Validation of Acquired Experience: between candidates’ career interests and policy intentions

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ABSTRACT In France, the Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE) has been established as a right for every citizen. The VAE system was introduced courtesy of the Social Modernization Act of January 2002, and implemented to deliver whole or partial vocational qualifications. Each qualification awarding body has developed its own rules for the context-specific implementation of the principles outlined in the legislation. The VAE system is regarded by both the government and parliament as a ‘new’ opportunity particularly for employees to obtain vocational certification and recognition for skills acquired in informal and non formal settings—or skills acquired “along a career of experience”. Nevertheless, questions have been raised as to whether the political wish for equity and social justice is enough to justify the costs associated with the VAE system. This paper examines some of the tensions caused by the introduction of the VAE system.

Keywords: Validation of Acquired Experience, career, knowledge, skills, validation, certification
Introduction

The Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE) provides anyone who has been working for at least 3 years the opportunity to validate their experience in order to obtain a degree or professional title[certification]. The new policy on vocational education and training changes the traditional pattern in which certification is given following the completion of, and achievement in academic courses or a professional training. From now on, learning through work or social experience, in the broadest sense, is counted as knowledge acquisition or know-how (Dubar, 2000). VAE is thus considered as equivalent to or at par with any similar verified and recognised vocational certification [award]. However, the policy on VAE has raised questions for many stakeholders. One question is whether the partnership—and joint investment—between training and labour organisations in the VAE process has adequately met the need of employers to improve work skills. Another question is whether, in the VAE process, there is an added value both for the individuals and the employer organisations.

However, these questions aside, the outcomes of the VAE implementation [to date] has revealed changes in the participants’ careers caused, on the one hand, by the dynamics of a conflicting cooperation between individual and other stakeholders, such as the employer organizations and, on the other hand, by new sources of socio-cognitive conflicts and a change in the candidates’ professional careers. A joint study involving the use of multiple methodologies—interviews, observations and verbal exchanges—for the final evaluation of the VAE validation process shows the underline commonality in the professional backgrounds of candidates seeking VAE to improve career. This commonality in the representations [backgrounds] of candidates makes the use of VAE both a ‘preventive’ and ‘defensive’ tool for securing future professional and social careers (see Castel, 2009; Lenoir, 2000). However, the outcomes of the VAE evaluation has brought into a sharp focus the gaps between political assertions [rhetoric] and the results of the VAE implementation.

Conflicting signals from the parliament

The law on the validation of acquired experience states the necessity for the use of VAE to meet the needs of the labour market, to have ‘stable’ and socially recognised validation benchmarks, to encourage transparency in the vocational qualification system and to streamline existing certification schemes many of which has

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1. 4th section, Art. L. 900-1 of the Labour Code
with multiple titles. Other goals of the VAE law include: to contribute to the recognition of various sources of knowledge (gained from workplace, community and through volunteer work) for the benefit of all stakeholders; to achieve professional equality; to promote individualised training; and to give a new definition to lifelong learning.

Debates within parliament/government

The process of decision-making in public policy on most subjects is often influenced by entrenched historical practices (Abelès, 2000). The rhetoric heard during the parliamentary debates on the VAE system confirms this historic practices. The government, during the VAE parliamentary debates, expresses the need to mobilise the support of the public and stakeholders in the private sector’s support for VAE. The government points out the flexibility in the procedures for and the implementation of VAE validation, while underlining industry responsibility to train its workforce:

“This experience is today insufficiently taken into account in the construction of a possible continuing training career in professional life, especially in the case of a change of employers. This is a social constraint.” (N. Péry, Minister in charge of women’s rights and equal opportunities for men and women).

