

Certification of informally acquired competences in France

Background report conducted for a Bertelsmann Foundation Study on Recognition of Informal and Non-formal Learning

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1. Initial situation and legal framework

Recognising the crucial importance of learning outside formal training contexts, the European Council has proposed in May 2004 a set of common European principles for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning. These principles identified some key issues which are critical in order to develop and implement systems and methods of validation¹. In 2012, The Council of the European Union has adopted a Recommendation that, “no later than 2018, Member States should adopt, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to:

- (a) have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, including, where applicable, through open educational resources;
- (b) obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences.’²

In France, the recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning through professional or other experience was established by the **Social Modernisation Act of 17 January 2002**³ under the name of ‘**Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience**’ (VAE). It represented an important innovation with respect to the previous system established in 1985 and by the Act of 20 July 1992 which allowed recognition and validation of competences only through professional experience for obtaining registration to higher education course without the usual prerequisite degree or the partial equivalence of tertiary education degrees (*validation des acquis professionnels* : VAP).

According to the law of 2002 anybody having at least an experience of 3 years in any kind of activity (professional or through responsibilities in a non-profit organisation for example) has the right to take the initiative to undertake a procedure of VAE aiming at validating informally acquired competences either by a certification/qualification recognised by the National Commission of Vocational Certifications: *Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle (CNCP)* also established by the 2002 Act or by another qualification recognised only at an industry branch level.

The VAE system has been developed over the years: taking into account the statistics provided by the public sector (ministries delivering certification) about 250,000 people have obtained a validation and certification of informally acquired competences between 2002 and 2012. In 2012, about 64,000 files of candidates were accepted by the competent bodies

¹ Council of European Union (2004) *Conclusions of the Council of Representatives of the Governments of Member States meeting within the Council on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning* (Educ 118 SOC 253, 18 May 2004).

² Council of European Union (2012) *Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (2012/C 398/01, 20 December 2012).

³ *Loi de Modernisation Sociale* (n° 2002-72) of 17 January 2002, which added a new provision within the *Code du Travail* (article L 900-1).

providing certifications, 48,700 actually presented their candidacy to a jury and 28,700 candidates obtained a full validation for getting a diploma or certificate (Legrand 2014). The main providers are the Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue⁴. But these statistics do not include all certifications delivered by the semi-public bodies (Chambers of commerce and industry, Chambers of agriculture, etc.) or accredited private institutions. In fact, one major drawback of the system adopted in 2002 is the lack of inter-ministerial structure able to monitor and evaluate the whole system. This was the counterpart of a will to leave some autonomy to the main stakeholders involved in the process.

In 2012, among the 64,000 successful candidates, women represent 76% of the candidates and 70% of the candidates apply for a EQF levels 3 and 4 certification, i.e. degrees concerning chiefly formally low-skilled persons (Legrand 2014). It was already the case in the first years of implementation of VAE. In 2006, 65% of the candidates applied for a degree of EQF level 3 or 4 and the proportion of unemployed candidates was about one third of the total (Labruyère 2006).

In 2007, 2008 and 2009, a few studies and official reports were written in order to assess the actual implementation and impact of the VAE system in France. In particular, a survey was organised by CEREQ, DARES and DREES⁵ for formally low-skilled persons (87% of women of an average age of 40) looking for a diploma of EQF level 3 (a '*certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*': CAP) mainly in the social sector and care for young children (Recotillet & Werquin 2008). Then a report to the Prime Minister was written in 2008 evaluating the implementation of the system, and listing the positive factors and the main obstacles to overcome (Besson 2008). This report was followed by a working group commissioned by the secretary of state for employment and which was chaired by Vincent Merle, professor at the *Conservatoire National des Arts et métiers (CNAM)* who had been very much involved in the creation of VAE through the Act of 2002. The three main aspects studied by the group were:

- Information and support of the candidates for VAE
- Clarity and accessibility to the system of certification
- Conditions for developing recognition of informal competences within the firms.

(Merle 2008)

The report proposed important recommendations to improve these three aspects and in particular to take into account the specific needs of formally low-skilled people.

The period 2008-2009 appears now as the golden age of VAE, with respect to studies and debates on VAE, especially with the report of Vincent Merle, who was one of the main founders of the VAE system⁶. Ever since, the VAE has not been considered as a top priority, because of the increasing rate of unemployment of the young people aged between 18 and 25, who are not the age group the most directly concerned by VAE. The general demographic situation of France is quite different from Germany, since the rate of natural increase of the population has been among the highest in Europe during the last ten years (Eurostat). In

⁴ For practical reasons, in this study these two ministries will be referred simply as 'Ministry of Education' and 'Ministry of Labour'. One should notice that their official names have often changed according to successive governments.

⁵ CEREQ: *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur l'Emploi et les Qualifications*, public body depending of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour.

DARES: *Direction de l'Animation, de la Recherche, des Etudes et des Statistiques*, Ministère du Travail.

DREES: *Direction de la Recherche, des Etudes, de l'Evaluation et des Statistiques*, Ministère des Affaires Sociales et de la Santé.

⁶ 'Vincent Merle, père de la VAE', *Le Monde*, 24/11/2013.

2012, this rate was about 3.8%. So, to some extent, the main challenge to face is more to increase the general level of education of the young people leaving the education system than to better recognise informally acquired competences of the older working force. This can be one partial explanation of the fact that in the recent period VAE has not been a very high priority on the political agenda of French governments.

In France, formal adult education curricula are competence-based insofar as they are identical with curricula in initial VET and general education or are registered in the National Qualification Framework: the national register of vocational qualifications (*Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles*) which is managed by the National Commission of Vocational Certifications: *Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle (CNCP)*: (<http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/repertoire>).

The term 'competences' refers to what learners know and are able to do (CEDEFOP definition). In 2008, the *CNCP* was officially designated as the national coordination point for the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and the *RNCP* is therefore the national qualification framework. In October 2010, France submitted to the European Commission the correspondence between the qualification levels set out in the *RNCP* and those in the EQF.

On the basis of the **Law on lifelong vocational training of 2009**⁷, the French Government has set up a program for the development of key competences targeting unemployed workers, 16-25-year old youth without qualifications, and workers currently in the workforce. Key competences include literacy, basic IT skills, and so on. These courses are provided free of charge upon request. In 2010, 800 municipalities offered such courses and there were about 45,800 participants. (<http://www.emploi.gouv.fr/dispositif/competences-cles>).

The recent law on vocational training (5 March 2014) sets up a 'personal training account' (*Crédit personnel de formation: CPF*) for all individuals aged at least 16, either employed or looking for a job, and reinforces the possibility to obtain a qualification through successive recognition of learning outcomes over time⁸. One major goal of the law is to improve the accessibility to vocational training and VAE for formally low-skilled individuals. The possible impact of this law on VAE will be analysed below in further section. The CPF replaces the former scheme called 'individual right to training' (*droit individuel à la formation: DIF*).

2. Objective, focus and structure of the country report

The main objective of this report is to analyse the overall system of validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning in France through the VAE system with a particular focus on relatively disadvantaged individuals in terms of formal qualification, which represents a higher percentage in France than in Germany (see below).

⁷ *Loi n°2009-1437 of 24 November 2009 relative à l'orientation et à la formation professionnelle tout au long de la vie* (about guidance and lifelong learning).

⁸ *Loi n° 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale* (about vocational training, employment and social democracy).

The core elements of the VAE system will be analysed in order to assess their effectiveness with respect to the population concerned, in particular the formally low-skilled individuals. The report will try to show the positive aspects as well as the main obstacles that remain and should be overcome by some reforms.

