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## Validierung und Anerkennung von Kompetenzen

Konzepte, Erfahrungen, Herausforderungen

Thema

### The French and German Validation Systems: Description

Mona Pielorz and Patrick Werquin



# The French and German Validation Systems: Description

**Mona Pielorz and Patrick Werquin**

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## Summary

This paper aims to describe the French and German approaches to validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. It prepares the ground for the analysis proposed in this issue of Magazin erwachsenenbildung.at. The two countries have different systems that coexist. They vary to a large extent (e.g. in historical background, size and scope), and these are considered archetypical cases because there are differences between the countries as well as within each country. Careful attention is required when describing the French validation of experiential learning outcomes, the less known Validation of personal and occupational learning outcomes and the Validation of tertiary education studies systems, and well as the German External Examination, university credit system, validation of competences, and the provision for migrant systems.

# The French and German Validation Systems: Description

**Mona Pielorz and Patrick Werquin**

**This paper describes the approaches used in France and Germany for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The focus is on validation, and all approaches are considered that document, visualise, validate and in certain cases recognise learning outcomes and therefore competences acquired since individuals received their initial education and training (i.e. in adulthood).**

In France, the idea of validation is rather old since currency has been given to competences acquired from experience since 1934; this took place on a small scale for workers who served as engineers without formal qualifications and were awarded the corresponding qualification without further study. In Germany, there is also a strong attachment to experience since the entire dual system for the vocational preparation of young people is based on the acquisition of experience (work-based learning). However, this occurs before the end of initial education and training and therefore takes into account into the assessment of students in the dual learning system. In this respect and despite a shared understanding that experience matters, the German approach to assessing experiential learning outcomes is not connected to a specific system for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes of adults after they have received their initial education and training. In Germany, the interest for competences acquired in adulthood is more recent than in France, with the notable exception of the External Examination (Externenprüfung) (see for instance Schreiber/Gutschow 2012), which is also relatively old.

## **Germany: A Combination of Different Approaches – No Direct Route to Qualifications**

A description of the German system for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes is simple and, at the same time, extremely complex. It is simple because there is little happening at the national level and nothing that leads to the direct awarding of a qualification based on the sole assessment of individual learning outcomes, regardless of how they have been acquired. On the other hand, it is complex because there is a plethora of local experimentation that definitely belongs to the world of recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes.

The German approach to validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes depends on the profile of the applicants and the use they intend to make of the competences which are rendered visible by the validation and recognition process. Different pathways are available to potential applicants. Professions that are usually practised by tertiary education graduates fall under the responsibility of universities. In this

case, potential applicants have to approach the universities, with the notable caveat that not all universities rely on the same process. In practice, there are no standardised procedures even if admission is always based on a credit points system; therefore, success rates may be higher at some universities. For occupations that fall under the jurisdiction of any of the chambers (commerce and industry, or trades and crafts), potential applicants have to approach the chamber in their state (Bundesland), which will provide guidance. It is also possible to attend preparation classes.

Furthermore, there is a specific approach for migrants. Here again, the level of one's command of the German language may provide different opportunities within the group of migrants. Potential applicants are free to choose their way (e.g. a migrant fully fluent in German may register for the External Examination (Externenprüfung), or apply to a university). Thanks to a well-developed guidance system, in theory potential applicants cannot be misled, even if the guidance system is somewhat fragmented with the risk of overlap and inefficiency (e.g. certain individuals may have never heard of the External Examination or university credit points system).

## External Examination (Externenprüfung)<sup>1</sup>

The External Examination (Externenprüfung) is a longstanding system that allows experienced professionals to take the same final examination as learners in the formal learning system and therefore to achieve a recognised vocational qualification without going through formal training in the dual system. Experience has shown that practical know-how has rarely proven to be an issue, whereas some applicants may find it difficult to meet the expected standards in terms of theoretical knowledge. What is interesting here is that prior learning outcomes give the individual the right to take the examinations that lead to a qualification but not to obtain the qualification directly. In fact, experienced professionals are just exempted from taking the courses. In practice, External Examination

candidates sit together with regular trainees the day of the examinations.

Potential applicants have to contact the chamber in their state (Bundesland) of residence. It will guide the potential applicant toward its assessment committee or a trade guild, where a decision is made based on the relevant experience of the applicant.

