

# European Inventory

on validation of informal and non-formal learning



# European inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning FRANCE

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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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The 2005 Inventory<sup>1</sup> showed that France is one of the EU countries at the forefront of the development of the validation of formal and non-formal learning. France was in fact the first Member State to introduce legislation with respect to validation, when in 1934 a law was introduced to enable individuals to obtain an engineering diploma on the basis of professional experience.

There has been growing concern in France about the need to recognise individuals' skills and competencies since the 1980s, when the country suffered from high unemployment rates, particularly among young people and those lacking qualifications. The importance of the validation of experience and skills has thus been recognised through policy initiatives and confirmed by legislation, including most recently the 2002 Social Modernisation Act and the 2003 cross-sectoral agreement on lifelong learning, confirmed by law in 2004. Initiatives such as the *Répertoire National de la Certification Professionnelle* (RNCP – national repertory of vocational certificates) have been set in place on a national level, with collaboration from relevant stakeholders, including the social partners, and support for their implementation at a regional level. Measures have also been taken to identify and address issues and problems with the existing methodologies and practice, in order to ensure that the systems in place best meet the needs of end users.

There is also a clear European dimension to the activity in the sphere of validation in France. Some of the initiatives implemented on a national level have been set in place as a response to European policy cooperation recommendations – the RNCP, for example, is in line with the recommendations by the Directorate General for Education and Culture for the transparency of qualifications.

The following sections provide an update to the 2004 Inventory and examine developments in policy and initiatives within the sphere of validation of non-formal and informal learning in France.

<sup>1</sup> ECOTEC Research and Consulting, 2005, European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

## 2.0 PUBLIC SECTOR

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### 2.1 Historical background

After the 1934 law relating to the engineering diploma, further progress in the 1950s facilitated the recognition of an individual's competences rather than qualifications in order to obtain a promotion in the workplace. Then in the 1970s, a new pedagogical approach moved towards the modularisation of training and suggested exemptions to some parts of the curriculum or parts of courses. This practice was referred to as either "positioning" (especially in the context of the ministry of labour continuing training) or ECAP (*évaluation des compétences et aptitudes professionnelles* – or professional skills and competences evaluation). ECAP permitted many workers to valorise the "learning outcomes" they obtained through their experience in a work situation or through short continuing training courses developed by their firms at different times of their working lives.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1980s, a trend in national policy proposed to increase the number of people entering higher education and in 1985 a decree was adopted to allow professional experience to be taken into consideration in determining access to higher education (HE).<sup>2</sup> The process, termed 'VAP 85' enables any person aged at least 20, who ceased their initial studies a minimum of two years ago, to apply for a place on a HE course. Any form of training, experience acquired through paid or voluntary work and knowledge or skills acquired independently of training can be taken into account in their application.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of 'VAP 85' is to enable an individual to take up studying again through exemption of the qualification normally required. It is based on a portfolio, which is assessed by a Pedagogical Commission. Today, 'VAP 85' is still the most used procedure in Higher Education.

In 1986, the Ministry of Employment created a network of over 100 publicly-run skills assessment centres (*Centres Interinstitutionnels de Bilans de Compétences*, CIBC). These centres were designed to enable individuals to analyse their skills and the opportunities open to them and, on this basis, to define a personal training or occupational plan. At this stage, the objective of the initiative was not to provide summative validation<sup>4</sup>, but rather to provide guidance and promote training opportunities.

<sup>1</sup> Charraud, A-M, The French approach of VPL, An historical approach and the state of art in 2007

<sup>2</sup> in 1985

<sup>3</sup> Refernet (2005-2006) , Accumulating, transferring and validating learning, France, published by Cedefop

<sup>4</sup> There were, in any case, no defined standards against which to judge an individual's skills

The CIBC network is still in operation and has assisted clients in the development of over 70,000 personalised skills audits or *bilans de compétences*.<sup>1</sup> The work of the centres is informed by collaboration with other relevant stakeholders such as social partners, sector representatives and chambers, which demonstrates the strong commitment to collaboration amongst key stakeholders within the sphere of validation in France.

A law passed on the 31st December 1991 gave all workers with at least five years professional experience<sup>2</sup> a legal right to obtain a *bilan de compétences*. The same law introduced the right to 24 working hours paid leave to undertake the process at an accredited centre (including, but not exclusively, the CIBC). The system is financed by a combination of compulsory employer contributions and direct subsidies from central government. The *bilan de compétences* is also available to those out of work.

In 1992, further legislation<sup>3</sup> enabled the concept of *Validation des Acquis Professionnels* ('VAP 92') to be used for exemptions for qualifications awarded by the Ministries of Education and Agriculture (secondary and higher education). People with five years' work experience could apply for exemptions by submitting a portfolio detailing the activities undertaken and skills (competencies) gained through their experience, which was then examined by an assessment panel (*jury*). In 1999, this law was extended to include qualifications delivered by the Ministry of Youth and Sport.

Within the 2002 "Social Modernisation Act", this model of validation was extended to include all the main types of qualification (*certification*) used in France and allow complete qualifications to be awarded on the basis of knowledge gained through experience. This broadened concept of VAP, referred to as *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE)* or Validation of Prior Experience is examined in more detail in the next section.

The developments outlined above have created a legal and educational environment in France where non-formal and informal learning is taken into account through both summative and formative approaches. These approaches are described in the following two sections.

