

On the Validation of Acquired Experiential Learning within the French VET System: Its functioning and role in promoting professionalisation and LLL

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Abstract

It is increasingly recognised that transparency and recognition of qualifications and prior experiential learning, play a crucial role in fostering LLL, employability, mobility, career development and socio-professional promotion of individual citizens. The validation of acquired learning experiences is also observed to contribute effectively to the promotion of professionalisation and learning path fluidity and complementarity within and between formal and non-formal learning systems. In this context and within the framework of CREDIVOC project (2007-2009) investigation, this paper explores and analyses the functioning, role and performances of the existing French "VAE" regime (i.e. Validation of Acquired Experiential learning) with the aim of identifying effective practices and their transference feasibility to other contexts in Europe. The adopted methodology in this investigation is mainly based on desk research and documentation completed by focus group meetings and interviews with experts and representatives from implementing silent partners and other involved stakeholders. The paper consists of four basic sections. The first section is a background overview of the overall structure of the French existing VET system. The second section presents the VAE regime, its development and functioning in practice. The third section examines the performance of VAE regime in terms of a quantitative input-output flow analysis of its beneficiaries, including its qualitative contribution to the achievement of its ultimate objectives such as the promotion of learning path-fluidity and complementarity between formal and non-formal learning systems and career development trajectories of its beneficiaries. The last section draws some overall concluding remarks and suggestions concerning the VAE role and its transference feasibility to other context in Europe.

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Introduction

The French VET is the second basic component of the whole French educational and training system (E&T) after the general educational system. It plays an important role in connecting the latter to the world of employment and the production sphere through its increasing capacity of promoting professionalisation and learning path fluidity and complementarity within and between formal, informal and non-formal learning through a variety of transparency and recognition of qualifications basic instruments such the validation of acquired experiential learning (VAE) and competence audit (Bilan de competences). In this context and within the framework of CREDIVOC project (2007-2009) investigation, this paper report explores and analyses the functioning, role and performances of the existing French "VAE" regime (i.e. Validation of Acquired Experiential learning) with the aim of identifying its transference feasibility as an effective practice to other contexts in Europe. The adopted methodology in this investigation is mainly based on desk research and documentation completed eventually by focus group meetings and interviews with experts and representatives from implementing silent partners and other involved stakeholder. In this connection, a specific reference will be made to the exemplary case of "technicians in mechanical engineering" who benefit from VAE regime throughout the grid of qualification/certification levels within the French NQF in the sub-sector of electromechanical engineering.

The paper consists of three basic sections and an overall conclusion. The first is an introductory overview of the overall structure of existing VET. The second section explores the VAE regime development, functioning and instruments in practice. The third section examines the performance of VAE in terms of a quantitative input-output flow analysis of its beneficiaries, including its qualitative contribution to the achievement of its ultimate objectives such as: the promotion of learning path-fluidity and complementarity between formal and non-formal learning systems and career development trajectories of its beneficiaries. The concluding section (section IV), deals basically with drawing some overall concluding remarks concerning the transference feasibility criteria of VAE instruments to other contexts in Europe as an effective practice for transparency and recognition of qualifications and LLL promotion.

I- Overall structure of existing VET system

The end of the compulsory education for all pupils under the age of 16 marks effectively the start of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) stream in France. The French VET system constitutes the second basic component of the whole educational and training (E&T) system after the dominant general educational stream. The present VET system is composed of two basic network streams: Initial Vocational Training (IVET) and Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) (Dif, 2007).

1. Initial Vocational Training (IVET)

The Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) system is, in its turn, made up of two basic systems: the initial vocational education (IVE) and the initial vocational training (IVT).

1.1) - Initial Vocational Education (IVE)

The initial vocational education is a full-time school-based system in one of the two educational streams: technological and vocational education undertaken at college and university levels.

At the upper secondary colleges (lycées), the vocational and technological education leads to the following degrees:

- The vocational aptitude certificate (CAP) or a vocational studies diploma (BEP) at the end of a two or three-year course based on alternation between vocational schools/centres and training within the enterprises. They allow their holders to have an easy direct access to the labour market.
- The final upper secondary college diplomas: the professional baccalaureate (Bac.Pro.) and the technological baccalaureate (BTn). They allow their holders to have access to higher education.

- The high technician diploma (BTS): It is a two/three-year university level degree which prepared within the upper secondary schools (lycées).

At the university and within the framework EU standardised “LMD (Licence-Master-Doctorate)” regime (launched via the higher education reform of 2002) whose implementation was generalised during 2006, the vocational education leads to obtaining Professional Bachelor and Master diplomas. All these undergraduate and post-graduate diplomas can also be prepared within the framework of particular work-related contracts such as the apprenticeship contracts.

