
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN FRANCE

By Simon Roy (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)

1.1 Introduction

As is often noted¹, France has a long tradition of recognition of non-formal learning. In the field of engineering, for example, individuals have been able to obtain a State Engineering Diploma on the basis of professional experience since 1934. On the other hand, France is also a country where formal qualifications (obtained through formal learning) have traditionally been particularly valued in the labour market.

The last 20 years have seen a number of developments in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning, culminating in the adoption of the 2002 Social Modernisation Act, which introduced the concept of Validation of Knowledge acquired through experience or *Validation des Aquis de l'Expérience* (VAE). This national legal framework has created a wide-ranging right to validation in France, which the nation's public bodies, training organisations and businesses are currently implementing. These developments are examined in the sections which follow.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector

1.2.1 Background

Over the last 20 years, the legislative framework in the field of non-formal and informal learning in France has developed in three main phases. In the mid-1980s, a first phase of activity saw the adoption of a decree to allow professional experience to be taken into consideration in determining access to higher education² and the creation of a network of 110 publicly-run skills assessment centres or *Centres Interinstitutionnels de Bilans de Compétences* (CIBC). These centres, established by the Ministry of Employment in 1986, were designed to allow 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 validation³, but rather to provide guidance and promote training opportunities.

A law passed on the 31st December 1991 gave all workers with at least five years professional experience⁴ a legal right to obtain a *bilan de compétences*, or personalized skills audit. The same law introduced the right to 24 working hours paid leave to undertake the process and an

¹ See, for example, *Making Learning Visible* (Cedefop, 2000) or *La Validation des Aquis de l'Expérience en France : un appui possible?* (TRANSFINE, 2003)

² in 1985

³ There were, in any case, no defined standards against which to judge an individual's skills

⁴ And having worked for the same company for at least 12 months

accredited centre (including, but not exclusively, the *Centres Interinstitutionnels de Bilans de Compétences*). 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. Indeed, a study undertaken in 2000 using data from previous years found that roughly three quarters of the *bilans* were performed for job seekers⁵, suggesting that (at this stage at least) the scheme had become a tool for tackling unemployment, as much as system for promoting lifelong learning among the working population.

The following year (1992), the concept of *Validation des Acquis Professionnels* (VAP) or Validation of Prior Occupational Learning was introduced into French law. This legislation allowed people with five years' work experience to be exempted from certain examinations for qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Education (secondary and higher education), on the basis of previous professional experience. To obtain validation of this experience, the individual was required to submit a portfolio detailing the activities undertaken and skills (competencies) gained, which was then examined by an assessment panel (*jury*), who, on this basis, could award credits for elements of a course of study or to allow access to a course where other formal qualifications would otherwise be required.

In 2002, within the context of the "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* or VAE, is examined in more detail in the next section.

1.2.2 The Current Situation: Summative and Formative Approaches

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.

Summative Approaches

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 of "parts" of a full diploma.

Access to validation of knowledge gained through experience is now a right for everyone with at least three years of work 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 now overseen and documented by the newly-created National

⁵ Ministry of Employment 2000, *L'activité des Organismes Prestataires de Bilans de Compétences en 1998*

Vocational Certification Commission (*Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle*), 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 same legislation that set in place the concept of VAE. The body has three key objectives:

- to establish and maintain a National Register of Vocational Qualifications (*Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles*);
- 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 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”.

The National Register of Vocational Qualifications maintained by the CNCP will contain around 15 000 different qualifications, including:

- Roughly 11 000 awarded by universities;
- Over 700 secondary-level qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Education (CAP and BTS etc);
- 600 certificates awarded by other ministries, including the 150 *certificats de compétences professionnelles* (CCP) awarded by the Ministry of Employment, using the ROME⁶ professional profiles as the standard reference;
- 800 qualifications awarded by private organizations, including the *certificats de compétences d’entreprises* (CCE) awarded by the Chambers of Commerce (see below);
- 400 other so-called *certificats de qualification professionnelle* (CQP), vocational qualification certificates⁷.

Individuals wishing to undertake VAE are now entitled to paid leave to do so, provided certain conditions of service are met. The assessment takes place at accredited centres (including *Centres de Bilan de Compétences*) on the basis of a portfolio of experience, drawn

⁶ *Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois*, a national register of professional profiles developed by the *Agence Nationale pour L’Emploi* (ANPE), the French Employment Service

⁷ La VAE en France: Un Appui Possible?, p. 17

up by the individual and submitted to an assessment panel or practical examinations to test the candidate's knowledge gained through experience. Where panels (*jurys*) are used, these are generally composed of the assessors who, in most cases, would usually award the qualification on the basis of more traditional examinations or practical work. The standards or *référentiels* vary depending on the type of qualification and in many cases are still under development.

