



# Changes and issues in the validation of experience



**Emmanuel Triby**

*Lecturer/researcher at Université Louis Pasteur, Strasbourg, France  
Special responsibility for Validation of Prior Experiential Learning (VAE)*

Concerning the validation of experience, in France we are shifting from validation of prior certificated learning (VAP) to validation of prior experiential learning (VAE); validation of experience has been instituted as a right, as has training. But even if this transforms certification practice, we should not regard the change solely as a consequence of formal adjustment. To some extent, the advent of VAE is establishing a new relationship between training and economic activity, ever since it was reinforced by new provisions for training (Law of 2004).

Our position is that like the changes affecting training, the development of validation is part of the trend of adapting to a lack of job security - it is 'a convenient tool in the face of increasing insecurity regarding jobs and a secure wage' (Lenoir, 1999: 9). It constitutes a kind of 'safety-first principle' applied to the value of work and to the potential that this value represents. To this extent, it can be compared with the theme of employability. Similarly, this procedure has a place in the relaunch of mobility and of the 'social elevator' that the crisis of 1970-1980 seemed to have brought to a halt. Lastly, the job shortage (accompanied by a shortage of workers in some fields) and recruitment problems also play a part in it.

This article is primarily concerned with the economic and social stakes of validation. Other aspects will not be taken into account except insofar as they shed light on the economic issues - i.e. institutional conditions for organising validation, educational methods of implementation, regulatory provisions and their policy framework, etc. In addition to the reference literature, the text is based on university validation practice and on an analysis of the questions emerging in this connection. Thus, greater emphasis will be placed on analysing the situation in universities.

Armed with the results of this initial experience and the problematic aspects outlined, we believe that we must begin by analysing the impact of the validation of experience with reference to the way in which such validation has changed in both training systems and certification practices. Its effect on how organisations function and how the production system is regulated can then be understood as a yet outstanding issue; in this context, an update on the position of universities may prove enlightening. Finally, global issues with a substantial impact on Europe can also be outlined.

## Changes currently under way

In order to understand the issues currently involved in the various modalities of validation of experience in France, we need first to summarise briefly the main changes brought about by the 2001 Law on 'social modernisation'. This also enables us to update the new 'social logic' included in this Law, and hence to understand the conditions put in place for adaptation to new modes of improving the status of training in vocational activities, in a globalised economy.

## The historical dimension of the changes currently under way

The regulatory context of validation in France is undergoing a major transformation, namely the shift from VAP to VAE. We shall not attempt to list all the changes, but shall describe some fairly radical changes brought about by the Law. For universities, the retention of a 1985 text on validation of prior personal and certificated learning, VAPP, leads to the coexistence of two systems, something that raises very delicate questions that will be addressed later.

**This article analyses the main changes in the rules for validating experience in France and of what they mean for society. It goes on to consider university validation practices. The way in which this system is evolving offers a chance to identify the issues involved for the economy and for society, with particular attention to the expected consequences for universities. This analysis enables us to understand how the problem of validating experience is linked to current economic globalisation and sheds light on the scope of lifelong training.**

**Substitution and duality of validation schemes** **Table 1**

Fields of validation	Decree of 1985 VAPP (retained)for universities	Law of 1992 - Decree of 1993 - VAP (repealed)	Law of 2001-02 VAE
<i>Duration of work experience required</i>	No duration is set for the experience	5 years' work experience	3 years' work experience (full-time equivalent)
<i>Nature of the experience to be validated</i>	Personal and work experience	Work experience only	Work and personal experience
<i>Qualification field involved</i>	University-level qualifications only	State education qualifications	All qualifications listed in the national directory*
<i>Field of validation of qualifications aimed at</i>	Access to preparation for a degree with possible exemptions	Partial validation only of the qualification aimed at	Possible validation of the entire qualification aimed at

\* Inclusion in the national directory of certifications

These new schemes have established a logic of social credibility. Certification is entering the sphere of 'social transactions' (Bonami, 1998). It is no longer the product of a particular activity developed in order to attain it, but is instead a quest for a transaction between two separate spheres, namely vocational activity and certification per se. Applicants for validation seeking recognition of the value of their experience often ask, entirely legitimately, 'What can you give me for my x years of experience?' This question is expressed in all the more arbitrary fashion, focusing on a 'good' (the qualification) in that the transaction is performed in an area characterised by a degree of abstraction as regards their working and living environment.

