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On the Development and Role of the Validation of Acquired Experiential Learning in France

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Abstract

Context: The validation of acquired experiences (VAE) of non-formal and informal learning outcomes constitutes alongside initial and continuing vocational education and training systems, the third pathway of access to vocational qualification certifications in France. It is connected to the national qualification framework and its directory RNCP (the national repertory of vocational qualifications) by allowing the VAE candidates to have access to the same qualifications accessible through the formal VET learning tracks. As it is practised at present, it allows any individual accumulating prior working experiences of at least one year in any type of activity connected with the domain of the targeted qualification, to apply for the validation of its required units/blocs of competences without undertaking any formal learning within the initial or continuing formal learning systems. The accreditation of the required units for the targeted qualification can be either partial or complete with an immediate award of the certification. In this context, this paper is an investigation into the background developments, the functioning mechanisms, performance and role of the validation of acquired experiential learning in VET and the whole educational and training system in France.

Methods: The adopted investigation methodology in this research is mainly based on recent scientific desk research, including documentation and performance evaluation reports and studies conducted and published by the stakeholders involved in the VAE. It is also based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the VAE related data obtained mainly through two main sources: First, the annual inquiries n°62 and n°67 conducted by the ministries of national and higher education; Secondly, the annual compilation of aggregated data from various ministries involved in the VAE process by the directorate for the animation of research, studies and statistics (DARES) of the ministry of labour.

Findings and conclusions: As a result, this investigation allowed for underlining the following outcome and concluding points: First, since its main reform undertaken within the framework of the Social Modernisation Act of the 17th January 2002, the accessibility flow of VAE candidates to a full validation and certification has been observed to register an important development with an average of 25,000 per year, including the confirmation of the VAE inclusive role in favour of initially low skilled beneficiaries. Secondly, the VAE has also been observed to contribute qualitatively to the promotion of professionalisation, employability, mobility and learning path fluidity and complementarity between the formal learning tracks and informal and non-formal experiential learning.

Keywords

certification, competences, experiential learning, vocational qualifications, validation



1 Introduction

The French educational system includes three basic pathways of accessibility to all levels and types of vocational qualifications registered within NQF directory: The initial vocational education training (IVET), which formally includes both the school-based IVET and the dominantly company-based apprenticeship, the continuing vocational training (CVT) and the validation of acquired experiences (VAE) of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The validation of acquired experiential informal and non-formal learning gives the opportunity, especially to those who have no qualifications in connection with their undertaken prior activities to obtain a level of formal qualifications corresponding to their skills and competences. France can be considered as a leading country in this area as the validation of experiential learning under its present acronym VAE (*Validation des acquis de l'expérience*) has now been in place for 19 years. It is an integrated system which has been developed from a national perspective, strongly articulated to lifelong learning, training and employment policies. It is connected to the national qualification framework (NQF) and its directory RNCP (the national repertory of vocational qualifications) allowing VAE candidates to have access to the same qualifications accessible through the formal VET learning pathways. As it is practised at present, it allows any individual who accumulated (regularly and irregularly) a prior experiential learning for at least one year in any type of activity in a field related to that of the targeted qualification, to apply for the validation of its required units/blocs of competences without going through any initial or continuing formal learning and training programme. The accreditation of the required units/blocs of competences for the targeted qualification can be either partial or complete leading to an immediate award of the certification (Beaupère et al., 2020; Dif, Héraud, & Nkeng, 2009; Hawley-Woodall, 2019; Mathou, 2019; MEFR, 2021; Silvestru & Silvestru, 2019). Its introduction and development in scope and contents has been a gradual process. At first, only practitioners in the engineering field could have their prior experiential learning validated, leading to the award of the engineer's grade (1934 Act of July the 3rd). In the mid-eighties, the 1985 Decree (of the 23rd of August) extended it to include, at the university level, the supervisors, technicians and management executives. Then its generalisation via the 1992 Act (of the 20th of July) to all categories of working individuals was extended and enriched by the Social Modernisation Act (17 January 2002) to include, in addition to work-based learning, other types of experiential learning acquired through charity work, social and cultural activities. The "VAE" functioning mechanism has been recently simplified and reinforced mainly via the 2016 Act (8th August) on "work, modernisation of social dialogue and securing professional career pathways" and the "VET Reform Act n° 2018-771 of the 5th September 2018 concerning the freedom to choose one's professional future" and through their VAE related implementation decrees. This paper is an investigation into the development, reforms, performance and role of the validation of acquired experiential learning in VET and the whole educational training system in France. The adopted investigation methodology is mainly based on recent scientific desk research, including documentation and performance evaluation reports and studies conducted and published by the stakeholders involved in the VAE. It is also based on the analysis of the VAE related data obtained mainly through the following basic sources: (1)- The annual inquiry n°62 conducted by the directorate for the evaluation, forecasting and performance (*DEPP- Direction de l'Évaluation, de la prospective et de la Performance*) of the Ministry of national education; (2)- The enquiry n°67 undertaken on a yearly basis by the department for information systems and statistical studies (*SD-SIED- Sous-Direction des Systèmes d'information et des Études Statistiques*) of the ministry of higher education, research and innovation; (3)- The annual compilation of aggregated data from various ministries involved in the VAE process by the directorate for the animation of research, studies and statistics (*DARES- Direction de l'Animation de la recherche, des Études et des Statistiques*) of the ministry of labour. The outcomes of the research investigation are analysed and presented through the following main sections:

(a)- background developments and reforms; (b)- functioning and accessibility mechanisms; (c)- observed role and performance; (d)- conclusions.

2 Background Developments and Reforms

The validation of acquired experiential non-formal and informal learning as a pathway of accessibility to formal (certification-based) vocational qualifications is not new to the French educational and training system. The first validation notion was introduced by the 1934 Act of the 10th July. In fact, this law provided the primary general conditions for accessibility to the award of an “engineer grade (diploma)” to individuals who accumulated at least five years of a working experience in the engineering field (Dif, 2007; Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009; Lenoir, 1996). This pioneering development was followed during the 80s and the 90s by a stage of further intermediary developments and extensions within the validation procedure. The 1984 Act (of the 27th January) concerning the reform of higher education and its implementation 1985 Decree (of the 23 August) extended the notion under the name VAPP (*Validation des Acquis Professionnels et personnels*- Validation of Acquired Professional and Personal experiences and competences) to allow adults over 20 years old to have access to different forms of formal learning programmes at the university level, leading to obtaining higher education degrees (except engineer's grade) starting from at least the NQF level 5 (EQF level 5). VAPP is still in use as a non (directly) certification-based validation instrument for promoting accessibility to higher education, especially among those adults without or with insufficient formal initial formal vocational qualifications but possessing strong professional working experiences. In parallel to VAPP, the Ministry of Labour created in 1986, a network of inter-professional centres for competences audits (*CIBC- Centres Interprofessionnels de Bilans de compétences*) to enable individuals to have their professional and personal competences and skills assessed by undertaking a non-formal competence audit (*BC- Bilan de compétences*) with the aim of allowing them to define or redefine their career and learning development projects. Then at the beginning of the 90s, the 1992 Act of the 20th July and its successive implementation decrees and regulations generalised the validation of acquired professional experiences under the acronym VAP (*Validation des Acquis Professionnels*) to all the NQF levels. It was designed to allow any individual who already accumulated (regularly or irregularly) a working experience of five years in at least one activity related to the field of the candidate's targeted diploma, to apply for the validation of all the qualification's required credit units but one (n-1). However, at this stage of its development, the validation system was observed to have in practice several insufficiencies, namely: (a)- its limitedness to exclusively work-based professional experiences, did not allow for taking into consideration all other forms of experiential learning; (b)- being based on a partial validation, it did not allow potentially successful candidates to have an immediate access to certification via the possibility of obtaining, through the assessment and validation process, a full validation of all the required credit units for the targeted diploma; (c)- the minimum accessibility requirement of an accumulated professional experience of five years, was observed to hinder young adults to have access to VAP during the process of their early career-learning development projects (Dif, 2007; Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009; Lenoir, 1996; Terrot, 1997). The third major stage in its development was launched at the beginning of this century through the “Social Modernisation Act of the 17 January 2002” (and its consecutive implementation decrees) which introduced the present certification-based validation system via the introduction of four primary basic reforms. First, the scope of the validation was broadened to take into consideration all the candidate's prior experiential non-formal and informal learning outcomes, including those connected with charity work, socio-cultural activities under the new acronym VAE (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*- Validation of Acquired Experiences). This also included the reduction of the required minimum experiential period for accessibility from five to three years. Secondly, with the aim of promoting the mobility of holders of national

