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1 NATIONAL STRATEGY

In 2002, the law on Validation of experience opened a new right for individuals making possible the recognition of what they have learnt, formally or informally, in their professional and personal life by official qualifications. All training and learning organisations, private or public, offering qualifications registered in the national list, the RNCP (Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles) are obliged to set up a procedure and to give an answer to candidates applying.

Validation of experience constitutes a new road to certification. All kinds of qualifications, diploma, degree and certificates, may be partly or totally awarded. This means that there is now a complete dissociation between the learning process and the assessment process for a qualification. The whole experience of an individual can be taken into account.

A three-level VAE system has been built and it is now progressively becoming an essential element of the educational policy in France.

A Committee for the Development of Validation of experience, involving Ministries awarding qualifications, has been established in 2006 and placed under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour. This Committee has built a "dossier" common to the 13 Ministries involved and defined a Charter for guidance. A specific website has been opened (www.vae.gouv.fr). The annual State Budget includes a chapter on VAE under the Vocational Education Annex. Numerous reports ordered by different Ministries have been published during the last years (around 10). Their objectives are on the one hand to assess the results of the process launched in 2002 and on the other hand to investigate new developments.

Social partners came to an agreement in 2003 regarding continuing education for employees. The agreement aims to place continuing education in a lifelong learning perspective and to contribute to positive professional pathways for employees. VAE is one of the tools at their disposal. This orientation has been confirmed by a new agreement signed at the beginning of 2009. This agreement stipulates that "collective approaches developed by companies and individual initiatives of employees or unemployed people must be encouraged". Information and access must be facilitated and guidance funded.

On the first level, we find information and orientation services which since 2006 are the responsibility of the Regions. All Regions have implemented a network of information and counselling offices (*Points Relais Conseil- PRC-*) where individuals may find information and counsel on the VAE process, qualifications, and procedures developed by learning and training institutions.

On the second level, we find procedures developed by learning and training institutions. In the case of institutions awarding State qualifications, the procedures are defined by Ministries. These Ministries have developed a validation action plan that introduces validation regulations, assessment procedures and application forms and tools, and procedures for the identification and training of professionals, and so on. The procedures of other institutions are their own responsibility, but they are controlled by the CNCP. The validation procedure is now part of the accreditation process.

On the third level, we find quality control procedures that have mainly been developed at the State level on the basis of annual reports provided by learning and training organisations and thematic reports produced by inspection bodies or experts.

2 MAIN RESPONSIBILITIES

The “VAE system” is placed under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, and more specifically to the DGEFP (Délégation Générale à l’Emploi et à la Formation Professionnelle), the administration in charge of continuing education in France. But the Ministry of Labour plays this role on an inter-ministerial basis, as demonstrated by the creation of the “VAE Committee”

Nevertheless, due to the volume of candidates and decisions each year, the Ministry of Education is very influent.

The CNCP plays a specific role. This Commission verifies that validation processes are really in place in educational institutions and are developed in conformity with the existing regulation.

Regions have received from the State the mission to develop a system of information and counselling with the PRC. The Regions have also set up a Commission organising the dialogue between the State, the Regions, and social partners about the implementation of VAE at the local level. The Regions are gradually investing in VAE. They are developing policies to meet the needs of specific groups such as low skilled and illiterate people, to help SMEs implement the procedure and to facilitate dialogue between learning and training institutions as well as including VAE in their continuing education policy, developing surveys, and so on.

Progressively Sectors are demonstrating more and more interest for VAE. More than 120 agreements regarding VAE have been signed by social partners in sectors since 2005. And VAE is becoming a key element of the human resources management in more and more companies. Initiatives have been taken by the Ministry of Industry trying to develop VAE in SMEs.

3 VAE AND SECTORS

The VAE system is a general system based on qualifications. It is not divided into the three traditional sectors. If a sector offers qualifications, it has to set up a VAE procedure. Our vision is that the 3d Sector is closely linked to the Ministry of Youth and Sports

4 TERMINOLOGY

A Glossary has been published on the website of the Committee for the Development of VAE.

5 NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

France has established a NQF in 1967, this framework has been revised in 1969 and precisions given later in 1991 and 1994. All existing qualifications are classified in this National Qualifications Framework, which is well known both by employers and educational institutions.

The NQF is placed under the responsibility of the CNCP.

The adoption in April 2008 of the EQF and the decision taken by the French authorities to refer by 2010 the NQF to the EQF obliges now the CNCP to work on a new list of reference levels taking into account on the one hand the decision of Higher Education adopting the EHEA framework, the BMD structure + one level for intermediate qualifications in the first cycle (this means that the four highest levels of the NQF are kept for the HE degrees) and on the other hand the wish expressed by partners not to be too far away from the NQF.