An entitlement to validation is created, by the same token as the right to training that already existed. In reality, however, these two entitlements do not involve individuals and their organisations in the same way - the second one is applicable within any training body, including the enterprise that sponsors the training. In contrast, the entitlement to validation refers to a body authorised to provide certification, of necessity separate from the enterprise that may have motivated this action. In the latter case, access to certification is of itself a specific step consisting in bringing together and formalising the 'signs of experience' capable of being validated. This step is much more costly in psychological terms than is participation in a training course, and the person seeking validation has to make the most effort. It is as if the effort put into working has to be extended in order for the formal worth of this work to be recognised. The paradox inherent in the validation of experience is that it introduces an apparent separation between training and validation (in the case of overall validation, there is no longer any for-

mal training activity), yet imposes on applicants a need for work per se that far exceeds the involvement required in most training measures.

A third path for accessing qualification is coming into being, one that can be regarded as involving a synthesis of the two existing paths - training (initial training in particular) and experience as recognised under the conventions obtaining in a working environment. Validation of experience adopts the pre-eminent role of the validating body in certification from the first path, and the crucial weight of the experience recognised from the second. Enterprises need, above all, an externalised validation body in order to move away from assessment by the internal hierarchical authority alone. On the other hand, it is to be expected that they will often prefer to internalise the part of the procedure that consists of assembling the applicant's ('supporting') documentation. (See diagram in the annex.) This is so that they will have control of the recognition of experiential learning and will derive at least a symbolic benefit from it with regard to their employees. Ultimately, this change could lead to a reduction in the importance of initial training qualifications, unless more experience (in the form of work placements) is required in order to obtain them.

A broader concept of experience induces us to take account of prior experiential learning in the context of both work experience and personal experience (commitment to the community, political and trade union commitment, etc.). This involves both extending the training/employment relationship to community or leisure activities and eliminating the borders between the two spheres of adult life, namely work and private life. This is directly in line with the increasing share allotted within organisations



to subjectivisation and individualisation of relationships with work and with work objectives (Vincens, 2002).

The reduction in the length of experience required is, without a doubt, aimed at the youngest generations. Their training paths are evolving into a transitional path which, while it is growing longer, combines initial vocational experience and training increasingly closely. It is not a case merely of recording students' activities and their wish to extend their qualification, but also of moving towards an integration standard based on young people with experience (Youth Employment Services - see box - could have been the archetype of this, if they had survived). The shorter time periods required also presuppose the recognition of job instability and mobility as a diversified source of experience capable of being validated. VAE accords with the 'new areas of mobility' that the vocational training reform currently under way in France is aiming to establish (Morin, 2003).

Ratification of qualifications is disappearing in favour of entry in the national directory of certifications. This new accreditation procedure, which applies to all certifications, will ultimately lead to a focus on a homogeneous area of certification, and hence to the loss of a degree of distinction for qualifications obtained in the state education system. This arrangement will continue to exclude university qualifications, for example, which are, strictly speaking, local, but will include sectoral vocational training certificates (CQP), based on occupational models or, indeed, jobs. There are, however, two noteworthy exceptions - certain qualifications protected by professional orders (doctors, lawyers) and competitive access to civil service posts (titulaires).

In this context, it is to be expected that different validation markets will emerge; these could relate to 'positioning', 'accompanying measures', and perhaps to the actual certification conditions, if the various entitlements to access to full certification were to become more professionalised (substitute tests, adherence to examining board instructions, etc.) (see diagram in the Annex). Many modalities are involved in organising and authenticating these markets, beginning with specification of the certifications eligible for inclusion in the national directory of certifications. They also pre-

#### **Youth Employment Services Programme**

The Youth Employment Services Programme, set up under the law of October 16th 1997, is to end.

