

Recognition of prior learning and the role of quality assurance agencies. Accreditation of prior learning in France (VAE) as a case study

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1. Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) implies the formal acknowledgement of learning acquired in a non-formal context (usually coming from experience unrelated to an academic context). This process is generally seen as an important tool for progressing in the fields of Life long and continuing education, two preeminent objectives of the Lisbon agenda.

RPL is normally conducted by educational institutions or professional certification bodies. In the case of certifications issued by educational institutions, this process provides recognition of a certain academic level (according to a national qualification framework) in view of two main objectives: increasing labour market recognition and/or enabling access to a higher level of studies.

Because of its potential role in the fields of employment and social promotion, RPL practices are politically sensitive and are normally part of an explicit political agenda which respond to national objectives.

This political dimension must be taken into account by quality assurance agencies as a starting point in order to develop quality assurance criteria in this field. The answer to the question: *what makes a sound RPL process?* is fundamentally dependant on the pursued goals and can in any way be affronted from an exclusively technical perspective.

An ENQA round table devoted to this subject¹ has enabled to confront different national realities and policies regarding RPL and, in consequence, different quality assurance roles and practices among the different QAA represented.

In this paper, the French experience in the field of prior learning recognition, or in French terms, *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE), is presented as a case study which enables to illustrate some important general issues.

After analyzing this case, the last section of this paper tries to reproduce the main issues raised during the discussion held at ENQA's round table on Recognition of prior learning and draw some conclusions as to the possible role of quality assurance agencies.

¹ The name of the round table was *Recognition of prior learning- exchanging national practices and experiences*, included within the programme of the *ENQA workshop- Quality assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: exchanging good practice* (Dublin, 9-10 February 2012)

2. Recognition of prior learning in France (*validation des acquis de l'expérience- VAE*)

2.1. National context

RPL processes, as they are practiced today in France, were established by the *2002 Law on social modernization*² with the name of VAE (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*).

This law establishes an *individual right* to the recognition of professional experience in the acquisition of an academic title or a diploma. This recognition device was established was established within the following context:

- *The existence of an important population sector*³ *with a low or inexistent graduation level*. Regardless of their individual competences, this population sector was not recognized by the French market labour and their professional and social ascension was, in practice, very difficult.
- *Initial qualifications play a stronger role in France than in other countries* (Anglo-Saxon countries, for example) in reference to social hierarchy. Some authors even talk about *France structural fondness for qualifications*⁴ or even *French dictatorship of qualifications*⁵. A 2005 study shows that over 73% of job offers in France, regardless of the age of the candidate, mention the number of years of study and the qualification required (in Great Britain, this rate goes down to 27%)⁶. Different studies also show that the possession of a diploma enables a quicker and more stable access to the job market in France. The fact of having a diploma has also an impact on the stability of the contract (with a much higher rate of indefinite contract for graduated people)⁷. Finally, the possession of an initial academic qualification plays, at least since Napoleonic times, an important symbolic role in the meritocratic France, where initial qualifications are one of the axes for social differentiation.

² *Law n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 de modernisation sociale*

³ According to the 1995 INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques- *National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies*) employment survey, four out of ten workers in France didn't have any formal qualification at the time.

⁴ TRYBY, Emmanuel; *Accreditation of prior experiential learning and the development of higher education*; European journal of vocational training, N° 46- 2009/1-ISSN 1977-0219

⁵ Méhaut Philippe, Lecourt Anne-Juliette (2007) ; *The accreditation of prior learning experience in France : A good start, to be continued* ; Discussion paper.

⁶ Marchal Emmanuelle, Rieudeau Géraldine (2003) « Candidat de plus de 40 ans non diplômé ou débutant s'abstenir », *Connaissance de l'emploi n°11*, CEE

⁷ Studies made by the CEREQ (Centre d'Études et des Recherches sur les Qualifications- *Center for the study and research on qualifications*)

- *A dual training system which establishes a sharp distinction between initial training and continuous and vocational education training (CVET). As an example, only around 1, 5% continuous education actions in 1996 resulted in an academic title or diploma⁸.*

The new VAE system established by the 2002 law tries to profit from the major role played by initial diplomas in France in order to attain two main objectives:

- Facilitate social promotion and secure career paths
- Build a bridge between the CVET system and the initial training system.

2.2. Brief description of the French VAE system

The VAE process enables an individual to get all or part of a certification (diploma, certificate with a Professional end or professional qualification certificate) based on his/her professional experience (salaried, non-salaried or voluntary). This experience, which must be related to the intended certification, is validated by a panel.

