



COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT STATUS REPORT (NATIONAL SURVEY)

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Competence-based Education in France National Survey

**FATCAT
Further Development and Transfer of Competence Assessment
Tools**

Report prepared by EIFEL



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1 Introduction: Vocational education in France

Before examining the role of competence-based education in France it is important to take into account the way education and training are organised and funded. For example, the dominance of a number of government ministries in the field of initial and continuing education is evident in the control exercised over qualifications and curriculum and this has had an obvious impact on the adoption and development of the competence approach.

In this report, the terms ‘training’, ‘education’ and ‘continuing education’ are used interchangeably. While the term ‘lifelong learning’ is employed, the dominant model in continuing education is still that of training and this reality is reflected both in the terminology and the practice. The term ‘apprentissage’ (from *apprendre* to learn) is rarely used to signify learning in its broader sense, but is still associated with apprenticeship. We are far more likely to see the terms ‘trainee’ or ‘student’ than learner.

Access to provision is also very patchy with most training going to those who are already trained and qualified and working in large organisations. There are still large sectors of the population who do not benefit from continuing education, as participation in continuing education is directly proportional to the initial level of education and skills: the better educated receive much more than those with little or no skills as the following table reveals. This is not, of course to say that people do not learn or acquire competencies. If it was necessary to wait for formal education provision for the acquisition of competencies, many more people would be unemployed and many – particularly small – organisations would have disappeared! On the other hand, France has yet to recognise the role of non-formal and informal learning in competence-acquisition, which is, arguably, the most important source for acquiring soft skills. While some progress has been made in the area of recognition of competencies by experience rather than by following a prescribed course or training path, the dominant model of recognition of competencies is still the academic diploma. Recent growing interest in key competencies may well assist progress towards alternative methods of developing and recognising competencies.

1.1 National policy

Initial professional training is provided for young people in schools and universities or as apprentices. Vocational high schools offer qualifications and certified training programmes as preparation for work. Universities, too, offer vocationally-oriented programmes up to master levels. These programmes can also be offered as part of an apprenticeship contract. Apprentices may also study in vocational high schools or in centres of apprenticeship training (CFA).

As is the case in most countries the purpose of vocational education is to

- Promote job placement or transfer
- Support job retention
- Enable the development of competencies and access to qualifications
- Contribute to economic and cultural development and their own personal development

Continuing education has seen several legislative landmarks since the Debré Law on social protection (31 July 1959) which recognised the need for continuing education, in particular the 16 July 1971 law, creating an obligation (a training levy) for employers to finance *training*. In doing so, the law gave a pre-eminent role to employers and to a lesser extent, trade-unions – employers and trade-unions manage the collection of funds per industry branch, and the unions have a say, post-facto, in the use of training within companies.

Continuing education (formation professionnelle in French) is governed by a complex legislative infrastructure based on a system of financing by all organisations employing staff and managed by officially appointed collectors and distributors of these funds in professional sectors (the ‘OPCAs’).

The right to training (open to all), along with the question of working hours is the domain that has been the most subject to modification in the last 30 years. Most notable in impact in recent years is the law passed in 2004 relating to lifelong learning, which concerned:

- The right to lifelong training (sic – the term learning is rarely used in France in this context)
- Agreement between employers and salaried workers on the choice of training programmes
- Greater responsibility for employees in the construction of their learning path
- Higher visibility of training needs

1. Funding of adult education and national spend

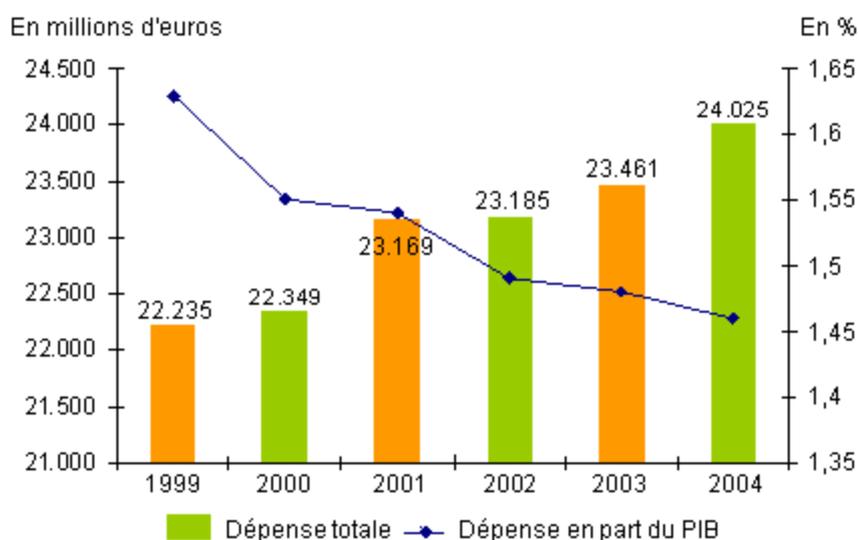
The continuing education sector is an important economic sector that represented 1.5% of GNP in 2001.

From 2004, the training levy was raised from 1.5% of the salary costs, to 1.6 %. Part of this contribution used to finance training away from the workplace is collected by a series of approved bodies (OPCA) of the industry branch. There is also a new right for individual training (Droit Individuel à la Formation, DIF) which is financed by this fraction of the training levy and which represents 20 hours per year that can be accumulated over a 6 years period. Out of the 1.60 % training levy, 0.9 % stays with the organisation to finance the training of its employees.

In 2005 national spend on continuing education and apprenticeships was 25.9 thousand million euros. This represents 1.5 of GNP. The state has readjusted its spending to target young people finding it

difficult to find employment. On the whole however, the contribution of the state to continuing education for job-seekers has been reduced. According to a recent study by the DARES, spending on continuing education has only risen 8% in 5 years.

Figure 1 – Global spend for vocational education



The table above shows spend on continuing education and apprenticeship to 2004. The most significant aspect to note is that the percentage of spend against Gross National Product (GNP) fell from 1.63% to 1.45%.

Spend by the central government has been radically reduced in favour of regions. Spend by organisations increased slightly in 2004 from 2.9 à 3 % of mass salaries. By contrast, training spend increased strongly in the public hospital and local government sectors – by 15.9 % and 9.8 % respectively in 2004.

It is interesting to note that, while the mandatory training levy is now 1.60%, the actual spend on training of employing organisations is still on average above 3% . Since it is clearly established that the training levy does not benefit skilled and unskilled workers equally, many wonder what the advantage is of maintaining this highly bureaucratic and opaque system to spend money that would be spent anyway....