In fact, the initial vocational and technological education plays an important role in keeping up students familiar with the new technological change. In addition, it contributes to smoothing the transition between schools and working life.

1.2) - Initial Vocational Training (IVT)

There are three methods of organising IVT: apprenticeship, alternating vocational training and other specific training (or inclusion/re-inclusion) programmes which integrate within the framework of specifically targeted measures.

A- Apprenticeship:

Apprenticeship in France has its historical roots in the mediaeval guilds with their strict hierarchy of apprentices, journeymen and master craftsmen. Today, apprenticeship is an employment contract comprising an alternation between school-based initial vocational training and work-based practical training, i.e. apprentices receive theoretical training at an Apprentice Training Centre (CFA) and acquire practical skills within an enterprise. Apprenticeships culminate in a vocational or technical training diplomas or an officially recognised title. In other words, apprentices prepare the same vocational and technological diplomas prepared in the initial vocational education (IVE) as it is confirmed by the apprenticeship reform Act 87-572 of 23 July 1987.

Within the apprenticeship system, the employer is required to arrange for the apprentice's practical training by appointing an apprentice master (*maître d'apprentissage*) for this purpose.

The apprentice master is a skilled employee who gives the apprentice on the job work assignments and tasks and secures the follow-up according to an annual schedule of progress drawn up through an agreement with the apprentice training centre. This training must be validated by a diploma or title.

Apprenticeship is basically funded by employers with the support of the State and regional councils. During the apprenticeship period, the apprentice receives a salary ranging from 30% to 80% of the national minimum guaranteed wage depending the apprentice's age and the length of time he or she has served under the apprenticeship contract.

B- Alternating vocational training:

Following the National Inter-professional Agreement of the 5th December 2003, the 2004 Act (4 May) concerning “LLL and social dialogue” introduced the “Professionalisation Contract” (Contrat de professionnalisation: CP) which has become since the 1st of October 2004 the, the substitute of the previous three vocational inclusion contracts (vocational qualification contract, vocational guidance contract and the vocational adaptation contract). It combines an alternation between work within an enterprise and training within a training institution (such as CFA). Its objective is to allow young people under the age of 26 and without professional qualification, or those who wish to complete their training at any level, including job-seekers aged 26 years and more. The objective is enabling its beneficiary to obtain a “Vocational Qualification Certificate (CQP: Certificat de Qualification professionnelle)”, a title or a qualification referenced by the collective agreement.

The duration of the contract or the professionalisation is 6 or 12 months, with the possibility of extending it to 24 months depending on sector agreement and the specific case of the beneficiary and/or the nature of the

undertaken training. The salary of the beneficiary is a percentage of the minimum guaranteed wage which goes up from 55% up to 85% (and even beyond) depending the age and the qualification level.

The funding is provided by an accredited fund collector and manager called OPCA obtained through the professionalisation contribution of 0.5% of the overall payroll (or 0.15% for firms with less than 10 employees).

C- Other specific and accompaniment measures:

They are socio-vocational inclusion and accompaniment measures targeting basically job-seekers within the age range 16-25 who left school without vocational qualification. They also concern long duration unemployed and unskilled adults beyond 25 years old.

2. Continuing Vocational Training (CVT)

CVT concerns basically adult individual already embarked on their working life, or they are just entering it with the main aim of:

- Helping them to adapt continuously to changing working techniques and conditions,
- Maintaining or improving their vocational core competences and specific skills,
- Contributing to the development of their work-related functional and promotional flexibility/mobility in particular and socio-professional promotion in general.

Since its formal introduction by the 1971 Act of 16/07/1971, the CVT has undergone important extensions and enrichment concerning its functioning, instruments and active role of social partners and other stakeholders on national and regional levels. The CVT has always been composed basically of two basic components: Employer-Directed CVT (ED-CVT) and Employee Self-Directed CVT (SD-CVT)

2.1) - Employer-Directed CVT (ED-CVT)

Employer-oriented and directed continuing vocational training (ED-CVT) is the dominant component of the French CVT system. It is generally carried out through the vocational training plan of the organisation (private or public). It includes all kinds of short term and medium term vocational training decided and implemented by the organisation in favour of its employees. It is the result of a concerted action within the enterprise aiming the promotion of internal functional labour flexibility and adaptability. For the enterprises, the training plan is usually financed through the firm's overall obligatory contribution to an accredited vocational training funds collector and manager (on branch and regional levels) called "OPCA" (representing now an overall a minimum contribution by the enterprises of 1.6% of their total wage bill).

The contributions of enterprises to the development of a vocational training system adapted to their needs through ED-CVT have been continuously increasing during the whole period of this new era since the 1971 Act. For instance, between 1980 and 1994, the number of trainees financed by companies had doubled. The amount of money put in by companies was very important representing for instance in 1994 about 3.3% of their total wage bill (about the double of their legal financial obligation).