The analysis will be based upon various available information: statistical data, a few qualitative surveys of candidates to VAE, previous studies (relatively rare in the last years), interviews with the main stakeholders: decision makers at national, regional and local level, members of juries, supporting and coaching staff and a few candidates.

The report is structured in line with the structure of the report on Germany:

1. Short description of the initial situation
2. Main objectives, focus and structure of the report
3. An overall presentation of the VET system in France including VAE
4. Analysis of the formally low-skilled population, its main characteristics and diversity
5. Analysis and assessment of the five core elements of VAE using CEDEFOP quality criteria
6. Education policies positions and main issues about the validation and recognition of informally acquired competences
7. Summary and prospects
8. References and main legal texts

3. Vocational training and informal learning in France: characteristics and concepts

The choice was made in France to deliver the same vocational diplomas that can be obtained through **four different pathways**:

- ***initial vocational education in schools***, mainly depending of the Ministry of Education, but also of other ministries (agriculture, health and social affairs, national defence, ...) and Chambers of commerce and industry, Chambers of trades and crafts (*chambres des métiers et de l'artisanat*) and Chambers of agriculture.
- ***Apprenticeship***
- ***Continuous vocational training (CVT)*** organised by ministries (mainly Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry of Industry), local authorities (Regional Councils), Chambers of Commerce and Industry, industry branches and enterprises themselves.
- ***Recognition and validation of informally acquired competences: validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE) after 2002.***

However, the network monitored by the Ministry of Labour delivers also certifications/qualifications called '**titres professionnels**' (which are different from education degrees but registered in the French national framework of qualifications) while the private sector delivers also 'vocational qualification certificates' (**certificats de qualification professionnelle**). These qualification certificates are delivered at the level of each industrial branch in order to validate some competences related to specific tasks or responsibilities. They are defined by an agreement with the trade-unions at branch level (*convention*

collective). They are not automatically recognised at a national level by the CNCP, while the '*titres professionnels*' delivered by the Ministry of Labour are recognised at national level and registered in the national qualification framework by the *CNCP*.

Thus, if we add all diplomas awarded by the ministries and other public or semi-public bodies, the *titres professionnels* awarded by the Ministry of Labour's network and the *certificats de qualification professionnelle* delivered by industry branches, there are about 8,000 vocational qualifications delivered in France.

Initial vocational education

In June 2000, all current legislation concerning education was consolidated within an Education Code (*Code de l'Éducation*). Schooling in France is compulsory from the ages of 6 to 16, but about 99% of the children attend pre-primary schools from the age of 3 and 35% from the age of 2, with a priority access given to children from disadvantaged social backgrounds, in particular in priority educational areas (*zones d'éducation prioritaire*).

At the end of lower secondary education (4 years in a junior high school called '*collège*'), the pupils attend a senior high school: either a '*lycée général et technologique*' (*LEGT*) in the first year of upper secondary which is called '*classe de seconde de détermination*', or they start a vocational stream either within a senior high school called '*Lycée professionnel*' (*LP*) or through apprenticeship sharing their time within an enterprise and an apprentice training center (*Centre de Formation d'Apprentis* or *CFA*) that tightly cooperate.

Those who attend a *LEGT* must choose at the end of the first year of upper secondary a general stream or a technological stream. Those who start a vocational stream, either in a *LP* or through apprenticeship, are supposed to prepare in 2 years a first level vocational degree, called certificate of vocational ability (*Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle* known as *CAP*) or to prepare in 3 years a vocational baccalauréat (*baccalauréat professionnel*) which was created in 1985 in order to increase the qualification of workers.

One specific feature of the French system of VET is to distinguish two streams:

- **A technological stream** that prepares normally students to go to higher technological education after the technological baccalauréat in order to obtain an ISCED 5 level technological degree in 2 years in a *Institut Universitaire de technologie* (*IUT*) or in a post-baccalauréat class of a high school - *Section de Technicien Supérieur* (*STS*).
- **A vocational stream** that prepares students to enter the labour market either in 2 years after a *CAP* or in 3 years after a vocational baccalauréat in a vocational high school (*lycée professionnel* or *LP*) or through apprenticeship. There are about 200 specialities of *CAP* and about 80 specialities of vocational baccalauréat. Both degrees can also be obtained through continuous vocational training or *VAE*. There are also some complementary degrees of 1 year after a *CAP* which facilitate the adaptation or induction to a specific job.

As a matter of fact in the technological stream an increasing proportion of students go beyond an ISCED 5 degree in order to obtain a vocational Bachelor's degree (*licence professionnelle*) mainly as a result of the LMD system established by the Bologna process at European level. Similarly, in the vocational stream, an increasing proportion of students (about 20%) attend higher technological education in an *IUT* or a *STS* after a vocational baccalauréat in order to obtain an ISCED 5 technological degree and then for a minority of students even a vocational Bachelor's degree (*licence professionnelle*). But it is

more usual for students of the vocational stream to obtain these tertiary degrees through continuous vocational training or VAE after some working experience.

In the vocational stream, both studies in a LP or apprenticeship include periods of theory-based learning and experience within an enterprise. In a LP, courses include compulsory periods of workplace training for between 3 to 10 weeks each year depending on the diploma and the speciality.

The vocational diplomas (*CAP* and vocational baccalauréat) are nationally recognised. They are defined and updated every 5 years by the competent public authorities in co-operation with trade-unions and employers' associations within **consultative professional commissions** (*Commissions Professionnelles Consultatives* or *CPC*). Within the Ministry of Education there are 14 *CPC* corresponding to broad sectors of economic activity (for example: metallurgy, food industry, tourism). Each *CPC* has 40 members of 4 categories: trade-unions, employers' associations, public bodies and individuals selected for their specific competences (*personnalités qualifiées*). There also *CPC* run by other ministries: Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Sports, etc.

It does exist more than 600 vocational diplomas or other types of certifications recognised at national level, including more than 200 specialities of *CAP* and more than 80 specialities of vocational baccalauréat run by the Ministry of Education (<http://eduscol.fr>).

Over time one can observe an overall increasing level of the qualification of young people leaving school to enter the labour market. A survey carried out in 2013 by the *CEREQ* (Centre of study and research on employment and qualifications) analysed the situation of the 700,000 young people who left school in 2010 (Barret et al, 2014) through a sample of 33,000 individuals (including from overseas departments). Despite the overall increase of the level of qualification, the proportion of those leaving school without any qualification remains relatively high in 2010 : 16% (against 18% in 2004). About 20% attended a training through apprenticeship with an increasing proportion of apprentices obtaining a tertiary level degree. Because of the economic context, after 3 years about one third of the 2010 cohort is still looking for a job, which is the highest percentage ever. Also, more than ever, the individuals without any qualification are the most penalised with 48% unemployed (instead of 32% in 2004). Among those having a *CAP* 32% are unemployed (17% in 2004) while those with a vocational baccalauréat are 20% (13% in 2004). Those having a tertiary technological degree have better job opportunities: 15% of unemployed for those having an ISCED 5 degree (*DUT* or *BTS*)⁹ and 10% for those having a vocational bachelor's degree (*licence professionnelle*), which is close to the situation of graduates from a business school (9% of unemployed). The best situation with respect to job opportunities is that of graduates from engineering schools: only 4% unemployed.

But the unemployment rate of young people does not depend only on the level of their qualification. It depends also on the speciality of the diploma and field of competence (Arrighi 2012). A *CEREQ* survey carried out in 2010 for a sample of 25,000 individuals having left the school system in 2007 showed that the speciality of the certification has a major influence on job opportunities. The rate of unemployment is particularly high (about 40%) for those having a secondary vocational degree in fields like clothing/textile, office work, or selling. On the contrary, the rate of unemployment is very low in the field of health (only 3%) or social work

⁹ *DUT* : *Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie* obtained in an *Institut Universitaire de technologie* (IUT)
BTS : *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur* obtained through a tertiary course in a high school: *Section de Technicien Supérieur* (STS).

