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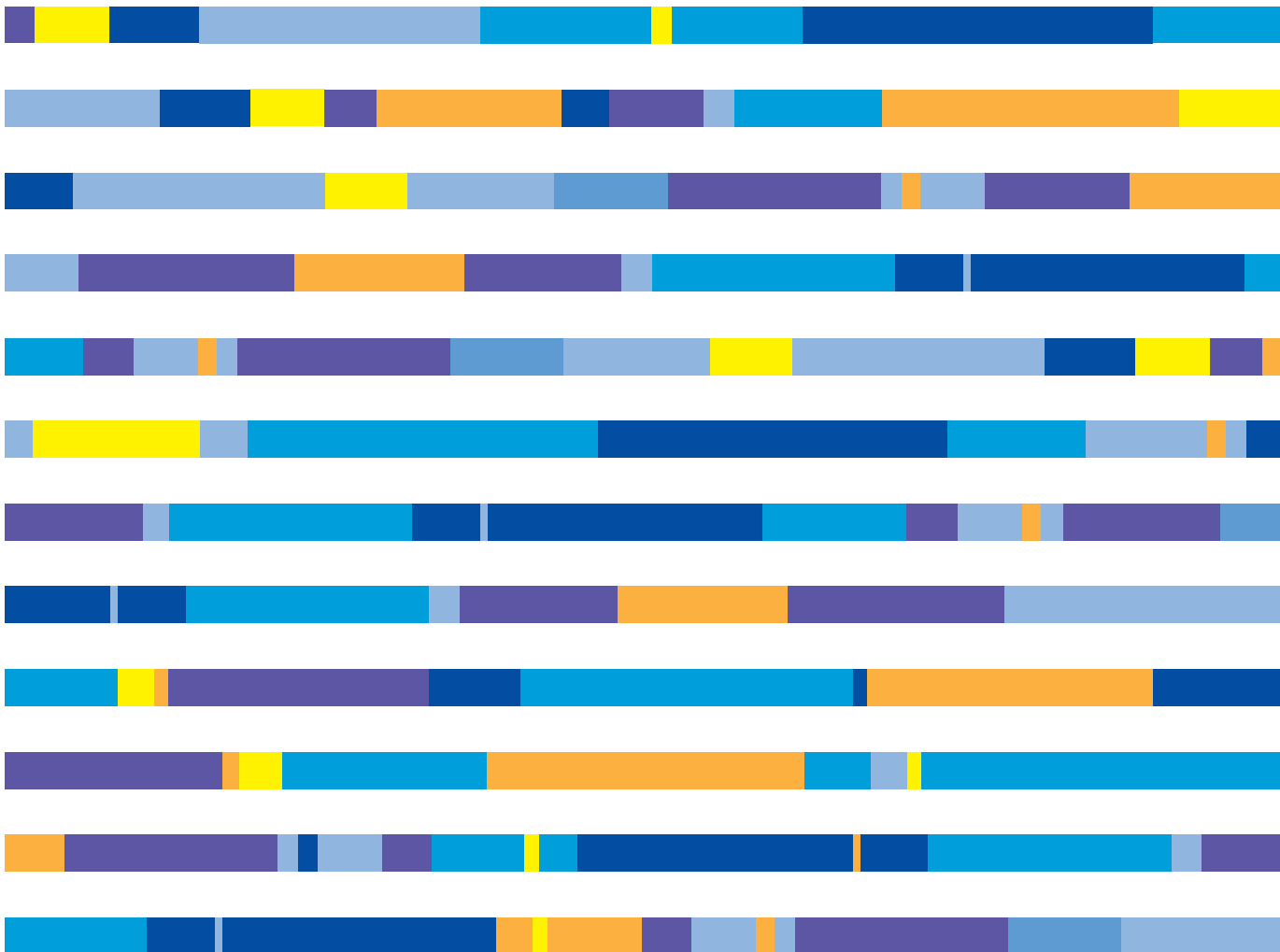
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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update

COUNTRY REPORT: **FRANCE**

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1 Introduction

Arrangements in France for the validation of non-formal and informal learning give the opportunity to those who have no qualifications in connection with the activities they have undertaken to obtain a level of qualification corresponding to their skills. France can be considered as a leading country in this area. *Validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE) has now been in place for 16 years. VAE has developed from a national perspective, strongly articulated to lifelong learning, training and employment policies. It is an integrated system, connected to the national qualification framework, the national directory of vocational qualifications (RNCP) which covers levels 2 to 8 of the EQF. The procedure is defined by law and decrees, ensuring consistency across sectors. It is now integrated in the Labour and Education code. Qualifications awarded through VAE have exactly the same value as those awarded through participation in formal VET.

VAE is a procedure that can lead to the award of whole or parts of qualifications with a vocational and professional orientation and purpose (*finalité professionnelle*) at all levels. VAE includes, by definition, the stages of identification, documentation, assessment and certification. In order to qualify, individuals must justify having exercised at least one year of activity directly related to the activities mentioned in the standards of the qualification they want to obtain.¹ The fact that VAE is strongly focused on certification (with its strong connection with the RNCP, the qualification directory) is considered to be a strength of the system. VAE is a fourth pathway to access qualification, alongside initial training, continuous training and apprenticeship.

Since the system was set up in 2002, over 330 000 people have obtained a qualification (awarded by one of the Ministries) through VAE (DARES, 2017). The VAE system grew rapidly from a quantitative point of view in the first years of its implementation. However, for public awarding bodies, VAE remains marginal compared to the awarding of diplomas obtained through initial training. Applications remain concentrated on a small number of qualifications, mostly in the health and social sector. Most importantly, a slight but steady decrease in the number of applicants has been observed across all Ministries (between 3 and 10%) since 2011. In 2016, about 23 400 candidates obtained a qualification (full validation) by VAE, 5% less than in 2015. It is important to bear in mind that these declining trends concern public bodies only; data are not available for other types of awarding bodies.

Efforts to encourage its use across a wider range of qualifications must be continued for further development of the system. VAE remains a demanding procedure, especially for candidates with low levels of qualifications. VAE requires not only the capacity to show evidence of previous experience, but also the capacity to reflect on past experiences and verbalise this analysis (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016; Doucet, 2015; Malaquin, 2013). In addition, the promotion of “collective VAE”² in companies is an interesting avenue for the development of the system.

Since 2012, two major legislative initiatives brought substantial changes which partly address the main problems affecting VAE. The Law adopted on 5 March 2014 broadened access to VAE, for instance for individuals who do not have a qualification level at EQF level 3, recognising as ‘experience’ training periods undertaken in a work

¹ It is therefore not possible to apply for VAE solely on the basis of learning outcomes from Open Educational Resources. However OER can be recognised by other procedures leading to course exemptions in the higher education sector. In addition to VAE, all individuals have the opportunity to undergo a “skills audit”, which will soon be integrated into the personal training account (CPF). The national system of VAE is far from summarising all types of practices aimed at recognising formal or informal learning and supporting career development.

² A VAE remains always an individual procedure even though it may concern a group of workers for whom the company is at the initiative of the VAE

context. It made the financing of VAE easier with the creation of a personal training account (CPF) and it strengthened support provided to candidates, clarifying the role of the various stakeholders involved.

Changes in 2016 with the new Labour Law (8 August 2016) have extended and deepened the changes introduced in 2014. In particular it goes further in terms of facilitating access to VAE, by reducing the three-year minimum duration of experience to only one year, by simplifying procedures and strengthening support to candidates. It also addresses problems that the 2014 Law did not touch upon, in particular the issue of partial validation. Many stakeholders underlined the loss of candidates following partial validations by the juries. With partial validation resulting in blocs of competences that are valid without a time limit, the articulation of VAE with training should be facilitated. Linkage between the personal training account (CPF) and VAE should be improved. With the implementation Decree that followed the new Labour Law (Decree of 4th July 2017), procedures will be shortened (maximum 12 months between eligibility and assessment session) and simplified (e.g. unique application file). The current government plan (Investment in competences) includes further actions to support candidates with EQF level 3 and 4. The impact of these recent changes remains to be seen.

A major weakness, which is still to be addressed, is the issue of the coordination between stakeholders considering the distribution of competences between the bodies financing the services associated with VAE (State, regions, public employment services (PES), companies, candidates). Governance is currently a weak aspect of the French VAE system, especially since the discontinuation of the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Development of VAE (CI-VAE) in 2009. Both the VAE system and the guidance and information system for individuals active on the labour market, as the vocational and training system itself, are indeed characterised by the high number of actors. The legal distribution of financial support also depends on the type of public (job seekers: regions, PES and personal training account; employees: companies and personal training account).

Any evolution of the system requires a legislative or regulatory change and a political and budgetary orientation of the government. This lack of coordination is also reflected in the absence of a centralised data collection and monitoring system. Therefore it is not possible to analyse, for each qualification awarding body and each region, the annual changes in the number of candidates at the various stages of the VAE course. The law of 5 March 2014 designated new coordinating institutions for vocational training at national and regional level (CREFOP and CNEFOP) bringing together the state, the regions and social partners. They are responsible for organising data collection on candidates' pathways obtained through a monitoring system which should feed into future decisions concerning further developments of VAE. These institutions have not yet taken on this coordinating role and work on the organization of this data collection allowing reliable diagnoses and decision-making aid. The new law on "The freedom to choose one's professional future adopted in September 2018 reorganizes the governance of vocational training. In January 2019, the CNEFOP and other organisms will be replaced by only one governing body, France Compétences, a national public body where the State, the regions, and social partners will be represented. The monitoring of the data collection on VAE is not defined yet.

NOTE: This report mainly deals with VAE, which means validation of non-informal and informal learning leading to certification. Many other forms of validation exist in France, for example the system of "commissions d'équivalence" which enables people who do not possess the requisite qualification to go through competitive exams leading to public jobs. One also has to keep in mind that most of the vocational continuing training programmes leading to national

qualifications are not considered as including validation although they often assume exemption of the requisite diploma or of part of the programme.

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

In France, the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning builds upon longstanding practices in the field of identification and recognition of prior learning and professional experience. The validation system, which is based on a clear legal framework, has taken shape in the framework of vocational training and labour market policies. Its legal base lies in book IV³ in the 6th part of the Labour code dedicated to vocational training (and in book III for the financial provisions). Its purpose is to give the opportunity to those who have no qualifications in connection with the activities they have undertaken to obtain a level of qualification corresponding to their skills.

A key milestone was the adoption of legislation in 2002, followed by various decrees, which created the current procedure known as validation of experience (*Validation des acquis de l'expérience* - VAE)⁴. The purpose of VAE is to obtain a qualification⁵. It can lead to the award of whole or parts of this qualification (*certification*) based on the knowledge and skills acquired through prior experience and learning in a variety of contexts.

VAE is defined as an individual right in France. In practice, one or more employers can implement, at their own initiative or on the suggestion of their professional branch or of decentralised services of the State, collective VAE projects for the benefit of a group of workers. These collective projects can also be implemented for job seekers; however, their applications are always assessed on an individual basis.

In order to qualify, **individuals must justify having exercised at least one year of activity** directly related to the activities mentioned in the standards of the qualification they want to obtain. VAE can be organised for a wide range of qualifications, not only those awarded or accredited by Ministries (vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications, including the higher education qualifications which are, in France, all considered to have a professional oriented purpose) but also sectoral qualifications

³ With a reference to Article L. 335-5 and L. 613-3 of the Education code, for a definition of the procedure.

⁴ Loi de modernisation sociale 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 (Journal officiel du 18 janvier 2002)

Loi de modernisation de la fonction publique 2007-148 du 2 février 2007 (Journal officiel du 6 février 2007)

Décret 2007-1470 du 15 octobre 2007 relative à la formation professionnelle tout au long de la vie des fonctionnaires de l'Etat

Décret 2002-1459 du 16 décembre 2002 relatif à la prise en charge par les employeurs des actions de validation des acquis de l'expérience et portant modification du titre V du livre IX du Code du travail (deuxième partie : Décrets en Conseil d'Etat)

Décret 2002-1460 du 16 décembre 2002 relatif au contrôle des organismes qui assistent des candidats à une validation des acquis de l'expérience et modifiant le titre IX du livre IX du code du travail (deuxième partie : Décrets en Conseil d'Etat)

Circulaire n°2003-127 du 01-08-2003 sur l'organisation de la validation des acquis de l'expérience (BO n°32 du 4 septembre 2003)

References in the Education code : Articles L 335-5 et suivants, Article L 331-1, Articles L 613-3 et suivants, Articles L 641-2) and Labour Code : Article L6111-1 (VD) , Article L6311-1, Article L6411-1 (VD) , Article L6422-1 (VD), Article L6422-10 (VD) , Article L6421-1 (VD), Article L6421-2 (VD), Article L6421-3 (VD), Article L6421-4 (VD), Article L6412-1 , Article R6422-11 (V), Article R6422-12, Article R6422-13 (V)

⁵ Article L. 6411-1 of the Labour code

recognised by social partners such as *Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle* (CQP) and others qualifications created by training organisations of private sector or consular chambers. **Any qualification listed in the national directory of qualifications, the *Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles* (RNCP) – except when it is linked to a ‘regulated profession’ (where activity made without the corresponding qualification is illegal) – must be accessible through a VAE procedure.** The qualifications awarded through VAE are exactly the same and have exactly same value as those awarded through participation in formal education and training.

It should be noted that in addition to VAE, other procedures linked to the identification, documentation and assessment of informal learning and non-formal learning exist:

- There is a mechanism for the recognition of professional and personal experience to grant access to a programme through exemption of the normal requirements; at higher education level, this procedure known as Validation des acquis professionnels et personnels (VAPP, initially “VAP 85”) was introduced in 1985⁶ and is still in place as of today;
- The skill audits or *bilan de compétences* (see Section 2.3) aims at the identification of skills and competences acquired by an individual through his/her professional pathway, without targeting a particular certification and without an assessment procedure. It is not in itself a validation procedure, the *Bilan de compétences* can still be the starting point of a validation process.
- Other types of competence portfolios developed outside of validation procedures also exist (See Section 2.3).

While the legal framework on VAE sets general parameters of the procedure, in practice the implementation of specific rules is under the responsibility of each authority awarding qualifications listed in the RNCP. This includes different Ministries (Ministries in charge of national education, higher education, agriculture, labour, culture, sports and youth, social affairs, health, defence), chambers of commerce, and chambers of trade and private training providers. Actual assessment procedures differ depending on the type of qualification targeted by the application and awarding authority.

