

The Accreditation of prior learning experience in France: A good start, to be continued

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The accreditation of prior learning experience (APL) is not new to France. In its new form, however, the VAE¹ relies on path dependency but brings a lot of innovations. These include increased opportunities for all qualifications, an improved definition of the role that experience plays and a mandatory practice for all awarding bodies. Moreover this innovation seems to fit well with many changes that affect the French CVET system, including the trend towards more individualisation, the diversification of the learning processes and the shift in active labour market policies.

This report does not aim at describing the legal and institutional characteristics of the VAE. These were already sufficiently described in the host country report (which should be read first). In this paper, the focus will not be the national (state) policy aimed at promoting and developing the VAE. This is widely the purpose of the host country report. Strictly speaking, any kind of assessment of this policy is still impossible today. Developed between 2002 and 2003, the new VAE framework was put into effect at the beginning of 2004. There is not enough data as of yet to begin qualitative studies. The first representative survey – that focuses on level 5 of the French qualifications grid - will be available in a few weeks.

This being said, the goals of this report are twofold. First, taking into consideration the VAE as an innovation, the report aims at giving it a broader perspective, and raises the following questions: what is the relationship between this new way of delivering qualifications and the role of qualifications (diplomas) in France? (Part I). How can the growth of the VAE be understood, according to the changing characteristics of the labour market (II)? Secondly, there is a general consensus on the VAE, which is supported by all players. It must not be overlooked however, that this consensus is partly due to the innovation itself. The VAE remains an unclear, blurred concept, which can be interpreted differently by each player, who can develop their own strategy. It is a learning process that must be taken into account by all players, and its implementation is a point of contention that will inevitably affect the results of the VAE and its assessment at a later stage. The third part (III) of the report will address the opinions and practices of the main institutional players, based on concrete experiences. In the fourth part (IV), we will mainly focus on the individuals: access, screening process, success, outcomes, etc. The conclusion will draw some scenarios.

1. The VAE within the education and qualification policy

1.1 The increasing role of qualifications

In France, three arguments are frequently put forth to justify the growth of investment in education. The first argument concerns youth unemployment, which is often attributed to inadequate education. The second argument is nowadays based, on the Lisbon Objectives and the rhetoric relating to the

¹ In the following report, we will use the French acronym VAE (Validation des acquis de l'expérience) rather than APL.

knowledge society. The third argument is based on the returns on investment in education and social justice. Since the 1980s, these three arguments have been frequently used to support the goal of achieving an 80% success rate for the *Baccalaureate* (French A-level). This rate grew rapidly in the 1990s and is stalled today at about 65% [Beduwe, Germe, 2004]. More recently, these arguments have been applied to support the Bologna Process and the transition to the bachelor-master-doctorate system. Although presented slightly differently, these three arguments have been used to assist the recent reform of the continuing training system, including the VAE.

Concerning initial education, it is taking longer to complete studies, and there is an increasing flow of newcomers onto the labour market, higher qualified than in the past [Cereq, 2001]. One of the consequences of this evolution is that in French society, the role of qualifications seems to be gaining importance. This is obviously the case concerning the labour market.

On the one hand, being qualified is a necessary (but not sufficient) component of the hiring process. Contrary to UK companies for example, French firms are widely requiring qualification and references when posting a job offer. On the other hand, with a comparatively high level of unemployment, there is a kind of queuing process within the labour market, ordered by the need of qualifications; Applicants without any qualifications are hit harder by unemployment, while people with the lowest qualifications can only apply for/are forced to taking up unskilled jobs.

Moreover, in a broader sense, qualifications are playing a stronger role in France than in any other country, in reference to social hierarchy. French society is often said to be ruled by qualifications and some analyses put the emphasis on the fact that opportunities for better jobs and social standing are decreasing all through the individual's life [Verdier, 2001]. The opportunity to become qualified through the VAE must be understood within this context.

1.2 French specificity: the double currency of most of the qualifications

We must also pay attention to the double value of some qualifications. If the diplomas awarded by the Ministry of labour, which mainly concern adults and unemployed, only have one value the ones awarded by the Ministry of Education have a double currency. These diplomas are "double-valued" standards, playing an internal role within the education and training system as well as an external role in the labour market [Méhaut, 1997]:

- Internally: a vocational diploma is meant to attest the achievement of a certain level in a common hierarchy of diplomas, allowing access to a higher level;
- Externally: the diploma is meant to provide an indicator to the labour market, which is more or less institutionalised according to market rules.

This double value of the "diploma currency" is a constant source of tension, in particular between those who take more interest in either of these values. For example, those favouring the immediate value of the vocational diploma on the labour market at the risk of seeing its value diminish in the educational environment, and vice versa. This double value has two consequences. First of all, it could explain why there is still some resistance within the education system regarding the VAE. In fact, some teachers fear that the educational value of the VAE could be lower than a classical diploma. Secondly, the double value could explain the fact that some individual strategies seeking qualification through the VAE are not interested in its direct labour market value, but consider it as a way to get access to a higher level of studies.