The announcement that the scheme will be gradually wound down is included in the 2003 Public Finance Bill. State aid will continue to be provided for organisations whose activities offer the greatest social benefit in order to support them beyond the initial five-year period.

#### **For the record, the object of the programme was to:**

- Set up and develop new and socially useful businesses to meet emerging and unmet local needs
- Enable 350,000 young people to work in these businesses and gain practical experience of a working environment.

#### **Its main features were:**

##### **Eligible employers**

The scheme applied to the non-commercial sector: local authorities, public (but not government) bodies, private bodies, non-profit-making organisations (voluntary organisations, foundations, provident associations, trade unions, corporate commissions, etc.) and private companies providing a public service.

##### **Eligible young people**

Young people under 26 years of age, with or without educational qualifications, or under 30 and registered disabled or without sufficient work experience (4 months) to qualify for unemployment benefit.

##### **Youth Employment Contracts**

A permanent or short-term contract of 60 months, governed by civil law even when concluded with a public body.

##### **State aid**

A total of EUR 15,924.55 a year per post for a period of 5 years.

Cf. <http://www.nsej.travail.gouv.fr/etranges/anglais.html> (consulted on the web on 10-02-2005) [Author's note]

suppose that a body of professionals will be constituted to receive applications and to conduct a feasibility study (based on the careers adviser model or counter-model), in such a way as to establish barriers to admission and effective selection without destabilising training provision; they will be experts capable of assessing the quality of applications. Lastly, these modalities involve approving support bodies for trainees capable of helping to express their experience. This institutionalisation process could go as far as to call into question the certification monopoly enjoyed by public or joint training systems.

#### **Validation practices**

Two types of empirical data are used to describe these practices: general statistical data on validation activities in France and local data supplied by universities. This overview will be supplemented by the thoughts of a VAP practitioner.

#### **National data**

As yet there are no significant data on VAE; the data available relate primarily to VAPP (Decree of 1985) for higher education and to VAP (1992-93) for state education qualifications (DEP, 2003). This inevitably limits the impact of statistical data on our work, but it


**Trend in validations by type at LPU\* (1985 and 1992/93).**
**Table 2**

All courses: validation requests (1)/validations agreed and ('success' rate) (2)

	(1) 96/97	(2) 96/97	(1) 97/98	(2) 97/98	(1) 98/99	(2) 98/99	(1) 99/00	(2) 99/00
Decree of 1985 VAPP	559	274 (49)	563	336 (60)	763	363 (47)	926	372 (40)
Decree of 1992-93 VAP	11	11	13	12	50	35	76	57
'1992-93' percentage	2 %	0,4 %	2,2 %	3,5 %	6 %	9,6 %	7,5 %	15,3 %

\* The Ministry has long regarded LPU as over-scrupulous in its validation practices. Since this time, it has largely made up for its weakness in this area.

must be remembered that, to a great extent, VAP practices anticipate the trends that are likely to be confirmed by VAE practice.

Even so, with regard to vocational and technological education it should be noted that under the VAP system, the number of applicants in France increased from 816 in 1995 (the year in which a new practice was fully implemented) to 4578 in 2001 (at the dawn of application of the new Law). In 2001, in a scheme involving mainly members of the working population in employment (82.3 %), the qualifications with the most requests for validation were the BTS (higher-level vocational training certificate) (45 % of applications), the CAP (vocational training certificate) (18 %) and the vocational baccalaureate (15 %). In the same year, the relationship between exemptions applied for and exemptions obtained was as follows: the most accessible examination was the CAP, with a success rate of some 70 %, followed by the vocational baccalaureate (65 %) and the BTS (55 %).

In higher education, VAPP certificates were applied for by just over 8000 people in 1996, but by almost 12 000 in 2001. As for VAP, it progressed at a more modest rate to almost 2000 applications in 2001. Both VAPP and VAP primarily relate to degrees (32.1 % and 26.1 % of applications respectively). The new vocational degrees involved VAP rather than VAPP. A study of applicants by age shows that the older they are, the more likely they are to apply for higher-level qualifications, and that these applications primarily involve intermediate occupations. Lastly, it should be noted that practices and the number of validations vary greatly from one establishment to the next (Le Roux, 2003), regardless of the number of students and courses in particular.

