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

Definition and selection of competencies in Flanders

1   Public debate

Hitherto no broad public debate - in which all the relevant parties are involved - has been held in Flanders about key competencies. Therefore, the DeSeCo project has provided Flanders with an ideal opportunity to launch the debate and give an incentive to open-minded discussions, in addition to carrying out the related research. The idea for the time being is to tread carefully by setting up a very restricted but varied group comprising 40 or so individuals who have already acquired some expertise on the subject of key competencies, even though their expert knowledge is often limited to a specific professional context. A draft report highlighting the state of play in Flanders has been produced by the Education Department which acts as the co-ordinator for the DeSeCo project in Flanders. On the basis of this report a written survey was conducted in this restricted group and a workshop was staged. These activities took place over the March-June 2001 period. In July 2001, a summary report was drawn up using this information. It is hoped that this will contribute to a broader debate.

1.1   Large-scale public debate

Different trends are obviously emerging in Flanders and various projects are in the pipeline in which competencies are considered across social domains out of sheer necessity. Within the framework of lifelong learning and the recognition of competencies, key competencies will be put on the agenda in the consultation between the education and employment sectors.

Whether common support for key competencies can be found in Flanders is still to be revealed. The workshop participants were particularly keen on holding discussions and consultations. The draft report also turned out to be of particular relevance as a starting point for the debate. Moreover, in some circles key competencies are not just talked about, but are already used in practice as well.

Opinions are divided about whether or not it is possible to establish a common basis for key competencies. In some fields and circles consultations are already being held or consideration is already being given to key competencies relevant to those particular spheres of life. Here, there exists a certain amount of faith in the feasibility of a common project. However, the workshop itself revealed just how difficult it is to reach a consensus. Each party approaches this theme from its own point of view or its own "environment". In other words, the main question is whether it is possible to transcend one's own environment in a large-scale open debate so as to be able to formulate a common, acceptable vision from which key competencies, that can be used in all those different areas of application, may be derived. There is some doubt about the feasibility of a common project for Flanders, that would serve a purpose both in terms of the labour market and personal development. One view is that the only thing that may be left is a somewhat "grey" list of key competencies that are formulated in an extremely generic way and establish no more than a vague frame of reference. This would merely leave a basis for an agreement for each party to interpret from its own point of view. Some people believe that finding this basis would be quite an achievement in its own right.

1.2 Debate within the education sector

As for education, debates are being held about key competencies - albeit sometimes indirectly - both at the level of the Flemish educational policy and in other policy sectors.

1.2.1 Flemish education policy

The structure of Flemish education policy provides for a consultation procedure for those matters that are laid down by the Education and Training Minister in Parliament of Flanders Acts or Government of Flanders Decrees. This applies both to compulsory education and adult education. This procedure, which involves both the Flemish Education Council and the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) in the consultations, ensures that debates are held at this stage in various social forums, as well as the social debate in the Parliament of Flanders. Amongst others in these consultation procedures, involving the education, socio-cultural and socio-economic sectors, items such as attainment targets, developmental objectives, occupational profiles and training profiles are discussed and selected. By these procedures key competencies are given tangible shape.

Flanders also has a tradition of co-operating with its neighbour, the Netherlands. Within the framework of this co-operation the GENT IV agreement was signed in 1999 by the Dutch and Flemish Ministers of Education. Education officials from both countries reached an agreement on a non-exhaustive alphabetical list of 36 "key skills" deemed to be important for vocational training. The list has no "official" status but it is used by the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) to establish occupational profiles. The relevant committees consult about which of these key skills are essential for the occupational profile in question and/or which ones need to be added.

1.2.1.1 Middle schools

The Authentic Middle Schools Study Group (St.A.M.), a consortium of schools comprising 80 or so members, has worked out a reference framework for key competencies so as to flesh out the basic curriculum for pupils in the 12-14 age group. The key element in this process is the fact that it is based on an approach to individuals and society that may be summarised as "human beings as a crossroads of relationships" whose identity is determined by networks of relationships in the physical, social and psychological environment they belong to and within which they are at the same time autonomous and independent. According to this view of individuals and society there are five generic key competencies that are important in order to participate in a critical and creative way in the development of that society and thus of oneself. These key competencies involve interpreting, designing and managing networks of relationships and are given tangible shape in a number of component skills. Each year, a congress is organised to debate this planning framework and its implementation in the classroom that is attended by some 200 management teams, middle managers and teachers. This theme is also discussed at separate one-day seminars where opportunities are sought to develop key competencies in pupils.

