

# Training & Employment

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## Across-the-board support required for VAE procedures

VAE procedures are frequently perceived to be protracted, but their length is not the only reason why withdrawals are so frequent. Evaluation of an aims and means contract (AMC) for VAE in Brittany highlights the importance of across-the-board support, from initial guidance to the post-assessment period. It also emphasises the need for economic actors to be involved if VAE procedures are to succeed.

evaluation  
support procedure  
firms VAE careers  
regional policies  
aims and means  
contract

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Assessments of the system for validation of experiential learning (VAE) have remained more or less unchanged for the past 10 years. They have reaffirmed the vital role it plays in placing individual careers on a more secure footing. They note that VAE has gradually developed '*from a quasi-experimental system, championed by militants, into a procedure familiar to many*' (Merle Report, 2008). However, they also point to the persistent limitations of the system, including the large number of individuals withdrawing their applications in the course of the procedure.

Since the certification bodies use a range of different statistical information systems, it is seldom possible to observe an application procedure over its entire duration. However, some evaluations (Besson Report 2008) estimate that one third of individuals who submit an admissibility application obtain complete validation. The remaining two thirds – whose individual situations are not identified – either withdraw their applications or obtain partial validation. Between 2002 and 2010, 200,000 individuals in France obtained a qualification by having their experience recognised (DARES, 2012). In view of the withdrawals that take place in the course of the procedure, the number of those appearing before an assessment panel could be greater.

The VAE procedure is divided into a number of different stages and can appear lengthy and complex. It is sometimes compared to an assault course and requires applicants to surmount a number of major obstacles, both procedural and cognitive. On average across the country, approximately two years elapse between receipt of the initial information and appearance before an assessment panel. This lengthy process is often identified as a factor in withdrawal.

This is why one possible way to increase the number of applicants obtaining full validation could be to shorten certain waiting periods. The Brittany region has made reduction of the time taken to complete the procedure one of the operational aims of its first AMC devoted to VAE (see Box 1 on the following page).

Nevertheless, without underestimating the role this factor plays in withdrawals, other determinants that are less visible but have greater explanatory power should be taken into account. This is one of the lessons to be drawn from the evaluation of this AMC carried out by CEREQ's associated centre in Rennes. After all, this evaluation would seem to show that it is less the waiting periods that create insecurity and cause applicants to withdraw than the sequencing of the various stages and the type of support ●●●

### Céreq's Recommendations

Foster the provision of continuous support and the involvement of companies.

Develop a standard statistical tool for the longitudinal monitoring of VAE procedures for a period of five years following a panel's decision.

## Box 1 • An aims and means contract (AMC) designed to raise the status of and develop VAE in Brittany

The principal aim of the AMC concluded between central government and the region in January 2008 for a period of three years was to establish on a permanent basis the validation of knowledge acquired through experience as a normal route to qualification and as a basic constituent element of lifelong training. In 2012, evaluation of the contract provided the basis for developing possible courses of action for inclusion in the second AMC, which is currently being drafted. Coordination is the responsibility of the VAE Promotion Centre, part of GREF Bretagne.

The commitment of central government and the region of Brittany to developing VAE within the framework of an AMC is unique among the French regions. In conjunction with the establishment of a VAE observatory, three main lines of action were decided on: the quantitative and qualitative development of VAE in Brittany, reduction of the length of the procedure and the strengthening of partnerships among the actors.

Various projects enabled the actors to cooperate and innovate through experiments such as 'combined procedures' and 'additional support'. Periods of consultation between certification bodies and/or support providers contributed to specific actions designed to raise the status of VAE among employers and occupational groups and brought together the actors in VAE in different employment areas.

As far as the quantitative sections of this AMC are concerned, the time taken to examine the admissibility applications fell and the number of applicants appearing before a panel increased over the period. However, assessment of the AMC's quantitative effects remains difficult, since the figures are heavily dependent on variables that fall outside the scope of the AMC (number of panels, compilation of applications by applicants, etc.).

••• available. The problems of guidance, across-the-board support and cross-institutional cooperation then become fundamental. They affect most of the objectives set out in the AMC, from the development of new partnerships to the professionalization of the Information and Advice Points (IAPs). Given the salience of these problems, the focus here is on the new modes of support trialled in or encouraged by the AMC.

