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**Validation of Acquired Experience
(VAE) in French Higher Education**

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Abstract

The Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE) offers anyone who has been active for at least three years and who has had a professional activity – salaried, non-salaried, or as a volunteer – the opportunity to have their experience validated, in order to obtain a diploma or a title with a professional finality, thus modifying the traditional pattern according to which certification used to be the terminal result of an academic or professional training. We will here present the contexts leading to the emergence to the VAE process and the circumstances that prepare both individuals and higher education institutions to fit into an evolution of their roles. Then, we will describe them to say to what extent this announces an irreversible evolution of the relationship between the universities and their audiences, concerning the validation of people's skills. The results prove that thanks to a critical analysis of the value given to the formalized content – a translation in terms of the visibility of the candidates' qualification and of the conditions of their transferability, the actors produce new knowledge. They can thus show their ability to confront a theoretical perspective with an observation protocol on their own professional or social experience.

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Introduction

The VAE process comes within a context where individuals, as well as institutions in general and universities in particular, are subjected to logics of the production of new skills and the transformation of subjectivity (Ehrenberg, 1998), logics which reveal as many constraints as opportunities. Yet, the analysis of a decisive change causing an evolution of structures, professional identities, assessment regulations, higher education practices (Bernoux, 2004) leads us to wonder about the effects caused by and on the higher education actors of the VAE. Does the organization of individual and collective measures for the VAE show that the partnership investment between higher education training and labour organisms meet the need to better apprehend the individuals' skills, who, as candidates, produce new skills all along the VAE process? Does this constitute an increase in value from the point of view of the teaching researchers, of the candidates as well as of the universities? This interrogation underlies the hypothesis that, if some teaching researchers and candidates seem to resist and others to renounce the innovating measures of the VAE, it is because they feel confronted with hardships rooted in their relationship with knowledge inherited from their personal and collective history.

Our analysis is based on methodological measures of observation involving candidates (n=25) to a Master's Degree in Social Sciences through the VAE and teaching researchers (n=4) invested in the implementation of the process. This analysis is centered on the study of motivations, on works of educational engineering, on changing postures between the assessed and the assessors, on validation files, considering that those candidates can be prescribed extra training modules in order to be awarded the targeted certification.

An evolving context

Technological changes as well as an increasing life expectancy provide opportunities of a new orientation unknown to the previous generations. Indeed, the VAE offers anyone who has been active the opportunity to have their experience validated, in order to obtain a diploma or a title with a professional finality. In France, the VAE has been established as a right for every citizen. The current system which was established in January 2002 (Social Modernization Act) is used to deliver whole or partial qualifications.

Each body awarding qualifications has developed its own rules for the context-specific implementation of the principles outlined in the legislation.

In addition, in higher education, the recognition of professional experience has also been used for a long time (in fact, it dates back to 1934) to allow access to individuals who do not meet formal requirement criteria and, in some cases, the acquisition of a diploma. In France, a new practice emerged in the 1970s, when a new pedagogical approach moved towards the modularization of training, to recognize the learning outcomes of workers (obtained through work experience or short in-company training courses) as an entry route to Higher Education (HE).

On the other hand, the main system of validation in France is used to deliver a whole or components of a qualification on the basis of the applicant's knowledge and skills acquired through experience. The qualification awarded having the same value as those awarded through the formal system of education and training. The number of VAE candidates per year is high in comparison to most other European countries (Hawley, Souto Otero, Duchemin, 2010). While, in accordance with the legislator's intentions, the VAE is principally an individual's initiative, nowadays more and more collective measures are being taken by labour organizations, as such is the case in our study where most candidates are working and assuming various professional responsibilities. Unsurprisingly therefore, common representations condition an involvement in a validation. By meeting social risks (Beck, 1998), and uncertainties (Castel, 2009), more particularly in their respective sector of activity, these representations, through individual and collective projects, principally make of the VAE a defensive and preventive use, with a view to securing the individuals' future professional and social careers. Thus, who are the beneficiaries?