<sup>1</sup> Information taken from the website of the Fédération Nationale des CIBC, [www.cibc.net](http://www.cibc.net), June 2007

<sup>2</sup> And having worked for the same company for at least 12 months

<sup>3</sup> Law no. 92-678 of the 20 July 1992 promoted by the Ministry of Labour, followed by decree no. 93-538 of the 27 March 1993

## 2.2 The Current Situation: Summative Approaches– *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* (VAE)

The 2002 legislation on the *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* (VAE) places more emphasis on summative validation (the award of certificates) than the previous concept of *Validation des Acquis Professionnels* (VAP). Whereas VAP was designed to allow professional experience to be taken into account alongside more traditional means of assessment in the award of formal qualifications, VAE can be used as a basis to award full qualifications, rather than just units or “parts” of a full diploma. VAE is also the main system in France for validation of informal and non-formal learning.

The 2002 law made access to validation of knowledge gained through experience a right for everyone with at least three years of paid or voluntary experience (compared to five previously). Non-formal and informal learning can be considered as a basis for the award of all types of nationally-recognised qualification, which are recorded in the national vocational certifications directory (RNCP), overseen and documented by the *Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle* (National Vocational Certification Commission), presented in the box below.

### The Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle – CNCP

The National Commission for Vocational Certification (CNCP) was created in January 2002 by the Social Modernisation Act, the same legislation that set in place the concept of VAE. The body had three key objectives:

- to establish and maintain a National Register of Vocational Qualifications (Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles, RNCP);
- to oversee reform and updating of qualifications (diplomas and certificates) on the basis of developments in education and the labour market;
- to provide recommendations to organisations that deliver vocational qualifications and provide information about the relationship between different types of qualification.

The Commission is composed of 43 members: ministerial representatives, social partners, experts and representatives of the Chambers of Commerce and the Regions. It has also set up a specialized Commission to examine requests to include qualifications in the Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles. The body functions on the basis on a national secretariat and a network of regional “correspondents”.

More information about the Commission can be found at: <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr>

The RNCP was created in 2002, on the initiative of the state but with the participation of social partners. Its purpose is “to catalogue all existing certificates in order to be able to establish bridges and equivalences between them, with a view to promoting employee mobility and preparing career plans”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Trade Union Confederation, Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications, Third follow-up report 2005

Qualifications contained in the RNCP are awarded by a variety of bodies, including national ministries, social partners and chambers of trade, commerce and industry. Diplomas awarded by private bodies must be evaluated by the CNCP before they can be classified in the *Répertoire*, whereas qualifications delivered by the State are automatically included. The registration of private qualifications in the RNCP is valid for 5 years, after which time, the awarding body must again apply for registration. State qualifications remain indefinitely in the RNCP, without need for re-registration.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of 2006, the RNCP contained over 3,500 'fiches' describing vocational qualifications, over 1,300 of which had been registered by request and subject to an evaluation by the CNCP (the remainder were qualifications provided by national ministries, which were included automatically).<sup>2</sup> Today, there are over 4,100 'fiches' in the database.<sup>3</sup>

All qualifications listed in the RNCP can be obtained through either formal, informal or non-formal means, provided that the individual can demonstrate the capacities and knowledge required to receive the certification. Credits can be obtained for professional skills acquired through paid, unpaid or volunteer work, as long as the individual has at least three years of relevant experience.

With regards its third objective, the CNCP remains committed to the development of a new framework of qualification levels and has commenced work on this, in collaboration with relevant partners. At the end of 2006, it was hoped that a firm proposal for such a framework would be finalised during the course of the year 2007.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.2.1 VAE Methodology

The decrees following the April 2002 Law outlined the basic principles of the procedure for VAE, which can be listed in five main steps:

- 1)** information about the process of VAE;
- 2)** decision on the validity (*recevabilité*) of the application (in terms of duration of experience related to the content of the qualification);
- 3)** development of a portfolio or "dossier" by the candidate describing his or her experience. This may include observation of the candidate in his/her work situation or in a

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Employment, 2007, 'La validation des acquis de l'expérience', last updated 28.02.07, available at: [http://www.travail.gouv.fr/informations-pratiques/fiches-pratiques/formation-professionnelle/validation-acquis-experience-vae-1074.html?var\\_recherche=validation re-registrati](http://www.travail.gouv.fr/informations-pratiques/fiches-pratiques/formation-professionnelle/validation-acquis-experience-vae-1074.html?var_recherche=validation_re-registrati)

<sup>2</sup> La Lettre d'Information CNCP, No. 1 Autumn/Winter 2006

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Labour, 2007

<sup>4</sup> La Lettre d'Information CNCP, No. 1 Autumn/Winter 2006

simulated situation and other evidence. The candidates may be mentored and financing can be available at this stage in the process;

4) interview/dialogue with a 'jury' – at the request of the jury or the candidate;

5) deliberation and decision from the jury based on the documents produced and their own observations.<sup>1</sup>

The French education system is based on **one single system of qualifications**, rather than separate systems for those qualified through VAE and those qualified through formal routes. Diplomas/certificates/degrees awarded by the different education institutes do not state whether the qualification has been obtained through VAE or formal route - this is currently quite different to many other countries in Europe.

## 2.2.2 Assessment

Assessment takes place at accredited centres, where a *jury* or board evaluates the individual's skills in relation to those required to obtain the qualification.

The VAE procedure is organised by the relevant bodies with responsibility for the certifications – procedures can thus vary according to the awarding body involved. According to one recent report, there can be certain 'challenges' in implementing validation methodologies and it will take some time for the stakeholders involved to fully adopt the process. Two main methods are used to assess skills gained through experience: examinations (*'mise en situation'*, a practical examination method used by the Ministry of Labour only) and the assessment of portfolios. For the portfolios, assessment panels are called upon to attribute "value" to an individual's experience, which may vary considerably in nature, depending on the context in which it was gained, and is difficult to formalise and assess against specific standards. Moreover, assessors are generally more used to formal examination procedures, and in many cases have not received detailed training on how to implement such assessment methodologies.<sup>2</sup>

The decree indicates that a jury must be constituted and chaired in accordance with the general regulations and those for each type of qualification. One quarter of the membership must be qualified representatives of the occupational sector and half of these must be employer representatives, half employee representatives. There must be an equal representation of men and women. Staff from the company where the candidate is employed may not be part of the jury. Advisors who have helped the candidate put together his/her portfolio also cannot be a member of the jury (except in higher education).