The St.A.M. regards debates and activities concerning key competencies as an opportunity to push through the desired reforms in the school culture and teaching practice at a faster pace.

1.3 Debate within the labour market sector

The labour market-related debates are focused on key competencies within the companies themselves and in some partnerships between labour market organisations or between the labour market and education.

1.3.1 Competence management in organisations and companies

Flemish research carried out in the year 2000 has shown that competence management is becoming a key component of the structure and strategy of an increasing number of organisations. This is also the case in Flanders. Competence management is gradually being adopted for recruitment, selection and remuneration. Although it is steadily gaining importance in the fields of training, education and career planning as well it is not so frequently applied here.

The competence models or planning frameworks used are strongly related to the approach and strategic goals of the relevant organisation. After all, the aim is to gear the individual competencies to the company objectives as precisely as possible. They are established in consultation between managers and the different staff members and are updated on a regular basis. This contrasts with the core competencies at the organisational level that have a stabilising effect and guarantee continuity throughout the change process. The ideal competence model is steered through the organisation's mission and strategy; it includes operational, departmental or team-based aims and competencies as well as the conversion thereof at the individual employee level.

In practice the planning frameworks applied are normally confined to sketching the broad outlines and tend to be quite similar in all companies. This can be attributed to the fact that key competencies are generally decided at a fairly high level of abstraction, such as coping with change, assertive communication, and co-operation in achieving a common goal. Consequently they comprise two dimensions, i.e. human capital management and an emancipatory dimension related to developing the independence and autonomy of the learner.. Differences emerge as the competencies are given concrete shape to articulate with the complicated nature of the work to be performed and are converted for actual activities and work situations.

1.3.2 Partnerships

The Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) and the Flemish Employment Services and Vocational Training Agency (VDAB) concluded a co-operation agreement at the end of 2000 with a view to gearing the COBRA (competencies and career catalogue for the Flemish labour market) to the occupational profiles of the SERV. COBRA is the VDAB's translation of the French ROME ("Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et Emplois") and is primarily based on lists of competencies (tasks, knowledge, skills, attitudes) grouped into professions or clusters of professions. These clusters are described in files that bring together description of the profession, tasks, competencies, employment and career opportunities, labour organisation and conditions, and future bottlenecks.

As a result of the close conceptual relationship between the SERV and the VDAB, the SERV occupational files draw their inspiration from the different types of information featured in the COBRA files. Both the VDAB and the SERV use the occupational profiles to flesh them out. The most important tasks, knowledge, skills and key competencies are selected from them. The

whole is validated by the sectors with which the SERV has drawn up the occupational profiles. This causes the occupationally specific training both within and outside the educational system to be harmonised, as in both cases the starting point includes the same tasks and competencies that are typical of a specific profession. A common glossary is now being developed so as to guarantee harmonisation, including with regard to the applied concepts.

Another area where co-operation is being promoted between the education and training sectors, on the one hand, and the employment sector on the other, is the management and recognition of competencies. Within the framework of lifelong learning, a working group has been set up between the offices of the ministers for education and employment to develop an integrated model for the recognition of acquired competencies. Competence is regarded here as a multidimensional concept. These competencies may be acquired in two ways. The most common way is the formal one, that is within a structured learning context, such as compulsory education, training programmes of the VDAB, the Flemish Institute for the Self-Employed (VIZO), etc. Alternatively, competencies can be gained in a non-formal, semi-structured or informal way.

2 Reasons for developing key competencies

In Flanders, there are many different reasons and motivations for defining and selecting key competencies and for emphasising their specific importance, but generally speaking, two trends have emerged. The first one is based on companies and organisations, and makes competencies and the need to acquire them fully dependent on the labour market. Consequently, this concerns competencies for people as employees or job-holders in a business or organisation. Social and personal skills are also involved but mainly because they are useful for the labour situation. A second trend is based on development of the human being as a person. Here, competencies have a purpose in the broader personal, cultural and social life of the individual and in relation to all aspects of life. The notion of education as emancipation is of vital importance here. Flanders wants to relate to both trends.