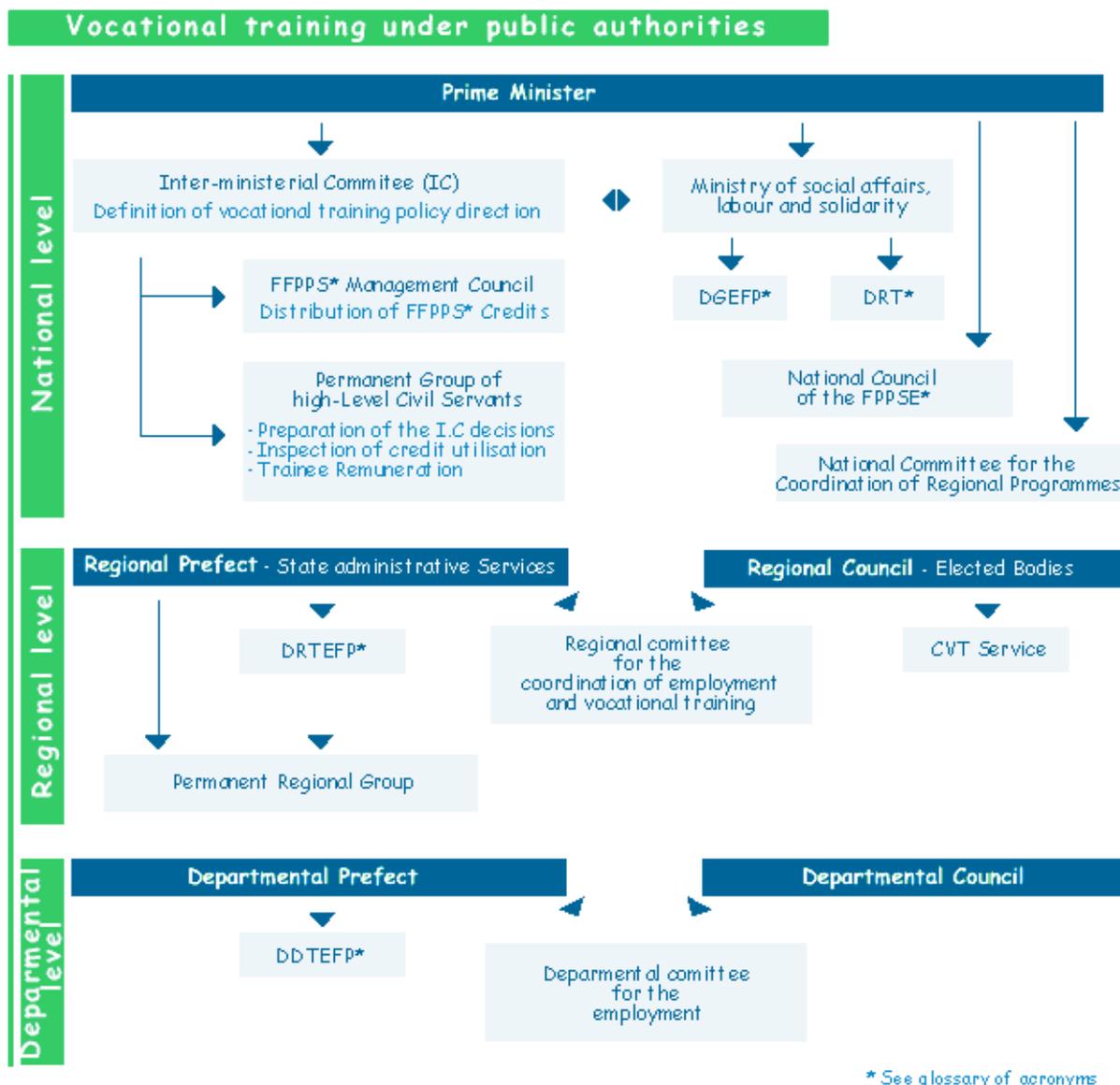
1.2 Stakeholders and responsibilities

The Government is responsible for the specialised budget for job-seekers, people with disabilities, immigrant workers, prisoners and those who are illiterate. It also finances some specific domains like new engineering specialities. It is responsible for information on training, subsidies to regions and assistance to organisations implementing training plans for individual workers. Regions finance

programmes both for young people and adults in line with regional priorities. Individual organisations contribute to the training levy. Organisations of 10 salaried personnel and more pay 1.6% of the salary costs. For organisations with fewer than 10, the obligation is 0.55%. These funds are paid to organisations created by social partners and certified by the state.

The table below shows the division of public responsibility for vocational training. The Government, the regions and the social partners work together on continuing education policy as members of a national council on continuing education. The government and regions share the responsibility for continuing education. The regions are responsible for apprenticeships and local continuing education and can formulate their own policies. Professional organisations, trade unions and organisations responsible for the collection of the training levy funds also play a significant role in policy and training design. Employing organisations are both the implementers and financers of the programmes. Alongside in-house training, training organisations, centres offering a 'bilan de compétence' and centres advising on the accreditation of prior learning meet the training needs identified.

Figure 2 - Vocational Training under Public Authority (source Centre Inffo)



The following are the principal stakeholders in the adult education field:

- Government – policies and funding
- Ministries – each ministry supports its own set of qualifications
- Regional authorities – policies and funding
- Local authorities
- Municipal institutions

Social partners

- Employer unions – policies in continuing training
- Chambers of Commerce and Industry – one of the largest providers of initial and continuing education and training

- Chambre des Métiers (Guilds, Trade and Craft Associations) – also provide training
- Trades Unions
- Parents' unions
- Consumers' unions
- Churches
- Political parties and associations

Organisations and institutions

- Institutions of higher education
- Training organisations
- Education organisations (initial, vocational, further, higher)
- Distance learning institutions
- Companies (large, SMEs)
- Employment agencies
- Media: press, radio, television, publishing industry
- Cultural associations
- Museums, parks

1.2.1 Regional context, policy

The authority of regions, recognised by law, extends to:

Education and training:

- Construction and renovation of secondary schools and maintenance, equipment and running – the regions owns the walls of the secondary schools
- Vocational training and apprenticeship – e.g. In 2001, Regional Councils spent slightly over 2 billion € in vocational education

Regional development (overall responsibility in co-operation with the Government or other local communities):

- Economic planning and economic development
- Transport and infrastructure
- Town planning and housing
- Environment, culture and research
- Social action and health