### Discontinuities a factor in withdrawals

From the start of the process until their career plans are finally realised, applicants' progress towards VAE is generally marked out in eight stages. As they pass through the various stages, candidates are informed, advised and supported, but without any real continuity; in some cases, they are left to their own devices when it comes to compiling their final applications and appearing before the assessment panel. Besides the length of the procedure, which varies depending on the applicant and qualification being sought, the segmentation of the various stages causes many applicants to abandon the procedure.

The first stage marks the inception of the procedure. In this initial phase, applicants try to identify the qualification best suited to the experience and skills they have acquired over the years and to their career plans. In most cases, the choice of qualification to aim for may be obvious; for some applicants, however, the

sheer number of qualifications on offer and the multiplicity of certification bodies make the search a complex process. The earliest withdrawals are in part attributable to the difficulty of finding a way through the maze of qualifications. During this stage, careers guidance is crucially important, although in the advice and information centres (the so-called PIC – Points Information Conseil) it is frequently reduced to the mere provision of information about the procedure. Nevertheless, the initial guidance phase is decisive. In general terms, the AMC – through the appraisal of the PICs and the training plan enshrined in it – and its evaluation have shown that, in contrast to the provision of information, providing advice and support for applicants requires unique skills and a truly professional approach.

The withdrawal rate is just as high in the subsequent stages. Whether they occur before or after the assessment panel, such withdrawals are a reminder of the precariousness of the procedure for applicants who are inadequately supported as they seek to realise their objectives. In order to be able to assess the share of withdrawals, a comparison would have to be conducted of the admissible applications (the so-called initial applications), the applications for validation (the so-called second applications) actually submitted and brought before a panel and the total validations obtained. However, the certification bodies' information systems seldom permit such monitoring of the progress made by applicants, who after an initial partial validation have up to five years to bring their cases before a second assessment panel.

The AMC and its evaluation have revealed the obstacles that directly impede the smooth progress of a VAE procedure. They have also revealed innovative localised initiatives which, at the point of transition between certain stages, seek to overcome the general compartmentalisation in order to provide genuinely continuous support tailored as closely as possible to individual's plans and ambitions. Given its impetus by the AMC, the cooperation that has become established between actors who are sometimes in competition with each other shows that it is possible to optimise and link the various stages, as happens with 'collective' VKE procedures and those enjoying 'additional support'.

### Making VAE procedures less risky and unpredictable: experimental initiatives

Although they preceded the AMC, 'collective' VAE procedures (i.e. those initiated jointly by an employer and his workforce) seem to offer a good example in terms of cooperation. Once an

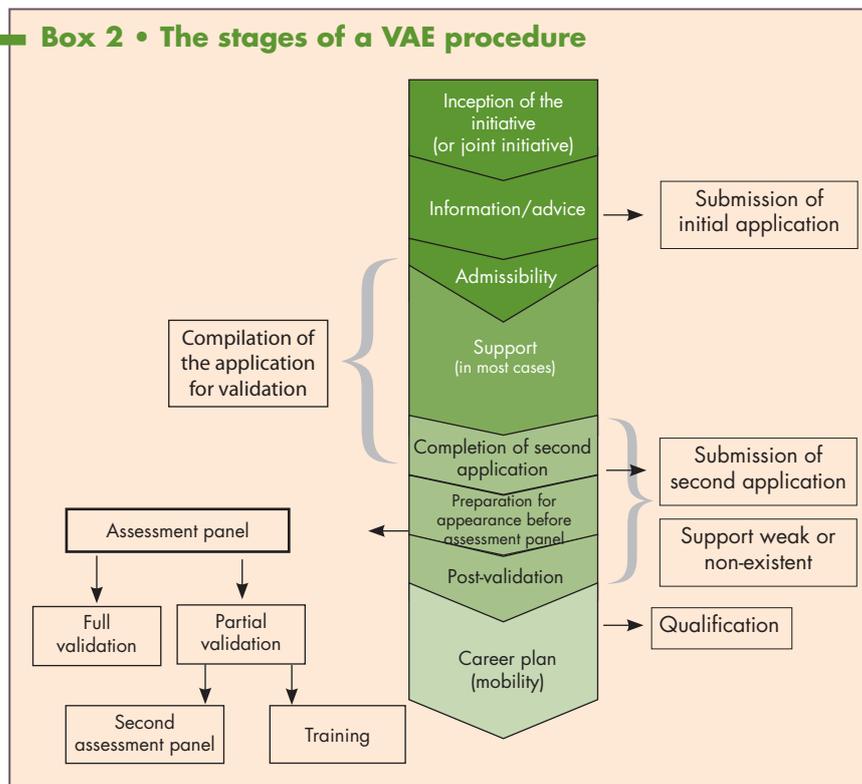
*In concluding an aims and means contract, public bodies, in many cases national government and one of the regions, undertake to fund projects falling within the scope of a particular strand of public policy (apprenticeships, VAE, higher education, etc.). They jointly set out in a contractual document the initiative's priorities, the results it is expected to deliver and the support to be provided to the actors concerned.*