and foreign formal qualification between different curricula and universities, the 2002 Act and its Decree of the 16th April 2002 introduced and implemented a specifically targeted validation instrument called *VES (Validation des Études Supérieures*, i.e. validation of educational studies in higher education). It allows any French higher education institution to grant a VES candidate, a partial or a full validation (in terms of equivalent credit units) to have access to one of its accessible degrees on the basis of the applicant's prior formal qualifications acquired within any public or private higher education institution in France or abroad. Thirdly, the creation via the 2002 Act implementing Decrees (616 & 617 of the 26th April 2002) of both “the National Commission for Vocational Qualification (*CNCP- Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle*)” and “the National Directory of Vocational Qualifications (*RNCP- Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*)” for referencing, registering and updating all vocational qualifications and titles equally accessible through the VET and VAE pathways. During the last two decades following its introduction in 2002, especially since the European Council recommendation of 20th December 2012 calling all Member States to establish (by 2018) arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, the VAE has undergone further development and reform actions, namely the following: (a)-The 2014 Act of the 5th March, extended the VAE accessibility to individuals without formal vocational qualifications equivalent to the NQF level 3 (EQF level 3) by taking into consideration, in addition to their prior experiential non-formal and informal learning, certain prior workplace training periods undertaken within the framework of VET system and labour market inclusion instruments. This included facilitating accessibility to funding through the creation of “the personal training account (*CPF- Compte Personnel de Formation*)” via the same Act. The notion of blocs of competences as a way to structure qualifications accessible through the VAE was also introduced through the 2014 Act ; (b)- The Labour Act of the 8th August 2016 brought several new developments within the VAE system, namely: (b1)- With the aim of making the VAE more attractive and accessible to individuals with low or without qualifications, the required minimum accessibility period of prior experiences was reduced from three to only one year; (b2)- In the case of partial validation, the validated parts of the targeted qualification are conserved for life instead of five years previously; (b3)- Strengthening the provided support to VAE leave by extending its automatic accessibility to employees on open-ended work contracts to those on fixed duration ones, including the extension of its duration for vulnerable candidates; (b4)- Reinforcing guidance provision (during the VAE information and counselling stage) via the creation of the professional development counselling (*CEP- Conseil en Évolution Professionnelle*). (c)- More recently, the implementation of set of reforms integrating within the framework of the 2018 Act (of the 5th September) for “the freedom to choose one's professional future”, was launched at the beginning of 2019. This included namely the following: (c1)-The the creation of a national public body called “*France compétences*” to take in charge among its basic missions the governance of “the national directory of vocational qualifications (*RNCP- Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelle*)” previously under the responsibility of “the national commission for vocational qualification (*CNCP- Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle*)”; (c2)- Since 2019, each newly registered vocational qualification within the national directory of vocational qualifications has to be presented in blocs of competences (*blocs de compétences*) corresponding to its different parts/units (Art.31 of 2018 Act of the 5th September); (c3)- Following the 2018 Act and as a replacement to the 1969 five- level- NQF, a new national qualification framework was created via its related Decree n°2019-14 of the 8th January 2019. It is an eight- level- NQF comprising seven levels having their own descriptors referenced to 2-8 EQF levels.

