

On transferable effective practices in regional VET networking from France

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Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research,
University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 10-12 September 2008
(EERA/VETNET)

Abstract

This paper integrates within the framework of the European research project LITVETNET (2007-2009) on “modelling the regional VET networking in Lithuania. In this context, the paper is an investigation into the transferability of some of the observed effective practices within the French regional VET networking to the Lithuanian case through the following three interrelated basic sections. The first section presents the contextual legal, institutional and socio-economic background developments of the French VET networking between training institutions, social partners and stakeholders on national, regional and sector levels. The second section explores the cases of transferable effective practices of regional VET networks through the identification and the analysis of their main characteristics, aims, functioning and performance. The adopted methodology in this investigation is based on desk research and documentation completed with interviews with experts and representatives of different socio-economic and institutional actors and stakeholders involved in the identified regional VET networking of cooperation and partnerships. The last concluding section examines the transference feasibility of identified French cases of effective experiences and practices to other European context with specific reference to example of Lithuania as a recipient country.

Introduction

The French VET networking constitutes 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 basic instruments such the validation of acquired experiential learning (VAE) and competence audit (Bilan de compétences). This is reinforced by the increasingly predominant and active role of social partners and other stakeholders on national, sector and regional levels.

Within the framework of the preliminary research stage in the implementation of the European project LITVETNET (2007-2009) on “modelling the regional VET networking”, this paper report is an exploration and analysis of the basic structure, functioning and role of the existing French VET networking with the aim of identifying some cases of effective practices and instruments, including the analysis of their transference feasibility to the Lithuanian context through the following sections:

- I- Contextual background for VET networking developments and functioning:
 - 1. Overall structure of existing VET networking
 - 2. Development of the role of social partners and other active stakeholders (on national, sector and regional levels)
- II- Cases of effective practice instruments of VET networking
- III- Overall conclusions concerning VET networking cases of effective practice instruments and their transference feasibility.

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I- Contextual background for VET networking developments and functioning

1. Overall structure of existing VET networking

The present French Vocational Education and Training (VET) networking is composed of two basic network streams: Initial Vocational Training (IVET) and Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) (Dif, 2007; Perker, 2000).

A. Initial Vocational Training networking

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

A1) - Initial Vocational Education

The initial vocational education (IVE) 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. 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 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.

A2) - Initial Vocational Training

There are three methods of organising Initial Vocational Training (IVT) in France: 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 an 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 on 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 (of the 4th of May) concerning "LLL and social dialogue" introduced the "Professionalisation Contract" (Contrat de professionnalisation: CP) which has become since the 1st of October 2004 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 to 12 months, with a possible extension to 24 months, by sector agreement, according to 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 on 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.

B. Continuing Vocational Training networking

The Continuing Vocational Training (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 and specific skills and competences,
- 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)

B1) - Employer-Directed Continuing Vocational Training

Employer-oriented and directed continuing vocational training (ED-CVT) is the dominant component of CVT networking. 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 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 minimum contribution of 1.6% of 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 (cf. Germe and Pottier, 1996).

B2) - Employee-Self Directed Continuing Vocational Training

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 (Congé Individuel de formation: CIF). Officially introduced in 1971, this 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 (cf. Paul, 1992; Guilloux, 1996). It was created to promote free choice and equal access to learning and training by introducing three interdependent guarantees (cf. 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 in 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 funds collector and manager (called OPACIF). This fund is fed by a compulsory contribution from the employers representing at the moment 0.20 % of the total wages paid to their employees. The state takes into charge some of the incurred 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: congé pour la validation des acquis de l'expérience). In accordance with the social modernisation act of 2002 concerning VAE and the implantation Decree of 3 May 2002, the employee can undertake a leave for VAE financed in the same way as LSD-CVT.

c- Leave for competencies audit: LCA (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 vocational and personal qualifications evaluated and 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 individual's 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.

B3) - Individual Right for Training (DIF)

The Act of 4 May 2004 on lifelong vocational training introduced an individual right to training (“Droit Individuel à la Formation – DIF”) for any employee, 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 can be accumulated over period of 6 years. The training is usually undertaken outside the enterprise and financially taken in charge by the employer.