Table 1 - Financing by Regional Council per type of organisation

| Financement par les Conseils régionaux des actions de formation par type d'organismes en 2001 | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Organismes de formation | Coûts de fonctionnement ¹ | | Nbre d'entrées en formation | |
| | (en milliers d'euros) | % | | % |
| Lycees, LEP, colleges, GRETA | 120 068 | 18,0 | 86 736 | 19 |
| Établissements du supérieur | 24 525 | 3,7 | 23 308 | 5,1 |
| CNAM | 12 695 | 1,9 | 26 028 | 5,7 |
| Autres | 1 728 | 0,3 | 1 542 | 0,3 |
| Total Éducation nationale | 159 016 | 23,8 | 137 614 | 30,2 |
| Établissements relevant du ministère de l'Agriculture | 30 375 | 4,5 | 13 061 | 2,9 |
| Établissements relevant d'autres ministères | 11 338 | 1,7 | 5 546 | 1,2 |
| CCI et organismes associés | 27 348 | 4,1 | 18 619 | 4,1 |
| Chambres de métiers et organismes associés | 11 915 | 1,8 | 17 779 | 3,9 |
| Chambres d'agriculture et organismes associés | 3 517 | 0,5 | 3 738 | 0,8 |
| Total organismes consulaires | 84 493 | 12,7 | 58 743 | 12,9 |
| Autres organismes publics et parapublics | 10 913 | 1,6 | 8 068 | 1,8 |
| AFPA | 41 279 | 6,2 | 9 878 | 2,2 |
| Total autres organismes publics et parapublics | 52 192 | 7,8 | 17 946 | 3,9 |
| Total secteur public | 295 701 | 44,3 | 214 303 | 47 |
| Formateurs individuels | 1 981 | 0,3 | 1 107 | 0,2 |
| Organismes à but lucratif (SA, SARL) | 125 461 | 18,8 | 75 035 | 16,4 |
| Organismes à but non lucratif | 230 639 | 34,5 | 145 054 | 31,8 |
| Autres organismes de droit privé (mutuelle, fondation...) | 8 790 | 1,3 | 17 608 | 3,9 |
| CFA | 5 353 | 0,8 | 3 075 | 0,7 |
| Total secteur privé | 372 224 | 55,7 | 241 879 | 53 |
| Total France entière | 667 925 | 100 | 456 182 | 100 |

The budgetary resources of the Region for education are made up of 40 % from the State and approximately 45% from the taxes paid by private individuals and companies. The table above shows the breakdown in financing within regions of training activities by the public and private sectors.

The State and the regions work within the framework of contracts such as *plan Etat-région (State-region plan)*, adopted for five years, setting in common priority objectives for co-financed programmes.

Regional planning is carried out mainly through 3 measures:

- *Programme régional de formation professionnelle et d'apprentissage* (PRAFP, Regional programme of vocational training and apprenticeship)
- *Plan régional de développement des formations professionnelles des jeunes et des adultes* (PRDFP, Regional plan for the development of vocational training for youth and adults) focused on initial access and return to employment
- *Fonds régional de l'apprentissage et de la formation professionnelle* (FRAFP, Regional Funds for apprenticeship and professional training) – a transfer of State credits and co-financed European Social Fund – used to pay trainees and the operations of training centres

The Region can also participate in financing:

- networks for welcoming and orienting young people such as *missions locales*, *PAIO*, *Espaces Jeunes*, etc.
- *Centres de Formation pour Apprentis* (CFA, Apprentices Training Centres)

This support can take various forms: *Chèques Formation* (training-chequebooks), scholarships, etc.

1.2.2 Who receives vocational education and training?

All salaried employees in the private sector have the right to training throughout their working lives as part of an individual ‘training plan’ (DIF). The employee can use his ‘DIF’ within or outside work time. Employees also have the right to time off to obtain a ‘bilan de compétences’ – a presentation of their competencies or achieve a ‘validation des acquis de l’expérience’ (VAE) – accreditation of prior experience. Those employed in the public sector are similarly well catered for with training provided during work time.

Non-salaried workers - for example, agricultural workers, retailers and freelancers - may also access training. They are obliged to contribute to their training through a training levy.

Young job-seekers can, under certain conditions, benefit from paid training programmes provided by training organisation or as part of work experience. Older job-seekers also have access to specialised programmes provided by the region or the government. There are also work placements that are regarded as part of the training offer.

At the same time, as we noted earlier, there are still large sectors of the population who do not benefit from continuing education as participation in continuing education is directly proportional to the initial level of education and skills: the better educated receive much more than those with little or no skills as the tendency is to offer formal learning opportunities to those working in large as can be seen in the tables below.

Figure 3 - Continuing education in relation to previous qualifications and organisation size (number of employees) (Source CEREQ)

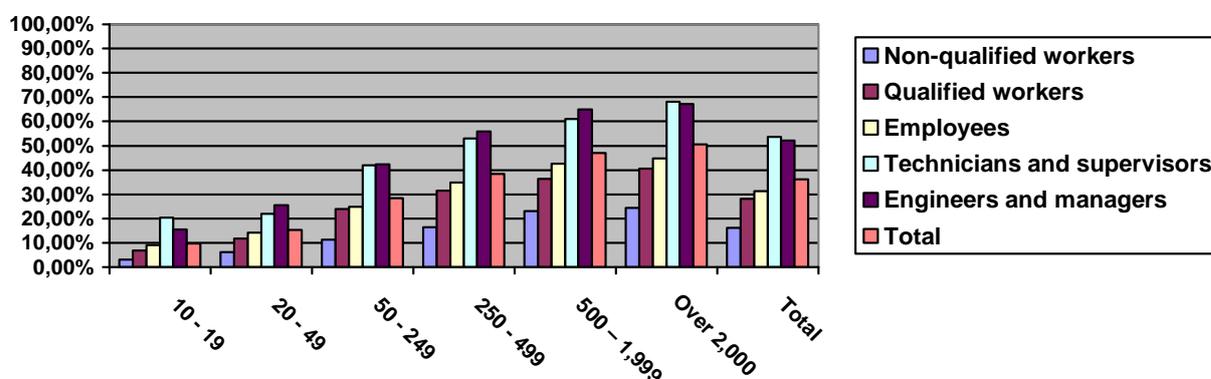


Table 2 - - Employees active in May 2003 in metropolitan France Source : Insee, enquête Formation et Qualification Professionnelle (2003).

| | Women | | Men | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Classified by type of employer | Rate of access to training | Classified by type of employer | Rate of access to training |
| Private sector | 68,3 | 20,3 | 79,1 | 23,4 |
| Personal services | 8,6 | 6,6 | 0,6 | 9,8 |
| Less than 10 employees | 11,1 | 10,8 | 11,2 | 8,1 |
| 10-49 employees | 10,7 | 17,6 | 14,4 | 12,8 |
| 50-99 employees | 4,4 | 23,7 | 5,8 | 19,4 |
| 100-199 employees | 4,3 | 21,5 | 6,1 | 22,3 |
| 200-499 employees | 4,9 | 21,5 | 6,1 | 24,0 |
| 500 employees or more | 24,3 | 29,7 | 35,0 | 33,5 |
| Public sector | 31,7 | 31,0 | 20,9 | 32,8 |
| All | 100,0 | 23,8 | 100,0 | 25,9 |

There is a wide discrepancy between qualified and unqualified staff: while over 50% of technicians, supervisors and executives (52.1 %) had some form of training, only 16,1% of unskilled workers did. This is a clear indicator that the current management of training funds increases the gap between skilled and unskilled workers.

The French system of a minimum expenditure by companies to support continuing education and training has been widely admired in several countries. Yet, while the French system may be effective in stimulating continuing education and training, it is biased against on-the-job training. Interestingly, in 1990, Australia introduced a Training Guarantee scheme in imitation of the French system. It was suspended in 1994, in the light of its perceived inefficiency and continuing employer opposition.

