

Informal, non-formal, formal – the effect of these learning environments on PIAAC key skills and occupational competence

Eduard Stöger & Jakob Peterbauer (Statistics Austria)

The given paper raises the question about the strength of effects of the different learning environments (informal, non-formal, formal) on the key skills that have been enquired into in the PIAAC framework, and focuses especially on the role of informal learning at the workplace. Moreover, the aim is to clarify the extent of significance assigned by people in paid work to this learning resource with regard to occupational knowledge and skills in relation to other learning environments. The empirical calculations were done by means of regression analyses. As results indicate, informal learning at the workplace has no correlation with literacy, numeracy and with problem-solving skills when taking into account the most relevant variables like formal educational attainment, age or family background. Within non-formal measures, only job-related learning activities play a statistically significant role, but due to their only small impact on proficiency, they are of minor importance.

The strongest correlation between learning environments and PIAAC key skills is reflected in formal learning, where people having passed a school-leaving examination show a distinct competitive edge compared to persons without such a certificate. Since the number of books available in the parental home also has a large impact on the proficiency in PIAAC, it is possible to speak of a socio-cultural determination, i.e. the influence of the parental home on the skill level is strong in Austria, both directly (by the number of books at home) and indirectly (by the level of school-leaving qualification). The exercise of reading and writing activities or numeracy activities in the workplace and in everyday life are important ways to develop and maintain proficiency in PIAAC skill domains, although this does not work to the extent of a higher level of educational attainment.

An analysis of the importance of different learning environments (with regard to occupational competence and not with respect to PIAAC key skills) from the workers' point of view shows a different picture: Most employed persons judge informal learning at the workplace as the most important learning environment, while formal and non-formal learning activities follow behind with approximately equal priority. Only people with a master/master craftsmen qualification and with a completed nursery diploma, respectively, attach the same level of importance for their occupational activities to the formal learning environment as well as to informal learning at the workplace. Since the meaning of informal learning at the workplace strongly diverges from the subjective assessment of the labour force and from regression results with regard to PIAAC key skills, we conclude that the skills enquired in the PIAAC survey correlate to a high extent with the first language, with social origin and with the level of educational attainment. However, the knowledge crucial for occupational competence is also acquired through informal learning. For this reason, PIAAC key skills are appropriate only to a limited extent to give evidence about the entire range of occupational skills and knowledge.

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