

Summary of the report

Preparatory adult education (FVU) and struggling readers in Denmark.

A quantitative analysis of participants at level 1 in reading at preparatory adult education (FVU).

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) 2016

Since 2000, FVU has been the most targeted initiative in Denmark to improve the reading skills of adults. ¹The need for FVU is emphasised by the fact that in 2013 the PIAAC survey showed that about one in six Danes between 16 and 65 years have such poor reading skills that they have difficulty reading simple texts. This corresponds to 569,000 people. The PIAAC results identify much more accurately the type of people who struggle with reading in Denmark. A natural follow-up to this knowledge is to examine how well FVU reading programmes reach the target group.

For the FVU reading, level 1 course, which is the most targeted reading programme for people struggling most with reading, the number of participants (unique persons) fell from 7,017 in 2006 to 5,813 in 2008. This number has since risen year-by-year, and in 2013 it amounted to 10,529 people.² Even though this is a clear growth in the activity, this is far from the number of struggling readers identified in PIAAC in 2011-2012.

Target group and design of the report

The report aims at decision-makers at various levels, from adult vocational education centres (VUC), which have operational responsibility for FVU, to the Ministry for Children, Education and Gender Equality, which has overall political-administrative responsibility for FVU. The report will also be interesting for the Ministry of Employment, not least with regard to the FVU initiative for the unemployed. Furthermore, the report aims at players interested in FVU such as *Lederforeningen for VUC* (management union for VUC) and the social partners. Finally, it is hoped that the report will contribute to the public debate and shed light on the serious social problem that many adults in Denmark are not good enough at reading to help their children with their homework, read a letter from public authorities or take part in written debates about important societal issues.

The study is designed such that it profiles who has participated in, and passed, FVU reading, level 1 in the years 2006-2014, and compares this user profile with the profile of struggling readers identified in the PIAAC survey in 2011-2012. This comparison illustrates how well FVU is reaching its target group. The study then examines in more detail the completion rate for FVU reading.

The following summarises the most important results of the study.

Main results regarding participant profile on FVU reading

FVU reading, level 1 has a participant profile which at educational level corresponds to the typical struggling reader in Denmark, but in terms of other parameters the participant profile does not correspond to the typical struggling reader. This applies especially with regard to ethnicity, but also with regard to gender, age and geography, and since 2010 also with regard to employment profile. In addition, the imbalance with regard to ethnicity and employment profile has become more pronounced over the past ten years.

¹The survey took place as part of the OECD Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and in Denmark included 7,328 participants between 16 and 65 years old. The participants were tested at home in reading, arithmetic and problem solving using IT.

²We have decided not to ignore the very low 5,174 for 2014, and this may be related to registration matters.

FVU reading reaches early school leavers

According to PIAAC, people with basic school as their highest level of education accounted for 51% of struggling readers in 2011-2012 (the Danish National Centre for Social Research - SFI 2013a). For comparison, the percentage at FVU with basic school as their highest level of education constituted between 54% and 61% in this period, with a slightly increasing trend from the beginning of the period to the end of the period. FVU reaches the target group relatively well with regard to the percentage of early school leavers. However, the percentage with a vocational training background is under-represented at FVU reading, level 1, and this difference has become larger over the years.

People of Danish origin are under-represented at FVU reading

Where PIAAC showed that 73% of struggling readers in 2011-2012 were of Danish origin, this percentage has been decreasing at FVU reading, level 1 over the years from 51% in 2006 to 30% in 2014. This development has been even more dramatic in terms of those who pass FVU reading, level 1, with a fall from 49% to 16%. Throughout the period, people of Danish origin have been significantly under-represented at FVU reading, level 1.

One in five immigrants at FVU reading has further and higher education

Where 2-4% of participants with a Danish background have further and higher education, this applies to 15-21% of participants with another ethnic background than Danish. This suggests that FVU reading, level 1 is used for groups whose greatest challenge is that they do not master the Danish language rather than that they have difficulty reading. Another EVA study has shown that many immigrants use FVU as a supplement to, and often simultaneously with, their Danish courses, even though Danish courses are not intended to be studied at the same time as FVU reading (EVA 2015).