(12%) because of increasing needs. Such observations have led to suppress some degrees at CAP level in some sectors that look for people with a higher degree (vocational baccalauréat, *BTS* or *DUT*) for certain jobs like office assistant or selling jobs.

When apprentices succeed their final examination, at the same level of qualification, they often have more opportunities to find a first job than students in schools because employers appreciate their working experience. In order to make apprenticeship more attractive many political measures have been taken over the last 30 years or so. For example, it was made possible to obtain through apprenticeship tertiary education degrees at ISCED levels 5 and 6 (engineering diploma for example). Young people in apprenticeship must be aged between 16 and 25. They are workers depending on the Labour Code (*Code du Travail*) and are paid a salary (employment contract most usually of 2 years). As this type of initial training is particularly effective for finding a job, the French Government has quite recently taken new financial measures to incite employers to recruit more apprentices.

Initial vocational and technological education does not exist only within the Ministry of Education. It does exist in other ministries like the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs for example. There are also vocational schools or apprenticeship centres run by Chambers of commerce and industry (*Chambres de commerce et d'industrie*), Chambers of trades and crafts (*Chambres des métiers*) and Chambers of agriculture.

The supply of initial vocational education is a shared competence between the State, Regional Councils (there are 26 Regions in France including 4 Regions overseas) and Chambers of employers representing employers of various economic sectors (business, agriculture, craft industry and trade, etc.).

Adult education (continuing education in a lifelong perspective)

The present continuous vocational system in France was basically created by an Act of 1971 which organised continuous vocational training (CVT) in a lifelong learning perspective (*éducation permanente*)¹⁰. It has been often improved and developed over the years, notably by the laws already mentioned of 2002, 2009 and 2014. CVT covers individuals at work (public and private sectors, including self-employed) or seeking for a job.

Funding of CVT is provided by companies (41%), the State (35%), Regions (14%), other public and private institutions and households (10%). Every enterprise or non-profit organisation must finance CVT according to a mandatory percentage of the total wage bill which depends on the size of the enterprise (0.55% for small companies employing less than 10 persons, 1.6% for companies employing more than 20)¹¹. This financial contribution concerns various types of devices defined by the law, such as: enterprise's training scheme, contracts of '*professionalisation*', individual leave for training (*congé individuel de formation*), individual training right (*droit individuel de formation*) which was replaced by another system (*crédit personnel de formation*) by the recent law of 2014, VAE procedure at the initiative of the employee, and most often payment to special institutions legally recognised (accredited) to collect the money for financing CVT that are called '*Organismes paritaires collecteurs agréés*' (*OPCA*) and organised at national and regional level for each professional branch and at an interprofessional level.

¹⁰ *Loi n° 71-575 (16 July 1971) sur l'organisation de la formation professionnelle continue dans le cadre de l'éducation permanente* (organising continuous vocational education in a lifelong learning perspective).

¹¹ The Act of March 2014 has modified the rate of these contributions and left more autonomy to the enterprises in financing training courses.

The self-employed have also access to training. They have to contribute to its funding by paying a mandatory contribution to a State-approved collecting agency.

Under certain conditions job-seekers can receive funding for their training. For young people aged 16-25 training can be undertaken through various schemes: special employment contracts like professional upgrading contracts, training courses provided by the State (for example by the Ministry of Education), or the Regional Councils, or by the national unemployment insurance system.

Training courses for adult education are offered by many various bodies: there are more than 15,000 providers, of which 95% belong to the private sector: companies of all sizes, non-profit organisations (associations) or individual providers. Public and semi-public bodies represent only 5% of the total number of providers but they train about 20% of the individuals and earn about 25% of the total income generated in this sector of activity.

The main public and semi-public providers of CVT are:

- **The Ministry of Education** through institutions specialised in CVT called GRETA (*groupements d'établissements scolaires*) which prepare to qualifications at ISCED levels 3, 4 and 5, and through universities or other higher education institutions (CNAM, Grandes Ecoles) for training at ISCED 5, 6 and 7 levels.
- **The National Association for Adult Training** known as **AFPA** (*Association Pour la Formation des Adultes*): with its 215 centres all over France, the AFPA network prepares job-seekers and employees to 280 vocational qualifications (*titres professionnels*) recognised by the Ministry of Labour and by the *CNPC*. The AFPA works in relationship with firms, local authorities and '*Pôle Emploi*' which is the public administration in charge of dealing with unemployed people. *Pôle Emploi*¹² was founded in 2008 by regrouping *l'Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi (ANPE)* and the *ASSEDIC* (Associations for employment in industry and commerce) that were in charge of collecting unemployment contributions and paying unemployment allowances. The main role of AFPA is to design training modules in relationship with employers and unions' representatives. It also plays an important role in the field of VAE advising and helping firms to design and implement procedures of VAE for their staff, and counselling individual candidates.
- **The schools run by Chambers of commerce and industry** (CCI), in particular many business schools (including top ones like HEC, ESSEC or ESCP Europe) all over France, but also engineering schools, and schools in various domains (bakery cooking, photography, etc.)¹³. They also have special services to help candidates to VAE.
- **The schools run by Chambers of craft industry and trade** (*chambres des métiers et de l'artisanat*) and **Chambers of agriculture** that are also have services to inform and help candidates to VAE.

¹² *Pôle Emploi* was established by the Act of 13 February 2008. It helps job-seekers in finding a job or a relevant training course and pays unemployment allowances. *Pôle emploi* has about 50,000 staff distributed all over France in 900 local agencies and 68 hot-line platforms: www.pole-emploi.fr

¹³ For example, the Chamber of Commerce of Paris-Ile-de-France runs 24 schools preparing to about 500 qualifications, which are open do CVT.

- **The Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM)** which has 150 campus and about 90,000 trainees every year who can prepare about 500 diplomas or vocational qualifications. The CNAM proposes an interactive website for those who intend to present their candidacy for a validation and recognition of informally acquired competences through a VAE procedure.

All economic branches also offer opportunities to obtain vocational qualifications either through training organised within the enterprises themselves or through institutes or other bodies financed by the professional federations. For example, for the banking profession, the '*Institut Technique de Banque*' offers many training courses that allow bank employees to have upward mobility. Vocational qualification certificates (*certificats de qualification professionnelle* or *CQPs*) can be issued within each industry branch as a result of a collective agreement between employers and trade unions. These *CQPs* are not necessarily related to the levels of qualification of the French National Qualification Framework and they are not automatically classified in the National Register of Vocational Qualifications (*Répertoire national des certifications*), while the '*titres professionnels*' delivered by the AFPA and the Centres accredited by the Ministry of Labour are automatically taken into account by the *CNCP* as long that they have been designed by consultative commissions (*CPC*) including representatives of employers and trade-unions.

The Ministry of Labour does not provide itself any training course but it plays a major role through *AFPA*, accredited centres, regional directorates of labour and local territorial units of the ministry for the organisation and delivery of *titres professionnels* and for the implementation of VAE in relationship with Regional Councils and the regional and local structures of *Pôle Emploi*. The *titres professionnels* concern any individual having left school, looking for a job or already employed: individuals without any formal qualification, individuals who wish to have their experience validated in order to get a promotion, those who have been fired and are looking for a professional reconversion. These '*titres professionnels*' are related to jobs in all industry branches: industry, commerce, building, tourism, transports, etc.¹⁴

There also training schemes organised by public or semi-public bodies that do not award certifications. Their goal is to facilitate integration or reintegration on the labour market of people with no qualification or obsolete qualification or meeting particular difficulties.

