

Ministry of Labour qualifications tested in the field

The French certification system is complex. Compared with other European countries, one of its specific features is that it is largely state regulated. Many ministries play a part in it. Existing alongside the qualifications awarded within the national education system and the burgeoning system of sectoral qualifications, the vocational qualifications issued by the Ministry of Labour now have the wind in their sails. The number of people obtaining such qualifications has doubled in 10 years. Well recognised by employers, these qualifications are a good passport into employment. Their modular design makes them precursors of units of competence.

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Alongside the qualifications awarded within the national education system and the vocational training certificates issued at sector level, the vocational qualifications issued by the Ministry of Labour (MoL) occupy an unobtrusive but growing place within the certification system. Thus the number of people obtaining such qualifications has more than doubled in ten years. In 2017, three quarters of the 183,000 candidates for the MoL qualifications were successful, the vast majority of them job seekers; 69% of those obtaining the qualifications had found a job six months afterwards [1]. The certificates issued by the MoL (cf. Box 1) constitute a wide-ranging sphere made up of more than 250 vocational qualifications, which are regularly updated and encompass a wide range of occupations, although there is an emphasis on service-sector specialties [2]. Ranging from level V to II of the French national qualifications framework, the training courses leading to award of the qualifications are targeted at the lower levels of the framework before rising gradually to the higher levels, thereby emulating the process of upgrading qualifications and jobs and upskilling the working population. A qualitative survey conducted by Céreq provides a broad picture of the uses to which the MoL qualifications are put by the actors in the labour market, in training and in enterprises and their perceptions of their value (cf. Box 2). At a time when the decrees implementing the new legislation on 'the freedom to choose one's professional future' are awaited, this survey offers an opportunity to investigate the way in which the actors on the ground are appropriating the MoL's certification arrangement.

Advantages in accessing employment and for the modularisation of training courses

Observations in the field confirm some basic tendencies [3]. The MoL's qualifications are universally recognised for the advantages they confer in terms of access to employment. They are also recognised for their progressive, modular design based on vocational competence certificates (CCPs - certificats de compétences professionnelles), which are precursors of units of competence. These advantages in the search for jobs are, nevertheless, counterbalanced by poor image, a lack of clarity in the offer and inadequate visibility among the various users. Frequently associated with job seekers, the MoL's qualifications are, consequently, too little known to other groups (employees, young people not in employment, education or training, known as NEETS, etc.) or to actors in the economic sphere – notably very small and small and medium-sized enterprises – and, more surprisingly, training specifiers and labour market intermediaries. For their part, recruiters say they find it difficult to identify the qualifications, and in particular to distinguish the MoL qualifications from those awarded within the education system. On the other hand, the distinction between the MoL qualifications and those awarded at sector level is more familiar to them, the former being associated with training in a recognised occupation and the latter with training to facilitate employees' adaptation to a job or workplace.

CERTIFICATION
MINISTRY OF LABOUR
QUALIFICATIONS
UNIT OF
COMPETENCES
TRAINING CENTRE
APPRENTICE
TRAINING CENTRE
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The MoL qualifications: what are we talking about?

There are three main types of qualifications: those awarded within the national education system, the vocational training certificates (*Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle/CQP*) issued at sector level and the Ministry of Labour's vocational qualifications. Listed in the National Register of Vocational Qualifications, these qualifications are certified by the French state and issued by the Ministry of Labour. They attest that the holder has the competences, aptitudes and knowledge required to practice a profession or occupation. They are aimed at anybody who has left education and has already embarked on their working life, whether they are in employment or looking for a job, and are looking to acquire a vocational qualification in order to contribute to their career development or to improve their chances of returning to work.

The MoL qualifications can be obtained through three different pathways: continuing vocational training, VEL and, since ministerial decree no. 2016-954 of 11 July 2016, apprenticeship. In this last case, the young person must fulfil one of the following two conditions: they must hold an educational or vocational certificate attesting to at least a level V qualification or be eligible for the right to return to education or training. The qualifications consist of units of competences known as vocational competence certificates (CCPs - *certificats de compétences professionnelles*), which are eligible for personal training accounts. In order to obtain an MoL qualification, candidates can either prepare for all the certificates stipulated in the reference framework for the qualification being sought or validate them gradually through a process of accumulation. As with educational qualifications, the lifetime of an MoL qualification may be limited. On the other hand, the acquisition of a qualification or of one or more CCPs is permanent. Whether they have taken the vocational training, VEL or apprenticeship route, candidates take the validation tests in front of a panel consisting of at least two professionals.