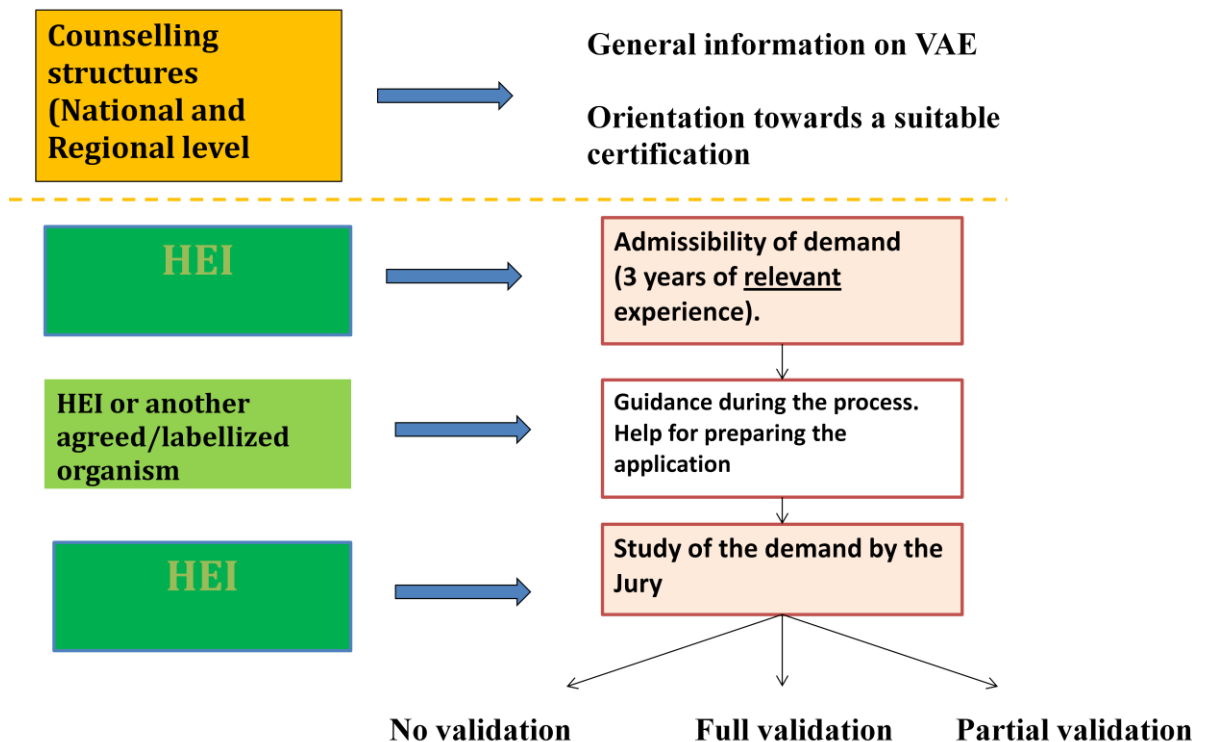
If the VAE process leads to an academic qualification, it is directly conducted by the Higher Education Institution. The diploma obtained has exactly the same validity as a diploma obtained by an ordinary path

All diplomas, certificates and qualifications with a professional end are available through VAE. They are registered in a public registry (RNCP- National Register of Professional Certifications, <http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/>). Academic diplomas registered in RNCP cover a variety of levels, from secondary education to the master level. All engineering degrees (master level diplomas) are included by law in RNCP and have thus the obligation of delivering their diploma through VAE.

The diagram below shows the main steps of the VAE process and the main actors involved. Several structures at the regional and national level have been put in place in order to provide general information on the procedure and orientate the candidate towards a suitable certification. Once the certification is chosen, a first check on the admissibility of the demand (mainly the verification of the candidate having the 3 years of relevant experience required) is conducted. After passing the admissibility check, the candidate must prepare an application which will be finally examined by a mixed panel composed of academic and professional members.

The panel may issue a full or a partial validation. In this last case, the jury can propose the necessary pedagogical complements (courses, internships,...). There is not a limited delay for obtaining these additional competences.

⁸ Again from the studies by the CEREQ



3. The VAE process in engineering higher education in France. The role of CTI

The main mission of CTI is to conduct accreditation of engineering programmes in France. CTI supervises all paths for obtaining the engineering diploma, including VAE. All engineering HEIs must include a specific section concerning VAE in their self-assessment report in view of programme accreditation (VAE procedures, number of accreditations issued, number of candidates, cost of the process, type of compensatory measures proposed, etc.).

CTI has developed a set of criteria regarding the way VAE procedures should be conducted. These criteria are gathered in the document *Références et Orientations* (References and Guidelines- available at www.cti-commission.fr).

The quality criteria applied are coherent with the political goals established at the national level. In consequence, the criteria have been developed under the assumption that *VAE is basically a beneficial procedure*, with a strong potential to boost employment and social promotion. Engineering HEIs in France are sometimes accused of being elitists; VAE is considered by CTI as one of the devices which can be employed to foster social diversity in this environment.