2. Development of the role of social partners and other active stakeholders

A- Role of social partners in VET networking development through collective bargaining agreements

Social partners play a crucial and highly autonomous role in decision-making concerning VET networking functioning and development (especially CVT and IVT) through collective bargaining process for which the law provides a legal framework for their interactivity in collaboration with the State, training providers, firms and the regions (including multipliers organizations and sector bodies such as chambers of commerce and industry). This role is undertaken on three, more or less three interconnected levels with parity-based governance and management level in the implementation and follow-up stage, especially in connection with VET financing: National Inter-professional level, sectoral level, company level and joint parity governance and management in the implementation stage (cf. H. Pinaud and A. Taillandier, 1995). This role, supported by the public authorities, is a relatively recent phenomenon in France. It started taking shape only thirty years ago and still in the process of further developments and improvements, especially at the enterprise' level.

The legal framework for collective bargaining concerning VET is established by the general legal provisions pertaining to bargaining in the "Employment Code (code du travail)". For instance, the core of the operative provisions (chapter IV) is that "organisations" which are bound by collective agreement are required to meet at least once every five years to negotiate vocational training. In this connection the Code of Employment even specifies examples of the points to which the collective bargaining must relate such as: the nature of training schemes and their order of priority, the validation of acquired qualifications, the means for the enterprises committees, the ways in which companies implement sectoral agreements, etc.

A1) - On national inter-professional level

In principle, the national inter-professional bargaining concerning continuing vocational training takes place exclusively at the national level. But there are instances where the negotiation is extended to the regional inter-professional level. This process can be carried out in "joint regional inter-professional employment committees" (Commissions Paritaires Interprofessionnelles Régionales d'Emploi - COPIRE). These bodies are social partner committees which focus on regional employment and training problems and questions of dialogue with the regional authorities. The territorial scope of the agreement remains national as its occupational scope is defined by the contracting parties. Consequently, all of the enterprises which are affiliated to one of the employer organisations belonging to the to the enterprises of the National Council of French Employers (Conseil National du Patronat Français – CNPF) or those of the General Confederation of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises - CGPME) fall within the occupational field of application of the agreement, except for those which expressly requested to be excluded when the agreement was being signed - which was the case when the CVT related national inter-professional agreement of the 9th of July 1970 was concluded between employees and employers' organisations.

The agreement of 3 July 1991, which initially covered all of the enterprises belonging to the CNPF, CGPME and the Craftsmen Union (UPA), has been the subject of the general application procedure for which provision is made in the Employment Code, so that enterprises which do not belong to the signatory employer organisations but which fall within domain of its implementation are also subject to the agreement (Pinaud and Taillandier, 1995).

The real instance of the general application of what constitutes one of the original aspects of the system of continuing vocational training in France, is actually the fact that the legislator has taken over the essential results of the social partners' negotiations at the national inter-trade level since 1970. And by incorporating those results into a law of general application, the legislator settled the question of the occupational application of the agreement at the same time. The only exception to this rule, and one which is probably temporary, is the part of the agreement of 5 July 1994 which related to training time capital (Pinaud and Taillandier, 1995; Prieur, 2002).

A2) - On sector level

In general, the sectoral negotiation is bound by the sectoral or professional agreement to take place at least once every five years, and at least every three years since the national inter-professional agreement ("ANI") of 2003. The negotiations concern the priorities, objectives and the means of vocational training for employees in accordance with the Employment Code (article L. 933-2). The negotiations take place, in practice, at the national level and the agreement constitutes an endorsement (or annex) of the professional agreement. They cover a wide range of actions. The content of negotiating at branch level in the field of vocational training (as discussed in chapter II of the

Employment Code under article L. 934-2) is extremely broad. This includes negotiating and reaching agreements concerning for instance:

- The nature of the training activities and their order of priority;
- The recognition of qualifications acquired as a result of training activities;
- the means given to union representatives and members of the enterprises councils to accomplish their mission in the area of training;
- Conditions of vocational inclusion of young people through alternating vocational inclusion contracts;
- Determination of sectors' objectives, priorities, levels and number and levels the of trained staff and the conditions of implementation of apprenticeship contracts;
- Training actions to be undertaken in favour of less qualified employees in order to facilitate their professional development;
- Defining the implementation conditions of training actions which secure equal access to vocational training for men and women;
- Search for adapted solutions to the problems specific to training within small and medium enterprises, particularly in those with fewer than ten employees;
- Impact of possible changes in the organization of work and working time on training needs;
- The impact of Europe construction on the training needs and actions;
- The consequences of the training needs and actions for development of economic and commercial activities of French companies abroad;
- The implementation modalities of the negotiated branch agreements by the enterprises.

Starting from a modest level attained in the eighties, the sector negotiations have expanded later as a result of legislative and inter-professional re-launching impetus in 1984.

But in practice, it was concentrated on the VET organisation and financing with a limited qualitative role concerning VET policies on the branch level. But, the 2004 Act concerning LLL in VET, extended its role and normative scope. Accordingly, the sectoral bargaining constitutes an important step in the adaptation of VET measures adopted through national inter-professional agreements (and/or confirmed by law) to the specificities and objectives of the sector of the activity: the training period, the duration of the professionalisation contract, defining the targeted groups and the priorities assigned to the measures to be undertaken, etc.

Thus, they have experienced a significant development for twenty years, and most importantly after the Inter-professional agreement of 2003 and the 2004 Act, with nearly 450 branch agreements reached. The professional sector has become, at the end of this process, an essential level for negotiating and undertaking vocational training policy decisions.

A3) – On enterprises' level

In contrast with the previous two bargaining levels, VET related negotiations and resulting collective agreements on the enterprise level are still not enforced by law as an obligation. Negotiation on the enterprise's level remains basically limited to its traditional concerted "information and consultative role" in the social dialogue, which takes place within the enterprise through the "enterprise committee" composed of representatives of the employers and the employees within the enterprises. VET has always been an important part of its consultative prerogatives since its creation by the Decree of 22 February 1945. The Act of June 1966 amended this decree by explicitly stipulating that it is mandatory to consult the enterprise's committee on general issues retaining to VET as well adapting provided training to the requirements of employment and technological development. This legislative provision concerning VET related role of the enterprise committee was confirmed in the preamble to the National Inter-professional Agreement of July 1970. The 1971 Act and related implementation decrees laid down in more specific terms the mandatory role of the enterprise's committee.

As further refined by the labour code, these consultative prerogatives of the enterprise's committee include for instance the following (Pinaud and Thailandier, 1995):

- The committees undertakes consultation every year (via at least two meetings) concerning the preparation of guidelines for in-house training in accordance with the perspectives of developing employment, investment and technologies within the enterprise. Moreover, it evaluates and gives an opinion concerning last year's training programme and the forthcoming draft one. The draft training programme must take into account of the guidelines for in-house training. This includes discussing the results of negotiations with the trade union organisations and any drawn programme connected with occupational equality.

- In the process of bridging the link between the consultative activities of the enterprise's and sectoral bargaining agreements, the committee of the enterprise evaluates and gives an opinion concerning the implementation of vocational and professional inclusions measures, particularly those concerning young beneficiaries of sandwich courses and professionalisation contacts.
- In accordance with the encouragement of the National Interprofessional Agreement of July 1991, the enterprises committee evaluates and gives an opinion about the employer's pluri-annual training scheme which must take into account the objectives and priorities assigned to vocational training as defined in the sectoral agreement.
- Given its extended prerogative in a public enterprise, the enterprise's committee has to deliberate and approve the enterprise's training programmes. If does not (or cannot) approve it, then the programme has to be submitted to management board of the enterprise for deliberation following an opinion issued by the supervisory council.

According to the collective bargaining reports of the Ministry of Labour, the VET related collective agreements negotiated at the company level represents on average about 2% of all the enterprises agreements in all these domains of negotiation together: wages, working times, etc. This due to fact that the number of negotiated agreements connected with VET has always been lower than the number of agreements negotiated concerning classification and employments. In 1993 for instance, out of a selection of 251 enterprise agreements related classifications, VET and employment only 28.2% were VET related ones against 55.7% on classifications and 45.8% concerned employment (Pinaud and Thailandier, 1995).

