



# How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

France – country report



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This country report was composed as part of a larger study on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The country reports of Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as well as the summary of the study both in English and German, and finally the complete publication (in German only) can be found at

[www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe).

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## Introduction

France first introduced legislation to support validation of prior learning in 1984. This system, which is referred to as validation of learning and experiences, or “Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience” (VAE) has evolved significantly over the past 30 years. VAE procedures, which recognize individual rights to validation of non-formal and informal learning, are now embedded in all certificate-granting agencies, and may also be followed for industry-specific certificates. Successful applicants may earn partial or full certification<sup>1</sup> through the VAE procedure.

The definition of learning outcomes (what learners know and are able to do) for general, vocational and tertiary education has also been important for the development of VAE. These learning outcomes are tied to the National Qualifications Framework, which sets out eight qualification levels, and includes expected learning outcomes for each level. Partial or full certification may be awarded based on evidence that the applicant has achieved the necessary outcomes.

France has made considerably more progress in defining outcomes than has Germany. Nevertheless, the notion of learning outcomes is not without controversy in France. Over the last two decades, a number of critics have charged that these approaches are purely instrumental, and reduce learners to economic beings rather than empowering them in a holistic way. These debates are quite similar to those in Germany, where there is a deep tradition of “Bildung” (i.e., the idea that education should support both personal and cultural maturation).

In spite of these controversies, successive national governments in France have consistently supported VAE, and the system has evolved and grown over time. Policy makers have seen VAE as a way to promote professional and social mobility, and individual motivation for further learning, all of which have a positive impact on the economy.

The following sections explore the evolution of the French VAE system. While there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed, it is clear that the VAE is firmly anchored in the French system.

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<sup>1</sup> In French the English word ‘qualification’ is translated by ‘certification’ or ‘certificate’ which can be a diploma, a degree or another type of qualification (specific validation of some competences). The French word ‘qualification’ means ‘skills’ or ‘skills’ level and doesn’t refer directly or necessarily to a diploma or degree or another type of certificate.. That’s why for example the national qualification framework is named in French ‘Répertoire national des certifications’.

## 1 Initial situation

In May 2004, in recognition of the crucial importance of learning outside formal training contexts, the European Council proposed a set of common European principles for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning. These principles identified issues that are critical to develop and implement systems and methods of validation (Council of European Union 2004).

A 2008 report to the Prime Minister evaluated the implementation of VAE, and listed positive factors and the main obstacles to overcome (Besson 2008). The report recommended improvements to (Merle 2008):

- Information and support for VAE candidates
- Clarity and accessibility to the system of certification
- Conditions for developing recognition of informal competences within the firms.

The report also recommended that the specific needs of people with low levels of formal qualification be taken into account more clearly. The Secretary of State for Employment established a working group to follow up on these recommendations.

On the basis of the 2009 Law on Lifelong Vocational Training, the French government set up a program to develop the key competences of unemployed workers, 16-25 year old youth without qualifications, and workers currently in the workforce. Key competences include literacy, basic IT skills, etc. These courses are provided free of charge upon request. In 2010, 800 municipalities offered such courses and there were about 45,800 participants (for more information see [www.emploi.gouv.fr](http://www.emploi.gouv.fr), accessed 16.12.2014).

The period 2008-2009 now appears to have been the golden age for studies and debates on VAE. However, since 2009 the growing unemployment rate among 18-25 year-olds, who are not in the age group most directly concerned by VAE, has been considered as a more urgent priority.

Indeed, the problem of youth unemployment is likely more serious in France than in Germany, as the general demographic situation is quite different. In France, the natural rate of population growth has been among the highest in Europe over the last 10 years (Eurostat 2014). In 2012, the population grew by 3,8 percent. To some extent, the main challenge has therefore been to increase the general level of education and to decrease the number of early school leavers, rather than to improve the VAE system for older workers. These factors might partially explain the fact that in the recent years, VAE has not been a very high priority on the political agenda of French governments.

## 2 Vocational training and informal learning in France: characteristics and concepts

In France, vocational certificates are delivered through four different pathways:

- Initial vocational education in schools, primarily administered by the Ministry of Education, but also other ministries (Agriculture, Health and Social Affairs, National Defence, etc.) and Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Chambers of Trades and Crafts (“Chambres des métiers et de l’artisanat”) and Chambers of Agriculture.
- Apprenticeship
- Continuous vocational training (CVT) organized by ministries (mainly Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry of Industry), local authorities (regional councils), Chambers of Commerce and Industry, industry branches and enterprises themselves.
- Recognition and validation of informally acquired competences: “validation des acquis de l’expérience” (VAE) since 2002.

The network monitored by the Ministry of Labour also delivers certifications referred to as “titres professionnels” (which are different from educational degrees but are nevertheless registered in the French national framework of qualifications). Private sector organizations deliver vocational qualification certificates (“certificats de qualification professionnelle”). The different industrial branches validate competences related to specific tasks or responsibilities and award certificates directly. The requirements are defined in agreement with the trade unions at branch level (“convention collective”). However, while the “titres professionnels” awarded by the Ministry of Labour are recognized at national level and registered in the national qualification framework by the National Commission for Vocational Certifications (CNCP), industry-awarded certificates are not.

Thus, if we add all diplomas awarded by the ministries and other public or semi-public bodies, the “titres professionnels” awarded by the Ministry of Labour’s network and the “certificats de qualification professionnelle” delivered by industry branches, there are about 8,000 vocational certifications delivered in France. These include more than 600 vocational diplomas or other types of nationally recognized certifications. Of these, more than 200 specialities lead to a CAP, and more than 80 lead to “vocational baccalauréat” specialities which are administered by the Ministry of Education (for more information see the portal for Education players [www.eduscol.education.fr](http://www.eduscol.education.fr), accessed 15.12.2014).

It should also be noted that the particular pathway(s) followed are not indicated on the certificate. This is particularly important for certificates earned through VAE, as they may not otherwise be held in the same esteem. Indeed, VAE certificates have exactly the same value as those awarded to participants in formal education and training programs.



## 2.1 Initial vocational education

In June 2000, all current legislation concerning education was consolidated in an overarching Education Code (“Code de l’Education”). Schooling in France is compulsory from the ages of 6 to 16; about 99 percent of children also attend pre-primary school from the age of 3 and 35 percent from the age of two. Priority access is given to children from disadvantaged social backgrounds, in particular, those from “zones d’éducation prioritaire” (priority educational areas).

Following their four-year lower secondary education (known as “college”), students who wish to follow a vocational pathway may choose between a “lycée général et technologique” (LEGT), a vocational stream within a senior high school, which is called a “Lycée professionnel” (LP) or an apprenticeship, with time shared between an enterprise and an apprentice training centre (“Centre de Formation d’Apprentis”, or CFA).

At the end of the first year of upper secondary school, those students following the LEGT pathway must choose between a general academic stream, a vocational stream or a technological stream. The vocational stream, which is offered either in a vocational upper secondary school (“lycée professionnel”) or through apprenticeships, consists of two-year programs leading to a first level vocational degree called a certificate of vocational ability (“Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle”, or CAP). A separate three-year program leads to a vocational baccalauréat (“baccalauréat professionnel”). The vocational baccalauréat was created in 1985 in order to increase the qualification level of workers.

