

Netherlands

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This report was prepared as part of the Country Contribution Process (CCP) conducted by the DeSeCo Project (*Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations*). The CCP was designed to identify and describe national initiatives regarding the measurement and relevance of competencies in different areas of society--among them, policy, business, civil society, and education.

Further information on the CCP can be found on DeSeCo's web page: <http://www.deseco.admin.ch>

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1 Goals and Procedures of the Country Contribution Process

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences in the Netherlands has decided to contribute to the Country Contribution Process in the DeSeCo Project. In general the main goals of DeSeCo have been underlined as important.

A central issue of the DeSeCo Program is that the definition and selection of key competencies is largely a process of negotiation among various stakeholders. National input into the process is the next step if a country-wide consensus concerning key competencies is to be reached. Such a consensus is a prerequisite if resources are to be committed downstream to assessments based on the DeSeCo conclusions. As a result, the success of DeSeCo will critically depend on the active engagement of as many countries as possible in the activities. The Netherlands agrees with this point of view.

The Netherlands is interested in participating in the Country Contribution Process (CCP), as in the long run DeSeCo cannot be simply an academic operation, but should be embedded in the development strategies of the overall OECD/INES Program for the next decade. DeSeCo should aim to lay a foundation for choosing important and rewarding directions for the development and interpretation of future indicators of key competencies. Such a foundation cannot be validly constructed without taking account of the social and educational policy perspective.

The Netherlands considers the CCP as an opportunity to reflect on national initiatives identifying and measuring key competencies in an international context. Furthermore, through this activity links between national initiatives and the international development of indicators have been enhanced indeed.

2 Procedure and Tasks

The Netherlands have decided to participate through organising a workshop. Thus the national coordinator—in cooperation with the DeSeCo CCP Coordinator—has been responsible for organizing the CCP activity.

The national coordinator has invited a group of key players representing different arenas from education policy, employers, trade unions and scientific research to participate in the CCP by attending a one-day workshop and providing input during and after it.

The participants included :

Labour market

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Policy

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At the workshop, selected main findings and issues of DeSeCo have been briefly presented. Based on the guiding questions the participants have made introductory statements about their own experiences and perspectives related to defining and selecting key competencies.

A discussion has followed on how key competencies are negotiated, defined, and selected in various sectors and in national contexts.

Drawing on the participants in the workshop have been asked to provide a short written statement covering some or all of the questions that were considered relevant at the workshop

These statements have been used in conjunction with the workshop minutes by the DeSeCo CCP Coordinator in drafting this country summary report of the workshop.

3 Answers to the Guiding Questions

The workshop closely followed the proposed questions, though not always an answer could be matched to the formulated question. In this presentation of the discussion we have—for the ease of close comparison between countries-- repeated the question, followed by the statements by the participants.

In the Netherlands three goals in education are distinguished:

1. development of personality,
2. development as responsible citizen
3. preparation for the labour market.

Especially in the last decade we see much more flexibility of work and overlap between the domains of work, leisure time and personal spheres. This implies that many competencies that are useful or necessary at the work place also will be developed or used in personal situations and *vice versa*. It thus becomes difficult to distinguish between competencies that are exclusively relevant for work, while others are only relevant for personal situations. Examples are: ICT competencies at work and at home; networking, parents negotiating with school boards or with hospitals for treatment.

Clearly competencies is presently a „buzz word“ and applied to many different situations. Thus it is not easy to get an overall picture and sort out those situations only that are relevant for DeSeCo purposes. We have for instance not extended our search for relevant information to the domain of the ISO Certification issues, where usually very detailed issues about required knowledge and competencies is formulated. Also we have not attempted to overview competencies in the world of labour market mediating institutions with specific information on competencies to match job characteristics.

A last general remark can be made on the tension between general and specific competencies. Trade unions presently emphasize the need to develop specific job competencies and skills that can be traded on the labour market. More general competencies as „networking“ have been emphasized from employer's side.

