

Training & Employment

Applicants for **VAE** are **unequally supported**

Applicants undertaking VAE procedures are not all on an equal footing. 70% of those applying for level 5 qualifications (ISCED level 2) are employed in the field of healthcare and social work. The associations in this sector provide a particularly favourable context for making VAE applications, thanks to the active policies they adopt. They provide their employees with support and cover the cost of accompanying and even training them. Completing the procedure successfully depends on a complex set of factors. The main challenges ahead are reducing the drop-out rates and simplifying the whole procedure.

The paths to obtaining qualifications through VAE (Validation of Experiential Learning) are always long and complex. A survey on the experience of candidates applying for level 5 qualifications (see the inset on page 4) showed that two years after completing the first phase in the validation process, one quarter of the candidates had still not appeared before a jury, and that 35% of this group had given up the attempt altogether. This survey also confirmed that benefiting from personal accompaniment is one of the main factors contributing to a successful outcome. Now less than half of the candidates are assisted with this procedure by a specialized organization.

The conditions under which the application procedure takes place, and hence applicants' chances of success, depend on their status and in the case of employees, on the sector in which they work and the type of employer involved. For example, among the candidates for the most frequently requested qualifications in the field of healthcare and social work, who account for 70% of all applicants, the likelihood of success depends on whether the employer is an association, a private fee-paying firm or a private individual. With a view to investigating the links between the conditions under which the application procedure is carried out and the types of employers involved, the latter were classified in an ad hoc typology. Since employers in the healthcare and social field feature prominently in the VAE system, these employers were first defined in terms of their status. The case of various public bodies and private firms outside the field of healthcare and social work is also examined (see the inset on the following page).

Some employers and some sectors produce more candidates than others

The type of employer has upstream effects on candidates' chances of having access to VAE. In the healthcare and social sector, workers employed by private individuals are the worst off in this respect: they account for only 8% of the applicants in this sector although their numbers are at least four times greater than those of the employees of associations providing home services, from which 37% of the candidates originate. Another striking point is the fact that the healthcare and social sector accounts for 59% of the applicants for level 5 qualifications although this sector employs eight times fewer workers than the other sectors of the economy, which generate only 10% of the applicants.

It is true, however, that there exist very few production and service sectors in which obtaining level 5 qualifications in mid-career is likely to open up new career prospects. The healthcare and social sector is certainly an exception from this point of view: the opportunity of obtaining level 5 qualifications still attracts employees, since it can be expected to improve the situation of those in precarious positions (by helping them to obtain full-time jobs, better pay, tenure, etc.). This situation was initiated by the State and the social partners, who took steps to promote the professionalisation of the least qualified workers and to have these qualifications officially recognized by including them in the classification grids based on collective agreements.

As far as the unemployed are concerned, one third of the job-hunters submitting requests for VAE qualifications originate from other sectors of the economy, where holding level 5 qualifications constitutes a prerequisite for gaining access to employment, although this may not in fact suffice.

DEAVS • Diplôme d'État d'auxiliaire de vie sociale (State diploma for assistant social workers) delivered by the French Ministry of Health and Sport.

DPAS • Diplôme professionnel d'aide-soignante (Professional nursing assistants' diploma) delivered by the French Ministry of Health and Sport.

ADVF • Assistante de vie aux familles (A vocational family helpers' diploma) delivered by the French Ministry responsible for Employment.

CCAS • Centre communal d'action sociale (Municipal social centre).

VAE • Validation des acquis de l'expérience (Validation of experiential learning).

Level 5 qualifications • qualifications corresponding to the CAP and BEP vocational certificates delivered by the French Ministry of Education – equivalent to ISCED level 2.