The 'key competences scheme' for example consists of tailored training modules designed to help individuals to master basic competences such as literacy, numeracy, digital know how or a foreign language. It concerns job-seekers between aged between 18 and 25 who are no more in the school-system, employees in work reintegration schemes or in subsidised employment contracts¹⁵.

4. Formally low-skilled individuals: an heterogeneous population

The 'formally low-skilled population' includes various categories of individuals:

¹⁴ For a list of 'titres professionnels' see the website : www.banque.di.afpa.fr and: www.emploi.gouv.fr/titres-professionnels

¹⁵ <http://emploi.gouv.fr/dispositif/competences-cles>

- Immigrants who do not speak at all the French language and did not attend school in France
- Illiterate individuals who have attended school in France for at least a year but have not mastered basic literacy and numeracy competences
- Individuals having dropped out school before the age of 16 (including some Rom children or children from illegal immigrant families) who do not master sufficiently literacy, numeracy and digital know how in order to face basic demands from an employer
- Individuals who stayed in school until the age of 16 but without obtaining any vocational qualification (at least a *CAP*)
- Individuals who completed their upper secondary studies without passing a *baccalauréat* or a vocational certification
- Individuals who passed a general *baccalauréat* and dropped out higher education without obtaining any vocational qualification
- Individuals who obtained a long time ago a qualification largely obsolete because of the evolution of the jobs in their specific domain of activity (often because of the increasing use of ICT).

It appears that, like in Germany, these formally low-skilled subgroups differ both in terms of level and quality of their informally acquired competences, and in terms of their attitude towards education and learning.

Illiterate population

In France, not including overseas departments or territories, according to the national Institute of Statistics (*INSEE*) and the definition of illiteracy given by the National Agency for Illiteracy, the illiterate population would account today for about 7% of the mainland population aged between 18 and 65 (this percentage being about 20% overseas) i.e. about 2.5 million persons. A survey of 2011 showed that 51% of this population were employed, 17.5% were retired, 13.5% were attending some sort of training, 10% were unemployed and 8% were at home.

The economic branches employing the most illiterate manpower are: agriculture, fisheries, agro-industry, building and public works, and social and domestic services.

Overall level of education attainment of the French population

According to 2012 OECD data (*Education at a Glance 2014*, indicator A1, p. 42) the percentage of the 25-64 years-old population who has only attained a level of education of ISCED 2 is much higher in France than in Germany or the US:

% of pop. 25-64 years old	France	Germany	USA	Average EU (21)
Primary education	10	3	4	11
Lower secondary education	18	10	7	9

Total ISCED 1 and 2	28	13	11	20
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It appears clearly that the issue of formally low-skilled adult population is more crucial in France than in Germany or the USA and that the education attainment level in France is under the average level in the European Union (including only 21 countries), even though the actual level of education is also depending on the effectiveness of each education system in terms of student achievement. But the relatively mitigated results of France in the PISA tests over the last decade show that the French school-system is not very efficient to develop practical competences useful for working life and confirm that there is a real issue as to the formal level of the adult population in France.

Higher education dropouts

The dropout rate in higher education in France is deemed too high but it is lower than the average dropout rate of the 14 European countries having participated in the OECD's PIAAC survey and providing the relevant data on this aspect (Schnepf 2014; OECD 2013): 10% in France, 30% in Italy (highest rate) and 13% for the 14 countries average.

Of course, among these dropout students those who do not have any vocational qualification have a handicap with respect to those who obtained before an ISCED 3 or 4 vocational degree. However a recent study (Schnepf 2014) which analyses the data of the OECD survey on adult skills carried out in 2011 (PIAAC) shows that attending one or two years of tertiary education without obtaining any degree still gives a small advantage for finding a job compared with young people having no qualification who only completed upper secondary education without any tertiary education experience. They also have easier access to further training courses or undertaking steps towards VAE procedures.

For all categories of formally low-skilled adults the design of procedures for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes must overcome some challenges which are well described in the German report (pp. 31 and 32) and in the CEDEFOP study on European guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning¹⁶.

The non-formal and informal learning pathways and processes can be so diverse that it is difficult to assess their learning outcomes with a set of predefined common standards, which is to a large extent required for a full recognition of them in order to be validated at the same level as learning outcomes acquired through formal education or training. This means that it must be understood that even for granting partial or total validation of competences required in a formal exam or test one must take into consideration other criteria that depend on each individual experience or life story. It is particularly difficult for teachers and other academic staff to deliver a degree or certification through other modalities and criteria of assessment than those usually taken into account in delivering diplomas.

The attitude of academic staff being often reluctant towards such a different paradigm of assessment explains to a large extent why the development of VAE in France has been rather slow.

5. Analysis of the core elements of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Five core elements have been selected in the German report for analysing the relevance and effectiveness of schemes designed for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal competences or learning outcomes: legal basis, procedures and instruments,

¹⁶ Cedefop (2009) *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*.

institutions, financial aspects, and support structures. In order to facilitate the comparison between Germany and France, the present study will analyse them in the same order.

Legal basis

Like in Germany, there is *'de facto'* recognition of experience and informally acquired competences within the enterprises. Existing human resource management procedures (such as regular staff appraisals, skills assessments (*bilans de compétences*), interviews and talks (*entretiens professionnels*), skills portfolios, observation at work, etc.) have been carried out in France for a long time and further developed over the last decades. A recent study of CEDEFOP has analysed the results of a European survey of 400 enterprises, 20 in-depth case studies and interviews about this aspect¹⁷.

But the formal recognition of informally acquired competences creating **binding legal framework** was first established by an Act of January 1984 and started to be implemented in 1985¹⁸ for access to tertiary education. It was enlarged by the Act of 20 July 1992¹⁹. Both legal texts allowed recognition and validation of competences only through professional experience for obtaining registration to higher education courses without the usual prerequisite degree or the partial equivalence of tertiary education degrees (*validation des acquis professionnels: VAP*).

As mentioned in the introduction of this study, the recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning through professional **or other experience** was established by the **Social Modernisation Act of 17 January 2002**²⁰ under the name of **'Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience' (VAE)**.

According to the law of 2002 anybody having at least an experience of 3 years in any kind of activity (professional or through responsibilities in a non-profit organisation for example) has the right to take the initiative to undertake a procedure of VAE aiming at validating informally acquired competences either by a certification/qualification recognised by the National Commission of vocational certifications: *Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle (CNCP)* also established by the 2002 Act or by another qualification recognised only at an industry branch level.

On the basis of the **Law on lifelong vocational training of 2009**²¹, the French government

¹⁷ Cedefop (2014) *Use of validation by enterprises for human resource and career development purposes*.

¹⁸ *Loi n° 84-52* (26 January 1984) about tertiary education and *Décret n° 85-906* (23 August 1985) *fixant les conditions de validation des études et des expériences professionnelles en vue de l'accès aux différents niveaux de l'enseignement supérieur* (setting up the conditions of validation of previous studies and work experience for access to different levels of tertiary education).

¹⁹ *Loi n° 92-678* (20 July 1992) *relative à la validation d'acquis professionnels pour la délivrance de diplômes* (about validation of work experience for delivering tertiary education diplomas).

²⁰ *Loi de Modernisation Sociale* (n° 2002-72) of 17 January 2002, which added a new provision within the *Code du Travail* (article L 900-1).