However, the continuing vocational training developed (directly and indirectly) by employers is mainly characterised by its short-term and punctual nature with the aim of adapting "core employees" to their changing functional tasks (Germe and Pottier, 1996).

2.2) - Employee- Self Directed CVT (SD-CVT)

As the second basic component of CVT networking, self-directed continuing vocational training (SD-CVT) is considered as the employee's choice and preference guided form of training. It is usually carried out through three main formally institutionalised vocational training regimes:

A-Leave for self-directed continuing vocational training (LSD-CVT):

Officially introduced in 1971, LSD-CVT (*Congé Individuel de formation: CIF*) regime was designed to allow any worker, over his or her working life, to take paid leave (under minimum requirements adapted to the nature of work contracts) to pursue self initiated and directed training programmes independent of the organisation's training scheme with the guarantee of maintaining the work contracts during the training periods (Paul, 1992; Guilloux, 1996). It was created to promote free choice and equal access to learning and training by introducing three interdependent guarantees (Gahéry, 1996; Guilloux, 1996):

- A guarantee of free-choice in the sense that the beneficiary of this kind of leave is free to choose any type of training programme outside the organisation's usual training scheme. The training undertaken can be vocational with a variety of ultimate aims such as the promotion a job conversion and mobility within the organisation or just a simple adaptation to changes in technology and labour market structures. The training programme can also be non-vocational with the aim of allowing the trainee to acquire general qualifications and/or get more involved in the social and cultural life.
- A guarantee of equal chance for having access to learning and training within this regime. This means that all workers with different types of work contracts can benefit from it. Originally, LSD-CVT was designed and implemented exclusively in favour of workers recruited according to non-limited duration work contract. It took twenty years for this regime to adapt to the situation of precarious employment. In December 1991, it was officially extended to include employees on fixed duration contracts and temporary workers.
- A guarantee of autonomous funding and management. Since 1984, the LSD-CVT has been financed through a special fund held and managed by an independent parity organism (called OPACIF). This fund is fed by a compulsory contribution from the employers representing at the moment 0.20 % of the total amount of wages paid to their employees. The state takes into charge a part of the training costs. However, the state contribution is variable over time and still, generally limited to financing special cases of vocational training leave such as long term training leaves and the training leaves within small companies (with less than 10 employees).

B- Leave for the validation of acquired experiential learning (VAE leave):

In accordance with the Social Modernisation Act of 2002 and the implantation Decree of 3 May 2002 concerning VAE, the employee can undertake a leave for VAE (*congé pour la validation des acquis de l'expérience*) financed in the same way as LSD-CVT.

C- Leave for competencies audit (LCA):

Leave for Competence Audit (*Congé de Bilan de Compétences: CBC*), which can be taken by any employee who possesses a working experience of five years, of which one year at least was with the last employer. It allows its beneficiaries to have their experiential vocational and personal qualifications assessed and to be able to state clearly their own competencies and career development projects. Its costs are taken into charge in the same way as those linked to LSD-CV. As is the case with the LSD-CVT regime, LCA is adaptable to the individuals' employment status: permanent, limited duration or temporary employment. Moreover, the beneficiary of these regimes has the right to same kind of guarantees: free-choice, equal access, autonomous funding and management.

2.3) - Individual Right for Training (DIF)

The Act of 4 May 2004 on lifelong vocational training introduced an individual right to training for everyone in employment, transferable from one company to another under certain conditions (redundancy, business closure or restructuring). The right is exercised at the initiative of the employee but in consultation with the employer. So it is half-way between ED-CVT and ESD-CV. The acquired credits in terms of duration are 20 hours per year, which can be accumulated over period of 6 years. The training usually takes place outside the enterprise and taken in charge by the employer.

II- VAE development, functioning and instruments

1. Background overview of VAE development

The notion of identifying, assessing and formally recognising the individual's informal and non-formal experiential learning outcomes is not new to the French educational and training system. Its introduction has been a gradual process in scope and content. Its origin goes back to the 1934 Act of July the 10th. In fact this act provided the first general conditions for the delivery of an "engineer" grade to individuals who accumulated at least five years of working experience in engineering (Lenoir, 1996). Then, the 1985 Decree (of the 23rd August) extended it under the name "VAP" (Validation des Acquis Professionnels: Validation of Acquired Professional experiential learning) to allow adults to have access to different forms of formal learning at university level (leading to national degrees starting from at least the supervisor-high technician level, i.e. level III) through the accreditation of their prior formal, informal and non-formal learning. Its generalisation to all categories of working individuals had to wait until the 20th of July 1992, date of its official introduction by the 1992 Act and successive complementary and implementation regulations (Ravat, 1997a, 1997b; Terrot, 1997; Dif, 2002 and 2007). However this generalisation had, at the same time, restricted its application to only prior work-based non-formal learning. This is why it has been further extended and enriched during the first half of this decade, under a new generic acronym name "VAE" (Validation de Acquis de l'Expérience: Validation of Acquired Experiences), through the "Social Modernisation Law" of 17 January 2002 to include, in addition to work-based learning, experiential learning outcomes gained through prior social and cultural activities. This includes reducing the required period of prior experiential learning from five to three years.