At both levels of education (secondary and higher), there has been a sharp increase in validation in the past few years, although it remains fairly marginal in relation to the

traditional certification methods. Analysis in greater depth of the validation actually implemented also shows the great variety of practices that the fairly flexible rules have not yet standardised or consolidated (Ancel, 2002).

In the long term, the coexistence of VAE and the 1985 Decree should establish a particular situation for university validation in comparison with other validating bodies, including the state education system. 'The launch of VAE does not in any way prevent people from applying for an exemption from qualification for access to training (+17.2 % in 2002), with such applications accounting for almost nine out of ten validation requests in higher education' (Le Roux, 2003). Among other things, this could indicate the existence of a potential demand for exemption outside universities, which however cannot be put into effect since there is no legislation authorising it. It should also be noted that with VAE, the qualifications applied for are at a higher level than when it is a question of obtaining exemption from examinations (Decree of 1985). This confirms the need to establish a distinction between validation as a right to resume studies and validation as recognition of knowledge acquired.

#### Local data - practice in one university

Very general data can be formulated for one university, Louis Pasteur University (LPU), specialising primarily in science (see Table 2 below). It will be seen that LPU shares in the general tendency for a marked increase in the demand addressed to this scheme, with VAPP clearly predominating in applications for validation. It should be noted that success rates vary widely, indicating that little has yet been done to consolidate practice in pedagogic committees, which, unlike initial training boards, are characterised by weak routines.

Analysis of validation by courses (see Table 3 below) shows that VAP is requested above all for LPU's 'vocationalised' degrees (main-



**Trend in validation by courses (Decreets of 1985 and 1993)** **Table 3**  
('General' science courses/other courses)

Courses	96/97		97/98		98/99		99/2000	
	VAPP	VAP	VAPP	VAP	VAPP	VAP	VAPP	VAP
1985/1992-93								
Physics degree	58	36	42	28	34	27	34	28
Masters in physics	12	5	6	6	10	3	8	8
Mech. eng. degree	16	6	12	7	11	7	13	10
Masters in mech. eng.	5	1	0	0	2	2	8	7
EEA degree *	88	25	61	25	48	17	49	35
Masters in EEA	11	1	10	4	14	9	13	5
Science degree	29	14	26	17	33	19	24	18
Masters in science	1	1	3	1	2	0	0	0
Total for sciences Up to degree and masters **	220	89 (40 %)	160	88 (55 %)	154	84 (55 %)	149	111 (75 %)
Other qualifications ***	350	196 (55 %)	416	260 (62 %)	659	314 (46 %)	853	318 (34 %)
Other qualifications	60 %	67 %	72 %	74 %	80 %	77 %	84 %	70 %

\* Electricity, electronics and automation

\*\* The figures in parentheses show the rate of 'success' or acceptance of application documents.

\*\*\* Postgraduate qualifications (DESS), masters from IUP, economic sciences, psychology, education science, multidisciplinary degree, etc.

ly DESS [qualification in specialised higher studies) and for training courses whose 'general' nature is particularly problematic - economic sciences (a substitute for business training), psychology, education science, multidisciplinary degree. This raises a question particularly with regard to psychology qualifications (sought above all by teachers who wish to become educational psychologists) and education science (which is in demand from professionals with all kinds of backgrounds in order to obtain access to the university teacher training institute (IUFM)). Do these courses constitute vocational training courses, or is their function to serve as a means of access to other (vocational) training courses?

Even if they do not cover VAE, these very abbreviated and outdated numbers show, firstly, a trend that only the greater or lesser success of the applicants seems to frustrate. This trend illustrates above all the situation created by the coexistence of two validation systems, one operating on the principle of entitlement to access to a qualification, with or without exemptions, and the other operating as (inevitably partial) certification, prior to the entry into force of VAE. Since the first system has proved to be faster and more flexible, its advantages can only become greater when a difference in cost also plays a part (Triby, 2003). Today VAPP is still a procedure that is usually free, while the new VAE has to be paid for (between EUR 500 and EUR 1200).