3 Functioning and Accessibility Mechanisms

The VAE is an individualised right for access to the process of assessment and validation of acquired prior experiential informal and non-formal learning with the aim of obtaining formal qualifications. It allows any individual, who accumulated regularly or irregularly an experience of at least one year (full-time or equivalent) in at least one activity related to a targeted degree, to apply for the validation the required units/blocs of competences for obtaining the targeted qualification (certification). The validation can be partial or full with an immediate access to the certification. Therefore, the beneficiary can be an employee, a self employed individual, an unemployed job-seeker, an artist or even a charity worker. This is possible regardless of the employment status of the candidate at the moment of submitting an application for a certification-based validation of acquired prior experiential informal and non-formal learning. All accessed certifications via the VAE system are the same as those accessible through the VET formal learning pathways (Dif, 2007; Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009; Mathou, 2019).

There are many stakeholders involved in the implementation and the funding arrangements of this permeability instrument. First, the social partners are involved (through sectoral and inter-professional consultative commissions on national and regional levels) in the design and updating of the occupational and certification referential standards of all certification-based vocational qualifications and titles (equally accessible via the VAE and VET pathways) referenced and registered within the NQF Directory (*RNCP- Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*) through its national governance body “*France compétences*”. They also participate in the assessment and validation of experiential informal and non-formal learning via the VAE jury. The VAE funding for its beneficiaries is usually secured through the the reallocation of employers' mandatory contribution to VET funding (including VAE such as VAE paid leave) via “the operators of competences (*OPCO- Opérateurs de Compétences*)” created by “*France Compétences*” national governance institution. The other important actors in this mechanism are the accredited validation and certification awarding bodies usually made up of the accredited educational and training provision intuitions (like, for instance, the universities for accessibility to higher education qualifications through the VAE). They implement the VAE procedure for candidature on individual basis through all its stages from information and guidance provision to the construction of a portfolio of competences to be submitted for the assessment and validation through the VAE jury. The regional authorities and sector bodies (such as Chambers) participate in the implementation process through their information and guidance provision stands (including accompaniment and financing in some cases).

The 2002 Social Modernisation Act, in its VAE related implementation decrees and the subsequent further enriching developments and reform actions, outlined the basic principles guaranteeing, in practice, the functioning and accessibility mechanisms to the VAE process through four main consecutive stages, namely: Information and guidance provision; feasibility assessment of the candidature; preparation of the candidate's portfolio of acquired competences, assessment and validation decision by a VAE jury (Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009; Mathou, 2019; MT, 2021). The first stage in the process allows interested individuals in the VAE to have a direct access to many sources of information provision, guidance and even accompaniment on national, sectoral and regional levels. In addition to documentation standpoints, repertories and websites connected with national governance and funding institutions such as “*France Compétences*”, different ministries and sector bodies. Each academy, local authority and educational institution on regional level is equipped, at least, with one VAE information and guidance provision centre/department and related website. The second stage consists of preparing and submitting a VAE feasibility request folder (called folder 1) to the candidate's chosen institution formally in charge of the process of assessing, validating acquired prior experiential learning and awarding the obtained targeted certification. This stage was designed to avoid committing candidates with highly reduced chance of success to go

unnecessarily through the remaining stages of the VAE process. This second stage is also a three-step process: pre-admissibility folder preparation (whose completion and submission usually goes through an individualised and accompanied feedback process between the candidate and the accompanying tutor), pre-admissibility reviewing and justified feasibility decision (in accordance with basic formal criteria such as the requirement of at least one year of prior experiences in at least one of the fields connected with the targeted certification). The third stage allows effectively the pre-admitted VAE candidate to explicit in more details (with the help of an appointed supervisor/tutor) his or her prior experiences in a formalised and structured way by preparing the VAE folder 2 usually called the “portfolio of acquired experiences and competences”. As for assessment and validation process (the fourth stage), it takes place at an accredited institution for this purpose, which is usually the certification awarding institution such as the university. It is taken in charge by a jury which must be made-up and chaired in accordance with VAE related general regulations and those specific to each type of certification. In general, a quarter of its members must be from the qualified representatives of the relevant occupational sector. Half of them must be representing employers and the other half has to represent employees with an equal gender balance between men and women. The jury assesses, interviews the candidate, deliberates and takes a decision falling within one of the three possible cases: full validation and certification, partial validation or no validation at all.