6 IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS

The report to the Parliament of December 2007 presents the main results of the 5 first years of the VAE system.

Information and counselling:

Around 800 PRC (information offices for VAE) are now opened, covering all the territory. This does not include the information offices of each institution offering VAE. Around 100000 persons are received each year in the PRC and nearly the same figure in educational institutions.

Number of candidates and number of qualifications awarded

Since 2002, the number of candidates in public institutions has progressively increased passing from nearly 30000 in 2004 to 55000 in 2007. There is no statistics for the moment concerning VAE in private institutions. On average 55% of candidates obtain a full qualification at the end of the assessment process.

2/3 of the candidates are women, 2/3 are between 30 and 45, 20% over 50. 2/3 are at the maximum at level 4 of EQF.

Motivations of individuals for VAE

- to protect themselves against unemployment
- to find a more steady professional situation
- to reorient his/her professional career
- to have access to a job with higher responsibilities, better paid, corresponding to what they wishes,...

Most of candidates underline their interest for the démarche. They recognise that it has been sometimes difficult; they consider the procedure as very demanding, asking for huge efforts and needing a full involvement during a period. But they measure their progression, they master now what they have learnt informally and are able to use this knowledge and skills in a better way. They are after that more confident in the future; they see themselves as well prepared to face new requirements from their personal and/or professional environment. Some of them consider this process as a first step and are ready to undertake a formal learning process leading to higher qualification.

7 STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

We have seen upper that VAE has become a national system involving politicians and ministries, regional authorities, educational institutions, social partners, companies, etc.

Three reports at the end of 2007 ("La Validation des acquis de l'expérience", report to the Parliament) and in 2008 ("Valoriser l'acquis de l'expérience – une évaluation du dispositif VAE" and the report to the Deputy Minister of employment) provide a general evaluation of the VAE system since 2002. The last one focuses in particular on the structural and institutional impact.

Originally perceived as a way to develop equal opportunities, VAE appears progressively as a vector of change. VAE passed from experimental arrangements carried out by militants to a well known démarche and integrated in human resources policies in more and more companies, sectors and regions. VAE is becoming a "normal route" to get a qualification.

This law created great hopes but met lot of obstacles which are more or less removed now.

It obliges educational institutions to change their approaches at several levels:

- VAE introduces a shift from a learning approach to an approach based on evaluation as well as an inversion of the logic of assessment. Validation of non-formal and informal learning obliges us to review our conception of assessment, we move from a one-way assessment to an assessment based on dialogue and on mutual trust.
- VAE obliges to shift from inputs, contents, disciplines, length of programmes to learning outcomes obliging educational institutions to revise the presentation of their provisions. The CNCP has introduced a unique form to describe qualifications registered in the RNCP.
- Validation requires an individual-centred approach because the candidates' experience is unique even if they live or work in identical environments. What they have learnt from different situations is quite specific as it is a result of an individual cognitive process of integration and assimilation (whether conscious or not) of all the resources these situations provide.
- A holistic process from reception to decision has been progressively built. A five steps is now at work in nearly all educational institutions offering validation procedures:
 - reception, information, orientation
 - admissibility
 - preparation of the dossier, portfolio or collection of evidences for the jury
 - assessment by a jury
 - decision and possible follow-up
- VAE obliged them to train or recruit staff able to develop this new approach, but also to prepare teachers, members of juries to adopt this new culture.

Even all problems are not solved, we register positive changes. In a few years, VAE provoked more transformation than previous national policies concerning education and training.

VAE has also changed the vision of social partners and professional bodies. VAE is seen as tool for the development of personal and professional routes. VAE is part of the agreement on continuing education in companies signed in January 2009 by the social partners (four articles). "Social partners consider that it is essential that sectors develop collective demarche for VAE". They are invited:

- to better inform companies and employees on the opportunities offered by VAE;
- to define access procedures for individuals and groups;
- to define ways of funding VAE for employees.

VAE is now considered as an essential element of making secure the professional pathways, allowing employees to develop their own lifelong progressive pathways, punctuating this route with milestones which are important in the French culture, qualifications.

Two major points are underlined in conclusion of the last report:

- Even VAE is a demarche which is done by individuals, it has the best chances to be efficient if it is embedded in a collective approach developed by a company or a sector. At this moment there is still some distance between intentions and concrete practices. Continuity between validation and recognition is still a challenge.
- VAE has reinforced the power of official qualifications (whatever they are) but at the same time has obliged authorities and social partners to work on the current system of qualifications, to make it readable and accountable. The creation of the CNCP and of the RNCP has been a first step on this way, the work on the French NQF will be the second one.

