ABSTRACT

Insufficient integration in terms of learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between the traditional formal learning and learning in other contexts, has led the French authorities after a period of experimentation, to generalise formally, during 1991/1992, two VET “instruments” of integration. The first was designed, under the acronym name “VAP” (Validation des Acquis Professionnels) to allow its beneficiaries (via the assessment and formal accreditation of their experiential work related learning) to have a direct access to further formal and non-formal learning in particular, and to socio-professional promotion in general. As for the second regime (“Bilan de Compétences: BC”), it is simply an assessment of the individual’s personal and vocational competencies in order to support basically, projects for career development and related further training and learning. It does not give its beneficiaries, the right to any direct formal accreditation or certification. The focus of this paper is an investigation, through its two basic sections, into the working of these two regimes in practice and their implications for the promotion of lifelong learning in terms of their contribution to the development of learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between formal and non-formal learning.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of identifying, assessing and formally recognising the individual’s competence acquired through experiential learning, is not new to the French education and training system. Its origins go back to the 1934 Act (of July the 10th), which provided the first specific criteria to identify, assess and deliver the experience-based grade of “engineer” (Lenoir, 1996). After the experimental period of the 80s, the application of this notion was formally generalised to all categories of individuals during 1991/1992 through two basic VET regimes. The first was designed, under the acronym name “VAP” (Validation des Acquis Professionnels) to allow its beneficiaries (via the assessment and formal accreditation of their prior work related learning) to have a direct access to further formal and non-formal learning, in particular and to socio-professional promotion in general. As for the second regime (“Bilan de Compétences: BC”), it is simply an assessment of the individuals’ personal and vocational competencies in order to support basically, their projects for career development and related further training and learning. It does not lead directly to any formal accreditation or certification.
The performance of these two regimes is usually assessed in terms of their contribution to the achievement of two sets of objectives:

- The intermediary objectives specific to the functioning of each regime, i.e. in terms of output flow;
- The ultimate objectives common to both regimes, such as their contribution to:
  - The development of learning-path fluidity between formal and non-formal learning;
  - The promotion of their beneficiaries’ employability, flexibility and mobility in particular, and their socio-professional promotion in general.

I- “BILAN DE COMPÉTENCES” REGIME: ITS FUNCTIONING AND IMPLICATIONS

After a period of experimentation, during the second half of the 80s, the non-formal competence assessment regime (“Bilan de Compétences: BC”), was formally generalised to all salaried and non-salaried individuals (including people in search of work) through (Calafuri, 1996):

- The 1991 Inter-professional Agreement (of July the 3rd),
- The 1991 Act (of December the 31st),
- The Implementing Decree of 1992 (2nd October).

The “BC” regime establishes the right of any working individual to have voluntarily his or her personal and professional competencies assessed, with the aim of being able to define a clear professional, career or training project. This assessment does not lead directly to a formal recognition and certification. In order to have access to the latter, the beneficiary has to go through another different regime: the accreditation of work-related learning (“VAP”) regime.

1- Its functioning:

For employees, access to the “BC” is organised within the general framework of the Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) system introduced in 1971, through its two basic components: employer-directed CVT/employee-directed CVT, i.e.:

- Dominantly, through the employee-directed CVT, by taking a “Congé de Bilan de Compétences: CBC” (“Leave for Competencies Assessment”);
- Partially, within the training scheme of the organisation (i.e., through the employer-directed CVT);

To have access to the “CBC”, the candidate has to justify a salaried regular activity of 5 years, of which one year within the last organisation. The individuals employed according to a limited duration work contract, have to justify only 2 years of work experience within this period of 5 years (of which 4 months on the basis of fixed duration work contract). As for temporary employees, they need to justify 3 years within the profession of temporary work (of which 2,028 hours within the last organisation).

Each “CBC” is financed by a parity fund collector (called OPACIF). It lasts 18 hours on average (a paid leave of 24 hours maximum). This can be spread over several weeks.
As for unemployed individuals in search of work, they can have access to “BC” by applying to the employment agencies where they are registered as unemployed. Their “BC” is partially or wholly financed by the State or local authorities.

These BCs are organised within more than 700 institutions accredited as “BC-Centres” (i.e., “Centres Inter Institutionnel de Bilan de Compétences: CIBC”). The assessment process in itself is formally fixed by the 1992 Implementing Degree. It goes through a succession of three individualised stages (Calafuri, 1996):

- A preliminary stage (the information collection and delivery stage), which allows the CIBC to:
  - Collect and analyse the necessary information about the candidate’s needs and engagement in the process;
  - Inform rigorously the beneficiary about the BC process, its stages and the assessment methods and techniques used.

- The assessment stage, which allows the beneficiary to:
  - Analyse his or her motivations, personal and professional interests;
  - Identify his or her personal and professional competencies (including general knowledge);
  - Determine his or her project for professional development.