The general academic stream as well as the technological stream may lead to a general or a technological baccalaureate (“baccalauréat général” or “baccalauréat technologique”) which are both prepared in a LEGT.

The distinction between the technological and vocational streams is a feature unique to France and countries influenced by the French system (e.g. French-speaking African countries).

- The technological stream prepares students to go on to higher-level technological education following the technological baccalauréat. Students may obtain an ISCED 5 level technological degree in two years in an “Institut Universitaire de technologie (IUT)” or in a post-baccalauréat high school – “Section de Technicien Supérieur (STS)”.
- The vocational stream prepares students to enter the Labour market following the two-year CAP degree or the three-year vocational baccalauréat degree (prepared in a lycée professionnel, or through an apprenticeship). There are about 200 CAP specialities and about 80 specialities for the vocational baccalauréat. Both degrees can also be obtained through continuous vocational training or the VAE. There are also some complementary one-year degrees following the CAP, which facilitate the adaptation or induction to a specific job.

An increasing proportion of students following the technological stream go beyond an ISCED-5 degree in order to obtain a vocational bachelor's degree ("licence professionnelle"). This is mainly a result of the License, Master, Doctorate (LMD) system established at the European level (Bologna process). Similarly, in the vocational stream, an increasing proportion of students (about 20 percent) attend higher technological education in an "Institut Universitaire de technologie" (University Institute of Technology, or IUT) or at the upper school level, the "Section de Technicien Supérieur" (STS) (Upper Level Technician Section) following the "vocational baccalauréat" in order to obtain an ISCED 5 technological degree and then, for a minority of students, a vocational Bachelor's degree ("licence professionnelle"). But it is more typical for students following the vocational stream to obtain these tertiary degrees through continuous vocational training or VAE after having gained some work experience.

In the vocational stream, studies in both the "lycée professionnel" (LP) and the apprenticeship streams include periods of theory-based learning and experience within an enterprise. In the LP courses, there are compulsory periods of workplace training lasting between 3 and 10 weeks each year, depending on the diploma and the speciality.

The vocational diplomas (CAP and "vocational baccalauréat") are nationally recognized. They are defined and updated every five years by the competent public authorities and in co-operation with trade unions and employers' associations within consultative professional commissions ("Commissions Professionnelles Consultatives", or CPC). Within the Ministry of Education, there are 14 CPCs corresponding to broad sectors of economic activity (for example, metallurgy, food industry, tourism). Each CPC has 40 members from 4 different categories, including trade unions, employers' associations, public bodies and individuals selected for their specific competences ("personnalités qualifiées"). There also CPC run by other ministries, including the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Sports, and so on.

Over time, qualification levels of young people leaving school to enter the Labour market have increased. A survey carried out in 2013 by the CEREQ (the Center for study and research on employment and qualifications) analysed the situation of the 700,000 young people who left school in 2010, based on a sample of 33,000 individuals (including from overseas departments) (Barret et al. 2014). Despite the overall increase of the level of qualifications, the proportion of those leaving school without any qualification remained relatively high in 2010 at 16 percent (as compared to 18 percent in 2004). About 20 percent participated in apprenticeship training, with an increasing proportion of apprentices obtaining a tertiary level degree. Because of the economic context, about one-third of the 2010 cohort was still looking for a job after three years, which is the highest percentage ever. Also, 48 percent of individuals without any qualification were unemployed (as compared to 32 percent in 2004). This group has been hit harder by the economic recession than at any previous time. Among those with a CAP, 32 percent were unemployed in 2010 (as compared to 17 percent in 2004) while 20 percent of those with a vocational baccalauréat were unemployed (13 percent in 2004). Individuals with a tertiary technological degree have better job opportunities: 15 percent of those with an ISCED 5 degree ("Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie" – DUT, a technical degree obtained after 2 years of higher education but within university or "Brevet de Technicien Supérieur" – BTS, a technical degree obtained after 2 years of higher education, within post-baccalaureat classes of an upper secondary high school), and 10 percent of individuals with a vocational bachelor's degree ("licence professionnelle") were unemployed. This is close to the situation of business school graduates (nine percent unemployment rate). With respect to job opportunities, engineering school graduates fare the best, with a four percent unemployment rate.

A 2010 CEREQ survey, based on a sample of 25,000 individuals who had left the school system in 2007, showed that the area of speciality has a major influence on job opportunities (see also Arrighi 2012). The rate of unemployment is particularly high (about 40 percent) for those with a secondary vocational degree in fields like clothing/textile, office work or sales. On the other hand, the unemployment rate is very low in the fields of health (only three percent) and social work (12 percent) due to increased demand. Such observations have led to the suppression of some degrees at CAP level and in some sectors requiring higher-level degrees (vocational baccalauréat, BTS or DUT), such as office assistant or sales jobs.

Because employers appreciate their work experience, learners who participate in apprenticeship programs and who pass the final examination appear to have better job opportunities than those who have followed the purely academic pathway, even though they receive the same certification. This is particularly true for those searching for their first job.

Many political measures have been taken over the last 30 years or so to increase the attractiveness of apprenticeships. For example, it is now possible to earn tertiary education degrees at ISCED levels 5 and 6 (engineering diploma for example) through apprenticeships. Young people in apprenticeship programs must be between 16 and 25 years old. They are considered as workers under the Labour Code (“Code du Travail”) and are paid a salary (typically with a two-year employment contract). As this type of initial training is particularly effective for finding a job, the French Government has recently developed new financial incentives for employers to recruit more apprentices.

While the Ministry of Education is the major provider of vocational and technological education, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Chambers of Commerce and Industry (“Chambres de commerce et d’industrie”), Chambers of Trades and Crafts (“Chambres des métiers”) and Chambers of Agriculture also run vocational schools or apprenticeship centres.

Provision of initial vocational education is a shared competence between the state, regional councils (there are 26 regions in France, including 4 regions overseas) and Chambers of Employers (representing employers of various economic sectors, including business, agriculture, craft industry and trade, and so on).

## **2.2 Adult education (continuing education in a lifelong perspective)**

The present continuous vocational system in France was basically created by the Act of 1971. This system organizes continuous vocational training (CVT) in a lifelong learning perspective (“éducation permanente”). It has been improved and further developed frequently over the years, notably through the laws of 2002, 2009 and 2014. CVT covers individuals already in employment (public and private sectors, including self-employed) as well as those seeking a job.

Funding for CVT is provided by companies (41 percent), the state (35 percent), regions (14 percent), other public and private institutions and households (10 percent). Every enterprise or non-profit organization must finance CVT based on a mandatory percentage of total wages paid, and depending on the size of the enterprise (this is 0,55 percent for small companies employing fewer than ten persons; 1,6 percent for companies employing more than 20. The Act of March 2014 has modified the rate of these contributions and left more autonomy to the enterprises in financing training courses). The self-employed have also access to training. They are required to contribute to funding by paying a mandatory contribution to a State-approved agency.

This financial contribution supports various elements defined by the law, such as, enterprise training schemes, contracts for “professionalisation”, individual leave for training (“congé individuel de formation”), and individual training rights (“droit individuel de formation”). A recent (2014) law replaced the latter with a system of personal training credits (“crédit personnel de formation”), and employee-initiated VAE procedures. In most cases, payments are made to special institutions “Organismes paritaires collecteurs agréés” (OPCA) which are accredited to collect CVT funds. They are organized at national and regional levels and for each professional branch and at an interprofessional level.