The government emphasises the ‘individualisation’ of the VAE validation process, while reinforcing the individual employee’s rights to training. It points out the support the government has received for the VAE policy from a majority of the stakeholders to counter hostile reactions that came from certain corporatists:

“Many adults give up the undertaking of a qualifying career because they cannot spend the necessary time for a complete training career. The accreditation of their working and social experience will encourage more relevant, defined and limited routes and a more efficient use of their right to training… As regards the reluctance of certain bodies… University Presidents said to us: ‘it will be very demanding because we will have to provide individualized courses and change our modes of accreditation’”

However, a parliamentarian, Mr. Terrier took a different position. His argued

2. The inefficiency and ill-known nature of the July 20th 1992 Act concerning the accreditation of professional experience (APE)—which states that anyone who has worked for five years is entitled to ask for this VAP, an equivalent of part of the required knowledge and skills, in order to be awarded an accreditation—should lead to larger opportunities and simpler procedures.

3. H. Mignon Report - n° 2798

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that the government attempts to streamline the training process within the VAE framework may end up producing ‘devalued or weakened’ qualifications; and that VAE might lead to shorter training courses for adults (see below). It is therefore necessary to legitimize the VAE process with empirical evidence and detailed evaluation. Without empirical evidence and detailed evaluation, therefore, the role and functions of the validation authority might raise question as to the legitimacy of the validation authority and its power to prescribe training curriculum for individuals seeking VAE training.

“The project provides shorter training courses for adults. It may result in a weakening of qualifications behind grand-sounding titles… if we do not want these validations to lead to mere dead ends, their usage must be questioned. Jobs change quickly: can this system fossilize them? Checking working and social experience must take place in an on-the-spot working situation, or, at least, in a recreated one.” [Ref: 1st reading at the National Assembly]

Social partners

The social partners, too, are involved in the VAE debates. For the Confederation of French Business, Mouvement des Entreprises DE France (MEDEF), a major social partner, the main concern relate to the ability of the employees seeking VAE participation to be flexible in the workplace or their readiness to respond flexibly to the changing global economic situation that is currently confronting French companies—especially the need for companies to constantly improving their competitiveness.

“We need better trained employees capable of coping with a growing added-value activity. Therefore, training and the VAE process are means for the maintenance and the development of the employees’ skills and qualifications, within the framework either of a business plan or of an individual approach.”

The MEDEF is therefore seeking to ensure that VAE participation should ensure that employees of member companies are flexible, adaptable and regularly updating their skills. The MEDEF believes that employees skills might run the risks of becoming obsolete if skills set are not regularly updated. However, there is a concern that the short training cycle has characterised the VAE system might not be robust enough even (even though it is generally accepted that reduced training hours could lead to a better training for certain categories—or professional routes—individual training routes. For the MEDEFE also, employees’

aspiration for a better appreciation of their potential should align with those of their employers, to raise efficiency and productivity. Since organization change or transformation can only achieve a desire result if it adapts to market’s conditions, it follows that there would be a convergence if each party to the VAE process—employee and employer—achieve some ‘balance’ in their training investment. Although the social partners’ position on the VAE system by and large reflects the socio-economic context of the VAE law, the position taken by the French trade-union, Confédération Générale des Travailleurs (CGT) and a parliamentarian, Mr. Fischer⁵, is particularly striking:

“Public involvement must meet the employees’ legitimate expectations and the requirements of the labour market, so that the utilitarian representation of the VAE does not overrule the very spirit of the social modernisation Act”.

The CGT supports the implementation of VAE provided it fits with the public service training and is flexible enough to accommodate and adequately cater for the needs of employer organisations and the labour market in general. To that extent, it is the wish of CGT that every employee benefit from the right to have their potentials recognised, at any given moment, that nobody [including the employee themselves hitherto] is aware of. Another French trade-union, Force Ouvrière (FO), broadly supports the VAE policy. Force Ouvrière wants employees to expand their horizon, arguing that specialising in one area of activity [in the workplace], might often limit individual knowledge base, something which workplace training practices do not take into account:

“It is the employers’ responsibility to pay off their employees by providing the latter with the means of periodically rebuilding their basic knowledge”.