Flows of beneficiaries, in France, for the period 2004-2010

In 2009, nearly 75 000 files were deemed admissible by the Ministries delivering Certifications by means of the VAE and a jury examined around 58 000. About 32,000 candidates obtained a certification through the VAE, which is 13% more than in 2008. After a slight reduction in 2008, the number of certificates by the VAE stabilizes with a tendency to the rise to the work from 2003: the number of candidates certificates had progressed a lot during the first years of the ascent of the device (+ 65% between 2003 and 2004, + 28% between 2004 and 2005), then more moderately (+ 15% between 2005 and 2006, + 16% between 2006 and 2007).

Validation of Acquired Experience in all the French certifying Ministries

In 2010, nearly 75 000 files have been considered admissible by the whole of the ministries delivering certifications through the VAE, and about 53 000 candidates have been heard by a jury.

These numbers have varied very little since 2007, after a big increase between 2005 and 2007. In 2010, about 30 000 candidates were awarded a certification by the VAE, i.e. 7 % less than in 2009. The yearly number of certified students had largely increased between 2003 and 2005, before they became stable at about 30 000. Since 2002, which is the date the device was implemented, the number of certified candidates has risen to practically 200 000.

Diversity in higher education

Understanding the context of the VAE implementation leads us to consider that higher education cannot be deconnected from an economic, social and political reality which influences its orientation as much as it aims at exercising pressure

on that reality. The actors of the VAE are asked to understand the social processes that go beyond the visible outlines of the specific contexts and measures they propose to analyze through the written production of their validation files (the candidates' skills portfolios). They are thus invited to use their imagination in order to reveal the singularity in their objects of study, more precisely to produce a critical analysis of the issues, with the help of the teaching researchers' tutoring. In front of this tension between scientific usefulness – the synonym of the production of the most learned knowledge – and the use of sociological knowledge in relationship with social expectancies, even of « the consulting, audit and lobbying agencies » (De Montlibert, 2004), it is most necessary for the candidates « to define a theoretical posture and to gather the appropriate methodological tools with a view to securing an academically accepted construction of knowledge and skills », on the basis of their experience, which, in the end, carries two principles: that of the educational innovation of the higher education training careers (Lafont, Pariat, 2012) and that of the biographization of professional and social careers. Companies are now confronted to a recurring challenge with the evolutions in matter of qualification recognition, according to the higher education promoters of the VAE:

« Whether the issue is to accompany the transformation of jobs and skills, individual strategies and professional careers, or to plan the future management of employment and competences, lifelong training requires a greater readability of diplomas »

They say that this corresponds to a set of recommendations that have been expressed at European and national levels, with a view to improving the training-employment relationship. In terms of contents, we thus move on to an approach aiming at the training results in order to facilitate professional integration and mobility, as well as the taking up of one's studies again.

The final goal is to make access to the VAE easier for the whole of the lifelong training candidates (the results showing some failures). In 2010, 45 % of the working candidates registering to a VAE course in order to get a diploma or a higher education degree were executives. 85 % of the beneficiaries are employed while 14 % are unemployed. Bachelor's Degrees (B.A.) represent 48,5 % of the degrees totally or partially awarded thanks to the VAE. The much sought-after professional degree represents 37% of the validations awarded by the VAE. As in 2009, it ranks just before the Master's Degree, even though the latter's success is still great: 36 % of the candidates registering for a VAE aim at obtaining a Master's Degree (Le Roux, 2011).

Higher Education Institutes

In France, the higher education system is structured in two distinct bodies, whose functions are historically very different. Up to the 1970s, the universities were strongly oriented towards culture and research, and missioned

with the transmission of abstract and disinterested knowledge¹. It was the specifically French « higher education institutes' » task to train engineers and the executives of the public and private sectors. These two institutions differed – and still do – by the way they select their students. Whereas all high school graduates theoretically have the right to enter university – apart from medical universities – « higher education institutes » practise an explicit selection based on an entrance competitive exam. This central part played by « higher education institutes » in producing social elites and in applying a specific selection mode, compared to higher education at university, is one good reason to question those institutes' ability to function according to their initial republican ideal based on merit (Albouy, Wanecq, 2003). Hence, « higher education institutes » are regularly accused of producing socially predestined elites and of legitimating social reproduction on a large scale. One can therefore acknowledge a real interest for the development of the VAE process, even though a few initiatives cannot be ignored (Pirrot, 2009). But is this distance more or less important than that of the rest of higher education at university, more specifically postgraduate/PhD levels, the « university equivalent » of « higher education institutes » ?