The Law adopted on the 5 March 2014⁷ (followed by a Decree the same year) introduced a number of important changes to the VAE system:

- It broadened **access** to VAE to individuals who do not have a qualification level equivalent to level V (EQF level 3). It provided the option to include, in the calculation of the duration of their experience, certain training periods undertaken in a work context, based on the principle of the recognition of all forms of learning (formal, informal and non-formal).
- Access to training leave for undertaking validation was made easier for employees with temporary contracts (CDD).
- It introduced a new mechanism for the financing of vocational continuing training and then for VAE with an individual training account attached to the individual until retirement age. It also created an obligation for companies to carry out interviews

⁶ Décret n° 85-906 du 23 août 1985

⁷ Loi no 2014-288 du 5 mars 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000028683576>

Décret no 2014-1354 du 12 novembre 2014 portant diverses mesures relatives à la validation des acquis de l'expérience : <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2014/11/12/ETSD1417561D/jo>

every two years with their employees to review their professional development and inform them about VAE.

- The law emphasised the possibility for candidates to have access to **support** (*accompagnement*). The scope and methods of such support were defined in the decree of 14 November 2014. Such support, considered as a factor increasing the chances of success of the candidate, was not formally identified in the previous legal provisions. It clarified the role of stakeholders involved in VAE: the review of the admission of applications and the organisation of the assessment depend of each authority awarding qualifications, the support (*accompagnement*) for post-admission is organised by the region for job seekers.
- In addition, it clarified VAE procedures by formally introducing a stage for prior examination of the **eligibility** of applications. This eligibility check was already carried out in practice prior to 2014 to verify the length of the candidates' experiences and the relevance of the activities carried out in relation to the targeted qualification.
- Finally, the law included provisions concerning the organisation of statistical **monitoring** of VAE pathways, by the coordinating institutions in the area of employment, professional training and guidance, at regional and national level (see Section 5). The aim was to improve, on the one hand, the transparency of VAE-related activities; on the other hand, the goal was to obtain data on candidates' pathways in order to better inform the steering of the VAE mechanism.

Further legislative changes have been introduced since the 2016 Inventory.

In the context of the modernisation of public action launched under Presidency Hollande, and given the fact that VAE was considered under-utilised and not reaching its objectives (250 000 persons qualified in 10 years, against the objective of 60 000 per year), the then prime Minister M. Valls entrusted a mission to the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education to evaluate VAE policy in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, governance, access, quality and relevance. The mission was also to develop scenarios for the evolution of VAE.

Launched in December 2015, the evaluation of the validation of acquired experience was entrusted to a mission composed of members of the General Inspectorate of Social Affairs (IGAS), the General Inspectorate of National Education (IGEN) and the General Inspectorate of National Education and Research Administration (IGAENR). In October 2016, the evaluation conclusions identified the main weaknesses of the scheme and problems hindering the development of VAE and recommended a number of measures including:

- a simplification of the steps and formalities to be completed in order to engage in the system as well as shortening the duration of the VAE pathway;
- enhanced guidance and support to candidates to increase success rates;
- targeting VAE as a priority towards unemployed groups or those at risk of job loss, on growth sectors of activity or specific territories in order to make VAE a tool in the service of employment policy;
- the development of collective VAE projects in connection with employment areas.

In parallel to the work of the mission, the Law No 2016-1088 of 8 August 2016⁸ on work, modernising social dialogue and securing career paths was being developed. The law has brought several important modifications to the VAE system:

- The minimum duration of required experience was reduced, from 3 years to 1 year - with the objective to make VAE more attractive and accessible to individuals with low levels of qualification or without qualifications.
- This one year of experience can now include periods of initial or continuing training in a professional environment. This was previously (with Law of 5 March 2014) only possible for persons who had not attained level V qualification (EQF level 3).⁹
- When candidates acquire parts of qualification (in cases of 'partial' validation), there is no longer a timeframe within which these parts of qualification are valid (previously, these 'parts' of qualification acquired as a result of partial validation were only valid for 5 years) - this should further encourage candidates to obtain a 'full' qualification (the one initially targeted, or another one, using systems of exemptions of certain modules/ exams) thanks to the introduction of 'blocs of competences' as a way to structure qualifications. This new measure is therefore closely link to the introduction of 'blocs of competences' in the design of vocational qualifications.
- The new 'Labour Law' also contains provision to strengthen the support offered to VAE candidates. The leave granted to VAE candidates can be granted to employees in a closed-ended contract without conditions of employment seniority/tenure. Its duration can be lengthened for 'vulnerable' employees. The Law provides, in article 78, that "enhanced support for certain groups may be provided for and financed by a branch agreement". The application of this recommendation will also result in longer support and may require extending the duration of VAE leave beyond the current 24 hours.
- The law strengthens guidance (during the information and counselling phase of VAE) with the "Counselling for Professional Evolution " (*Conseil en Évolution Professionnelle*, CEP).

The Labour Law of 2016 therefore extends and deepens the changes that were introduced in 2014. It goes further in terms of facilitating access to VAE, simplifying procedures and strengthening support. As noted above, it also addresses problems that the Law of 2014 did not touch upon, in particular the issue of partial validation. Many stakeholders underlined the loss of candidates following partial validations by the juries, partial validation being considered as a 'failure'. With partial validation resulting in blocs of competences that are valid without a time limit, the articulation of VAE with training will be facilitated. Linkage between the personal training account (CPF) and VAE, lifelong training and VAE should be reinforced. For instance, it is possible for candidates to use time credited on their personal training account and

⁸ LOI n° 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016 relative au travail, à la modernisation du dialogue social et à la sécurisation des parcours professionnels, available at:

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000033000929&dateTexte=20160908>

⁹ Conditions: Any person with 1 year of activity, whether continuous or not, part-time or full-time, under one or more statuses (employees, self-employed workers, volunteers, job seekers, etc.). All of the following activities can be taken into account: professional activities (as employed or self-employed), voluntary activities, activities carried out by a person on the list of high-level sportsmen and women, activities carried out within the framework of trade union responsibilities, activities carried out in a local electoral mandate or a local elective office, certain activities carried out during initial or continuing training activities (periods of on-the-job training, periods of work experience, practical training, periods of preparations for employment, periods of practical training under apprenticeship contracts, professionalisation contracts). No age limit, diploma requirement or academic level required.

valued in euros to complete the funding provided by the registered collection bodies (OPCA) for the VAE leave (*congé VAE*).¹⁰

These new provisions raise a number of questions and issues:

- Does it mean that VAE will be less and less targeted towards certification (as it was originally the case) and more and more towards the acquisition of parts of qualifications, which could later be completed by additional training? How will qualification awarding bodies examine candidates' eligibility, to preserve the foundation of VAE (access to full qualification) and avoid the validation of small 'parts' of qualification which should then be substantially completed by long training pathways?
- How will 'parts' of qualification be recognised in collective agreements by social partners?
- Will juries be reluctant to validate candidates' experience when this experience is only one year - to obtain a diploma that requires several years of training/education? Is there a risk that the new provisions might negatively impact the value of the qualifications acquired through VAE? Especially among employers and the general public?
- Have CREFOP and CNEFOP set up the necessary statistical monitoring to provide a national overview of VAE and allow the monitoring of candidates' pathways?
- Are the modifications made by the 2016 Law enough to increase the number of candidates?

In March 2017, the State Secretariat for State Reform and Simplification presented "61 measures to simplify the lives of French people"¹¹. Twelve of them directly concern VAE. These measures are partly based on the recommendations of the report of the mission conducted by IGAS and IGAENR on the "Evaluation of the policy of validation of prior learning", dated October 2016 and published in April 2017. If not all measures are applicable in the short to medium term (in particular those pertaining to the dematerialisation of VAE files and assessment procedures and automated tools to identify qualifications), they provide interesting avenues for the development of VAE. These measures (and the current provisions in place to address them) are the following:

- Set up a quality reference system for VAE support services for consistent implementation of support by providers throughout the territory;
 - *This is provided for by the law for "the freedom to choose one's own professional future" adopted in September 2018. It will be followed by two decrees, one on the quality criteria and one on the indicators (elements of evidence and audits of the providers) of the criteria.*
- Set up a single reference person throughout the course of a VAE pathway for candidates who need it;
- Experiment with the use of a tool to automate the orientation towards the provision of qualifications accessible through VAE most adapted to the professional skills of

¹⁰ In 2017, among the training most often requested in the framework of the CPF, VAE arrived in fourth position (Source: interview with Ministry of Labour). For the link between VAE and the CPF, see Ministry of Labour: <http://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/actualites/l-actualite-du-ministere/article/la-validation-des-acquis-de-l-experience-vae-expliquee>

¹¹

See: http://simplification.modernisation.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/61_nouvelles_mesures_de_simplification_pour_les_particuliers-1.pdf

the candidate, to increase the use of VAE (the automated tool will be available to guidance counsellors and other information, advice and guidance stakeholders to help them identify the qualification best suited to the candidate's skills);

- Propose a detailed analysis of the candidate's validation project by the certifier, prior to the submission of an admissibility file;
 - *This recommendation will not be implemented as this service already depends on the VAE counselling centres established in the Labour Code and which are involved in the field of information and guidance.*
- Gradually set a maximum period of 12 months between the date of admissibility of the request for VAE and the date of the assessment session by the jury in order to make full use of the VAE as a lever for access to employment;
 - *This is now provided by the decree of 4 July 2017.*
- Use a single CERFA model (administrative file) for all VAE applications, regardless of the type of certification and the certifier;
 - *This is now provided by the decree of 4 July 2017 and the decree (arrêté) of 29 November 2017. The CERFA was published in February 2017.*
- Based on an expertise of existing tools and practices, promote the development of dematerialisation for candidates and jury member (for instance dematerialised validation files could be made available via a collaborative tool to allow jury members to give their opinion on the candidate's file and on whether or not an interview is necessary, thereby limiting the number of interviews and speeding up the processing of VAE applications);
 - *For reasons of security of personal data and verification by the jury of the identity of candidates regardless of nationality and place of residence in France or abroad, these provisions will not be put in place immediately.*
- Apply the principle of "silence is agreement" (SVA) for the first part of the procedure (*admissibilité*) within two months and the principle of "referral to the administration by electronic means" (SVE) to all certificates with the exception of diplomas and qualifications in the health field.
 - *The Ministry of Labour has decided in the new law to propose the application of the principle of "silence for two months is equivalent to agreement" to all awarding bodies.*
 - *The service by electronic means requires as for the organization of data collection to have databases or at least generic email addresses of all awarding public and private bodies in France. This project requiring strong political orientation and a substantial budget to develop has not yet been the subject of a government decision.*
- Pooling and homogenising the assessment practices of candidates by juries (dissemination of a guide to good practice);
 - *A deontology charter for the jury was produced by the former inter-ministerial Committee in 2009. According to the Ministry of Labour no other tool to homogenise practices will be produced, as each qualification is specific. The awarding body is sovereign to define the evaluation standards of its own qualifications. The recommendations of the existing guide on neutrality and positioning of the members of the jury is sufficient for the time being.*
- Develop support for candidates who have obtained partial validation so that they can continue their pathway towards full validation;

- *It is already provided between the first VAE outcome and a second evaluation by the jury. It is not possible to support the candidate in the duration of his entire professional career for obvious costs reasons.*
- Apply for funding at one time to all potential funding sources;
 - *That will be the goal to be achieved with the personal training account (CPF) in the recent law.*
- Provide VAE candidates to a level IV or V qualification (EQF level 3 and 4) with a proposal for support and funding to secure his project.
 - *This will be addressed by the government plan (see below).*

Finally, with regard to the recommendation on implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation¹², President Macron has launched a EUR 13 billion skills investment plan (*Plan d'Investissement dans les compétences*). This plan is articulated around three axes. The main axis is based on a multiannual contract 2019-2022 with each region (PACTE) which includes actions aimed at supporting adults with a low level of qualification (living in an isolated or disadvantaged territory, people with disabilities, single parents, NEET, people with learning disabilities). The Ministry of Labour is currently negotiating agreements with regional councils to determine financial contributions to support these actions, in the continuation of actions such as the plan "500 000 additional training courses for job seekers" (implemented under the previous Presidency in collaboration with the regions, Pôle Emploi and Afpa) which included a national experiment to enable 10 000 people to use their right to VAE to obtain a qualification and find a job. Over the period 2019-2022 the "PACTE" will include actions related to VAE, the development of tools allowing individuals to identify their skills with regard to occupation and training standards (*référentiels de formation*) and actions to evaluate and certify digital skills, already used in middle and high schools. The aim is to offer an online service adapted to the diversity of situations and people.

2.2 Validation in education and training

The French validation system is well-developed and based on a legal framework. VAE candidates can obtain a whole qualification (*certification*), based on the knowledge and skills acquired through prior experience and learning in a variety of contexts. Since 2016, any person with minimum one year (instead of three years) of activity, whether continuous or not, part-time or full-time, under one or more statuses (employees, self-employed workers, volunteers, job seekers, etc.) can apply for VAE. The experience gained through this activity must be directly related to the professional diploma or title or certificate of professional qualification for which the application is made. This year of activity can include, according to the Implementation Decree of 2017¹³:

¹² The Upskilling Recommendation is to offer adults with a low level of skills, knowledge and competences, for example those who have left initial education or training without completing upper secondary education or equivalent, and who are not eligible for support under the Youth Guarantee, access to upskilling pathways which provide them with the opportunity, according to their individual needs, to: (a) acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital competence; and/or (b) acquire a wider set of skills, knowledge and competences, relevant for the labour market and active participation in society, by making progress towards a qualification at EQF level 3 or 4 depending on national circumstances. See <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224>

¹³ Décret n° 2017-1135 du 4 juillet 2017 relatif à la mise en œuvre de la validation des acquis de l'expérience. Decree available at: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2017/7/4/MTRD1708398D/jo/texte>

- All employed, self-employed, voluntary professional activities or activities carried out by a person registered on the list of high-level sportsmen and women, or exercised within the framework of trade union responsibilities, a local electoral mandate or a local elective office.
- In the case of activities carried out during initial or continuing training, the following may be taken into account: periods of training in the workplace, practical training, operational preparations for employment and periods of practical training in the workplace under apprenticeship contracts, professionalisation contracts or single integration contracts.

In cases where candidates undergo validation of “parts” of a qualification (“partial” validation), the parts of certification obtained are delivered in the form of attestations of competences (document taking stock of the learning units validated by the “candidate) or a booklet comprising competence certificates or specialisation certificates, mentioning the blocks of competences acquired definitively. Prior to 2016, the candidate had five years to acquire further experience (e.g. through training, traineeships) before re-submitting an application.¹⁴ Individuals can now use their personal training account (created by the Law of 5 March 2014) to obtain the missing competences through training.

Qualifications awarded through VAE have exactly the same value as those awarded through participation in formal education and training. Awarded diplomas do not mention on what grounds (Initial training, apprenticeship, CVET, VAE etc.) the qualification was obtained.

VAE processes include the four stages of validation: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. The process includes a first step (“Livret 1”, now called CERFA) which consists of an initial review of the eligibility of applications (based on legal requirements). It gathers evidence of at least one year of experience in relation to the activities of the occupational standards of the qualification targeted. Once the CERFA is declared admissible, the documentation phase can start: the candidate will elaborate a portfolio (“Livret 2”, now called VAE request) to demonstrate that he/she possesses the necessary competencies required for the targeted qualification. During this phase, the provision of support is now officially recognised as from 2014 (Decree 12 November 2014). This portfolio (“VAE request) is then assessed by a jury, leading (or not) to award of the certification.