2. VAE functioning, financing and instruments

2.1) - VAE objectives

As promoter of life long learning, the accreditation of experiential learning in the spirit of 1992 Act and its recent enrichment (through the Social Modernisation Act of 2002), is a generalised codification of a new individual right, based on two innovative concepts (1992 Act; Perker & Lairre, 1997; 2002 Act; Dif, 2007):

- Life experience at workplace and outside it is not limited to the application and use of knowledge acquired within the traditionally well established formal educational and training institutions. On the contrary, it is a continuing learning process, which can produce equally recognised competencies and knowledge, which allow for the development of further formal, informal and non-formal learning.
- Furthermore, it contributes to the promotion of learning path-fluidity and complementary between formal, informal and non-formal learning within an open dynamic and multidimensional approach to identity formation and development in an active citizenship.

It is an individualised right for a continuing access to the process of experiential learning assessment and certification under a certain number of conditions. It allows any individual, who could accumulate regularly or irregularly an experience of three years, as a full-time or a part-time worker in at least one activity related to a targeted degree, to apply for an exemption in the required exam-units. Therefore, the beneficiary can be an employee, an artist or an independent worker. This is possible regardless of whether the candidate is still working or looking for work at the moment of applying for an accreditation (Dif, 2007).

Moreover, as a summative instrument for validating experiential learning, the "VAE" is to be distinguished from another individualised right for access to a "Bilan de Compétences (BC)" (i.e. a "Competence Audit"). The latter is simply an audit of the individual's personal and professional competencies with the basic aim of supporting the beneficiaries' projects for career development/re-orientation and related further training and learning. As a formative and guidance instrument, it does not give its beneficiary the right to any direct formal accreditation or certification.

2.2) - VAE access procedure

The access procedure to VAE regime in its last generalised version can be grouped into a succession of three main stages (Dif, 2007; Hawley, 2007; Feutrie, 2006):

Stage 1: Information and guidance:

There are many sources of information and guidance for interested individuals in VAE. In addition to the VAE national governmental website <http://www.vae.gouv.fr>, each academy, department and university on regional level is equipped with at least one information and guidance provision centre and related website. This allows the potential candidates to have a direct access to necessary information and guidance to complete an initial dossier which outlines their experience in relation to the qualification validation they want to apply for. For this purpose, they can also access the related online “qualification/certification-occupational referential” as standard reference frameworks which outline the knowledge, skills and competence they the candidates should possess in order to be awarded the relevant qualifications. Then this initial dossier is submitted to the certification body for the relevant qualification, which decides within 2 months on the application validity to go on for the second main stage.

Stage 2: Preparation of the candidate's portfolio of acquired learning experiences:

Once the initial application is approved, the candidate proceeds to the preparation of his or her complete VAE dossier: the “portfolio of acquired experiences and competences”. From this stage onward, the candidate is strongly recommended to choose receiving an accompanying or mentoring support. The completed application is generally a four-part file:

- The first part has to include all the formal documents necessary for admission [e.g. an application for exam-exemption units, a motivation letter, a formal proof of 3 years of (regularly or irregularly) working experience, a full description of previous occupational and training tracks, and an affidavit for correct information].
- The second part gives a full description of previous occupations related to the targeted diploma. It includes a presentation of previous employers and occupations, and a full description of at least two main activities related to the subject of the requested validation (including the conditions in which they were performed).
- The third part is a complement to the previous parts. It contains further information chosen voluntarily by the candidate to back up his or her candidature for an accreditation.
- The fourth part is made up of different questionnaires which cover basic exam-units related to general or transversal core competences (such as French language, mathematics, physics, foreign languages, etc.).

Stage 3: Assessment and validation by a Jury:

The assessment and validation process takes place at an accredited centre for this purpose. It is taken charge by a jury which must be constituted and chaired in accordance with VAE related general regulations and those specific to each type of qualifications. In general $\frac{1}{4}$ of its members must be from the qualified representatives of the relevant occupational sector. $\frac{1}{2}$ of them must be representing employers and the other $\frac{1}{2}$ has to represent employees with an equal balance between men and women. There are no further formal regulations regarding the remaining members of the jury, except the fact that no staff from the candidate's company is allowed to be a member of the jury. Except in a certain cases in higher education, they are also excluded from the VAE jury the accompanying advisors who helped the candidate to prepare his or her VAE application file. Although the general regulations are the same, the composition and role of the VAE Jury is slightly different. The president or the director of the higher education institution nominates the chair and members of the jury. The VAE jury in this case must be made up of a majority of teachers/academics and must include at least one member from a company or external organisation (connected with the occupational sector of activity) with the exclusion of the candidate's employer organisation.