Nevertheless, the VAE contributes to some important changes in the French conception of the learning process and qualifications.

- In the past, learning was associated with school-based education, and the workplace was regarded as destroying knowledge rather than developing it (unlike in countries with a dual apprenticeship system). Knowledge was also related to a 'course' being the standard unit, calibrating the qualification level which was linked to the number of hours a particular course represented (Gehin, Méhaut, 1993). Competence-based management, the VAE and the growing importance of apprenticeships and internships within the school system (sandwich courses) clearly indicate that this view has evolved. The workplace and work experience are now considered as a means of producing competences. The VAE, both with regard to its conception and to the compulsory rules in reference to achieving qualifications highly contribute to this change.
- According to what has been said previously, qualifications are playing a strong role in the French society. The CVET system, which is mainly firm based (through a compulsory levy), emphasises short courses. There are not so many opportunities to obtain a qualification through CVET courses. Moreover, the old French social promotion system, that allows people to get a second chance for getting an education through CVET was said to be declining. If the VAE is in continuity with the French "dictatorship" of qualifications, it also strongly breaks it, by providing a new track for becoming qualified. As it is strongly supported by the main stakeholders of the system (public authorities, employers organisations and trade unions), hopes are high that in the future, it could also help reform personal behaviours regarding initial education. Most of the parents, students, as well as teachers do not envision lifelong education and training. On the one hand, parents and teachers think that everything is decided during initial education. On the other hand, France's training model differs from the Anglo-Saxon model and, to a lesser extent, it differs from the one adopted by countries with a "dual" vocational training system. In France, there has traditionally been a sharp distinction between initial training and continuing education and general training. Indeed, the terms differ to such an extent, implying that the notion of 'lifelong learning' is often understood in France as relating almost exclusively to continuing vocational education and training. The VAE contributes to build a solid bridge between the two systems.

2. The VAE and the trends on the labour market.

2.1 From internal labour market to new regulations?

According to many analyses, the French labour market has been defined as dominated by internal labour market (ILM) rules (i.e. low level entry ports, seniority as a main goal and indicator, promotional path being based on experience, vertical hierarchy). This picture is said to be blurred. On one hand ILM's scope is decreasing because its rules are changing. On the other hand, new types of labour markets are developing, such as the classical secondary and external markets which focus on services and unskilled work, new kinds of upper tier labour markets that are intended for professionals - this market allows workers to jump from one firm to another, according to their skills, qualifications and reputation. Moreover some occupational rules are expanding, even if this is highly controversial [Cahuc and Kramarz, 2004].

This is the case in household services (home care), but also in many activities where the quality of goods and services is called into question (in matter of security, etc.). The quality certification (ISO) often leads to a need for an increased percentage of qualified workers within the firms.

2.2 Three trends in debate

- Is there a shift in the nature of knowledge and skills? On the one hand, one of the key hypotheses is that specific skills are becoming less and less important. This could be due to technological changes as well as to the internal codification of tacit knowledge by firms, which essentially lead to a demand for more and more general theoretical-based knowledge, and for less experience-based knowledge. The other theories, however, do not necessarily support these hypotheses. Firms are increasingly emphasising the growing need for “embedded competencies”, such as personal skills, which should be developed closely with colleagues, customers, etc. On the one hand, these skills cannot be acquired at school or by further formal training. On the other hand, the latter is not purely firm specific. Design activity is gradually needed (concerning managers and engineers among others). This design wouldn't only be based on analytical knowledge and routines, but also on permanent mutual adjustments, on the exchange of information. Experience-based knowledge could reinforce the mix of explicit -general- and tacit -specific knowledge. Firm or networks could compete efficiently if they contribute to this mix. This activity could explain the crisis of some internal policies, the individualisation process within the HRM, as well as the increasingly active role of policies, aimed at boosting employee qualification.

- Are there new internal mobility rules? Even if it only concerns a minority of firms, the development of the “competency based management” demonstrates how the ILM is reshaping its rules. In this new “competency based management”, workers are evaluated yearly according to a competency grid and a mastering scale. Moreover, firms try to develop new ways of organising jobs, as well as new types of careers management [Kalck, Monchatre, 2001]. In most cases, emphasis is put on the re-enforcement of internal mobility paths. Often, these paths have been affected by two factors. First, the decrease of employment and the low rate of voluntary quits during a period of high unemployment have reduced these paths. Furthermore, the restructuring of hierarchical lines, has reduced promotion opportunities. New rules of evolution, when quitting a job for another are designed by competency requirements, sometimes including qualifications requirements.