VAE has to be organised for any vocationally or professionally oriented qualification – including a higher education qualification – officially listed in the national directory of qualifications, the *Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles* (RNCP). This national qualifications framework is managed by the National Commission of Professional Qualifications (CNCP). It classifies professional qualifications (*certifications*) into five levels (with the exception of CQP¹⁵) based on National classification of levels of training (1969).

¹⁴ When engaging in a validation process however, the candidate always files an application targeting a whole qualification. In case of “partial validation” following assessment by a jury, the candidate has 5 years to validate the diploma. Complementary professional experiences, such as training, stages, can be undertaken to enrich the candidate’s experience, before re-submitting an application. The jury makes recommendations regarding the type of activities that can be undertaken to fulfil the qualification standards’ requirements (Art. R335-9 du Code de l’éducation). Details are available at : <http://www.vae.gouv.fr/espace-ressources/fiches-outil/l-etape-post-jury-vae.html>

¹⁵ Sectoral vocational qualifications recognised by social partners such as Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle (CQP)

Table 2.1 Equivalence between 1969 qualification framework and European Qualification Framework ¹⁶

Nomenclature 1969		Levels EQF
Level I	Staff with a middle management job that normally requires training above the first-year Master's degree level. In addition to the strong knowledge of scientific basis of the job, a level I requires knowledge of process design and research.	8 and 7
Level II	Staff with a middle management job that normally requires a training of a Bachelor's degree level or a first-year Master's degree level. At this level, the practice of an employment contract or independent means knowing the scientific foundations of the job, generally leading to autonomy in carrying out this activity.	6
Level III	Staff with a job that normally requires a <i>Diplôme universitaire de technologie</i> (DUT) or a <i>Brevet de technicien supérieur</i> (BTS) or end of undergraduate higher education. A degree of Level III corresponds to the knowledge and skills level, though lacking the knowledge of the scientific basis of the areas concerned. Capabilities and knowledge required needs to ensure ability to work autonomously or independently with responsibilities of design and/or coaching and/or management.	5
Level IV	Staff with a jobs of control or highly skilled worker and can attest to a level of training equivalent to that of the <i>brevet professionnel</i> (BP), the <i>brevet de technicien</i> (BT), a <i>Baccalauréat professionnel</i> or a <i>Baccalauréat technologique</i> . A degree of level IV requires more theoretical knowledge than the previous level. This activity involves chiefly technical work which can be performed independently and/or entail executive coaching (control).	4
Level V	Staff with a job normally requiring a level of training equivalent to the <i>brevet d'études professionnelles</i> (BEP) or the <i>certificat d'aptitude professionnelle</i> (CAP), and by equivalence, of the <i>certificat de formation professionnelle des adultes</i> (CFPA). This level corresponds to a full qualification for the practice of a specific activity, with the ability to use instruments and techniques relating thereto. This activity involves chiefly the performance of work which may be independently conducted within the limits of the techniques related thereto.	3
Without object		2
Without object		1

All vocationally-oriented qualifications awarded by French ministries and developed in cooperation with consultative bodies, including social partners (via specific Committees depending on the Ministry)¹⁷ are automatically registered in the RNCP directory¹⁸. Since 2009, the commission in charge of RNCP issues an opinion (publicly available) on the relevance of the development of new qualifications.

¹⁶ Following the new law of September 2018, a new national qualification framework has been set up. It comprises 7 levels referenced to level 2 to level 8 of the EQF. The decree on the new national framework is currently under discussion.

¹⁷ CPC (Commission professionnelle consultative) for the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue and the Ministry of Education; CNESER (Conseil national de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche) for the Ministry of Higher Education.

¹⁸ For more information on the French NQF, see European Inventory on NQF 2012: The French NQF, as defined by the RNCP, covers vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications, including higher education qualifications as they have a vocational and professional purpose. The framework covers three main types of qualification: those awarded by French ministries (in cooperation with the social partners through a CPC); those awarded by training providers, chambers and ministries but where no CPC is in place; those set up and awarded by social partners under their own responsibility.

Other qualifications, including higher education¹⁹ qualifications and sectoral vocational certificates (*Certificats de qualification professionnelle*, CQP), are registered in the RNCP on the basis of a request submitted to the CNCP.

With the exception of specific cases defined by law or regulations, all qualifications registered in the RNCP are opened to VAE. Such qualifications may include certificates that can be obtained through continuous vocational training (e.g. certificates awarded by Chambers of commerce, by the Ministry of Labour) if they are registered with the RNCP. However, many certificates available through continuous training are not registered with the RNCP.

VAE and OER (Open Educational Resources)

The VAE procedure does not aim to facilitate the validation of learning outcomes from OER. VAE validates learning outcomes acquired in “professional” environments. It is not possible to apply for VAE solely on the basis of learning outcomes from OER.

OER such as MOOCs could be taken into account in the validation of higher education studies (*validation des études supérieures* - VES)²⁰ – which is not part of VAE, nor of VAPP²¹ – whereby previous studies and obtained diplomas are taken into account in obtaining directly a whole/part of a diploma. There is no data available on VES (source: Ministry of higher education).

They could as well be taken into account in gaining access to a programme through the “VAPP 85” procedure.

2.3 Validation and the labour market

The national system of VAE is far from summarising all types of practices to recognise formal or informal learning and support career development or access to the labour market. It is important to highlight that validation has a specific meaning in the French context. Skills audits, skills identification and documentation etc. are not equivalent to validation.

A variety of tools are being developed to identify individuals’ skills and/or support access to the labour market or career development, at the regional level (the Carif-Oref), at local level (the Maisons de l’emploi), by public employment services (PES) but also by sector actors (professional branches), bipartite funds (OPCAs) and individual companies.

The labour market reforms initiated by the Law of 5 March 2014 and the Law of 8 August 2016 introduced new individualised rights for all workers:

- the personal activity account (CPA) which includes three accounts:
 - the personal training account (CPF) which enables working individuals to accrue hours of training;

¹⁹ Universities award both State diplomas (can be automatically registered in the RNCP if it fulfils the criteria such as presence of CNESER) and “university diplomas”, which are not automatically in the RNCP; a request must be made to have a diploma registered, it needs to fulfil a number of criteria.

²⁰ Another type of validation procedure in place in the higher education sector - not linked to non-formal and informal learning - is the “validation of higher education studies” - VES e.g. for studies carried out abroad. Instead of evaluating the professional experience, this procedure takes into account the prior studies followed and the qualifications the person has obtained in order to deliver a partial or full qualification. To date, there is no data available for this type of validation. See: <http://www.vae.gouv.fr/validation-des-etudes-superieures>

²¹ For more information on VAPP, see: <http://www.vae.gouv.fr/validation-des-acquis>

- the hardship account (C3P), which allows employees exposed to occupational hazards to accumulate rights;
- the Citizen Commitment Account (CEC), which makes it possible to acquire training rights in the event of citizen or voluntary commitment (associations, reserves, civic service, etc.).

The personal activity account allows each individual to formalise his/her professional profile, by declaring his/her skills, in order to access his/her mobility area, i.e. professions where he could transfer and exercise the skills he holds. These new approaches raise the question of the various ways in which individuals, companies, training providers, guidance counsellors etc. can identify and formalise transferable and transversal skills to better secure individual career paths.

- The Counselling for Professional Evolution (CEP):

A working group set up by France Stratégie (body under the remit of the Prime Minister) identified many tools and devices for identifying, formalising and sometimes certifying transferable and transversal competences, underlying the proliferation of initiatives, and their insufficient coordination (France Stratégie, 2017). The development of these tools has grown since the adoption of the law of 5 March 2014, and in particular the implementation of the personal training account (CPF) and Counselling for Professional Evolution (CEP).²²

For instance the construction sector has developed an experiment to secure the careers of workers, by identifying the transversal skills necessary for the exercise of these trades. This experiment aimed to integrate modules on transversal skills into occupation and training standards so that these skills could be correctly identified, taught and evaluated, and to ensure their recognition. Approximately 4 000 employees were trained according to these new teaching methods implemented in early 2012. The validated skills were then described in a passport that fosters mobility. This approach is accessible to people without diplomas or low qualifications, and allows recruitment or career security to be considered independently of the diploma or past professional experience.

Other examples of practices developed in the private sector include the skills portfolios used to record the skills acquired by employees during their professional practice developed by FEDESAP (Federation of companies in the personal services sector) (see Malaquin, 2013).

Box 2.1 "My itinerary" tool developed by Orange

In 2010 and 2011, the *Observatoire des métiers des télécommunications* carried out two studies to shed light on the new areas of professional development and, on the other hand, to highlight the transferable skills that can open new pathways. The studies made it possible to map the areas of mobility (more or less strong proximity between trades) and for each bridge (*passerelle*), to analyse the transferability of skills and the level of ease or difficulty of acquiring and developing these skills.

Based on the Observatory's approach to mobility areas, a digital tool called "My itinerary" was set up by Orange, to which employees have access from their intranet. This tool provides information on recruitment by trade/territory, on competencies ("capabilities", i.e. groupings of competencies). It also provides the necessary contacts about training opportunities. This tool is based on a reference system updated twice a year. The effects of

²² The working group focused on the tools and mechanisms that professional branches, large companies or local actors have developed. The tools and mechanisms developed by private consulting and support actors were not analysed as part of this work.

the implementation of this tool have been multiple, notably a better social climate, an increase in the use of career advisors and a renewal of HR policy.

Source: France Stratégie, 2017

It is also important to mention that companies also increasingly make use of the VAE system via the implementation of collective VAE. Collective VAE is a major avenue for the development of VAE, according to recent evaluation reports (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016; Malaquin, 2013). A collective VAE project consists of setting up a VAE procedure for several employees simultaneously, to enable them to obtain the same certification or different certifications. One example of collective VAE is the one implemented by the company ORANGE, in partnership with AFPA and other training providers. Orange's Technical Department (Direction Technique France) has implemented collective VAE since 2009. In five years, 550 employees successfully obtained a VAE.²³ Since then, ORANGE has pursued this initiative with new waves of collective VAE.

2.3.2 Skills audits²⁴

Skills audits (*bilans de compétences*) are a well-developed tool in France. This tool is used mostly for workers, but also for jobseekers. Its objective is to allow individuals to identify and analyse their professional and personal competencies, their aptitudes and motivation, with a view to define a professional project or training project. A skills audit is personalised and is not related to a specific qualification or standard. A skills audit is a professional development tool available for every individual regardless of his/her situation vis a vis the labour market. It is performed by an accredited provider (known as "*Centre de bilans de compétences*"). There are about 2 500. The vast majority of them are HR consulting or professional development services companies. "Regular" skills audits are primarily conducted on behalf of the PES, the social partners and/or the vocational training organisations. The law on "freedom to choose one's professional future" provides for the inclusion (in the new "quality" specifications initially geared towards training bodies) of quality criteria for skills audit bodies and VAE support bodies.

According to the Labour Code (Article R6322-35 and further revisions):

- A skills audit can be requested by an employee or by his/her employer, but cannot in any case be imposed on any individual. It is assimilated to a training activity. While it used to be part of the individual right to training and training leave, with the personal training account (CPF), it will be integrated into the CPF as "professional transition" and will be financed through the CPF.
- The skills audit must be carried out by an external accredited provider and include a preliminary phase (preparation) an investigation phase (assessment), and a conclusion phase. The procedure must last at least 24 hours in total, including 10 hours of face-to-face interviews taking place over a period of three weeks to three months.
- The skills audit results in a synthesis document drawn up by the professional counsellor. This document is confidential and only provided to the worker who is the object of the skills audit, unless this person agrees to communicate it to another party. This document summarises the competencies and aptitudes which

²³ See: <https://orange.jobs/site/fr-actualites/Orange-fete-ses-10-000-salaries-certifies.htm>

²⁴ Section mostly based on the DG Employment Skills audit study - forthcoming

have been identified and how these relate to the objectives of the candidate, and includes one to three proposals for career evolution, as well as an action plan. Advice is given on necessary steps to reach the objectives in question.

In practice, professionals in charge of performing skills audit are often also trained to provide guidance on VAE procedures and support to candidates.

The skills audit can be a tool to undertake a VAE but it does not have the objective to recognise or validate learning outcomes; it does not therefore lead to the award of a qualification. The approach is 'formative': it aims at identifying the strong and weak points of an individual's professional profile (Doucet, 2015). Beneficiaries usually obtain a better idea of their formal, informal, social and personal skills as well as suggestions for the future in terms of reorientation, need for a validation of certain skills or training.

This framework has been completed over many years and several labour policy reforms have impacted on the use of "regular" skills audits. A law was passed in 2006 to make companies over 300 employees adopt a jobs and skills forecast management agreement (GPEC). The objective is to identify, in coordination with social partners, all existing available skills in the company and to compare them with future needs in relation to the company's mid-term and long-term strategy. Based on the analysis, the company can decide to use a series of tools to anticipate skills shortage such as individual skills audit, training or mobility.

The recent introduction of the Counselling for Professional Evolution (*Conseil en évolution professionnelle* - CEP) may be an opportunity to reinforce bridges between the different existing tools to increase the level of qualification but also to better match the actual skills needs on the labour market. In 2014, the implementation of an "open-to-all" and free-of-charge CEP has improved access to "regular" skills audits as any "active" individual is now allowed to contact, at his/her own initiative, one of the five certified organisations (Pole emploi, APEC, Missions locales, OPACIF and CAP emploi) to request personalised career counselling. In this context, a "regular" skills audit (chargeable) or an adapted/simplified assessment of competences (free of charge) can be recommended. In 2015, more than 700 000 individuals were reported as beneficiaries of a Career Counselling Service. A large proportion of them were registered with the PES (more than a third). A skills audit (*bilan de compétences*) has a cost (between EUR 2 000 and EUR 3 000) as it is carried out by an external provider (private in most cases). Although this cost can be covered by the employer, the social partners (for someone who has a job) or by the Region (unemployed people registered with the PES), it can function as a significant barrier. Nevertheless, the skills audit can be financed by each individual's personal training account.

The need for coordination between CEP and VAE has been identified by some regions, e.g. Rhône-Alpes region (from 1 January 2016, the bodies authorised to provide VAE advice for employees will be the bodies which ensure the CEP).

Since January 2017, every "active" individual can pay for a "regular" skills audit (and for other training opportunities) through his/her personal training account (*Compte personnel de formation*), an account created in 2014 to receive credit for training (in hours) for every year of actual work.

Skills audit activity is difficult to estimate considering the large number of assessment tools developed locally. However the number of regular skills audits (*Bilan de compétences*) was estimated between 60 000 and 70 000 (each year) by the Statistical Division of the Ministry of Labour.