3.1 Which Key Competencies?

1. *Which competencies (or sets of competencies) have been identified or discussed as necessary for individuals to cope with important demands and challenges in particular social arenas (such as the political and civic sphere, business and labor, family) or for a successful life in general? Please focus on developments in the sector you work in.*

The competencies that are identified by the Council for Youth Policy as necessary for young people to cope with the demands and challenges are:

- Self steering: develop self-steering and self-learning capacities
- Self confidence: be confident and set the direction
- Communication: operate under different circumstances, use different alternatives for action, play different roles
- Problem solving: list different possibilities, select options for choice, be aware of the consequences
- Engagement: treat others respectfully, have compassion and be loyal
- Commitment: co-operate with others to find creative solutions.

Employers approach key competencies from the frame of employability. Employability is the chance to get and to keep work. Employability is the responsibility of the employee, but the employer can stimulate employability by offering facilities. In that respect it is a joint responsibility. Competencies are the ability to act adequately. It is an important concept because it forces one to make competencies visible so evaluation becomes possible. Relevant key competencies are:

- instrumental key competencies: to create or do something
- problem solving ability: to evaluate situations and to respond and act adequately
- flexibility: to adept to new situations easily and quickly
- co-operating: teamwork

In addition the competencies distinguished in the IALS en the ALL studies have been reviewed by the Dutch National Coordinator (Houtkoop) and these are seen as highly relevant for evaluation purposes.

2. *Are some of the key competencies identified/discussed specifically related to different periods in life and age groups or are they universally applicable? Which ones? Please explain.*

Employers distinguish career related competencies:

- able to be responsible for one's own career planning
- learning potential: able to acquire absent skills

In recent studies on the relation between education and the labour market focus on three sets of key competencies:

- Context specific competencies that can be learned at school and that give individuals a comparative advantage in fulfilling specific types of jobs. One may think of vocational,

occupational, study field and or discipline specific skills. These competencies are crucial to be selected for a job and to give an effective economic contribution to the firm that offers the job.

- Competencies which are important for further career steps, but can more effectively be acquired when working than at school. An example is management skills.
- Competencies which are important to acquire new skills effectively. One may think of general academic competencies like analytical competencies, reflective thinking, learning abilities, power of concentration, written communication skills. These competencies are of crucial importance to learn effectively at school and to acquire during later stages of the career the lacking knowledge and skills which are necessary to meet new demands of the job, the career and society.

The initial stages of the school career are of crucial importance to acquire the first and third set of competencies. The second type of competencies is by definition of more importance during later stages of the working life. In the era of lifelong learning the third type of competencies must be present during the whole working career.

The competencies defined above are of such a general nature that they are of importance independently of the country concerned. It is important to define above mentioned functional roles of competencies in order to being able to identify what skills has to be learned in initial education to have a good preparation for working life, and what skills formally or informally can better be trained later.

3. *Are some of the key competencies identified/discussed considered to be specifically important in your country as compared with other countries? Which ones? Why?*

This issue has not been discussed at length. But it has been noted that countries differ with respect to a more general education philosophy, that matches with the national culture. So in some countries students are for instance expected to develop autonomous behaviour and critical thinking, while in other countries or cultures this is not directly seen as a virtue.

4. *What is the rationale, in your national and professional context, for identifying and selecting key competencies that would match present and future needs in society and the economy?*

This issue has not been discussed explicitly

5. *To what extent do the identified/discussed key competencies correspond to DeSeCo's three generic key competencies¹?*

An overlap exists of the key competencies mentioned by the employers and the three core competencies defined by DeSeCo. However, employers are convinced that the context is of decisive importance to make these core competencies more alive.

Above mentioned division into three sets of competencies identified in recent research can be seen as complementary to the division into three categories as proposed by DeSeCo. They don't necessarily exclude each other.

3.2 Assessment, Indicators and Benchmarking

In establishing a system of assessment one has to distinguish positive and negative effects.

Positive are:

- identification of groups at risk
- measuring the efficacy of training and education
- humanistic effect meaning that the assessment is accepted as an appropriate measure for a person's set of competencies, if this is not reflected in a diploma or certificate.

Negative are:

- testing only identified competencies and the focus and training of testable competencies
- negative labeling and classification of groups at risk

Furthermore it remains to be seen whether all identified competencies can be benchmarked. Can standards and levels be established for civic knowledge, networking of self-concept?