Depending on the qualification awarding bodies, there are three main categories of accessible certifications: (1)- “National Vocational Certificates (diplomas)” delivered by the State through its different ministries automatically and permanently registered within the the national repertory of vocational qualifications (*RNCP- Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*) of “*France compétences*”; (2)- “Vocational Qualification Certificates (*CQP- Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle*)” created and delivered by the professional sectors under the responsibility of social partners. Their registration (for 5 years) within NQF directory (RNCP) is requested by the concerned sector bodies and approved by the vocational qualification commission of “*France compétences*”; (3)- “Certificates and titles” delivered by chambers of commerce, public or private institutions under their own names. They can also be registered (for 5 years) within the national repertory of vocational qualifications (RNCP) at request and after the approval of the vocational qualification commission of “*France compétences*”. All these types of accessible qualifications are also distributed, according to the new French NQF (Decree n°2019-14 of 8 January 2019), over the last six levels (3 to 8) given that the first two levels are devoted to basic knowledge acquisition with no related formal vocational certification awarding at the moment. Moreover, the process of their creation is based on a combination of two basic referential standards. The first referential standard (the “occupational referential”) refers to the identification of the main missions and tasks to be performed by the future holder of the diploma, including the specification of the conditions under which they will be implemented. As for the second (i.e. the “diploma referential”), it requires establishing a list of the corresponding skills, competences and knowledge required effectively by the employment process itself (Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009; Mathou, 2019; MT, 2021). The VAE financing is dependent on the candidate’s employment status as follows: (1)-For employed individuals there are three open possibilities through the use of the enterprise's training plan, the personal training account (*CPF- compte personnel de formation*) and the VAE leave. (2)-For unemployed/job-seekers, the funding can be obtained via the employment centre (*Pôle emploi*), the regional authority (Regional council) or through the use of the personal training account (*CPF- compte personnel de formation*). (3)- For self-employed individuals, VAE is financed through the use of either the personal training account (*CPF- compte personnel de formation*) or the insurance training fund (OPCO) connected with its professional activity sector.

The VAE quality assurance is is basically taken in charge through the following existing mechanisms (Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009; Mathou, 2019): (a)- A set of criteria set by the 2002

legislation and decrees concerning the introduction and the implementation of the VAE procedure including the composition and functioning of the VAE assessment and validation jury; (b)-The quality assurance regarding the organisation and the implementation of the VAE procedure is under the responsibility of each accredited certification awarding body, which is also expected to develop its own evaluation, review and follow-up of the implementation process on a continuous basis and to introduce the necessary improvements; (c)- Extending via the 2018 Act (of the 5th September) the quality requirements already in place for the training providers to the VAE support provision organisations (including the competence audit centres). (d)- In connection with the process of controlling both the quality and the use of vocational training funds, the control services connected with the Ministry of labour are also entitled to control VAE involved stakeholders; (e)-The existence of a referential framework of standards (common to all certification awarding pathways, including VAE), combining both the occupational and qualification (certification) standards for each type of qualification (certification) initially proposed by different certification awarding bodies examined and registered within the NQF directory (*RNCP- Répertoire National des Certifications professionnelles*) by the vocational qualification commission of the unique national governance body of the RNCP called “*France compétences*”. All these qualifications (certifications) and their referential standards are designed and updated (every five years) by the advisory commissions connected with different accredited certification awarding bodies; (f)- A number of regional charters regulating the provided support to the VAE candidates are signed between the States and the regional authorities.

4 Observed Role and Performance

The VAE performance can be assessed in terms of its contribution to the achievement of two layers of interrelated objectives: (1)- The intermediary objectives specific to its effective implementation and functioning in practice, i.e. in terms of accessibility flow; (2)-The ultimate objectives such as its contribution, namely to: (2.1)- the individual beneficiaries’ LLL, professionalisation, employability, flexibility and mobility in particular, and their socio-professional promotion in general; (2.1)- the development of learning-path fluidity and complimentary between formal and non-formal learning, (2.3)- improvements in the mode of human resource development and management for the employers.