Being supported or applying privately

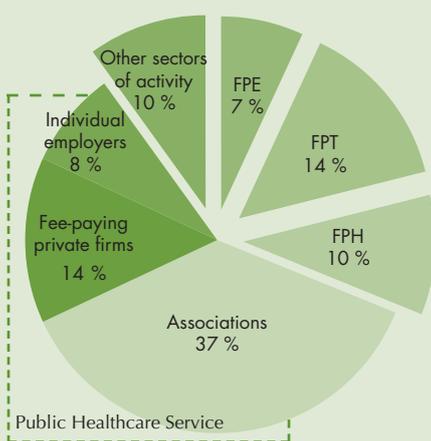
Employees engaged in VAE application procedures are not all supported by their employers to the same extent. In most cases, amounting to two-thirds of the applications, VAE procedures are initiated by the employees themselves, who inform their employers with a view to having their expenses (VAE leave, enrolment fees, personal accompaniment fees, etc.) covered. In just over one case out of four, the employer takes the initiative for VAE and supports his employees throughout the procedure, even providing accompaniment services and mobilising the necessary funds. Some employees go through the whole process on their own, however, without even informing their employers. In this case, they are precluded from having their expenses covered by the accredited collecting fund for training (OPCA), which requires the employer's consent before agreeing to finance projects of this kind. The results of qualitative studies have shown that self-imposed secrecy is often due to the fear of failure, which is harder to accept by members of a work collective, since both their colleagues and their superiors are bound to hear about the procedure and its outcome. Secrecy can also be motivated by plans for mobility which applicants prefer not to divulge before being sure of having all the trump cards required.

The context in which candidates launch the application process therefore affects the outcome and depends on the type of employer and the occupational sector involved. The employers who most frequently initiate and support VAE applications are associations in the healthcare and social sector. The branch organizations in this sector have set up schemes and complementary funds for accompanying and supporting applicants throughout the VAE process. A branch agreement was signed in 2004 in the home services sector to encourage small associations to support their employees by mobilising mutual funds via "Uniformation", the OPCA responsible for this branch. This scheme has improved workers' access to VAE as well as the conditions under which they carry out the application procedure. Civil servants employed by the State or local authorities also apply relatively frequently for VAE qualifications at the initiative of their employers and with the support of the latter. This situation occurs much more rarely among employees of other kinds in other sectors: 19% and 26% of the employees working for private individuals and at private firms who applied for VAE did so without informing their employers.

Apart from the healthcare and social sector and the civil service, the situation in France is extremely diverse. Among private firms in

At level 5, many VAE applicants originate from the healthcare and social sector

■ Distribution of candidates by type of employer



FPE • National Public Service
FPT • Local and Regional Public Service
FPH • Public Healthcare Service

■ Distribution of candidates by type of employer

		State diploma for assistant social workers DEAVS	Professional nursing assistant diploma DPAS	Vocational family helpers' diploma ADVF	Diploma in health -care and social work delivered by the French Ministry of Education*	Other Min. of Education diplomas	Other Min. of Employment qualifications	Total
Healthcare and social work	Associations	72	9	12	5	1	1	100
	Fee-paying private firms	19	62	6	10	2	1	100
	Individual employers	36	4	21	37	1	1	100
Civil service	The State (FPE)	31	18	4	28	13	6	100
	Local (FPT)	40	8	4	40	6	2	100
	Hospitals (FPH)	5	78	2	4	11	-	100
Other sectors of activity		4	-	3	3	53	37	100
Employees of all kinds		41	23	8	14	9	5	100
Unemployed applicants		19	7	19	24	14	17	100

Source: DARES survey on VAE candidates for level 5 qualifications. Data processed by Céreq.
Scope: candidates eligible to apply for level 5 VAE qualifications during the first semester of 2005.

