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**Reform of recognition and accreditation
of experiential learning
in France**

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highly suitable for validating qualifications at the first level in manual occupations (BTP, for example) or service jobs which had not yet achieved professional status (private services, for example).

3.1 *The law on the Accreditation of Experiential Learning (Validation des Acquis de l'Experience/VAE) aimed at significantly increasing the number of candidates.*

The law on “social modernization” of January 2002 further enlarges measures for validating experience to all professional certification and expands the potential public for assessing experience acquired during voluntary activities, and by reducing the minimum length of experience required from five to three years (cf. box opposite). It also creates the possibility of directly obtaining a complete diploma. By giving access to the same diplomas via two routes (through training or validation of experience) the Law thus definitively recognizes the training value of experience. Heated debate preceded the passing of the Law, in Parliament as well as among the social partners consulted: some were particularly worried about an evolution that would ultimately deny the importance of formalised education and training, as suggested by Lucy Tanguy³⁶: “*Certification has come about as a training guarantee forced on the industrial world... We cannot, in a so-called knowledge-based society deny formal courses, for there are no skills without knowledge...and no knowledge if it has not been learned*”. Others raised questions about a change which could also, in the long run, substitute the right to certification for the right to training, established by employees in 1971.

Adopted definitively in January 2002, the concrete implementation of the Law has not been totally settled, neither in its procedures, nor in the appropriate means. The expected increase of the number of candidates and the diversity of their profiles, linked to the wish of the public authorities to give priority to employees and non-diploma holding job seekers, implies both a greater standardisation of procedures and a certain diversification of validation possibilities. This potential rise should be achieved while guaranteeing the strictness and the transparency of assessment procedures to maintain the credibility of the diplomas awarded, while at the same time shortening the response time for applications, often considered today as excessive. It will also necessitate the development of guidance for candidates to deal with failures; for the latter could be particularly counterproductive, especially for candidates who have already experienced failure in initial training.

Considering that the overall increase in the number of stakeholders involved in the procedures from the initial reception of a demand through evaluation (by a jury) including guidance, efforts to train this personnel could not fail to grow dramatically. In terms of recruitment, too, questions arose: from what background should these professionals be coming from? What should they be trained to do? What level of qualifications should they be concerned with? Research undertaken to ascertain the activity of counsellors and the members of the jury³⁷ reveals the particularity of these new activities, compared to traditional teaching. All the same, will they give rise to the emergence of new professions? For the members of the jury, surely not – this new function provides an opportunity for teachers to permanently upgrade their knowledge about the professional world and to evolve their pedagogical aims. For counsellors, probably – the required skills are focused on listening, the analysis of work, and methodological “guidance” functions.

³⁶ Comment from the High Committee for Education, Economy and Employment, Feb. 2002.

³⁷ As for the specific activity for counsellors and juries, see the work undertaken by the Psychology of Work team of the CNAM (Clot et al. 2002) and that of J-M Bonamy (réf ?)

The possibility opened by the Law to demand a complete diploma should be understood by juries as a more universal way of assessing qualifications. And, it should make more necessary than ever the systematic presence of professionals on juries. This requirement will not fail to re-launch already recurrent debate on the means to facilitate participation, and in particular, the question of remuneration for this operation, which is regularly claimed by employer representatives to compensate for the absence of professionals from their jobs.

Finally, the growth of the number of candidates wishing to validate experience will also necessitate a greater flexibility and adaptability (modularisation and individualisation) of educational resources to respond to the expectations of candidates, who will only have obtained a part of their diplomas, but chosen to take supplementary training. As for these certifying bodies, they should assure that their diplomas are built in such a way that they allow for a modular assessment based on blocks of skills which make sense from the point view of the job held³⁸. This should lead them to reconsider the actual interlinking of certification credits, which still too often directly correspond to educational modules based on the logic of academic disciplines.