Depending on the purpose of the assessments it may be useful to separate the functions into three levels:

1. the macro level: comparing between societies, countries, education systems or cultures;
2. an intermediate level for within country comparisons between schools, organisations or sectors of industry
3. the micro level of individuals.

The general attitude in the workshop was that it would be very useful to develop the sets of competencies and the indicators on the macro and intermediate level. The legal and psychological implications on the individual micro, however, are presently very unclear, so development of practice at this level is not suggested.

Also the issues at stake ask for refinement of the criterion against which the indicators can be benchmarked. Is the goal to relate the competencies to aspects of the labour market (income, position, job security, autonomy) or to aspects of personal life (good health, the family, happiness or The Good Life). This issue is not irrelevant for the final selection of competencies in DeSeCo.

1. *When measuring educational and training outcomes and evaluating the meaning of learning outcome indicators in your country, are overarching key competencies considered important? If yes, which ones?*

Although no overall assessment was made of the key competencies acquired, some conclusions can be drawn with regard to competencies mentioned in educational policies.

Self steering and self confidence

Possibilities for self-steering in the education are limited. It is expected that the new approach in upper secondary education, where students work independently on assignments and plan their own work, will improve the situation.

Situations in school and at home are potentially in conflict: while a high degree of self-steering is expected at school, for many pupils prevails obedience at home. Higher educated persons have a higher potential for self steering than lower educated ones, their capacities for social, cultural and leisure time activities are better developed.

Communication and problem solving

Children from low educated parents have no strong relationship with the schools. They enter as educationally disadvantaged pupils, and are very likely to lag behind the other pupils during their whole school career. And after finishing school, they have usually a lower job and a lower income.

Immigrant pupils who master Dutch, are in a school with predominantly native Dutch pupils and are supported at home, have a fair chance for a good school career, and therefore higher paid jobs and better income.

Early school leavers are potential dregs of society. Everything must therefore been done to prevent early school leaving.

Lower educated persons have less employment opportunities. Children from low SES-parents are less well off in education, in employment but also in services provided to the community.

Engagement and commitment

It seems as if the school does not develop enough countervailing powers to the increasing degree of individuality in society. Although initiatives have been developed (such as the extended school days), a more drastic change in educational culture and organisation is required.

Higher educated persons are better in networking than lower educated ones, have better opportunities for participation.

Pupils that have strong ties with the school are also more committed to society; the same is true for pupils that attach great importance to school results, school career and extra-curricular activities.

Low performing pupils flock together with birds of the same feather, and as a group they fall into deviant behaviour and social crime.

In vocational education, qualification standards are often a calibration for work domains, especially the instrumental competencies for the professional practice function as calibrations. For the lower educated employees personal competencies are becoming more important, for the higher educated employees the specific competencies directed at the profession remain of great importance.

In the intermediate vocational education system studies are well defined on the basis of occupational competency/qualification profiles. These profiles are very specific and don't have a uniform format; key skills are underexposed, especially those meant for personal and social development.

2. *Could you relate qualification standards and assessment practices in the business world (e.g. hiring and evaluating employees) and other social fields to key competencies? If so, which ones? How?*

In the evaluation systems the internal consistency *in* the company is of greater importance than the external consistency among companies. A completely consistent evaluation system does not exist, because the evaluation is mostly carried out by people from the own company.

3. *When participating in international comparative studies on student outcomes and life skills, are there indications in your country of an increased interest in key competencies by policymakers? Are there competency areas in which it would seem especially important for your country to be benchmarked against others?*

Researchers see a growing interest into key skills, for instance those for social development and civics. Personally, I am very interested in international comparative research into the sets of competencies defined by me above. Especially on the effectiveness of the ET systems of the countries involved to produce them.