Table 2.2 Overview of skills audits in France: sectors, framework, target group and scope

Sector where the skills audit is being used	Is there any legal or policy framework specific to the sector? What is the overall situation with regard to skills audits in a given sector?	Target group	Indication of the relative scale/ importance of this practice
All sectors	Every individual who is working or is looking for a job has a legal right to a “regular” skills audit (<i>bilan de compétences</i>). A 2013 law created a new framework to improve general access to career counselling services (<i>Conseil en évolution professionnelle</i>)	Every individual	Estimated annual number of completed “regular” skills audit is between 50 000 and 70 000, mostly employees.
All sectors (companies above 300 employees)	Larger companies have an obligation to develop a forecast management agreement for jobs and skills (GPEC). HR services offer career counselling and orientation services (including professional assessment, skills audit and vocational training) to prepare for a professional change. Sectoral approaches have been developed for those industries that are undergoing major transformations (e.g. banking, media, retail industries)	Employees of companies implementing a jobs and skills plan (GPEC)	Last available data (early 2010): more than 300 companies have developed a jobs and skills forecast agreement (GPEC).
Public employment service	Every individual who is registered with the PES can be offered the possibility to carry out a “competences and professional abilities assessment”, similar to the “regular” audit skills.	People registered with the PES	More than 6 million people registered with the PES in 2017. No specific data for beneficiaries of audit skills services
Graduate and post graduate education	Professional orientation services are offered by every graduate school to their students, including “skills assessment”. A general framework has been set by a 2007 law.	Students registered with a graduate or post graduate school/college	More than 2.5 million students registered in a graduate or post graduate school in 2015. No specific data for students using these orientation services
Non-profit sector	Non-profit organisations working with specific groups of people that are hardly reached by “standard social/employment” services can develop specific tools to assess and/or identify skills and competences. These are local practices with no common frame.	Highly vulnerable groups such as homeless people, the poor, NEETS or refugees	Partial data available - e.g: regarding the Accelair programme, more than 6 500 refugees have been supported by the NPO. In 2015, 1 000 individuals have been offered employment counselling (including skills assessments) and 30% of them have secured a job.

SOURCE: DG Employment Skills audit study - forthcoming

2.4 Validation and the third sector

There are no separate validation systems in the third sector. However there are a number of tools developed by the third sector to identify and document the skills gained through voluntary experience, for instance the *Passeport Bénévole*, a tool developed by the association "France Bénévolat".²⁵ The passport helps volunteers keep track and document the skills acquired during volunteer assignments, which could be transferred to companies, or could be used to initiate a VAE process. It is recognised as a supporting document for the VAE files of the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and AFPA. It falls within the framework of the support initiatives at the VAE of Pôle Emploi.

Since 1 January 2017, the civic commitment account (CEC) (Law of 8-8-2016) makes it possible to identify voluntary activities carried out and to acquire hours of training (20 hours) in return for one's civic commitment. The hours of training contained in the CPF can be used for the preparation of VAE.

3 Links to national qualification systems

Qualifications and qualifications frameworks

In France, recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is directly linked to formal qualifications, as VAE specifically aims at the award of an official formal professional qualification (*certification professionnelle*) with a vocational or professional orientation.

The National Vocational Qualifications Directory or RNCP, which was established by law in 2002, is the basis for the French National Qualification Framework (NQF). The aim of the RNCP is to ensure quality and transparency of formal professional qualifications in France, by establishing a publicly accessible register of qualifications formally recognised by the State and social partners. The RNCP is overseen by a national commission, the *Commission Nationale de la Certification professionnelle* (CNCP).²⁶

The RNCP and the VAE are interdependent: a VAE procedure has to be planned for all qualifications registered in the RNCP, except when a qualification is linked to a 'regulated profession' (where activity made without the corresponding qualification is illegal). Recently, the possibility to use VAE has also been introduced for qualifications in the field of accounting and management.²⁷

From 2019, qualification awarding bodies which will want to register their qualifications in the RNCP will have to provide a clear presentation of the blocks of competences (*blocs de compétences*) corresponding to the different parts of a qualification. The value of having qualifications divided into blocks of competences corresponding to typical activities is to modularise the training provision leading to a

²⁵ See : <https://www.francebenevolat.org/documentation/le-passeport-benevole>

²⁶ The RNCP was created in 2002, with a focus on vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications. It is only since 2010 that the RNCP became the framework for the French NQF. But the RNCP only includes qualifications from level 3 to level 8; there are no qualifications corresponding to EQF level 1 and 2. It does not include certain qualifications from general education, notably primary and lower secondary education. In addition, it does not include general upper secondary qualifications (the General Baccalaureate). It is defined by its labour market focus (Cedefop, 2015).

²⁷ As of 2011, for the DCG et DSCG (décret n° 2006-1706 du 22 déc. 2006), being implemented for DEC (décret n° 2009-1789 du 30 déc. 2009).

qualification, and allow flexibility in the management of individuals' pathways, whether through training or VAE.

When engaging in a validation process, the candidate files an application targeting a whole qualification. However the procedure can result in partial validation, meaning that the qualification awarding body delivers a document taking stock of the learning units validated by the candidate.²⁸

In Higher Education, the credit system for formal learning is implemented through the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). VAE follows this structure for the diplomas or degrees concerned.

Table 3.1 Post-secondary qualifications, their position in the NQF, EQF and corresponding ECTS

Number of years after "baccalauréat"	French diploma	Level (French framework)	Level – European Framework (EQF)	ECTS
Bac+8	Doctorat (PhD)	Level I	8	
Bac +5	Master	Level I	7	300
Bac+3	Licence (Bachelor)	Level II	6	180
Bac+2	BTS / DUT	Level III	5	120
Bac	Baccalauréat général, technologique ou professionnel (General, technological or vocational Baccalaureate)	Level IV	4	

4 Standards

The RNCP describes the content of each qualification. The qualification standards or *référentiels de certification* describe skills, knowledge and know-how and have been defined in relation to occupation standards or *référentiels d'activités* (list of functions and tasks to be performed within the given occupation).

Any certification with a professional end, delivered in the name of the State and created after opinion of a consultative authority in which social partners are represented (CPC – *Commissions Professionnelles Consultatives*; and, CNESER – *Conseil national de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche*), are registered by right on the RNCP²⁹. Their *référentiels* or standards are regularly updated by these consultative authorities. Other certifications (university degrees - DU; CQP, professional degrees of business schools etc.) are registered on request for a limited duration and the request must be renewed.

²⁸ Partial validation means that the candidate's experience only partially fits the requirements of the qualification (competences, skills and knowledge). Source : <http://www.vae.gouv.fr/espace-ressources/fiches-outil/l-etape-post-jury-vae.html>

²⁹ Qualifications awarded by Ministry of Education (CAP, BEP, Bac Pro, BTS...); Ministry of higher education (Bachelor, Master, PhD; Engineer diploma...); Ministry of agriculture; Ministry of Labour; Ministry of Youth and Sports; Ministry of Social affairs.

Qualifications registered « upon request » include qualifications issued by professional branches (CQP); Ministry without consultative committees (Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Culture, etc.); Public institutions (e.g. University diploma); Chambers of commerce and industry, Chamber of trades; private and third sector bodies.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

The general institutional framework for VAE is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour. The Ministry has played a key coordinating role to implement this new system on the ground, in partnership with the regional council and the other Ministries awarding qualifications.

Specific rules and practices for the implementation of VAE are under the responsibility of each authority awarding qualifications included in the RNCP. This includes chambers of commerce, chambers of trade, different Ministries (Ministries in charge of national education, higher education, agriculture, labour, culture, sports and youth, social affairs, health, defence, justice, interior), professional branches and other private training providers.

In the higher education sector, in line with the principle of autonomy of higher education institutions, every institution defines the details of the national VAE procedure and of the national criteria for the composition of juries (for example, design of the VAE file, number of juries a year, appointment of the juries...), the price of the stages of the procedure of VAE mentioned in the code of education and labour code and its decree of implementation. The same applies to awarding bodies of the private sector. The procedure, in every case, has to respect the phases defined by law. Information, guidance and counselling are provided to the candidates on the following:

- the choice of the certification,
- the completion of a file describing the knowledge and skills related to the certification,
- the interview and the evaluation by the jury.

Allocation of responsibilities

Information, promotion, and raising awareness about VAE is the joint responsibility of different stakeholders and takes place at different levels (national, both inter-ministry and ministry levels, regional level, provider level, sectoral social partners level and company level). In relation to State diplomas (i.e. those awarded by Ministries), VAE standards and procedures are designed nationally, while the organisation of its implementation depend on education institutions, and the organisation of information, guidance, counselling (for all candidates) and support (for job seekers) is delegated to the regions.

For job seekers and more generally groups remote from employment, promotion and financing of collective VAE projects still mainly depend on the regional services of the **Ministry of Labour** (the regional offices DIRECCTE - *Directions régionales des Entreprises, de la Concurrence, de la Consommation, du Travail et de l'Emploi*); however regions should increasingly finance and support collective VAE projects.

Each Ministry is responsible for setting up general standards for its qualifications, as well as overall quality assurance and evaluation mechanisms.

At national level, cooperation between Ministries takes place between their services. Between 2006 and 2009, an inter-ministerial committee for the development of VAE (*Comité interministériel pour le développement de la VAE - CIDVAE*) included representatives of all Ministries involved. Its activity was suspended in 2009 without any national structure for steering, animation or monitoring replacing it. According to the evaluation mission of the VAE policy (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016), the disappearance of the CI-VAE coincided with the beginning of the erosion of the VAE system. The VAE system, as the vocational and training system itself, is indeed characterised by

the high number of actors and the entanglement of their missions (information, support, financing, certification actors).

Cooperation is now mainly taking place within **Committees of the governing bodies for employment, guidance and vocational training** (CREFOP at the regional level; CNEFOP at the national level)³⁰. However, the DGEFP (employment, vocational and training delegation of Ministry of Labour) informally continued the animation of a group for the redesign of the government VAE portal, for the consultations on legislative and regulatory developments pertaining to VAE and for the development of the model of Cerfa (for VAE applications). The law of 5 March 2014 and the application decree extended and defined the role of the regions in the area of VAE. In particular, CREFOP are now the bodies in charge of monitoring the pathways of VAE candidates³¹. However for the time being, the Ministry of Labour must still transmit national data on VAE to be included in the draft budget law and in reports. This Ministry is responsible for the evolution of the general legal framework. It also receives surveys conducted at national and regional level and identifies good practice and issues of concern that are submitted by awarding bodies as well as by applicants.³²

In some regions, the regional services of the Ministry of Labour established Committees of bodies awarding qualifications. They are facilitated by regional authorities and involve Ministry services (and in some regions, chambers of commerce and chambers of trade), with the aim of harmonising their practices.

The organisation of VAE takes place at the level of the bodies awarding qualifications, and for the ministries at the level of the bodies approved by every Ministry (e.g. DAVA for secondary education, ASP for health/social affairs, bodies approved by the Ministry of Labour, etc.)³³. Once potential candidates have chosen the qualification they wish to obtain, they can go directly to these structures which provide them with information and guidance about this qualification, the VAE process and individual support available. The verification of the eligibility of the application is carried out by these structures but the assessment sessions are systematically organised by the regional services of the ministries. The candidate can choose to have recourse to another body independent from the awarding body to be supported in the development of his or her file (CERFA phase).

The **Ministry of National Education** (currently the main VAE provider in France) is aiming to improve the coordination between the services in charge of implementing VAE in the different Academies (DAVA) and foster the exchange of good practices. Some of the priorities that have been identified, based on local experiments, are described below.

³⁰ The law of 5 March 2014 created new governance bodies for vocational training: at the national level, a coordination and concertation body, the *Conseil national de l'emploi, de la formation et de l'orientation professionnelles* (CNEFOP), bringing together the State, the regions and social partners. At the regional level, the *Comité régional de l'emploi, de la formation et de l'orientation professionnelles* (CREFOP) streamlines the steering of regional employment and training policies.

³¹ According to the IGAEN report on universities and lifelong learning (2014), the law of March 2014 could potentially have the effect to limit access to higher education for beneficiaries of LLL. The governing bodies at regional level (CREFOP) do not include universities. In addition, funding could give priority to the acquisition of Level V (EQF level 3) diploma.

³² The CNEFOP is expected to be dissolved in its current configuration with the new bill. It will be replaced by a new institution (France Compétences) which will regroup, in the form of commissions, notably but not only, the missions of the CNCP, the regulatory body for the financing of vocational training (FPSPP).

³³ Within each *Académie*, a service called *Dispositif académique de validation des acquis* (DAVA) provides information and guidance to candidates about the qualifications available and the process. The eligibility check and organisation of the assessment (jury sessions) is carried out by the service in charge of examinations (DEC) at the level of the *Académie* or by the DAVA.

- The improvement of guidance/feedback offered to VAE candidates whose applications are considered eligible, to provide tailored advice at an early stage and help those candidates that are likely to be awarded a partial validation to plan their training in advance. Currently, partial validation is too often perceived by the candidate as a failure and very few of these candidates will continue their training/validation pathway in order to obtain a full qualification.
- The development of online platforms to store applicants' portfolios and make them easily accessible to the members of VAE juries.
- The grouping of applications from different regions for some qualifications for which there is little demand (i.e. the minimum threshold for organising a jury session is not reached) and the use of video-conferencing to organise interviews between the juries and candidates (this is also done by the Ministry of Labour).
- The training and professional development of members of VAE juries (validation practitioners).

The **Ministry of higher education** (DGESIP) developed a roadmap concerning lifelong learning in universities, drawing on the recommendations made by the General Inspectorate (IGAENR, 2014). It included measures to facilitate VAE, as part of a set of broader strategies to improve lifelong learning guidance services within universities. The IGAENR report (2014) identified that lifelong learning still occupied a marginal role in universities' strategies, and that lifelong learning services were generally lacking support from universities' boards. Moreover, these services generally failed to integrate all aspects of lifelong learning (continuous training, VAE, guidance etc.), resulting in a lack of a coordinated response to the demands of potential beneficiaries.

The legislative changes adopted in 2014 and 2016 partially address these difficulties, for instance by making complementary short training periods before validation or following partial validation more easily accessible. However it is still difficult to measure the impacts of the new laws in the HE sector. For instance concerning the reduction of the experience requirement to one year, the average candidate for a VAE in the HE sector has between 5 and 10 years of experience (Objectif Formation, 2016). Though, the last figures available for HE for the year 2017, show a significant increase of the number of VAE : + 16%, bringing the numbers of beneficiaries at the same level as in 2014, which means 4 056 people who have been awarded a partial or total diploma.

Education and training providers

The formal education and training sector plays a major role in the development of VAE given that this procedure can lead to an award of formal qualifications. For example, individual upper secondary schools are not directly involved in organising VAE procedures for vocational/technical qualifications (managed by the DAVA and not at the provider level) but VET teachers, trainers and professionals from the field are represented in VAE juries.