There are two options for sitting the External Examination. The first option requires the candidate to be able to prove he or she has relevant experience that is 1.5 times longer than the training period in the dual system (e.g. 4.5 years of work for a qualification than normally requires 3 years in the dual system). The proof could be job references, employment contracts or other evidence, for example business registration for the self-employed. Periods of formal learning in a subject area close to the target qualification are also taken into account. If the duration of prior occupational experience cannot be proven, a second option is to provide testimonies or other pieces of evidence (e.g. training sessions) that prove the vocational skills of the applicant (ability to act). Foreign qualifications and proven time spent at work are also accepted.

The chambers and trade guilds offer two examinations per year. The chamber is the formal authority for the applicant's place of residence or work. For the prior learning outcomes assessment procedure, the applicant has to submit several documents relevant to the target qualification: e.g. CV, qualified job references, activity reports, job descriptions, proof of training periods in other occupations, proof of participation in relevant seminars, qualifications or testimonials of education institutions. Potential applicants may benefit from fee-based guidance and courses provided by consultants (e.g. preparation of the document, relevance of technical courses).

In the External Examination approach, prior learning outcomes are accepted only if they can be authenticated. In other words, informal learning outcomes are not recognised.

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<sup>1</sup> Admission to the final apprenticeship examination, in specific cases by the Vocational Training Act (BBiG); Paragraph 45, Section 2 or the Craft Code (Handwerksordnung, HwO); and Paragraph 37, Section 2.

## ValiKom<sup>2</sup>

ValiKom is the German response to the European Commission push towards the validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2012 (see EU-Recommendation 2012). At the end of 2015, the ValiKom project began and its procedures were developed and tested. They include guidance before, during and after the validation procedure. The applicant is assessed individually by staff of the chamber after having provided his or her CV and completed a self-assessment regarding job-related competences relevant to the chosen occupation. Therefore, both non-formally and informally acquired competences are important for the assessment in the ValiKom project.

The result of the procedure is a certificate of competences that is issued by the Chamber of Trades and Crafts, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry or the Chamber of Agriculture. This certificate shows which occupational tasks the applicant is able to perform successfully. Since the chambers are also responsible for assessing learners in the dual system, it is expected that this certificate will be recognised by employers and therefore it is well accepted even though an evaluation has not been published yet.

The target group of the validation procedure is very broad in the context of the ValiKom project. The conditions for applying are that the candidate has relevant vocational competences and he or she is at least 25 years old. Employment status as well as the place where the competences were acquired (in Germany or abroad as long as the occupation is not regulated by any Vocational Qualification Assessment Law (Berufsqualifikationsfeststellungsgesetz, BQFG) are irrelevant. The applicant should not have any vocational qualification. If he or she has one, however, it must be in another subject area.

Since applicants receive comprehensive guidance from consultants—before, during and after the

validation procedure—there is some evidence from fieldwork that applicants become motivated to continue their professional development.

During the preparation/guidance phase, the applicant selects the competences for which assessment is desired. The certificate of competences awarded to successful applicants displays all the competences for which the applicant met the standards of the dual system. The certificate is an “official” document that verifies informally and non-formally acquired competences that the participant may use on the labour market to enhance his or her job prospects.

ValiKom is an interesting approach to validating non-formal and informal learning outcomes because it is able to address the needs of a wide spectrum of non-formal and informal learners since assessment is an individual process. However, there is room for improvement, as ValiKom does not yet allow for the direct awarding of a qualification solely on the basis of an assessment.

## Recognition by Universities<sup>3</sup>

In the university system, the regulations for recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes are prescribed by state laws<sup>4</sup> and have three sources. The legal foundations are provided by the common structural guidelines for the accreditation of bachelor's and master's degree programmes, which were developed by the Conference of Ministers of Education (Kultusministerkonferenz). The two other building blocks are the Accreditation Council (Akkreditierungsrat), which sets the rules for the accreditation of bachelor's and master's degree programmes and publishes circulars, and the universities that have set the examination regulations.