The development of enterprises' negotiations on vocational training in comparison with other domains remained relatively modest during the decade 1990-2000. However, the reduction in working hours has opened up new spaces for negotiating; particularly concerning the creation of a balance between working time and training time Training. The National Inter-professional Agreement (ANI) of 20 September 2003 and 2004 Act on LLL in VET (including the individual right to training, contracts and periods of professionalism) have brought new opportunities for negotiation on the enterprises level.

A4) – On parity governance level

Parity governance is a joint management system through which social partners (employees trade unions and employers trade union organisations decide to manage jointly on parity basis a "social guarantee" which is basically in this case "continuing vocational training" financing. This means that the Employer College and Trade Union College comprise an equal number of representatives with an alternation in chairing the management board. They have also an equal power in collective bargaining and agreements. They play an important role in laying down the principles and methods for the creation, management and control of CVT financing parity organisations called OPCAs. These organisations are created through agreements between the social partners (i.e. basically between employers and employees organisations) and formally approved by the public authorities on national and/or regional levels. They collect and manage the enterprises' obligatory contributions for CVT financing. They are grouped into three basic categories (Bentabe & Théry, 2006):

- Nationwide sectoral or intersectoral OPCA's;
- The inter-professional OPCAs which include SMEs'OPCA's (called AGEFOS-PME) created and approved on national level by the state. They also include the regional OPCAs (called OPCAREG) which are created and approved on regional level.
- Regional inter-professional OPCAs (called FONGECIF) created and approved specifically for CIF management.

On the whole, out of 99 OPCAs for CVT financing, 31 are in charge of ESD-CVT schemes financing management called OPACIF or FONGECIF (25 regional and 5 national).

B- Decentralised role of regions in VET networking

The process of increasingly regionalised VET networking was launched by the decentralisation law in March 1982 and July 1983, completed by the five-year government-regional planning agreement of December 1993. This law and its complementary agreements transferred direct competences and responsibilities to the regional communities in the field of continuing vocational training, initial vocational training (apprenticeship, and all forms of alternating vocational training contracts). The regional councils together with the social partners have the power of coordinating and structuring the supply of initial and continuing vocational training for young people of 16-25 years (by means of the regional plan for the development of vocational training for young people) and of continuing vocational training measures for adults. This transfer of competences and responsibilities has been accompanied by a handover of the appropriate financial means (Walther, 2003; Richard, 1995).

Moreover, regional employment and vocational training co-ordination committees were set up in 2002, in order to promote the co-ordination of vocational training policy and action and to ensure a better harmonisation of vocational training and employment policy through co-operation between the various involved organisations and stakeholders. These committees are made up of state representatives in each region, regional assemblies, management and labour organisations, and regional chambers of agriculture, commerce and industry. The August 2004 Act relating to liberties and local responsibilities further widened the regions' responsibilities in VET networking functioning and development.

In connection with the Validation of Acquired Experiential learning networking practices, many regions have been very active in developing tools to help both candidates and professionals working in the field for implementation of the system. All regions have established a co-ordination centre (*Cellule Régionale Interservices – CRIS*) for VAE within their training information services, and a network of information stand points within existing establishments (*Points-Relais-Conseil: PRC.*). In addition to PRCs management, the CRIS plays an important role in disseminating VAE among wider public users.

This overarching VET related regionalisation is reinforced by the development of practical work-related learning partnership (WLP) networking between the enterprises themselves, the training providers and other institutional, economic and social actors, namely through (Dif, 2006; WLP Consortium, 2006):

- WLP network between the enterprises and their training providers basically through apprenticeship contracts, alternating vocational training contracts, professionalisation contracts and the networking connected with the implementation of VAE and competence audit regimes on regional level.
- WLP between the enterprises themselves through the “GEIQ Networks” (i.e. the Groupings of Employers for Inclusion and Qualifications). There are today in France about 103 groupings of GEIQ network distributed in 21 regions (including Alsace) where 3300 companies, primarily SMEs, are actively involved.
- Inter-regional cross-border partnerships networking between companies in VET with Euregio certification (“Euregio training schemes”) as exemplified by the case of tri-national training programme network between France, Germany and Switzerland.