The jury's role in this stage can be divided into three key steps:

- Analysis and assessment of all the information contained in the application file to identify the applicant's prior experiential knowledge and competences which comply with the requirements of the candidate's targeted certification (in accordance with a standard qualification/certification-occupational activity referential to secure a minimum of quality assurance).
- Interview: this allows for obtaining complementary information and clarifications from the candidate concerning his or her submitted portfolio of acquired experiences and competences. If in general the interview may take place at the request of the jury or the candidate, it is compulsory in higher education.
- Deliberation and final decision: The VAE jury then proceeds to deliberation and takes as an outcome of the overall assessment one of the following final decisions: a full validation (and awarding related certification), a partial validation (some exemption units) or refusal to award the requested qualification/certification.

2.3) - VAE financing

As for the VAE financing, it is dependent on the candidate's employment status as follows:

- For employed individuals there are three open possibilities:
 - Within the framework of ED- CVT: the enterprises training plan;
 - Within the framework of "DIF" (Individual right for training) scheme;
 - Within the framework of ESD-CVT: VAE leave scheme (financed through an independent accredited parity funds collector and manager called OPCA (Organisme Paritaire Collecteur Agréé)).
- For unemployed/job-seekers, there are two possibilities:
 - ASSEDIC (Association for Employment in Industry and Commerce) which manages unemployment insurance funds
 - Regional authority (Regional council)
- For self-employed individuals, VAE is financed by a Training Insurance Fund collector and manager called FAF (Fonds d'Assurance Formation).

2.4) - VAE functioning instruments within the French national qualification framework

The output of VAE process covers a wide range of certifications distributed through the French nomenclature for vocational qualification levels (ranging from I to V).

There is a grid of levels used in different manners according to the awarding bodies (certificateurs) responsible for the certifications (Bouder & Kirsch, 2007):

- Level 1: It concerns executives, engineers, managers and experts possessing qualification level through education and training equal or superior to the Master degree and more (Baccalaureate + five years or more in higher education level).
- Level 2: Middle managers and experts possessing a qualification level through education and training equal to a Bachelor degree or a first year of a "Master" (Baccalaureate + 3 and 4 years of higher education).
- Level 3: high technicians and supervisors with a qualification level corresponding to the Baccalaureate plus two-year higher education level.
- Level 4: Team leaders, technicians and highly skilled workers possessing a technological or a vocational Baccalaureate ((BTn or Bac.Pro.), a Technician or a Vocational Certificate (BT and BP).
- Level 5: skilled workers and employees holding CAP (Vocational Aptitude Certificate) or BEP (Vocational Studies certificate).

The process of diplomas creation connected with this grid (levels within the "French Qualification Framework: FQF") is based on the combination of two referential standards: "occupational referential" and "diploma/curricular referential".

- The first referential standard ("occupational referential") refers to the identification of the main missions and tasks to be performed by the future holder of the diploma, including the specification of the conditions under which they will be implemented.
- As for the second (i.e. the "diploma referential"), it requires establishing a list of the corresponding skills and knowledge required effectively by the employment process itself

The Technical Accreditation Commission of technological qualifications (Commission technique d'homologation des titres et diplômes de l'enseignement technologique) taking in charge this process, was substituted by the National Commission for Vocational Certification (CNCP) in January 2002 through the Social Modernisation Act which was the same legislation that set in place the "VAE" regime (Hawley & Roy, 2007).

The CNCP body had three key objectives:

- Establishing and maintaining a National Repertory for Vocational Qualifications/certifications (Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles -RNCP);
- Overseeing the reform and updating of qualifications (diplomas and certificates) on the basis of developments in education and the labour market;

- Providing recommendations to organisations that deliver vocational qualifications and provide information about the relationship between different types of qualification.

The National Commission for Vocational Certifications (CNCP) is composed of 43 members: ministerial representatives (16), social partners (10), qualified experts (11) and representatives of the Chambers of Commerce (3) and the Regions (3). It has also set up a specialized Commission to examine requests to include qualifications in The National Repertory for Paraprofessional Qualifications (Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles - RNCP). The RNCP which is functioning on the basis of a national secretariat and a regional networking was also created in 2002, on the initiative of the state but with the participation and agreements of social partners. Its purpose is "to catalogue all existing and certificates in order to be able to establish bridges and equivalences between them, with a view of promoting employees' mobility and preparing career plans".