In practice, however, the most striking aspect is the curious alchemy that comes into play in transforming experience into a qualification. This 'conversion' (in the financial sense of the word) is likely to be strongly circumscribed and formalised with the implementation and operation of VAE boards whose members are obliged to base their decisions vis-à-vis full or partial certification on a dual reference system (employment and qualification). This being so, validation decisions will continue to be acts of monetary conversion for several reasons. Validation of experience establishes a compatibility between two separate worlds that are heterogeneous or even opposites (Ancori and Cohendet, 2003):

□ Between two value systems - economic value, sanctioned by the market, and the value of free access, in terms of the historical progression of knowledge and the ways in which it is transmitted, i.e. essentially via education and university. For many university students, academic learning cannot be 'translated' into experiential learning and vice versa, because it does not have the same relationship with the activity.

□ Between two temporalities - sequential time, or the 3 ages of man (training, building on training, and decline) and continuous time (lifelong training). In other words, validation of experience corresponds to a shift from capital logic (a qualification) to be built on (in the activity), to a logic of val-





ue added (the activity) to be validated in the form of a qualification. This shift in the time-point of certification calls into question not so much the value of university qualifications, but the capacity of universities to exert an influence on this value.

□ Between two institutions that are largely strangers to one another - the enterprise, governed by the economic evaluation of human capital, and the university, operating in accordance with a selective logic of 'pedagogic' evaluation of formal learning. The strong misgivings of universities are due to their particular culture, which shuns the objectivisation of the effects of teaching. Marks are sufficient, and speak for themselves.

□ Between two spheres of existence - the private, personal sphere and the public, socialised sphere. The mediation offered by validation does not relate only to social, personal and vocational experience. As an expression of a more intimate dimension of the individual, it is also of interest to the adult who is coming back to training after experiencing failure in initial training, or the person who goes to university to find answers to personal questions.

### **The financial issues involved in validation**

To clarify the analysis, a distinction is made between issues facing the enterprise and issues concerning the regulation of economic activity. It should be remembered that there are strong connections between the two sides of the same reality, and that validated knowledge represents a dual signal. This involves not just certification but above all certification by experience; a procedure of this kind acts as an effective filter, in both practical and symbolic terms. Within this trend, the university serves the purpose not only of producing knowledge and certification but, increasingly, of regulating the flow of entrants to the labour market. It is in this sense that it plays a large part in validation.

### **The financial issues involved in VAE for companies and the system of production**

For companies, validation arises from a dual need to reduce training costs and to maintain an optimal human capital potential. Today, this need is strengthened by an increasingly powerful market constraint, mak-

ing it necessary to rationalise expenditure, and by the importance of workforce training, which requires better management of human resources - hence the idea of validating experience. Not only does validation help to make it easier to 'read' the labour market, but it also reinforces the role of qualifications as social 'selectors' and signals for the market.

Today's enterprises are also interested in re-vamping methods for classifying employees; existing methods seem too dependent on political considerations such as collective agreements, wage laws, etc. For companies it is thus a matter of reappropriating a capacity to classify and to appoint by increasing access to certification. Certification also helps to free differentiation between individuals from the unknown quantities of intersubjectivity and the resonance of 'strongly linked networks' and other 'social capital'. Moreover, enterprises need to find a scientific basis for work organisation and human resource management, one that is standardised by an external body and therefore difficult to question. A codified translation of vocational experience into certification can help to achieve this by legitimising companies' capacity to define certifications (CQPs [vocational certificates] in particular). This power is to some extent reinforced by the progress made in enterprises, as regards certification of products at source, of today's processes (Paddeu and Savoyant, 2003).