3.3 Public Debate: Negotiating and Legitimizing

1. *In the last decade, has there been a public and/or professional debate in your country on key competencies in different arenas and social fields (politics, civil society, economics, business, labor, mass media and communication, education)? What are the main topics being addressed? What is the relationship between education and key competencies? Has the debate spanned different arenas and social fields?*

Several educational programmes are geared towards the enhancement of key competencies, especially for educationally disadvantaged children. (Knelpunten in het stedelijk jeugdbeleid, Social and Cultural Reports). Detailed negotiations on relevant goals can usually be seen at the very beginning of such programmes. But after agreement on the goals usually much less discussion is directed to the specification of the detailed competencies. Most of these programmes are part of the local policy to help educationally disadvantaged children.

The community school

The community schools (brede scholen) are offering after school activities for pupils, in cooperation with other institutions in the neighbourhood. The aim of the community school is to stimulate the social participation, the citizenship of pupils in a democratic society, the participation in social institutions and to take the required responsibility. Cognitive and social competencies are the means to this aim.

Early childhood education

Special programmes are encouraging the parents of especially educational disadvantaged children to participate in early childhood education. It is believed that participation in these programmes will contribute to the linguistic and cognitive development of the children and reduce the chance at social outcasting, fringe grouping and deviant behaviour.

Going to school together

This programme creates places for children with special educational needs in regular schools. In this programme much attention is paid to the social-cognitive development of the children, both with and without special educational needs.

Extended school days

Schools are offering activities outside school hours, for at least one day a week for several months. These activities are related to the school programme. The aim of these activities is to enhance the key competencies and to increase the social attachment and social participation.

The safe school

The aim of the ‘safe school’ (veilige school) campaign is to create a feeling of safety in the school and to prevent early drop out. This goal is reached by activating pupils participation within and outside the schools lessons, to train the key competencies of pupils, to provide more guidance for the pupils and to establish clear rules in the school, that are adhered to by all in the school community.

Prevention of early school leaving

Early school leaving is one of the major reasons for deviant behaviour later in life. Therefore schools will have a strict school attendance policy, registration of drop outs and ‘back to school’ or ‘get to work’ programmes for early school leavers.

According to the employers

- the debate has concentrated on the question what competencies really are and how one should integrate competencies in the practice of education in the broadest sense of the word, including general education, vocational education, learning on the job and in the practice of the incentive structure of wages, salaries and bonuses.
- feel a tense discussion on the importance of personal versus job-related competencies in the educational debate. Employers fear that a too strong emphasis on the personal competencies will lead to too general and opaque vocational education.
- they agree on the three aims of vocational education: personal, societal and job-related. However, criticism on vocation education that it should concentrate too much on the labour market and neglect the other two aims are unjustified. Employers argue that the all three aims can be integrated in one vocational education, and don't need to be taught separately.

Intensified by discussions about the evaluation of the Law on Vocational Training and Adult Education, the following topics emerged:

- The optimal width of the occupational domain of a vocational study. Which key skills determine the width of the domain? How can productivity in the occupational domain be valued against the flexibility and risks in the labour market?
- The optimal combination in the curriculum of vocational skills and general academic skills. Are these skills generated as substitutes or complements in the learning process?
- The optimal spread of the generation of key skills over individual's life and the resulting tasks for initial education.

2. *Would you see, in the field you are coming from, relatively consensual or controversial positions regarding the definition and selection of key competencies? Could you describe the most influential positions? Who are the main actors and stakeholders? Given your professional background and expertise, which position would you take? Could you put forward your arguments?*

This issue has not been discussed explicitly.

3. *Are there mechanisms in place to define, negotiate, and select 'what really matters' in terms of key competencies? Are these negotiating procedures and decision-making processes on the agenda of educational, social, or economic policies?*

Representatives of business and education debate with each other on these issues, especially in the areas of adult education and vocational training. The potential negotiations and opposing views are mediated by institutionalising the discussions. So specific councils or bodies have been established to regulate these discussions.

4. *Would you see a sufficiently legitimate basis for establishing priorities of indispensable key competencies in your national and professional context? If yes, which ones? If no, why not?*

This issue has not been discussed explicitly.