Universities

At university and at the « National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts », 4 064 candidates benefitted from the VAE in 2010, in order to be awarded a complete or partial degree or a higher education diploma, i.e., practically 95 % of the files examined by the juries. The total number of awarded validations has remained stable (around 4 100) since 2007. For all the institutions, the complete diplomas - increasing again in 2010 – represent 55 % of the juries' positive decisions, whereas they were 53 % in 2009. The part they represent among the awarded validations keeps rising : it was only 17 % in 2002. Today all universities practise the VAE. The implementation of the VAE process is revealing of the extent of the social transactions at work on the borders of institutional teaching and research practices, thus inducing a change in higher education ethos. Recognizing knowledge acquired through experience implies deeply modifying the common representation of the knowledge that academics have built all along their own careers, in reference with the knowledge elaborated thanks to their studies and teaching.

The interrogations on the value attributed to knowledge according to the conditions and places of acquisition take on a new aspect in the perspective of social innovation and modernization, where the VAE may present both an opportunity and a risk, as much for individuals as for institutions (Merle, 2006). The spreading out of such postural changes makes it necessary for academic knowledge and knowledge through action (Barbier, Galatanu, 2004) – though of different origin, nature and construction, yet pertaining to knowledge – to be identical in their social recognition.

¹With the notable exception of the Faculties of Medicine, which offer a professional training within the framework of the university.

Finally, the VAE process forces higher education institutions to open up, to discover and better understand the professional and social spheres where knowledge through experience is building. This should be done through a training engineering work based on the confrontation between the VAE candidates' experience and the certification referential requirements. This work, though, should not be reduced to a mere correspondance between experience and a degree, particularly when degree referentials largely used in initial training are concerned. Therefore, taking into account the importance of knowledge through experience, in training, would mean, some say, *«providing companies with the opportunity to interfere with higher education»*. Through this criticism of the interference of the world of labour in higher education, they echo the accusation of the ideological and economical nature of an employers' policy tending to reduce the university to a training place submitted to their requirements:

« This attitude appears to us as antinomic not only with higher education traditions but also with the very foundations of university, the place of knowledge elaboration and transmission, whose legitimacy is based on their proximity to research, and that higher education degrees are meant to validate » (Ropé, 2005, p.82).

Plurality in higher education practices

In 2010 a survey of the big disciplinary fields shows that Economics, Management and AES (Economic and Social Administration) still constitute the largest number of applications (38 %). They are followed, in equal parts (21 %), by applied fundamental sciences and other social sciences, including information and communication.

The teaching researchers

In the light of the profiles of the teaching researchers involved in the VAE process, among those who are *« indifferent, proselytes or activists »* (Cherqui-Houot, 2001), between the characteristics of the careers and professional histories of the teachers invested in continuous training and the characteristics of the population interested in the VAE, an isomorphia seems to appear for those teachers who know and have experienced working with people likely to go into a VAE. However, having the capacity to award a complete higher education degree seems to cause the risk of affecting :

«The principles of degree awarding and of their social role. Like the notion of skills, the extensive use of this notion aims at affecting the cognitive and cultural models that prevail in the higher education sphere» (Ropé, 2005, p.61).

The mobilization of the VAE candidates' knowledge and individual and collective experiences should enable them to share, and to make their own the issues revealed in those exchanges. Then they should be able to go further in order to produce new and shared knowledge, the basis of the validation file.

The VAE would then contribute to a reflection on the educational act, so as to make it a moment of cooperative production and exchanges, when the candidates place themselves at the center of their training. This educational argument is a legitimate answer to those who insist that implementing the VAE generates the substitution of a degree to training and who also underline the risk associated to modularization, which would no longer correspond to a necessary educational coherence, the characteristics of the conventional forms of training. This critical point of view is also sometimes associated with the economical argument which consists in underlining the rationalization of training costs, i.e., that it is less expensive for companies to pay for a VAE registration than to have their employees be absent for a long training period.