- The concluding stage, which allows, by means of an interview, the beneficiary to:
  - Have access to detailed results of the investigation stage;
  - Identify the favourable and non-favourable factors for the construction of a professional or training project, and predict the principal steps of its implementation.

2- Its implications:

In 1994, for instance, 125,000 individuals benefited from “BC” regime. Three quarters of the requests were made by unemployed people looking for work. The remaining quarter concerned those who were already employed. Inactive individuals (such as non working housewives and students) represented only 1% of all BC-candidates. The parity between women and men is well represented (52% for women candidates).

Concerning the candidates’ motivations, half of them indicated that the elaboration of a professional project was their main objective. 20% for employment purposes and 21% for access to vocational training. But only 1.9% indicated that BC was the first step to have access to “VAP” regime and formal certification.

Moreover, the “BC” beneficiaries are basically concentrated within the tertiary sector: 44% against 18% within the industry, 7.8% in the construction sector and only 4.3% from the agriculture (Andreani & Pinaud, 1998; Bjonavold, 2000).

Given that “BC” regime is operative on clear formative basis and on a large scale, with the main aim to clarify the potential of individuals, it is hoped that it will then contribute to the promotion of further learning and career possibilities. But, taking into consideration that this regime does not aim at the formal recognition of assessed competencies according to qualification standards, the effectiveness of its (direct) integrative role between formal and non-formal learning is highly reduced.
II- “VAP” REGIME: ITS FUNCTIONING AND IMPLICATIONS

Its introduction in France has been a gradual process. First, only engineers were concerned (1934 Act). The 1985 Degree extended it to include supervisors, technicians and management executives. Its generalisation to all categories of working individuals had to wait until the 20th of July 1992, date of its official introduction by the 1992 Act and successive complementary and implementation regulations (Ravat, 1997a, 1997b; Terrot, 1997; Dif, 1999b, 1999c).

“VAP” regime is a codification of a new individual right, based on two innovative concepts (1992 Act; Perker & Lairre, 1997; Dif, 1999b):

- Work is not limited to the application of knowledge and use of competencies acquired within the formal educational and training institutions. But, on the contrary, it is a learning process, which can produce equally recognised competencies and knowledge at work and allows for the development of non school-based certification and further learning activities.
- Moreover, it contributes to the development of an integrated education and training system within, an open dynamic and multidimensional approach to the formation of the individuals' identities.

“VAP” is, within the context of the 1992 Act, an individualised right for a continuing access to a non school-based certification process, under a certain number of conditions. It allows any individual who could accumulate regularly or irregularly an experience of five years, as a full-time or a part-time worker in at least one activity related to a targeted degree, can apply for an exemption in the required exam-units. Therefore, the beneficiary can be an employee, an artist or an independent worker. This is possible regardless of whether the candidate is still working or looking for work at the moment of submitting an accreditation application (Ravat, 1997a; Dif, 1999b).

“VAP” is limited, within the context of the 1992 Act, to the validation of all prior work-related competencies for a non-school-based formal certification. This is possible with the exclusion of all other technical and vocational qualifications acquired within the formal educational and training institutions. The ultimate output of this process covers a wide range of degrees distributed through the French formal nomenclature for occupational qualifications.

1- Its functioning:

The real implementation of this regime was left until the end of 1994. An experimentation period of two years was necessary to allow for feasibility verifications and corrections and to specify final nation-wide working procedures of the whole process.

The process which guarantees a real access to this regime, is functioning through a succession of three individualised stages (M.E.N.R.T., 1998; Perker & Lairre, 1997; Ravat, 1997; Dif, 1999b):

- Stage of an individualised access to the required information: Each academy is equipped with at least one information stand point to receive potential applicants and inform them about the regime and how to benefit from it. This stage allows effectively the potential
candidate to collect all the necessary information for an overall assessment of the feasibility of his or her accreditation project.

• **Stage of an individualised accompaniment:** It is a personalised consulting of the candidate. It is supposed to allow the applicant to build up and shape efficiently, his or her accreditation project. This includes, for instance:
  – Choice of the targeted diploma and the exam-exemption units;
  – Identification of the most relevant elements to the application, which effectively backs up the applicant's candidature.

• **Stage of evaluation and decision making:** An accreditation jury is formally made up of representatives of the Ministry of National Education, experts in the field and employers to evaluate the candidate's application. It analyses all the information contained in the application file, identifies all prior work-based competencies and knowledge which comply with the requirements of the candidate's targeted diploma. The applicant might be interviewed for complementary information. In the light of all this, the jury takes its decision as to whether to accept fully, partially or not at all the exam-exemption units applied for. Then, the candidate is notified about the nature of the decision taken by the jury.

2- **Its implications:**

In 1997 for instance, 2551 accreditation applications were examined according to “VAP” regime. 86% of them were made by employed individuals, and only 14% concerned those who were unemployed and still searching for work. 71% of applicants were aged between 25 and 40 years old. 58% of the candidates had already accumulated a working experience of 10 years at least. Women were represented through 54% of submitted applications (M.E.N.R.T, 1998).