However, Force Ouvrière contends that getting all or part of a degree through VAE might harm salary interest of many workers since a degree qualification does not necessarily confer employer recognition [for a pay rise] nor will additional VAE qualification directly influence employees’ career progression. As a principle, Force Ouvrière believes that ‘getting a complete title or degree can only be a minimum validation’. And that there cannot be an exact match between VAE participant’s experience and the contents of a traditional diploma award. For this reason, therefore, Force Ouvrière’s actively supports the VAE system includ-

⁵. M. Fischer’s speech (CP), first reading in the Senate
ing the recognition of skills acquired in both non-formal and informal contexts, which will add value to employees as well as enhance their professional careers.

For another social partner, the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), the introduction of the VAE system and the accelerated expression of employers’ response was a positive development, even if the VAE mechanisms allowing their staff participation has evolved rather quickly. The CFDT is concerned that the investments that companies agree to make to enable certain categories of staff to participate in the VAE system might be ‘wasted’ if companies do not see the added value [improve employee efficiency] or return on their investment. The CFDT, nonetheless, believes that ‘knowledge and experience acquired in workplace and in other non-formal settings are as worthy modes of knowledge acquisition as classroom environment’. Therefore, knowledge and acquired skills either in formal, informal and non-formal settings must be recognised equally, should lead to certifications (approved titles and degree). To that extent, the CFDT says ‘the VAE must become an asset [tool] to climb up the social ladder’.

For the Confédération Française de l’Encadrement - Confédération Générale des Cadres (CFE-CGC), the French executives’ trade-union, the VAE represent economic and psychological interests for many employees, which could lead to employees’ greater awareness of the value and usefulness of VAE to future professional development. The CFE-CGC believes that VAE that ‘could bring additional resources that could be devoted to various training and certification routes’. And that, external training, which the VAE system facilitates, will allow better recognition of training that is cost-effective.

In conclusion, for the Opposition Members of Parliament and the employer organisations, the VAE system—skills and experience validation and training accreditation—should enable employees to work flexibly and to adapt to the changing competitive nature of the economy in which companies operate as well as to foster entrepreneurial spirit in the individual employee participant of the VAE system. For the government, the parliamentary groups who support it and the workers’ organizations, their concern lies in the extent to which the VAE system would contribute to a reduction in social inequalities and to the greater recognition of skills and experience validation and improve training provision for employees. To that extent, the policy VAE fits with the government’s other social and economic policies.

Issues for VAE stakeholders

The introduction of the VAE system has raised a number of questions for the stakeholders.
For example: is it possible to identify common or underlying characteristics in the careers of candidates participating in VAE? Is it possible to define the types of professional and social pathway that are likely to influence the VAE participants in undertaking VAE training in particular? Do the position of employer organisations on VAE influence individual employee participation? Are skills and experience validation meet particular demands of the labour market? Finally, could the career change brought about by the VAE system be forced on people by circumstances outside their control [such as external imposition by the state authority] thereby given the impression that the choice is that of the VAE participant? These are some of current issues facing the stakeholders as many VAE participants begin to (re) construct their professional identity.

In validating their skills and experience under the VAE system, candidates face some difficulties relating not only to their career pathways but also to the expectations of, or the standards required by the VAE validating authority. One of the difficulties relates to how to define—or rather lack of clarity in—the standard of work that a candidate needs to produce in order to satisfactorily complete training under the VAE system. At the moment, successful outcome in the VAE process can be determined by the VAE candidates’ and their tutors’ wording of candidates’ experience and the process of validating that experience. The draw back of this situation is that while the success of career validation under VAE often ‘announces’ a change in a candidate’s social and professional status, the candidate’s academic credential might not be academically well regarded (Baudelot and Establet, 2009).

