
DeSeCo Annual Report 1998

Background

The OECD program *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)* aims:

- To identify and define, through an interdisciplinary scientific approach in an international context, a set of the most relevant competencies that are vital for individuals to lead overall successful and responsible lives and for society to face the challenges of the present and the future.
- To advance the theoretical underpinnings of the measurement of skills and competencies, so that future construction of measures in the form of relevant indicators will be based on a refined and solid theoretical foundation.
- To provide reference points for the scientific validation of assessment indicators and for more accurate and appropriate interpretation of empirical results.
- To provide feedback regarding education policy.

DeSeCo is a three-year program, initiated at the end of 1997 and managed by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office with support from the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. The program is accompanied by an Advisory Group composed of international experts in the field of competencies. The Advisory Group holds semi-annual meetings to discuss the progress of DeSeCo and formulate future actions. Advisory Group meetings in June and November 1998 were extremely productive, and recommendations produced at the November meeting can be found in Annex A. Overall, the past year has seen exceptional progress in several DeSeCo activities.

1998 Activities

The initial undertaking of the DeSeCo program was an analysis of previous work in the OECD context determining and developing education outcome indicators. The examined projects included the Cross-Curricular Competencies Project, the International Adult Literacy Survey, and the Human Capital Indicators Project. In addition, several ongoing projects were briefly reviewed as well (ILSS, PISA, CCC Problem Solving, IEA Civic Education Study, TIMSS/TIMSS-R). Project documentation and interviews with key actors served as source material for the analysis, the result of which is the report *Projects on Competencies in the OECD Context: Analysis of Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (Doc. DeSeCo 98-2)

The authors found that while the projects all had related goals, their conceptual development was not bound by any overarching theoretical notions, and there was little organizational interaction among them. All three projects entertained a broad conception of competence and outcome indicators, as the notion of preparation for life has become a leading theme in the definition and selection process of outcome indicators. Ultimately though, all the projects relied on existing instruments, methodologies, and/or data and focused on the empirical measurement of competencies and the production of indicators. Further, this focus on measurement resulted in a reduced emphasis on understanding the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the competencies and the interrelations among them. However, the projects were enormously successful in presenting empirical evidence in the field of competency and in expanding interest in such projects to larger audiences.

The second activity under the DeSeCo program is an analysis of existing theoretical and conceptual approaches to concepts on competence. Professor Franz Weinert of the Max-Planck Institute in Munich has undertaken this activity from a psychological perspective, and a first draft of his paper, *Concepts on Competence*, is now available (Doc. DeSeCo 98-5).

The author examines different conceptions and definitions of the term competence, providing a glossary of commonly used terms. Several theoretically based definitions are examined, but ultimately no coherent system of overlap or symmetry is identified among the various psychological approaches. There follows a discussion of the theoretical and practical concerns that surround any attempt at conceptualizing an overarching notion of competence based on existing theories. From these issues several underlying criteria for developing a usable conception of competence are derived and suggestions and recommendations regarding next steps are offered.

Professor David L. Featherman and Professor John Carson of the University of Michigan have produced a commentary to the paper, examining the work from a sociological perspective. Professor Weinert is currently revising *Concepts on Competence* based on the commentary and on suggestions coming out of the DeSeCo Advisory Group meeting in November 1998, and will attend the next Advisory Group meeting in Spring 1999 to discuss the paper further.