Finally, it is imperative that enterprises find ways of managing working relationships between the different 'generations' of employees, in circumstances of slower rotation, ageing workers, greater use of temporary workers (particularly young workers), and increased qualification levels of new entrants to the labour market. VAE makes it possible to add value to the work of the oldest employees by giving this work a designation in accordance with the categories of certification obtained by the younger workers. It also makes it possible to relativise the value of qualifications submitted by new entrants.

In other words, validation contributes, for companies, to a rationalised comparison between internal and external labour markets within increasingly problematic demographic circumstances. Indeed, whether it is the employer or the employee who has recourse to one of these markets, VAE can contribute



positively to knowledge management. The employee's mobility on the internal market, within her company, is improved by official recognition of her skills, just as she can better defend herself on the external market against competition from more highly qualified candidates. In principle, the employee is better protected against unemployment and can entertain hopes of attaining more highly skilled jobs. On the other hand, it is also possible that an employee whose experience has been certified will cope better with the prospect of redundancy, and the employer will regard this possibility as a lesser risk; similarly, the employee may be of greater interest to an employer seeking identifiable applications. We should remember that the two markets share 'a common aim: organising competition between employees' (Leclercq, 1999: 279), which establishes the link with a more macroeconomic vision.

For the system of production as a whole (i.e. at the macroeconomic level) the question of educational level arises in a context of increased international competition and increasingly formalised comparison. The 'knowledge economy' is, first and foremost, an economy in which the level of certified knowledge is thought to make a difference. Moreover, as the relative shortage of skilled workers leads to a rise in wages, companies have an incentive to make arrangements that buck this trend by significantly increasing competition between workers with certified knowledge. Finally, we should note that the system needs to ensure greater worker mobility. This concern for mobility is due to growing unemployment and increasingly precarious employment conditions (Boyer, 2000).

Validating experiential learning by certification thus has a dual meaning. It allows both the company to relieve itself more easily of the constraints of the wage bond and the employees to expect to 'bounce back' if they are made redundant. Thus, validation facilitates the tendency for companies to loosen their relationship with their employees (Rozario, 2003). This in turn is likely to reinforce the need for clear signals, and thus the importance of certification in the demand for work.

### **VAP in socioeconomic adjustment**

For the political authorities, and reflecting users' concerns, validation only has mean-

ing if it allows access to qualification or, more generally, certification. But inasmuch as VAE reverses the customary relationship between experience and certification the State and the social partners inevitably interfere with market regulation by adding value to career paths via certification bodies deemed independent of the market.

Despite the necessity of involving the political authorities, their involvement is problematic, leading to questions about the value of public qualifications compared with the many forms of private validation (in particular CQPs), which are expected to rise substantially in the future (Merle, 1997). This calls into question a key element of public regulation. At the moment, qualifications, more than 90 % of which are issued by public players, constitute the most practical 'standard signal'. It can be argued that the more accurately VAE 'translates' vocational experience, the more its value or added value will be recognised and accepted by the labour market. Thus it is the effectiveness of the meeting of two bodies of knowledge and of their conversion (particularly in the validation board) - one representing experience and the other being more formal - which will be permanently open to question.

Moreover, we cannot ignore the significance of training costs for society as a whole, or the need to justify their rise in a context of diminished legitimacy for collective levies, particularly for the universities. It is not only the level of direct costs that is at issue, but also the way in which they are distributed and the costs deriving from training. The development of VAE could represent a redistribution of responsibility for training with the social partners, by the intermediary of joint financing bodies and local authorities, especially regional authorities. This redistribution will be all the more significant when validation involves job-seeking populations. Training leading to a qualification also includes time spent on production, as evidenced by the substantial growth in on-the-job training. Thus, for employed workers validation of experience means time spared for production.

Furthermore, for reasons that are essentially budgetary and political, there is a definite need to speed up modernisation of the initial training system (vocational training and higher education); the difficulty of keeping costs under control and encroaching bu-



reacratism underline the need to change this system's organisation and practices. To this end, action should preferably be taken 'outside' the system when it no longer seems possible to achieve reforms 'inside' it, or when such reforms appear to be largely ineffective. Without a doubt, the development of VAE can play this part, inasmuch as this procedure undertakes to call into question, step by step, this system's reference points, all too often designed to be intangible - the occupations aimed at, the teaching methods, development of a path to accessing knowledge, etc.