Under certain conditions, job seekers can receive funding for training. For young people aged 16-25, training may be undertaken through various schemes, including special employment contracts for professional upgrading, training courses provided by the state (for example, by the Ministry of Education) or the regional councils, or by the national unemployment insurance system.

Training courses for adult education are offered by various bodies. There are more than 15,000 providers, of which 95 percent are in the private sector (companies of all sizes), non-profit organizations (associations) or individual providers. Public and semi-public bodies represent only five percent of the total number of providers, but they train about 20 percent of individuals and earn about 25 percent of the total income generated in this sector of activity.

The main public and semi-public providers of CVT are:

- The Ministry of Education through institutions specialized in CVT called GRETA (“groupements d’établissements scolaires”, or groups of educational establishments) which prepare to qualifications at ISCED levels 3, 4 and 5, and through universities or other higher education institutions (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), or the National Conservatory of Arts and Trades, and the, “Grandes Écoles”) for training at ISCED 5, 6 and 7 levels.
- The National Association for Adult Training known as AFPA (“Association Pour la Formation des Adultes”), which has a network of 215 centres across France. The centers prepare job-seekers and employees for 280 vocational qualifications (“titres professionnels”) recognized by the Ministry of Labour and by the CNPC. The AFPA works with firms, local authorities and “Pôle Emploi” (the public administration in charge of dealing with the unemployed). “Pôle Emploi” was founded in 2008 by bringing together “l’Agence Nationale pour l’Emploi” (ANPE) (the National Agency for Employment) and the ASSEDIC (Associations for employment in industry and commerce) that were in charge of collecting unemployment contributions and paying unemployment allowances. The main role of AFPA is to design training modules with employer and union representatives. It also plays an important role in providing advice on VAE including counselling for individual candidates and helping firms to design and implement VAE procedures for their staff.
- The schools run by Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CCI), in particular many business schools (including top ones like HEC, ESSEC or ESCP Europe) all over France, but also engineering schools, and schools in various domains, such as cooking, photography, etc. The Chamber of Commerce of Paris-Ile-de-France, for example, runs 24 schools preparing about 500 qualifications, which are open to CVT and VAE. They also have special services to help candidates with VAE procedures. The schools run by Chambers of Craft, Industry and Trade (“Chambres des métiers et de l’artisanat”) and Chambers of Agriculture also have services to help VAE candidates.
- The Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), which has 150 campus and serves about 90,000 trainees every year. CNAM offers about 500 diplomas or vocational qualifications. It also proposes an interactive website for those who intend to present their candidacy for a validation and recognition of informally acquired competences through a VAE procedure.

All economic sectors also offer opportunities to obtain vocational certification, either through training organized within the enterprises themselves, or through institutes or other bodies financed by the professional federations. For example, for the banking profession, the “Institut Technique de Banque” offers many training courses offering upward mobility for bank employees. These courses can be organized as part of a VAE procedure, for example in order to complete a partial validation of prior learning.

Vocational qualification certificates (“certificats de qualification professionnelle”, or CQPs) can be issued within each industry branch as a result of a collective agreement between employers and trade unions. These CQPs are not necessarily related to the French National Qualification Framework and they are not automatically classified in the National Register of Vocational Qualifications (“Répertoire national des certifications”), while the “titres professionnels” delivered by the AFPA and the Centres accredited by the Ministry of Labour are automatically taken into account by the CNCP as long that they have been designed by consultative commissions (CPC) including representatives of employers and trade unions. For any of these, individuals may earn partial or full certification through a VAE procedure.

The Ministry of Labour does not provide training courses itself, but it plays a major role in the AFPA, accredited centres, regional directorates of Labour and local territorial units of the ministry for the organization and delivery of “titres professionnels”, and in the implementation of VAE with regional councils and the regional and local “Pôle Emploi”. The “titres professionnels” are relevant for any individual who has left school, is looking for a job or is already employed (including individuals without formal qualifications, individuals who wish to have their experience validated to obtain a promotion, those who have been fired and are looking for a professional reconversion). These “titres professionnels” are for jobs in all industry branches, such as manufacturing, commerce, building, tourism, transport, etc.

There are also training schemes organized by public or semi-public bodies that do not award certifications. Their goal is to facilitate Labour market integration or reintegration of people with no qualification or an obsolete qualification or otherwise meeting particular difficulties.

The key competences scheme consists of tailored training modules designed to help individuals to master basic competences such as literacy, numeracy, digital know-how or a foreign language. It concerns job seekers between the ages of 18 and 25 who are no longer in the school-system, employees in work reintegration schemes or in subsidized employment contracts.

### 3 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: a heterogeneous population

The population of persons with low levels of formal qualification includes various categories of individuals:

- Immigrants who do not speak the French language and who did not attend school in France
- Individuals with low levels of literacy who have attended school in France for at least a year, but who have not mastered basic literacy and numeracy competences
- Individuals who dropped out of school before the age of 16 (including some Roma children or children from illegal immigrant families) and who do not have a sufficient level of literacy, numeracy and/or digital skills necessary to meet basic employer demands.
- Individuals who stayed in school up to age 16 but who have not obtained a vocational qualification (at least a CAP)
- Individuals who completed their upper secondary studies without passing a “baccalauréat” or a vocational certification
- Individuals who passed a general “baccalauréat” and dropped out higher education without obtaining any vocational qualification
- Individuals who obtained qualifications in years past, but which are now largely obsolete due to of the evolution of the job functions in their specific domain of activity (often because of the increasing use of information and communications technology –ICT).

It appears that, as in Germany, there are differences among these sub-groups of individuals with low levels of formal qualification, both in terms of the level and quality of their informally acquired competences and in terms of their attitude towards education and learning.

#### 3.1 Overall level of education attainment of the French population

According to 2012 OECD data Indicator A1 (OECD 2014: 42) the percentage of the 25-64 year-old population having only attained level ISCED 2 is much higher in France than in Germany or the US:

*Table 1: Level of education attainment in percent of population 25-64 years old (source: OECD 2014: 42)*

	France	Germany	USA	Average EU (21)
Primary education	10	3	4	11
Lower secondary education	18	10	7	9
Total ISCED 1 and 2	28	13	11	20

Thus, it is more urgent to address the needs of formally low-skilled adult population in France than in Germany or the USA. Furthermore, the educational attainment level in France is under the average level in the European Union (i.e., across the 21 countries included in the OECD report), even though the actual level of education also depends upon the effectiveness of each education system. But the relatively mixed results of France on the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) over the last decade has shown that the French school system is not very efficient at

developing practical competences for working life, and confirms that this has a real impact on the competences of the adult population in France.

The dropout rate in higher education in France is deemed too high, but it is lower than the average dropout rate of the 14 European countries which participated in the OECD's Program for International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) survey (Schnepf 2014; OECD 2013): 10 percent in France, 30 percent in Italy (the highest rate), as compared to an average of 13 percent across the 14 European countries.

Of course, students who have dropped out of higher education or who do not have a vocational qualification are at a disadvantage as compared to those who have obtained an ISCED 3 or 4 vocational degree. However a recent study (Schnepf 2014), which analyzes OECD's PIAAC 2011 data, shows that attending one or two years of tertiary education, even without obtaining a degree, still provides a small advantage in the job market as compared to young people with no qualification and who have only completed upper secondary education. They also have easier access to further training courses or to VAE procedures.