employer has set things in motion, employees are able to embark on a process whose various stages are relatively well signposted. Those involved decide collectively on the modes of funding and support, the qualifications being sought and even the timetables. While the applications are compiled individually, employees can take advantage of the logistical back-up offered to all applicants. The scheduling of the various stages is optimised and, when necessary, applicants who obtain partial validations can be given supplementary training before they present themselves to an assessment panel for the second time. These collective VAE procedures are often presented as complete packages of services, from the information stage to full validation via advice on the qualifications to be sought and the additional training to be provided. The resultant increase in certainty, the success rate among applicants and the group dynamic tend to reassure employers.

This philosophy of providing support can also be seen in the experimental schemes providing 'additional support'. Introduced in the AMC, this increased support helps to make the VAE procedure less risky and unpredictable for some applicants. Increased hours of support over and above the 24 hours normally funded are provided and applicants are offered assistance prior to their appearance before an assessment panel in order to help them overcome the difficulties they may experience in completing their applications.

Similarly, some OPCAs (*organismes paritaires collecteurs agréés*, the authorised joint collection bodies set up to collect, pool and redistribute employers' training levies) offer their members applicant support packages. For one of these bodies, the aim is clearly to 'make the VAE procedure less risky and unpredictable for firms'. Thus these OPCAs undertake to provide a package of support services from initial information to full validation and including the provision of additional training should an applicant obtain only partial validation. They put together packages that include assistance provided before and after compilation of the application itself. When such comprehensive support packages are made available, VAE truly becomes a tool to be used in the cause of lifelong training and skills management. Seen in this light, what the VAE procedure really needs is not so much to be simplified or shortened as to be properly supported at each stage in order to encourage applicants and employers to prioritise VAE over training. The initiatives being taken by some OPCAs, in conjunction with the achievements of the AMC, are wholly consistent with its aims and are helping to affirm its relevance by showing how VAE procedures can be made less risky and unpredictable.

## Box 2 • The stages of a VAE procedure



### From a series of uncoordinated stages to a unified procedure

The AMC has revealed spaces in which the responsibilities of actors not formally involved in the support of applicants might very well become factors in the success or failure of applications. This is why the VAE procedure, which in the public imagination is frequently reduced to compilation of the application for validation, must be understood more broadly to include, in particular, the information and advice required prior to the choice of qualification, applicants' acquisition of the ability to list and explain the skills and expertise deployed in work situations and, finally, the post-assessment panel period. This period seems to be crucial in converting the qualification obtained into actual mobility and in planning possible changes of occupation. Taking responsibility for these various stages of the process, which still tend to be considered as separate phases, has implications for, and challenges, the practices adopted by actors that will have a considerable influence on applicants' ability to maintain a sufficiently high level of motivation until the end of the process and thus to realise their plans.

The AMC and its evaluation clearly validate the distinction that has been made between support reduced to assistance with compiling an application and a broader definition of support based on a set of resources that can be mobilised as part of an upskilling (or reskilling) process. Only by defining support in this way can the process of making a VAE procedure less risky and unpredictable be regarded as indissociable from that of making individual

#### Reports

*Valoriser l'acquis de l'expérience*, rapport Besson, septembre 2008.

*Groupe de travail sur la validation des acquis de l'expérience*, rapport Merle, 2008.