<sup>1</sup> Charraud, A-M., The French approach of VPL, An historical approach and the state of art in 2007

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

The jury's decision can be an award related to a whole qualification or a part of a qualification. In the latter case, the jury must indicate which knowledge and skills will be assessed later in order to award the full diploma/certificate.

The legislation brought new practices in assessment: there is no certification without a future plan; future plans may be those of an individual or the individual with his/her company or organisation; and the jury's role has changed from one of sanction to a more positive role of giving value to the candidate's experience and help for candidates to develop further. This is particularly pertinent when only part of the qualification has been awarded - the jury has to propose ways in which the candidate can obtain the whole qualification (this may be a mixture or further experience, courses, seminars, projects etc).

The arrangements also imply new competences for the relevant stakeholders; fewer trainers and more "designers"; more tutors; increased guidance: for access, for producing the portfolio, and for completing the qualifications.

A further notable consequence of the introduction of the validation system in France has been the modularisation or breaking down into units, of diplomas and degrees. As a result, qualifications can be obtained progressively, either through examinations over a number of years or through validation of experience. Where an individual's initial VAE assessment leads to only partial award of the desired qualification, the modules awarded are valid for five years, during which time the remaining modules can be obtained via initial or continuing training, apprenticeship or VAE.

### 2.2.3 VAE and Higher Education

With specific reference to higher education, VAE is not a new concept. We have already seen that as early as 1934, it was possible to obtain a higher engineering qualification (DPE) through the validation of professional experience. The 2002 Law on Social Modernisation made it possible to be awarded part of or a full degree through VAE (while the earlier 1985 decree had already facilitated applications to HE based on validation of prior learning and prior professional experience).

Candidates apply to the institution which awards the qualification they wish to obtain and a jury, specific to each degree, carries out the VAE assessment based on the analysis of a dossier compiled by the candidate and an additional interview. Candidates are also entitled to tailored support and advice, provided by university schemes for further training and adult education. This aims to enable the candidate:

- 1) to better understand the VAE approach;

2) to determine more precisely how the degree corresponds to their own path and vocational experiences, and

3) to identify the strongest features of their experiences before their appearance before the jury.

The 2002 legislation has had significant consequences for higher education in France and has required certain changes to be made, for example with respect to renewing the degrees and the development of tools and support to assist candidates in drawing up their dossier. In addition, the rapid increase in demand for VAE at Higher Education level has necessitated the implementation of measures to ensure the practical organisation and implementation of the procedure.<sup>1</sup>

The number of individuals having to apply / meet the jury more than once during their VAE application is greater in higher education than in further education. The Université Paris-sud 11 can be given as an example of this:

#### The Université Paris-sud

Université Paris-sud 11 is a university with over 27,000 students. In 2006, the university had 110 VAE candidates of which 38 received their qualification on their first attempt and just under 60 candidates were recommended by the jury to take further formal or non-formal training as a way of qualifying for the degree<sup>2</sup>

The Ministry of Higher Education and Research is strongly committed to developing VAE in higher education and attaches a strong importance to a development in quality. There has been an increasing focus on the concept of the recognition of competences within higher education, and this approach in fact is relevant for several current reform projects – the introduction of the *licence-maîtrise-doctorat (LMD)*, the trend towards increased modularisation of courses and the adoption of the diploma supplement.

Projects supported by the European Social Fund, with a value of 1.5 million euros per year, have been implemented with the aim of helping universities to put in place the necessary frameworks to deliver VAE.<sup>3</sup> In fact, structures for the implementation of VAE have been put in place relatively quickly as a result of collaboration in a national network through the *conférence des directeurs de services universitaires de formation continue*<sup>4</sup> which began in 2000-2001. Universities which had more experience in VAE as a result of the 1985 decree and the introduction of VAP shared their learning with those which were

<sup>1</sup> Towards the European Higher Education Area, Bologna Process, National Reports 2004-2005, France

<sup>2</sup> Information provided by Georges Michailesco, Université Paris-sud 11

<sup>3</sup> Benhamou, Prof. A-C., 2005, 'La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience en Actes', Rapport de Mission sur l'application de La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (Loi 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Conference of Directors of University Services for continuing training

new to VAE and as a result, many universities had structures in place to implement VAE soon after the 2002 legislation was introduced.

While respecting the culture and autonomy of each institution, an important process of harmonisation was carried out in the higher education sector, in order to ensure equal treatment for all applicants. For example, a website was set up and a national training plan devised for staff involved, which was delivered to 900 participants.

Nonetheless, a 2005 report produced by Professor Albert-Claude Benhamou<sup>1</sup> also made recommendations for improvement to the provisions currently in place for VAE in higher education. The report suggested for example that the resources currently allocated to VAE, both in terms of personnel and in terms of finance, were insufficient and that more action needed to be taken to ensure that sustainable actions are implemented to ensure the predicted future increase in demand can be met.