Among accredited universities, there is mutual recognition of comparable modules<sup>5</sup> so that students

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2 See for more informations: <https://www.validierungsverfahren.de>

3 See for instance KMK (2014) and Freitag et al. (2015).

4 Resolution of the Conference of the Ministers of Education (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK) of 10 October 2003, revised on 4 February 2010.

5 See Annex to decision of the Conference of Education Ministers (KMK), 4 February 2010, Section 1.2.

have the opportunity to change their university or subject area. This recognition is based on the quality of either the accredited study courses or the university. The prerequisite is that there are no substantial differences in the learning outcomes of the two modules.

In addition, learners without a university background may also have their learning outcomes recognised in order to gain access to university and be exempted from part of the curriculum. The content and level of their knowledge and skills are then categorised. If they are comparable with parts of the aimed university course, the student will be partly exempted from the corresponding courses. There are three options:

- Agreement among institutions, typically a vocational institution and a higher education institution, which is based on an initial single review by the latter to decide which learning outcomes or parts of the curriculum of the former it will recognise (blanket recognition);
- Individual recognition, which is a case by case approach developed by certain universities<sup>6</sup> during which applicants prepare a portfolio for each component of the curriculum that has to be substantiated by relevant documents; and
- A combination of the two options when the individual approach is used for the components of the curriculum not covered by blanket recognition.

In these three options, applicants may not obtain more than 50% of the credits for the target qualification<sup>7</sup>. To help future students find a university that recognises their competences, the Databank for the Crediting Vocational Competences (“DAbeKom”) was developed by the University of Applied Sciences Bielefeld. The University of Aalen developed the Crediting Databank (“andaba”) to support university staff in the decision-making process during individual recognition procedures.

## **Federal Recognition Act<sup>8</sup> – Target Group: Migrants<sup>9</sup>**

Thanks to the 2012 Federal Recognition Act (Anerkennungsgesetz des Bundes), Germany has the basis for a standardised procedure for assessing foreign qualifications. This act is an omnibus act that includes several new laws or amendments to existing laws and relates to trade jobs regulated by federal laws. Since it does not deal with trade jobs governed by state laws, foreign university qualifications for unregulated occupations (e.g. mathematicians, journalists, economists), foreign university admissions and foreign secondary education qualifications are not recognised. These exceptions are regulated by state laws and therefore are not part of the Federal Recognition Act.

Even though the act includes the word recognition (Anerkennung), there is hardly any recognition or validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The focus is on establishing an equivalence between qualifications achieved in the formal system in Germany and qualifications received abroad. Therefore, applicants have to present certificates and documents regarding content and duration which prove they have worked in the specific field corresponding to the qualification for which they seek equivalence.

In the event the applicants cannot provide certificates or documents, they still have the opportunity to prove their competences through an assessment (Qualifikationsanalyse). Part of this assessment may be done with work samples, expert discussion or an observation with a test at the workplace. The results of this assessment are documented and used for the equivalence procedure. Therefore, the assessment can be described as a form of validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, even though it does not directly lead to a qualification.

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6 It is a complex endeavour because the description of the learning outcomes in the vocational system does not match the structure of the learning outcomes in the university system.

7 See Annex to decision of the Conference of Education Ministers (KMK), 28 June 2002, Section 1.2, 2.

8 Recognition Act is the abbreviated title for: “Law to improve the assessment and recognition of professional and vocational education and training qualifications acquired abroad”

9 See the Act for the Assessment of Equivalence of Vocational Qualifications (Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Feststellung und Anerkennung im Ausland erworbener Berufsqualifikationen, 2011).



## Portfolios and Other Validation Procedures

Over the last two decades, more than 50 competence portfolios have been developed and financed by the European Commission, federal or regional (Länder) ministries and foundations. These portfolios were developed for all types of target groups: job returners, migrants, volunteers, further training providers, pupils and workers in specific industrial sectors, to name just a few. Some are holistic approaches based on a biographical and systematic approach, such as the ProfilPASS. Others are based on a psychological and diagnostic approach, for example Kode Kompetenzatlas. Both of these approaches have been used by a large group of individuals. However, most of the portfolios did not last long after the end of the funding period, probably because they did not develop business models, the target groups were too small, and/or the information on these tools was not well disseminated or was outdated. ProfilPASS and Kode Kompetenzatlas are two of the rare examples that are still available and up-to-date; ProfilPASS also benefits from a network of contacts that is still operational.