In relation to qualifications awarded by higher education institutions, all stages are implemented at the provider level. For example, each university is in charge of setting up and implementing information, guidance, administrative procedures and organisation of jury sessions. Nevertheless, the procedure must be in line with the rules laid out by the rules of education code and labour code on the implementation of VAE by HE institutions and therefore only the details of implementation differ. For instance, differences can be seen in the information phase (individual or collective information), in the type of counselling proposed to the individual, and in the number of juries organised per year. Each institution also has to plan quality assurance and evaluation processes.

The level of development of VAE across higher education institutions is heterogeneous. Overall, those higher education institutions with a strong tradition of involvement in continuous training provision are generally the most proactive in developing and promoting the use of VAE. The level of involvement and acceptance of VAE in the university sector is generally increasing, but some cultural, organisational and financial barriers remain. For example, a strong hindrance factor is insufficient level of interest for VAE among university professors and their involvement in related procedures (e.g. as members of VAE juries), which is partly due to the fact that this role can be time-consuming and is not always being well recognised in terms of career development. On the other hand, some university professors acknowledge that VAE fulfils a social purpose and also brings added value in their own work, as the process of evaluating learning outcomes acquired in other contexts brings new insights into the relevance of existing qualifications. The roadmap includes developing tools to recognise the involvement of academic staff during guidance and jury stages.

Box 5.1 The role of the network of services for collective validation at university level

At higher education level, innovative approaches can also be identified in relation to the use of **online application and documentation tools**, use of video-conferencing and remote support; some universities can provide a whole VAE procedure online.

The network of the VAE services at university level (www.fcu.fr), which is linked to the conference of directors of university services for continuous training, contributes to the exchange of information on innovative practices in the field of VAE. Recently, the network issued a guide on how to implement VAE for PhD qualifications, which provides a methodology in line with both general provisions on VAE as well as standards applicable to PhD qualifications.

The network is particularly efficient at dealing with the companies' need to qualify their employees by using the VAE procedure: the grouping of applications in one university, which is charged to examine the applications and dispatch them afterwards to the other universities, according to the needs of the applicants and the degree they want to get, makes VAE easier for companies.

In 2015, the FCU published a guide concerning collective validation: "Conduire un projet collectif de VAE en direction des entreprises". The guide contains methodological "fiches" to support universities and CNAM (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers) to carry out collective validation.

However in 2017, only 23 universities out of 77 concluded partnerships with companies to set up collective validation: 10 partnerships with administrative bodies and 34 with private companies, involving more than 500 people in the VAE procedure. In total 413 candidates obtained a full qualification via collective validation, 70 obtained parts of qualification and 21 obtained the full qualification following the recommendations post-jury. Collective VAE was mostly funded via training plans (63%) and personal training account (CPF, 12%). (DEPP, 2018).

Private sector actors (including social partners)

Chambers of commerce, chambers of trade, private training providers or social partners are directly responsible for implementing VAE procedures related to the type of qualifications they award. They take charge of the entire process, from the provision of information to candidates to the organisation of jury sessions, certification, and providing quality assurance. Private sector actors are not directly involved in the VAE procedure if the targeted qualification is a State diploma, but the legislation foresees that at least 25% of the jury members are professionals, which may include representatives of the private sector. Private sector actors also contribute to

awareness raising and promotion of VAE, regardless of the type of qualification targeted.

At the national inter-sectoral level, social partners can contribute to shaping the general policy framework on VAE, through the adoption of sectoral or inter-sectoral collective agreements, through governance bodies of employment, guidance and vocational training, within the framework of GPEC agreements at company level.

Sectoral bipartite organisations in charge of vocational training and the OPCA³⁴ (bipartite training funds), as well as individual employers, play an essential role in promoting the use of VAE for workers, including through the development of so-called collective VAE (groups of workers undertaking individual VAE procedures). Collective VAE projects can be put in place for various employees of the same company or for employees from different companies performing similar occupations in a given sector (this is organised with the support of the OPCA or sectoral bipartite organisations).

VAE can be used by employers as a useful tool as part of their human resources policies, with a view to:

- Raising qualification levels among staff, contributing to the professional development of employees while limiting training costs and duration;
- Facilitating occupational mobility of workers and managing needs of specific groups of employees, assessing training and recruitment needs;
- Improving social dialogue, stimulating interaction between employees and between employees and management.

In addition, the law of 17 August 2015 amended article L 2242-13 of the Labour Code, instituting mandatory three-year negotiations within companies with more than 300 employees on the management of jobs and career paths, including VAE as an accompanying measure. The 2009 Law on Guidance and Lifelong Learning already set out that VAE must be part of negotiations between the social partners in each sector. However the law of 24 November 2009 on vocational training essentially concerns the conditions for employee participation in an examination board with the introduction of an absence permit by the employer and the financing of related expenses.

6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising

Awareness-raising and recruitment is the joint responsibility of different stakeholders.

Since 2002, a network of regional offices provide information about VAE, called *Points Relais Conseil* (PRC) – renamed by the law of March 2014 “VAE Counselling Centres”. Such structures act as a focal point at the regional level: to provide basic information about the VAE process; to analyse individual’s pathways; to identify the corresponding qualifications matching their profile and refer potential applicants to the relevant awarding body (see also 6.2). A stock taking report on the activities of PRC

³⁴ Changes will however be introduced with the Law on the freedom to choose one’s professional future adopted in September 2018 (LOI n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichLoiPubliee.do?idDocument=JORFDOLE000036847202&type=general&legislature=15>). The OPCAs will be renamed operators of competences (OPCO) and lose the management of the collection of professional training funds, henceforth entrusted to the URSSAF (Unions for Social Security and Family Allowance Coverage), to refocus on services to branches and small businesses. A transitional period will take place in 2019 for entry into force at the end of 2019.

(Réseau CARIF OREF, 2015) highlights that the situation varies across regions (some have one network, others have a diversity of structures). The public information service enables anyone to receive complete information on the VAE system and to benefit from personalised and free advice. This advice aims to determine if the VAE approach is the most relevant and to help in the choice of certification.

The general information portal on VAE is under the responsibility of the ministry in charge of employment (www.vae.gouv.fr). It provides information on VAE for the public - including employers - on the procedure with a lot of tools on the use of the VAE and access to reference documents and to a list of the regional VAE Counselling Centres³⁵. This website was revamped in 2014, in order to provide better information services for potential candidates, employers and validation practitioners. The number of unique visits has tripled since its launch with an average of 90 000 monthly visits.

Sector specific websites have also been developed by ministries or bodies with a public service mission (e.g. healthcare, vae.asp-public.fr) and by branches or bipartite training funds (www.batiprovae.fr).

All services of the authorities delivering a certificate provide information, guidance and support to candidates on the certificate they are interested in.³⁶

The law of March 2014 has increased the decentralisation of the support to candidates, extending the responsibilities of the regions. They can lead awareness-raising activities and contribute to collective VAE projects.

Other types of stakeholders/agencies can also provide general information to candidates and can refer them to the right contact points:

- Public Employment Services, including *Missions locales* (for young people);
- Other guidance providers (not part of PRC network);
- Sectoral social partners.

³⁵ See map : <http://www.vae.gouv.fr/?page=carte-prc>

³⁶ For instance, regional services depending on the Ministry of Education in charge in VAE (DAVA) - DAVA are primarily intended to support candidates who are interested in acquiring a qualification delivered by the Ministry of National Education, but can provide initial guidance to all candidates regardless of the qualification targeted.

Different stakeholders involved in the field of guidance/continuous training/skills audit - including local offices of the Association for the vocational training of adults (AFPA), sectoral training funds, and the networks of education and training institutions in charge of adult training (GRETA), etc.;

Box 6.1 AFPA/Pôle Emploi partnership to reach potential VAE candidates: an experimental project

An experiment was launched in 2015 in five regions to accompany job seekers on a VAE course, with the aim of speeding up their return to work.

Pôle emploi thus targeted 26 professional titles in eight fields of activity and contacted, through its files, 19 000 job seekers whose past experiences could enable them to be eligible for a VAE course. 8%, (1 300), responded, and half of them expressed interest.

Of these, 396 cases were declared admissible. 57% of them integrated a mixed course, i.e. completed their experience by training before going to jury. The average length of training taken was 95 hours.

Ultimately, 87% of the candidates, or 236 people, who appeared before the jury obtained a total validation, or 205 people, and 4% obtained a partial validation. By way of comparison, the total validation rate for all the same titles in 2013 at Afpa was 73.9% and concerned 812 job seekers.

69% of those who fully validated the prepared professional title found a job within three months of the validation, corresponding in nine out of ten cases to the field of the obtained professional designation.

This project has been extended as part of the training plan for 500 000 additional jobseekers currently in progress.

SOURCE : IGAS-IGAENR, 2016

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

Every individual has the right to receive information and advice on the VAE process. It is important to distinguish between IAG provided before the eligibility check and IAG provided afterwards, once the individual interested in VAE has become a “candidate”.

Information, advice and guidance provided before engaging in VAE procedure

As mentioned above, early information and advice are provided by the regional information points (PRC), as well as a range of different stakeholders. Information and advice provided by PRCs are personalised and free of costs. The number of individuals informed by PRC is not directly linked to the number of individuals engaging in a VAE process. Based on the advice given by PRCs, individuals can be oriented towards other types of mechanisms. Not all interested individuals are eligible for VAE. Besides, information and advice by PRCs is not compulsory, potential candidates can receive information from other structures, or address themselves directly to certification bodies.

Overall, candidates confirm their VAE projects following information provided by PRCs in 70% of cases (Réseau CARIF OREF, 2015). The evaluation of the VAE policy (IGAS-IGAENR) also found that between 60 and 80% of candidates submit a VAE file directly without going through the PRC; that the density of the PRC has no impact on the number of contacts; that PRCs have no impact on the number of potential candidates; and that the passage through a PRC in the first stage has no impact on the quality of the admissibility file. The mission recommended that the advisory information service should be offered using an approach allowing a single entry point, as is the case in the Hauts-de-France region.

Box 6.2 The Interval Scheme

The "Interval" scheme in Hauts-de-France offers a one-stop shop for qualifications awarded by the Ministries of National Education, Health and Social Affairs, Animation and Sports, in cooperation with Agriculture.

Interval has 23 reception centres spread all over the territory of region, which provides a local service in the VAE approach. Each centre is capable of providing assistance in the study of the project and in the constitution of the admissibility file ('VAE request'), whatever the qualification concerned. However, it does not have delegation from the qualification awarding ministry to pronounce admissibility.

Source: IGAS-IGAENR, 2016

Guidance practitioners are well informed about VAE as its use has been continuously encouraged for some time and the current system has been in place for 14 years. At the regional and local level, a number of specific initiatives are also in place to enhance the level of awareness of VAE among guidance practitioners. For example, the region of Ile-de-France through its VAE information service (*Pôle Régional Information Conseil en VAE*) organises regular information sessions on VAE for all counsellors/advisors/practitioners working in the field of vocational guidance, labour market services and social inclusion. The target group includes professionals from the Public Employment Service (*Pôle Emploi*) as well as other stakeholders such as APEC (national association for the promotion of employment of managers), *missions locales* (local structures offering vocational guidance and placement services for young people) and other employment and training stakeholders.³⁷

It should be noted that the provision of guidance on VAE is integrated within lifelong guidance in France. Typically, professionals in charge of providing advice on VAE can also offer general occupational/vocational guidance and advice on lifelong learning opportunities. For example, some regional PRCs are Information and counselling centres (*Centres d'information et d'orientation - CIO*), whose core mission is to provide guidance to pupils in initial education and training.

Information, advice and guidance provided after the candidate is considered eligible for VAE

Since the adoption of the Decree of 12 November 2014, support to candidates is officially part of the VAE process. Support (*accompagnement*) is provided commencing at the point when the validation application is declared eligible and stopping when it is examined by the jury (Art. 6423.2). *Accompagnement* consists of methodological support to describe the activities and experience of the candidate (in relation to the occupational standards of the targeted qualification), to develop their portfolio, and to prepare for the interview with the jury (and when applicable, the simulation of a professional situation). It can be extended to the additional assessments needed in case of partial validation.

The decree also specifies that based on the recommendation of a representative of an organisation belonging to the public guidance services, support can also comprise guidance and support to find funding in order to undertake complementary training corresponding to the requirements of the qualification standards or corresponding to

³⁷ http://www.infovae-idf.com/jcms/c_5580/les-professionnels-de-l-ai

a block of competences (*bloc de compétences*)³⁸ – one part of the qualification standard – missing in the candidates' experiential pathway (Art. 6423.3).

More recently, the law of 8 August 2016 provides, that "enhanced support for certain groups may be provided for and financed by a branch agreement". The application of this recommendation will result in longer support and may require extending the duration of VAE leave beyond the current 24 hours.

Support to VAE candidates or *accompagnement*, is provided after admission of the application by the structure/awarding body responsible for the organisation of the procedure or by a specialised counselling provider.

For example, concerning vocational and technical qualifications (delivered by the Ministry of national education), guidance and counselling is provided by a service called DAVA in each *Académie*. During the first phase of the application (eligibility check), when the candidate does not go to a VAE Counselling Centre and speaks directly to the awarding body, the advisors working at the DAVA provide initial information and guidance on how to submit an application to candidates. This is entirely free of charge. As part of the second part of the application, DAVA can also provide intensive counselling upon request of the candidate (not free of charge), to help them prepare their portfolio. Counselling can be provided individually or collectively, depending on the needs of the candidates and the working practices of each DAVA. In practice the network of GRETA (local networks of education and training institutions involved in the provision of training courses for adults) are also involved in the provision of support to candidates.

In the Ministry of Labour, authorised organisations provide this service, including AFPA which is its biggest operator.

In the field of health and social care qualifications, guidance on VAE and services to candidates are provided by a structure called ASP (*Agence de Services et Paiement*) on behalf of different Ministries.

In the higher education sector (universities), support to VAE candidates is provided by the specific service in charge of VAE and/or continuous training. Counselling is generally provided by a team of two professionals, including a general guidance practitioner and a professor responsible for the type of qualification targeted.

Private providers can also provide counselling and support on how to prepare their application and their portfolio to candidates.

Though counselling is not mandatory, it is a very important element of the validation process increasing significantly the chances of success of the candidate.

The evaluation mission (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016) found that support services are real assets in a candidate's VAE process at the level of the most demanding stages (elaboration of the validation file and interview preparation). For an equivalent profile, candidates who were accompanied had a much higher probability of making it to the jury than those who had not. The time between admissibility decisions and interview by the jury would on average be halved when the candidate receives such support. In addition, it tends to increase the probability of obtaining full validation.

The mission also insisted on the need for broader support, sometimes called reinforced support when the demand concerns low-skilled groups, job seekers or

³⁸ The Law of 5 March 2014 refers to the notion of "blocks of competences". It can be seen as a way to facilitate the implementation of "mixed pathways", combining VAE and complementary training. This should ease access to a diploma through a variety of differentiated pathways. The General Inspectorate recommend the opening up of VAE to the logic of "blocks of competence" to take into account learning outcomes from initial training, professional experience and continuous training (IGEN-IGAENR, 2015).

certain specific groups (young people at the beginning of their working lives, declining professions and active people undergoing retraining, etc.).