Another consequence often evoked by the teaching staff concerns the increasing competition that such logic will create between more or less lax universities, since companies, they say, strategically turn towards the university with the best offers. What's more, some consider that such a competition between universities may cause a decrease in value of diplomas, which would mean selling them off. Yet the teaching researchers who adhere only to initial training refer to the long-established model of academic curricula and favour the institutionalized written work with its lot of bibliographic norms. They convey a taylorist paradigm of the division between conception and execution, between theory and practice. They thus reveal their relationship with academic knowledge, with the valorization and hierarchization attributed to learned knowledge, and the devalorization of technical know-how and the ability to act and react in a professional situation.

The candidates

Elaborating their VAE files leads the candidates to rebuild their professional and personal careers so that they can prove their ability to go into the training they are registering for, in order to validate their acquired learning, with the risk of producing a « *biographical illusion* », a gap between reality and the representation of reality. So how do the candidates use their autonomy and their personal initiative in the choice of the experiences they consider most appropriate to evoke ? How do they manage the relative dependence to the norms and requirements of the institutions they are addressing ? Does all this condition their commitment to training ? Can it represent an obstacle to their commitment ? The undertaking of a VAE training results from a conjunction of socio-economical and psychological factors, but also and mostly from the representation the candidates have and the benefits they can make of it. In other words, entering training:

« is the result of a positive interaction between two fundamental factors, i.e., on the one hand, the value attributed by the candidates

to the training they are contemplating, and, on the other, the hope of success in that task » (Bourgeois, 1998).

While it is commonly admitted that the VAE is a new mode of access to certification, it is however rarely seen as a training career. This is probably due to the dominant representation of a training situation implying the transmission of knowledge in an academic face to face relationship. However, most of the interviewed candidates consider the VAE as a training career. Those who don't, say they do not have such technical markers as a certification referential, thanks to which they could identify and measure the new knowledge acquired in their VAE career (evaluation function). One other reason is the acquisition of the skills previously mobilized and which remain to be validated. They think that previous acquisitions do not seem revealing of new knowledge acquisitions, thus showing a form of resistance to consider reflection as being part of the training process.

Yet the candidates who see in the VAE a training career say that they will thus be awarded a certification, as in initial training; and that, moreover, the experience of the VAE career can be given greater value by a progression in terms of qualification, these two terms testifying to new theoretical and practical acquisitions, as well as a new awareness of the links between practical skills and academic knowledge. They see this career as a work of introspection which will lead to the transformation of an action, whatever its value, into training as much on the level of knowledge, of a know-how as of inter personal skills. While training and the validation career aim at personal development, they establish an equivalence between the training process and the validation process. By inducing a substitution of institutional programs for practice through experience – which becomes content through the theorization of practice – the validation career places the candidates in a proactive situation, which makes them take the full responsibility of their training.

By considering the formalization of experience through the mobilization of theoretical references appearing in the initial training career thanks to the training referential, the very idea of added value asserts itself. Articulating those references around chosen situations of experience induces the candidates to consider that there is a greater richness in terms of the variety of knowledge, of the pluridisciplinarity of possible approaches, in order to give greater value to their experience. The very fact of reflecting on the articulations of theoretical and practical dimensions contributes as much, and even more, to the individuals' social and professional development. For certain candidates, however, the VAE career cannot in itself be enough to contribute to their personal development. Finally, as this personal development is not evaluated in a training career, this could call for another phase, so as to give it value and make it appear in terms of qualification and career evolution, i.e., an articulation of continuous training actions.

Those representations and the obstacles to training registration raise the question of the tension between reaching optimal degrees of freedom of action – the expression of a certain form of autonomy – and adapting to environmental constraints – the relative expression of an existing dependence.

Thus the way one adapts to those constraints, while taking advantage of the margins of freedom emerging in the gaps, is likely to reproduce and contribute to individual as well as collective dynamics. And if tension proves to be too strong or if the possibility to reach the expected benefits does not seem sufficient enough, then a logic appears, transforming the characteristics of representations into obstacles to training registration, the source of renouncement and the distortion of the motivational characteristics, constitutive of an inner model reality which accounts for the interactional order between the individual and his/her environment. Registering for the VAE process means aiming at reducing this gap (consciously or not) and at being recognized as being able to follow a training course which is more coherent and better adjusted to the reality the candidates intend to face, whether in their professional situation, or, more globally, in their social identity, through the projections they formulate.