### **The financial issues involved in validation for universities**

Validation of experience leads to much greater integration of universities into economic activity, both in terms of their resources and prospects and of their mode of operation. This analysis is especially applicable to French universities, now facing a critical situation in terms of defining their mission and finding the means to implement it.

### **University resources and pedagogic risk**

Social and academic evolution (i.e. an end to extended education), in combination with the demographic tendency of the last hundred years or so (the ageing of society), weighs heavily on student cohorts that are stagnating or even diminishing in number (CNE, 1987). As an indirect consequence, tenure for teaching posts and hence for research posts in public laboratories is called into question. Because research is publicly funded in France, those involved in research which is not entirely subject to the market are not particularly concerned by this development, rejecting as they do the market's interest in applicable results and its indisputable myopia. But universities are now called on to diversify their funding sources. Validation could constitute an alternative source to direct funding, following the example of continuing training and distance training ('digital' campuses).

This being so, resources emanating from VAE are problematic. Half these resources can be expected to come from enterprises and individuals, and the other half from public funding, and regional funding in particular. Then 'support' may be given by companies or by other agreed bodies. This means that lucrative activity may elude the vali-

dating body, in this case the university. Moreover, since VAPP and (partial) VAE do not in principle justify presumptive selection of students, they call into question the principle of training with limited numbers. This creates risks for training quality and the social status of the qualifications concerned.

Last but not least there is also a pedagogic cost: validation of knowledge will lead to a generalisation of the student mix in university courses. This coexistence will necessitate a change in practices and teaching relationships. Universities will have to get the measure of the trend in expectations and in the previous knowledge of increasingly varied groups (Pratiques de formation, 2001). There is also a great risk that qualifications will lose some of their prestige, not so much because of increasing numbers or over-generous awarding, but because of the heterogeneous content introduced by VAE. This is because it makes it possible for an equally varied group to enter training and thus for widely varied knowledge to be validated by means of the same qualifications. This devaluation will not necessarily reduce the need to have recourse to qualifications. On the contrary, they will become more and more necessary, but less and less adequate.

### **The vocationalisation of university studies**

The already longstanding vocationalism of university studies (DUT [university-level technology qualification], DESS, vocational research degrees, etc.) and the more recent creation of new vocationalised qualifications (IUP [vocationalised university institutes], vocational degrees) have been a major factor in the development of VAP, now VAE. Without a doubt, the latter will bring about a more significant change - the translation of all its qualifications into knowledge capable of being mobilised in vocational skills and situations. This shift has one direct implication, already identified with the preceding law - 'involving universities in reflecting on their programmes and, in particular, on the training objectives they pursue' (Feutrie, 1999, p. 56). This 'reflection' is likely to affect the relationship of university disciplines with each other, to the detriment of academic disciplines which most universities regard as being impossible to translate into vocational or personal experience.





In the Modernising Law of 2001, the validation board has supreme power as regards the 'scope' of validation, and hence 'the nature of the knowledge and skills that must be subject to supplementary checking' - this is 'prescribed' by the board in the form of training or experiential supplements, realisation of records or reports, etc. This supreme power seems to fall within the university tradition. With VAE, however, supreme power is the opposite of the traditional position. In the latter, the board is all-powerful, with teachers marking students on the knowledge they themselves have imparted. With VAE, the board must refer to the reality of the vocational and social activity. It derives its legitimacy and imposes the arbitrariness of its evaluation only inasmuch as it is capable of translating its academic knowledge, usually ensuing from a single discipline, into syncretic knowledge, action-based knowledge, applied knowledge, etc. Thus the board is involved in legitimising work organisation methods and their capacity to produce knowledge.

### **Future prospects: validation in European context and globalisation**

To bring our reflections to a provisional close, we will demonstrate that the questions raised are not restricted to France. On the contrary, they arise in more global trends, and particularly in trends across Europe. Validation of experience may still operate in accordance with specific national provisions, and may not yet have acquired a European regulatory framework, but it is practised in many other European countries (UK, Spain, Italy, etc.).