3 Definition of (key) competence

The draft report that was prepared for Flanders in the light of the DeSeCo project includes a proposal to work out a *temporary* definition of the concepts of "competence" and "key competence". In common with the OECD DeSeCo definitions, a number of criteria are applied to flesh out the concepts in a pragmatic way and to limit their application. This procedure is less complicated and easier to accept for everyone. To aim at finding a generally accepted, strictly formulated definition, that would probably never satisfy all parties, could lead to endless discussions.

3.1 Developing the criteria

The various criteria are derived from an analysis of the definitions and descriptions used in Flanders in various social spheres for notions such as competence, basic competence, core competence, key competence, professional attitude, and so on.

A competence:

- is *multidimensional* in that it involves a combination of knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes;
- may be *acquired* in all sorts of contexts, both formally and informally, consciously and unconsciously;
- must provide a suitable answer to the requirements of a specific situation or task;
- is a *necessary though insufficient condition* for (re)acting efficiently at any time. It merely has a predictive value for the actual performance.

A key competence also meets the following requirements:

- it is *transferable* and therefore applicable in many situations and contexts;
- it is *multifunctional* in that it can be used to achieve several objectives, to solve different problems and to accomplish different tasks.

3.2 Comparison with OECD definitions

The Flemish descriptions are in a way both similar to and different from the OECD definitions.

Flanders and the OECD have a fairly similar understanding of the 'competence' concept. In both cases it involves more than knowledge and skills. In addition these can be acquired through a process of learning.

However, there are clear differences in the way both sides define "key competence".

3.2.1 Multidimensionality of key competencies.

Flanders interprets 'multidimensionality' in a different way from the OECD. In *Flanders*, multidimensionality refers to the *combination of knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes*, whereas to the OECD it is a *combination of different mental processes*. Moreover, an accurate description is given of which mental processes are involved, i.e. coping with complexity, the perceptive dimension, the normative dimension, the co-operative dimension and the narrative dimension. It may be wondered whether this OECD interpretation is necessary and is not too specific. These dimensions (mental processes) could each be regarded as a key competence in itself or as part of a number of key competencies. For example, in order to solve a problem it is essential that one is able to cope with complexity (among other things), to make a distinction between relevant and irrelevant information (perceptive dimension) and to choose the appropriate tools required for solving the problem (normative dimension). The other two dimensions are certainly not always necessary in a problem-solving process.

3.2.2 Key competencies refer to a mental complexity of a higher order

Being too restrictive, this characteristic has not been reflected in the Flemish definition. It implies, for example that young children and people with a mental disability cannot have key competencies. A key competence may be situated at both a "simple" and a "complex" level, as the requirements of the tasks, problems and situations one is faced with always have to be considered as well. A scientific researcher must indeed have the competence to analyse and solve complicated problems. Some mentally disabled people have to and can solve problems at their level that are 'complex to them'. A toddler is also expected to behave as autonomously and

independently as possible, but not at the same high level as the manager of a multinational company.

3.2.3 Transversality and multifunctionality in the OECD definitions versus transferability and multifunctionality in the Flemish ones.

he OECD takes the view that a key competence is transversal and multifunctional. These concepts are defined as follows:

- *Transversal* implies that a key competence is so general it can be used in various areas of human existence, such as in school, in professional life, in family life and so on.
- *Multifunctional* refers to the fact that a key competence is required to meet/complete the various demands/tasks in the daily, professional and social life.

The distinction the OECD makes between transversality and multifunctionality is very subtle and not terribly clear. In order to avoid this problem in Flanders, it is opted to replace "transversality" by "transferability". Moreover, it has been decided to flesh out the "multifunctionality" concept in a slightly different way than the OECD on the basis of an analysis of the concepts and definitions used in Flanders.

According to the Flemish definition, key competencies are transferable and multifunctional whereby these concepts may be described as follows.

- *Transferability* implies that the competence, which was acquired in a specific context, can be transferred to other situations that differ in varying degrees from the original learning environment. So, one is able to apply the acquired competence in a flexible way in another situation or context (for example, to use a competence that was taught at school later at the workplace).
- *Multifunctional* refers to the fact that key competencies are necessary to meet efficiently the daily requirements for participating in different aspects of social life as well as to continue to work each day on various aspects of personal development.