For all categories of formally low-skilled adults, there are still some challenges in procedures for validating and recognizing non-formal and informal learning outcomes (these are described well in the German report and in the Cedefop study on European guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning).

The non-formal and informal learning pathways and processes can be so diverse that it is difficult to assess learning outcomes using a set of pre-defined common standards, which are, to a large extent, required if skills are to be validated at the same level as those acquired through formal education or training. This means that for granting partial or full validation of competences, individual experiences need to be taken into consideration. It is particularly difficult for teachers and other academic staff to grant a degree or certification based on assessment criteria different than those used in granting formal diplomas.

Academic staff are also often reluctant to use such a different assessment paradigm. To a large extent, this explains why the development of VAE in France has been rather slow.



## 4 Core elements of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning

The German report focuses on five core elements in its analysis of the relevance and effectiveness of schemes designed for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal competences or learning outcomes. These include: the legal basis, procedures and instruments, institutions, financial aspects, and support structures. In order to facilitate the comparison between Germany and France, the present study follows the same order.

### 4.1 Legal basis

France has comparatively long experience in recognition and validation of prior learning. The national government established a binding legal framework in 1984, allowing individuals to attend higher education courses without having obtained the usual required diplomas. The Act of July 20, 1992 further opened access to higher education courses for those without the usual prerequisite degree or only partial equivalence of tertiary education degrees (“validation des acquis professionnels”, or VAP).

The recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning through professional or other experience was established by the Social Modernisation Act of January 17, 2002 under the name of “Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience (VAE).” Under the 2002 legislation, anybody with at least three-years’ experience in any kind of activity (for example, professional or through volunteer responsibilities in a non-profit organization) has the right to undertake a procedure of VAE to validate informally acquired competences. Validation may lead to a certification recognized by the National Commission of Vocational Certifications: “Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle” (CNCP) (also established by the 2002 Act) or by another qualification recognized at the industry branch level. The national legislation has opened direct access to formal qualifications, particularly for individuals with low-level qualifications.

The recent law on vocational training (March 5, 2014) sets up a personal training account (“Crédit personnel de formation”, or CPF) for all individuals at least 16 years old who are either employed or looking for a job, and reinforces the flexibility to get a qualification through recognition of successive learning outcomes over time. One major goal of the law is to improve the accessibility to vocational training and VAE for individuals with low levels of formal qualification. The CPF replaces the former scheme called “individual right to training” (“droit individuel à la formation”, or DIF).

For individuals without any formal qualification, Article 6 of this law allows some experiences, such as responsibilities within a trade union or as an elected member of a local authority, as well as short periods of training, to be taken into account. Article 21 states that the regional councils must help job-seekers to fulfil administrative steps necessary to obtain a certification through VAE and to contribute financial support, along with the relevant local “Pôle Emploi” unit (this is, in fact, already the case in most regions).

Overall, France has an effective national legal framework setting out binding procedures for VAE. However, in a few very rare cases, the financial aspects may be an obstacle for the target group of workers with low levels of formal qualification.

Table 2: Summary table of the legal basis for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

Legal title	Subject	Requirement	Scope
Law No. 71-575 (July 16, 1971)	Organization of continuous vocational education in a lifelong learning perspective	N/A	National
Law No. 84-52 (January 26, 1984)	Tertiary education	Validation of professional experiences for the purpose of admission to courses in tertiary education	National
Decree No. 85-906 (August 23, 1985)	Establishment of the conditions for validation of previous studies and work experience for access to different levels of tertiary education	Same as Law 84 - 52	National
Law No. 92-678 (July 20, 1992)	Validation of work experience toward tertiary education diplomas	Same as Law 84 -52 and Decree 85 – 906	National
Law on Social Modernization (“ Loi de modernisation sociale”) No. 2002-72 (January 17, 2002)  Main implementation text, Decree of April 26, 2002	Adds a new provision to Article L 900-1 of the work code (“Code du travail”) regarding the right of any individual to get his or her informally acquired competences validated by a certification recognized by the National Register of vocational qualifications.	Minimum of three years’ experience required	National
Law No. 2009-1437 (November 24, 2009)	Addressing guidance and lifelong learning	Same as Law No. 2002-72	National
Law No. 2014-288 (March 5, 2014)	Vocational training, employment and social democracy Reinforces the possibility to obtain a qualification through successive validation procedures to recognize outcomes of non-formal and informal learning over time Establishes a system of training credits	To be established	National

## 4.2 Procedures and instruments

In this section, we describe the procedures and instruments used by the main institutions awarding certifications through VAE with a special focus on the Ministry of Education's network. This network consists of the "Dispositifs Académiques pour la Validation des Acquis", or DAVA), one within each of the thirty academies in the French territories (described in more detail below). These DAVA work in co-operation with the "groupements d'établissements scolaires" (GRETA), which prepare ISCED levels 3, 4 and 5 certificates, and with universities or other higher education institutions (the roles of the DAVA and GRETA are described in more detail below). We also analyse their relevance for the target group of individuals with low levels of formal qualification

All procedures for validation of informal learning outcomes are defined at a national level and are consistent with the four basic stages recommended at European level (Council of Europe 2014):

- 1) Identification of learning outcomes acquired through the individual's non-formal and informal learning.
- 2) Documentation of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning necessary to develop an application file. In particular, it is necessary to give evidence of three years' experience relevant to the diploma or other certification (legal admissibility of the application).
- 3) Assessment of these learning outcomes.
- 4) Certification of the results of the assessment in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.

From 2002 to 2012, about 250,000 individuals obtained a certification through a VAE process delivered by a ministry (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Culture). In 2012, among the 64,000 successful candidates, 76 percent were women. Of all successful candidates, 70 percent found employment and 70 percent applied for an EQF level 3 (CAP) or level 4 certification (vocational baccalauréat) (these are degrees tailored for persons with low levels of formal qualification) (Legrand 2014).

These figures have not changed much since the earliest years of VAE implementation. In 2006, 65 percent of the candidates applied for an EQF degree at level 3 or 4. The proportion of unemployed candidates was about one-third of the total (Labruyère 2006).

Other main European recommendations are also respected:

- Validation arrangements are linked to the national qualification framework: The Act of 2002 established the CNPC and the National Register of Vocational Qualifications at the same time as the VAE. All certifications validated by accredited bodies that are made after consultation with the Commissions (CPC), including employer and trade union representatives are automatically registered in the national qualification framework. Other (more specialized) certificates are delivered by bodies representing industry branches – certificates of qualification ("certificats de qualification") – may be proposed by the CNPC for inscription at the national NQF, but inscription is not automatic, as quality criteria must be respected.
- Information and guidance on the benefits and opportunities for validation are the first stage of any procedure. This is also the most crucial stage. The 940 specific units called "Points Relais Conseils" (PRC) for VAE give the first basic information to potential candidates and help individuals to understand what type of certification they should seek,

based on their experience. The list and addresses of these PRC can be found on the governmental website, [www.vae.gouv.fr](http://www.vae.gouv.fr). Advisors/counsellors within the education system (DAVA and GRETA), or the Ministry of Labour's network and AFPA, or other institutions (such as Regions, "Pôle Emploi", Chambers of Commerce and Industry, etc.) may also provide information on the benefits and opportunities for VAE, and also help determine what diplomas or other certifications should be targeted, given each individual's experience.