1.2.3 Vocational Education and Training Providers

There are two principal categories of providers in the field of initial and continuing vocational education: training organisations and centres offering the ‘bilan de compétences’. More than 50 000 providers supply the market, only around 9,000 of which have training as their principal activity.

Public and parapublic organisations include:

- Establishments administered by the national Ministry of Education
- Establishments administered by other ministries:
 - AFPA (National Association for the Training of Adults) administered by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Cohesion
 - The centres of vocational training for agriculture administered by the Ministry of Agriculture
 - The ‘consular chambres’ – of agriculture, commerce and industry and metiers
 - The GRETA – centres of vocational training, administered by the Ministry of Education
 - Vocational high schools
 - Universities

Private organisations include :

- Not for profit organisaions
- Profit-making organisations

This figure of more than 50.000 training providers needs deciphering. Firstly, the law allows all organisations to have their own training centres for training their personnel – and why not their clients’ staff? There are therefore many training bodies whose sole role to organise training in in-house software or a particular work process. Furthermore there are many independent trainers who often work for training organisations but occasionally carry out training for themselves.

The training market is essentially composed of small enterprises. One out of two has an annual turnover of less than 75 000€, while at the other extreme 2% have a turnover of more than 3 million euros (2003 figures). The first group represents 3 % of the global market, the second one-third. The training market is also highly fluid: a third of the organisations were created after 2000.

It should also be noted that in France the public sector is a powerful competitor to private providers. Public sector institutions have both the prestige associated with the support of the state and public subsidies that allow their prices to be highly competitive. Although public training organisations make up only 5% des specialist providers, they represent 20% of the sectoral turnover, training 12% of the learners and offering more than 22% of training hours.

1.2.4 The principal public training providers

Greta

Created in 1973, the network of GRETA (GRoupements d'ETAbissements publics locaux d'enseignement, Grouping of local public education establishments) is one of the major actors in training in France today. It comprises educational establishments of the Department of Education that may be schools, secondary schools of general and technological education, and vocational training colleges.

The GRETA is a network of 290 centres with 30,000 trainers and 500,000 trainees per year, for the most part employees working within the framework of the training plan (*plan de formation*) or on personal training leave; job-seekers; young adults on job placement schemes; people financing their own training. The network had a turnover of 406,2 millions d'euros in 2003. Employers contributed 44,6 %, public financers 50,6 % and individuals financing their own training 4,8 %.

The Gretas offer more than 650 professional and technological qualifications. The most frequently delivered training programmes are in the secretarial, office automation and IT domains. The majority of trainees are mostly adults over the age of 30 years, of whom 60% are women. Greta centres are highly competitive in the training market, having 7% of the market.

AFPA

Created in 1947, AFPA (Association for Adult Vocational Training) is the largest organisation for adult vocational education and training in France and Europe. Its services include counselling, vocational training, validation of professional experience (VAE) and human resources counselling. The following figures give some idea of the extent of AFPA's activities.

- 4740 trainers
- 780 psychologists providing information, evaluation and orientation of the candidates
- 350 consulting engineers and consultants
- In 2003, 70.2 % of the trainees found a job within six months following their training

In 2004

- There were 154,990 trainees of whom 104,385 were job-seekers
- 261,134 job-seekers benefited from the services of a psychologist for planning their learning and 4,346 for accreditation of prior learning (VAE)
- 15 963 « certificates of professional skills » were awarded through recognition of prior learning

AFPA pedagogy is based on the ‘professional gesture’ (“*geste professionnel*”): The training facility reproduces the work environment (equipment, machines etc) and the person is placed in real working situations.

AFPA is currently under reform, moving from a centralized management and funding system to a ‘regionalisation’ of independent entities, with closer links to regional governments.

APP

The creation of APP was the result of the crisis in the coal and iron industry in the seventies, and the need to reorient hundreds of thousands of workers who needed to be re-qualified. Created in 1983, the APP (*Ateliers de Pédagogie Personnalisés*, Personalised Pedagogy Workshops) is a network of centres providing individualised training to people with low level qualifications. More than two million young people and adults have benefited from the services of APP’s, allowing a majority of them to find a job or obtain access to a training programme leading to a qualification. For the last 20 years the State has supported their activities (50%) alongside other funders.

In 2002 there were 469 centres, 260 delegations and 30 APP centres in prisons (ANTP). 191 000 persons were trained by APP, for an average duration of training per person of 81 hours supported by 3 000 professionals (coordinators, trainers, secretaries).

In 2001 and 2002 the APP:

- Delivered 60,000 certificates of navigation on Internet
- Supported 5,000 learners registered with CNED (Centre National d’Enseignement à Distance – National Centre for Distance Education)
- Trained 1,000 ADS (security assistant to the National Police force).
- Trained 4,500 prisoners

CNAM (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers)

Created during the French Revolution (October 1794), the CNAM (National Conservatory for Arts and Crafts) is one of the most important providers of continuing education in higher education. It has

three principal missions: lifelong learning, technological research and innovation and the diffusion of scientific and technical culture. In 2004 the CNAM

- Administered 150 training centres, in France and overseas organised in 28 regional centres
- Provided services to 40,000 mature students (‘auditeurs’) registered in Paris and the same number in regions, of whom 7, 700 were distance students
- Delivered 8.3 million student hours
- Provided 70 000 full or partial certifications and 8,000 diplomas
- Provided short courses enabling the updating of competences

Universities

In 2005, in the domain of continuing education, the university sector (including the CNAM) awarded 47 000 qualifications, of which more than half are national qualifications. A third of these were first degrees, a third masters’ degrees and the remainder university technology diplomas and university entry diplomas. With 316 millions d’euros en 2005, the revenues of this sector have increased.

The Chambers of Commerce and Industry

The Chambers of Commerce and Industry are a major actor in the provision of continuing education, with more than 200 establishments. They train around 380,000 people each year in continuing education (in addition to their activities in initial training and 163 apprentice training centres). They have a turnover of more than 310 million euros.

1.2.5 What are learners learning ?

In 2000 the foremost training specialities were as follows:

Table 3 - 10 top training specialties in 2000 (source, MES-exploitation/DARES)

| Contents | % trainees | % hours | Average Hours |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| ICT | 8.9 | 4.1 | 38 |
| Employability skills | 8.4 | 9.6 | 94 |
| Secretarial and office skills | 7.8 | 9.8 | 103 |
| Transport | 6.0 | 4.7 | 65 |
| General education | 5.3 | 5.3 | 82 |
| Sales | 5.0 | 7.3 | 121 |
| Security, health & safety | 5.0 | 1.8 | 31 |
| Health | 4.7 | 3.5 | 63 |
| Interpersonal skills | 4.3 | 5.2 | 100 |
| Language | 3.5 | 3.2 | 76 |
| Total of top 10 | 59.0 | 54.5 | 76 |

1.2.6 Qualifications

As we have seen, the right to continuing education is enshrined in the Work Code and available to all employed workers or job-seekers. Continuing education allows workers to improve their level of qualification and acquire a professional qualification.