#### 2.2.4 Impact

At first, validation did not receive a real welcome from those teachers who were given the responsibility to develop VAP. There was strong opposition to this initiative because it was feared that it would decrease the value of the qualifications delivered - even now such fear still exists. Many people believe that only formal learning in a training centre can produce valid learning outcomes for individuals.<sup>2</sup>

However, trust in the concept of validation gradually increased and today it can be said that the introduction of VAE in France has been relatively successful, in particular in terms of public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Since its creation in 2002, there has been a considerable increase in demand from individuals with no or few qualifications, 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 qualifications were awarded between 2002 and 2005 (10,709 in 2002; 17,724 in 2003 and 22,660 in 2005).<sup>4</sup> In 2005, over 3,000 candidates were awarded a full qualification by the Ministry of Employment alone – almost twice the number in 2004.<sup>5</sup> 5600 university degrees were obtained through VAE during the period 2002 - 2006 (7882 partial degrees were delivered during the same period).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Benhamou, Prof. A-C., 2005, 'La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience en Actes', Rapport de Mission sur l'application de La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (Loi 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002)

<sup>2</sup> Charraud, A-M, The French approach of VPL, An historical approach and the state of art in 2007

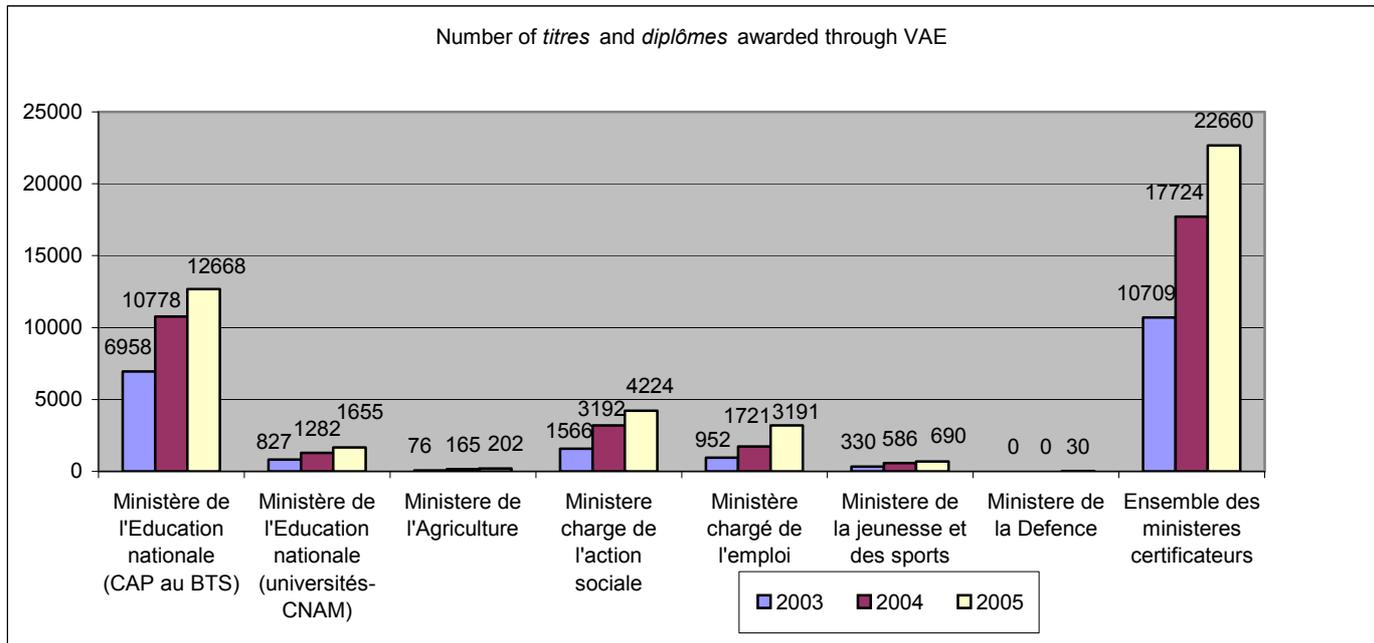
<sup>3</sup> 'Education et Formation 2010', Rapport National France 2007

<sup>4</sup> Charraud, A-M, The French approach of VPL, An historical approach and the state of art in 2007

<sup>5</sup> Bonaiti, C. (DARES), 2006, Premières Informations, La Validation des Acquis de L'Experience au Ministère chargé de l'Emploi, en 2005: davantage de candidats dans les métiers de l'industrie et du bâtiment, Ministère de l'Emploi de la cohésion et du logement

<sup>6</sup> Information provided by a representative of the Ministry of Education

The table below shows the number of *titre* and *diplôme* qualifications awarded via VAE by the national Ministries during the period 2003-2005.



Source: Charraud, A-M, *The French approach of VPL, An historical approach and the state of art in 2007*

Despite of the rapid increase in the take-up, when compared with the total level of certification delivered in France, only a small number are delivered through VAE (more than 1,500,000 certificates are delivered each year against less than 300,000 through continuing education and around 30,000 through VAE).<sup>1</sup>

VAE is currently concentrated in certain sectors and for a small number of qualifications – over a quarter of the qualifications delivered in 2004 and 2005 related to professions in health and social care. Around 4,000 of the 30,000 qualifications obtained through VAE are university degrees. Candidates are also predominately women: only a third of applicants were men in 2005 (although this is increasing – in 2004 men accounted for only 10% of applicants). Its success is said to depend upon the level of take-up on a regional and local level, as well as by the general public – the importance of informing the public on VAE is emphasised.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charraud, A-M., *The French approach of VPL, An historical approach and the state of art in 2007*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

The table below shows the profile of the candidates involved in a VAE process in 2004:

		Ministries in charge of...				Total
		Agriculture	Labour	Universities	Education	
Sex	Men	69	12	60	41	32
	Women	31	88	40	59	68
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
Age	Less than 30	8	12	10	14	Unknown
	30 to 39	47	30	65	68	
	40 to 49	37	41			
	50 and +	8	17	25	18	
	Total	100	100	100	100	
Status	Job seekers	15	72	19	25	31
	Salaried	85	28	80	74	68
	Non active	0	0	1	1	1
	Together	100	100	100	100	100
Levels of qualification	V	30	81	0	24	43
	IV	33	17	0	34	21
	III	37	2	17	42	45
	II	0	0	59	0	8
	I	0	0	24	0	3
	Together	100	100	100	100	100

Source: DARES – Ministry of Labour – March 2007

### 2.2.5 Further development of VAE

Several reports have been produced in recent years which have identified problems and inefficiencies within the existing French VAE framework. Professor Albert-Claude Benhamou's 2005 report *"La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience en Actes"* called for a simplification of the existing VAE framework and for measures to improve the coherence and transparency of the systems in place.<sup>1</sup> Some of the problems and issues identified in his report include:

- the burden placed on the actors involved, as a result of considerable growth in demand for VAE;
- the need to streamline the number of qualifications offered through VAE, in order to achieve increased transparency and to ensure that the systems are able to operate more efficiently;

<sup>1</sup> Benhamou, Prof. A-C., 2005, 'La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience en Actes', Rapport de Mission sur l'application de La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (Loi 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002)

- the need to develop a single internet portal for VAE (this has already been achieved – see below)
- the problem faced by the unemployed in order to find funding for support in developing their application for VAE (this has already been achieved – see below);
- the importance of forming partnerships between the Ministries which award certificates through VAE, which the report suggested could be overseen by a national VAE ‘agency’;
- the importance of forming partnerships with the private sector;
- the need for a new information campaign.

The literature also shows that the organisations and institutions responsible for implementing VAE are insufficiently equipped in terms of resources and expertise. The division of responsibility across the various bodies involved was reported in 2005 to require more precise definition and the need for increased financial support (e.g. state investment in a single point of access information platform) was emphasised.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the organisations involved in administering VAE are struggling to meet the increasing level of demand, despite recruitment of additional staff.

Other reports have also identified both that individuals encounter barriers to access to VAE. Poor information, difficulties in putting together a dossier and the costs involved were cited as the principle obstacles to individuals in studies carried out for the Ministry of Employment which were published in 2006.<sup>2</sup> As a result, while requests for information regarding VAE have increased considerably, only a small number result in an actual application.<sup>3</sup> Other barriers include those listed below:

- There are not always diplomas or degrees available which correspond to an individual’s experience.
- The quality of information and guidance can vary. Experience-validation procedures are relatively recent and not all social actors or personnel managers have an in-depth knowledge of the procedures.
- The VAE procedure can be lengthy. Certain ministries (Agriculture, Education, Universities, Youth and Sport and Social Action) use a detailed application procedure which relies on the individual being able to put their career into perspective and to have a good level of writing skills.

<sup>1</sup> Vilchien, D., Audige, TI, Debeaupuis, J., Segal, P., 2005. Validation des acquis de l’expérience: du droit individuel à l’atout collectif. Report no. 2005067, June 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Etude “la VAE dans les entreprises un atout collectif?” Etude des pratiques dans des TPE & PME-PMI – DGEFP (January 2006); no. 230 of the CERREQ newsletter “La VAE, quels candidats, pour quels diplômes?” (May 2006)

<sup>3</sup> ibid

- Some individuals prefer not to take up the dispensations from training. They may choose to take up the training course as they feel they do not have the appropriate theoretical knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of such barriers to access, studies published in 2006 revealed that 50% of the 70,000 individuals who went to *Points Relais* for advice on VAE did not proceed any further than seeking advice.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, there is a considerable problem in finding suitable jury members, who have the time to take part in the VAE procedure. This is particularly the case for sectors characterised by a high number of micro and small businesses. This is because usually half of the jury members should be from the private sector, but it is difficult to get experienced workers from the sector to find time to attend these jury sessions, particularly if it means more competition may be created for them as a result. For example, in the hairdressing industry half of the VAE jury members should be professionals. However, hairdressers from the same region (particularly if the region is one of the more sparsely-populated) are sometimes reluctant to attend these juries because the more qualifications they award, the more people have the possibility to set up their own salon in the region (thus creating more competition). On some occasions in certain sectors / regions there have been significantly lower success rates than in others, precisely because some jury members have been reluctant to award qualifications as a means of protecting their own business interests. In these cases national authorities have had to intervene and try and find professionals from outside of the region.

In February 2006, the Ministry of Labour was assigned responsibility for taking forward the development of VAE. Validation was identified by the Prime Minister as a key tool in the fight against unemployment and a target was set to increase threefold the number of individuals gaining certification through the VAE process. A specific committee was set up under the umbrella of the Ministry of Labour and working groups were organised with the main ministries involved.

A '*Plan VAE*' was set in place in September 2006, with the objective to remove barriers to the validation process. It is based on five key measures:

- a national information campaign based on two main services: the internet portal [www.vae.gouv.fr](http://www.vae.gouv.fr)<sup>3</sup>, which became operational in February 2007 and a helpline service

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2005-2006) , Accumulating, transferring and validating learning, France, published by Cedefop

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Labour, 27 June 2006, 'Validation des acquis de l'expérience: cinq mesures pragmatiques pour simplifier la procédure', available at [www.travail.gouv.fr](http://www.travail.gouv.fr)

<sup>3</sup> This website, specifically dedicated to VAE, has contributions from all the ministries and other stakeholders involved.