### **Standardising higher education qualifications across Europe**

In universities, implementation of the VAE system intersects the reorganisation of studies broken down into first degree, masters and doctorate (LMD), and the generalisation of the breakdown of knowledge acquired from study in terms of half-yearly credits (ECTS). This is no coincidence: by supporting the segmentation of preparation for qualifications and student mobility, universities are helping to increase the gap between training and certification. They are increasing the need to translate their qualifications into training modules achieved in accordance with rules other than those of the universities awarding the qualification. This rein-

forces the tendency of those applying for higher certification to calculate in terms of transferable rights. Each of these trends gives greater weight to the validation of experience. Moreover, structuring courses on the basis of LMD involves the same conversion for universities as the transition to VAE, i.e. conceding that what counts is the knowledge actually acquired, itself defined in relation to the subsequent employment situations or training that give it meaning.

### **Lifelong training**

P. de Rozario (2003) compares the validation practices of different countries and notes that 'with validation of experience, we are truly at the heart of the European concept of lifelong learning, and in a world that has never valued knowledge so highly' (!). More than the project itself, validation challenges its practical implications, 'it being possible to associate low employability with lengthy work experience' (Stankiewicz, 2002: 26). Both validation and lifelong training invite a break with the idea that experience alone could generate a supplementary qualification capable of being recognised by the market. If not accompanied by training and, more to the point, by an effort to formalise and evaluate this experience, it is difficult to see how the development of personal abilities could extend throughout one's life. It is, rather, 'lifelong certification'!

Furthermore, lifelong training is a way of confirming that initial training can be conceived only as a form of primitive accumulation, to be made profitable only if continually enriched by further training. This investment is as effective, in terms of reclassification or conversion, as the possibilities it offers to access the new qualifications that certification offers. Ultimately, the invitation to make oneself 'one's own contractor' which underlies this entire project only works if individuals acquire the ability to put their own career paths into perspective and to analyse the working situations that they have experienced. Access to validation is rightly dependent on the construction of such abilities.

### **Policies for reducing unemployment and recruitment problems**

At a time when unemployment is again increasing and traditional policies have seemingly run out of steam, a return to training (particularly training leading to a qualifica-

(!) In this context, see Cedefop's recent report (2003) - Learning for employment - which speaks of a Europe 'of great cognitive intensity'.



tion) represents an arrangement that both enables qualification levels to be raised and temporarily removes job seekers from the labour market. In the event that this return to training is further developed, validation will serve as a kind of lever, since it facilitates a return to study at levels higher than those achieved in initial training. In case of recruitment problems, which could increase if the economy were to improve, an enormous effort would be needed to re-train the working population. Such an effort could prove even more necessary if training of (particularly younger) wage-earners favours general knowledge and social skills. This could lead to a redistribution of training efforts between initial and continuing training, and of course validation of experience would have a place in this.

We must ask ourselves whether it would have been possible for VAE to develop if substantial work had not first been put into reinterpreting vocational training and analysing jobs. Within organisations, this dual task has

crystallised, doubtless too exclusively, around the concept of competences/skills, which expressed employers' hopes that classification methods and methods of regulating working relationships would be radically transformed. Critical work on this concept must continue. Validation of experience clearly has a place here, offering as it does both conceptual and methodological tools.

Putting validation into practice makes it necessary to question both the vocational activity and the certifications regarded as proving the ability to perform it. Validation thus offers the concept of competence/skill an opportunity for practical enrichment and for formal specification. Moreover, it obliges employers and employees to agree to look behind the 'signals', which are so practical and yet so formal. In this sense, competence/skill can leave the field of managerial discourse and give shape to new vocational identities, based on employees themselves formalising their knowledge.

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### Key words

Certification,  
validation,  
diploma,  
work experience,  
skills acquired informally,  
university.

**Diagram (simplified): the stages of the validation process****Annex**