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

Validation practitioners include administrative staff, staff in charge of guidance and support, and members of VAE juries.

Generally, administrative staff (but in some cases, teachers or trainers) are in charge of the receipt of the application and performing an administrative check on the 'VAE request'.

A jury carries out the actual validation and evaluation of the content of the portfolio. The profile of VAE jury members is heterogeneous. According to the legislation, at least 25% of jury members must be qualified professionals (half of them employers and half of them employees). The rest of jury members are teachers or trainers – with the exception of juries of the Ministry of Labour and professional sectors where they are all professionals. The professional jury members receive a compensation to participate in the assessment sessions if they take time off or if they are recently retired. Otherwise, the employers who provide their qualified staff to be jury members are entitled to be compensated for the remuneration and travel expenses.

Concerning VAE procedures at the Ministry of National Education, a report published in 2011 by the IGAENR highlighted that in practice, it is difficult to ensure a balance between employers and employees representing the profession (IGAENR, 2011).

In higher education institutions, the jury must be composed of a majority of professors who are very familiar with the qualification standards and professionals in the area; a balance between female and male members has to be respected.

7.2 Qualification requirements

Qualification requirements for VAE jury members depend on the subject field and vary for each targeted qualification.

In the legislative and regulatory provisions, there are no requirements in terms of experience in the professional domain targeted by the qualifications. Jury members must have relevant experience as professionals or teachers.

In the Ministry of Labour however, individuals wishing to become jurors must provide evidence of at least five years of experience in the trade covered by the title and not having left their position for more than five years.

A code of ethics for VAE jury³⁹ was published by the inter-ministerial Committee of the development of the VAE, during its mandate.

³⁹ *Charte de déontologie des membres de jury de VAE*, available at: <http://www.vae.gouv.fr/espace-ressources/fiches-outil/charte-de-deontologie-des-membres-de-jury-de-vae.html>

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

Each awarding body and regional structure for VAE are in charge of providing training to their VAE jury members, as well as guidance practitioners. These arrangements may differ.

Jury members involved in validation sessions with respect to professional titles (awarded by the Ministry of Labour) are accredited professionals who must have very good knowledge of the rules related to the award of titles and of the organisation of validation sessions. The Ministry has designed a standard training format (for general purposes) for new jury members. The format is based on simulation games, whereby the trainee has to adopt the role of jury member. The training covers all aspects related to accreditation and all stages of validation. The jury members then undertake more specialised training regarding the qualifications for which they are accredited. Training is not compulsory.

Within the Ministry of National Education, the training of VAE jury members is currently considered as a priority for further development. A challenge reported by a recent report of the inspectorate general IGAENR (2011) on the functioning of validation juries is the fact that jury members too often lack experience in similar contexts (e.g. as tutors, mentors or jury members) and therefore are not familiar with the methodology and procedure used, and would benefit from common tools.

In the higher education sector, many higher education institutions have developed their own internal training courses and material for validation practitioners. In addition, the conference of directors of university services for continuous training (*Conférence des Directeurs de Service Universitaire de Formation Continue*) organises training courses for VAE guidance practitioners, members of VAE juries and staff responsible for VAE. These sessions are open to participants from all across France. For example, a regular one day training course is organised for VAE jury members on an annual basis. This training course introduces the main principles about VAE and methodologies to support jury members as part of the assessment of applications (e.g. use of different tools and criteria). The focus of the training is practical and case studies are presented.

8 Quality assurance

The 2002 legislation on VAE and decree set some general criteria on the procedure, including with respect to the functioning and composition of VAE juries.

In relation to the provision of support to VAE applicants, a number of methodological tools have been developed by State services in order to outline a set of key principles for the provision of support (after the first part of the application – i.e. for those applications considered eligible).⁴⁰ The main objective is to ensure consistent level of the quality of support provided.

In addition, a number of regional quality charters for the support of VAE candidates have been signed by the State and the regional authorities.⁴¹ They focus on various aspects such as providing suitable conditions to receive candidates, ensuring the transparency of the procedures, guaranteeing the confidentiality of the procedure,

⁴⁰ Available at: <http://www.vae.gouv.fr/espace-ressources/fiches-outil/l-accompagnement-en-vae-quelques-reperes-methodologiques.html>

⁴¹ For instance, charter signed between the State and the Bretagne region: <http://bretagne.directe.gouv.fr/Charte-Qualite-de-l-accompagnement>

providing quality support services with reasonable waiting times consistent with the needs of the candidates, ensuring the professional standards of practitioners, and developing cooperation and information exchange between institutions. The quality approach results in the implementation of satisfaction surveys and the monitoring of candidates' pathways.

VAE quality assurance systems/procedures (regarding the organisation of the procedure and the characteristics of validation practitioners) are the responsibility of each awarding body awarding (at the Ministry/national level or at the provider level). However, the laws and regulations on the control and quality of vocational continuing education and training apply largely to VAE.

In addition, the quality requirements already in place for training organisations will be extended to VAE support organisations and competence assessment centres with the new law of 5 September 2018.

As far as quality control and control of the use of vocational training funds are concerned, the control services of the Ministry of Labour are empowered to control all actors involved in the field of VAE.

Each body awarding qualifications is expected to develop their own evaluation of the implementation of VAE, review the process and procedures used for VAE on a continuous basis, and make the necessary improvements. For example, the implementation of VAE at the Ministry of National Education was examined by the Inspectorate General of the Administration of National Education and Research (see for example GAENR, 2011; IGEN-IGAENR, 2015).

Finally, the measures put forward by the State Secretariat for State Reform and Simplification ("61 measures to simplify the lives of French people"⁴²) include proposals concerning quality assurance, for instance setting up a reference system for a consistent implementation of support by providers throughout the territory; homogenising the assessment practices of candidates by juries (through the dissemination of a guide to good practice).

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

In France, VAE is funded by public and private sources.

Actors which intervene in the financing of VAE are:

- Regional councils, for the organisation and funding of information centres which provide information on VAE to the general public and provide support to candidates.
- *Pôle Emploi*, provides funding for the costs which are not covered by regional councils, for candidates who are also job-seekers.

⁴²

See: http://simplification.modernisation.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/61_nouvelles_mesures_de_simplification_pour_les_particuliers-1.pdf

- OPCA, which collect contributions from companies in relation to training, can also provide information on VAE and finance the set of costs related to support and assessment of candidates who are employed.⁴³
- Companies can finance some VAE actions.
- The State, through the DGEFP, within the framework of collective actions supporting employment.

Funding streams can be complex given the variety of stakeholders involved.

Public funding is part of the overall budget from lifelong learning including State funding – within each Ministry concerned and regional funding as awarding body – regional authorities and Ministry of Labour can allocate funding with a view to support the development of VAE.

Regional authorities are responsible for the Information and Guidance centres and they also finance them. The public employment services, *Pôle Emploi*, also contribute to the funding of VAE. Information and guidance centres can also receive funding from the European Social Fund.

Concerning the volume of public funding, no consolidated data is available. For instance, within the Ministry of Education, there is no specific budget line allocated to VAE. Within each *Académie*, functioning costs of the services in charge of VAE (DAVA) are integrated within the general budget. This funding is allocated internally and may therefore differ across *Académies*. Similarly, universities receive a global budget from the State which does not include a specific budget line for VAE.

In addition, a part of the DAVA revenues are generated by counselling activities offered to candidates during the second phase of the application.

Private funding sources include:

- bipartite bodies, OPCA – (*Organismes paritaires collecteurs agréés*) for individual training leaves (such as FONGECIF, UNIFORMATION) or for training plans, work and training courses, which are sectoral bodies managed by social partners and whom collect taxes from employers and employees in order to finance and develop training;

In 2016, OPCA financed⁴⁴:

- 7 168 individual applications for VAE leave (**long-term employed contracts**); success rate: 97,96%; 6 876 accepted files, of which 4 000 out of working time;
- amounting to EUR 10.1 million (average cost: EUR 1 411);

⁴³ With the new law on the freedom to choose one's professional future adopted in September 2018 (LOI n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichLoiPubliee.do?idDocument=JORFDOLE000036847202&type=general&legislature=15>), the OPCAs will no longer manage VAE funding except within the contributions of the skills development plan paid within a single contribution which will also include contributions for work-related training for companies with less than 300 employees. VAE will therefore be financed for employees of large companies mainly through their directly managed skills development plan and through the personal training account.

OPCAs will be renamed operators of competences (OPCO) and lose the management of the collection of professional training funds, henceforth entrusted to the URSSAF (Unions for Social Security and Family Allowance Coverage), to refocus on services to branches and small businesses. A transitional period will take place in 2019 for entry into force at the end of 2019.

⁴⁴ Data provided by the Ministry of Labour. Compared to 2015, VAE for individuals in employment has decreased by 14% (8 337 files). See: <http://www.fpspp.org/portail/resource/filecenter/document/042-000038-01c/enquete-quantitative-cif-2016-synthese-et-donnees.pdf>

- 69% of beneficiaries were women;
 - 68% of beneficiaries between 25 and 44 years of which 29% between 25-34 years;
 - Level of qualification aimed: 37% (lev III – NQF) ; 26% (lev IV-NQF) ; 14% (lev V-NQF);
 - Most of the candidates (1 770) come from companies with fewer than 11 employees;
 - Job classification: employees (4 221) – intermediate professions (1 355) and workers (546), others (managers and engineers);
 - In addition, 292 accepted files (which 208 out of working time) for **short-term contracts** were financed out of 377 applications, amounting to EUR 410 919. Average cost EUR 1 407.
- additional contributions from employers, and;
 - candidates.

Bipartite funds collecting employees' and employers' contributions for continuous vocational training (OPCA) are a major contributor as they fund individual leave to undertake a skills audit (*bilans de competences*) and VAE.

Examples of national, regional, local or EU funded initiatives

Examples of implementation of VAE mobilising public funds are numerous (see table below), at all levels. Pôle Emploi (PES) and regional councils finance individual VAE requests for job-seekers. Regional services of the Ministry of Labour manage, finance or co-finance (with regional councils, professional branches, OPCA or Pôle Emploi) schemes or projects aiming at collective VAE. They can target several qualifications, either in one company (for instance to secure pathways of vulnerable employees, with the support of the State) or in one given territory.

Table 9.1 Sources of funding for VAE, 2016

Source	2016 (Millions EUR)
The State	EUR 10.91
Ministry of Labour ⁴⁵	<i>(specific collective project for the unemployed = EUR 9)</i>
National Agency (PES) ⁴⁶	
	EUR 3
The joint registered collection bodies (social partners) ⁴⁷	15.3
- except The Personal Training Account (CPF)	

⁴⁵ Budget opérationnel central 103

⁴⁶ Bilan convention tripartite Ministère du travail/unédic/Pôle Emploi

⁴⁷ Etats statistiques financiers OPCA

Source	2016 (Millions EUR)
Regions ⁴⁸	7.5

Funding source	Since its creation (01/01/2015)		2016	
	Millions (EUR)	Numbers of applications for VAE	Millions (EUR)	Numbers of applications For VAE
Personal Training Account (CPF) ⁴⁹	30.5	25 500	12.9	14 500

The implementation of a collective VAE scheme aims to provide a set of services to the person wishing to undertake an individual VAE process; this person is supported throughout the process (for instance, platform of VAE providers in Rhône-Alpes region, See Box below). Collective VAE projects are the result of a pre-established diagnosis highlighting the need for competences, or for a strategy at company level or territory level.

⁴⁸ Enquête annuelle Régions dépenses formation professionnelle (DARES)

⁴⁹ Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (gestionnaire du CPF)

Box 9.1 “10 000 VAE” as part of the “500 000 training courses”

Within the framework of the "500 000 training courses" plan, the State (in collaboration with the Regions), Pôle Emploi and AfpA initiated a national experiment in 2016 whose objective is to enable 10 000 people to use their right to VAE to obtain a qualification and find a job. For 2016, the objective was to initiate 7 000 VAE pathways at national level, 880 in the region Grand East.

Pôle emploi carried out upstream work at the regional level in order to identify employment opportunities and certification needs. In the Grand East, the collective VAE process was organised for 20 professional titles in different sectors that recruit: hotels/restaurants, personal services, commerce and mass distribution, construction and industry.

This national experimentation has been underway since September 2016, and will be active until June 2018. Pôle emploi mobilised its teams in the Grand East region: more than 6 000 jobseekers were invited to join the scheme. To date, 823 people have been accompanied or are being accompanied, 202 have already obtained their diploma.

The objective of this collective VAE scheme is to enable people without diplomas to acquire a professional title (diploma), supplementing their skills where necessary with ad hoc training modules. Although the process traditionally involves 12 hours of support, the drafting of a professional file, and preparation for the final exam, the possibility was given to the jobseekers concerned to access additional training of up to 150 hours. Pôle emploi thus financed 55 000 hours of training.

This assessment of the scheme will make it possible to study the possible follow-up to this experimental approach. The 2016 labour law – which reduced from three years to one year the professional experience necessary to undertake a VAE pathway – will open new perspectives.

SOURCE : IGAS-IGAENR, 2016 ;

Press release Région Grand Est, AFPA, Pôle Emploi, 10 October 2017, Available at : http://www.orientation-paysdelaloire.fr/mediatheque/doc_num.php?explnum_id=27458

Box 9.2 Platform of VAE providers in Rhône Alpes region

VAE can be part of a collective project piloted by a company that wishes to use VAE as a tool for human resource management. Companies interested in such a project can contact the platform of bodies awarding qualifications in the Rhône-Alpes region. This platform gathers public and private stakeholders involved in certification and validation: AFPA, AGERA, DIRECCTE, DRAAF, DRJSCS, Éducation Nationale, Universités Rhônealpines. The platform was created in 2008. Its objectives are to:

- steer collective VAE projects that involve several bodies in certification;
- foster collaboration between these bodies; and,
- build a process that encourages the use of VAE in the forecasting and management of employment and skills (GPEC).

Source: <http://www.vae-certificateurs.fr>

The use of VAE was being promoted as part of the flagship initiative launched in 2012 by the government to support (low-skilled) young people facing difficulties to access the labour market, the Subsidised jobs programme (Emplois d’Avenir)⁵⁰. However the

⁵⁰ <http://www.gouvernement.fr/action/les-emplois-d-avenir>

new government has decided to discontinue the scheme. Since 2018 no new contracts can be signed. This system is being replaced by skills employment pathways.

9.2 Distribution of costs

No consolidated data is available on the real average costs and the distribution of costs linked to VAE (costs related to the design of the standards, the VAE procedure itself and the provision of information and guidance to candidates, the counselling, the set-up of VAE juries, etc.).