“39 39”, together with a communication campaign to inform the public of the right to VAE;

- simplified administration procedures, including one unique form for all VAE candidates, regardless of the qualification they are applying for;
- guaranteed payment of expenses for members of the assessment boards;
- payment of the costs of VAE for the unemployed;
- the implementation of a local policy for the development of VAE.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the national agency for job-seekers (ANPE) has developed tools to increase interest in gaining certification through VAE. The *Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois* or ROME (National repository of skills descriptions) will be linked to the RNCP in 2008, in order to improve the guidance on offer. Furthermore, considerable efforts are being made to raise awareness among private companies.<sup>2</sup>

It is positive to see that monitoring and reporting systems have been effective in highlighting problems and suggesting how the system of validation in France can be improved. The future impact of VAE in France will therefore depend on the success of the *Plan VAE* and it will be important to maintain a comprehensive system to monitor and evaluate the success of this initiative.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid

<sup>2</sup> Charraud, A-M, The French approach of VPL, An historical approach and the state of art in 2007

## 2.3 Formative Approaches - The *bilan de compétences*

Alongside the new system for VAE, the well-established concept of the *bilan de compétences* continues to play an important role and more than 70,000 skills audits have now been carried out.<sup>1</sup>

Since its introduction, the *bilan* has been conceived as a formative guidance and counselling tool, rather than a summative assessment and validation instrument. This is made clear in the objectives set out in the legislation governing the bilan, listed below.

### The Bilan de Compétences

The Bilan de Compétences permits the identification and valorisation of:

- professional and personal competencies
- abilities and potential
- interests and motivations

with the objective to:

- draw up a career strategy
- support an external or internal ‘mobility’
- develop competencies within a profession
- design a training path
- prepare a validation of experience<sup>2</sup>

Following an analysis of the expectations of the candidate and their skills and abilities, the *bilan de compétences* results in a synthesis document drawn up by the professional counsellor employed by the accredited centre. This document summarises the rationale for the assessment, the competencies and aptitudes uncovered and how these relate to the objectives of the candidate. Finally, advice is given on necessary steps to reach the objectives in question. In the context of VAE, the *bilan de compétences* will remain a useful step for many individuals to take to assess their skills in advance of seeking VAE. As such, the bilan is an “upstream” instrument within the VAE system.

## 2.4 Role of Sub-National Public Authorities

A process of decentralisation began in France during the 1980s and intensified during the 1990s. As a result, the regions in France have a central role in vocational training and are responsible for many aspects of the day-to-day management of adult education provision and upper secondary education (they are responsible for *lycées*, or upper secondary schools, for example). Regional employment and vocational training co-ordination

<sup>1</sup> Information taken from the website of the Fédération Nationale des CIBC, [www.cibc.net](http://www.cibc.net), June 2007

<sup>2</sup> Taken from the website of the Fédération Nationale des CIBC, [www.cibc.net](http://www.cibc.net), June 2007

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 many organisations involved. These committees are made up of state representatives in each region, regional assemblies, management and labour organisations, and regional chambers of agriculture, commerce, industry and trade.<sup>1</sup> The August 2004 law relating to liberties and to local responsibilities further widened the regions' responsibilities in vocational training.<sup>2</sup>

Since the introduction of VAE, many regions have been very active in developing tools to assist both candidates and professionals working in the field and called upon to implement the new system. All regions have established a co-ordination centre (*Cellule Régionale Interservices – CRIS*) for VAE within their training information service and a network of information points within existing establishments (*Points-Relais-Conseil, PRC.*) The CRIS, as well as managing the PRC, disseminate the new concept of VAE to a wider audience – more detail of their work in partnership with private sector actors is given in the next section.

<sup>1</sup> Cedefop, Thematic Overview, The French vocational education and training (VET) system

<sup>2</sup> Cedefop, Thematic Overview, The French vocational education and training (VET) system

## 3.0 PRIVATE SECTOR

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### 3.1 Sector Initiatives

#### 3.1.1 Role of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry

In 1998, the national network of Chambers of Commerce and Industry launched the *Association pour la certification des compétences professionnelles*<sup>1</sup> (Association for the Certification of Professional Competencies, ACCP) to validate non-formal learning acquired in the workplace. The ACCP obtained European Standard EN 45013 for the certification of individuals and established a system of certification based on *Certificats de Compétences en Entreprise* (CCE).

CCE certification is available to employees, on the basis of a portfolio submitted to an assessment panel (similar to other forms of VAE). However, the certificate is not a formal diploma of qualification (which often have an impact on remuneration within the French system of collective bargaining), but rather a standardized means to gain recognition for workplace skills.

The ACCP defines the standards against which the CCEs are awarded and in 2004, certificates were available in the following fields:

- Secretarial and Personal Assistant skills
- Sales
- Remote Sales (Vente à distance)
- Customer Service
- Management
- Office IT skills
- Maintenance
- Hotel Reception
- Communication

More information on the certification methods and standards used, refer to the ACCP website: <http://www.acfci.cci.fr/emploi/accp.htm>.

In a report published in 2005, a representative of the Assembly of French Chambers of Commerce and Industry noted that the introduction of VAE had not only meant that qualifications awarded by the Chambers had been modularised but had also led to an increased linking up of their training to professions and skills, rather than to training

<sup>1</sup> Association for the Certification of Vocational Skills

reference frameworks. VAE had thus led the Chambers to make the training they offered more transparent for candidates and had improved the recognition of their training through certification.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.1.2 Role of the Social Partners

The social partners play an important role in the implementation of the new framework for VAE established by the 2002 Law on Social Modernisation. Between 2002 and 2005, they financed 111,200 validation actions benefiting workers within the framework of the apparatus for individual training leave. During the same period, the sectors also created numerous vocational qualification certificates (CQPs) to recognise acquired skills and competences.<sup>2</sup>

A national cross-sectoral agreement on employee access to lifelong learning was finalised on 5 December 2003 and confirmed by law on the 4 May 2004. All national and cross-industry level employer and worker organisations participated in the agreement. The law reforms French VET for employees of the private sector and includes:

- an individual right to training for employees;
- the possibility for employees to attend training courses outside working hours;
- a “professionalisation’s contract” for young and adult job seekers providing for sandwich courses or programmes which facilitate integration (validation of learning or vocational skills analysis);
- an increase in the levels of contributions to be provided by individual firms.<sup>3</sup>

The agreement particularly recognises the issue of the ageing population in France and has prioritised access to VAE action for all workers with twenty years of professional activity or who have reached their 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. Employees who meet these criteria and who have a minimum of one year’s service with their current employer are entitled to a skills review.