II- Cases of VET networking transferable effective practices

Insufficient integration in terms of learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between the traditional formal learning and learning in other contexts, has led the French authorities after a period of experimentation during the second half of the 1980s, to generalise formally, during 1991/1992, two VET related networking “instruments” of integration. The first was designed, under the acronym name “VAP” (Validation of Acquired Professional learning: Validation des Acquis Professionnels) and then under the name “VAE” (Validation of acquired Experiential learning: Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience) in 2002, to allow its beneficiaries (via the assessment and formal accreditation of their experiential learning) to have a direct access to certification and further formal and non-formal learning in particular, and to socio-professional promotion in general. As for the second regime (“Bilan de Compétences: BC”), it is an assessment of the individuals' personal and vocational competencies in order to support basically, their projects for their career development and related further training and learning. It does not give its beneficiaries, the right to any direct formal accreditation or certification (Dif, 2007).

The performance of these two VET networking related cases of effective practices is usually assessed in terms of their contribution to the achievement of two interrelated sets of objectives:

- The intermediary objectives specific to the functioning of each regime, i.e. in terms of output flow;
- The ultimate objectives common to both regimes, such as their contribution to:
 - The development of learning-path fluidity and complementarity between formal and non-formal learning;
 - The promotion of their beneficiaries' employability, flexibility and mobility in particular, and their socio-professional promotion in general.

The focus of this second section of the paper report is an investigation, through its two basic sections, into the working of these two regimes in practice and their implications for the promotion of lifelong learning in terms of their contribution to the development of learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between formal and non-formal learning.

1. "VAE" case

The accreditation of experiential learning is not a new notion 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 (10th July), which 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 (23rd August) extended it 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 the 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 work-based prior learning. This is why, it has been recently further extended and enriched, under a new generic acronym name "VAE" (Validation of Acquired Experiential Learning - Validation de Acquis de l'Expérience), through the "Social Modernisation Act" (17 January 2002) to include, in addition to work-based learning, learning gained through social and cultural activities. This includes reducing the required period of prior experiential learning from five to only three years.

In the context of this development, this section will focus through its two basic parts, on the performance of VAE regime ("Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience: VAE") during the last decade (i.e., the stage of its effective formal introduction and implementation). After a brief introduction of the working of the system in practice (part a), its effective contribution to LLL development and socio-professional promotion of the individual beneficiaries will be examined in a last part (part B).

A. "VAE" functioning in practice

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 and learning in other contexts 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).

Accordingly, 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. It does not give its beneficiary the right to any direct formal accreditation or certification.

Ultimately, the output of this process covers a wide range of degrees distributed through the French nomenclature for vocational qualification levels (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 concern executives, engineers, managers and experts possessing qualification level through education and training equal or superior to the Master degree and more (Baccalaureate +five year or more 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 is based on the combination of two referential standards: “occupational referential” and “diploma 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 (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 CNCP is composed of 43 members: ministerial representatives (16), social partners (10), 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” (Hawley& Roy, 2007).

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) and 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 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 qualifications, 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 state whether the qualification has been obtained through VAE or formal routes. This might be quite different in many other European countries (Hawley & Roy, 2007; Boudier & Kirsch, 2007).

Moreover, this process 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 (QF) 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).

The procedure which guarantees a real access to VAE regime in its generalised version is functioning through a succession of three basic 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.

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

- For employed individuals there three open possibilities:
 - o Within the framework of ED- CVT: the enterprises training plan;
 - o Within the framework of "DIF" (Individual right for training) scheme;
 - o Within the framework of ESD-CVT: VAE leave scheme (financed through a fund collector called (OPCA: OPACIF/FONGECIF).
- For unemployed/job-seekers , there are two possibilities:
 - o ASSEDIC (Association for Employment in Industry and Commerce) which manages unemployment insurance funds
 - o Regional authority (Regional council)
- For self-employed individuals, VAE is financed by a Training Insurance Fund collector and manager called FAF.