Some raw data is however available such as data from the Regions on the provision of information and advice prior to an approach of VAE. These data represent the most important part of the data on this service offer, but they are not exhaustive.

The statistical financial statements of the former OPCAs provide some data about the costs of a file, but the data collection requires a heavy treatment that prevents regular publication of these indicators given the lack of resources and resources available.

Administrative/ registration fees may apply in some cases. In the higher education sector, fees for VAE are set by the management board within each institution.

Importantly, VAE candidates can apply for different types of financial support depending on their status (employed, unemployed), their age, etc. In 2016, half of the candidates who obtained a source of funding to undertake VAE in the HE sector were funded by their employer (they were 79% in the private sector), and one third partly or entirely funded their VAE pathway themselves. Job seekers mostly find financial support with their region (49%) or Pole Emploi (35%) (DEPP, 2017b).

So to sum up, individuals can have their VAE financed by their company or by a bipartite body when they are employees, and by <i>Pôle Emploi</i> (public employment services) or the Region when they are unemployed. All individuals can now finance VAE via their personal training account. Information/Guidance ⁵¹	EUR 6 500 000 Free for the individuals
Global cost (admissibility, counselling, evaluation, certification) ⁵²	EUR 850 to EUR 7 000 per candidate
Average cost for employees ⁵³ Fixed term contract Open-ended contract	EUR 1 660 per candidate EUR 2 090 per candidate

Source: Ministry of Employment

⁵¹ Enquête annuelle Régions dépenses formation professionnelle (DARES)

⁵² Etats statistiques financiers OPCA

⁵³ Etats statistiques financiers OPCA

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

VAE has been a pathway of the recognition of skills, but also recognition within the family, improved self-confidence and self-image. This finding is corroborated by three surveys:

- A survey was conducted in Haute-Normandie (Pôle observation et prospective, observatoire de la VAE, 2013) on people who obtained full or partial validation in 2009 or 2010: 56% of beneficiaries of professional development said that their outlook on their professional practice had changed following the VAE. According to them, this translates into greater self-confidence (30.6%), acquisition of skills and knowledge (23%), better understanding of the job and the tasks performed (22%); however, the direct link between VAE and professional development is limited. In Haute-Normandie, 54% of the people who responded experienced a professional evolution, two thirds of them thanks to VAE. And 30% had a pay rise. The success of a VAE approach would encourage further training as part of a professional project. The Haute-Normandie study shows that 64% of those who wish to continue their training after obtaining a partial or total VAE wish to return to school, 36% wish to take a new VAE and 24% wish to enter a competition (*concours*).
- A survey was conducted among DAVAs at the request of the evaluation mission (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016): 68% of candidates who obtained full validation in 2015 indicated that obtaining their diploma gave them more confidence and personal satisfaction. Only 16% of candidates who obtained full or partial validation actually engaged in new training.
- A survey conducted by BVA as part of the IGAS-IGAENR report (2016) indicated that 81% of VAE users were satisfied. Among those, 17% reported a positive change in their situation (promotion or career evolution, 9%; finding a job, 5%; career change, 3%; personal achievement, 16%).

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

In the absence of a single information system to monitor all VAE candidates, each certifier is responsible for the data under their authority. Thus, each year, the DARES collects and publishes aggregate data only from the pioneering certifying ministries with gaps in the data provided by some of them from one year to the next. These data do not cover the entire scope of the VAE (in particular certifications of professional qualifications, CQP, certifications of chambers of commerce and industry and chambers of trades and crafts but also certifications of other ministries such as the Ministry of Justice and Interior).⁵⁴

Since the system was set up in 2002, over 358 000 people have obtained ministerial certification through the validation of acquired experience (DARES, 2017).

⁵⁴ For instance, according to the data published in 2014 by DARES (25 300 validations for ministerial certifications), should in particular be added: 1 500 VAE approximately 110 issued by private certifiers; 4 300 CQP, including a little less than 50% of the metallurgy branch (Source: IGAS-IGAENR, 2016).

The most recent data compiled by DARES are presented below (Source: Ministry of economy, 2018).

In 2016, approximately 34 800 candidates appeared before a jury with a view to obtaining a diploma or qualification awarded by the State (excluding the Ministry of Culture, for which data are not available, and the Ministries of Higher Education and Research and Agriculture, for which data are provisional), i.e. a **decrease of 6% compared to 2015**. The number of candidates presented to a jury has decreased since 2011 (-3% between 2014 and 2015, -8% between 2013 and 2014, -4% between 2012 and 2013, -6% between 2011 and 2012). **About 23 377 candidates obtained a qualification (full validation)** by VAE in 2016 (leaving out the Ministry of Culture). This figure is 5% lower than in 2015, continuing the trend observed since 2011 (-19% between 2011 and 2015).

About 60% of the candidates who are assessed by a jury obtain a full qualification.

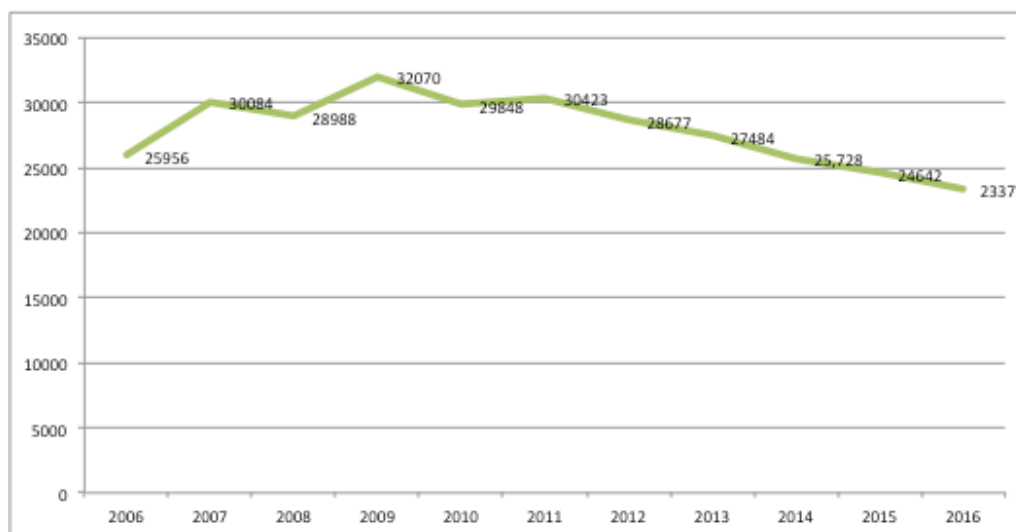
Table 9.2 Number of eligible and assessed candidates in 2015/2016

	2015	2016	2015/2016	2010/2016
Number of candidates considered eligible	52 545	51 079	-3%	-11%
Number of candidates presented to the jury	36 968	34 853	-6%	-25%

Source: DARES⁵⁵ (Ministry of economy, 2018).

Scope: qualifications awarded through VAE by all Ministries (missing data: Ministry of Culture); data for 2016 (Ministry of Higher Education; Ministry of Agriculture) are provisional.

Figure 9.1 Qualifications awarded through VAE by certifying Ministries, 2006-2016



Source: DARES (Ministry of economy, 2018).

Scope: qualifications awarded through VAE by all Ministries (missing data: Ministry of Culture); data for 2016 (Ministry of Higher Education; Ministry of Agriculture) are provisional.

⁵⁵ The DARES (research institute under the Ministry of Labour) compiles annual aggregated data from various ministries involved in VAE (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education and Research, Ministry of Agriculture Ministries of Health and Social Affairs, Department for Employment, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy & Ministry of Youth and Sports). Qualifications awarded by Ministries (State diploma) account for about 85% of all qualifications awarded through VAE. Data on qualifications awarded by chambers of commerce and trade and CQP through VAE are not centralised.

VAE remains a marginal pathway for most qualifications. The candidates who obtain a diploma by VAE (qualifications awarded by National Education) represent approximately 10% of the candidates obtaining a diploma by continuous training. However, this proportion varies considerably according to diplomas, programmes and specialities. In the HE sector, on average 3% of the diplomas awarded are by VAE. In 2016, The Ministry of National Education remains the main qualification awarding body with approximately 12 800 qualifications awarded (-2% compared to 2015). Between 40% and 45% of candidates qualified through VAE obtain a qualification from this ministry.

The Ministry in charge of health and social affairs is in second position with approximately 4 900 certifications awarded (-2% compared to 2015). According to still provisional data, the ministry in charge of higher education and research would be the third certifier with 2 600 certifications obtained, closely followed by the ministry in charge of employment with about 2 200 certifications obtained (-27% compared to 2015).

In 2016, the number of candidates who aimed at obtaining a “titre” from the Ministry in charge of employment decreased by 28% compared to 2015. However, the number of eligible candidates increased by 38%, an increase following the implementation of the 10 000 VAE experiment initiated as part of the emergency employment plan (see Box 1.7). Given the time required to prepare the VAE application and to organise the jury sessions, this increase should result in an increase in the number of candidates presented in 2017. In the Ministry of Labour, the overall success rate is slightly higher in 2016 (73%) than in 2015 (72%).

In the Ministry of Labour, VAE is becoming a frequent entry route for certain professional titles: e.g. executive assistant; industrial manufacturing agent; professional adult trainer or family life assistant.

Box 9.3 National statistics on VAE and exchange of information among Ministries

Currently, the national statistics on VAE which exist today do not allow the identification of national trends nor to analyse the pathways followed by VAE candidates (e.g. time spent to obtain a qualification). The diversification of the offer of qualifications accessible through VAE has developed in the past ten years without prioritising the organisation of the statistical feedback and monitoring. This would require important human and material resources.

A legal basis concerning the monitoring of VAE, defining clearer responsibilities in the area, was adopted in 2014. Article 6 of the Law of 5 March 2014 introduced new provisions in the Labour Code, according to which the regional committees on employment, training and vocational guidance (CREFOP) and the national council for employment, training and vocational guidance (CNEFOP) are in charge of the statistical monitoring of the use of VAE. Furthermore, the Decree of 12 November 2014 introduced provisions in the regulatory part of the Labour Code. As part of their responsibilities mentioned in Articles L. 6423-1 and L. 6423-2 of the Labour Code, the regional committees of employment, training and vocational guidance and the National Council on employment, training and vocational guidance are now tasked to undertake a statistical monitoring of VAE candidates from the beginning to the end of the procedure (in case of partial validation, until awarded credits remain valid). Anonymous data would have to be submitted by VAE providers (both public and private organisations). The National Council for Employment, training and vocational guidance would ensure the harmonisation of categories of data collected to allow the monitoring of candidates and their pathways.

No or little progress has been made since 2014 on the materialisation of the new provisions.

9.4.2 Validation users

Data on validation users from the main public qualification awarding bodies indicate the following trends. Women (73%) and employed persons (74%) remain in the majority among candidates with qualifications awarded by a ministry. In addition, half of the candidates focus on only about ten certifications, mainly in the fields of health, social affairs and education. 58% of candidates are aiming for a baccalaureate or CAP/BEP degree or diploma (DARES, 2017).

Overall, the representation of jobseekers among VAE candidates (about 30%) is higher than their share in the active population, with a special situation for Ministry of Labour titles for which 64% of candidates are job-seekers. However, jobseekers applying for VAE are only about 15 000, or 0.25% of the total number of jobseekers (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016).

Ministry of Education

For the most important Ministry in terms of number of qualifications awarded through VAE (Ministry of National Education), the average candidate in 2016 was female (64%) and employed (72%) (DEPP, 2017a).

There has been a decrease in 2016 in the number of applications from job seekers: -24% of admissions and 15% of applications submitted compared to 2015. The launch in January 2016 of a national plan providing for 500 000 additional training courses for unemployed people could have captured some of these groups.

Job seekers continue to benefit from support more often than other groups (nearly seven out of ten jobseekers have been supported within the VAE scheme, against four out of ten for employed people). However, they also remain more exposed to the risk of "abandonment".

Nine out of ten files examined target a diploma in the service sector, which is not without consequences on the profile of applicants, since 67% of candidates are women. One third is aiming for a social work diploma, with the CAP "childcare" (*Petite enfance*), the DEES (specialised educator) and the DEME (educator) being the first three diplomas applied for in VAE and which already account for 30% of the files. The "childcare" CAP represents 15% of the total files examined.

Table 9.3 Profile of VAE candidates in 2016 (%) - Ministry of Education

		Eligible files	Applications received	Validations
Sex	Male	36	33	33
	Female	64	67	67
	Total	100	100	100
Age		2	1	1
	25-29	11	9	8
	30-39	38	36	35
	40-49	35	37	38
	50 +	15	17	18
	Total	100	100	100
Situation	Job seekers	27	24	24
	Employed	72	75	76
	Inactive	1	1	0
	Total	100	100	100

Source : MEN-DEPP, enquête n° 62. DEPP (2017) Note d'information, n° 17.27

Ministry of Higher Education

For candidates applying to qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Higher Education, slightly more than half of candidates are male candidates, and 84% are in employment: 34% are managers, 25% are employees. The majority (84%) aim to obtain a vocational bachelor or a master (Note DEEP, 2017).

9.4.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

There are no **specific** validation arrangements for disadvantaged groups, e.g. migrants, low qualified adults etc. It is important to note that VAE was not designed in relation to one or several target groups but aimed at validating acquired experience regardless of an individual's status.⁵⁶

In regard to the recognition of formal prior learning, the CIEP (International Centre for Educational Studies), which is an operator of the Ministry of National Education, the Department for the Recognition of Diplomas (ENIC-NARIC Centre), examines applications for recognition of refugee and asylum seekers' diplomas free of charge. It also contributes to reflections on the recognition of their diplomas and the reception of migrant students in French universities. If the applicant cannot provide diplomas, the ENIC-NARIC centre adopts a specific procedure based on a reconstruction of the educational biography of the person in the context of art. VII of the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of qualifications of refugees, displaced persons and persons in a similar position.

In addition, government plans such as the *Le Plan d'Investissement dans les Compétences* target low or unqualified jobseekers by offering them positions and training but also VAE support.

Data on the profile of users indicates that individuals who are unemployed generally represent about a third of users (except for qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Labour, for which almost 60% of candidates are unemployed people).

The Decree of 12 November 2014 includes new provisions with respect to support for candidates. In addition to a representative of an organisation which is part of the public guidance services giving advice, support can also comprise the following:

- guidance and help to look for funding
- complementary training corresponding to the requirements of the qualification standards, or corresponding to a set of competencies (*bloc de compétence*) missing in the candidates' pathway, that correspond to one part of the qualification standard (Art. 6423.3). This new provision could be helpful for vulnerable groups.