At the end of June 2005, more than 250 sectoral agreements were concluded in application of the 5 December 2003 national cross-industry agreement. These agreements define the conditions for implementation of forward-looking observatories of trades and qualifications for each professional sector. They also define vocational training priorities as

<sup>1</sup> Mme Leboniec and Mme Schaap from the ACFCI, in Benhamou, Prof. A-C., 2005, ‘La Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience en Actes’, Rapport de Mission sur l’application de La Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience (Loi 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002), p. 42

<sup>2</sup> European Trade Union Confederation, Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications, Evaluation Report 2006

<sup>3</sup> Cedefop, Thematic Overview, The French vocational education and training (VET) system

provided for in the agreement. They deal with themes such as the implementation of arrangements for VAE and the issue of certificates.<sup>1</sup>

Social partners have also collaborated on a regional level with the CRIS to raise awareness and provide information regarding VAE among their representatives. For example, information days have been held by the CRIS to inform and train representatives of the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*) in the Centre and Loire regions.<sup>2</sup>

Some sectors have developed specific qualifications processes for their employees, for example steel, chemicals, automotive, industry, sales etc. Sector certification may be obtained through validation of experience but few sectors have developed this to date.<sup>3</sup>

On 15 February 2007, a national agreement on the development of VAE was signed by Minister-Delegate Gérard Larcher, with the employers' organisations MEDEF, CGPME, UPA, UNAPL and 16 professional sectors. The signatories confirmed their commitment to this essential tool for the recognition of competencies.

### 3.2 Examples from Individual Companies

At company level, many companies have facilitated their employees' access to validation of experience-based skills, either through an individual initiative or on a collective basis.<sup>4</sup> However, the importance traditionally attached to formal diplomas in France and the importance for the individual of having credible, transferable qualifications has meant that there has been limited development of standards and certification at the level of the firm.

Large companies, such as the state railway SNCF and the national postal service *La Poste* have shown a willingness to play their part in the development of VAE:

*"SNCF...is fully committed to the priorities of the framework of actions for lifelong learning. Actions taken relate notably to creation of a skills institute, internal initiatives for validation of experience-based skills, and a mechanism for vocational advice and guidance."<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> European Trade Union Confederation, Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications, Evaluation Report 2006

<sup>2</sup> Les Entreprises et les acteurs socio-économiques face à la VAE, Actions, projets, animations des Cellules Régionales Inter-Services (CRIS), February 2006

<sup>3</sup> Refernet (2005-2006), Accumulating, transferring and validating learning, France, published by Cedefop

<sup>4</sup> European Trade Union Confederation, Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications, Evaluation Report 2005

<sup>5</sup> European Trade Union Confederation, Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications, Evaluation Report 2005

*"La Poste carried out a sociological study on traditional postal skills. Among other things, this study identified new or "undervalued" aspects of these skills. The project and its main findings were the subject of presentations to trade-union organisations. The results of the work will be incorporated into assessment tools and will also serve to build career plans."*<sup>1</sup>

The importance of support from private enterprises was recognised in a report produced in 2005 *"La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience en Actes"*.<sup>2</sup> This report suggested VAE should be made a contractual obligation for enterprises, to guarantee employees the chance to take on increasingly complex tasks in order to work towards higher qualifications.

There is evidence that businesses are increasingly beginning to understand the importance of VAE and the management of people's professional experience. As a result, several companies have launched VAE projects. Danone, for instance, launched a major VAE project in 2003 entitled EVOLUANCE. 750 employees, on 39 sites, have been involved in the programme which offers them a chance to validate the skills they have gained at work through 38 state-recognised qualifications. Peugeot is another company that has really 'utilised' VAE and is now trying to find ways to introduce similar systems in their plants / offices in Eastern Europe. Other examples of private sector VAE initiatives include the textile industry, the tobacco industry group SEITA, AXA insurance and the Banque de France.

In addition, the regional CRIS have worked with several public and private enterprises to support them in the development of VAE initiatives. These include enterprises of all sizes, although the very small enterprises are less represented. CRIS activities in the private sector have included informing employees about VAE, awareness-raising among human resources directors and supporting VAE projects which have been set in place by enterprises. Freescale Semiconductor is a good example of a private company working with the CRIS, as outlined below.

#### **VAE in the company 'Freescale Semiconductor Toulouse'**

In Toulouse, the PRCs worked with Freescale Semiconductor to implement a project to provide information on both a collective and individual basis for its employees. The project's priority target group was the 880 employees working as operators but the project had the potential to reach out to the entire Freescale Semiconducteur Toulouse workforce, which totals 1900 people.

Following an internal communication campaign run by the company's Human Resources department from January to March 2005, the PRC developed two information tools: one for managers and a second for employees. In June 2005, four information meetings were organised by the PRC, which were attended by

<sup>1</sup> ibid

<sup>2</sup> Benhamou, Prof. A-C., 2005, 'La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience en Actes', Rapport de Mission sur l'application de La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (Loi 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002)

225 people. 11 on-site visits then enabled 48 employees to access information on an individual basis. Around 25 employees then went on to pursue a qualification through VAE.

