Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society
Key Competencies

for A Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society

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Foreword

The world is rapidly becoming a different place, and the challenges to individuals and societies imposed by globalization and modernization are widely acknowledged and apparent. Our increasingly diverse and interconnected populations, rapid technological change in the workplace and in everyday life, and the instantaneous availability of vast amounts of information represent but a few of these new demands. Other demands relate to the type of world OECD countries want to promote: balancing economic growth with the sustainability of natural environments, individual prosperity with social cohesion and reducing societal inequalities. The development of the knowledge, skills, and competencies of the population – through education systems and learning opportunities in the workplace and other venues through the life span – is key to meeting these demands. This necessarily sparks related questions about what are the competencies that are most important for today’s and tomorrow’s world and how they can be developed and fostered. OECD countries are at the forefront of addressing these issues and developing sound indicators of the knowledge and skills of young people and adults. To date, however, OECD work in this arena has focused on measuring individuals’ reading, mathematical, and scientific literacy. The Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo) Project was initiated to provide solid theoretical and conceptual foundations for the broad range of competencies that
are needed to face the challenges of the present and the future. The project, in which many OECD countries have participated, is led by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, and with support from Statistics Canada.

DeSeCo aimed to develop, through an interdisciplinary, collaborative, and forward-looking approach, a frame of reference for assessments and indicators of competencies that would have resonance with the information needs of policy-makers.

The first DeSeCo volume—*Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*—was published in 2001 and provides the scholarly contributions during the first phase of the project. In these papers, one can find the bases on which the DeSeCo framework is built and fully appreciate the rich interdisciplinary nature of the project. The present volume presents DeSeCo’s final report. It is a vital contribution to advancing our understanding of what it means to be a competent individual and of how investments in key competencies can benefit both individuals and societies. DeSeCo’s overarching framework is valuable because it provides a broad-based conceptual foundation that recognizes the complexity of the topic and stimulates us to take a more comprehensive view on why key competencies are important and to reflect on what we value in competent individuals and what type of world we are striving for.

DeSeCo’s framework will serve as a guide to the OECD for the planning and implementation of a coherent, long-term strategy for assessments and indicators of key competencies among young people and adults. The DeSeCo framework could also find much wider application in the development of education and training programs for all stages of lifelong learning.

Many people made important contributions to the work of DeSeCo, but none more than Dominique Simone Rychen and Laura Salganik. Their commitment, their intellectual leadership, and their drive have ensured that the work has been brought to such a productive conclusion. Heinz
Gilomen and Eugene Owen provided the project with significant intellectual support and, through the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and the National Center for Education Statistics, with crucial financial support. I thank the four of them on behalf of all who enjoyed the opportunity to work with them on the project and all who will benefit from this publication.

Barry McGaw
Director for Education
OECD
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Introduction

A project defined

Recent trends toward increasing diversity and liberalization on the one hand, and continued globalization and standardization on the other hand, both within and across countries, present clear challenges. While individuals and the governments that represent them seek continuous economic growth, there is concern regarding the impact of this growth on natural and social environments (OECD, 2001d). In a similar vein, many are uneasy that although the rapid introduction of new technologies may increase productivity, it will also contribute to increasing social inequality. In such a context, education is widely considered an indispensable aspect of any and all conceptual and practical approaches to these issues, as evidenced by the ever-increasing emphasis that is placed on education as a resource and asset for individual and social achievement. With this heightened attention on education, tomorrow’s curriculum has become a relevant topic for political discourse and education reform efforts all over the world. There is a growing concern among governments and the general public about the adequacy and quality of education and training, as well as the economic and social returns on public educational expenditures.

As a result, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other multinational institutions have invested considerable effort in the development of internationally comparable outcome indicators in the education field (Salganik, Rychen, Moser, & Konstant, 1999; Salganik, 2001). In general, these indicators measure traditional notions of academic achievement and skill development, such as reading and mathematics skills. This focus is partly the result of practical considerations, but
is also due to the widely held and justifiable notion that these areas are crucial to success in the modern economy and society. Simultaneously, though, for some time it has been recognized that these curriculum-based and subject-related competencies and basic skills do not capture the full range of relevant education outcomes for human and social development and political and economic governance.

Apart from reading, writing, and computing, what other competencies are relevant for an individual to lead a successful and responsible life and for society to face the challenges of the present and the future? What are the normative, theoretical, and conceptual foundations for defining and selecting a limited set of individually based key competencies (Rychen, 2001)? An interest in such questions led to an international and interdisciplinary endeavor launched in late 1997 under the auspices of the OECD. This project, entitled *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (hereafter referred to as DeSeCo), has been carried out under the leadership of Switzerland.

DeSeCo’s goal was the construction of a broad overarching conceptual frame of reference relevant to the development of individually based key competencies in a lifelong learning perspective, to the assessment of these competencies in an international setting, and to the development and interpretation of internationally comparable indicators. DeSeCo has considered the topic of important, necessary, or desirable competencies from a broad, holistic perspective. Thus, the reflection on key competencies was