8 STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT

It is possible to say that in France all stakeholders are committed with VAE:

- the ministries have established a Committee to develop a concerted policy;
- every ministry offering qualifications have developed VAE procedures with the educational institutions placed under its responsibility;
- regions have established PRC to inform the population, have established a Regional Committee for the development of VAE, most of them are funding VAE for unemployed people or develop specific policies to ensure locally the implementation of VAE;
- social partners consider now VAE as a key element to ensure continuity and progression in professional pathways;
- more and more sectors and companies have established better links between VAE and human resources management. The effort is done on SMEs with the support of the Ministry of Industry.
- All educational institutions having a qualification registered in the RNCP have now a VAE procedure. It is an obligation in order to be registered. However all of them are not offering accurate procedures and are not really facilitating access to VAE.

9 DEBATES – DISCUSSIONS

The three last reports on VAE have identified the main current debates in France concerning VAE.

The report to the Parliament underlines several points:

- Some progresses must be done on funding VAE. Regions have taken initiatives, mainly for unemployed populations, but companies have not been, for a large part of them, very cooperative for the moment.
- The difficulties to find representatives from companies in juries have to be solved. Companies ask for money from state for this activity.
- The admissibility phase must be clarified. Too many educational institutions use this phase as a way to limit candidatures, as a way to not apply the regulation. To limit the risk of failure must not lead to the reinforcement of criteria for access to the procedure.
- Some progresses must be done on guidance in order to provide the best solution for the candidates and their future, not necessarily the one which guarantee the best chances of immediate success.
- The educational institutions must guarantee real learning opportunities in case of partial validation and possibilities of funding must be offered by companies or professional bodies, or other institutions funding continuing education.

It recommends action plans at local or regional level, or at sectoral or company level to develop collective approaches.

The Besson's report is more critical. It reflects the politicians' disappointment about the results of the procedure. Their vision is based on quantitative results. Their argument could be expressed as following: we have decided a very positive measure for individuals, especially for those without qualifications; we do not understand why so few people are applying for validation; it must be the responsibility of institutions in charge of information or of validation and of companies.

The report propose 10 recommendations:

- to launch a national campaign of information targeting on populations with low level of qualification;
- to improve the readability of qualifications, reduce the number and articulate them to facilitate mobility;
- to reinforce the power and means of the CNCP;
- to reduce the duration of the procedure;
- to facilitate the work of juries;
- to provide specific and additional support during the procedure for low qualified people;
- to integrate VAE in professional pathways;
- to encourage companies to mobilise VAE in a collective approach;
- to encourage social partners to identify additional competences acquired at work;
- to set up a follow up system providing technical, pedagogical and financial information on the system.

10 RESEARCHES ON VALIDATION

VAE is now become a field of investigation for researchers. It is impossible to mention the number of thesis, dissertations, books and articles which are published every year since 2002. VAE progressively became a fashionable theme.

We can divide them in four categories:

- official reports financed by the State, Ministries or Regions on general or specific issues;
- analysis of the functioning of the system, of the arrangements, of the procedure and of the results;

- theoretical approaches exploring the articulation between knowledge and experience, how can we learn through experience and how this can be assessed?
- Case studies, individual stories, best practices,...

11 PROBLEMS/DIFFICULTIES... AND RESISTANCES

We have already partly answered this question when mentioning the content of the most recent reports of evaluation of the system. However, some key issues are now in discussion. Deepening the reflection on these issues will certainly contribute to the improvement of the VAE system.

- To work on guidance methodologies in order to help candidates to best express what they have learnt in different situations, by different ways. This is relatively new for each of us, it is not natural to do that. We have to help individuals to assess, from time to time, what they have learnt and to present it an understandable way for others.
- To work on assessment procedures and on the role of the jury
- To work on the assessment of informal learning in family and social life, in non for profit organisations,...
- To work on processes encouraging the recognition of the results of the VAE in professional life.
- To better link VAE and human resources management, to insert VAE in staff management procedures.
- To develop the sources of funding.

Despite the important results obtained in 6 years, all over the country, in all sectors, some resistances remain:

- some educational institutions are reluctant to award the same qualification than the one obtained through formal learning only on the basis of experience. That is one of the reasons why they are developing procedures trying to limit the number of candidates (preliminary exams, very high costs,...)
- some human resources managers or recruitment companies are reluctant to recruit people having got a qualification by VAE, because it is not supported by a formal learning process.