3.2 The economics of Accreditation of Experiential Learning/VAE which still needs defining

All the changes potentially contained in the new version of the Law on the Accreditation of Experiential Learning/VAE, both quantitative, as well as qualitative, will reveal themselves in the need for new sources of financing. A genuine “economics of VAE” still remains to be established, in close relationship with the means of funding Continuous Education, with which it interrelates. By allowing the time devoted by an employee to building a “portfolio” to be considered as training time, the public authorities, in agreement with its social partners, have laid the foundations of this financing. Those actively employed can indeed demand to take advantage of a coverage of expenses billed by the certifying bodies for counselling set up to assist candidates in their applications. They could also demand the benefit of a leave of absence-validation period (maximum of 24 hours) which would be covered by the collective organizations, similar to the individual leave of absence for training. For young people experiencing difficulties in penetrating the job market and job seekers, other financial sponsors could be engaged, like the Regional Council or unemployment insurance, as a part of their responsibilities in matters of professional training for these categories of the population. Some experiments in this direction were begun with the setting up, locally, of agreements between the Ministry of Education and collective bodies, chambers, unemployment insurance and Regional Councils, so that each candidate, whatever his or her situation, can benefit from financial coverage, thus eliminating the need to support the cost of the procedure all alone.

During the Accreditation of Professional Experience/VAP phase (1995–2002), these costs were borne rather by the accrediting bodies, who often benefited from European Social Funds/ESF in the experimental phase. When they were billed, which was not the case everywhere, it was always below the real costs of return – except in the case of some institutions who had opted to bill this new service to businesses, when the latter were behind (or supported) moves by their employees.

³⁸ After the Ministry of Education which opted for this in the middle of the nineties, the other ministries have recently gotten involved in this great question.

While evaluating the costs occasioned in the different institutions for receiving and guiding candidates is still at a preliminary phase³⁹, the various potential financial sponsors wish to be rapidly informed in precise and consistent terms about how much the “validation service” is going to cost. This will necessitate some preliminary co-operative effort among various institutions to accurately define the actual content of this service, which can be divided into five phases⁴⁰: reception, guidance and counselling, presentation before the jury, follow-up to the jury's decision, and finally a second passage before the jury to obtain the diploma. Some parts of the service could be assigned to external service providers, which should make it possible to rationalize the offer locally and control costs. Other responsibilities will devolve on the certifying bodies – i.e. evidently the assessment phase (processing of the “portfolio” by the jury). Should the latter cost be billed to the candidate (or to those who replace him or her via mechanisms for covering expenses), or not? This is one of the ongoing debates among potential financial sponsors, who consider that the activities related to delivering diplomas has always been considered in France as being part of the mission of the educational civil service, and thus as such, should be offered at no cost to all candidates⁴¹. The financial implications of this debate are not insignificant for the certifying bodies, and in particular the Ministry of Education, given the foreseeable multiplication of jury sessions and the probable lengthening of each session, due to the setting up of an obligatory interview with each candidate.

The expansion of services and reinforcing them will necessitate in the years to come the massive assignment of new professionals who will have to be trained for reception, guidance and the constitution of juries – if Accreditation of Experiential Learning/VAE is going to make it possible, as wished for by its promoters, to radically change practices in the area of access to qualification by lifelong learning. The numbers involved should be sizeable compared with other means of access to a diploma and, in particular, Continuing training. A recent report⁴² advocates setting the ambitious objective of at least 300,000 diplomas obtained via this route, which supposes an even higher number of candidates handled by this service (the figure of 500,000 has been suggested). At the rate of an equivalent of 30 full-time jobs⁴³ to deal with 1,000 candidates, this means several thousand professionals of a new type who should be trained and assigned to manage this activity.

Even if the overall costs of implementing this new “right”⁴⁴ are shared among various habitual financial sponsors for professional training (mainly, the state and business), a question arises as to whether this will be a fixed spending or within the framework of a significant increase in expenses devoted to the qualification of the workforce. Given the commitments taken by the new government in June 2002, both to reduce public spending and to reduce financial burdens on business, the most probably hypothesis is that this will be a

³⁹ B. Decomps proposes the following estimates after broad consultation: “For an average estimate, we will schedule at least 24 hours of expert time for a partial validation, and certainly at least **thirty hours** for the delivery of a diploma. Moreover, the following should be added: charges for technical and administrative support, equal to 20 to 25% of the preceding; and of the national or regional authorities responsible for training experts and juries – this is also worth 20–25% of the time for expertise required for each applicant.