- Qualifications or partial qualifications obtained by means of the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences comply with agreed standards that are either the same as, or equivalent to, the standards for qualifications obtained through formal education programs. This aspect may create an obstacle, as any kind of standardized approach is not consistent with the aims and spirit of VAE in all cases.
- To a certain extent, synergies have been created between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, such as the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Credit Transfer System for higher education (ECTS), which have been adopted to facilitate mobility of students and learners throughout Europe. But, there is still much more to do in this respect.
- Each year, about 70 percent of VAE candidates apply either to the Ministry of Education or to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (Legrand 2014). The VAE procedure is the same in all ministries except the Ministry of Labour.
- A candidate who undertakes steps towards a VAE process in any ministry (except the Ministry of Labour) must:
  - Develop a file for admissibility ("livret de recevabilité" or "livret 1") which allows each ministry to check that all legal conditions are met: at least three years' experience linked to the certification being sought (the identification stage).
  - Develop a file describing informal learning outcomes acquired through experience ("livret 2"). In order to properly complete this step, the candidate is most often supported and advised by a certifying body or a training institution (the documentation stage).
  - To obtain either full validation or a partial one, have one's experience validated by a jury that includes professional representatives and teachers/trainers specialized in the field of the certificate sought. The candidate must prepare and, within five years, take additional tests or participate to additional interviews to obtain full certification (the assessment/validation and certification stages).

Employees can use a special leave for VAE, so they may prepare and take the validation tests.

As in Germany, there is also de facto recognition of experience and informally acquired competences within enterprises. Existing human resource management procedures (such as regular staff appraisals, skills assessments ("bilans de compétences"), interviews and talks ("entretiens professionnels"), skills portfolios, observation at work, etc.) have been carried out in France for a long time and further developed in recent decades. As is explicitly underlined in a recent Cedefop country report on validation of non-formal and informal learning in France, the "bilan de compétences" is not considered as a validation procedure, as it does not lead to the award a qualification" (Cedefop 2014b: 3-4).

For candidates applying to the Ministry of Labour, the validation procedure is a bit different. The candidate must develop and present a file synthesising and analysing his/her experience ("dossier de synthèse professionnelle"). The second stage involves the observation of the candidate in a simulated working situation. At this stage, the candidate may obtain a full validation and therefore the

vocational certification (“titre professionnel”) or a partial validation, with a certificate of vocational competence. If the applicant has been granted only a partial validation, he/she must complete validation requirements within the next 5 years to obtain a full certification.

For those applying through the Ministry of Labour the final interview with the jury is of course another important stage of the procedure. Under the Decree n° 2002-615 of 26 April 2002, at least 25 percent of the jury must include qualified occupational representatives (half employers and half wage-earners) and to the extent possible, an equal number of men and women. But within this general legal requirement, the composition of juries varies according to the awarding structures, the nature of the targeted diploma, the industry branch and the occupation. Most of the time, a jury includes employers, employees, trainers and teachers. But it never includes the employer or any other member of enterprise where the candidate works.

Juries take one of two approaches:

- An analysis of the candidate’s experience: all the tasks and responsibilities and the associated knowledge and competences are systematically compared to the description of learning outcomes described in the diploma (“référentiel du diplôme”). This approach may lead to a partial validation.
- A more holistic approach to assessment of the candidate’s experience, which takes the range of experiences into account, and which can often be more meaningful and consistent with the goals and spirit of VAE.

*Table 3: Advice from candidates who have obtained a complete validation (source: Barabel and Meier 2014: 242-243)*

“I entered the room. The jury was composed of five persons who presented themselves and their primary work responsibilities. I presented my school route and my professional experience briefly and then my application file showing the types of responsibilities and competences I had acquired. The last part is the most difficult: the discussion with the jury. One must show a strong personality. It is particularly important to demonstrate that one has a holistic approach to the job and its meaning. You need to keep in mind that the main objective is to make the jury aware the way in which you understand your responsibilities and duties and perceive the type of competences which are required to do it properly.”

“Before the jury interview, I presented my application file to trainers and coaches who simulated this type of interview. It was very useful.”

“One must be natural and sincere.”

“The interview was very different from oral exams in school or for the baccalauréat. It was much closer to a job interview.”

“One must know one’s application file and be able to justify completely what is written very well.”

Source: Survey of 100 employees having taken and passed a jury’s interview at the University of Paris-Est.

The VAE system has developed and grown over the years. Taking into account statistics provided by ministries delivering certification, about 250,000 people obtained validation and certification of informally acquired competences between 2002 and 2012. In 2012, 64,000 VAE applications were deemed acceptable, but only 48,700 candidates were actually assessed by a jury. Of these 28,700 obtained a diploma (full validation) (Legrand 2014). As has been noted, the main providers are the Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue (in this report, the two agencies are referred to simply as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour). But these statistics do not include certifications delivered by the semi-public bodies (Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Chambers of Agriculture, etc.) or accredited private institutions. In fact, one major drawback of the system adopted in 2002 is the lack of an inter-ministerial structure to monitor and evaluate the whole system. This is the result of a desire to leave some autonomy to the main stakeholders involved in the process.

In 2007, 2008 and 2009, a few evaluations on the implementation and impact of the VAE system in France were conducted. In particular, a survey of persons with low levels of formal qualification (organized by CEREQ, DARES and DREES) found that 87 percent of women, average age of 40, were looking for an EQF level 3 diploma (a “certificat d’aptitude professionnelle”: CAP) primarily to work in the social sector and in care for young children (Recotillet and Werquin 2008).

### **4.3 Financial structures**

The VAE is legally considered as being part of continuous vocational training (CVT). In the Code of Labour (“Code du travail”) an article of Part VI stipulates that the costs of VAE procedures be financed under the rules governing CVT.

Of course, the civil servants who manage the VAE system at national, regional and local levels are paid by the state or by regional councils or other public bodies. This is the case for staff within the DAVAs or within the VAE services in universities within the Ministry of Education, and those working within the Ministry of Labour. In this respect, the services provided by the public authorities are never charged at their full cost. However, the counselling, training and coaching service is not free, even for public bodies. According to the candidate’s status (employee, unemployed, volunteer worker) different financing schemes are available. The cost of a VAE procedure varies depending on the institution delivering the validation/ and certification.

The cost includes:

- The organization of the validation procedure (which depends on the type of diploma and the certifying body), registration fees for the application and its assessment for legal admissibility, organization of the jury meeting and payment of the jury members, administrative procedures, etc.
- The cost of the training/counselling/coaching which may vary with the needs of candidates and the targeted certification.
- In some cases, complementary training to complete a partial validation and obtain the full validation.
- Some expenses for preparing the application files (“livret 1” and “livret 2”): transportation, photocopying documents, telephone, etc.
- The opportunity costs of the time spent to the VAE procedure.

For example, in the Rennes Academy (“Académie de Rennes”), 10 hours of counselling and coaching provided by a GRETA (to prepare the application file (“livret 2”) describing the informally acquired competences during the professional or extra-professional experiences and the interview with the jury) is estimated at a cost of 700 to 1,000 Euros. But this amount varies from a few hundred to a few thousand euros — and is may be much higher for some diplomas and validating bodies (Barabel and Meier 2014: 126).

