
DeSeCo Annual Report 1999

Background

The OECD program *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)* is a four-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.

DeSeCo aims to:

- **advance the theoretical underpinnings of key competencies**

The project will work towards developing a common, overarching theoretical framework for the identification of relevant competencies. The program aims at identifying, in an international context, those competencies needed for individuals to lead an overall successful and responsible life and for society to face the challenges of the present and the future. To accomplish this, an interdisciplinary scientific approach has been chosen.

- **provide a reference point for indicator development and for interpretation of empirical results**

The work of the program will provide a resource for the process of defining and selecting key competencies, as well as for the development and understanding of measures aimed at producing relevant indicators of skills and competencies.

- **encourage an iterative process between conceptual and empirical work**

A final goal of the program is encouraging an iterative process between conceptual and empirical work. To this end, close linkages to INES activities in the domain of competence will be established and maintained.

1999 Activities

The past year was an important one for the DeSeCo program, as activities central to the program were successfully undertaken and completed.

The primary activity undertaken in 1999 was the production of five reports; each detailing a proposed set of competencies grounded in a different theoretic and academic discipline. The authors were to fully expound on their conceptualization of competence 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. The authors are:

- Monique Canto-Sperber, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France and Jean-Pierre Dupuy Ecole Polytechnique, Centre de Recherche en Epistémologie Appliquée, France, representing a philosophical perspective;
- Jack Goody, St. John’s College, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, representing an anthropological perspective;
- Helen Haste, University of Bath, United Kingdom, representing a psychological perspective;
- Frank Levy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, United States and Richard J. Murnane, Harvard University, United States, representing an economic perspective; and
- Philippe Perrenoud, University of Geneva, Switzerland, representing a sociological perspective.

A commenting process followed, wherein the expert reports were distributed among the authors, other academics, and participating leading representatives from various fields of society (e.g., economic, social, educational, and cultural sectors). A number of experts were asked to comment on the applicability and appropriateness of the reports in relation to their own field of expertise. The commentators included:

- M. Boediono, Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia;
- Carlo Callieri, Confindustria, Italy;
- Jacques Delors and Alexandra Draxler, Task Force on Education for the Twenty-first Century, UNESCO;
- Jean-Patrick Farrugia, Le Mouvement des Entreprises de France (MEDEF), France;
- Bob Harris, Education International;
- Robert Kegan, Harvard University, United States;
- George Psacharopoulos, University of Athens, Greece (formerly with the World Bank);
- Cecilia Ridgeway, Stanford University, United States;
- Laurell Ritchie, Canadian Auto Workers, Canada; and
- Leonardo Vanella, Centro de Estudios e Investigacion del Desarrollo Infante Juvenil, Argentina.

In October 1999, the DeSeCo Program held an international symposium in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. The symposium was the culmination of the program to date, as it was an opportunity to reflect on the first three activities of the DeSeCo Program. The first,

conducted in 1998, was an analysis of past indicator development in the domain of competencies within the OECD context. The second, also conducted in 1998, was an examination of existing notions of competence and an analysis of existing theoretical approaches to concepts of competence. This study was undertaken by Franz E. Weinert, Max-Planck-Institute for Psychological Research, Germany. The third, and primary activity, involved the creation of the expert reports and the subsequent commenting process detailed above.

The symposium brought together the authors of the scientific reports and commentaries with additional scientists, representatives of leading economic and social institutions, and policymakers (60 persons). The symposium represented a compromise between a large-scale public congress and an intimate discussion among experts and was a success in:

- creating an international network of highly competent scientists and experts representing different disciplines and social fields interested in collaborating and working towards an overarching, conceptual framework for identifying key competencies;
- increasing the awareness and discussion of the issues inherent in dealing with questions of competencies and their measurement; and
- clarifying which avenues will be particularly fruitful for further work in this area.

An overview of the symposium discussions, including brief synopses of the expert papers, can be found in Annex A.

Future Activities

The expert reports, comments, and contributions associated with the symposium, together with a synthesis of the symposium results, will be published in the form of a book in Fall 2000. In addition, a chapter will be prepared for the INES September 2000 General Assembly Compendium.

DeSeCo is not simply an academic operation, but is embedded in the development strategies of the overall OECD INES Program for the next decade. DeSeCo aims to lay the foundations for future choices on what would be important and rewarding directions for the development of future indicators. Such foundations can be validly constructed only by taking social and educational policies into account, as defining and selecting key competencies is a process that partly relies on negotiations and consensus building among various social actors. With this in mind, DeSeCo will initiate a country contribution process in the second half of 2000. A small number of countries will be invited to provide information on attempts at defining and selecting key competencies within their national context along with their reactions to the work of the DeSeCo Program. The subsequent report will provide information on the mechanisms of negotiation and consensus

building, and on national and cultural variability in defining and selecting key competencies.

Additional complementary expert opinions will also be commissioned in order to specify key competencies for relevant social fields.