- External mobility. Both firms and individuals are seeking more room to manoeuvre within the external labour market. Some firm explicitly want workers to quit voluntarily, in order to have an opportunity to reshape their workforce. Others are anticipating downsizing and are saying that employees with transferable qualifications will be more likely to move within the external labour market.

2.3 Skill shortages

Today, some sectors are facing tight labour markets and skill shortages. This is the case for example in the construction industry and in some parts of the care sector. Moreover, the main forecasts [Amar, Topiol, 2001] stress two trends. The first trend is focused on the renewal and growth of unskilled/unqualified jobs.

The other one concentrates on a rapid increased need for a skilled/highly skilled labour force regarding some professions or sectors, which is due both to the high number of future workforce retirements and the growth of employment.

This will affect the health and care sector (nurses, nurse assistants), teachers and trainers, and the insurance sector or the skilled trade professions. It is forecasted that some firms will change their hiring policies to reinforce the internal mobility of their workforce, including more pro-active training and improved qualification policies. In these ways, the validation of acquired experience (VAE) becomes an essential issue.

2.4 Is the legal obligation of qualification increasing in some occupations?

A good example of the French debate and of the question of the VAE is the case of care and households services. These personal services are seen as a growing employment potential, if the ageing population and the increasing demand for home services and childcare are all taken into consideration. However, the developmental model is a source of tensions. Questions are raised as to whether these kinds of home services could be provided by unqualified women, based solely on their own household experience, or whether those services need to abide by some regulations, in order to enhance the quality of services.

In certain professions qualifications are mandatory. Nurse assistants at hospitals and home cares are among those professions. This is also the case for home services such as eldercare and for those requiring special care. This was debated with regard to nursery schools assistants, owning or not a CAP - French vocational training certificate. This was also debated concerning municipality coordination providing childcare, etc. In some of these fields, despite the call for more flexibility, qualification is becoming mandatory. On the one hand, if qualifications are required, there is the risk of a screening process, which would lead to an exclusion of the unskilled workers - such as housewives - from the labour market. It also risks a labour shortage, increased costs for consumers, and a lower rate of new jobs being introduced. On the other hand, without any control or regulation, the quality of services would be threatened and would cause a dumping between providers.

Moreover, today, the sector of care and personal services is not very attractive because it mainly consists of low wages and part-time jobs. The approval processes are very complex for qualifications providers. Most importantly, there is a large difference between needing vocational training and an initial vocational training offer. The VAE seems to overcome these risks. It provides a path for unskilled but experienced women, and does not counteract the need for quality rules. This is probably the reason why a strong growth in the demand for VAE in this field could be seen.

3. A strong consensus between the stakeholders, with various strategies

3.1 Employers and trade unions: from consensus to active implementation

- A consensus on the VAE, but not without conditions meeting

From the very beginning, the VAE received a quite strong support from both employer organisations and trade unions. In the 2003 National Collective Agreement on Lifelong Learning, this concept was considered as an opportunity, a tool contributing to the professional development of a person. The complementary agreement (endorsement number 2: 20th July 2005) ensures the development of the VAE and the conditions of its implementation: access to CQPs, the possibility of a VAE leave, company spending related to the adoption of the VAE that could be endorsed in the firm's vocational training budget, and/or on to a bipartite fund.

According to trade unions, the VAE seems to be an advantage for workers. It could ensure promotion and protection, for example. Unionists are pushing for an easier access, financial aid and a development of supporting policies during the VAE. For the employers' organisations, the VAE could provide a better control of training costs. Instead of participating in all training sessions, the employees could have their former experience validated. Therefore the VAE can reduce employee training length and costs. In some firms or sectors, promoting a VAE policy can ensure access to vocational training qualifications and improve mobility. Moreover, if emphasis was placed on work experience, the VAE would go well with the policies of some employer organisations that promote competence-based management.

This strong consensus, embodied in collective agreements, has also been set up through the financial support accorded to the VAE by the bipartite training funds.

- Some resistances

Nevertheless, some employer associations and trade unions have been curbing the enthusiasm for VAE, in order to protect their jobs. For instance, during the National Joint Commission of Pharmacists, the National Federation of Chemists represented by the French trade union "Force Ouvrière", protested against the VAE track for pharmacy assistant qualifications. The implementation process of the VAE concerning nurse qualification has begun. If some trade unions fully support this process, others will be more reluctant, because they fear that this could reduce the value of qualification.

They would support VAE if they were able to impose conditions on it. They announced that they would be very strict on the VAE procedure allowing foreign workers to obtain a French diploma. They also added that they are against the accreditation of experience when it implies "illegal" tasks, such as the ones performed by nursing assistants, which sometimes exceed their job duties.

3.2 Training/qualifications providers

Unlike some countries such as the UK or New Zealand, in France, there is no distinction between awarding and training bodies. The main public organisation (Ministry of Health, Education, and Labour) not only defines and rules the process of qualification, but also controls the main training institutions. Even if regional authorities are entirely responsible for organising the training supply in their area, qualification policy remains at the national level.