The next phase of the DeSeCo program involves the production of five reports; each detailing a proposed set of competencies grounded in the theoretic and academic discipline of the author. The authors are to fully expound on the conceptualization of competence utilized and justify their approach theoretically at the level of the state-of-the-art, taking into account any available research-based empirical evidence underlying the importance of the proposed set of competencies. Professor Jürgen Baumert, Max-Planck-

Institut für Bildungsforschung, Berlin, Psychology; Professor Jean-Pierre Dupuy, CREA-Ecole polytechnique, Paris, Philosophy; Professor Jack Goody, St. John's College, Cambridge UK, Anthropology; Professor Richard J. Murnane, Harvard Graduate School of Education/APSP, Cambridge, USA (together with Professor Frank Levy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA), Economics; and Professor Philippe Perrenoud, Faculté de Psychologie, University of Geneva, Sociology, are currently preparing first drafts of their reports, to be available early in 1999. The first drafts will be circulated among the authors and the DeSeCo Advisory Group for commentary and feedback, which will be relayed to the authors for incorporation in the final versions. Once the papers have been finalized in Spring 1999 they will be commented upon by other academic experts and by non-academic experts from the policy arena.

Future Activities

An international symposium is currently being planned for Fall 1999 wherein *Concepts on Competence*, the five expert papers, and the various commentaries will be discussed extensively.

The four main questions to be examined by the symposium are:

- What do we mean by competence and competencies relevant on the individual and societal level?
- What are the key competencies needed for a successful life?
- How is a successful life defined?
- What is the relevance of these notions to policymakers?

The results of the international symposium will feed into the final DeSeCo activity, a country reporting process wherein the approaches taken to concepts of competence in individual nations will be examined. Once the country reporting process is completed a second international symposium will be held and a final report on the DeSeCo program produced.

January 15, 1999

Annex A: Suggestions from the November 1998 DeSeCo Advisory Group Meeting

The DeSeCo Advisory Group formulated the suggestions detailed below at the November 16-17, 1998 meeting held in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Specific proposals to the INES Steering Group are followed by those to other related organizations and projects. While these recommendations have not been officially conveyed to any group other than the INES Steering Group, DeSeCo believes that they will improve the overall quality of the DeSeCo program and enhance all the activities in the competence arena.

To the INES Steering Group:

- Support the recommendations to the OECD Secretariat, NWA and ILSS and other activities related to education outcomes
- Support the idea of a symposium to be held in 1999 focusing on the following four questions:
 - What do we mean by competencies and key competencies relevant on the individual and societal level?
 - What are the relevant key competencies for a successful life in a changing society?
 - What does a successful life mean?
 - What is the social, political and economic relevance of the answers to these questions?

To the OECD Secretariat:

- Support the recommendations to the INES Steering Group, NWA, and ILSS and other related activities
- Inform the CERI Governing Board and the Education Committee on the ongoing work of DeSeCo through annual reports from DeSeCo

To Network A:

- Support the ongoing work on conceptualization in the field of outcomes and outcome indicators, particularly by taking into account the results of DeSeCo in the course of their development work and by providing feedback to DeSeCo
- Institute DeSeCo as a permanent agenda item for network meetings, for the sake of information
- Provide an organized feedback and comments to DeSeCo about its work and products
- Post DeSeCo products on the NwA Internet site

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- Invite individual NWA members to react personally to DeSeCo activities and products through the NWA structure (i.e., officially through Eugene Owen or Andreas Schleicher)
 - Inform DeSeCo about any activities and developments related to its work

To the Life Skills group and other related activities (PISA, Life Long Learning, HCI, etc.):

- Support the ongoing work on conceptualization in the field of outcomes and outcome indicators, particularly by taking into account the results of DeSeCo in the course of their development work and by providing feedback to DeSeCo
- Institute DeSeCo as a permanent agenda item for ILSS group meetings, for the sake of information
- Provide feedback and comments to DeSeCo about its work and products
- Invite individual ILSS members to react personally to DeSeCo activities and products through the ILSS structure
- Inform DeSeCo about any activities and developments related to its work

To DeSeCo:

- Institute the discussion of related activities within INES/OECD (NWA, PISA, ILSS, etc.) as a permanent agenda item for Advisory Group meetings
- Produce an annual report on DeSeCo activities to be presented to the Education bodies in OECD.
- Institute the formulation of activity updates and suggestions as a permanent agenda item

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