For an employee, the cost may be paid by the enterprise or by an accredited joint body, such as the OPCA (“Organisme paritaire collecteur agréé”, which is as part of the enterprise’s training scheme) and as part of each employee’s individual right to some continuing training (“droit individuel à la formation” or DIF). As the DIF was recently replaced by the Personal Account for Training (“Crédit personnel de formation”, or CPF, Act of March 2014), the cost of VAE will be allocated to this account in the future, and will follow specific conditions.

The cost of VAE can also be paid by the enterprise as part of the individual leave for training purposes (“Congé Individuel de Formation”, or CIF). The CIF allows any employee during his/her working life to attend training sessions, at his/her own initiative, independent of the enterprise’s training scheme (Code of Labour, Article L6322-1). The CIF and the DIF were replaced in 2014 by the personal training account “crédit personnel de formation”, also referred to as CPF. But the employee must meet certain conditions and present his request to his/her employer beforehand.

The employee can, under certain conditions, apply for payment by an accredited body (the OPACIF and FONGECIF). These organizations finance the CIF scheme through collection of mandatory contributions from enterprises. As a matter of fact, in the CPF and CIF mechanisms, the enterprise typically pays for his employee and is reimbursed by the OPCA, OPACIF, the FONGECIF, etc.

For an unemployed individual, the State, “Pôle Emploi” and the regional councils share the payment of the costs of a VAE procedure. The distribution between these structures depends on the region. For example, in the region of Bretagne (Académie de Rennes) the regional council pays the entire cost of the procedure for unemployed individuals. For all VAE candidates, the distribution of financial contribution is: regions: 30 percent; FONGECIF, OPACIF: 30 percent; OPCA: 30 percent; “Pôle Emploi” and individuals: 10 percent.

It appears that very few candidates have to pay a significant share of the costs of a VAE procedure: therefore the financial aspect is not the most important issue for the candidates, except for the complexity of the administrative steps required to get the payment in some cases.

## 4.4 Institutionalisation

The main providers of certification are public (ministries) and semi-public institutions (which includes a diverse range of organizations, such as AFPA, and to a lesser extent Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and other smaller organizations). Other public institutions that play a major role in the VAE arrangements include: regional councils, the “Pôle Emploi” network (under the Ministry of Labour) and the National Commission for Vocational Certifications (CNCP), which establishes and maintains the national register of vocational certifications (RNCP). Also, private stakeholders play an important role in the VAE system: enterprises, including those that are specialized in training, counselling and coaching, bodies at the level of industry branches, etc. These stakeholders contribute to VAE but there are no aggregate statistical data at national level for VAE. Aggregate statistics are available only for the ministries (Cedefop 2014a).

The three main providers of certification are at Ministry level:

- The Ministry of Education, which delivers about 700 different types of diplomas is the most important provider of certifications. Between 2002 and 2012, 129,000 diplomas were awarded through VAE procedures: 29 percent at the first qualification level („Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle” – CAP) and 42 percent at tertiary level. However, the share of VAE graduates remains low: in 2012 only 2 percent of all diplomas awarded were obtained through VAE procedures.
- The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, which is the second most important provider of VAE diplomas. In 2012, it received more than 16,000 applications: 40 percent obtained a diploma and 44 percent a partial validation (Legrand 2014). In this ministry, 96 percent of candidates were women, as most of the diplomas proposed correspond to jobs nearly exclusively occupied by women, such as care attendants, assistant nurses, child care workers, home carers, etc. 87 percent apply for a CAP diploma (EQF level 3).
- The Ministry of Labour, which in 2012 received about 6,300 applications. Of these, 4,800 were accepted, and 76 percent of this pool of candidates obtained a full validation and 12.5 percent a partial one (Legrand 2014). This ministry with its operational actors (AFPA and local units of the ministry working in relationship with local units of “Pôle Emploi”) in particular supports VAE candidates who are unemployed. 57 percent of the applications to this ministry are for unemployed individuals as compared to only 30 percent on average across all ministries.

A national quality chart for inter-ministerial use has been developed by the inter-ministerial committee for VAE; it applies to the Ministry of Education and the other ministries involved in VAE, chiefly the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. In addition, transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks are in place to support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools.

VAE procedures are primarily managed by the DAVA and AFPA, but other agencies may also be involved. In case of the qualifications awarded under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education this task is delegated to 30 Académies in the French territories (also known as “Dispositifs Académiques de Validation des Acquis”, or DAVA).



The DAVAs work in co-operation with the school networks providing continuous vocational training (CVT) – the GRETA (“Groupements d’Etablissements d’enseignement”) – as well as with CVT services of universities. A GRETA is a structure which identifies competences and resources across schools in order to provide CVT to adults and participate in VAE procedures to counsel candidates. There are 210 GRETA in France and the whole network offers 6,500 places for adult courses. They manage the procedures and the juries that are in charge to assess the applicants and deliver total or partial qualification.

Trained VAE counsellors and teachers specialized in targeted certification can support the candidates throughout the procedure, starting with evaluation of the relevant experiences and determination of which certifications are most relevant, the preparation of the application file and finally, the preparation of the jury interview or observation of a simulated work situation.

In 2012, the national network of DAVAs dealt with 20,800 VAE application files. Two of three were successful in obtaining a full validation and another 22 percent a partial validation. The counselling services are not free but can be financed through various sources.

Fourteen DAVAs (out of thirty) have adopted a formal quality chart for their VAE management: three concurrent types of standards have been chosen: GRETA + (Ex: DAVA of Académie de Caen), ISO 9001 (DAVA Académie de Créteil), and VAE + (DAVA Académie de Toulouse). But all must respect the principles of the national chart set up by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour.

To illustrate concretely the organization and activity of the DAVAs, the Box below presents an example from the Académie of Rennes. Even though the VAE procedures are the same in all academies, the organization of the structures managing the system may differ slightly, as may sources for finance (the regional councils are more or less involved in the financial aid).

*Table 4: Activities of the “Dispositifs Académiques de Validation des Acquis” (DAVA)*

In the Académie de Rennes, the DAVA, is under the responsibility of the “Recteur” (chief administrative officer). The adviser in charge of CVT is run by a VET inspector, assisted by two pedagogical counsellors and three administrative staff who check the legal admissibility of candidates, i.e. their conformity to the legal conditions (three years of experience linked to the targeted diploma).

These administrative courts have a restrictive conception of the DAVA’s role. However, one can argue that it is in the interest of the candidate to be informed as early as possible if the application has very little chance at being validated.

The role of the DAVA is also to manage the support and training brought about to the candidates in designing their application file describing the experiences and the informally acquired competences (“livret 2”). This support is provided by about 40 counsellors who are designated each year by the “Recteur”. The DAVA organizes the counsellor training in cooperation with inspectors, who are specialists of the various vocational fields, to ensure they are up to date with the evolution of the description of occupations in terms of tasks, responsibilities and required competences.

The whole implementation of the VAE process is delegated to the GRETA network in the Académie: there are four GRETA (one in each department, or zone, of the region Bretagne). Support sessions are either individual or with a group of candidates. In any case, this support is considered as adult training, which is the usual activity of GRETA.