The workshop participants were satisfied with the Flemish definitions, but the debate showed that some matters still need some clarification. There is a problem of interpretation, for one thing. "Transferability", for example, is understood by some as "within related contexts" and by others as "universally applicable". The discussion about this subject reveals that additional criteria or conditions have to be established so as to make clear what the "key competence" concept exactly means. Moreover, the criteria have to be feasible for the target audience.

In any event, it appears from the discussion that clear and unambiguous definitions are needed, that the criteria must be feasible and that additional criteria are advisable.

Once the conditions have been set, they must be met by all the key competencies to be selected.

4 Selection of key competencies

In the DeSeCo draft report for Flanders a number of key competencies were selected on the basis of lists submitted by 16 bodies from various social areas such as education, the labour market,

culture, welfare and so on. This involves a quantitative process - using limited information - whereby competencies are grouped.

This was a multi-stage process. Firstly, the lists of competencies of these 16 bodies were combined into one large table in order to provide an exhaustive list of ninety or so competencies. Next, competencies that were nearly similar or closely related were grouped under a possibly general heading. After that, the competencies in this reduced list were classified in a frequency table indicating how often a specific competence was selected. Next, the competencies were grouped into a number of broad categories and subcategories. Finally, any competencies that were selected by less than 25% of the bodies were ignored. This process resulted in a list of categories and corresponding key competencies.

4.1 Examples of possible categories and their component competencies

Category: Social competencies
1. The capacity to participate actively in society with respect for the multicultural dimension and concern for equal opportunities.
2. Communication competencies (including assertiveness, being able to stand up for oneself and maturity)
3. Being able to co-operate

Category: Positive self-image
4. Having a positive self-image with a view to self-development (including self-confidence)

Category: Being able to act and think autonomously
5. Competencies in data acquisition and processing (including ICT)
6. Problem-solving competencies
7. Self-guidance and self-regulation (including a sense of responsibility)
8. Being able to think and act critically and reflectively

Category: Motivational competencies
9. Having the courage to explore and being eager to learn
10. Sense of initiative

Category: Mental agility
11. Creativity and inventiveness
12. Flexibility and adaptability

Category: Functional competencies
13. Linguistic competencies
14. Technical competencies

The sole aim of this list is to provide an incentive for a debate. In other words, the list is intended as an <u>item for discussion</u> and is <u>certainly not representative of a selection of key competencies in Flanders</u>.   As mentioned earlier, a public debate still has to be held on this subject in Flanders.

4.2 Adding or rejecting key competencies

The limited debate held on this issue, during which the participants had the opportunity to add and delete key competencies, threw some light on a number of issues.

Recognisability for each social domain appears to be an essential factor. For instance, all the participants stressed the importance of "social competencies" and would even like them to be given more emphasis. Some of the participants apparently felt that several of the key competencies that are essential for their field are missing. Therefore, the welfare sector, for instance, proposes to adopt "care competencies" and add "learning competencies" within the framework of lifelong learning.

Some additions may indicate the exceptional importance one wishes to attach to specific key competencies. For instance, many proposals for key competencies are situated in the "being able to think and act autonomously" category: such as being able to act independently, being able to formulate and defend a personal opinion, having the courage to act in an unusual way, and so on. Such additions may, however, also highlight the need (with some people at least) for clearly recognisable and concrete formulations. This raises the question of the *level of abstraction* at which key competencies are formulated and the related number of key competencies to be selected.

The proposed deletions reveal other aspects as well. Some key competencies such as inventiveness and creativity could be dropped. This raises issues such as whether it is feasible for everyone to attain such competencies, and what the 'basic level' should be. Other deletions rather relate to the *set of criteria for a key competency.* For example, it could be said that "sense of initiative" refers to an attitude and does not meet the multidimensionality criterion. "Having a positive self-image", for instance, does not meet the criterion of being learnable.

Some key competencies refer too much to personality characteristics. The motivational key competencies, for instance, could be dropped for this reason. This touches on the subject of personal privacy and ethics.