Depending on the delivering bodies, there are three main categories of certifications:

- National Vocational Certificates (diplomas) delivered by the State through its different ministries (education, agriculture, youth & sport) automatically and permanently registered in the national repertory "RNCP".
- Vocational Qualification Certificates ("CQP: Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle") created and delivered by the sectors under the responsibility of social partners. Their registration (for 5 years) within "RNCP" is requested by the concerned sector bodies and approved by the commission "CNCP".
- Certificates and titles delivered by chambers of commerce, public or private institutions under their own names. They can also be registered (also for 5 years) within the National Repertory for Professional Certifications (RNCP) at request and after the approval of the National Commission for Vocational Qualification Certifications "CNCP".

By the end of 2006, the RNCP contained over 3,500 vocational qualification (or certification) descriptors of which over 1,300 descriptors had been registered by request and subject to an evaluation by the CNCP. The remaining ones were provided by national ministries and were included automatically. Today, there are over 4,100 descriptors available in the RNCP database (Hawley & Roy, 2007).

In this connection, it is very important to underline that the French educational and training (E&T) system is now based on one single system of qualification and certifications, rather than separate systems for those qualified through VAE and those qualified through formal routes. Certificates and titles awarded by different educational and training bodies do not differentiate certifications obtained through VAE instrument and those obtained via school-based formal routes. This might be quite different in many other European countries (Hawley & Roy, 2007; Boudier & Kirsch, 2007).

Moreover the VAE functioning was further reinforced through higher education reform of 2002, leading within the EU standardised three-cycle-system (Bachelor – Master – Doctorate, named in France LMD: Licence-Master-Doctorat) to the simultaneous introduction and implementation of ECTS (European Credit Transfer) distributed through the French Qualification Framework (FQF) level grid structure as follows (M.E.N., 2006) :

- FQF3 (Bac. +2): 120 ECTS for BTS (High Technician Certificate) and 120 ECTS for DUT (University Diploma in Technology);
- FQF2 (Bac. +3 and 4): 180 ECTS for the Bachelor degree (Licence) and 240 ECTS for the first year of Master degree (M1);
- FQF1 (Bac. +5): 300 ECTS for Master degree (2nd year of Master degree: M2).

III- VAE performance

The VAE performance can be assessed in terms of its contribution to the achievement of two layers of interrelated objectives:

- The intermediary objectives specific to its effective implementation and functioning in practice, i.e. in terms of input/output flow (basically quantitative indicators);
- The ultimate objectives such as its contribution:
 - To the development of learning-path fluidity between formal and non-formal learning;

- To the individual beneficiaries' LLL, employability, flexibility and mobility in particular, and their socio-professional promotion in general.

1. Its performance in terms of input/output flow

In order to keep track of the development and its performance, it is important to distinguish between two periods: prior to 2002 Act and afterwards (Dif, 2000 and 2007).

1.1) - Prior to 2002 Act

Prior to 2002 Act, there is a distinction between two level-categories of certification and further learning for which the accreditation is usually requested:

- Accreditation for vocational and technical certification linked to the secondary school vocational education and training system (where only the 1992 Act and its implementation decree of 1993 were applicable).
- Accreditation for access to the university-level further (general, vocational and technological) learning and certification. Here both the 1985 Decree (concerning access to higher education) and the 1992 act are applicable.

A) - At the secondary school level of certification:

In 1998, 3,383 accreditation applications were examined (against only 971 in 1995). 77 % of them were made by working individuals, and 23 % concerned those who were unemployed and still searching for work. The participation of the latter (unemployed individuals) had been observed to be increasing (compared to 20 % in 1995). The majority of the applicants (seven out of ten) were aged between 25 and 40 years old. About six out of ten had already accumulated a working experience of 10 years at least. Women were represented through 55% of the total number of submitted applications (M.E.N.R.T, 2000).

As for the requested form of certification, the applicants were interested in all kinds of existing certificates. But, they have a higher preference for "BTS" (higher technician diploma) represented by 44.7%. 21.7% have increasing preferences for "CAP" (the vocational aptitude certificate). The third position, is occupied by both the vocational certificate ("BP") and "Bac. Pro" (Vocational Baccalaureate) with about 14%. All these diplomas were dominantly requested within the activities of the tertiary sector (69%) and the industry (26%) (M.E.N.R.T, 2000).

The applicants' motivations were basically linked to their decisions to have their experiential work-related learning formally recognised. They represent about 52% of the whole number of applicants. Only 17% were motivated by job-conversion and mobility (M.E.N.R.T., 1998/2000).

Concerning the rate of intermediary and final success, 88% of the accreditation applicants succeeded in obtaining partial or full exam-exemption-units in 1998. 69% of these success cases were obtained in the tertiary sector, followed by the industry with 26.3% (leaving only 4,7% to the construction sector). As for the final certification, out of 5,360 candidates during the period of 1995-1997, 47% of them succeeded in obtaining their targeted diplomas (M.E.N.R.T., 1998).