A range of vocational qualifications are available, for example CAPA, BEPA, Bac Pro, BTA, Bac Techno, BTSA, and the designation ‘engineer’.

The length of the programmes leading to such qualifications varies according to the training and the entry level of the candidate. Many of the qualifications available have been criticised as being too academic, being based on the model of initial education. Exceptions are the CQPs – professional qualifications awarded by professional branches.

In addition to the formal qualifications available, it is now possible to obtain recognition of prior learning/achievement. We shall look at this system in detail in a later section.

2 The definition of the term competence and the history of competence-based education and training in France

2.1 *The definition of competence in French vocational education*

As is the case in many countries, it is possible to find numerous definitions of competence. For the most part, however, they may be seen as variations on a theme rather than radically opposed concepts.

According to M.Parlier[1] competence has four characteristics:

1. competence is operational and accomplished : it is always ‘competence for action’ and is indissociable from activity
2. competence is learned : the worker must become competent by personal and social construction
3. it is structured : it combines knowing how to act, wishing to act and being able to act.
4. it is abstract and hypothetical : one cannot directly observe real competence but one can observe its manifestations and its consequences.

For Guy Le Boterf (2000), one of the most respected authorities in the field of competency development in France, competencies are the result of three factors :

- Knowing how to act – which implies knowing how to combine and mobilise appropriate resources
- Wishing to act – this refers to the individual’s motivation and to the context that incites actions
- Being able to act – this implies a context, organisation of work, management choice and the social conditions that make individual assumption of responsibility and risk-taking possible and legitimate

He uses a musical analogy: we could say that all the elements of the work context represent the piece of music (the given competence). The real competence of the workers lies in interpreting the piece. The implication of this is that there is not just one way of resolving a problem competently.

During its International Training Days in 1998, the Medef (the national employers’ association) defined competence as a ‘combination of knowledge, skills, know-how, experience and behaviour operating in a given context’

We can see then that the idea of ‘soft skills’ – often translated as ‘savoir être’ is integrated into definitions of competence.

2.2 The development of competence-based education and training in France

The competence movement in France can be said to have begun in the 1980s, but its progress and influence were relatively slow in comparison with such countries as the Netherlands, the UK, Ireland or Denmark and only started to become an integral part of the education and training scene from the mid-90s. As Françoise Delamare Le Deist and Jonathan Winterton observe (1)

The emergence and development of competence has passed through several stages: after the first appearance of the idea within organizations, came the development of instruments and tools for HRM practitioners and consultants, then the conceptualization of competence as a theoretical concern, and finally more critical approaches.

We saw earlier the sacrosanct place of the right to vocational training and the important role of collective agreements in France and it is in this context that the competence-based movement has developed. The movement received state support when in 1993 the national employment agency, ANPE (Agence nationale pour l'emploi), modified its framework of occupations (Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois) to a competence-based system, which stimulated widespread academic commentary (Le Boterf, 1994; Levy-Leboyer, 1996; Merle, 1996; Minet et al., 1994). Enterprises were thus given the opportunity to carry out individual evaluation of competence instead of relying upon qualifications (although even today this practice is far from widespread).

Further impetus was given to the competence movement during the 1990s when the state introduced a right for individuals to have their competences assessed (bilan de compétences) independently to provide a basis for personal development in their occupation. The concept of competence has featured increasingly in human resource management since the mid 1990s, both in research and practice and has been associated with several different normative models and various practices. Competence also became more focused on HRD and the instruments for developing and measuring competences began to appear. Competence-based pay was introduced in some heavy industries. The competence movement gained further ground after the employers' association MEDEF (Mouvement des Entreprises de France) launched Objectif compétences (MEDEF, 2002) encouraging the adoption of competence approaches in enterprises and further stimulating academic interest. From an epistemological perspective, the logic of competence is polarized into two distinct directions: an individual approach, centred on individual behaviours, and a collective approach, centred on building the required competence in an organization. Most definitions of competence fall somewhere between two extremes: competence as a universal attribute, such as literacy, and competence in terms of individual capacity, which is found only in the work context. Several French authors have compared the French approach with the 'Anglo-Saxon' (often exclusively American) approach. The French

approach is generally more comprehensive, considering savoir (compétences théoriques, i.e. knowledge), savoir-faire (compétences pratiques, i.e. functional competences) and savoir-être (compétences sociales et comportementales, i.e. behavioural competencies).

3 Key competences and the development of ‘soft skills’ in France

In addressing the question of what are regarded as key competencies in France, we should of course distinguish between occupational competencies associated with specific work activities and those ‘generic’ or key competencies that are common to most vocational/professional activities and transferable from job to job. What we call ‘soft skills’ enter into this category.

We should remind ourselves again that the majority of formal training is received by those already educated, qualified and working in larger organisations. The acquisition and deployment of key competencies/soft skills is no less essential for other citizens but we must assume that they are acquired in and outside the workplace – non-formally and informally. However, there are some state-wide initiatives designed to improve the general level of key competencies.

In the education domain, the French Ministry of Education has identified two categories of competence that should be developed during compulsory schooling: general competences and subject-specific competences. The first category of competencies relates to verbal and written communication. Subject-based competences are taught with the aim of ensuring good reading, writing and verbal skills for students. There are no standards for assessing achievement. For language competence, the European reference framework is in use in secondary education.

From 2002/2003, new “pathways to learning” have been introduced at lower-secondary level. These aim to encourage independent work on inter-disciplinary projects. At primary level, artistic and cultural education has been enhanced. A wide debate has taken place on basic competences that should be acquired by the end of compulsory schooling and a report was published in 2004.

The organisation responsible for employment and vocational education issued a report in January 2008 regarding access to key competences for job seekers. The report urged a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders, including regions and the social partners.

The report notes that in France today, more than 3 million adults are illiterate (of whom 57% are employed and 11% job seekers). More than a quarter of the long-time unemployed have a level of education below level V. This is in line with the general situation in Europe, where more than a third of the labour force has a low level of qualification. It concludes also that the European framework defining basic competencies for lifelong education and training should be adopted. It makes particular reference to the key competencies defined by the European parliament and stresses that the period of mandatory education should guarantee to all the mastery of a common base of knowledge and

competencies that will enable success in schooling and preparation for further development, work and succeed a citizen. The state recognises its responsibility towards those adults who have never achieved or have lost this mastery, part of the population that faces obstacles in access to or maintaining a job. The raising of the general level of training accentuates even more the inequality of access to employment of these people, who thus find themselves in competition for jobs demanding a low level of qualification. At the same time, the demands of employers are becoming ever higher in response to international competition, increasing the risk of social exclusion.

Currently, initiatives put in place by the Ministry responsible for employment in order to promote access to 'key competencies' include the 'APP' (personalised pedagogical workshops); 'NSI' (Navigate on Internet) and IRLLE (campaign against illiteracy). In 2006, 200,000 people were given access to programmes on general culture and basic IT skills. 65,000 people benefited from introductory courses on the Internet and 28,000 people followed basic skills programmes.