4.1 Performance in Terms of Accessibility Flow

On the whole, the VAE has gradually gained during the last two decades an increasing real welcome and interest, particularly from individuals with insufficient initial formal qualifications. Since its creation in 2002, there has been a considerable increase in demand, especially from less qualified individuals seeking to take up this offer of a ‘second chance’ and to progress towards a higher level of qualifications. A total of over 428,928 certifications were awarded by different accredited certification awarding bodies connected with different State ministries during the period 2003-2019. These awarded qualifications which are national certifications (State diplomas) represent about 85% of all qualifications awarded via the VAE system. Certificates and titles awarded by the chambers of commerce, the public or private institutions under their own names and by the social partner such as the vocational qualification certificates (*CQP-Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle*), are not covered by the statistical data centralised through the State ministries. The VAE accessibility flow development since 2002, allowed each year 25,000 VAE candidates on average to benefit from a full validation of the targeted qualifications with an immediate access to certification. In 2019, out of 55453 pre-admitted validation requests at different accredited certification bodies connected with all the State ministries, 36,094 were assessed by the VAE jury leading 21,888 VAE candidates obtaining a full validation and immediate access to certification. About 94.3% (20,641 out of 21,888) of all these obtained qualifications through the VAE are awarded through accredited certification bodies

connected dominantly with four ministries, namely: the Ministry of national educational and higher education (15,142 awarded certifications), followed by the ministry of health and social care (4,522 awarded certifications) and the ministry of labour (977 awarded certifications). 69.2% of all awarded qualifications and titles through the VAE in 2019, were delivered by the ministry of national and higher education alone. They are distributed according to the candidate's gender, age group, employment status, initial qualification level and finally the form and level of the most requested certifications and titles via the VAE, as follows (DEPP, 2020; DEPP & SD-SIES, 2020; MEFR, 2017, 2020, 2021):

- First, according to the employment status, initial qualification level, age group and gender:
 - 80 % were working and only 19% were unemployed or job-seekers. Nine out of ten of them were initially holding a qualification at most equivalent to level 4 of the NQF (17% without any initial formal vocational qualifications);
 - 57.6% were part of the age group which usually includes individuals with enough working experience aged between 30 and 50 years old;
 - Over 2/3 of the beneficiaries were women, as the awarded certifications are connected with the activities of the service provision sectors (which are more gender biased in favour of women).
- Secondly, according to the most requested type and level of certification in a decreasing order of importance:
 - 42.5% of the NQF Level 5 certifications such as the most requested BTS (the high technician certificate) with 29.3%;
 - 24.8% of the NQF Level 4 certifications such as the dominating professional Bacculaureate with 16.1%;
 - 15.1% of the NQF level 3 certifications such as CAP (the professional aptitude certificate) with 14.1%;
 - 10% of the NQF Level 6 such as the dominant “professional Bachelor's degree” with 8.1%;
 - 7% of certifications of the NQF Level 7 and 8 such as the “professional Master's degree”.

4.2 Performance in Terms of Ultimate Qualitative Impacts

In terms of its contribution to the achievement of its ultimate objectives and missions mentioned above (i.e., the second set of performance evaluation criteria), the “VAE” has many advantages for the VAE beneficiaries, for the organisation and the integration between formal and non formal learning (Dif, 2007; Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009; Mathou 2019). First, concerning the socio-professional impact on the the individual beneficiaries, the “VAE” has many interdependent advantages, namely: (1)- the social recognition and promotion of work as means of access to lifelong learning and certification-based qualifications; (2)- the promotion of socio-professional mobility, where via a continuing validation of acquired experiential knowledge, skills and competences and access to further learning, the individuals are more able: (2a)- to improve the quality and the level of their formal qualifications and have ultimately more open possibilities for functional and promotional mobility; (2b)- to develop and diversify the portfolio of their skills and competences; (2c)- to adapt to changes in employment requirements and working conditions. Secondly, in connection with its impact on the educational and training as a whole, the VAE contributes to its professionalisation and bridging the link between formal, informal and non-formal learning through basically its following interdependent fundamental roles, namely: (1)- Widening the scope of diploma delivery modes, whereby the traditional formal educational and training activity is no longer the unique mode of accessibility to formal qualifications. As a result, the validation of prior acquired experiential informal and non-formal learning constitutes now the third pathway of accessibility to formal qualifications alongside with the formal initial vocational education and training (IVET, including apprenticeship) and the continuing vocational training (CVT) system; (2)- Establishing, consequently, a new