The debate about functional competencies is to do with whether or not key competencies are context-related. Owing to their context-related status, technical competencies, for instance, would be deleted by some parties, whereas others stress their importance and call for them to be retained and even emphasised.

During this process of adding and deleting, the question also arises whether the exercise is concerned with either *separate key competencies* or *the whole of the selected competencies and their mutual cohesion,* which of course has implications for the selection.

Another aspect is the planning framework. The feasibility and usefulness of a common planning framework that serves all social spheres and is based on one singular approach is called into question and is even thought by some participants to be inadvisable. Many preferred the idea of developing a planning framework within a personal context which would be based on a personal vision and provided with concrete competencies appropriate for the specific context.

Generally speaking, it can be said that there are still a lot of ambiguities in Flanders concerning key competencies. A selection of key competencies is possible only when the problems that occur have been solved. What is the target audience? Are key competencies a tool or a goal, in

other words, to be acquired or merely aimed at by everyone? Are key competencies universally applicable? Are key competencies to be regarded as "keys" to shape one's own life?

Once all the conditions have been set, they must be met by all the key competencies to be selected.

As in Flanders the debate about this subject is still at an early stage, it is currently impossible to make a comparison with the OECD's key competencies.

5 (Key) competencies and education and training

Although they are not generally referred to as such, key competencies do actually play a role in determining the educational curriculum, and in deciding the contents of training programmes outside the educational system and in companies and in lifelong learning strategies. Key competencies are applied, amongst others, by schools at all educational levels, the Flemish Employment Services and Vocational Training Agency, the Flemish Institute for the Self-Employed, businesses, Human Resources centres and career guidance centres. However, these bodies do not all use competencies in the same way.

5.1 Education

The competence debate in education was actually initiated when the new quality control system for Flemish education was introduced as a result of federalisation. One of the cornerstones of the system was the definition of education's social task. In order to guarantee the quality of education in terms of content, goals which seemed necessary for everyone and for which a social consensus had been reached were developed. These educational objectives -- referred to as attainment targets or developmental objectives --are the minimum objectives that guarantee that pupils receive the minimum training they are entitled to through the school curriculum.

Attainment targets and developmental objectives are related to a specific curriculum area in primary education and a specific subject in secondary education. Some attainment targets and developmental objectives, however, do not relate to one curriculum area/subject but to several ones or are achieved by pupils through educational projects. They are cross-curricular/cross-subject attainment targets or developmental objectives. This cross-curricular/cross-subject knowledge and these cross-curricular/cross-subject skills and attitudes are organised on the basis of a number of priority social themes: learning to learn, social skills, citizenship training, health education, environmental education and expressive-creative training. The distinction between attainment targets and developmental objectives has to do with the target group for which the minimum objectives are intended.

So attainment targets and developmental objectives are minimum objectives with regard to the knowledge, skills and attitudes which the government considers necessary and achievable for a specific pupil population and which all schools have to offer to their pupils. These attainment targets and developmental objectives have above all been formulated for basic education. After a social debate, the Flemish government decided that basic education was to be understood as *the cohesive system of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are a precondition for critical and creative activities in society and for developing a personal life.*" This also includes "key competencies." It can be stated that in the Flemish system basic education, including the key

competencies, constitutes the basis and normative framework for the development and conversion into concrete developmental objectives and attainment targets.

Within vocational education (in both compulsory and adult education) targets that are specific to vocational education are formulated for the occupationally specific part of the training. In addition, key skills are defined. A *key skill* is a cognitive, psychomotor or affective skill belonging to the core of a profession, that is more generally applicable than in the profession for which one is being trained and that contributes to the general development of a person. *Transferable skills* are those that meet the requirements regarding flexibility and that help pupils and course participants to become more 'assertive' in dealing with changes.

As for non-vocational training programmes, the key competencies are processed implicitly in the attainment targets by analogy with basic education.

In schools, targeted initiatives with regard to key competencies are rather limited. However, all schools are compelled by the Parliament of Flanders Act to work on attainment targets and developmental objectives. Thus they focus indirectly on the development of key competencies. Some schools seek opportunities to work on key competencies in a more conscious way.