Some figures on the DAVA’s activity in 2013:

- Number of information requests: 2,209
- Number of files accepted: 1,003
- Number of supported candidates: 458
- Number of candidates presented to a jury: 634 (applying for 97 diplomas)
- 72 percent of candidates obtained a diploma (full validation)
- 24 percent of candidates obtained a partial validation

Therefore, only four percent failed to obtain any kind of validation; the DAVA’s policy to be more selective in the beginning of the process leads to a very low failure rate.

Other interesting data:- Two of three applicants are women

- 80 percent are employed
- 45 percent of the candidates are aged between 40 and 49

25 percent apply for a CAP (EQF level 3), 23 percent for a “vocational baccalauréat” (EQF level 4) and 28 percent for a “Brevet de technicien supérieur – BTS (EQF level 5).

At the national level, the Sub-directorate for Initial and Continuous Vocational Education in the Ministry of Education, is in charge of supervising VAE. One person is in charge of co-ordinating the DAVA's activity in the field. The centrally-developed and administered website: [www.education.gouv.fr](http://www.education.gouv.fr) describes the national activity related to VAE both in the DAVAs and in higher education (Universities and CNAM which took care of 4,000 applications in 2012). A report of the General Inspectorate of the French Ministry of Education recommended improved national coordination and observed that more than one person should be designated to fulfil this important task (IGAENR 2011).

The AFPA ([www.afpa.fr](http://www.afpa.fr)), which is under the umbrella of the Ministry of Labour, plays a major role. This national association for adult education, which received a State grant of 206 million Euros in 2012, includes 4,400 trainers and counsellors over France and provides training for more than 300 occupations.

The AFPA in particular supports unemployed individuals who are sent by "Pôle Emploi" as (these two agencies co-operate tightly). AFPA also works in permanent co-operation with the regional councils, which are in charge of organizing and financing adult education, and with the regional and local administrative units of the Ministry of Labour (including regional and departmental directorates of Labour and Vocational Training, or "Directions régionales et directions départementales du travail et de la formation professionnelle", or DIRECCTE and DDTEFP, [www.direccte.gouv.fr](http://www.direccte.gouv.fr)).

The main role of AFPA is to design and organize training courses to support applicants for vocational certifications proposed by the Ministry of Labour – the "titres professionnels".

## 4.5 Support structures

The first element of support is to provide basic information on existing procedures, legal conditions, possible financial aid, possible interlocutors, etc. In this respect, several websites have been improved over the last few years. Some of them have already been mentioned earlier in the present study (see [www.vae.gouv.fr](http://www.vae.gouv.fr), [www.francevae.fr](http://www.francevae.fr), and [www.cncp.gouv.fr](http://www.cncp.gouv.fr)). We have not identified any research on the effectiveness of these websites.

Each "Académie" also disseminates newsletters and flyers which include information about VAE. In addition, two recently published books provide practical information and advice for applicants to VAE (see Barabel and Meier 2014; Rivoire 2012). However, there is too little attention to persons with low levels of formal qualification. Most of the testimonies ("témoignages") concern individuals who have attained at least an EQF level 4 and target a higher education diploma.

Consultation and first guidance are easily available through the different structures of the Ministry of Education (DAVAs, universities, CNAM), of the Ministry of Labour and AFPA, and to a lesser extent, the other ministries.

Counselling and coaching by the Ministry of Education (DAVAs, GRETA, universities and CNAM), the Ministry of Labour (DIRRECTE, AFPA, Pôle Emploi) and Regional Councils are available to support all categories of candidates, particularly the unemployed, and also to provide some targeted support to low-skilled individuals, and individuals with disabilities. The counsellors help the candidate to prepare his or her file and the interview with the jury in charge of assessing learning outcomes and delivering partial or full certification.

Special attention and arrangements are provided for individuals in disadvantaged groups, in particular job-seekers who have low levels of formal qualification. The AFPA and the regional councils devote specific human and financial resources for helping these target groups. They automatically benefit from a skills audit in order to identify knowledge, skills and competences acquired through their life experience.

Provision is made for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors (counsellors, trainers and jury members).

## **5 Education policies on the recognition of informally acquired competences**

Since the establishment of VAP in 1984-1985 and its extension to VAE in 2002, the recognition and validation of informally acquired competences has developed gradually in France. It is now largely accepted by all the main stakeholders. Employers and trade union leaders agree that it represents real social progress, has increased motivation of workers and professional mobility, and has likely had positive impact on the economy.

More and more employers envisage establishing and implementing collective VAE schemes in their own enterprises. AFPA and the GRETA networks have already signed contracts with firms in order to implement VAE schemes specifically adapted to their needs for human resources management. A few large companies (such as Orange, the telecommunications company) have already implemented VAE schemes.

In fact, the stakeholders who are most reticent about VAE are education professionals, chiefly university teaching staff, who have had some difficulty in accepting new criteria for assessing and awarding diplomas. It has been relatively easier for teachers or trainers in the field of vocational training because they generally give more value to experience in real professional situations.

The main issue in France, within the context of the economic crisis and budget deficit, is to reduce the growing youth unemployment rate (16-25 year-olds) and at the same time, to reduce public spending. Therefore, VAE improvement and extension is not a top priority for the political agenda.

Nevertheless, the Act of March 2014 reinforces the possibility of obtaining a qualification through successive validation procedures to recognize outcomes of non-formal and informal learning over time. One major goal of the law is to improve the accessibility to vocational training and VAE for individuals with low levels of formal qualification. Another is the development of a quality chart for VAE and the gradual adoption of formal quality standards in the GRETA and AFPA networks. But apart from these initiatives, there are no current projects concerning the development of improvement of VAE in France.

## 5.1 Main positive elements

The legal framework may be considered as the first positive element of the VAE system in France. It clearly defines mandatory procedures at national level and affirms clearly that VAE is an individual right, which may be initiated by the individual. It also defines some procedures for financial aid to support candidates. The law delegates the competence and allocates funds for the award of diplomas and other certifications that are recognized and classified (using EQF standards) in the national qualification framework and by certain public and semi-public institutions.

The significant mobilization of the Ministry of Education networks, the Ministry of Labour and AFPA and “Pôle Emploi”, other ministries which share responsibility for VAE, of regional councils (which cooperate with all agencies and play a major role), and other bodies is also another positive aspect. In many cases, and in certain economic sectors, VAE procedures have effectively allowed low-skilled persons or persons who hold responsibilities that are higher than those corresponding to their formal qualification level, to improve their professional situation. This improves their motivation and effectiveness.

For low-skilled persons, the VAE schemes are particularly well adapted to the needs of women between 35 and 55 years of age who are working in the social sector (child care, home care, etc.) or other areas of the service sector. But in all cases for this target group, the procedure is too complex and they need effective support in designing and writing their application files (“livret 1” and “livret 2”).

## 5.2 Main negative aspects and difficulties

An important issue is the need to simplify procedures to obtain financial aid.

Another issue is the necessity to increase and improve the support to low-skilled persons. In the Caen Académie, for example, an effort to help candidates complete the required documents and the “livret 1” has significantly decreased the number of people who abandon the process during the first stage.

At the regional level, there is some concern about the number of jury interviews that need to be organized for very few candidates. Given the great number of diplomas and other certifications that may be targeted, the cost of organizing an interview for one or two candidates is very high. To address this, the DAVAs, for example, have started to regroup candidates in a few regions, and to conduct interviews through video conferences.

