

Definition and Selection of Competencies

DeSeCo Symposium

Neuchâtel, October 13-15, 1999

Background Note

Definition and Selection of Competencies:
Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)

DeSeCo SYMPOSIUM

Neuchâtel, October 13–15, 1999

The Swiss Federal Statistical Office, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education are jointly convening an international symposium on the definition and selection of competencies.

Context

Rapid changes in economic, social, and political life, including those related to the advent of new technologies and on-going globalization, pose major challenges in today's world. Individuals, communities, work organizations and nations increasingly recognize that their future well-being depends on high levels of knowledge, skills and competencies. This recognition, together with an increased focus on the outcomes of education, has led policymakers to seek information about the skills and competencies of the population and about the effects of education, training and informal learning on those skills.

To inform the policy-making process, OECD is developing internationally comparable indicators of skills and competencies, and of their roles in promoting individual, social, and economic well-being. To this end, OECD Member countries are collaborating on the development of a range of instruments designed to deliver reliable and policy-relevant measures on education outcomes and on the distribution of skills and competencies in the population. These efforts recognize that the desired outcomes of education are broader than the acquisition of subject-related knowledge typically taught in school and that the idea of competencies extends beyond the school context.

While the development of the empirical components of these efforts is well underway, there is a clear need to further advance the theoretical underpinning of the assessment of skills and competencies. As a contribution to such work, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office has launched, within the framework of the OECD indicators project, a three-year program, entitled *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)*.

The international symposium will be an opportunity to reflect on the first three activities of the DeSeCo Program. The first was an analysis of past indicator development in the domain of competencies within the OECD context. The second was an examination of existing notions from different perspectives such as philosophy, sociology, economics, anthropology and psychology as well as an analysis of existing theoretical approaches to concepts of competence. The third and largest activity is the identification and definition of theoretically-based sets of relevant competencies.

Main Discussion Topics

The definition and selection of competencies is a complex process that can be addressed from multiple disciplinary, theoretical, and cultural perspectives. The symposium will focus on the following topics:

1. What is meant by the notions of competence, key competencies, skills? Although these terms have become fashionable in both scientific and policy domains, different meanings and vague usage have led to much conceptual confusion. A common terminology is therefore a prerequisite for communication in an interdisciplinary and international context.
2. What conceptions about the nature of human beings and society should serve as a starting point for the identification of relevant competencies needed by individuals to lead a successful and responsible life in a modern democratic society, and for society to face the challenges of a changing and often conflictual world? What are the underlying normative criteria for defining competencies? Is there a common denominator among the different viewpoints on this issue?
3. To what extent is it possible to arrive at an identification of key competencies independent of culture, age, gender, status, professional activity, etc.? How do these factors affect the conceptualization of key competencies?
4. Which competencies are necessary for understanding and acting in different fields of life – including economic, political, social, and family domains; public and private interpersonal relations; individual personality development, etc.? How can the identified competencies be described and theoretically justified?
5. Do competencies operate independently, or should they be viewed as an interdependent set? In either case, how do the identified competencies relate to each other?
6. What is the relevance of these notions for policymakers and for future research endeavours? What is the role of social institutions in transferring the competencies to the population? What are potential approaches towards operationalizing the competencies?

In preparation for the symposium, these topics are being addressed from various academic viewpoints including philosophy, sociology, economics, anthropology, and psychology. A few internationally renowned scientists have been asked to propose sets of most relevant competencies grounded in their theoretical background (see section 6. Documentation). Other experts, including representatives of the economic world, and other policy and social spheres will contribute their knowledge and experience through a commentary on the scientists' work.

Objectives

The symposium will broaden the circle of experts by bringing together the current authors of scientific papers and commentaries with additional scientists, representatives of leading economic and social institutions, and policymakers. It will provide a forum for debate, exploration, and reflection; it has been designed to facilitate dynamic interaction among the varied participants that will stimulate innovative and creative approaches to the topics.

The purpose of the symposium is to advance the theoretical foundations for the identification of relevant competencies, taking into account the social and economic environment. The main convergences and divergences among the different approaches to competencies will be identified.

The symposium will work towards developing a common, overarching theoretical framework for the identification of most relevant competencies that can provide a basis for more accurate and appropriate measurement of competencies and interpretation of empirical results. Finally, the symposium will identify areas for additional inquiry and clarification.

Participation

Participants will include leading scientific experts, representatives of industry, business, education, and public administration, and policy-makers. Participation will be limited to 60 persons.