3.4 Key Competencies and Education

1. *Is the definition and selection of key competencies an issue in your country when discussing, for example, goal setting and the curriculum of the educational system, training at the work place, or life-long learning strategies? What prospects are envisaged? What are the expectations?*

The foundations for acting adequately in the labour market, should be developed in primary and secondary school firstly. Basic skills like reading, writing, mathematics and co-operative problem solving should be taught in primary education and developed further in secondary education or vocational education. General and vocational education are two ways to the development of one's capacities. Education should strive to realise a certain standard.

In the Vocational Training and Adult Education System there is a growing interest in key skills. The discussion, as far as I know, originates from the feeling that the system is too far differentiated by a huge number of specific studies with a too narrow curriculum each. Introducing key skills could widen the occupational scope of these studies and make them better resistant against processes of skill obsolescence.

2. *Which institutions and/or agencies are responsible for the training of key competencies, within and without the formal education system? What role(s) do schools play in the teaching of key competencies?*

In primary education and in lower secondary education attainment targets for key competencies have been defined by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. Attainment targets describe the standards that students are expected to attain. The requirement for the school is that they use the attainment targets as the minimum levels of achievement.

Cross-curricular attainment targets in primary education

According to the Primary Education act, the aim of education is a broad development of the pupils. This means that education should be aimed at the emotional and cognitive development of pupils, the development of their creativity and the acquisition of social, cultural and physical skills. Together, the attainment targets should express this broad area of education.

Knowledge and skills in the field of cognitive, cultural and physical development can easily be translated into attainment targets that belong to particular subject matter areas. However, there are also some more general skills, which cannot easily be described as attainment targets and meaningfully be included in a specific subject matter area, have been included as separate categories, called 'cross curricular attainment targets'. Cross-curricular attainment targets are attainment targets aiming at the development or enhancement of general skills. Therefore, they should not be included in the specific subject matter areas. These objectives pertain to the whole of the educational offering in primary education.

As certain general skills form a basis for the attainment targets specific to a subject matter area, it is possible that some of the elements will be found in both types of objectives.

The cross-curricular attainment targets are grouped around the following themes:

- Attitude to work. The pupils take an interest in the world around them and are motivated to explore it
- Working according to a plan. The pupils can draw up a plan and act according to it
- Use of a diversity of learning strategies. When carrying out learning activities the pupils can use a diversity of strategies and skills
- Self-image. The pupils learn to handle the possibilities and limits of their own capacities
- Social behaviour. The pupils make a positive contribution to the group
- New media. The pupils make responsible and purposeful use of means of communication including the new media

For a detailed description of these attainment targets see appendix 1.

General attainment targets in lower secondary education

In august 1993, all Dutch secondary schools introduced the new curriculum for basic secondary education. Basic secondary education provides lasts from two to three years, and provides a broad, general education for all students aged between 12 and 15 years.

With the introduction of basic secondary education, a core curriculum comprising attainment targets became compulsory. This core curriculum comprises:

- Attainment targets for 15 compulsory subjects;
- 6 general attainment targets, including several skills and subject bridging topics.

The six general attainment targets are:

1. Cross-disciplinary themes. Within the context of broad and balanced consideration of people and society, pupils should obtain a degree of insight into their position within their immediate personal environment and the wider social environment.

2. Learning to do. In situations which are as recognisable as possible, pupils should learn how to further develop certain scholastic skills, making use of information and communications technologies where appropriate.
3. Learning to learn. Pupils should learn to acquire knowledge and skills, making use of information and communication technologies when appropriate. To this end, they should learn certain strategies for improving the learning process.
4. Learning to communicate. Pupils should learn how to further develop certain social and communicative skills, on an interactive basis where appropriate.
5. Learning to reflect upon the learning process. Pupils should learn to be analytical about and to control the learning process, by reflecting upon their own performance.
6. Learning to reflect upon the future. Pupils should learn to be analytical about their options for the future/prospects and interests, by reflecting upon their own performance.

A detailed description is given in appendix 2.

Competencies in vocational education

Vocational education is in the process of developing a set of core competencies, to be acquired during the study (ACOA). A distinction is made in:

- Occupational and methodological competencies, related to the specific occupational content and to the solution of problems they face
- Organisational and strategic competencies, needed to function adequately in a labour organisation
- Social communicative and normative cultural competencies, in order to function as member of a group or a team
- Research and development competencies, in order to contribute to personal development and the development of the profession and the firm

The qualification profiles of vocational studies are proposed by national tripartite bodies organised by branch. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science decides. The vocational colleges can apply for those studies. An effective way to promote key competencies in vocational studies could be to force the national bodies to take the statement in the law seriously that vocational studies have to offer their students a broad and durable preparation for fulfilling certain occupations.