In most cases, these organisations have been able to quickly provide the new track to gain qualification (the VAE track). This quick adaptability is due to the fact that the changes made in qualification files have started previously and that the VAE (which implies a “certification system of reference” design) has only fostered one previous movement. In other organisations (such as the Ministry of Health) this change is in progress (a new qualification file and a new regulation concerning the nurses VAE may be available soon).

According to various opinions, universities seem to be sometimes more reluctant in adopting VAE policy. The Chamber of Trade network, considering private providers, is also proposing qualifications through the VAE.

How to explain this various point of views? Some teachers and trainers see the VAE as a threat to the value of qualifications. This is a very tricky subject for some universities where some teachers refuse the VAE arguing that one cannot learn without courses. Training providers are sometimes also aware that the VAE track will be more appealing, to the detriment of education and the training track. Thus, VAE leads to a decrease in the flow of trainees and funding. This was a part of the debate when the law was written. The Ministry of Education was afraid that some pupils coming from vocational schools could drop out without qualification and come back years after, asking for a diploma through the VAE. The point about the “three years of experience” was fiercely debated.

Competition between the training or qualification providers is a reality in France. However, in most cases, its consequence is more often a quicker implementation of the VAE.

Nevertheless, anyone can attest that finding a way through the French qualification framework is difficult, despite the transparency developed by the new “repertoire national des certifications” (national repertory of qualifications). There are more than 4000 qualifications registered. If this number is reducing at the upper secondary level, it is expanding at the tertiary level (for example more than 600 vocational bachelor degrees, are often very similar, as universities are competing to attract and retain students). Finding the good qualification (i.e. not only fitting with the experience, but also adequate to the level of learning and to the goals of the person) is challenging. The role of the information desks is crucial (see below).

The case of the Certificate of Professional Qualification (CQP) is interesting. Social partners, usually according to their sector of origin, design these qualifications. Some of these CQPs are very specific; others are quite broad, competing explicitly with public certificates. Since its creation, the “repertoire national des certifications” has also included the CQPs. Nevertheless some employer organisations are not keen to register to the CQPs. On the one hand, they disagree with the dual procedure, which is automatic for public qualifications when they follow the main rules, but not for the CQPs. On the other hand, employers disagree with the mandatory ranking of qualifications by level, carried out on the certificate list.

Employers are sometimes also reluctant to accept the VAE policy. Nevertheless, in the 2005 agreement, CQPs are said to be obtained with VAE, without being registered in the national repertory of professional qualification (RNCP). Very recently, the conflict seems to be disappearing as the first CQPs have been registered. And some sectors are now actively promoting the VAE track for CQPs.

3.3 Regional authorities.

- VAE in the decentralisation's context.

The governance of the VAE policy is a multi-level, multi-players one. In most of the fields of the CVET, this is a common situation. Since the beginning of the seventies and eighties, most of the competencies have been transferred, on the one hand to the social partners, on the other hand to the regional authorities. Even if the state still keeps a leading role through the law, most of the concrete implementation is shared between the other stakeholders. One can speak of a "hollow state". And the result is a very complex institutional device, a lack of coordination between the players. A recent report about the CVET policy is raising the question: "who is the pilot of the plane?" [Sénat, 2007]. It could also apply to the VAE policy. This is true at the national level and even more when looking at the regional level.

- Regions' legal competences in the VAE system

In 2004, the law about local responsibility reaffirms that regional authorities must organise the network of information, council and guidance in CVET and VAE. And they must provide support for candidates (article 8, section III). So the regional authority is theoretically in charge of the coordination of the whole CVET policy (including VAE) in their local area. But it is not so easy.

Firstly, the qualification policy remains mainly a national one, in order to guarantee a common value of the qualifications at the national level. Secondly, most of the qualification providers are state led and more or less coordinated by the state, which sometimes leads to tensions with the regional authority and/or with the other providers, which are competing on the market of qualifications. Thirdly, a part of the CVET and VAE policy is embodied within the active labour market policy, which is a national question, in order to avoid dumping policies between regions. And last but not least, most of the unions and employers organisations are organised at the national/sectoral level and not at the regional one.

The result is a quite fuzzy picture for the individuals and the firms, with difficulties to understand who is the appropriate spokesperson, with some overlaps between the institutions and their responsibilities, with holes in the welfare/CVET system and sometimes with competition/tensions between the various levels and players.