The promoters of most of these tools (called competence passes, portfolios or passports) claim they are suitable for validation or recognition, but most of the time this is an incorrect description of their purpose. None of these tools are or were connected to a validation process that leads to a qualification, a partial qualification or credits for resuming a course of study in the formal learning system. In Germany, these different tools are mainly used to collect documents and, in the best-case scenario, to figure out what kind of competences, abilities and strengths the users have in order to support their further development (identification and documentation of competences). Nevertheless, some of the holistic tools could be used in validation procedures to visualise the competences of applicants in order to facilitate the process of matching individual competences and standards (for example occupation profiles).

In addition, enterprises, especially those with a human resource department, are likely to have developed their own instruments to visualise and

promote the competences of their staff. Finally, Germany has a well-known system of assessment centres and a provision for training opportunities for managers to invest in the process of visualising the competences of the participants.

## France: A System – Another Route to Qualifications

### Background

In France, the Social Modernisation Law established the Validation of Experiential Learning Outcomes (Validation des acquis de l'expérience, VAE) as a right for every citizen in 2002. It is the most recent achievement in a 200 year process started during the French revolution that has focused on the vocational preparation of adults for the labour market (Condorcet, 1792). This focus also drove the training policy during the Industrial Revolution and gave rise to the apprenticeship system in 1919, which was meant to provide France with a qualified labour force. More recently, it also explains the early establishment of a national qualifications framework (1969), though it is not based on learning outcomes yet.

What seems to be a fundamental building block of the French long-term approach is the largely widespread belief that a qualification can be achieved in different ways. The learning pathway and the assessment/validation method may be different, but the qualification must be the same, provided the applicants are assessed against the same qualification standards. This principle is apparent in the Law on Continuous Training (Loi sur la formation continue, 1971). It stipulates very clearly that, for adults, the exact same qualification can be achieved through different pathways (initial formal learning, apprenticeship, or continuous adult learning). The precise concept of the VAE had not been spelled out yet, but this law paved the way for what would develop from 1971 on.

The multiple types of paths to qualification is the essence of the 2002 VAE system. This was the birth of a seminal concept in France that easily translates into prose: a qualification is the result of a learning process, organised or not, not necessarily a learning



programme. The right to have all learning outcomes validated, no matter how they were acquired, was born. The VAE system was established in 2002, after validation had received continuous attention for a long time and after many laws on adult vocational training. In particular, the law on Validation of Occupational Learning Outcomes (Validation des acquis professionnels, VAP), in 1992, was rather unsuccessful. VAE is now 15 years old. Despite a slow start in terms of take up, participation kept increasing until 2011 and then started to decline. Between 2002 and 2015, 330,000 individuals achieved a qualification through VAE (e.g. of the 60,000 eligible applicants in 2015, 41,400 went all the way through the assessment process and 24,600 were awarded a full qualification).

## The French System for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes

A major shift took place in 2002 because for the first time in French legislation, whole qualifications may be only awarded on the basis of a successful assessment against existing standards. The general institutional framework for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, which is in charge of lifelong learning in general and adult learning in particular; this is consistent with the fundamental vocational purpose of the French adult learning system. Nevertheless, the legislation was prepared during discussions with social partners and the different ministries that deliver qualifications (around ten).

If the French system mainly relies on the VAE approach (see for instance Chassard et al. 2008), it is complemented by two other sub-systems. In 2019, therefore, France has three co-existing systems (see Werquin 2012, 2015 for details on the three approaches). In short, the VAPP85 system is clearly about access, whereas the VAE and VES systems are clearly about qualification, and potentially direct qualification. The French VAE system in particular considers any kind of learning outcome, whether

private or occupational, that potentially leads to the awarding of a full qualification without any additional formal learning as long as the applicant meets predefined standards, which are not necessarily set by the Ministry of Education. The predecessor to VAE, the VAP, was not a real success to say the least, and the VAE has proven to be much more effective in increasing the number of participants. The take up was low (Chassard et al., 2008), probably because not all learning outcomes were considered, only those acquired in a work-related context, and because the direct awarding of a full qualification was not possible (it was compulsory to undertake supplementary formal learning activities).