B) - At the university level of certification:

According to a survey carried out in 1998 by the DPD (Department for Programming and Development) and the DES (Department of Higher Education) of the Ministry of National Education (MNRT) concerning the effective practice of VAE has revealed the following developments:

- Most of the universities have responded favourably to the implementation of the generalised version of the "VAE" by creating the necessary organisational structures for the identification, assessment and the accreditation of experiential learning. About 12,000 accreditation applications were treated in 1998 to a variable degree by all the universities.
- The dominant tendency to continue with the application of VAE (VAP at that time) in its version limited to the framework of the 1985 Decree: 90 % of the accreditation applications are treated within this framework, i.e.

over a third of the universities still did not make use of all the possibilities offered by the generalisation of VAE regime in its 1992 version. This is basically due to the difficulty to make the necessary practical arrangements for its strict implementation at the university level. The VAE in its 1992 version required the use of modular courses in coherence with the prior experiential learning and the individual units of the targeted diplomas tested by an independent jury. In order to increase their chance of success, most of the applicants had preference for an examination based on inter-modular compensations.

- A high rate of accreditation in both versions of “VAE” regime: 80% in the case of the limited version of “VAE” (1985 Decree) and 75% in its generalised form (1992 Act).
- The beneficiaries of VAE regime in its two versions were dominantly employed individuals representing 59%. The unemployed individuals represented only 27%.
- Most of the beneficiaries of the VAE go for general education disciplines: 40% for three-to-four-year university degrees (B.Sc. and M.Sc.), and between 20% -25% of them for two-year university degrees. Then those who have preference for vocational education diplomas came with 20% on a postgraduate level and less than 10 at the graduate level.

1.2) - After 2002 Act

On the whole, VAE has gradually gained especially after the 2002 Act an increasing real welcome and interest, particularly in terms of public opinion and individuals. Since its creation in 2002, there has been a considerable increase in demand from less qualified individuals seeking to take up this offer of a ‘second chance’ and to progress towards a higher level of qualifications. A total of over 50,000 certifications were awarded between 2002 and 2005 (10,700 in 2002; 17,700 in 2003 and 26,700 in 2005). In 2005, over 3,000 candidates were awarded a full certification by the Ministry of Employment alone – almost twice the number in 2004 (Hawley & Roy, 2007).

In 2004, the regional information stand points (PRCs) received 70,000 individuals for information. 70% of them benefited of an individualised guidance interviews. 36,000 effectively submitted their applications for assessment and validation by the VAE jury. About half of these applicants were successful in obtaining their certificates or titles, distributed as follows (Labruyère, 2006):

- According to the candidate’s employment status, age and gender
 - 2/3 employed (against 1/3 unemployed/job-seekers);
 - 30 to 45 year old individuals constitute the dominant age group;
 - 2/3 women.
- According to the level of certification:
 - Level V certification (CAP & BEP): 42%.
 - Level IV (Bac. Pro., BT et BP): 23%
 - Level III (Bac+2): 25%
 - Level II (Bac+3 and 4) : 7%
 - Level I (BAC+5 and more):3 %.
- According to certification delivery body:
 - National certificates delivered by the ministry of education are the most requested form of certification especially BTS (High Technician Certificate), Level 4 professional certificates and level 5 certificates (CAP).

2. Contribution to the achievement of its ultimate objectives

In terms of its contribution to the achievement of its ultimate objectives and missions mentioned above (i.e., the second set of performance evaluation criteria), the “VAE” has many advantages for the beneficiaries, for the organisation and the integration between formal and non formal learning (Dif, 2001 and 2007).

For the beneficiaries, the “VAE” has many interdependent advantages, namely:

- Social recognition and promotion of work as means for access to lifelong learning and certification.
- Promotion of vocational and social mobility: Through a continuing accreditation of work-related knowledge and access to further learning, the individuals are more able to:
 - Increase the level of their qualifications and open possibilities for job promotions;

- Develop and diversify the portfolio of their knowledge, competencies and identities;
- Adapt to changes in employment requirements and working conditions.

As for its contribution to bridging the link between formal and non-formal learning, it can be achieved through its following interdependent fundamental roles:

- Widening the scope of diploma delivery modes, whereby the traditional formal educational and training activity is no longer the unique way for certification. Learning at and from work is considered, according to this regime, as another mode of vocational and technical diploma delivery.
- Establishing, therefore, a new dynamic and more coherent relationship between occupational activity and formal modes of certification.
- Facilitating the creation of a real self-initiated and directed matching between vocational education and training, employment requirements and the individual's needs for identity and carrier development.
- Development of a learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between different components of the educational and training system as a whole.