Box 1: What happens in a region: a case study*Information*

A wide range of institutions, depending or not on the regional authority can provide information and guidance: regional organisations acting in the employment policy: information, vocational counseling and support (SEDOP, Missions locales, ALE, Cap Emploi, PLIE...), qualifications providers, as candidates or firms can contact directly qualifications providers; bipartite training funds can also inform employers or individuals and the National Employment Agency provides information for the unemployed. Beside all these institutions an official network specially devoted to information and guidance for both CVET and VAE has been set up, mainly funded by the state, but under the umbrella of a joint body, managed by the state and the regional authority ("Espace compétence"). From 2002 to 2004, the state decentralised the VAE policy (information, orientation and guidance) but the regional authority was not so keen on it. So, the information network (17 points of information all around the region) was mainly funded by the state until 2006. In 2006, PACA Region takes the full responsibility. The regional authority does not want to keep the 17 PRC (intermediary advice point which inform and give VAE advice) and some were closed, in order to put the emphasis on a wider network. Nowadays, the regional authorities as information providers agree more than 80 institutions. And 100 are agreed for the step 2 and 3. Some of them are directly supported by the regional authority (mainly universities), with a lump sum in order to provide tutorship to some applicants. Others are on a reference list, allowing individuals to claim for a voucher.

Funding

During the step 3, when preparing the assessment, individuals can get some financial help for the tutorship from various authorities. The tutorial system is an open market. The region supports unemployed persons without financial support by the employment agency with vouchers (550 euros). Individuals are free to choose from the list of agreed partners.

Networking the qualification providers

Since the very beginning of the VAE, another policy of the regional authority was to support a network of qualifications providers, in order to improve their practices, to exchanges information and experience and to share best practices. This network, which gathers most of the public qualifications providers, is quite active, even if its relationship with the GIP remains a bit unclear.

3.4 VAE and firms

The VAE is said to have been designed for the individual (according to individual demand, the process of training policies individualisation). Nevertheless, the VAE is used more generally, as an element of local policies or of a firm's policies. These collective actions have raised public interest. They are seen as a way to extend the VAE and to overcome difficulties.

- The firm's perception of the VAE. According to Layec and al (2006), HR Managers are sometimes reluctant to accept this concept. They fear that the VAE could raise payroll costs and influence qualified workers to quit. They also think that partial validations could increase complement-training demands, increase training expenses and create unsatisfying demands, which could deteriorate the atmosphere. These fears are not specific to the VAE. The same arguments apply to other training policies.

However, they are also aware that the VAE can be used to identify and develop workers' skills, to facilitate internal mobility and formalise workers' experience.

- For firms, as well as for individuals, finding the appropriate qualification is an important step. It suggests a shift in the way people think: the job and work experience must first be analysed in order to choose the adequate qualification, rather than thinking first about the training and then about the job. Learning institutions and qualification suppliers are key actors. Mainly in SME, there are many examples that show that sometimes the wrong choice is made in the beginning.

An example of this is choosing a diploma rather than a qualification at the Ministry of Labour, which may be a better fit. Choosing the correct qualification depends on a firm's strategy. Different strategy points may include anticipating personal management, improving internal mobility or external flexibility, increasing the prestige of the workforce, responding to quality standards (ISO or others), etc. This choice could influence whether or not a person succeeds, as workers with a limited formal education must rely on their own experience. This, consequently, often leads to failure.

- VAE's advantages. Most fears about VAE tend to disappear as a candidate moves along in the process. VAE helps to cushion a firm's time constraints, as its organisation is more flexible than it would be with formal training. For those in management, use of the VAE provides a new approach to skills and activities. One of its main practices is the development of organisation at work and the enrichment of jobs. More and more firms are developing better practices thanks to the VAE. This was possible due to agreements that were made between some firms and the Ministry of Labour. In these agreements, the Ministry of Labour awarded funding to the firms that was either partially or completely supported by public funding. Nevertheless, despite public support, these changes are still in question for the future development of the VAE.

Box 2 : A firm's strategy (Béret and Lewandowski, 2005).

At the beginning of the century, a big microelectronic firm was developing an active training programme to help employees, who had a limited formal education, to further their qualification and to fulfil new quality regulations. Part of the costs of this training policy (roughly 13% of the entire training budget), which was spent on internal mobility and re-deployment, was split between employers and employees. These training practices are based on double career management: management by qualification (pay rate changes and positions are based on qualification and seniority) and management by skills (skills are tested each year).