Candidates’ construction of their professional identity—an example from La Poste

For the VAE candidates working in La Poste, the French Post Office and Telecommunications Service, VAE mobilisation is centered on the individual, and on the transmission of knowledge and skills that are regarded as essential in many professions. This mobilisation involves VAE candidates’ construction of their professional identity, professional identity that they believe should lead them to act as ‘professionals’ in their chosen fields. Professionals that are capable of undertaking with rigor tasks entrusted to them as well as processing the abilities to adapt to various workplace situations. What is clear from the La Poste experience and other research evidence is that professional training and the VAE process are used by candidates as major tools for constructing their professionalism—by professionalism it is meant continuing development in knowledge, potentials and skills (Wittorski, 2005, pp. 27-28).

11. ACE of an Ile-de-France University Academy.
Another point worth mentioning is that a majority of the VAE candidates agree with a notion that there is equivalence between traditional training careers and the VAE training career; this shows candidates’ awareness of possible links between knowledge acquired through experience and knowledge gained through formal learning in academic environment. Such awareness would enable candidates to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

VAE as a strategic incentive to employees to upgrade skills

For certain proponents of the VAE, the device could, in future, contribute to re-balancing the effects of the different types of training provisions. Moreover, when measured in terms of the companies’ expenditure, the VAE could lower training costs (Besson, 2008) by reducing training hours, a frequently used argument to convince companies. For public authorities, however, the purpose of VAE training mechanism is professional career progression. These actions are embedded in the career framework for qualification. They are meant, as much as possible, to lead to recognised certifications for VAE candidates where certification is the outcome of validation, at the completion of their training. On a practical level, it is necessary to give thought to the limits of the trainings that can be undertaken within the framework of this process, and more particularly to the link between employees skills and their qualification.

Beneficiaries of VAE

The annual number of VAE candidates is high in France in comparison to many other European countries by some estimation. Since 1985, the validation system in France has been based on a legal framework which is regularly updated after consultation and agreement with the social partners (especially in those in the field of lifelong learning).

In 2009, nearly 75,000 candidates files [portfolios] were deemed eligible by the ministries delivering VAE certifications. Out of 58,000 files that were assessed, about 32,000 candidates obtained certifications, which is 13% more than in 2008. After a slight reduction in 2008, the number of VAE certificates became more stable. The number of certificates has increased significantly during the first two years of VAE implementation (65% increase between 2003 and 2004; 28% between 2004 and 2005), then moderately afterwards (15% increase between 2005 and 2006; 16% increase between 2006 and 2007). Altogether, since 2002, 167,000

6. Documents of the Accreditation of the Créteil Academic Center
In 2009, the number of candidates deemed eligible for the Ministry of National Education degrees increased by 13%. However, after an exceptional rise in 2007 (83%), the number of eligible candidates for the Ministries of Health and Social Affairs fell by 26% in 2008 and by 11% in 2009. While the predominance of the Ministry of National Education candidates has fell since 2004, due to the fact that degrees in other Ministries could be obtained through the VAE, National Education remains the most important awarding institution. For instance, in 2009, about half of the VAE graduates (47%) were awarded a degree in Professional and Technological Education. The proportions were 49% in 2008, 46% in 2007 and a little more than 6 out of 10 in 2004 (see tables 1 and 2). The number of graduates for the Defense and Equipment Ministries was low in 2009, but now on the increase. Such is the case, in particular, for Defense Ministry lawyers (from 185 in 2008 to 266 in 2009).

In 2010, nearly 75,000 files have been considered eligible by the whole of the ministries delivering certifications through the VAE, and about 53,000 candidates have had their files assessed. These numbers have not increase very much since 2007, after a big increase between 2005 and 2007. In 2010, about 30,000 candidates were awarded a certification through the VAE—7% less than in 2009. The yearly number of certified students largely increased between 2003 and 2005, before they became stable [currently] at about 30,000.

Also in 2010, the number of candidates who were considered eligible for the awards of Ministry of National Education titles reduced by 4%. However, after that number had greatly increased in 2007 (+83%) due to an updated treatment of the files, the number of candidates who were considered eligible for the titles of the Ministry in charge of Health and Social Affairs has decreased since 2008—-26% in 2008, -11% in 2009 and -9% in 2010.