Only few men at FVU reading

Where PIAAC showed that 55% of struggling readers in 2011-2012 were men, this percentage has been relatively stable at FVU reading over the years, from 40% in 2006 to 42% in 2014. Similarly, the study shows a relatively stable development with regard to those who have passed FVU reading, level 1, where the percentage was 38% in 2006 as well as in 2014. Men have been significantly under-represented at FVU reading, level 1 throughout the period.

Few 45-65-year-olds at FVU reading

Compared to PIAAC, the age distribution for participants at FVU reading, level 1 deviates significantly from the age distribution for struggling readers: Where 16-44-year-olds are overrepresented at FVU in all the years, 45-65-year-olds are under-represented with regard to the age profile of struggling readers. In all the years from 2006-2014, the age distribution at FVU is significantly different from the distribution for struggling readers according to PIAAC.

Geographical bias for FVU reading

The geographical distribution of struggling readers, see PIAAC, is not reflected in the FVU activity figures broken down by region. In the North Denmark Region and Region Zealand the percentage of participants at FVU reading, level 1 has been smaller in all the years than the percentage of struggling readers in all the regions, whereas the opposite applies for the Central Denmark Region and the Capital Region of Denmark. Until 2010, the Region of Southern Denmark had a high level of activity compared with the percentage of struggling readers in the region, but this activity has since been relatively low.

FVU reading has difficulty attracting employed people

Where people with jobs were overrepresented at FVU in 2008, they are significantly under-represented in 2012 and 2013. From 56% of participants in 2008, they only constituted 39% in 2013. For comparison, 52% of struggling readers were employed according to PIAAC. However, this development does not indicate that the number of employed people has fallen over the period in absolute terms. On the contrary, this period has seen an increase of 26% in the number of employed people at FVU. This is because the number of unemployed people at FVU has risen by even more, i.e. by almost 300%, and the number of people outside the labour market has risen by 120%. Even though it is positive that more unemployed people and people outside the labour market, e.g. students, are participating at FVU, the slow recruitment of employed people to FVU remains a challenge.

Strong readers also participate at FVU reading

Even though FVU reading is aimed at struggling readers, an analysis of the people who have participated in both PIAAC and FVU reading, level 1 shows that actually only about 50% of those who started at FVU reading, level 1 were struggling readers at levels 0 or 1. The rest of them were at level 2, corresponding to readers "around or below middle", or at level 3, corresponding to "strong readers". It is surprising that such a large proportion of participants at FVU reading, level 1 does not belong to the group of struggling readers.

Main results regarding completion at FVU reading

Passing FVU reading at level 1 is a stepping stone to more FVU

Three-quarters of the people who have passed the exam in connection with FVU reading, level 1 continue with FVU. A total of 43% continue with their second course with FVU reading at a higher level than level 1, primarily at level 2, whereas 14% continue with mathematics after having passed FVU reading, level 1.

The majority complete FVU reading at level 1 without an exam

In round figures, one in five participant completes FVU reading, level 1 by passing an exam, whereas three in five participants complete the course without an exam, and one in five drop out during the course. This pattern has been relatively stable since 2007.

From 2007 to 2013, between 21% and 28% passed FVU reading, level 1. This rose to 33% in 2014. Even though this is a positive development, a rather large percentage still do not complete the course with an exam. Women pass the exam to a slightly higher degree than men. Moreover, there are considerable variations between the regions: Where 21% passed FVU reading, level 1 in the North Denmark Region in 2014, 41% passed in the Capital Region of Denmark in the same year.

Many people take FVU reading, level 1 several times

Relatively many people start FVU reading, level 1 more than once: A total of 36% of participants started FVU reading, level 1 more than once, and of these 20% started twice and the final 16% started more than twice on the same course. Moreover, one in ten participants who pass FVU reading, level 1 have taken the course previously.

Most participants who have passed FVU reading, level 1 remain struggling readers

A total of 62% are at level 0 or 1, one to six years after they have passed FVU reading, level 1. This is shown in an analysis of the small group of people (n = 26) who passed FVU reading, level 1 in 2006-2010, and who were subsequently tested in PIAAC. This is not possible to explain on the basis of data, but it may be associated with the fact that these people have lost skills since completing FVU reading, level 1, e.g. because they have not maintained their reading skills. This may also indicate that completing FVU reading, level 1 does not necessarily improve reading skills to such a level that people are no longer considered struggling readers.