Finally, a second international symposium is currently scheduled for September 2001. This symposium will be an opportunity to discuss the results of the country contribution process and the complementary studies mentioned above. Remaining questions will be outlined and possible promising avenues discussed.

Annex A: Overview of the Symposium Discussions

I. What are competencies? What is meant by this concept?

F. E. Weinert from the Max-Planck-Institute concludes that in the social sciences there is no unitary use of the concept of competence, no broadly accepted definition and no unifying theory. He, therefore, recommends a pragmatic approach constraining the use of the concept of competence with some more or less explicit, plausible and scientifically acceptable criteria analogous to the concept of intelligence. He recommends that the concept of competence should include cognitive components and that it should be used only when learning processes are a necessary condition for the acquisition of prerequisites for successful mastery of complex demands.

II. Why do we need competencies?

The definition and selection of individual skills as key competencies is directed by normative assumptions about individual quality of life and ideas of what kind of society we imagine/desire/not desire. It has become very clear that defining and selecting key competencies for a successful life cannot be restricted to an academic discussion. The answers largely depend on political and ethical choices. Among the different viewpoints and approaches there is a strong general commitment to so-called democratic values in the sense that the proposed sets focus on learned skills and claim competencies for all. Its meaning in different fields of life, however, is most likely less consensual and will need to be further discussed.

III. Theoretical models of competence

An interdisciplinary approach seemed to be most promising for addressing the issues at stake. This implied examining different theoretical models and highlighting different concepts colored by different disciplines. Among the underlying theoretical arguments put forward by various disciplines, there are theoretical elements/models (e.g. concept of social fields in reference to Bourdieu and introduced by Perrenoud, the Tool User Model proposed by Helen Haste) that show promise for contributing to identifying key competencies and eventually constructing a coherent frame of reference relevant/useful/meaningful for different disciplines and applicable both within and between different national contexts.

IV. What are the key competencies needed to lead an overall successful life?

Various sets of key competencies deduced from different theoretical and normative backgrounds were proposed and discussed, reflecting different discipline-oriented viewpoints:

The answers Levy and Murnane provide come closest to the current framework of knowledge and skills at the OECD. Levy and Murnane use relevant economic theory and

available empirical results, as well as their own research with hiring practices of high-performance firms, to identify those competencies that predict economic success and individual income. These competencies include reading and mathematical skills (not only for their instrumental use but as the basis for life-long learning); oral and written communication abilities; skills to work productively in different social groups; emotional intelligence and related abilities to co-operate well with other people; and familiarity with information technology.

Helen Haste emphasizes the importance of cultural and sociolinguistic processes in her approach. Her analysis is applied through three different psychological models of human competence, the Puzzle Solver model, the Story Teller model, and the Tool User model. Based on these models the author first identifies the management of the tension between innovation and continuity as an overarching meta-competence. From there she details five broad areas of key competence: using technology; dealing with ambiguity and diversity; finding and sustaining community links; managing motivation and emotion; and the competence to focus on morality, responsibility, and citizenship.

Philippe Perrenoud focuses his analysis on the average individual and the competencies needed for that person to freely exercise his or her autonomy within society. Based on Bourdieu's concept of social fields, Perrenoud identifies competencies that are transversal across different fields. These competencies include being able: to identify and evaluate one's resources, rights and limits; to form and conduct projects and develop strategies, individually and collectively; to analyze situations and relationships systematically; to co-operate, act in synergy and share leadership; to build and operate democratic organizations and systems of collective action; to manage and resolve conflicts; to play with rules, using and elaborating them; and to construct negotiated orders over and above cultural differences.

Informed by their respective fields of moral philosophy and philosophy of mind Monique Canto-Sperber and Jean-Pierre Dupuy first discuss their conceptions of man and of society. Based on these conceptions the authors then identify five broad dimensions of competence that are needed to achieve the good life, which they define generally in terms of success in life at home, life in the economy, and life in political society. More specific competencies and skills can be located at various points across the dimensions, which are competencies for coping with complexity, perceptive competencies, normative competencies, cooperative competencies, and narrative competencies.

Finally, Jack Goody analyses the issue of measurement, the role of schooling in competency development, and the need to include the developing world in any conception of competence. His approach is ethnographic, focusing on the context of practice wherein any competence is inevitably applied. Ultimately, he is quite skeptical about identifying necessary or desired competencies within any one country, let alone

across cultures and societies, due to the enormous variety of social and cultural contexts that must be taken into account

It is quite obvious: the expert papers are very heterogeneous. Nevertheless, three of the authors agree to some degree in the identification of general, abstract competencies and key competencies. There seems to be a broad agreement about some general areas of competence such as joining, forming and functioning in groups; the management of innovation, continuity and complexity; a positive self concept; and autonomy in the sense of reflective action and critical thinking. There is, however, still a need for further analytical work in order to extract general statements, recognizable problems and associated questions.