Participants will present ideas and interact with each other through panels and group discussions. The working language for the symposium will be English.

Further details on the organization of the symposium can be found in the draft agenda.

Products

The various expert reports, commentaries, and the results of the symposium will lead to two publications planned for release in Fall, 2000.

The expert reports, commentaries, and contributions at the symposium will be published in a volume addressed mainly to the research and scientific community. A second volume addressed mainly to policymakers will be prepared for the INES General Assembly, scheduled for late 2000. It will include a synthesis of the symposium results, a summary of the expert reports, and an analysis of potential implications for future work related to competence.

Documentation

The following contributions produced within the OECD program *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (DeSeCo) are included in the briefing material and will form an initial input for the symposium:

- Swiss Federal Statistical Office (1999), *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo), Background Paper, 2nd revision*, Neuchâtel.
- Laura H. Salganik, Dominique S. Rychen et al. (1999), *Projects on Competencies in the OECD Context: Analysis of Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations*, SFSO, OECD, ESSI, Neuchâtel.
- Franz E. Weinert (April 1999), *Concepts of Competence*, Max-Planck-Institute for Psychological Research, Munich.
- Monique Canto-Sperber, Jean-Pierre Dupuy (May 1999), *Competencies for the Good Life and the Good Society, A Philosophical Perspective*, GRISE, Ecole Polytechnique, Paris.
- Jack Goody (May 1999), *Education and Competences, An Anthropological Perspective*, St John's College, Cambridge.
- Helen Haste (June 1999), *Competencies; Psychological Realities, A Psychological Perspective*, University of Bath, Bath.
- Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane (May 1999), *Are there Key Competencies Critical to Economic Success?, An Economics Perspective*, MIT and Harvard University, Boston.
- Philippe Perrenoud (May 1999), *The key to social Fields: Essay on the Competencies of an Autonomous Actor, A Sociological Perspective*, University of Geneva, Geneva
- Various Authors (September 1999), *Contributions from the Commenting Process*, Compiled by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Neuchâtel.

Logistical Information

The symposium will take place at the lakeside *Hotel Beau-Rivage*, a beautifully restored historic building located in the heart of Neuchâtel, which is mid-way between the Geneva and Zurich airports. A numbered map of Neuchâtel is enclosed for convenience.

There are direct trains leaving every hour from the Geneva (1 1/2hr) and Zurich (2 1/4hr) airports to Neuchâtel (see enclosed train schedule). The hotel can easily be reached from the Neuchâtel train station (see map; 9A) by taxi or bus (No. 6 to Place de Pury) within a few minutes.

Registration will take place on October 13 from 11:00 AM to 3:30 PM at the Hotel Beau-Rivage (see map; 3A).

The opening session of the symposium will be held in the Castle of Neuchâtel (Le Château), the seat of the cantonal Government. The Castle (see map; 24A) can be reached from the Hotel Beau-Rivage within 15 minutes by foot.

A number of guest rooms have been reserved at the following two hotels:

Hotel Beau-Rivage **** (see map; 3A)
Esplanade du Mont-Blanc 1
2000 Neuchâtel
Switzerland
Phone: +41(0)32 723 15 15
Fax: +41(0)32 723 16 16
<http://www.beau-rivage-hotel.ch/f/>
email: reception@beau-rivage-hotel.ch

Hotel Touring au Lac *** (see map; 9A)
1, Place Numa-Droz
2001 Neuchâtel
Switzerland
Phone: +41(0)32 725 55 01
Fax: +41(0)32 725 82 43
email: touring.au.lac@worldcom.ch

All fees relating to the DeSeCo symposium can be settled at the Hotel Beau-Rivage. Fees will include accommodations, meals, and symposium materials as follows:

- The standard fee of SFR 225 will apply to all participants for lunches on October 14 and 15, dinner, including drinks and apero, on October 13, and symposium documentation.
- For those staying at the Hotel Beau-Rivage, the charge for room and breakfast on October 13 and 14 is SFR 180 per night for a standard room, and SFR 240 per night for a double room. Participants wishing to extend their stay at the Hotel Beau-Rivage should add an additional SFR 190 per night for a standard room (without breakfast).
- Those staying at the Hotel Touring will be charged SFR 90 per night for accommodations and breakfast.

Further Information

Further information on the symposium, the symposium program or the DeSeCo Program in general will be provided by the DeSeCo Secretariat:

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