New initiatives – to be in place by January 2009 - will see more resources devoted to access to key competencies to ensure more efficient and effective job placements. Targets include those lacking basic skills, who will initially occupy low-skilled jobs; support for training in key competencies for those in employment, and the encouragement of services aimed at assisting the mastery of key competencies. There is even provision for employees who do not wish their employees to know that they are receiving help with key competencies!

3.1 The Common base of knowledge and competencies

In common with some other European countries, the French Government has decided to put in place a comprehensive programme of development and evaluation of key competencies known as the SOCLE COMMUN DE CONNAISSANCES ET DE COMPÉTENCES (Common base of knowledge and competencies).

In July 2006 the French Ministry of Education announced a new regulation (code) to work towards mastery of a common base of knowledge and competencies at each stage of compulsory education. It also set out the way in which acquisition of this base would be assessed. This repertoire of knowledge and competencies is regarded as essential for succeeding in school, undertaking further training, constructing a personal and professional future and playing a fulfilling role as citizen. The role of the school is seen as critical here. The 'socle' is seen as the 'cement of the nation' – it implies value, knowledge and practice and demands the mobilisation of educational institutions and effort and perseverance on the part of the students. The French initiative has been developed in line with the European Parliament's recommendations regarding key competencies for education and lifelong

learning. It has also taken into account international studies such as PISA, which proposed a measure of knowledge and competencies necessary for life.

The base is composed of 7 competencies. 5 of these are already an integral part of the curriculum:

- **Mastery of the French language**
- **Practice of a foreign language**
- **Basic competence in mathematics and scientific and technological culture**
- **Mastery of current techniques of information and communication**
- **Humanist culture**

Two other domains do not yet receive sufficient attention:

- **social and civic competencies**
- **personal autonomy and initiative**

Each of these main competencies is composed of a combination of fundamental knowledge, the capacity to put them in practice in a variety of situations, but also of attitudes essential throughout life, such as being open to others, seeking truth, respect for self and others, curiosity and creativity.

This base is to be acquired progressively from kindergarten to end of compulsory education. Each competency requires the input of several disciplines and conversely, a discipline contributes to the acquisition of several competencies. Evaluation tools will be available for teachers, for example, a personal record allowing the student, his/her family and the teachers to monitor the progressive acquisition of competencies. Programmes will take into account different paces and styles of learning, offering a range of methods and resources.

The presentation of the key competencies is accompanied by a detailed description of the ways in which they may be acquired in education. Here is a brief summary of the importance of each of the competencies

3.1.1 Mastery of the French Language

The ability to write, read and speak French is the entry-point to all domains of knowledge and the acquisition of all competencies. It is the premier tool of equal opportunities, the liberty of the citizen. It allows communication orally and in writing in a variety of situations. It also allows citizens to understand and express their rights and their responsibilities.

3.1.2 Practice of a foreign language

Communication in a foreign language entails the capacity to understand, to express oneself and to interpret thoughts, feelings and facts orally and in writing in a variety of situations. It also entails knowledge and understanding of cultures of which language is the vector: it enables one to go beyond stereotypes.

The European Language Framework, produced by the Council of Europe, constitutes a fundamental reference for the teaching and learning of languages. Mastery of level A2 (elementary user) corresponds to the level required for the common base.

3.1.3 Basic competence in mathematics and scientific and technological culture

This involves giving students the scientific culture necessary for a coherent representation of the world and an understanding of their daily environment. They must understand that complexity can be expressed by fundamental laws. The concrete and practical approaches of mathematics and sciences, associated notably with manual dexterity, helps students to understand abstract notions. Maths and the experimental sciences promote intellectual rigour.

3.1.4 Mastery of current techniques of information and communication

Digital culture involves the confident and informed use of the techniques of the Information Society. It concerns information technology, multimedia and the Internet, which today permeate all economic and social domains.

3.1.5 Humanist culture

Humanist culture enables students to acquire the sense both of continuity and of rupture, of identity and of otherness. By knowing where France and Europe come from and in knowing how to situate them in the world of today, students will be able to project themselves more lucidly into the future. Humanist culture contributes to the formation of judgement, of taste and of sensibility. It enriches the sense of the real, opens the spirit to the diversity of human situations, invites reflection on one's own opinions and feelings and arouses aesthetic emotions.

3.1.6 Social and civic competencies

Developing this competency entails putting in place a veritable civic path for the student, composed of values, knowledge, practice and behaviour, the aim of which is to promote an effective and constructive participation in social and professional life, to enjoy liberty of action while being fully conscious of the rights of others and to reject violence. They need therefore to learn the difference between universal principles (the rights of man); the rules of the State (laws) and social customs (civic

behaviour). It also involves developing the sense of belonging to one's country, the European Union, in the respect due to diversity of people's choices and of their personal options.

3.1.7 Autonomy and initiative

Personal autonomy is an indispensable element in the rights of man: the common base of competencies establishes the possibility to interact with others, act and make informed choices by developing the capacity to exercise personal judgment. Autonomy is also a necessary condition for success in education, appropriate future orientation and the ability to adapt to evolutions in personal, professional and social life. Lifelong learning is another essential element here.

As far as the spirit of initiative is concerned, the student must show himself/herself capable of planning and carrying out individual or collective projects in the artistic, sporting, patrimonial or socio-economic domains.

3.2 Soft skill development provision

Alongside these governmental initiatives to raise the level of generic competencies there is increasing interest in the development of 'soft skills' in higher education and in human resource management. Indeed, the term 'soft skills' itself is to be found widely in academic education, most notably in MBA programmes. The director of one MBA programme recently referred to 'a notable evolution' in the domain of soft skills, i.e. managerial competencies such as the management of teams, leadership, conflict resolution and business ethics. Grenoble Graduate School of Business, for example, promises for its MBA programme:

- We balance theory and applied learning, the academic and the operational. For you this means a practical hands-on approach, constantly focused on the real world.
- The program develops hard analytical skills and soft interpersonal skills, to build competence across the full range of managerial activity.

In an earlier section we presented the enormous training market in France and the area of soft skills is well catered for. There are numerous courses and programmes that range from 1-day for a single area, for example, presentation skills, to many months for more extensive business and management programmes. It is safe to say that all extensive programmes of business and management studies would include an important component of soft skills development. E-learning (or as it most widely known in France, distance learning) suppliers represent one of the most important sources of soft skills development.



Available programmes may or may not be accompanied by some form of recognition in the form of certificates of attendance through to diploma credit under a VAE programme.

4 The competencies required of employees by French employers

The employers' Association, MEDEF is extremely influential in France. They have a vision of a 're-foundation of society' in which the management by competencies plays a major role, with a significant responsibility being placed on the individual for the development of his/her own competencies. There is a move away from the old Taylorian approach to work organisation. In the MEDEF's view the emphasis on jobs roles is incapable of mobilising employees or of rendering them 'polyvalent' and thus permitting greater external and internal mobility for organisations –essential to the highest level of performance and competitiveness. This means that all organisations must develop the competencies of their employees.