These activities were funded by the FONGECIF Midi-Pyrénées<sup>1</sup> and Freescale.

<sup>1</sup> FONGECIF: Fonds paritaire interprofessionnel régional agréé pour la Gestion du Congé Individuel de Formation et du congé bilan de compétences.

## 4.0 THE THIRD SECTOR

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There were 12.5 million volunteers in France in 2003 (which equates to 27% of the population aged over 18).<sup>1</sup> For many, volunteering is seen as a way to develop or acquire skills which are not required within one's professional life.

The value of voluntary experience has also been recognised through legislation: on July 6, 2000 the Ministry of Youth and Sports modified a previous law of July 16, 1984 related to the organisation and promotion of physical and sport activities. Following the 2000 amendment, qualifications required for teaching and training in a professional perspective in the field of Youth and Sports can now be validated through professional or voluntary experience. The 2002 Social Modernisation Law then extended the validation of voluntary experiences to all domains of associative activities. Individuals must be able to show that the skills they have acquired through a minimum of three years' voluntary work are of the level required by the certification.

A report<sup>2</sup> produced by the "AVE in a professional perspective: Assessing voluntary experiences" project funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme judges that in the area of VAE within the voluntary sector, the question of financing is a key problem. The report suggests that one possible solution to this might be to consider the validation of voluntary experiences as a form of vocational training – which is already funded for volunteers by both the National Council for the Associative Life (*Conseil National pour la Vie Associative*, CNVA) and by the regions.

Some examples of good practice in the assessment of voluntary experiences in France are highlighted in this report. These include:

- **A guide on the assessment of professional and voluntary experiences in the field of Youth and Sports.** The guide is edited by the Ministry for Sports and the Ministry for Youth, Education and Research. It outlines a basis for the procedure which should be followed to assess, value or validate an individual's skills and qualifications in order to obtain a specific diploma. The guide is addressed both to the individual volunteer and to the assessment jury.
- **Two working groups** initiated by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2003. They focus on two specific issues: volunteering and building competencies and volunteering and professionalism.

<sup>1</sup> Halba, B. 2004. AVE in a professional perspective: Assessing voluntary experiences, Report for France

<sup>2</sup> Halba, B. 2004. AVE in a professional perspective: Assessing voluntary experiences, Report for France

- **A notebook to record voluntary skills.** The notebook has been supported by the National Union for University Clubs (UNCU) since 1998. The notebook can be used to provide evidence of the voluntary activity of the UNCU's members.
- **A notebook to record voluntary activity.** The National Olympic Committee (CNOSF) devised this notebook, which can be used to quantify the number of hours spent on voluntary activity and the activities carried out. The Ministry for Sports also collaborated in the development of the notebook.
- **A study to assess the voluntary experiences of the volunteer members of the ARIA association.** ARIA (*Association de reflexion, information et d'accueil des familles de militaires en activité*) is the Association for Reflection, Information and Accompanying for the families of military staff. The study carried out by ARIA aimed to identify, value and assess the knowledge, expertise and behaviour gained through volunteering for the association. Following completion of the report, a tool was devised for the assessment of the members' experiences. The impact of this tool on the members' experiences in the labour market was then analysed and finally, in 2006, a label was to be proposed for ARIA to be used both within and outside of the association.

The report also identifies certain gaps in the sphere of VAE within the voluntary sector. For example, it suggests that guides similar to the one produced for youth and sports would be useful for the other areas in which associations are active. It raises the question of who will take on the role of identifying and assessing skills developed by volunteers and calls for this to be carried out externally, with the involvement of the public authorities and the private sector.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

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As outlined in the previous sections, France has put in place a detailed legal framework for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, implemented mechanisms to oversee the process of “certification” and developed dense networks of guidance, assessment and validation centres throughout the country. Action within the sphere of validation has benefited from a strong national lead on the development of legislation and supporting frameworks and initiatives, carried out in partnership with relevant stakeholders from both public and private sectors.

One of the major challenges facing the system is to gain credibility in a country where particularly high importance has traditionally been attached to qualifications gained in formal education, often at the expense of skills acquired through professional experience. A culture shift may be required to allow greater value to be attached to vocational skills and to bring the formal education system and non-formal learning closer together.

Equally important is to gain buy-in and support from the private sector and from the public. The success of validation relies on firms providing support to their employees, to enable them to develop their skills and competences through professional experience and then to access validation processes in order to gain recognition for this experience. Strong awareness-raising campaigns among the public, combined with effective information and guidance are also vital, in order to facilitate access to validation for all.

In addition, the stakeholders involved need to be clear as to their roles and responsibilities within the VAE process. Assessors need to be fully trained on what they have to identify and value in order to grant award of a certification.

There is an ongoing commitment to the development of VAE in France, with the introduction of new actions continuing into 2007. These include the *Plan VAE*, to overcome the barriers to access identified in 2006 and the national agreement on the development of VAE, signed by Minister-Delegate Gérard Larcher, with the trade unions MEDEF, CGPME, UPA, UNAPL and 16 professional sectors in February 2007.

Each year, around 20,000 individuals are able to gain certification for their skills through VAE<sup>1</sup> and this number is likely to continue to increase, provided the barriers to access are resolved, together with a formal recognition on the part of employers of its importance. The success of the actions in the area of VAE will rely on a continuation of this level of commitment and partnership-working, the allocation of sufficient resources to maintain and

<sup>1</sup> 'Education et Formation 2010', Rapport National France 2007

improve the initiatives in place, and a comprehensive system of monitoring and evaluation to learn from the progress made to date in order to inform future action.