* Qualifications delivered by the National education authority – including the CAP in services to young children

The DEAVS is the flagship diploma among French associations providing home services, which account for a large proportion of the associations in the healthcare and social sector from which many applicants for VAE qualifications originate. The nursing assistants' diploma plays a similar role among public hospital employees. Likewise, the DPAS attracts the majority of its applicants from the private healthcare and social sector, which recruits many employees "to serve as nursing assistants" at retirement homes and healthcare establishments. Among the employees hired by individuals, 21% apply for ADVF qualifications, which involve the ability to provide a fairly wide range of services at the homes of working parents. A similar balance exists between the DEAVS diploma and the CAP certificate in services to young children among the applicants working for local authorities running services for the elderly and for young children (nursery schools and day-nurseries, extra-curricular activities, etc.). More than half of the applicants working in the private sector who are not involved in healthcare and social services target CAP or BEP certificates and 37% target qualifications delivered by the French Ministry of Education.

■ Conditions of application

%		The procedure was ...				Total	Candidates benefiting from accompaniment (as a % of the total number of candidates)	Candidates who paid for the procedure (as a % of the total number of candidates)
		Initiated and supported by the employer	Initiated by the employees without informing their employer	Initiated by the employees, who informed their employer				
Healthcare and social work	Associations	35	4	61	100	53	46	
	Private fee-paying firms	31	7	62	100	43	50	
	Individual employers	9	19	72	100	36	67	
Civil service	The State	30	9	61	100	40	43	
	Local authorities	31	7	62	100	43	50	
	Hospitals	23	4	73	100	43	44	
Other private fee-paying firms		14	26	60	100	36	44	
All employees combined		28	8	64	100	44	43	
Unemployed applicants						41	66	

Source: DARES survey on VAE candidates for level 5 qualifications. Data processed by Céreq.
Scope: candidates eligible to apply for level 5 VAE qualifications during the first semester of 2005.

other sectors, those in industrial manufacturing encourage their employees most to apply for VAE: 29% of applications are supported by the employers and the rate of accompaniment is 44%. This reflects the many collective VAE efforts which have been launched, often with the support of the public authorities, as a means of making career paths safer in industrial spheres threatened by the process of globalization. In the framework of collective efforts of this kind, all VAE candidates are systematically entitled to personal accompaniment services free of charge. This has kept drop-out rates low and increased applicants' chances of obtaining qualifications at the first attempt; whereas in the service sector, especially in the fields of commerce, automobile maintenance and security, almost half of the employees engage in the VAE process without informing their employers. In these sectors, which still include many small firms, employees may apply for VAE because they plan to move to larger, more attractive firms providing better conditions of employment. The signature in February 2007 of a national framework agreement on the development of VAE by 16 professional federations, including those representing the construction industry, cleaning services, automobile services and the retail trade, greatly improved the support from which VAE applicants in these sectors have benefited since that date - at least whenever the branch organizations in question have supplied the means and funds required for this purpose, as those in the healthcare and social sector have done.

Unequal access to personal accompaniment services

52% of applicants for level 5 qualifications do not benefit from any personal accompaniment

services. These fee-paying services, which consist of helping to complete the application files and practicing for the interview with a jury, are never compulsory. The fees vary from one service provider to another, depending on whether they are accrediting Ministries or training organizations targeting this particular market. These services naturally help applicants to obtain qualifications, simplify the task of putting together the portfolio of evidence, and prepare candidates to present their case to the jury, and in particular, they greatly reduce the duration of the VAE procedure, since candidates are motivated at successive appointments with their tutors to write up their applications regularly.

Civil servants have the second best chances of benefiting from personal accompaniment services, after employees working for associations in the healthcare and social sector. There exists a large gap between the two groups, however: 43% of the civil servants working at public hospitals who apply for VAE benefit from accompaniment, as compared with 53% of those employed by associations. As far as the private sector's employees are concerned, only just over one third of those submitting VAE requests are provided with accompaniment services, and again there are considerable differences between sectors. Employees in the industrial sector fare as well as civil servants in this respect, whereas those in the construction and public works and woodworking sectors seem to be particularly disadvantaged. When asked why they had not been assisted with their VAE application, candidates in all the sectors included in the survey stated that they lacked information, and secondly, that they

had not needed help. This shows that they had underestimated the difficulty of the VAE exercise: the only exceptions were those working for private firms in the healthcare and social sector, who less frequently underestimated the need for accompaniment, probably because nursing assistants' qualifications are reputed to be particularly sparingly awarded. The second greatest difficulty mentioned by these candidates was the lack of financial means.