In any cultural confrontation, the representations structure themselves at the VAE process registration. Each candidate gauges his/her acquired experience and constitutes a representation of the way that experience must be transcribed, so that it can later be officially recognized in the form of a certification. In that sense, the candidates' perspectives reveal their mental and introspective organization between, on the one hand, the subjects they embody, in positions objectively identifiable on a professional level – originated in also objectivated school careers – founded on particular experiences gathered in sociologically differentiated contexts ; on the other hand, of the objects, in the given circumstances, their worded intention concerning the registration for the VAE training, which constitute a clever decoding socially differentiated from the higher education world, and therefore from the differential interpretations of the considered future.

The projection of « probabilities » during the presentation of the biographical and administrative elements – the constitutive elements of the first part of the validation file – initiates a work reconstituting acquired experience, a work which starts in a way that it can be associated to an analytical process resulting in a transformation of the nature of the experiences described by the candidates into an object of knowledge. While distinguishing :

«two kinds of experiences, one can be called initial experience : non verbalized, non-formalized and non explicit mere real-life experience. The other, which can be defined as second degree experience, results from a work of verbalization and the translation of the first form of experience into concepts and scientific theories » (Lainé, 2005).

The latter are assigned to rebuild a professionalized awareness of the production modes of actions which, being repeated daily, have become banal. The injunction induced and imposed on themselves at giving value to their movements, postures and behaviors could reveal a form of didactic engineering that forces them to manipulate knowledge and know-hows whose objective is to highlight a coherent career, whatever its linearity. The validation file offers

the opportunity of a new reflection on their career by achieving a proportionally difficult written work, considering the fact that sometimes school days are long gone. The validation file offers the opportunity to highlight dispositions and requirements which are, in fact, social skills that have been acquired – or not – in the initial and professional environment, such as the marking of the function and organization regulations of the educational and training system, the ability to capitalize information or the ease at writing. And if one can speak of training, all the more of undertaking a training career, it is because thanks to the validation career, the candidates can no longer see their social and professional experience in the same way. Distancing themselves from and analyzing that experience enable them to draw from it teachings and conclusions.

Conclusion

As much as the assertion that individuals are to be considered as fully-fledged subjects is shared and supported by all the actors who are interviewed on the conditions of change, of fulfilment, of development and of transformation, it echoes an answer to the uncertainties of professional and social careers (Rincquesen, Rossin, Boisson, 2010) – an answer which, within the framework of the VAE, opposes a liberal conception of the right to training to another, centered on the collective guarantees that are provided in the access to training and in the management of professional careers. Thus the candidates negotiate their way all along an « uncertain career » with moving outlines according to their professional, social and personal histories and to the institutional contexts in which they evolve, between a career of adaptation, « individual responsibility » and political and institutional injunctions in a society « aiming at disengaging itself from collective responsibilities » (Liétard, 1993, p.6), contrary to the legislator's spirit. So it seems possible to associate the VAE careers to training careers, since the candidates participate as much in the enunciation and formalization of acquired skills as in the structuration of new skills, which, in the end, lead them, through individual dynamics, simultaneously to find and to create their position in society all along their lives, without however considering them as indissociable. Finally, a reflexive analysis and an on-the-job training lead them to explain the effects of the confrontation between their discursive and their practical intelligence in order to report on what they have done and produced. To conclude, while the State asserts its desire to secure professional careers by developing processes which aim at giving a better protection to employees and at helping them to be more mobile before the uncertainties of professional and social life, the VAE fits into this strategy which tends at reactivating the notions of people's activation, autonomization and responsabilization in their careers. Thus requiring the individuals' activation appears from the very beginning of their validation career, when – tutored or not – they attempt to define a « strategy » with a view to achieving the certification of their experience. This is achieved by going through various stages and individual tutoring, where candidates are asked to implement an introspective speech – also called « biographical narrations »

(Astier, 2007, p. 51), according to this author, « the counterpart currently required of those people who ask for assistance, a status or social protection ». But will they be able to keep up producing that speech within the context of higher education?

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