²¹ *Loi n°2009-1437* of 24 November 2009 *relative à l'orientation et à la formation professionnelle tout au long de la vie* (about guidance and lifelong learning).

has set up a program for the development of key competences targeting unemployed workers, 16-25-year old youth without qualifications, and workers currently in the workforce. Key competences include literacy, basic IT skills, and so on. These courses are provided free of charge upon request. In 2010, 800 municipalities offered such courses and there were about 45,800 participants. (<http://www.emploi.gouv.fr/dispositif/competences-cles>).

The recent law on vocational training (5 March 2014) sets up a personal training account (*Crédit personnel de formation : CPF*) for all individuals aged at least 16, either employed or looking for a job, and reinforces the flexibility to get a qualification through successive recognition of learning outcomes over time²². One major goal of the law is to improve the accessibility to vocational training and VAE for formally low-skilled individuals. The CPF replaces the former scheme called 'individual right to training' (*droit individuel à la formation: DIF*).

The article 6 of this law allows explicitly to take fully into account some experiences such as responsibilities within a trade-union or as an elected member of a local authority and short periods of training for individuals without any formal qualification. The article 21 states that the Regional Councils must help job-seekers in their administrative steps to obtain a certification through VAE and contribute to finance them along with the relevant local '*pôle emploi*' unit. As a matter of fact it was already the case in most regions.

Overall, today in France, the legal framework, which has a national scope of validity, can be considered as satisfactory with respect to the binding procedures concerning VAE, except perhaps for the financial aspects that may remain an obstacle in some cases for the target group of formally low-skilled workers.

Procedures and instruments

We will describe the procedures and instruments used by the main institutions awarding certifications through VAE with a special focus on the Ministry of Education's network, given its relative importance in the overall VAE system in France. We will also analyse their relevance for the target group of formally low-skilled individuals.

The procedure which is defined at a national level for all processes of validation of informal learning outcomes respects the 4 basic stages recommended at European level (Council of Europe 2014):

- 1) **Identification** of each individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
- 2) **Documentation** of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in order to develop a file of application to a certification. In particular, it is necessary to give evidence of 3 years of various experiences likely to develop competences that are relevant for the type of diploma or other certification (legal admissibility of the application).
- 3) **Assessment** of these learning outcomes
- 4) **Certification** of the results of the assessment in the form of a qualification, or credits

²² *Loi n° 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale* (about vocational training, employment and social democracy).

leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.

The other main European recommendations are also respected:

- **The validation arrangements are linked to the national qualification framework:** The Act of 2002 established the *CNPC* and the National Register of Vocational Qualifications at the same time as the VAE. All certifications validated by accredited bodies that are made after consultation of Commissions including representatives of employers and trade-unions (*CPC*) are automatically registered at the national qualification framework. The other certifications (more specialised) delivered by bodies representing industry branches – the certificates of qualification (*certificats de qualification*) – can be proposed at the *CNPC* for inscription at the national NQF but the inscription is not automatic as they must respect some quality criteria.
- **Information and guidance on the benefits and opportunities for validation** are taken into account: it is the first stage of a procedure and also the most crucial one. It is the role of 940 specific units called '*Points Relais Conseils (PRC) for VAE*' to give the first basic information to potential candidates and help them to understand what type of certification they should look for given their experience. The list and addresses of these *PRC* can be found on the governmental website: www.vae.gouv.fr In the same way, advisors/counsellors within the education system (*DAVA* and *GRETA*), or the Ministry of Labour's network and *AFPA*, or other institutions (such as Regions, *Pôle Emploi*, Chambers of Commerce and Industry, etc.) can inform on the benefits and opportunities of VAE but also to help determining what diplomas or other certifications should be the target, given the type of experience acquired by each individual.
- **Special attention and arrangements are provided for disadvantaged groups**, in particular job-seekers who are formally low-skilled. The *AFPA* and the Regional councils devote specific human and financial resources for helping these target groups. They automatically benefit from a skills audit in order to identify their knowledge, skills and competences acquired through their life experience.
- **Appropriate support and counselling are provided in order to prepare the candidate's file and the interview with the jury** in charge of assessing the learning outcomes and delivering partial or full validation for obtaining a diploma or another type of certification.
- **Transparent quality assurance measures** in line with existing quality assurance frameworks are in place that support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools.
- **Provision is made for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors** (counsellors, trainers and jury members).
- **Qualifications or parts of qualifications obtained by means of the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences comply with agreed standards** that are either the same as, or equivalent to, the standards for qualifications obtained

through formal education programmes. This aspect can be an obstacle as it cannot be quite consistent with the aims and spirit of VAE in all cases.

- **To a certain extent, synergies have been created between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system**, such as ECVET and ECTS²³. But, there is still much more to do in this respect.

The VAE procedure is the same in all ministries except the Ministry of Labour.

A candidate who undertakes steps towards a VAE process in all ministries (except the Ministry of Labour) must go through three main stages:

- Develop a 'file for admissibility' (*livret de recevabilité* or *livret 1*) which allows each ministry to check that all legal conditions are met: at least 3 years of experience in activities that have a link with the certification which is aimed for.
- Develop a 'file describing informal learning outcomes' acquired through experience (*livret 2*). In order to do it properly the candidate is most often supported and advised by a certificating body or a training institution.
- Have one's experience validated by presenting the file to a jury that includes representatives of the profession and teachers/trainers specialised in the field of activity in order to obtain either full validation or a partial one. In this case, the candidate must prepare and take within 5 years complementary tests or interviews in order to obtain a complete certification.

Employees can use a special 'leave for VAE' which permits them to prepare and take the validation tests.

For candidates applying to the Ministry of Labour, the validation procedure is a bit different. The candidate must develop and present a 'synthetic file' (*dossier de synthèse*) that is an analysis of his/her experience. The second stage is the observation of the candidate in a simulated working situation. As a result, the candidate obtains a full validation and therefore the vocational certification (titre professionnel) or a partial validation through which he is granted certificates of vocational competence. He/she must complete to meet the validation requirements within the next 5 years.

The interview with the jury is of course an important stage of the procedure. According to the Decree n° 2002-615 of 26 April 2002, the jury must be composed of at least 25% of qualified representatives of the occupations (half employers and half wage-earners) with as much as possible an equal number of men and women.

But within this general legal requirement, the composition of juries varies with the awarding structures, the nature of the targeted diploma, the industry branch and the occupation. Most

²³ The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Credit Transfer System for higher education (ECTS) have been adopted to facilitate mobility of students and learners throughout Europe.

of the time, a jury includes employers, employees, trainers and teachers. But it never includes the employer or another member of the candidate's enterprise.

Two types of attitudes can be opposed according to the juries:

- An analytic approach of the experience of the candidate: all the tasks and responsibilities and the associated knowledge and competences are systematically confronted to the description of learning outcomes described in the diploma (*référentiel du diplôme*). This approach may easily lead to a partial validation.
- A more holistic approach of the experience described by the candidate which can often be more meaningful and consistent with the finality and spirit of VAE.

BOX 1

A few advice given by candidates who obtained a complete validation

'I entered the room. The jury was composed of five persons who presented themselves and their main job. I presented briefly my school route and my professional experience and then my application file showing what types of responsibilities and competences I had acquired. The last part is the most difficult: the discussion with the jury. One must show a strong personality. It is particularly important to demonstrate that one has a holistic approach of the job and his meaning. One must keep in mind that the main objective is to make the jury aware of the way the candidate understands his responsibilities and duties and perceives the type of competences which are required to do it properly.'

'Before the jury's interview I presented my application file to trainers and coaches who simulated a jury's interview. It was very useful.'

'One must be natural and sincere.'

The interview was very different from oral exams in school or for the baccalauréat, it was much closer to a job interview.'

One must know very well one's application file and be able to justify completely what is written.'