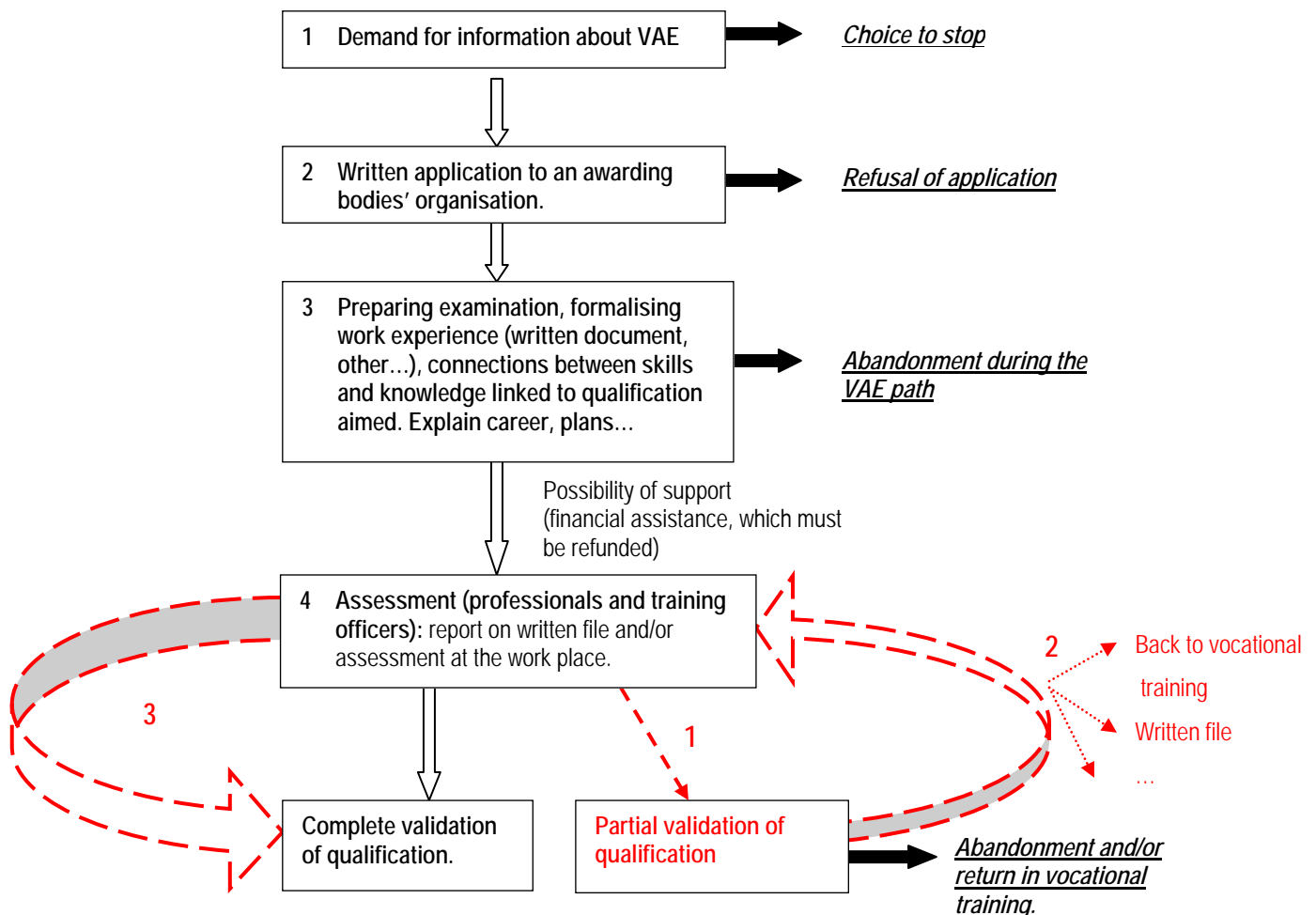
The VAE could become an opportunity for firms to reduce training time and costs. Costs are fully integrated in the training plan and provided by the firm.

From 2004 to 2005, VAE has been progressively articulated within skills management. A global training system together with a VAE policy has become standard. The VAE concerns all kinds of jobs and workers. As part of the training policy, it is used in a new context, economic difficulties and the closure of one plant on the site. It contributes to social peace and fosters internal and external mobility. Getting a qualification through formal training and/or through the VAE seems to have its advantages, both contributing to upward mobility as well as an increase in wages.

4. Persons.... Demand, access, outcomes

4.1 A quite long and difficult path

The following diagram describes the VAE process from the demand for information to the award of qualification:



The procedure is a "long and complex itinerary with an uncertain outcome" (Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005). These two authors observed that a VAE path implies "a virtuous set of resources" such as a good qualification choice, institutions and firms should support the measures set, the information and self-confidence. The various steps are explained below.

- Step 1: The demand for information

The demand for information has increased consistently. Nevertheless, the demands are not necessarily followed by a next step. More than 44.000 persons were accepted at information desks in 2003 (C.Labruyère 2006), (step 1), 29.000 have been heard during an interview at information desks, and 22.000 were directed to VAE (step 2). Nearly 80.000 people were accepted at information desks in 2004, of which 53.000 were interviewed, and 42.000 were directed to VAE. However, only 16% of the applicants managed to access the last step. According to some studies, it is difficult to navigate through the qualifications scene, because of their quantity. It is not unusual to choose the wrong path or qualification, or to be sent to the wrong organisation by a consultant. Several candidates first registered in different services of ministries before making their choice. Some candidates are also scared of the inevitable private and/or financial investment. Not fully understanding the process is also frequent and could drive someone to give up during the first step. Screening exists during the first and second step. Some candidates dissuade themselves from doing a VAE for different reasons, such as going back to work, unemployment negative impact, family events, fear of failure, difficulties accessing information, etc. An institutional screening exists as well. Firms and institutions screen candidates to keep only the best candidates, analysing individual characteristics, bad work experiences, difficulties in written language and communication. When they get the notion to take the VAE path, many candidates may delay their entry, waiting for the right moment to start it and gathering information about necessary and sufficient conditions.