dynamic and more coherent relationship between occupational activities and formal modes of certification; (3)- Facilitating the creation of a real self-initiated and directed matching between vocational education and training, employment requirements and the individual's needs for vocational identity and career development; (4)- Development of a learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between different components of the educational and training system as a whole. Thirdly, for the employer, the “VAE” regime constitutes a new external indicator for human resources evaluation and development within the organisation. It is more objective performance indicator than the traditional internal performance evaluation procedures. Through a process which combines both "occupational referential" and "certification referential" standards, the organisation can develop a system which allows for the identification of reliable criteria to be used in optimising its recruitment/training policy and career development schemes for its employees. Always as complementary tool for human resource development, a company may also undertake the piloting of a collective VAE project for a group of its individual employees targeting the same or different certifications connected with the field of its activity (Beaupère at al., 2020; Mathou, 2019).

However, in spite of all these identified roles of the regime in favour of beneficiary individuals, employers and the educational and training system as a whole, the VAE is still not a shortcoming free instrument in practice (Dif, 2007; Dif, Hearud & Nkeng, 2009). First, VAE is still not a "pure" inclusion system as only 17% of VAE candidates obtaining full validation in 2019, were not initially holding any formal qualification. This is in spite of the encouraging measures undertaken during the last decade such as: (a)- extending via the the 2014 Act of the 5th March, the VAE accessibility to individuals without formal vocational qualifications by taking into consideration, in addition to their prior experiential non-formal and informal learning, certain prior workplace training periods undertaken within the framework of VET and labour market inclusion instruments; (b)- reducing, via the 2016 Act of the 8th August, the required accessibility period of prior experiences from three to only one year. Secondly, it does not practically cover all the fields of work-related learning. Some highly institutionalised and powerful “corporatist-type of occupational identities” are still rigid and not open to the implementation of the VAE system. This case can be found, for instance, in the medical, paramedical and pharmaceutical sector.

5 Conclusions

This investigation into the development and role of the VAE in the French context, especially since its reform through the Social modernisation Act 2002 under the present acronym “VAE”, allows for underlining the following basic outcome and concluding points: First, the VAE candidates' access to the formally awarded qualifications referenced within the NQF directory (RNCP) has been observed to register an important development, especially since the launch of the implementation of the main reform undertaken within the framework of the 2002 Act, by allowing each year about 25,000 VAE candidates on average, to benefit from a full validation with an immediate access to certification. Secondly, the VAE has also been observed to contribute throughout its development especially during this period to contribute to the promotion of professionalisation and bridging the link between the formal learning tracks and experiential informal and non-formal world-wide learning namely through the following roles: (a)- widening the scope of certification delivery modes within a unique common ground formal qualification and certification framework; (b)-establishing a new dynamic and more coherent relationship between occupational activity and formal modes of certification awarding; (c)-contributing to a competence-based learning outcome curricular modularisation in VET and higher education; (d)- facilitating the creation of a real self-initiated and directed matching between vocational education and training, employment requirements and the individual's needs for occupational identity and career development; (e)-development of a learning path-fluidity and

complementarity within and between different components of the educational and training system as a whole and work related experiential learning; (f)-reinforcing the quality assurance and the formative dimensions via the VAE working in practice and the effective implementation of the procedural requirements embedded in the assessment and the validation process undertaken by the VAE jury. Thirdly, the VAE” has also been observed to constitute for the firm, a new external indicator for human resource performance evaluation and development.

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