B. "VAE" performance

The performance of "VAE" 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.

B1) - Its performance in terms of input/output flow

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

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.

At the secondary school level of certification:

In 1998, 3383 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" (the 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).

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 came those who have preference for vocational education diplomas: 20% on a postgraduate level and less than 10 at the graduate level.

After the 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).

The regional information stand points (PRCs) received 70,000 individuals for information in 2004. 70% of these individuals 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 the 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).

B2) - Contribution to the achievement of its basic 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, "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 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 its extensions and identified roles 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 (Dif, 2001 and 2007):

- First It is not a "pure" inclusion regime as it practically excludes workers without any initial qualifications at all, including 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.

2. Case of Competence Audit

Competence Audit ("Bilan de Compétences - BC") is a counselling and guidance instrument based on the assessment of the individuals' personal and vocational competencies (formally, informally and non-formally acquired through their learning and professional trajectories) in order to identify and to support basically, their projects for career development and related further training and learning. As formative and guidance instrument (and in contrast with VAE which is a summative instrument), BC does not lead directly to any formal certification of the individuals' identified and assessed competences. But it might guide them to undertake eventually a "VAE".

After a period of experimentation, during the second half of the 80s, the non-formal competence audit regime ("Bilan de Compétences: BC"), was formally generalised to all salaried and non-salaried individuals (including people in search of work) through (Calafuri, 1996):

- The 1991 Inter-professional Agreement (of July the 3rd),
- The 1991 Act (of December the 31st),
- The Implementing Decree of 1992 (2nd October).

The "BC" regime establishes the right of any working individual to have voluntarily his or her personal and professional competencies assessed, with the aim of being able to define a clear career and/or a learning trajectory project. This assessment does not result directly in a formal recognition and certification. In order to have access to the latter, the beneficiary has to go through another different regime: the VAE regime (Dif, 2001)

A. Its functioning:

For employees, access to the "BC" is organised within the general framework of the Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) system introduced in 1971, through its two basic components: employer-directed CVT/employee-directed CVT, i.e.:

- Dominantly, through the employee-directed CVT, by taking a "Congé de Bilan de Compétences: CBC" ("Leave for Competencies Audit");
- Partially, within the training scheme of the organisation (i.e., through the employer-directed CVT);

To have access to the "CBC", the candidate has to justify a salaried regular activity of 5 years, of which one year within the last organisation. The individuals employed according to a limited duration work contract, have to justify only 2 years of work experience within this period of 5 years (of which 4 months on the basis of fixed duration work contract). As for temporary employees, they need to justify 5 years within the profession of temporary work (of which 1600 hours within the last organisation).

Each "CBC" is financed by a parity fund collector (OPACIF or FONGECIF and FAF-TT for temporary employees). It lasts 18 hours on average (a paid leave of 24 hours maximum). This can be spread over several weeks.

As for job-seekers, they can have access to "BC" by applying to the employment agencies where they are registered as unemployed. Their "BC" is partially or wholly financed by the State or local authorities. Within the framework of the launch of the Personalised Action Programme for a New Departure (Programme d'Action Personnalisée pour un Nouveau Départ : PAP-ND), the National Employment Agency (ANPE) created since July 2001 the "Reinforced Competence Audit (Bilan de Compétences Approfondi – BCA) in favour of unemployed job-seekers (DARES, 2005)

These BCs are organised within more than 921 institutions accredited as "BC-Centres" (including "Centres Inter Institutionnel de Bilan de Compétences : CIBC"). The assessment process in itself is formally fixed by the 1992 Implementing Decree. It goes through a succession of three individualised stages (Calafuri, 1996):

- A preliminary stage (the information collection and delivery stage), which allows the CIBC to:
 - Collect and analyse the necessary information about the candidate's needs and engagement in the process;
 - Inform rigorously the beneficiary about the BC process, its stages and the assessment methods and techniques used.

