching and improving alignment between graduate competencies and labour market needs.

The paper concludes that functional literacy should become a core, measurable outcome of higher education.

Keywords: functional literacy; higher education; social sciences; PIAAC; quality assurance; graduate competencies