Box 3 : Time and money

The length of the procedure varies greatly, depending on the applicant's choice as well as on institutional constraints. One of the main questions is the availability of the jury when it is time to complete the final step (which is sometimes only available for one or two sessions a year). Some studies show a total duration ranging from several months to one year. Within this period, the personal investment required will depend on the type of qualification and assessment. It is often estimated that a good written file relating to work experience will require 50 to 100 hours of work to complete. For those who already have jobs, part of this time could be completed during the workday, using various CVET leaves. When the firm supports the procedure, it could also time off work. Other applicants will have to complete the work during the evening or weekend. This accounts for the total time required to complete the programme.

Costs can also vary greatly, depending on the type of qualification and of the individual's employment status. Usually, for public institutions, fees will be the same as they would be for a normal student in the VET track (which could range anywhere from 100 € to 500 €) Additional costs would be those associated with the tutorship required for step 3. This cost varies greatly (from a few Euro to more than 500 € depending on the way this tutorship is organised - whether it is individual or collective - on its duration (from 2 or 3 hours to 10 or more). It could be free of charge for someone who is unemployed, or paid for by a bipartite training fund, by the firm or by the individual.

- From information to assessment (step 2 and 3)

During the VAE path, dropouts are linked to many factors.

- Insufficient support from family, firms and counselors. This factor is important because the whole process relies on a strong personal contribution. It seems that the firms supporting the workers (bringing financial support and income effects...) increase motivation and could lead to success.
- Difficulties formalising work experience in accordance with the requirements of the qualification. The different providers do not follow the same rules.

- Moving from VAE to formal training. The VAE and vocational training are not separated in all cases. Within some firms, which take initiatives from VAE, the path to certification is sometimes completed with vocational training, especially concerning the first standard of qualification [Liaroutzos, Paddeu and Lozier, 2003]. The VAE should allow people to stay out of vocational training and to easily plan vocational training and easily access it as well.
- Getting the qualification (step 4)

In 2003, 48% of candidates (step 4) received the whole qualification, 40% received part of it. This is against the 61% success rate on the vocational training track [C.Labruyère, 2006]. The rate of success is quite high at this final level. Despite many difficulties in finding members for the jury, introduced to this new procedure, the assessment procedure seems to be quite open. This high percentage of success however, must not overlook the high rate of drop outs throughout the process. Moreover, a yearly average of 20.000 qualifications (probably 30.000 if the tertiary level, the CQPs and others are included) being awarded through the VAE track is far off from the CVET track. It is also unable to contribute solidly to the rising percentage of qualified workers within the active population. On the one hand, the workforce has a high share of unqualified workers. On the other hand, the number of young people who drop out yearly from the school system without any qualification is approximately 80.000.

4.2 Candidates characteristics

Only partial data is available: there is almost no information about university degrees or about the CQPs. Most of the information is about those who apply to the assessment, and not those who are at the first step.

- Employment status.

One third of the candidates are unemployed. The share of unemployed people is understandably higher for the qualifications from the Ministry of Labour, which are mainly built for this purpose and where the financial support is easier to get. The Ministry of Education is more dealing with employed people, who are sometimes looking for an upgrade of their qualifications.
- The gender balance shows a higher percentage of women.

This is mainly due to the candidates in both the medical and social sectors, getting work qualifications, from the employment, social care and education ministries. In the education ministry, many women want to obtain a vocational training certificate focused on child care (CAP "earlychildhood") (level 5). Men tend to access the VAE in order to obtain qualifications in agriculture, youth and sports.
- Aims of the VAE.

Every qualitative study shows a wide range of objectives: These objectives include getting a first qualification in order to get a job (for the unskilled and unemployed) securing an existing job (see the case of mandatory qualification for a nurse assistant); improving the level of the

qualification (from level 5 to level 4, from level 4 to level 3) in order to widen the opportunities of mobility and of promotions; and getting a qualification to start later at an upper level of VET.

For instance, a person gets a vocational training certificate which is taken after the age of 18 (BTS), then he or she can start a Bachelor or a Master degree. Sometimes, candidates get a qualification for personal achievement, or family reasons. It explains why there is such a wide range of individuals (and collective) strategies to be analysed.