3. *How could overall policy-making in different sectors, including but not limited to the education sector, promote the teaching and learning of key competencies?*

In the near future a new didactic in vocational education will have a lot of attention. The development of a new didactic is directed by the defined competencies. Because competencies are not perfectly concretely defined, the new didactic needs a lot of discussion and fine-tuning with regard to the programmes which combine schooling and learning on the job.

3.5 Assessing and Developing DeSeCo

The three suggested DeSeCo dimensions are seen as highly relevant for further work, but may have to be embedded in and related to national contexts. So the positive evaluation of

autonomous and reflexive thinking in one country may be in contrast to high preferences with regard to conformity in another country. The same may apply for the ways persons are socially involved in organisations or communities, being either heterogeneous or more homogenous. The workshop regarded these as relevant but difficult-to-solve issues, that would need much elaboration and discussion.

1. *Do you know of any concrete initiatives resembling the DeSeCo Program in your country (research, developmental work in education, especially work related to outcome measurement and indicators, skill lists in the economic sector, policy initiatives coming from civil society, etc.)? Please name and describe them briefly.*

We think that a relevant source of information may be WJ Nijhof (Ed) Key Qualifications in Work and Education (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998). His chapter 2 reviews the literature and is attached as Appendix 3, while other relevant studies are mentioned in Appendix 5.

Relevant initiatives in vocational education are:

- Development plans for a qualification structure (low and middle vocational education)
- Competent high vocational education)
- Re-designing vocational education (AXIS)
- EVC's for those who do not yet meet the requirements for "start qualification" in vocational tracks
- Individual Personal development plans for employees
- Competence management

2. *What are, in your view, the highlights and critical issues in the main findings² of DeSeCo so far? Do you consider these findings relevant in your national context? How? In any specific contexts?*

The activities of DeSeCo underline the difficulty of defining generic domain-general competencies. Even when generic competencies can be defined, they will only become concrete when content can be defined in a specific context.

Deseco is considered as a relevant activity for at least establishing a catalogue and Clearing House of competencies that can be used in the discussions in the frameworks of PISA, ALL, EU and other activities on key skills and similar enterprises.

3. *How would you relate the DeSeCo Program and, theoretically, the expected results to your own academic, social, economic, or political context?*

The work done by DeSeCo is important. It identifies competencies which are meant to help people to face the 'challenges of the present and the future in an increasingly interdependent, changing, and conflictual world'. Especially interesting are some related scientific questions to the competencies defined.

- What is the most effective way to generate key competencies in education. As subjects in a general curriculum or as by products of a context rich curriculum like vocational training?
- Is the effectivity of using key skills the same in any work or social context?

- When context in education, work and life is important for acquiring and using key skills isn't it in that case of crucial importance to pay more attention to the relation between key skills and these contexts and the skills that are specific for being effective in these contexts like vocational skills?

4. *Does your country have any proposals for contributions to advance the work in this area?*

We suggest two follow-up activities after the conference in February 2002:

- Develop a common core programme in the frame of PISA related to the Cross-Curricular Competencies activities. It appears to be rather time consuming difficult to develop new indicators such as Self-regulated learning, Problem solving, Communication, Knowledge of functioning within society (Civics). Thus a high priority should be given to support these on-going activities and speed up the process of getting indicators that measure broader competencies than just mathematics, science or reading comprehension. New areas in these CCC's should be included, such as care for other persons and/or attitudes related to environmental issues.
- Establish concrete projects in identifying dimensions that have highest priorities and develop instruments to measure these appropriately. The legitimisation of Deseco is closely connected to the fact that theoretical issues can be translated into concrete data to develop indicators on which countries and educational systems can be compared. New areas in these CCC's should be included, such as care for other persons and/or attitudes related to environmental issues.