Since the ministerial circular of 18/02/2011 was issued, any training organisation, including the AFPA, which was exempt from the procedure before that date, has to request authorisation to hold these validation sessions leading to the award of an MoL vocational qualification. They are supervised by the departmental units of the deconcentrated public services of MoL called *Direction Régionale des Entreprises, de la Concurrence, de la Consommation, du Travail et de l'Emploi* in the department concerned, which also accredits the members of the panels. An authorisation is issued for a specified qualification, a specified geographical site and a specified length of time.

The MoL qualifications seldom feature in the continuing training plans drawn up by the enterprises surveyed. They play a much greater role in subsidised employment contracts (professional development contracts, professional development contracts for temp agency workers, etc.) that provide support for those retraining in order to facilitate their mobility in the labour market. There are other reasons for the limited use made of MoL qualifications. These include a lack of information, particularly about the various ways of funding the relevant training courses, perceptions of the value of the qualifications among HR managers, most of whom were educated within the academic system, and a fear of having to deal with requests for reclassification and wage increases from employees obtaining such qualifications, even though the MoL qualifications seldom have any formal status in collective agreements. Furthermore, employees seeking validation of experiential learning (VEL) are seldom looking to obtain a vocational qualification, apparently because of the administrative red tape associated with the procedure or with the training courses leading to the qualifications. The most experienced workers struggle to validate experience acquired on the job when taking the final examinations for the qualifications. If a solution to these obstacles could be found, then VEL could constitute a significant step forward in MoL certification policy.

Temporary employment agencies, on the other hand, say they make frequent and specific use of

MoL qualifications. They regularly provide training on behalf of or instead of their clients, combining recruitment and training through professional development contracts (*contrats de professionnalisation*), labour market integration contracts for temp agency workers (*les contrats d'insertion professionnelle intérimaire/CIPI*) and professional development contracts for temp agency workers (*les contrats de professionnalisation intérimaire/CDPI*). Some agencies guarantee that, for a period of variable length after obtaining an MoL qualification, candidates will be sure to obtain placements. According to some of the managers surveyed, this period may be 18 months, for example, when it applies to production workers in the automotive industry. Such a guarantee is regarded as advantageous for all concerned. For the temp agency, it limits labour turnover costs by ensuring the loyalty of a pool of experienced agency workers already familiar with the requirements of a particular area of work. For the workers themselves, it opens up the prospect of a period of less precarious employment. And for enterprises, it places at their disposal a skilled and accredited workforce that can be operational in the short term without the need for training and the associated financial burden.

Training centres awaiting changes

The training centres, licensed by the Ministry of Labour, whether private or public (including the AFPA, the national adult vocational training agency), are on the front line when it comes to preparing candidates for the MoL qualifications. In order to do this, they must first obtain an authorisation that permits them to hold examination sessions. It is generally agreed that it is the modes of evaluation and validation that ensure the value of the qualifications in the labour market. However, certain difficulties in organising the examination sessions sometimes render the whole exercise rather challenging. They include problems in recruiting, training and remunerating examiners, inadequate material conditions for high-quality evaluations and the lack of a dedicated corps of inspectors for the MoL qualifications, which is perceived as a serious omission since support for and monitoring of teaching are seen as ways to improve the content of training courses. Furthermore, whereas the reference framework for certification of the qualifications is regarded as meticulous, training centre managers regret not having a similar framework for the training programmes (training guidelines) along the lines of what exists for most of the qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Education.

According to these same centre managers, the key factor in obtaining an MoL qualification is the personalised allocation of candidates to the correct level of training on entry to a programme. Overestimation of a candidate's level leads to failure, underestimation to demotivation; both scenarios frequently lead to candidates dropping out of courses. This is why the effectiveness of certain

methods advocated by the French National Placement Agency (*Pôle emploi*) and widely recognised within the profession, such as simulation-based recruitment, could lead to the use of a similar type of tool in all authorised training centres.