Even for the employer, the "VAE" regime constitutes a new external indicator for human resources evaluation and development within the organisation. It is more objective than the internal performance evaluation procedures. Through a process which combines both "occupational referential" and "diploma/curricular referential", the organisation can develop a system which allows for the identification of reliable criteria to be used in optimising its recruitment/training policy and career development schemes for its employees.

However, in spite of all these identified roles of the regime in favour of employees, employers and the development of learning-path fluidity between formal and non-formal learning, the VAE is still not all shortcoming free instrument in practice (Dif, 2001 and 2007):

- First, it is not a "pure" inclusion regime as it practically excludes workers without any initial qualifications at all and non-occupationally active individuals;
- Secondly, it does not practically cover all the fields of work-related learning. Some highly institutionalised and powerful "corporatist type of identities" are still rigid and not open to the application of the regime. This case can be found, for instance, in the medical, paramedical and pharmaceutical sector.

IV- Overall conclusions: VAE role and its transference feasibility

In the light of the above analysis of the VAE functioning, instruments and performance within the French VET system (sections I, II and III), it is important to underline that VAE transference feasibility as an effective practice for LLL promotion is based on meeting three categories of interconnected common ground criteria within both original and/or recipient countries. These criteria include basically: the VAE observed effectiveness in the original country, its integration of the European dimension and the existence of contextual receptivity in the recipient country.

The first criterion is its observed effectiveness in the original implementing country. According this basic criterion, the VAE especially in its extended and enriched versions has many far reaching implications for the promotion of lifelong learning, professionalisation, employability and mobility as it effectively allows for recognising effectively that:

- School-based formal learning is not necessarily of greater importance than experiential learning which can be made visible via VAE instruments.
- Learning has a "life-wide" dimension which brings the complementarity of formal, informal and non-formal learning into one focus, implying that learning can and does take place within the family and the community, in daily social and leisure, cultural and working-life.
- A learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between formal education and training and informal and non-formal learning can be established by allowing for an equal individualised access to the accreditation of all kinds experiential learning outcomes based on common referential criteria.

- That individuals can develop their own professional identities in a more dynamic and multidimensional context, and consequently be more prepared to cope with the requirement of change and increasing demand for flexibility and mobility;
- The existing qualification/certification delivery system can be further enriched and widened in scope to allow for an increased access to certification and lifelong learning inside and outside the dominant formal school-based learning system.
- Combining occupational referential with diploma/curricular referential in the process of certification creation and inclusion in the national repertory of vocational certification, it contributes to an effective matching between employment requirements in the labour market the expected learning outcomes. For this purpose, the National Employment Agency (ANPE) has recently established a direct web link between ROME (Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois) and the national repertory for vocational certification (RNCP) in order to improve its training and employment guidance and counselling for job-seekers.
- That transparency and recognition of learning outcomes based on one single system of qualifications/certifications connected with the use of modularisation and ECTS system, contributes directly and effectively to the development of national and sectoral qualification framework (NQF and SQF) increasingly integrated within the EQF.
- As a summative instrument for the accreditation of informal and non-formal learning outcomes, the VAE is supported up-front, since the mid 80s, by the existence of more formative approach to the identification and assessment of experiential learning outcomes called Competence Audit ("Bilan de Competences: BC"). It permits the identification and valorisation of the individual's:
 - professional and personal competences,
 - abilities and potential capacities,
 - interests and motivations.
 It allows effectively its beneficiary:
 - to draw up a career/learning strategy
 - to support an external or internal 'mobility'
 - to develop competencies within a profession
 - to design a training path
 - to prepare for undertaking a VAE.

The second criterion is the "European dimension" criterion. As a transparency and recognition of informal and non-formal learning instrument, the VAE integrates well within the common ground strategy guidelines and recommendations of the "Lisbon-Bologna-Copenhagen" process for the promotion of cooperation and exchange of effective practices within and between all EU countries through:

- Improving quality and effectiveness of education and training throughout life in Europe for the creation of knowledge-based economy and society;
- Introduction and effective implementation of the European three-cycle (Bachelor-Master-Doctorate) higher educational system, based on modularisation, ECTS system and diploma supplement;
- Development and implementation of national and sectoral qualification frameworks connected with the European qualification framework (EQF);
- Creation of ECVET and common ground principles for identification, assessment and validation of informal and non-formal learning.

The third criterion for exchange and transference feasibility of effective practices between EU partner countries consists of the existence of favourable contextual receptivity in the recipient country. Given their voluntary collective adherence to the implementation of "Lisbon-Bologna-Copenhagen" process strategy guidelines, especially in connection with the LLL promotion through the implementation of common principles for transparency, mobility and validation of informal and non-formal learning instruments, most of the EU countries possess now the required contextual receptivity for cooperation, exchange and/or transference of related effective practices and instruments.

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