As for the requested form of certification, the applicants were interested in all kinds of existing certificates. But, they had a higher preference for “BTS” (higher technician diploma) represented by 44.5%. 21.5% had preferences for “CAP” (the vocational competence certificate) and then came in the third position the “Bac.Pro” (the vocational baccalaureate) with only 15.2%. These diplomas are dominantly requested within the activities of the tertiary sector (64%) and the industry (33%) (M.E.N.R.T, 1998).

Potential applicants' motivations are basically linked to their decisions to have, formally, their experiential work-related learning recognised. They represent 52% of the whole applicants. Only 17% are motivated by job-conversion and mobility (M.E.N.R.T., 1998).

Concerning the rate of intermediary and final success, 88% of the accreditation applicants succeeded in obtaining partial or full exam-exemption-units in 1997. As for final certification, out of 5,360 “VAP”-candidates during the period of 1995-1997, 47% of them succeeded in obtaining their targeted diplomas (M.E.N.R.T., 1998).

In terms of its contribution to the achievement of its ultimate objectives and missions mentioned above (i.e., the second set of performance evaluation criteria), the “VAP” has many advantages for the beneficiary, for the organisation and the integration between formal and non formal learning (Dif, 1999b, 1999c).

For the beneficiaries, “VAP” has many interdependent advantages, namely:
Social recognition and promotion of work as means for access to lifelong learning and certification.

Promotion of vocational and social mobility: Through a continuing accreditation of work-related knowledge and access to further learning, the individuals are more able:
- To increase the level of their qualifications and open possibilities for job promotions;
- To develop and diversify the portfolio of their knowledge, competencies and identities;
- To adapt to changes in employment requirements and working conditions.

As for its contribution to bridging the link between formal and non-formal learning, it can be achieved through its following interdependent fundamental roles:

• Widening the scope of diploma delivery modes, whereby the traditional formal educational and training activity is no longer the unique way for certification. Learning at and from work is considered, according to this regime, as another mode of vocational and technical diploma delivery.
• Establishing, therefore, a new dynamic and more coherent relationship between occupational activity and formal modes of certification.
• Facilitating the creation of a real self-initiated and directed matching between vocational education and training, employment requirements and the individual’s needs for identity and carrier development.
• Development of a learning path-fluidity and complementarity within and between different components of the educational and training system as a whole.

Even for the employer, “VAP” constitutes a new external indicator for human resources evaluation and development within the organisation. It is more objective than the internal performance evaluation procedures. Through a process which combines both "occupational referential" and "diploma referential", the organisation can develop a system which allows for the identification of reliable criteria to be used in optimising its recruitment/training policy and career development schemes for its employees.

However all these identified roles of the regime in favour of employees, employers and the development of learning-path fluidity between formal and non-formal learning, are facing, in practice, two kinds of hindrances linked basically to the scope of its application (Dif, 1999b):

• First of all, it does not cover all the fields of work-related learning. Some powerful "collective occupational identities" are still rigid and not open to the application of the regime. This case can be found, for instance, in the medical and pharmaceutical sector (Perker & Laiire, 1997).
• Secondly, it does not include, in the context of the 1992 Act, non-work related learning, especially that related to cultural and social activities.

A recent project of social modernisation, is expected to take into charge part of the “VAP” shortcoming, by:

• Extending its scope to take into consideration learning gained through any socio-professional activity;
• Harmonising the related general system of certification;
• Reducing the cumulative experiential learning period from five to three years only.
CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper, it is important to underline the following remarks concerning the role of “BC” and “VAP” regimes in making non-formal learning visible and contributing to the creation of a learning-path fluidity and complementarity between them and the dominant formal learning system:

- First, both regimes constitute an important VET instrument in making non-formal learning visible through their process of identification and assessment of the individual’s competencies. However, BC’s scope in terms of competencies’ coverage (personal and professional competencies), is wider than that of VAP regime. The latter remains formally limited to professional competencies (specific and transversal). Moreover, the VAP regime is still not equally applied within all institutionalised activity sectors.

- Secondly, both regimes contribute to the integration between formal and non-formal learning. But, the contribution of VAP regime is explicit and more direct. VAP gives its successful beneficiaries, the automatic right and access to formal certification and learning.

- Thirdly, a rigorous performance evaluation of both regimes, in terms of their contribution to the creation of learning-path fluidity and complementarity between formal and non-formal learning (including their contribution to the beneficiaries’ socio-professional promotion) has not been done yet. The link between formal and non-formal learning created by means of the two regimes, can be, empirically, tested only through a follow-up of the beneficiaries’ learning and professional trajectories. For instance, the investigations conducted so far at the “BC Centres” (CIBC) do not give a direct indication about the performance of “BC” regime in terms of its contribution to the creation of any link between formal and non-formal learning.

REFERENCES