However, these attempts by authorised training centres to innovate and improve the quality of their provision come up against the dictates of a market that is seen as contradictory. On the one hand, it is pulled by a single regional purchaser seeking to lower the unit price in order to control costs; on the other hand, it is dominated by the increasingly intense competition generated by a growing number of providers, including 'newcomers' such as the GRETA network and the apprentice training centres (CFAs)

Expanded provision for new target groups

After a few regional experiments, the regulations (ministerial order of 11 July 2016) extended preparation for MoL qualifications to the apprenticeship pathway, in addition to the continuing training and VEL pathways. With the opening of the apprentice training centres to a post-education public, the intended targets of the MoL qualifications, participants are expected to become increasingly heterogeneous while the courses themselves are expected to become less compartmentalised. This measure should make available more training options for young people who left school with only lower-secondary or level V qualifications. The extension of the apprenticeship system to post-education groups was facilitated by the raising of the upper age limit for embarking on an apprenticeship from 26 to 30. It also gives employers a much larger pool from which to recruit for highly specialised occupations, shortage occupations and those regarded as unattractive. In order to avoid duplication of training, a survey of needs has been carried out in the various occupational sectors. An initial list of 85 MoL qualifications obtainable through the apprenticeship route has been compiled. This list is likely to be extended in future.

These measures are too recent for all their consequences to be assessed. Initial observations on the ground suggest that the apprentice training centres are making varied uses of the MoL qualifications, depending on their own histories. For some of them, making the MoL qualifications accessible via apprenticeships is nothing new. Since they are not only apprentice training centres but also continuing vocational training centres for adults, they have been offering the qualifications for a long time and are well versed in the appropriate teaching methods. Other centres that are more dependent on a particular occupational sector that promotes its own certifications are being impelled to exclude the MoL qualifications in favour of the sector's own vocational training certificates. For yet others, the tradition of cooperation with educational establishments within a catchment area has led

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The survey and the sample

Carried out between June 2016 and October 2017 with the support of the DGEFP (*Direction générale de l'emploi et de la formation professionnelle*), the survey investigated the uses of and perception of the value of MoL vocational qualifications [4]. Some 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with several categories of actors: about 20 companies or groups of companies (12 of which were the subject of in-depth case studies) of varying size and in different sectors and locations; occupational or sectoral organisations; 15 authorised training centres, both independent (excl. the AFPA) and enterprise-run, all of them selected from the VALCE database (Validation Certification Emploi, an information system managed by the Ministry MoL ? in charge of the use of the legislation relating to certifications); decision or policy makers (Regional Council and national job placement centres); institutional actors in charge of certification policy at national or regional level; the AFPA; labour market intermediaries. In order to take account of the current regulatory regime, the survey was extended to include eight private apprentice training centres. The qualifications for which the training centres surveyed prepare candidates are very diverse, in terms of both specialisms and levels. More than 20 are represented.

them invariably to favour qualifications awarded by the national education system. Acknowledging this diversity of practice, those in charge of apprentice training question the wisdom of allowing all apprentice training centres to prepare candidates for the MoL qualifications. However, the expenditure required to install the technical facilities needed to comply with the reference frameworks for the MoL qualifications should eventually set in motion a process of 'natural selection', since not all the centres will have the financial capacity to do so, and certainly not for all the specialties. Finally, there is the question of monitoring the quality of the training courses for the MoL qualifications offered by the apprentice training centres, a task hitherto carried out by officials of the *académies*, the educational regions into which France is divided for administrative purposes.

Enterprises - unrecognised suppliers of training for the MoL qualifications

Unexpected actors though they may be in the field of MoL qualifications, some companies have, nevertheless, started to set up their own authorised training centres in order to prepare a wider range of candidates for the MoL qualifications than just their own workforce. It is difficult to know with any accuracy the share of these company-based authorised centres in the total provision of training for the MoL qualifications. For some specialties, they play a decisive role in the production of sectoral qualifications, the protection of professions and the creation of new qualifications listed in the national register of vocational qualifications (*Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles/RNCP*). What are the factors driving companies to offer training for the MoL qualifications in their authorised centres? Five strategies can be identified from the case studies carried out (cf. Box 3).

The first of these strategies is intended primarily to protect a rare or disappearing professions or to preserve a wealth of sectoral skills. This strategy may be adopted by businesses of all sizes, from multinationals to very small craft companies.