*La validation des acquis de l'expérience*, Céreq, Dares, DGEFP, rapport au parlement, 2007.

careers more secure. Putting the information and advice phases on the same footing as careers guidance highlights the role of regional public action in the field of VAE and the need to mobilise the actors in a given territory, at a time when national government and the Inter-ministerial Committee on the Development of VAE, whose mandate was not renewed in 2009, are disengaging to some extent.

## Greater involvement on the part of business and industry

As part of the evaluation process, recommendations were made that go beyond analysis of the effects of the AMC. In line with the observation that support restricted to compilation of the application for validation is inadequate and that the preceding and subsequent periods should also be taken into account, it is reasonable to point out that firms have a responsibility to help reduce the riskiness and unpredictability of upskilling procedures and make them priority areas for improvement.

The first thing firms need to do is to incorporate VAE into the training measures they put in place in order to improve their workers' employability and to support individual career plans. They also need to adopt approaches to strategic workforce planning that involve employees in the identification of skill needs. The effort involved in identifying and explaining skills in such approaches is very similar to that required of applicants for VAE when compiling their applications and employees who have been involved in strategic workforce planning will be better prepared than others when they embark on a VAE procedure.

Finally, firms' responsibilities extend to the periods following partial validation. In most cases, after all, partial validations lead neither to a second appearance before an assessment panel nor to a return to a normal training programme in order to obtain the missing modules. The reasons for withdrawal after partial validation (according to some certification bodies, almost two thirds of applicants withdraw at this stage) are closely correlated with the difficulty of reconciling training and work. Support from employers during this period, both financially and through the rearrangement of work schedules, would

### Box 3 • VAE in Brittany: some quantitative data

GRAF Bretagne's monitoring of VAE in the region during the implementation of the AMC provided an opportunity to investigate the progress of applicants who appeared before an assessment panel in 2009. Eight certification bodies provided information on applicant profiles. Although it is difficult to calculate it with any degree of certainty, the average duration of the procedure for applicants who obtained full validation was one year and four months. Depending on the qualification being sought, this time varied considerably. Of the applications submitted in Brittany, 56% obtained full validation, 35% partial validation and 8% no validation at all.

A total of 2,710 individuals appeared before an assessment panel, the majority of whom (75%) were women, with an average age of 41. The proportion of women is the same at national level. In France as a whole, the national Ministry of Education is the leading certifying ministry, followed by Health and Social Affairs; in Brittany, the order is reversed, with the health and social sector accounting for 37 % of applicants compared with 31% for the Ministry of Education. The typical profile of a VAE applicant is a female employee seeking to obtain a level V qualification in the health and social sector. Half of them will achieve full validation of the qualification they are seeking. Job seekers accounted for only 15 % of the applicants who appeared before an assessment panel in Brittany in 2009, whereas they accounted for one applicant in four at national level in 2010 (Dares, 2012). Getting job seekers enrolled in a VAE procedure is one of the AMC's priority action areas.

considerably increase the chances of obtaining full validation.

In addition to triggering a new dynamic among the actors concerned, the Brittany region's AMC also provided an opportunity to improve understanding of the recurrent weaknesses of the VAE system that give rise to withdrawal and discouragement. Detailed examination of the points of transition between stages, as well as the unusually wide angle of observation, have revealed the possible scope for development. The evaluation has provided an opportunity to assess the relevance and coherence of the objectives laid down in the AMC and to reveal the real issues at stake.

Now that the evaluation has been completed, therefore, we are better able to determine the conditions that have to be met if less risky and unpredictable VAE procedures are to be put in place. Guidance and support should become the main focus in the construction of more robust individual career plans. Fulfilment of these conditions will require in particular a high degree of cooperation between the actors usually involved in VAE procedures as well as with firms in order to carry on with the measures already taken to reconfigure VAE and take full advantage of its potential for social change. ■

### Further reading

La VAE en 2010 dans les ministères certificateurs, M. Beque, *DARES Analyses* n°37, juin 2012.

Des candidats inégalement soutenus dans leurs démarches de VAE, C. Labryère, N. Quintero, *Bref* n°263, avril 2009.

*La VAE en entreprise : une démarche collective qui soutient des projets individuels*, D. Brochier et al., NEF n°38, novembre 2008.

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