Since 2002, when the VAE scheme was first implemented, the number of certified candidates has risen to 200,000 (tables 1 and 2 in the appendices).

**Implications of VAE policy for higher education**

The recognition of knowledge acquired through experience is a new innovation in France, which implies a cultural shift for academics in particular and higher education (HE) in general. The VAE policy would require transition on the part of higher education from a ‘lecturing’ culture and to that of knowledge learned or acquired as well as that of training and professionalism (Barbier, 2003). Another policy implication for higher education relates to widening access and participation in the HE sector. What is noticeable since the introduction of VAE is that the VAE process has ‘forced’ higher education institutions to open up [widening access and
participation], and to better understand the professional and social contexts of learning as well as knowledge acquired through experience. The implementation of the VAE process has therefore highlighted the need for stakeholders’ capacities and investment necessary for launching new relationships with the professional and social organisations interested in VAE.

The policy also has highlighted tension in higher education-industry-higher relationship. It has been argued that the VAE process has led to the interference of the industry in an area regarded as essentially a higher education responsibility. The argument is that the VAE process has reduced a university role to that of training dictated by the industry—something that is seen as contrary to French higher education culture, “This attitude appears to us as antinomic not only with higher education traditions but also with the very foundations of university, the place of knowledge elaboration and transmission, whose legitimacy is based on their proximity to research, and that higher education degrees are meant to validate” (Ropé (2005, p.82).

The VAE is presented as a process that meant to make the labour market more fluid.—to the extent the VAE process acknowledges the skills of those people who already have certain work responsibilities and duties, but without the required higher education degree as well as allows the promotion of those who could have access to higher functions. The VAE process therefore breaks with the traditional degree-delivering mode of higher education, by making it possible for individuals [interested in the VAE process] and the employer organisations to obtain certification for their skills and experience that they might have acquired in non-formal and informal settings.

**Conclusion**

A validation of training acquired through the VAE process is form of professional and social career development and part of the government strategy improve skills training by making employees flexible and adaptable to the demands of the labour market especially those confronted with the risks of skills obsoletes. Nonetheless the VAE process may have unintentionally results in the stakeholders’ career adaptation to both the political [state] and institutional [employer organisations' and validating authority] demands.
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### Table 1: Flows of beneficiaries, in France, for the period 2004-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total number of candidate applications</th>
<th>Total number of candidates who were assessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Ministry of Education</td>
<td>19136</td>
<td>21818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education &amp; Research</td>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>DNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Social Affairs</td>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>21661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Employment</td>
<td>5200</td>
<td>7463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Youths &amp; Sports</td>
<td>3480</td>
<td>3023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Army</td>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>DNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Culture</td>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>DNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Maritime Affairs</td>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>DNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of ministries awarding qualifications</td>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>Between 6000 and 61000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DARES

DNA: Data non available

NB These statistics only take into account qualifications officially recognized by the State. For the time being, there are no statistics for other certificates (for instance, those awarded by the Chambers of Industry and Commerce).
Table 2: Validation of Acquired Experience in all the certifying Ministries in France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry or Ministry of Employment</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Ministry of Education</td>
<td>6 958</td>
<td>12 668</td>
<td>13 804</td>
<td>14 127</td>
<td>14 823</td>
<td>13 280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education and Research</td>
<td>827</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>2154</td>
<td>2 154</td>
<td>2 225</td>
<td>2 016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Social Affairs and Health</td>
<td>1 566</td>
<td>4 224</td>
<td>7316</td>
<td>5 719</td>
<td>8 308</td>
<td>7 539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Employment</td>
<td>952</td>
<td>3 191</td>
<td>5 478</td>
<td>5 482</td>
<td>5 580</td>
<td>5 479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of ministries awarding qualifications</td>
<td>10 744</td>
<td>22 652</td>
<td>30 033</td>
<td>28 988</td>
<td>32 252</td>
<td>29 955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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