- The assessment stage, which allows the beneficiary to :
 - Analyse his or her motivations, personal and professional interests;
 - Identify his or her personal and professional competencies (including general knowledge);
 - Determine his or her project for professional development.
- The concluding stage, which allows, by means of an interview, the beneficiary to:
 - Have access to detailed results of the investigation stage;
 - Identify the favourable and non-favourable factors for the construction of a professional or training project, and predict the principal steps of its implementation.

B. Its performance:

Following the period of experimentation and after two years of its formal establishment 125,000 individuals benefited from “BC” regime in 1994. Three quarters of the requests were made by unemployed people looking for work. The remaining quarter concerned those who were already employed. Inactive individuals (such as non working housewives and students) represented only 1% of all BC-candidates. The parity between women and men is well represented (52% for women candidates).

Concerning the candidates’ motivations, half of them indicated that the elaboration of a professional project was their main objective. 20% for employment purposes and 21% are for access to vocational training. But only 1.9% indicated that BC was the first step to have access to “VAP” regime and formal certification.

Moreover, the “BC” beneficiaries are basically concentrated within the tertiary sector: 44% against 18% within the industry, 7.8% in the construction sector and only 4.3% from the agriculture (Andreani & Pinaud, 1998; Bjonavold, 2000).

Then about a decade afterwards, the number of “BC” beneficiaries had gone up from 125,000 in 1994 to 205,000 beneficiary individuals in 2003, representing an overall increase of 64% during the whole period (1994-2003). However, with the introduction by the National Employment Agency (ANPE) of the reinforced or “Deepened Competence Audit” (Bilan de Compétence Approfondi – BCA) for unemployed job-seekers in 2001, the number of this category beneficiaries represented in 2003 over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total number of BC beneficiaries (i.e. 155,000 job-seeker out of 205 BC beneficiaries). This development of BCA beneficiaries is basically characterised by the following (DARES, 2005):

- Over 7 out of 10 BCA beneficiaries belong to the age group of 20-44 years (i.e. 70,9%) followed by the those aged 45 years and more representing, in their turn, over 2 out of 10 (i.e. 21.1%);
- About 6 out 10 BCA beneficiaries are qualified workers (i.e. 59,6% of all qualified workers among job-seekers);
- Among women beneficiaries over 7 out ten are qualified job-seekers (i.e.70.6% of women BCA beneficiaries).

On the whole, for both employed and job-seekers, the main beneficiaries of BC development since its introduction are the age group of 25 to 45 years old, women and holders of diplomas (qualified workers and executives).

Given that “BC” regime is operative on clear formative basis and on a large scale, with the main aim to clarify the potentials of individuals, it is hoped that it will continue contributing to the promotion of further learning and career possibilities. But, taking into consideration that this regime does not aim at the formal recognition of assessed professional and personal competences according to qualification standards, the effectiveness of its direct integrative role between formal and non-formal learning is highly reduced in comparison to VAE instrument.

III- Overall conclusions concerning VET networking cases of effective practice instruments and their transference feasibility

In the light of the above exploratory analysis of the structure, functioning and performance of the existing French networking (throughout the sections I and II), it is important to underline that the transference feasibility (to the Lithuanian context) of the identified cases of effective practice are based on taking into consideration of three categories of interconnected common ground transference criteria within both original and/or recipient countries. These criteria include basically the observed effectiveness of the identified cases in the original country, their integration of the “European dimension” and the existence of contextual receptivity in the recipient country.

The first criterion is the observed performance of the identified measure in the original country in terms of its positive contribution to VET networking development, based on effective and active participation and interactivity of social partners and other stakeholders involved in VET networking functioning and development on national, sectoral and regional levels. According to this criterion, Both “BC” and “VAE” are in practice effective VET networking instruments as they are observed empirically to have the advantage of:

- Bridging the link between informal and non-formal system through making experiential informal and non-formal learning visible;
- Establishing continuous functional and interactivity bridges between the whole educational and training system, the production sphere and labour market change and development as they both allow complementarily their beneficiaries:
 - To re-orient and adapt continuously their learning and career and projects trajectories in accordance with changes in technology and employability in the labour market;
 - To promote their LLL, functional flexibility and mobility through their continuous access to further formal and non-formal learning. This tendency is confirmed by the fact that access to competence audit (CB) usually leads to access to VAE and then to further learning and certification;
 - To the development of flexible vocational identities more open and able to internalise the requirements of change in technology, product and labour market;
- Contributing through their complementary functioning within the national vocational qualification system to increased transparency of qualifications and links between sectoral qualification framework, NQF and EQF.
- Contributing to the promotion of active work and learning related partnerships, cooperation and interactivity on national, sectoral, and especially on regional and inter-regional levels between social partners, training providers and other socio-economic stakeholders.

In spite of their common ground complementarity-based impacting role in VET networking development, the BC and VAE remain two different but complementary instrumental approaches in this connection.

Since its introduction the Competence Audit (BC) has been conceived conceptually and practically as a formative guidance and counselling tool rather than a summative and validation instrument. This role was clearly set out in its basic objectives and the legislations governing its effective introduction and implementation. In conformity with these objectives, the analysis of its performance since its introduction confirms clearly that competence audit (BC) permits the identification and valorisation of the individual's:

- professional and personal competences;
- abilities and potentials;
- interests and motivations.

All these allow effectively in practice the BC 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 and learning path;
- to prepare for a VAE.

Thus in practice and following an analysis of the expectations of the candidates, their skills and abilities, the *bilan de competences (BC)* results in a synthesis document drawn up by the professional guidance counsellors employed by the accredited centre. This resulting document summarises the rationale for the assessment, the personal and professional competencies and aptitudes and how these relate to the objectives of the candidate's project. Finally, advice is given to the beneficiary concerning the necessary steps to reach the objectives in question. In the context of VAE, the Competence Audit *remains* a useful step for many individuals to go through an identification-assessment of their skills in advance before undertaking eventually a “VAE” scheme. As such, the BC is an “up-front” instrument within the VAE system.

The VAE in its extended and enriched versions has a far reaching implication for the promotion of lifelong learning as it, formally and practically, recognises that:

- Formal learning is not necessarily of greater importance than learning gained through other contexts;
- 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 in the family and community, in leisure and daily social, 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 chance for access to the accreditation of all kinds experiential learning based on common referential criteria.
- That individuals can develop their own vocational 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 diploma-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/curricula 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. This is why, the National Employment Agency has established recently a direct link between ROME (Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois: National Repertory for Trades and Occupations) and the national repertory for vocational qualifications and certification (RNCP) in order to improve its guidance offers for job-seekers.
- That transparency and recognition of learning outcomes based on one single system of qualifications connected with the use of modularisation and ECTS system, contributes directly and effectively to the development of national vocational qualification framework (NQF) increasingly integrated within the EQF.

The second criterion for transference feasibility of the identified case(s) of effective practice is its integration of the “European dimension”. As transparency and recognition instruments of informal and non-formal learning, both VAE and BC integrate 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 have the required contextual receptivity for cooperation, exchange and/or transference of related effective practices and instruments. More specifically, and in accordance with this criterion, Lithuania is rapidly moving away from centrally organised and managed VET networking (inherited from the Soviet era) with a highly reduced role of social partners and regionalisation towards a more decentralised VET networking (where an effective role for social partners is increasingly emphasised). Within this move, Lithuania is increasingly open for undertaking some of the measures connected with the most successful experiences in the partner countries such as VAE and BC instruments where the social partners are observed to play an important role on national, sector and especially regional levels as it exemplified by the related responsibility for VET devolved to French *regions* through, for instance, the tripartite Coordination Committees for Regional Apprenticeship and Continuing Vocational Training Programmes (*Comités de coordination des programmes régionales*) which oversees the harmonization of regional CVT and apprenticeship policies including their implementation, financing and follow-up. Moreover, the Lithuanian contextual receptivity for the identified effective practice instruments is favourably reinforced by the fact that Lithuania has already developed and adopted its NQF in concordance with the EQF, and it is planning to develop next year an instrument connected with competence assessment and accreditation of experiential learning.

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