Competence is seen as a much more complex concept than qualification as it concerns both the individual and the employer. It thus represents the interface between worker and employer. As we have seen from previous definitions, competence here involves knowledge, skills, experience and behaviour applied in a given context. This goes far beyond the idea of 'qualification' as a guarantee of immediate and continuing value to the employing organisation. It is up to the employee to ensure that what he/she is offering is appropriate to market demand – for as long as they will be working. To use the MEDEF's words, the employees must consider that their 'competence capital' is more important than the capital destined to put a roof over their heads! We shall no longer be qualified once and for all, we shall no longer be competent for life – we must make continual progression. The MEDEF calls this the 'responsibilisation' of the employee. This of course, has obvious implications for collective agreements between employer and employees and does not find favour with all trade unionists, fearful of the potential for insecurity of employment. Employers would maintain that a full 'portfolio of competencies' is the best guarantee of employability and that organisations have a responsibility to ensure that employees are able to achieve this.

What naturally follows from this is that employers wish increasingly to recruit young people with with a level of general and technological education that indicates their capacity to fit into and adapt to the evolution of the organisation. For the MEDEF initial education institutions today are far from achieving this 'product'. The employers' association has thus strongly criticised the current system, accusing it of no longer carrying out its missions. They cite as proof of this the number of young people who leave school every year with no qualifications or diplomas, representing a whole generation every five years. According to the MEDEF previously the values of the school were in perfect harmony with those of organisation, and particularly with the way work is organised,

promoting dedication, punctuality, professional consciousness, probity and respect for expertise and authority. For the MEDEF this goes a considerable way in explaining the high level of employment among young people in France!

Their natural conclusion is a reform of education. In order to ensure the development of initiative, autonomy, creativity and development, the school must overtly promote the notion of competence and become more open to the world of enterprise. Relations between school and employers must be strengthened. Fundamental to the competence base of the individual is ability to read, write and calculate

This brings into question the value of diplomas and certification, since they cannot guarantee to the employer the validity of the skills and behaviour expected and, moreover, competencies acquired evolve continually with changes in the organisation of work. The MEDEF has even brought into question the idea of a compulsory duration of education, preferring to focus on competencies acquired and fitness for employment. They are therefore in favour of greater flexibility. Not surprisingly critics of this approach wonder if the employers are in favour of the suppression of general (cultural) education if employability should be the sole driving force. They find the employers' attitude too 'instrumentalist' and find a closer relationship between educational institution and the world of work, for example with work placements, not necessarily progress. There is some resistance to the MEDEF's desire to promote the concept of the 'learning organisation', which is well established in some other countries.

Such an approach implies a change in the system of validation of competencies, greater responsibility for which should, in the view of the MEDEF, be given to employers. They are in favour of opening up the current system of qualifications to allow competencies to be validated on the basis of relevant achievement supported by proof. For the current French system, in which the expectation is that continuing education is provided in work time and at the employer's expense, this may require an unpopular evolution towards a greater contribution on the part of the employer given economic realities.

These economic realities are considerable. A large percentage of HR directors anticipate a penury of necessary competencies. For them, therefore, it is essential to improve the management of key competencies. There is at the same time also a 'race' to attract 'stars', a race which is of course, open principally to the larger organisations, and this has been criticised as an approach that both fails to focus on developing internal competencies, and on undervaluing the employees they have. There is fierce competition among employers to attract engineers, technicians and specialist workers – again often at the expense of developing and retaining current staff. It would appear that one of the

dangers of this kind of preoccupation with competencies is that too little attention is paid to the ‘social climate’ of the organisation, which in turn may have consequences for staff retention.

Traditional approaches to the development of competencies and evaluation of performance are being questioned. For example, there is still a great deal of reliance on the annual appraisal interview – easier to manage than working with a global set of standards of competence!

We shall now look generally at the place of the competence-based approach in France, and at some examples of initiatives directly concerned with the recognition of competencies that go some way towards addressing the concerns expressed by employers.

5 The role of competence-based education in France today

It has to be said that while the concepts of competence-development and management by competence are becoming well-established in France, there is still some considerable way to go. This may be explained in part by the patchwork nature of the development of indicators of competence and accompanying measures of recognition/qualification, with many different actors serving the needs of particular sectors and no unifying national framework. However, it is possible that plans to work in line with the EQF and other Europe-wide measures will help to achieve greater coherence and transparency.

One of the most obvious manifestations of the competence-based approach in France is not explicitly linked to ongoing education and development, but rather represents a *snapshot* of competencies: the *bilan de compétences*. We shall also look in greater detail at the system of VAE, whose aim is the formal recognition of competencies, wherever they may have been acquired and at a professional qualification, the CQP that is ostensibly based on the demonstration of work-based competence.

5.1 Bilan de competence

The bilan de competence or ‘competence profile’ enables individuals to carry out an evaluation of their achievements, strengths and career path. All French citizens are entitled to a bilan de competence, which is produced with the help of advisers. An initial interview is followed by 6 interviews of 2 hours each and a final interview at the end of 6 months. There is no quality control of centres offering these bilans, but all must have a psychologist on the staff.

The initiative has not been an unqualified success, from the point of view of employers or potential/actual employees. Despite state backing of the exercise as an ‘indispensable tool’, the bilan is far from being that. While 91% of enterprises may have used in 2006, only 2% of the working population were actually involved. In principle the exercise could have its uses, in allowing enterprises to make an assessment of the competencies available in the organisation and to make decisions on this basis, both for organisational and individual development. However, in practice, organisations have reservations about the usefulness of the initiative. For example, sometimes employees receive what employers perceive to be an inflated evaluation of their competencies and potential – and this brings problems in its wake as employees’ expectations are raised. This problem may be attributed to the real lack of a national standard, giving too much freedom to individual counsellors. On the other hand, another problem could be the unwillingness of employees to communicate a negative ‘bilan’. This

results in the reporting of only positive results and thus a partial profile, preventing the identification of weaknesses that could be improved with help at organisation level.

From the point of view of the employee, there is sometimes a reluctance to request a bilan de compétences in case this is interpreted as a plan to leave the organisation or an expression of discontent. Other employers fear that they will not be able to live up to expectations raised by the exercise and others still fear an exposure of their limitations. Finally, there is in fact, little in-depth knowledge of the initiative. Employers note that those counselling the candidates have scant knowledge of the operations of the organisation and its competency needs. Above all, the exercise of carrying out a bilan de compétences, which involves evaluation and reflection, must not be an isolated activity but must be followed up with coaching or other forms of development and, indeed, an ongoing bilan.

If we carry out a 'bilan' of the 'bilan de compétences', we note that the initiative has been in existence for 20 years, that 160 000 bilans are dispensed every year but only 50 000 of these are received by those in employment. The rest are produced by job seekers. Thus, although it serves a useful purpose in assisting people to gain employment or change jobs, there is also a need for it to play the role intended for it, that is as a tool for career management and lifelong learning and development, which is an important responsibility for employees.