Survey of 100 employees having taken and passed a jury's interview at the University of Paris-Est (Barabel & Meier 2014, pp. 242 and 243)

Institutionalisation

The main providers of certification are public (ministries) and semi-public institutions (AFPA, Chambers of commerce and industry, for example). Other public institutions play a major role in the VAE arrangements: Regional Councils, *Pôle Emploi* network (which depends on the Ministry of Labour), and the National Commission of Vocational Certifications (*CNCP*) which updates the national register of vocational certifications (*RNCP*). Also private stakeholders play an important role in the VAE system: enterprises in general, enterprises specialised in training, counselling and coaching, bodies at the level of industry branches, etc. Aggregate statistical data at national level for VAE are available only for the ministries.

From 2002 to 2012, about 250,000 individuals have obtained a certification through a VAE process delivered by a ministry (Ministry of education, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs,

Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Culture,...). In 2012, 64,000 VAE applications were deemed acceptable but only 48,700 candidates did actually present their candidacy in front of a jury. Among them 28,700 obtained a diploma (full validation).

Other interesting data: 70% of the candidates are employed and 70% of the candidates are looking for a vocational diploma of EQF level 3 (*CAP*) or 4 (vocational baccalauréat). This means that VAE is attractive for relatively formally low-skilled individuals. But these percentages vary according to the ministries. About 70% of the candidates apply either to the Ministry of Education or to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (Legrand 2014).

The Ministry of Education, which delivers about 700 different types of diplomas is the most important provider of certifications. In 10 years (from 2002 to 2012) 129,000 diplomas have been awarded by VAE: 29% at the first qualification level (*CAP*) and 42% at tertiary level.

However, the share of VAE graduates remains low: in 2012 only 2% of the total of diplomas delivered were obtained through VAE procedures. Some specialities are particularly well adapted to VAE. For example, in 2012, the *CAP* 'childhood care' (*Petite enfance*) accounted for 72% of the *CAP* and 16% of all diplomas delivered by VAE by the Ministry of Education (Abriac 2014).

In order to manage the VAE procedures, in each of the 30 *Académies* on the French territory²⁴ a special service of the ministry of education is devoted to the management and implementation of VAE procedures: the '**Dispositif Académique de Validation des Acquis**' (**DAVA**).

The *DAVAs* work in co-operation with the networks of high schools, that have been organised in order to provide continuous vocational training (CVT) - the **GRETA** (*Groupements d'Etablissements d'enseignement*)²⁵ – as well as with CVT services of universities, in order to manage the procedures and the juries that are in charge to assess the applicants and deliver total or partial qualification.

Trained counsellors of VAE and teachers specialised of the relevant diplomas can accompany the candidates during the whole procedure, starting with the evaluation of the relevant experiences and determination of diplomas to try to obtain, then the preparation of the application file and finally the preparation of the interview with a jury or the observation of an experimental working situation.

In 2012, the national network of *DAVAs* dealt with 20,800 VAE application files, of which two out of three were successful in obtaining a diploma (full validation) and another 22% a partial validation. The counselling services are not free but can be financed by various sources (see below).

14 *DAVAs* (out of 30) have adopted a formal quality chart for their VAE management: 3 concurrent types of standards have been chosen: 'GRETA +' (Ex: *DAVA of Académie de Caen*), 'ISO 9001' (*DAVA Académie de Créteil*), and 'VAE +' (*DAVA Académie de Toulouse*).

²⁴ The *Académie* is the regional constituency of the Ministry of Education. In most cases, the territory covered by an *Académie* corresponds to a Region, but not always: for example the Region *Provence-Côte d'Azur* includes two *Académies*: *Académie d'Aix-Marseille* and *Académie de Nice*.

²⁵ A *GRETA* is a structure which mutualises competences and resources of several high schools in order to provide CVT to adults and participate in *VAE* procedures to counsel candidates. There are 210 *GRETA* in France and the whole network includes 6,500 places to offer adult courses.

But all must respect the principles of a national chart set up by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour.

In order to illustrate concretely the organisation and activity of the *DAVAs* we will briefly present in the following boxes the examples of the *DAVA* in the *Académie of Caen* and the *DAVA* in the *Académie of Rennes*. If the VAE procedures are the same in all académies, the organisation of the structures managing the system may slightly differ as well as the financing sources (the Regional Councils are more or less involved in the financial aid).

BOX 2

In the *Académie de Caen*, for example, the *DAVA* which comprises 3 full-time staff and a half-time Counsellor for CVT (*Conseiller de formation continue* or *CFC*) is run by the director of CVT himself. It works in co-operation with the network of GRETA in this académie and 15 trainers or counsellors are partially busy with VAE. The choice was made to adopt the same quality label as for the GRETA network - *GRETA +* - which is based on the standard AFNOR BPX 50-762. This quality label was granted in 2011 and renewed in 2014.

Some figures about the VAE activity of the DAVA in 2013:

Number of information requests: 436

Number of files received: 212

Number of files accepted: 177 (legally admissible)

Number of candidacies actually presented: 134

Number of full validations for obtaining a diploma or other certification: 83 (62%)

Number of partial validations: 38 (28%)

Number of types of diplomas or other vocational certifications: 47

The example of the *DAVA* of Caen illustrates some aspects that need to be taken into account and improved: the difficulty for individuals to undertake a VAE process because of its complexity and its length over time (12 to 18 months on the average) as well as the fear to take the tests and face jury's questions. This is particularly true for formally low-skilled individuals. As noticed by somebody from the *DAVA* staff: the level of mastering French language required for writing the file describing the learning outcomes acquired through experience ('livret 2') is higher than the level required in theoretical tests of the CAP. It shows the importance of an effective support during all the stages of the process (see below).

BOX 3

In the *Académie de Rennes*, the *DAVA*, which is under the responsibility of the *Recteur* of the *Académie* and his adviser in charge of CVT, is run by a VET inspector, assisted by 2 pedagogical counsellors and 3 administrative staff who check the legal admissibility of candidacies, i.e. their conformity to the legal conditions (experience of 3 years having a link with the targeted diploma).

But the appraisal of admissibility includes also an appreciation of the relevance of the application concerning the link between the experience of the candidate and the targeted diploma. Even though the administrative courts have a restrictive conception of the *DAVA*'s role in this respect, one can argue that it is the interest of the candidate to be informed as early as possible if the application has very little chance to result in a validation.

The role of the *DAVA* is also to manage the support and training brought about to the candidates in designing their **application file** describing the experiences and the informally acquired competences (*livret 2*). This support is given by about 40 counsellors who are designated each year by the *Recteur*. The *DAVA* organises the training of these counsellors in relationship with inspectors who are specialists of the various vocational fields in order to keep them updated with the evolution of the description of occupations in terms of tasks, responsibilities and required competences.

The whole implementation of the VAE process is delegated to the *GRETA* network in the *Académie*: there are 4 *GRETA* (one in each *département* of the region *Bretagne*). Support sessions are either individual or with a group of candidates. In any case, this support is considered as adult training, which is the usual activity of *GRETA*.

Some figures about the DAVA's activity in 2013:

Number of information requests: 2209

Number of files accepted: 1003

Number of supported candidates: 458

Number of candidates presented to a jury: 634 (applying for 97 diplomas)

72% of candidates obtained a diploma (full validation)

24% of candidates obtained a partial validation

Therefore, only 4% did not obtain anything: the *DAVA*'s policy to be more selective in the beginning of the process leads to a very low percentage of failure.