The legal obligation for all HEIs to establish VAE processes has also had some methodological benefits at the national level, in the sense that it has been a major driver to formalize the competence-based approach within French HEIs.

Some engineering HEIs in France are reluctant to deliver their diploma through VAE, as they think that the educational value of the VAE is lower than a classical diploma and hence could degrade the value of their academic certification. Being able to articulate a VAE procedure that ensures the same level of exigency as in the standard path is indeed a crucial issue for CTI.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, some HEIs could take this practice as a business opportunity. The fact that they can deliver a “partial validation” followed by a recommendation on pedagogical complements could encourage engineering HEIs to use VAE in order to *feed* their continuous education programmes. CTI is aware of this potential conflict of interest and tries to be vigilant in order to prevent abuse.

As far as accreditation is concerned, CTI has tried to adopt a balanced position, which respects the specific policies of each institution with regards to VAE but, at the same time, tries to ensure a fair implementation of these recognition processes. The main accreditation criteria applied by CTI are:

- *Certification*: the diploma delivered must be strictly the same as that delivered through other learning paths.
- *Professional outcomes of the programme*: Engineering HEIs must adequately formalize the outcomes of their programmes in a way that they can serve to the certification of professional competences. These descriptions must be made public and transmitted to the National Registry of Professional Certifications.
- *Evaluation procedures and criteria*: The procedures and evaluation criteria must be clear and public. They must guarantee an equitable treatment of all candidates. The evaluation criteria should be at the same exigency level than the ones used to attribute the diploma through other paths.
- *Information and guidance to the candidate*: HEIs must be transparent and provide sufficient information to possible VAE candidates. They must put in place (or offer) guidance and counseling to the candidates throughout the process.
- *Accreditation panel*: the VAE panel must include academic and professional members (other than the external lecturers of the programme). It must include some of the members from the jury that delivers the ordinary diploma in order to ensure a same exigency level, but other than that, the composition must be substantially different and adapted to understand the specific challenges of this track.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Recognition of prior learning is implemented at various levels and with various objectives in the different European countries. Whereas the RPL process in some countries⁹ mainly involves considering the learner's prior formal or informal learning in order to gain entry to further study or to gain credit or exemption towards a degree, in other countries, such as France, RPL is used as a major route to award an academic degree.

The case of France's VAE is indeed an extreme case. VAE enables the acquisition of a complete academic degree through the exclusive validation of professional experience. The VAE legislation doesn't limit the number of certifications obtained by a particular person. In France, it is hence possible to get up to the master level without having any formal academic qualification. As an example, we can examine the case of a French citizen, who left school without his secondary education degree and was subsequently able to obtain 6 academic diplomas through VAE (including a bachelor in literary Arabic) up to the master level. This person is currently in charge of VAE processes at a prestigious engineering HEI.¹⁰

The French approach to RPL raised some critic voices among QA colleagues during the ENQA round table (see note number 1). Whereas they could easily accept that one can arrive to the same *level* of professional competence through working experience than via an academic degree, it is more difficult to argue that this path could be equivalent in terms of methodological skills and analytic capacity. There is also an experiential dimension associated to formal higher education which definitely plays a role in building a competence *profile*.

The case of Hong Kong¹¹ provides an example on how RPL processes can be established without mixing the notions of *level* and *profile*. In this country, the recognition of professional competences is made by a number of specific agencies with closed links to industry. Candidates obtain recognition of a certain academic level and the right to be admitted to a higher level of studies, but they don't obtain an academic degree.

However, the French VAE should be understood in the light of the French specific national context; particularly, a number of urgent structural problems which needed to be addressed in order to improve competitiveness and social equity, and the special role played by initial qualifications in this country.

RPL practices are indeed politically sensitive and highly dependent on the context. Agencies must explicitly assume this political dimension in order to define what role to play regarding RPL processes. The following previous questions should be posed:

⁹ Such as Ireland, Germany or the Netherlands

¹⁰ See for example, the case of Hassane Akka: <http://orientactuel.centre-inffo.fr/Hassane-Akka-de-bac-3-a-bac-5-en.html>

¹¹ http://www.hkqf.gov.hk/guie/HKQF_intro.asp

- Is RPL an important issue in my specific national and political context? Is it being practiced at a significant level?
- Are there any risks of derive in the way HEIs are implementing these recognition processes?

Depending of the answer to these questions, the quality assurance agency may adopt a more or less active role. In the case of France, RPL practices are politically important and there are indeed certain risks of derive (a general HEI's reluctance to VAE, conflicts of interest to be avoided and certain methodological aspects associated to the competences approaches), which justifies, as we have seen, an active role from the national accreditation agency.

5. References

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