Nevertheless, according to Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud (2005), mainly labour market strategies such as protection, re-conversion, promotion strategy are founded. Those who are unemployed and workers who are threatened by the possibility of being laid-off usually demonstrate the primary motivation. In these cases, getting a qualification is a kind of flexicurity advantage. For example, in many cases, women, under the age of 35, have baccalaureates (A level), but only hold insecure jobs. They are unemployed and looking for a stable job, in the social sector, without any link between this sector and their initial vocational training. Others want to change their profession and a diploma will help them to do so. This strategy is often used when a qualification is mandatory. Lastly, the promotion motive concerns people with rising career prospects. They want to obtain social recognition and reduce the difference between the job practiced and the initial vocational training qualification. This does not differ from what has been analyzed regarding the entry in formal CVET.

Previous levels of qualifications. The balance between the various levels is quite equilibrated. One third of the candidates did not hold any qualification before. This fits well with one of the legal objectives of the law and of the employment policy, even the share of unskilled/unqualified workers could be higher. On the contrary, it must be emphasized that if the VAE has a too narrow focus on unskilled workers, it would lead, as in some others public policies, to a kind of stigmatization of the policy and, potentially of the qualifications as well.

4.3 Outcomes

Few studies and data are available (see box 2 for the case of a firm). Nevertheless, due to the role of qualifications in the French society and on the labour market, one can wonder if the outcomes are positive:

- Faster transitions from employment to unemployment, increasing mobility (some case studies in certain firms shows a positive effect leading to promotions).
- Not only getting a qualification, but also developing skills and competencies is an area of debate. Some studies show that, when preparing an assessment, the individual does not solely draw on its own experience, but rather increasingly also upon his or her knowledge and skills. The reflexivity process during the preparation is a way to improve the applicant's own practice. This is also emphasised in some case studies where employees say that they do not regard their job in the same way as they did before (Layec and al, 2006).
- Collateral/unexpected effects. More informal effects are also sometimes emphasised in qualitative studies: workers saying that they "feel better in their jobs", that they are "proud" to be receiving their first qualification; employers saying that the commitment, and social dialogues are better within their firms; it also seems that success has consequences on the lifelong learning strategy: there is higher self esteem and new demands for CVET.

Conclusions

The VAE is still a young policy in the early stages of development. Moreover, VAE is embedded within other components of public policy, which could affect it. A good example is the new step of the decentralisation of the CVET policy, which re-shapes the role of the various players. At present, a global assessment of this policy is impossible to make.

There are many examples that show the success of this policy: the strong consensus and mobilisation of all players that contributed to a quick implementation; the high number of requests for information that show an individual's needs and knowledge concerning this new opportunity; as well as the balance it has brought between unskilled and skilled workers and between genders are all among these examples. VAE allows individuals to get a qualification at comparatively low costs. The examples of firms' and sectors' good practices as a result of VAE are numerous.

Nevertheless, about twenty or thirty thousand qualifications do not fit the foreseen description. There is a huge gap between the number of requests for information and the final results. Is it due to some misunderstanding among the applicants, who think that they would automatically be qualified? Is it due to the complex institutional path or to the difficulty in passing from direct experience to its educational equivalence? It could be a result of the screening process, because qualification providers remain reluctant to accept VAE in order to protect the value of their qualifications and their formal training programmes. The answer is probably a mix of these hypotheses. Further studies would contribute to clarify this question.

Some risks remain, however:

- After a strong mobilisation of the players, a kind of routine has taken place, earlier than expected, as the VAE is still experimental and not yet firmly grounded in the players' habits. Strong support from public authorities is still needed.
- It is difficult to overcome institutional complexity. This is not specific to the VAE and is a general concern regarding the whole CVET system. France does not want a system led purely by the market, but rather a regulated multi-player system, with the market ruling part of it. This would produce a complex system, which nobody knows enough about nor does anyone have the legitimacy required to be in a position of leadership. Coordination costs are high and that is why individuals and firms find it difficult to manage this complexity
- The number of qualifications is very important. University degrees and CQPs are estimated to be added in mass quantities to the "Répertoire National", which contains more than 10,000 qualifications. This repertory provides more transparency, but does not fulfil its other goal that is to avoid overlaps and simplify the structure of qualifications.
- Empirical proof of the value of a VAE qualification within the labour market is still missing. What will be the firms' strategies?

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Acronyms

APL Accreditation of prior learning experience, the French translation is VAE "Validation des Acquis de l'expérience", (Validation of Acquired Experience) .

BTS Brevet

CVET Continuing vocational and education training

CPQ Certificat de qualification professionnelle, a vocational qualification, mainly for wage earners, managed by the social partners, usually at the sectoral level

HRM Human resources managers

ILM Internal Labour Market

PACA Region Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur

PRC Point Relais Conseil, Intermediary advice point.

GIP Groupement d'intérêt public, non-profit organisation, usually mixing private and public partners

ISO International quality norm standard

RNCP National Repertory of Professional Qualification

SME Small and Medium Enterprise.