5.2 Business sector

5.2.1 Occupational profiles

"Key competencies" are used in Flanders to draw up occupational profiles. The "key skills" concept is one of the many synonyms used in Flanders for key competencies.
Key skills are referred to as "the more general characteristics that have less to do with a specific application (such as mechanical aptitude, caution, precision, ability to learn, …), the attitudes and the personality and behavioural characteristics that may play a functional role in the labour process (such as motivation, loyalty to the company, stable working behaviour, willingness to put up with inconveniences at work, …). They represent the sum of the cognitive, affective and operational components that are essential in order to pursue a profession.

Occupational profiles are drawn up by the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV), in co-operation with the relevant sectors. However, there is a clear interaction with training and education. In fact, the occupational profiles constitute the conceptual framework, including the key skills, for determining the curriculum in vocational training within education and for the training programmes provided by the Flemish Employment Services and Vocational Training Agency (VDAB).

5.2.2 Employment services and career guidance

Centres for employment services and career guidance, such as the Flemish Employment Services and Vocational Training Agency (VDAB) and the Flemish Institute for the Self-Employed (VIZO), incorporate specific elements in their vocational training programmes for the development of what they call "non-technical competencies." The curriculum is developed in such a way that different competence levels are provided for each key competence. On the one hand, these competence levels are used for observing applicants and for preparing an assessment

of their strengths/weaknesses. On the other hand, they are utilised in defining the individual learning and guidance pathways of each applicant.

5.2.3 Competence management in organisations and companies

Competence management increasingly steers the training and education of employees in organisations and companies. The strategic competence model of *UBISA*, a Spanish subsidiary of the Flemish multinational Bekaert, illustrates how competencies can be used in businesses and how the competence approach can be incorporated into training schemes.

Competencies are the backbone of Bekaert's new HRM strategy. According to Bekaert, the competence approach is the practical lever for utilizing and developing the potential of individuals and teams in the best possible way according to the strategic targets. To this end, the company determines both the core competencies at the level of the company and the competencies at the level of the individual staff members.

This is a multi-stage process. A search is made for a definition of the core competencies, for the possible effects on the company's structure, culture, system and processes and for action plans at the individual level as well as at the level of the organisation. Initially, the process was confined to the project team but later on it was extended to employees on the shop floor, first line management, and so on. The competence model has not resulted yet in changes in the organisation that relate to core competencies.

5.2.4 Comprehensive policy

A comprehensive policy with regard to key competencies could be fitted in with the initiatives that are being taken in Flanders in connection with lifelong and lifewide learning. Inspired by a number of developments in Europe, Flanders is currently also working on an integrated model for the recognition of acquired competencies, involving education and employment. Today, the model still leans heavily towards structures and procedures. At some stage, the most significant competencies will have to be firmly identified, mainly because key competencies are playing an increasingly important part in lifelong learning.

The question could also be raised as to whether an integrated policy between education and employment is sufficient when defining key competencies. Should other policy areas, such as culture, youth issues, welfare, and health not be involved in this as well? After all, they all should have their say in the selection of the key competencies. An agreement also has to be reached about the distribution of responsibilities with regard to the development of key competencies in young people and adults. Whatever their approach, all training initiatives should ideally be based on the selected key competencies so as to avoid splitting society into those with competencies and those without.

6   Assessment of (key) competencies

6.1   Education policy

Within the framework of macro-level educational policy, the Flemish government has several tools at its disposal to implement quality control.

6.1.1   Indicators

Educational indicators in Flanders are subdivided into context indicators, input indicators, process indicators and output indicators. Currently, Flanders does not have the sort of output indicators that provide information about the extent to which the Flemish population has acquired key competencies. Other Flemish government publications which include macro indicators do not make any reference to this either. Yet a number of developments show that the Flemish educational authorities are paying heed to the output of basic skills and key competencies. This interest is further prompted by developments in relation to lifelong and lifewide learning.

Between 1994 and 1997 Flanders co-operated on the IALS project designed to review how skills relating to reading, writing and calculating are spread amongst the adult population and what bearing these skills have on socio-demographic variables and employment.

The publication '*Vlaamse onderwijsindicatoren in internationaal perspectief – editie 2000*' (Flemish educational indicators in an international perspective - 2000 edition) does not include any output indicators regarding key competencies. However, an indicator has been included in the context indicators for assessing society's expectations about the acquisition of social skills. These expectations were then tested against the 'social skills' attainment targets that are currently applied in the first stage of secondary education. An assessment of this indicator shows that society regards "learning to co-operate", "learning to take responsibility" and "learning to communicate" as extremely important contents of education. The attainment targets cater for these expectations to a great extent, but civil society would like education to focus even more on imparting social skills.