At management level, even though managers are no strangers to self-evaluation of their competencies, there is rarely the opportunity to obtain an external evaluation and they represent around 10% of those achieving a bilan de compétences.

5.2 Validation des Acquis

The law for Accreditation of Prior Learning (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*, VAE) n° 2002-73 (17 janvier 2002) states that every person with at least 3 years of professional activity can have his/her competencies recognised by a diploma or certificate. Delivered by private or public organisations, or industry lead bodies, these qualifications must be registered in a national repository (RNCP).

Obtaining certification takes on average between 6 months and a year. Guidance is a vital part of the process from specialised information or training centres. Certifying organisations include:

- Ministries of Education, Employment, Social Affairs and Agriculture for state-delivered diplomas..
- Ministries of Defence, Culture, the Sea and Transport, the Gretas, chambers of commerce and industry, chambers of metiers and agriculture, private organisations and associations for professional diplomas.

- Professional sector branches for the Certificats de qualification professionnelle (CQP).

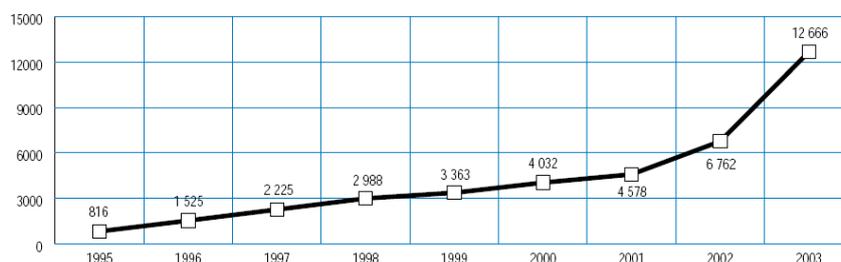
The application is assessed on such criteria as:

- Accordance with legal regulations, such as the number of years of experience of the candidate and their relevance to the qualification sought
- Correspondence between the educational path of the candidate and the qualification sought.

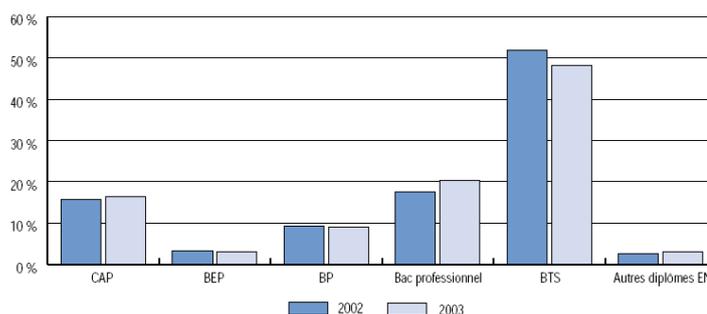
The candidate usually receives help in putting together his/her application, in preparing for the interview with the jury (evaluation committee) and the demonstration of relevant competencies depending on the rules of the certifying organisation. The candidate has to pay for such help, which may be offered by the certifying organisation or by other training providers. The ministries have adopted a 'charter' to guarantee the quality of this support.

Figure 4 - Evolution of Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (Source MEN)

Évolution du nombre de candidats à la validation ayant obtenu au moins une dispense (VAP) ou une unité de diplôme (VAE)



Répartition des candidats à la validation des acquis selon le diplôme désiré



In 2005, 23 000 certifications delivered by all the certifying ministries together were obtained by means of VAE, representing a rate of growth of 28% since 2004. Since 2004, the 800 centres offering information on VAE have dealt with 160 000 people, of whom around 110 000 benefited from a guidance interview. 60 % of those passing through were women; 40% were job-seekers

However, the number of qualifications acquired by VAE is still marginal. Very few qualifications are entirely awarded by this route: it is still used more as a way to accredit a limited number of units of a

full qualification. A fundamental flaw is that vocational qualifications are still conceived and assessed against the existing institutional models. There has been no full-scale attempt to design a new framework that devolves power from the Ministries or professional sector bodies. The absence of an independent awarding body and the central role played by the National Education System in the validation are two of the main impediments to a full development of Accreditation of Prior Learning (VAE).

5.2.1 The Certificats De Qualification Professionnelle (CQP) – Professional Qualification Certificates

The CQP is a certification delivered by the professional sectors representing both employers and trades unions. There are no national regulations, resulting in great diversity in terms of design of standards of competence and of validation of achievement. The qualifications are designed in line with Sectoral needs to respond to clearly identified needs. The only requirement in force is that each CQP must be approved by a national body responsible for employment and training. What distinguishes CQPs from traditional diplomas is the emphasis on productive professional knowledge and practices. More than 30 branches have produced CQPs – there are currently over 500 qualifications. Branches may apply to have their qualifications included in a national repertoire allowing candidates to follow the VAE route. However, few have done so, resulting in their remaining outside the ‘mainstream’.

Workers may pass from one qualification to another through the CQP, as each qualification is divided into modules. Proof of competence may be demonstrated through interviews, activities in the work situation, case-studies, etc. There is an entry requirement of 3 years of work experience. They are accompanied by a counsellor from their professional branch. The candidate presents him/herself before a jury, whose role is to check that his/her achievements correspond to the competencies necessary for obtaining the relevant CQP modules.

6 The levels of work competences in France

The previous sections have presented the approach to competence development and assessment in France in initial and continuing education. They have highlighted current initiatives, the desire on the part of the Government to promote a competency-based approach in line with major European measures, and the demand by employers for a more versatile and flexible workforce to enhance employability and organisational performance. They have highlighted certain structural problems in the organisation of education and training, such as the over-reliance on academic diplomas and the lack of a national qualifications framework.

- The 1971 law for permanent education which aimed to bring education to all has had a limited impact on training:
- Although most companies spend more than the double of the training levy, the usefulness of the levy is not clear. It has been said that it is a way to buy social peace and to fund the union bureaucracy which runs the organisations in charge of collecting the training levy (OPCA)
- Training funds have not gone to those with the most needs (unskilled workers) – training goes to trained people
- The very slow take-up of APL (VAE) is another indicator of the difficulty of moving away from the traditional approach of assessment and recognition. The assessment method, using a jury, is another concern for the quality of the process, as the members of the jury do not have to be qualified assessors, and no external audit is provided to insure the consistency of the assessment decisions.

While the concepts of competence-development and management by competence are becoming well-established in France, there is still some considerable way to go. The *Socle de Compétences* initiative has only recently been put in place and it will be some time before the impact is felt in the world of work.

At the same time, these problems need to be put in the context of France's position as the world's sixth country in terms of economic performance. The country is rich and stable with a strong industrial and service infrastructure and an important position on the world stage. By definition, therefore, there is no lack of competencies in France! The challenge is to ensure that learning and development and qualifications are more attuned to needs of employers – to sustain healthy economic performance, to tackle skill shortages and to ensure a workforce appropriate for 21st century. Soft skills will play a major role in meeting this challenge.

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