Other interesting data:

Two out of three candidates are women

80% are employed

45% of the candidates are aged between 40 and 49

25% apply for a CAP (EQF 3 level), 23% for a vocational baccalauréat (EQF 4 level) and 28% for a Brevet de technicien supérieur (BTS: EQF 5 level)

At the national level of administration of the Ministry of Education, it is the 'sub-directorate for initial and continuous vocational education' that is in charge of supervising VAE. One person is in charge of the co-ordination of *DAVAs*' activity on the field. Among the initiatives taken at central level one should mention the website: www.education.gouv.fr

This website describes the national activity related to VAE both in the *DAVAs* and in higher education (Universities and *CNAM* which took care of 4 000 applications in 2012).

Another initiative has been the development in 2014 of a national software application for the management of individual VAE procedures and longitudinal study of VAE candidates including after they have obtained a partial or full diploma or after their failure.

A national quality chart for inter-ministerial use has been developed: it applies to the Ministry of Education and the other ministries involved in VAE, chiefly the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs is the second most important provider of VAE diplomas. In 2012, it received more than 16,000 applications: 40% obtained a diploma and 44% a partial validation of certain elements of the diploma (Legrand 2014). In this ministry, 96% of candidates are women as most of the diplomas proposed correspond to jobs nearly exclusively occupied by women: care attendants, assistant nurses, child care workers, home carers, etc. 87% apply for a *CAP* diploma (EQF level 3).

The Ministry of Labour received in 2012 about 6,300 applications and 4,800 were accepted, 76% of candidates obtaining a full validation and 12.5% a partial one (Legrand 2014). This ministry with its operational actors (*AFPA* and local units of the ministry working in relationship with local units of *Pôle emploi*) is particularly specialised for VAE candidates who are unemployed: 57% of the applications to this ministry concern unemployed individuals (against only 30% for the average of all ministries).

The AFPA plays a major role. This national association for adult education, which has received from the State a grant of 206 million euros in 2012, includes 4,400 trainers and counsellors over France providing training for more than 300 occupations (www.afpa.fr).

The *AFPA* is in particular taking care of unemployed people who are sent by *Pôle emploi* units as *AFPA* and *Pôle emploi* co-operate tightly. *AFPA* also works in permanent co-operation with the Regional Councils that are in charge of organising and financing adult education and with the regional and local administrative units of the ministry of labour: 'regional and departmental directorates of labour and vocational training' (*Directions régionales et directions départementales du travail et de la formation professionnelle: DIRECCTE and DDTEFP*)²⁶.

The main role of *AFPA* is to design and organise training courses for obtaining vocational certifications proposed by the ministry of labour and called '*titres professionnels*'. *AFPA* has also a role in the VAE procedure along with some other institutions called '*Centres agréés*' in collaboration with the *DIRECCTE* and *DDTEFP*.

Financial structures and procedures

The VAE is legally considered as being part of continuous vocational training (CVT). In the Code of Labour (*Code du travail*) an article of Part VI stipulates that '*the cost generated by a VAE procedure must be financed according to the rules governing CVT*'.

Obviously, the civil servants who manage the VAE system at national, regional and local levels are paid by the State or by Regional Councils or other public bodies. It is the case for example of staff within the *DAVAs* or within the VAE services in universities within the Ministry of Education and those working within the Ministry of Labour. In this respect, the services provided by the public authorities are never charged at their full cost. However, the counselling/ training/coaching service is not free, even for public bodies. According to the candidate's status (employee, unemployed, volunteer worker) different financing schemes are available. A VAE procedure has a cost that depends on the institution delivering the validation/certification.

The cost includes:

²⁶ <http://www.direccte.gouv.fr>

- The organisation of the validation procedure (which depends on the type of diploma and the certifying body (registration fees of the application and its assessment for legal admissibility, organisation of the jury meeting and payment of the jury members, administrative procedures, etc.).
- The cost of the training/ counselling/coaching which can vary with the needs of candidates and the targeted certification.
- In some cases, complementary training to complete a partial validation.
- Some expenses for preparing the application files (*livret 1* and *livret 2*): transportation, photocopying documents, telephone, etc.
- The opportunity costs of the time spent to the VAE procedure.

For example, in the *Académie of Rennes*, within the education system, 10 hours of counselling and coaching provided by a *GRETA* - in order to prepare the application file (*Livret 2*) describing the informally acquired competences during the professional or extra-professional experiences and the interview with the jury - can be estimated between 700 and 1000 euros.

But this amount can be much higher for some diplomas and other validating bodies. It can vary from a few hundreds to a few thousands euros (Barabel & Meier 2014, p. 126).

For an employee, the cost can be paid by the enterprise or by an accredited joint body called *OPCA* (*Organisme paritaire agréé*) as part of the enterprise's training scheme or the individual right of any employee to some continuing training (*droit individuel à la formation: DIF*). As the *DIF* was recently (Act of March 2014) replaced by the 'Personal Account for Training' (*Crédit personnel de formation: CPF*) the cost of VAE will be in the future allocated to this account given certain conditions.

The cost of VAE can also be paid by the enterprise as part of the 'individual leave for training purpose' (*Congé Individuel de Formation: CIF*). The *CIF*²⁷ allows any employee during his/her working life to attend training sessions, at his initiative, independently of the enterprise's training scheme (Code of Labour, article L6322-1). But the employee must meet certain conditions and present his request to his employer by a determined procedure.

The employee can, under certain conditions, obtain to be paid by the accredited body collecting the mandatory contributions of enterprises in order to finance the *CIF* scheme. These bodies are called *OPACIF* and *FONGECIF* (see the websites: www.opacif.fr and www.fongecifcentre.com).

As a matter of fact, in the *CPF* and *CIF* mechanisms, usually the enterprise pays for his employee and is paid back by accredited bodies collecting funds: *OPCA*, *OPACIF*, *FONGECIF*, etc.

For an unemployed individual, the State, *Pôle Emploi* and the Regional Councils share the payment of the costs of a VAE procedure.

²⁷ The *CIF* is another scheme than the *DIF* in the French system of CVT and the *DIF* was replaced in 2014 by the personal training account (*crédit personnel de formation: CPF*).

The distribution between these structures depends on the Regions. For example, in the Region of *Bretagne (Académie of Rennes)* the Regional Council pays entirely the procedure cost of unemployed people. Overall, for all the VAE candidates, the distribution of financial contribution is: Region: 30%; *FONGECIF, OPACIF*: 30%; *OPCA*: 30%; *Pôle Emploi* and individuals: 10%.

It appears that very few candidates have to pay an important share of the costs of a VAE procedure: therefore the financial aspect is not the most important issue for the candidates, except for the complexity of the administrative steps required to get the payment in some cases.

Support structures

The support structures have been already described to a large extent in the two previous sections of this study: 'instruments and procedures' and 'institutions'. Indeed, it is difficult to describe procedures and institutions involved in the VAE system without talking of the support structures which play a major role in the VAE mechanisms.

However, it is useful to further describe the various elements of the supporting devices and to examine to what extent they are relevant and effective, particularly for the formally low-skilled candidates.

The first step of any support is the basic information about existing procedures, legal conditions, possible financial aid, possible interlocutors, etc.

In this respect, some important progress has been accomplished with respect to websites. Many websites have been improved over the last few years. Some of them have already been mentioned earlier in the present study.

In this respect, one must mention first the governmental website: www.vae.gouv.fr. This website gives all the addresses of the 940 '*Points Relais Conseils (PRC) en VAE*', the specific units likely to give all the basic information on the VAE procedure and the opportunities of validating experience to obtain a formal certification. This website is particularly well designed. Like the website of the Ministry of Education, it provides useful practical information and makes a distinction between potential individual candidates, employers interested in adopting an enterprise scheme of VAE, and professionals of VAE. The website proposes also short videos where candidates having obtained a diploma through VAE describe their experience of the process. In particular, if one clicks the choice 'professionals of VAE' a video is proposed where low-skilled persons and also handicapped persons explain their experience and the impact on them. It is a very lively way to get information on VAE.