In addition, VAE candidates whose application is deemed admissible by the Ministry of Labour may be accompanied by the National Association for Adult Vocational Training (Afp) who helps them to compile their file and to prepare for the interview and the simulation of professional situation. Each year, almost half of the candidates presented to a jury are accompanied. This has a positive effect on the success rate of candidates. While more employees still obtain a full title (85% success rate in 2015),

⁵⁶ VAE is not meant to address the needs of all disadvantaged groups (job seekers, school drop outs, NEETs etc.) and to represent a unique solution to all situations. The needs of vulnerable groups are addressed via multiple tools and programmes, e.g. self-positioning tools, self-assessment tools, exemptions to access training programmes. The objective of VAE is to enable a person who has exercised activities in a trade or professional field to obtain certification based on evidence of such activities. This is not a suitable approach for everyone (Source: Ministry of Labour).

the proportion of jobseekers in this situation reached 76% in 2015 and has been stable for three years (DARES, 2017).

Beyond the national validation system itself, there are various initiatives (often led by PES and their local services) to support vulnerable groups such as low qualified adults and long term job seekers.

Box 9.4 “My future occupation” website

The website “My future occupation” (*mon métier de demain*, www.monmetierdedemain.com) developed by the three *Maisons de l'emploi et de la formation* of South Alsace, by the State and by the Alsace Region, aims to enhance the professional skills of workers for a reorientation in line with the needs of businesses in Southern Alsace.

This website is aimed at all working people, in particular those undergoing retraining, and makes it possible to match the skills held by individuals with the skills required for future occupations in the employment area. Work was carried out with the various sectors (textiles, metallurgy, construction, chemicals, plastics, personal assistance, transport, etc.) to identify disappearing and future occupations, and the transferable skills were identified with the support of AFPA Transition (skills assessment centre). The site makes it possible to identify in a precise way the transferable skills acquired, those to be developed and those to be acquired to evolve towards a new occupation.

Source: France Stratégie, 2017

10 Validation methods

The approach used for VAE in France is the portfolio method completed with interviews and debates with a jury.

Identification/documentation phase

The VAE application follows a two-step procedure for all qualifications.

For the registration of applicants in the VAE process, a common application form for the collection of information has been developed between Ministries, which is known as a ‘VAE request’. This is used for a first eligibility check. A decree of the Ministry of Labour establishes a standard model for a “Request for VAE,” with all ministries awarding qualifications⁵⁷. This form called CERFA is certified and published by the Prime Minister's Office. It can be downloaded from the following websites: www.service-public.fr, www.vae.gouv.fr and www.travail-emploi.gouv.fr but also from the websites of the awarding bodies.

The second part of the application is the preparation and submission by the candidate of a **portfolio** identifying and documenting the learning outcomes to be validated. The exact structure and content of this document can vary in content according to the awarding body and the standard requirements of qualifications that are sought; in all cases, it contains a detailed written description of the applicant's knowledge and skills acquired through experience as well as evidence of past professional achievements.

As part of the procedure used at the ministry in charge of employment, the candidate must present a document called *dossier de synthèse de pratiques professionnelles* (DSPP) presenting their professional experience.

Assessment/certification phase

⁵⁷ See: http://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/it_951_452_fbb7b.pdf

The content and relevance of the portfolio is assessed by the members of an ad-hoc validation jury. The jury meets in the presence of the candidate; this typically includes a presentation by the candidate about his/her experience, an interview with the candidate and debate with jury members. The jury can then decide to award a full or partial validation to the candidate or not to award anything. During these evaluations, the law introduces the possibility of integrating an observation of the candidate in real or simulated work situations. As part of the procedure used at the ministry in charge of employment (as well as other qualification awarding bodies such as AFPA), the assessment includes a simulation of the work environment (called *épreuve de synthèse*) in front of a jury, who is also evaluating the dossier submitted by the candidate. The validation can be total or partial (one or several certificates of professional competences can be awarded) (DARES, 2014).

Traditional tests and examinations are not common practice.

Delays before candidates can present their case in front of a jury are deemed excessive, in particular for qualifications pertaining to public certification bodies (except qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Labour). The Ministry of education is experimenting with a video-conference system for the Baccalauréat (A-levels) which could also apply to VAE candidates. The frequency of validation sessions could thus be increased. It would also be more efficient as it would allow more candidates to take part per session. This can only apply to qualifications not requiring the simulation of a work situation.⁵⁸

Finally, the Plan for the simplification of VAE (March 2017, "61 mesures pour simplifier la vie des français") put forward proposals to promote the development of dematerialisation for candidates and jury member: dematerialised validation files, made available to authorised jury members (via a collaborative tool), could allow jury members to give their opinion on the candidate's file and on whether or not an interview is necessary. This new possibility would limit the number of interviews before the jury, thus speeding up the processing of VAE applications. At present, however, VAE's approach is not based on dematerialised tools. The evaluation mission (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016) evokes the possibility of capitalising the recognition of competences in a passport where, with different levels of trust, the blocks of competences recognised by a certifier, those recognised by an employer or those recognised by peers can be found. Their recommendation is to build methods of validation and especially capitalisation of skills recognised by ministries, professional branches, employers during professional interviews, peers. A personalised and secure online profile would make it possible to upload official certificates and recognised skills that the owner could communicate to third parties of his or her choice.

Box 10.1 Alternative methods for validation (assessment phase)

The demonstration in front of the jury can be done in two ways:

- either by the production of a written document detailing the ins and outs of well-chosen activities with regard to the certification in question (*CERFA*). These detailed descriptions provide proof to the jury that the candidate "knows how to do" because he or she is able to formulate it in detail in writing or even orally. This method has the advantage of not requiring anything other than the candidate's writing, but it is also in the production of this writing that its main disadvantage lies. The production of a reflexive written document proving the acquisition of the skills covered by the diploma is far from a simple exercise. This requires time for preparation and reflection on the diploma standards. The production of this file, often called "booklet 2", is particularly demanding for candidates with few or no diplomas,

⁵⁸ Source : Ministry of Labour.

who may feel, rightly or wrongly, far from the codes of written production. All ministries implement *CERFA*, except the Ministry of Labour, which uses the *dossier de synthèse des pratiques professionnelles* (DSPP). Some of the reasons given for the limited use of VAE include the formalism of the procedure, especially for the least qualified people.

- or by demonstrating the skills acquired during the simulation of a professional situation. In this case, the writing required is very limited. This is often the case for social partners qualifications (CQPs) or certain titles of the Ministry of Labour, which mainly uses the technical platforms of the AFPA centres. AFPA has taken a more pragmatic approach starting from concrete work situations. Validation is based on a combination of situations observed and evaluated by a team composed of a trainer and a professional. They take place on a platform that reproduces as faithfully as possible the work in situation. This methodology has the advantage for the jury of direct observation and for the candidate to do what s/he knows how to do. The major disadvantage is the need to provide the jury and the candidate with an appropriate technical platform (equipment and materials, for example). All this raises questions about the availability of equipment, the existence of the equipment in the region where the candidate lives and the cost of the scenario.

Organisations such as Pôle Emploi believe that, for people at level V (EQF level 3), validations based on practical situations are more appropriate and therefore prefer to mobilise AFPA's methods. However, trade unions in certain sectors (e.g. Home Help branch) emphasise the fact that people who do not know how to write can be detected by going through the development of the file. Modules to combat illiteracy can then be offered to them.

SOURCES: IGAS-IGAENR, 2016; Malaquin 2013

11 The position of validation in society: visibility and trust

In terms of institutional design, VAE was positioned at the crossroads of training and employment, although in terms of the funding it receives, funding is earmarked for continuing vocational training. It has developed from a national perspective, a key milestone being the adoption of legislation in 2002, defining the legal framework for validation of prior experience. It is an important component of vocational training and labour market policies. The general institutional framework for VAE is under the responsibility of the Ministry in charge of employment in partnership with regional councils and the other Ministries awarding qualifications. However, the VAE system is characterised by the high number of actors and the entanglement of their missions (information, support, financing, qualification award). One of the reasons for the lack of visibility and readability of the VAE system lies in this complex landscape. The Inter-ministerial committee for the development of the VAE disappeared in 2009 without any national structure for steering or monitoring replacing it. According to the VAE evaluation mission (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016), this coincided with the beginning of the erosion of the system. Any evolution of the system requires an agreement between the nine qualification awarding ministries - it is therefore extremely difficult to make the system evolve.

The VAE system grew rapidly from a quantitative point of view in the first years of its implementation. However, VAE remains marginal compared to the awarding of diplomas obtained through initial training. VAE still represents a marginal share of the vocational diplomas awarded by the Ministry of education and of higher education and research. This share is also decreasing. Applications remain concentrated on a small number of qualifications, mostly in the health and social sector. Since 2011, a slight

but steady decrease in the number of the applicants has been observed across all Ministries.

VAE remains a demanding and sometimes lengthy procedure for candidates, especially for candidates with low skills and low levels of qualifications. Delays before candidates can present their case in front of a jury are generally deemed excessive, in particular for qualifications pertaining to public certification bodies (except qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Labour). This is leading to dropouts before applications can be assessed (Doucet, 2015). Partial validation is still perceived negatively by candidates. VAE also requires not only the capacity to show evidence of previous experience (putting together evidence material), but also the capacity to reflect on past experiences and verbalise this reflection and analysis (requiring good proficiency in oral and written expression). This can be particularly challenging for certain groups of candidates who would benefit from VAE, especially individuals with low levels of qualifications.

The time to obtain a jury date has been reduced with the decree of 4 July 2017 which obliges the certifying bodies to offer the candidate an evaluation session within 12 months of his eligibility to the VAE system.

The recent emphasis on support provided to eligible candidates and the clarification of responsibilities between stakeholders should ensure that more candidates go through the whole process. The law of 5 March 2014 also designated the bodies responsible for organising data collection on candidates' pathways (obtained through a monitoring system, to be created). However, a draft law proposes to transform the collection system and the collection and coordination bodies for vocational training.

Regarding the general level of awareness about VAE opportunities, it is estimated that this is increasing as the current scheme has been in place since 2002⁵⁹. More specifically, a recent survey undertaken in the framework of the evaluation of the VAE policy in 2015-2016 examined the level of awareness and the use of VAE by employees and job seekers (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016).

According to the survey carried out by BVA on the perception of VAE by the working population (self-employed, employees and job seekers), almost half of the respondents know precisely what VAE is (in particular, the elaboration of a file, the personal training account and the VAE leave). The employer (for 41% of respondents) and family and friends (for 28%) was the main source of information.

Of the 59% of respondents who are familiar with VAE, 51% have a good image and 34% have a very good image of the system, i.e. a total of 91% who have a positive view of VAE. VAE is considered useful for employees (92%) and provides profits to the company (75%).

However, 28% of those who had heard about VAE had inquired about the process, and only a quarter had actually undertaken VAE. This means that the vast majority of those who have heard of VAE do not follow up even though they have a positive opinion about VAE. The first reason given is the lack of perceived usefulness (63%), particularly for public service and higher professional and managerial occupations, followed by lack of time (19%), insufficient information (13%), the complexity of the procedures (11%) and the search for certification corresponding to experience (10%).

On the other hand, 81% of those who have undertaken a VAE approach are satisfied with it, while 18% are not. Dissatisfied people criticise the complexity of the process.

⁵⁹ An official stock-taking report on VAE published in 2008 reported that, according to a survey, the general public is relatively well informed about VAE, however, the less qualified are also the less aware about VAE opportunities.

On the employer side, a survey was conducted by TNS Sofres in June 2016 among 1 400 company managers, in the framework of the evaluation mission (IGAS-IGAENR, 2016).

VAE is known by at least two thirds (66%) of respondents and half (53%) say they see exactly what it is. Contact persons working in large companies are more familiar with VAE than those from smaller companies. VAE is first known by word of mouth (28%) and the media (16%). Institutional channels such as CCI's (6%), OPCAs (1%), government services (1%), or the region (less than 1%) are not or rarely mentioned as vectors of VAE's notoriety.

The system is positively perceived by managers (86% have a good image). Although the usefulness for companies is slightly less recognised than that for employees (76% consider the VAE useful for companies vs. 91% useful for employees), the results remain very positive. VAE is perceived as a complex system (64%) and some points remain little known: 65% of respondents are unaware that it is sufficient to provide pay slips to prove a past activity, 59% that the candidate's experience does not necessarily cover all the skills of the diploma in question, 52% that it is not necessarily necessary to take a written exam.

Respondents were somewhat sceptical about the benefits to the company of a VAE approach. One third of them consider that the benefits are non-existent, and one fifth are not directly able to evaluate them. Simplifying procedures in order to make VAE more accessible appears to be a priority.

In practice, the use of VAE remains limited. Few companies have used it (11% of those who know VAE, i.e. 8% of the overall sample) and the procedures are mainly individual. Collective VAE approaches remain rare (7% of companies that have used VAE, or 0.6% of the overall sample).

It is mainly the employees who initiate the approach (in 82% of cases), companies being much less inclined to launch a VAE (the company is at the origin of the approach in 29% of cases). Indeed, the benefit for the company is not always clearly perceived. Even when the approach is initiated by the company, managers declare that they do so primarily for the benefit of the employee(s), at 67%, and to a lesser extent for the company (32%). Nevertheless, respondents who have already experimented with VAE say they are largely ready (87%) to recommend the system to their counterparts. And expectations for improvement remain limited and fairly general, primarily a request for simplification of procedures (33%).

Box 11.1 Why VAE is not used in the construction sector?

If the coexistence of a low level of training and a high level of professional experience theoretically designates VAE as a potential lever to respond to it, the reality is quite different, the employees of the BTP being among those who have the least recourse to the system (in comparison with the other regional sectors of activity). A study explored the reasons for this paradox.

The credit given to practice via professional experience but without the need to have a diploma partly explains the decline in the number of employees in the building and public works sector for the VAE, and more broadly for continuing training.

The lack of knowledge of VAE among construction professionals, is at the top of the factors explaining the low use of the scheme (as in most of the studies on VAE). This misconception is often associated with the fact that many of the companies in the sector are small (more than 90% of companies have fewer than 10 employees). In the absence of a human resources department, company managers are in charge of all training issues and have very little time to devote to them (particularly in times of economic difficulties and

regulatory changes). In this context, it is naturally compulsory training that is preferred. Sometimes, VAE is associated with the tertiary professions, appear unsuitable for technical occupations where the culture of the written word is not widespread.

VAE appeared to be more relevant to meet a need for career security, which could be increased in the coming years, particularly because of changes in the sector. If evolution through experience is part of the construction sector culture, it has become weaker in the past years. The hiring of people without a diploma has already declined, while the recruitment of young apprentices has also been reduced in recent years.

Some employer views were rather opposed to VAE, for example explaining that companies have no interest in promoting VAE or other training schemes to employees who are not destined to evolve. And even more so if, at the end of the pathway, remuneration must be revised upwards for identical work. These arguments have sometimes been supplemented by the assertion that VAE is an individual right which is not the responsibility of the company, and which should be promoted by employee unions.

SOURCE: Pôle Observation et Prospective Observatoire VAE (2015) Pourquoi la VAE n'a pas trouvé sa place auprès des professionnels du BTP ? Available at: http://www.cariforef-reunion.net/files/2015_VAE_BTP_CREFORNormandie.pdf

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12.2

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