Many people have to pay the cost of obtaining qualifications through VAE. The fees charged for personal accompaniment services are not always covered, and there are other expenses which have to be paid for by the applicants themselves (the enrolment fees, extra training, documentation, transport, babysitters, etc.). More than four employees out of ten were out of pocket: this occurred less frequently in the healthcare and social sector, and most frequently among those who worked for private individuals. Two-thirds of those who were unemployed had incurred expenses as the result of their VAE application. In 2007, the system of coverage for VAE expenses still called for improvement despite the agreement signed in 2005 by the social partners and UNEDIC (the social unemployment fund), which entitled people receiving unemployment benefits to have all their VAE expenses covered.

Combining resources

The success of the application procedure depends on whether resources of various kinds are mobilised. Social resources (family support and that of friends and occupational networks) are those most frequently mobilised: regardless of their occupational setting, the vast majority of applicants declared that they had obtained the active support of their family and colleagues. Those working for associations in the healthcare and social sector most frequently mobilised resources of other kinds, whereas those working for private individuals rated lowest on this score. "Resources of other kinds" include technical resources (personal accompaniment, extra training and technical assistance provided by the employees' immediate superiors), as well as financial and institutional resources (such as VAE leave and coverage of the cost of personal accompaniment and/or training). In the latter respect, applicants from private firms tended to be rather well catered for, since they benefited from these resources almost as frequently as those employed by associations in the healthcare and social sector. Another important resource is time, which can be provided via special arrangements or by reducing the number of working hours.

Mobilising only social resources occurred twice as frequently among unemployed applicants

A survey on VAE applicants for level 5 qualifications

This survey designed by DARES and Céreq was the first quantitative survey conducted on applicants for VAE qualifications since this procedure was first introduced in the 2002 Social Modernisation Act.

During the first quarter of 2007, almost 5 000 applicants for level 5 qualifications (corresponding to the level of the CAP and BEP vocational certificates delivered by the French Ministry of State Education – ISCED level 2) were interviewed. These applicants had accomplished the first phase in the procedure, i.e., they had been officially declared to be eligible during the first quarter of 2005. This survey yielded some original statistics about the conditions under which applicants launched and carried out the procedure. The results obtained throw light on the drop-out rates and the success rates recorded during a period of eighteen months, which can be explained in terms of the objective conditions of accompaniment and support from which the applicants benefited or otherwise.

as among those with jobs, which confirms that the former have greater difficulty in mobilising financial and institutional resources than the latter. There is therefore still much to be done to ensure that the funding of VAE procedures is extended to all unemployed persons, regardless of the accrediting body responsible and the category of job-hunters involved. The UNEDIC agreement mentioned above applies only to people receiving unemployment benefits, who account for only half of the unemployed. As far as the remainder are concerned, the conditions of coverage depend on whatever measures have been adopted or otherwise on their behalf by the Regional Councils. Further efforts are therefore required to improve the capacity of public unemployment departments to provide VAE applicants with assistance and accompaniment.

Generally speaking, the most fortunate employees in terms of the resources available are therefore those covered by collective company arrangements or supported by occupational branch schemes, who benefit from personal accompaniment services and financial assistance throughout the duration of the VAE application procedure. Five years after the Social Modernisation Act was passed and despite several subsequent attempts to reform and improve the institutional VAE system, obtaining level 5 qualifications via this pathway is still an extremely arduous task for most applicants, since very few of them have access to all the resources required to succeed. In a report submitted in September 2008 to the French Prime Minister, the issues focusing on those who give up the battle because the process is too complex and lengthy and because of the low rate of accompaniment were referred to as the weak points in the system. Although the public authorities initially aimed at awarding 60 000 qualifications per year, only 30 000 were awarded in 2007.

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