More fundamentally, certain experts think that the validation and certification system in France is based on an “adequationnist” approach to vocational diplomas. In Labour economics the “adequationnist” theories are based on the assumption that training should be adapted to predefined needs stated by the employers, while interactive theories assume that the supply of qualifications and skills has also an impact on the demand of qualifications and that in fact there is an interactive dynamic between supply and demand of qualifications over time. This is also relevant to VAE. This limits the scope of VAE as it is sometimes very difficult to establish a link between the learning outcomes required for different diplomas (“référentiel” of the formal diploma) and the informal competences acquired through successive professional and extra-professional experiences.

The VAE appears particularly well adapted to people who have had the same job for many years, but who do not have a formal diploma corresponding to their responsibilities. However, in this case the value added of VAE is not so important, in the sense that it is not as difficult to validate this type of experience as it is for more mobile workers.

Today, except for some occupations in the health and social sector, the VAE is only fully meaningful through the recognition of experience and competences as set out in modules (units), and articulating this recognition with training courses that then allow for a real professional upward mobility.

Finally, one difficult issue is in finding the right balance between two contradictory policy objectives:

- Make the French system of vocational diplomas and certifications simpler in order to make it more understandable at European and international levels.
- Leave initiatives to all stakeholders and training institutions to make the system more flexible and allow for more adaptability to the various needs of individuals and enterprises, which also increases the complexity of the French system.

## 6 Summary and prospects

The main issue to solve in order to improve the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning in France is to simplify the VAE procedures and to increase the counselling/coaching of candidates with a specific effort in favour of low-skilled persons.

One can accept the conclusions of the most exhaustive assessment of VAE, which was carried out in the Region of Bretagne in 2012 by the CEREP (Beaupère and Podevin 2012). Support and guidance from the beginning and through the post-jury interview is vital to help the candidates effectively acquire and use their certification for upward professional mobility.

Another priority should be to further develop training and professional development of members of VAE juries (validation practitioners).

As proposed in 2011 by the General Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education, there is a need to enhance the exchange of good practices and develop greater cross-fertilization across relevant initiatives.

National statistical data on funding, number of applicants, number of partial validations and full validations, including all involved stakeholders should also be improved.

## 7 Case studies: Practical consequences of the core elements

### **Kira**

Kira (30 years old, 2 children of 14 and 9) has obtained a lower secondary school leaving certificate (collège in France) but has not had any further education or training because she was busy looking after her children. She lives in a rural community, the nearest large town is approximately an hour away on public transport and there is a lack of nearby education opportunities and resources. This fact has also contributed to discourage Kira to get some further education. However, Kira has always done temporary work as a temporary cleaner in different medical practices and as a care worker in a nursing home amongst others. She received workplace induction training for these jobs but no recognised form of professional qualification.

### *Legal basis*

In France, Kira has the legal right to have her informally acquired competences through her working experience recognised and validated through a VAE procedure (“validation des acquis de l’expérience”), if she can provide proofs of her activity (pay bills, employers’ attestations).

### *Process*

In order to start a VAE procedure, Kira will ask information and first advice to a local specialised administrative unit called “Point Relais Conseil (PRC) en VAE”. The list of the 940 PRC and their addresses can be found on the governmental website: [www.vae.gouv.fr](http://www.vae.gouv.fr)

In order to have more advice to make a choice about the diploma or other type of certification that she should try to obtain, given her experience and competence, she can also contact local or regional units of various certifying ministries depending on the type and domain of certification: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, or Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

In all cases, she will get a support from the relevant certifying body. The procedure will be a bit different depending on the nature of the certification: diploma awarded by the Ministry of Education (for example in this case: CAP “Hygiène et propreté”), the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (ex: diplomas for personal care of elderly people) or the Ministry of Labour (“titre professionnel”).

In all cases Kira will have first to present a file in order to obtain legal admissibility of her request and then a second file demonstrating competences acquired through her experience that she will have to present and comment during an interview with a jury who is responsible to award or not the certification or a partial validation.

### *Financing*

The PRC or the relevant certifying body will advise Kira to obtain financial aid. If she is still employed, the cost of the procedure (including the leave she will have to take for some training) will be paid by her different employers (medical practices and nursing home) through the bodies collecting their mandatory financial contribution to staff training (OPCA or FONGECIF). In case of unemployment Kira would ask the Regional Council and “Pôle emploi” to share the payment.

### *Support*

In all cases, Kira will be able to ask for some support (advice, coaching and training) during the whole process until the interview with a jury. Depending on the choice of certification (diploma or “titre professionnel”) she will have the support of DAVA and GRETA, or of AFPA or another body agreed by the Ministry of Labour or by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

### **Bastian**

Bastian (29 years-old) lives in a little town in Normandy. He attended high school in a general lycée (upper secondary education) for one year before going to a vocational lycée where he obtained a certificate of completion of secondary education, but no formal vocational qualification. He then started studies to become an assistant nurse but he dropped-out after one year.

A few months later he managed to find a job in IT domain. He gained 4 years of professional experience in a large industry company where he was responsible for network management and coordination of IT service.

Following job cuts and outsourcing of IT services, he could work for one year for an external service provider with a 12 month fixed-term contract. When this contract expired, he could not find another job and he has now been unemployed for the past five months.

Bastian has acquired expertise and experience in managing a small team and in network management by working for nearly 5 years in this field. However he has no formal proof of these skills apart from his employers’ references.

### *Legal basis*

In France, according to the legal context, Bastian has the right to have his informal competences recognised and validated in order to obtain a certification included in the National Qualification Framework (RNCP) and classified according to the EQF levels.

### *Process*

Bastien can start a procedure of validation of experience (VAE). He can initially ask relevant information and first advice to a local unit of VAE information (“Point Relais Conseil en VAE”). He can find the list of addresses of these local units on the Government web site: [www.vae.gouv.fr](http://www.vae.gouv.fr)

Depending on his professional project and his non-formally acquired competences, he will be helped to choose the diploma or other type of certification that he wants to obtain, given his experience.

In order to get guidance, more support and advice, he can contact various bodies: the “Dispositif Académique de Validation des Acquis” (DAVA) at the “Rectorat” (regional unit of the Ministry of Education) or the local unit of the ministry of labour and/or AFPA.

Then, he will be able to ask for some support during the whole process which differs a bit depending of the certification that he is looking for: diploma awarded by the ministry of education, or a “titre professionnel” awarded by the Ministry of Labour. In the first case, he will be counselled and coached by a member of the DAVA or of a GRETA; in the second case he will be coached by AFPA or another body agreed by the ministry of labour.

In both cases he will have first to present a file in order to obtain legal admissibility of his request and then a second file demonstrating competences acquired through his experience that he will have to present and comment during an interview with a jury who is responsible to award or not the certification or a partial validation.



### *Financing*

The local “Pôle Emploi” agency will provide the relevant information to Bastian concerning the possible types of financial aid. As an unemployed person, most of the cost will be paid by the Regional Council and “Pôle Emploi”.

### *Support*

In all cases, he will be able to ask for some support (advice, coaching and training) during the whole process until the interview with a jury. Depending on the choice of certification (diploma or “titre professionnel”) he will have the support of DAVA and GRETA, or of AFPA or another body agreed by the ministry of labour.

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