⁴⁰ Decomps, 2002, *idem*

⁴¹ In France, the cost of opening a file for an exam by the Ministry of Education for a “free candidate” has symbolically remained around 20 Euros.)

⁴² B. Decomps, Report to the Prime Minister, April 2002

⁴³ B. Decomps estimates that about twenty experts (for guidance, counselling, jury), 5 administrative personnel, and 5 for training to satisfy 1,000 candidates to be handled.

⁴⁴ B. Decomps estimates at 1 billion Euros the annual amount for the functioning of VE at a normal rhythm. This represents about 5% of the overall amount of expenses actually given to professional training (22 billion in 1999).

fixed contribution for each of the financial sponsors. Even if the results obtained in terms of diplomas awarded improve quantitatively, this transfer of expenses (from training to the Accreditation of Experiential Learning/VAE) will not be without repercussions on the finances of training institutions who will be obliged to reposition themselves on the market, not only in slight decline⁴⁵, but above all, undergoing dramatic change, so as to take into account the new constraints of “individualisation” and the modularisation of training generated by VAE. Also, the phenomenon will not only effect organisations traditionally the most intensely involved in providing qualifying training, but also those specialised in so-called adaptive training. In this area, business demand could indeed turn towards training which, even though short-term, could lead to the obtaining of certification credits.

Box 2

NEW PROCEDURES FOR THE ACCREDITATION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING/VAE

New procedures for accrediting experiential learning (VAE) adopted last January, modify conditions for access and the procedure for validating experience. The main changes:

- Professional experience taken into consideration have been enlarged to include experience gained in the context of a non-paid activity or voluntary work
- The minimum duration for professional experience demanded to benefit from VAE has been reduced from 5 to 3 years.
- The area of certifications liable for validation of experience has been expanded. From now on, it covers a much wider number of diplomas and certificates for professional purposes and certain Certificates for Professional Qualifications (CQP).
- Henceforth, candidates have the possibility of obtaining the totality of a certificate or a diploma by a VE.
- The juries make a decision on a portfolio put together by the candidate, eventually following an interview (obligatory for the diplomas related to higher learning), or, in some cases, based on professional situations, either real-life or simulated.
- if the jury does not attribute the totality of the diploma or the sought-after certificate, it draws up a statement about the nature of the knowledge and skills which could serve as a basis for a supplementary examination.

Conclusion

Vocational diplomas, which in France have been developed in close co-operation with social partners, are of genuine value to employers, especially when recruiting new employees. However, they also have an intrinsic value in the education system: as with general diplomas, possession of a vocational diploma opens the way to further studies, even when the initial reason for creating them is to facilitate direct integration into the workforce. The respective shares of general, technological and vocational content in training programmes are determined through compromise, and these compromises are regularly re-examined to take account of changing needs in both the spheres where such diplomas are of value: the productive sector and the educational sector.

⁴⁵ Less than 5% however, taking into account the fact that in all of the costs of VE are registered the costs of professional training.

The right to obtain diplomas on the basis of experiential learning (Accreditation of Experiential Learning/VAE) changes not only the methods used to assess candidates but also the very nature of what is assessed: in this case, the knowledge underpinning occupational skills is evaluated, rather than knowledge formulated from an academic standpoint. This presupposes that the frame of reference used to define diploma content shall be based on an activity and competences frame of reference, to the detriment of traditional training programmes, which become a sort of derivative product that is specific to a particular learning mode: formal education (whether initial or continuing). This focus on the competence frame of reference in the VAE procedure obviously raises some concern within the education system, particularly in higher education: for example, those who obtain diplomas through VE are suspected of having gaps in their theoretical knowledge, which may compromise their ability to benefit from the courses of study which they are legally entitled to enter. As a result, the teaching community has shown some resistance to the development of VE, which could lead to a high rate of failure if teachers sitting on panels of examiners apply overly stringent standards to degree candidates. This would inevitably discourage potential candidates and doom the VE procedure to marginal status, whereas in fact the authorities wish to make it a cornerstone of the new approach to obtaining employment qualification, as part of the process of “lifelong learning”.