The output indicators do include an indicator with regard to pupils' well-being. The indicator shows, among other things, whether schools succeed in influencing this well-being in a positive way, as school experiences often have a major effect on the emotional and social development of young people.

6.1.2   Survey tools

Today, the Flemish government also provides for survey tools in order to be able to carry out large-scale periodic surveys, as always with the aim of achieving the attainment targets. For example, survey tools have already been developed for "reading comprehension" (Dutch language) and for the entire field of mathematics, both targeted on primary education. In secondary education, survey tools are now being developed for "data acquisition and processing" in the first stage of secondary education. This research is intended to optimise the educational provision.

6.1.3 Inspection

Finally, there is the Education Inspectorate in Flanders that examines, through observations and conversations during school audits, to what extent the attainment targets and developmental objectives, and hence indirectly the key competencies, are being realised at school and during lessons.

So, several strategies have been created within Flemish education policy to assess key competencies or their components.

6.2 Assessment of competencies at school

Flanders does not have any national test systems to assess pupils. This is done at school level. Today, this assessment is often confined to gauging the level of knowledge acquired, as assessing skills and attitudes is considered to be much more difficult. These issues are still being debated in the schools. It is a matter of converting competencies into skills and component skills that can be assessed. Refined interpretation schemes are required to assess key competencies in education but these still have to be developed. The assessment techniques used in the business sector are not really applicable in education, as they are overly focused on measuring key competencies in relation to a specific work situation and with a view to recruitment, selection and professional development. Assessments are based on the expectations one has from an individual for a specific work situation or function. This often also involves extensive and time-consuming assessments that are performed by several assessors.

The situation in education is somewhat different. It is not easy for schools and teachers to convert key competencies into representative observable component skills on the basis of which an opinion can be formed on these competencies. Another problem the education sector faces is the tremendous difference between pupils. The ability to communicate can vary enormously among 12-year-olds. The education system is rather looking for alternative assessment techniques to evaluate progress in pupils, which is certainly the case for key competencies. The idea is not to start from a certain pattern of expectations but mainly to indicate how pupils are developing and what progress they are making. In any event, this calls for a change of mentality and for new competencies in the teachers, who often still assess from a product- and knowledge-oriented point of view. However, this does not put an end to the discussions, because at some stage it will have to be decided whether an individual is sufficiently competent to make a certain choice of studies or to start following a certain type of training programme.

6.3 Assessment of competencies in companies and organisations

On the Human Resources front, competencies in companies are determined by their objectives or strategic targets. Competencies that do not fit in with this framework are not considered, nor are people assessed from this point of view. In this approach a competence is something that contributes to the realisation of the company objectives.

In order to render an assessment possible, the selected competencies are linked to behavioural indicators at various levels. The assessment is carried out using appropriate simulation exercises that are representative of a specific function and where all the behavioural indicators to be observed are featured. People are thus assessed on the basis of their specific behaviour.

For instance, in order to evaluate the social competence, more specifically the communicative competence, the following exercise is done. Six individuals (employees) have a specific problem explained to them in advance in writing that is approached from various viewpoints. They have to look for a solution to this problem in a group (for instance the simulation of a management committee or another type of meeting). About 4 to 6 assessors observe the group discussion. One individual is always evaluated by two assessors at the same time. Each assessor has an assessment form mentioning the competencies to be observed and the corresponding behavioural indicators (for example: involves other group members in the conversation, listens to others, uses non-verbal behaviour to involve others in the conversation). Sometimes the opposites are mentioned as well (for example: keeps apart or does not take part in the discussion, and so on). During the group discussion, which lasts about half an hour, the assessors individually give scores (e.g. from 1 to 10) to each behavioural indicator. To this end, a quantitative assessment is made as well: how many times does a person intervene, how often does he/she try to involve someone in the conversation? On the basis of the individual assessments, an overall assessment is made which indicates to what extent an individual has acquired certain competencies. The assessment data can be used for different purposes: to decide on a person's training pathway, the potential of an employee, career opportunities, and so on.