The national website on VAE set up by the Ministry of Education (www.francevae.fr) is also well organised. It gives the main national information about the VAE objectives and procedures, the diplomas that can be targeted, possible financial aid and other supports. Moreover, on its home page it gives, by a simple click on a map of the 30 French *académies*, the possibility to have access to the email, phone number and address of the DAVA in each *académie*.

Each *académie* also disseminates newsletters and flyers in which there is information about VAE.

One should also mention the website of the National Commission for vocational certifications (www.cncp.gouv.fr) where people can find the national qualification framework (NQF) and the classification of all diplomas, certifications awarded by the Ministry of Labour (*titres*

professionnels) and those other qualifications (*certificats de qualification*) delivered by industry branches that have been accepted 'on-request' in the National Register of vocational certifications (*RNCP*: French NQF). This website traffic has had over 2 million visits each year since 2011.

Most of the other websites mentioned along this study give useful practical information on VAE and on the various possible financial aid.

Also two books have been published recently that give practical information and advice. They are quoted in the list of references at the end of this study (Barabel & Meier 2014; Rivoire 2012).

However, all the available information devotes too little attention to formally low-skilled persons. Most of the 'testimonies' (*témoignages*) concern individuals who have attained at least a EQF level 4 and target a higher education diploma.

We did not find any study about the effectiveness of the websites.

Consultation and first guidance are easily available through the different institutionalised structures of the Ministry of Education (*DAVAs*, universities, *CNAM*), of the Ministry of Labour and *AFPA*, and to less extent of the other ministries. It is certainly a positive aspect of the VAE scheme in France. But the websites of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry do not mention explicitly VAE. If they play an important role in initial and continuous vocational training, they play a marginal role in VAE, even though some their schools (like *Novancia* or *ESCP Europe* business schools, in Paris, for example) have a special unit specialised in VAE coaching.

Counselling and coaching by the Ministry of Education (*DAVAs*, *GRETA*, Universities and *CNAM*), the Ministry of Labour (*DIRRECTE*, *AFPA*, *Pôle Emploi*) and Regional Councils provide an effective support to all categories of candidates, particularly to unemployed persons and also target some specific support to low-skilled and handicapped persons.

6. Education policies positions on the recognition of informally acquired competences

Since the establishment of VAP in 1984-1985 and its extension to VAE in 2002, the recognition and validation of informally acquired competences has developed relatively slowly in France but it has become largely accepted by all the main stakeholders. Employers and trade-unions both agree that it is a real social progress and that it has positive impact on the economy by increasing motivation of workers and professional mobility.

More and more employers envisage to set up and implement collective VAE schemes at the level of their enterprises. *AFPA* and the *GRETA* networks have already signed contracts with firms in order to implement VAE schemes specifically adapted to their needs in terms of human resources management. A few large companies (like *Orange* for example) have already implemented such VAE schemes.

In fact, the stakeholders who were most reticent were the education professionals, chiefly university teaching staff, who had some difficulty in accepting to accept new criteria for awarding a diploma. It was relatively easier for teachers or trainers in the field of vocational training because they were more used to the importance of experience in real professional situations for acquiring some transversal or specific competences that are deemed crucial for being effective in one's job.

The main issue to face in France within the context of the economic crisis and budget deficit, is to reduce the increasing unemployment rate of the youth (16-25 years-old) and public spending. Therefore, VAE improvement and extension is not a top priority of the political agenda.

Nevertheless, the Act of March 2014 reinforces the possibility to obtain a qualification through successive recognition of learning outcomes over time²⁸. One major goal of the law is to improve the accessibility to vocational training and VAE for formally low-skilled individuals. But apart from this initiative, there are not important projects concerning the development of improvement of VAE in France. One just should mention in this respect the development of a quality chart of VAE and the gradual adoption of formal quality standards in the *GRETA* and *AFPA* networks.

It seems now useful to assess the present situation and try to analyse the main positive and negative aspects of VAE arrangements as well as possible improvements.

Main positive aspects

The legal framework can be considered as the first positive aspect: it clearly defines some mandatory procedures at national level and affirms clearly that VAE is an individual right which belongs to individual initiative. It also defines some procedures in order to bring financial help to the candidates. The legal context has also attributed to certain public and semi-public institutions the competence and funds to award diplomas and other certifications that are recognised and classified (using EQF standards) in the national qualification framework.

The important mobilisation of the Ministry of Education networks, of the Ministry of Labour and *AFPA* and *Pôle Emploi*, of other ministries, of Regional Councils, and other bodies is also another positive aspect.

In many cases and in certain economic sectors VAE procedures have effectively allowed low-skilled persons or persons having responsibilities higher than those corresponding to their formal qualification level to improve their professional situation and become more motivated and effective.

For low-skilled persons the VAE schemes are particularly well adapted to the needs of women between 35 and 55 years-old in the social sector (childhood care, home care, etc.) and other services. But in all cases, for this public the procedure is too complex and they need an effective support in designing and writing their application files (*livret 1* and *livret 2*).

Main negative aspects and difficulties

An important issue is to simplify the procedures to obtain a financial aid.

Another one is the necessity to increase and improve the support to low-skilled persons: in the *académie* of Caen, for example, an effort to help candidates in filling out the required documents and the *livret 1* has decreased significantly the number of people who abandon during the first stage of the process.

One important problem to solve at the regional level is the number of jury interviews to organise for very few candidates given the great number of diplomas and other certifications

²⁸ *Loi n° 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale* (about vocational training, employment and social democracy).

that are targeted. The cost of organising an interview for one candidate or two is very high. So the DAVAs for example have started to regroup candidates of a few regions or started to use distance interviews through video conferences.

More fundamentally, certain experts think that the validation and certification system in France is based on an 'adequationist approach' of the vocational diplomas that limits the scope of VAE as it is sometimes very difficult to establish a link between the description of the diploma in terms of learning outcomes (*référentiel* of the formal diploma) and the informal competences acquired through successive professional and extra-professional experiences.

The VAE appears particularly well adapted to people who have had the same job for many years without having a formal diploma corresponding to their responsibilities. However, in this case the value added of VAE is not so important to the extent that it is not too difficult to valorise this type of experience in the context of a mobility.

Today, except for some occupations in the health and social sector, the VAE can be totally meaningful only through procedures recognising by *modules* (units) competences acquired in different occupational experiences and articulating this recognition with training courses allowing for a real professional upward mobility.

Finally, one difficult issue is to find out the right balance between two contradictory policy objectives:

- Make the French system of vocational diplomas and certifications simpler in order to make it more understandable at European and international levels.
- Leave initiatives to all stakeholders and training institutions to make the system more flexible and allow for more adaptability to the various needs of individuals and enterprises, which also increases the complexity of the French system.

7. Summary and prospects

The main issue to solve in order to improve the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning in France is to simplify the VAE procedures and to increase the counselling/coaching of candidates with a specific effort in favour of low-skilled persons.

One can accept the conclusions of the most exhaustive assessment of VAE which has been carried out in the Region of *Bretagne* in 2012 by the *CEREQ* (Beaupère & Podevin 2012). The support must be brought from the start of the process (guidance) until the post-jury interview in order to help the candidates to effectively use their certification to obtain an upward professional mobility.

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Loi de modernisation sociale n° 2002-72 (17 January 2002) which adds a new provision at article L 900-1 of the '*Code du travail*' about the right of any individual to get his or her informally acquired competences validated by a certification recognised by the National Register of vocational qualifications. The minimum length of activity to be taken into account is three years. Main implementation text: Decree of 26 April 2002.

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