The new system calls upon assessment panels to take a more comprehensive view of an individual's skills and experience and make decisions on a "collegiate" basis, rather than each evaluator submitting an assessment relating to their particular subject area, as occurred under the previous VAP system.

The development of VAE

Since the launch of VAE, the system has developed rapidly, although not entirely without problems. The most recent consolidated figures available show that 14 374 candidates were examined to obtain a diploma via VAE in 2003, a 90% increase compared to 2002⁸. Roughly 75% of candidates were employed, compared to 23% unemployed. 60% of candidates were women. Nearly half of candidates aimed to obtain a higher education diploma (BTS) and just over 20% a professional secondary education certificate (*Baccalauréat Professionnel*). Of the candidates whose dossiers were examined in 2003, 49.1% successfully obtained a full diploma, 39% received recognition for a component of a diploma and 11.9% were effectively rejected.

Despite the increasing uptake of VAE, there is some evidence that the system is still struggling to assert itself in the French educational and labour market culture, which has long judged individuals on the basis of formal qualifications. In March 2005, the director of the *Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle* (CNCP), Bernard Decomps, resigned, claiming that the organisation lacked the resources to implement VAE effectively. *Le Monde's* education correspondent commented in an article at the time that this development in part reflected the difficulties of implementing a system that challenged "*la tyrannie du diplôme*" (the tyranny of formal qualifications) in France⁹. Given that the system is still in its early phases, however, more time is needed to evaluate the extent to which these are teething troubles or more fundamental problems.

Formative Approaches

Alongside the new system for VAE, the well-established concept of the *bilan de compétences* will continue to play an important role. Since its introduction, this personalised skills audit has been conceived as a formative guidance and counselling tool, rather than a summative

⁸ Note d'information: Ministère de l'éducation nationale, December 2004.
<ftp://trf.education.gouv.fr/pub/edutel/dpd/ni0436.pdf>

⁹ Alain Faujas, La validation de l'expérience peine à se mettre en place, *Le Monde*, 22 March 2005

assessment and validation instrument. This is made clear in the objectives set out in the legislation governing the *bilan*, listed below.

The Objectives of the Bilan de Compétences

- To take stock of occupational and personal experience;
- To identify and assess knowledge and skills acquired through work, training, and social life;
- To identify the potential of the individual;
- To put together and structure elements to define a personal or occupational ‘project’;
- To help the individual manage and exploit their personal resources;
- To organise the individual’s occupational priorities;
- To allow an individual to maximise the use of their attributes in career choices and career changes.

Following an analysis of the expectations of the candidate and their skills and abilities, the *bilan de compétences* results 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.

1.2.3 Role of Sub-National Public Authorities

The regions in France 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 examples). Since the introduction of *Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience*, 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 for VAE within their training information service and a network of information points within existing establishments (*Points-Relais-Conseil*)

In the region of Nord-Pas de Calais, for example, 86 *Points-Relais-Conseil* for VAE have been established in organisations such as the ANPE offices (job centres) and universities. For more information, see http://www.c2rp.fr/decouv_localis/mission.php?mission_id=6#

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector

1.3.1 Sector Initiatives

In 1998, the national network of Chambers of Commerce and Industry launched the *l'Association pour la certification des compétences professionnelles*¹⁰ (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 award and the Certificates are currently 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

For more information on the certification methods and standards used, refer to the ACCP website: www.accp.asso.fr

Increasingly, businesses are 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, has launched a major VAE project. With 43% of the workforce being 45 years and older and 40% not having a school leaving certificate, the VAE project is to raise the level of qualification of the workforce, thus leading to a more productive workforce with more mobility within the company. Other examples of private sector VAE initiatives include the textile industry, the tobacco industry group SEITA, AXA insurance and the Banque de France.

1.3.2 Examples from Individual Companies

The importance traditionally attached to formal diplomas in France and the importance for the individual of having credible, transferable qualifications means that there has been limited development of standards and certification at the level of the firm. In large companies, such

¹⁰ Association for the Certification of Vocational Skills

as the state railway SNCF, workers can seek advice about VAE from the in-house training association AGECEF-SNCF¹¹.

1.4 Conclusions

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. At the time of writing, many aspects of the implementation of *Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience* (VAE) are still being developed or refined and it will be important to monitor how this progresses.

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.

Another challenge raised in the literature is a lack of appropriate validation methodologies¹². Two main methods are used to assess skills gained through experience in the context of VAE: examinations and the assessment of portfolios. In the latter case, 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 formalize 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. This is another area where future developments will be of crucial importance.

¹¹ Association pour la gestion des congés individuels de formation du personnel de la SNCF

¹² See *La VAE en France: Un Appui possible?*, 2003