7 Expectations with regard to the DeSeCo programme and international comparisons

7.1 Comments on the programme

The OECD's DeSeCo programme has acted as a stimulus for Flanders to make an inventory of key competencies and to initiate a debate on this subject. Important in this respect was the information collected and provided by the OECD.

Nonetheless, some people in Flanders have a few comments to make about the DeSeCo project.

They believe that the generic key competencies are too abstract, that some criteria are aimed too high or allow several interpretations, and that some criteria are missing.

Another problem is the feasibility of common international support - witness the theoretical sets of relevant competencies from the different disciplines, as combined in the third activity of this OECD/INES-DeSeCo initiative, which revealed few common features. It remains to be seen whether the countries' studies will help to throw some light on these critical items.

7.2 The feasibility of International comparisons

Flanders' involvement in this project is a reflection of its growing interest in this theme. In common with other OECD projects in which it is involved, Flanders is also interested in an international comparison, as such comparisons are interesting and useful. Due to the increasing level of globalisation and mobility Flemish education policy can no longer be disassociated from international developments. Keeping track of developments, exchanging information about different systems, looking for models of good practice – all these activities have an inspiring effect. Thanks to international comparisons, Flemish policy and its quality can be put in an international context, which in turn helps policymakers to gain an insight into the strengths and

weaknesses of the Flemish system and/or policy and into the lessons that need to be drawn, where appropriate.

However, Flanders expresses its doubts about an international study into the extent to which learners in Flanders have acquired key competencies in comparison with other countries, particularly when this is linked to benchmarking. Is it feasible to carry out international comparative research through benchmarking? Is it possible to perform a large-scale international study into the extent to which the various countries are succeeding in actually realising certain key competencies in their citizens?

Benchmarking is indeed a useful research tool when dealing with statistical data that can be collected quite simply and objectively. It is clearly a completely different matter when it comes to measuring the outcomes with regard to the acquisition of specific competencies. There are no easy-to-measure indicators for assessing to what extent (key) competencies have been acquired. In other words, it is almost impossible to measure in a reliable and valid way whether or not someone has mastered a certain key competence. It may, however, be possible to obtain a reliable insight into the desired competencies for a specific function in a concrete context through well-considered test instruments. Still, an extensive, complex assessment of general key competencies is not feasible for international comparative research. In addition, it is not clear whether "key competence" is to be understood as a goal to be aimed at or to be actually acquired.

Moreover, the problem of context always arises in the case of international comparative research. The differences in, for instance, the structures of different educational systems, including the difference in duration of compulsory education, and in the nature and content of the (compulsory) curriculum are often considerable. Consequently, the proposed competencies may differ, as may the period during which they are taught and the period during which they must be/are acquired. In education, this has a tremendous impact on the outcomes of comparative research. This implies that in the case of benchmarking the differences in context, educational structure, curriculum, and so on between the various countries or regions would have to be taken into account. Benchmarking is a fine principle but perhaps it is somewhat fanciful to imagine being able to put it into practice.

Moreover, a national policy is not free of values and the main objectives (key competencies) are often linked up with the specific context or needs of the relevant country and usually do not apply to other countries. As a result of benchmarking, countries pull out all the stops to gain the best possible position, even though they may regard the particular key competence as unimportant within their context. The risk of "teaching to the benchmark" is therefore quite real. By focusing on a key competence which is given a lot of attention at the international level, the country's own objectives and key competencies that are considered to be a priority locally may be overlooked.

It is a good and feasible idea for countries to select for themselves the key competencies they want to study whilst taking account of their own context, as working on key competencies is too culture and context-bound in practice. It may, however, be interesting to exchange methods on and experiences with such national research.

To conclude, it can be stated that Flanders is not in favour of benchmarking in the acquisition of key competencies in terms of a quantitative comparison and ranking according to the results achieved. What is useful though is to compare theoretical concepts, procedures and the nature of the selected key competencies whereby an attempt can also be made to achieve a selection of key competencies that is supported at international level.

7.3 Expectations

Flanders is definitely in favour of continuing the DeSeCo project and is awaiting fresh incentives. We are also prepared to co-operate with other interested countries in concrete projects and to receive feedback about our approach.