- VAE: The Validation of Experiential Learning Outcomes (Law of 2002) directly leads to a qualification on the basis of solely the assessment of experiential learning outcomes. It is the main system by far.

To claim eligibility, applicants must have at least three years (one year since 2017) of experience relevant to the qualification they aim to achieve. In practice applicants have to complete two Booklets (frz. Livrets) that are essentially portfolios of competences; a first one for access to the assessment process (eligibility) and then, for individuals allowed to apply, a second one (Booklet 2) for the actual assessment of experiential learning outcomes toward a full qualification. An interview with a panel of assessors (frz. Jury)<sup>10</sup> is organised in almost all cases but is not compulsory. In the event the applicant fails to achieve the full qualification, the VAE committee<sup>11</sup> that assessed Booklet 2 – and most of the time also composed the panel – can award a partial qualification or fail the applicant all together. In both cases, the law requires that the committee must provide a rationale for its decision and recommend further learning activities (top-up learning) where appropriate. In the case of partial qualification, units that have been validated remain valid for five years (for life since 2017). Finally, there is no mark on the transcript indicating how the qualification

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10 The Jury that comprises all or part of assessors of the whole process is responsible for the final interview. (Red.)

11 The committee is the group of assessors that assess the applicants all along the VAE process. (Red.)

was achieved, and it confers the exact same rights and duties as qualifications awarded in the formal initial education and training system.

- VAPP85: The Validation of Occupational and Personal Learning Outcomes (Validation des acquis professionnels et personnels, VAPP85; Law of 1984-85) facilitates access to tertiary education through the exemption of an academic prerequisite on the basis of experience (any kind of learning outcomes).
- VES: The Validation of Tertiary Studies (Validation d'études supérieures, VES; Law of 2002) allows the achievement of all, or part, of a tertiary qualification through the validation of other studies wherever they were pursued. All studies, at public or private institutions, in France or abroad, are accepted for assessment. The VES process leads to the awarding of a qualification or of credits toward a qualification.

Worthy of note in the French context is the Bilan de compétences. There is no official translation of this term and it is usually not translated in the literature. A literal translation would be „taking stock of someone's competences“. A personal appraisal, it occupies a major place in the French system of human resource management and is intrinsically related to the French system of information, advice and guidance of workers. Contrary to what has been falsely stated in certain literature (e.g. Cedefop 2017, Chapter 4), the Bilan de compétences is not a validation system simply because it does not involve assessment. It does not lead either to the awarding of a (full or partial) qualification, nor some credits. It is only an individual reflection on one's competence and previous occupational path. It may constitute the first step in a validation process, but

it is not concerned with validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes.

Since 2002, the most important improvements took place in 2009 and in 2017. The first time, the revision aimed at increasing participation in VAE by targeting private sector employees in particular and by developing an effective information and guidance system. In 2017, the Law on Work (Loi Travail):

- Reduced the eligibility condition from three years to one,
- Stated that partial qualifications are now valid for life (instead of five years),
- Extended the scope of the 2002 law so that all learning outcomes are explicitly targeted (e.g. from work-related activities whether as an employee or not, from volunteer activities, from high performance sport, from trade union-related activities and from elective mandates),
- Stated that guidance will be facilitated (free when it regards the principles, implementation and financing of the VAE; often in connection to a Bilan de compétences), and
- Stated that the pay for VAE leave for workers is the same whether they have an unlimited or fixed-term contract (there used to be a difference).

In 2019, different systems of unequal size and scope coexist in France. The VAE system that covers all situations except regulated occupations (e.g. in the health care industry), which replaced the less successful VAP system of 1992. The VAPP85 and VES are very specific to the tertiary education system.

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# Das französische und deutsche Validierungssystem – eine Beschreibung

## Kurzzusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag beschreibt den französischen und deutschen Ansatz zur Validierung und Anerkennung von non-formalen und informellen Lernergebnissen. Er bereitet den Boden für die Analyse, wie sie in der vorliegenden Ausgabe des Magazin erwachsenenbildung.at vorgeschlagen wird. In beiden Ländern finden sich unterschiedliche, nebeneinander bestehende Systeme. Sie unterscheiden sich in hohem Maße (z.B. in Hinblick auf den geschichtlichen Hintergrund, auf Größe und Umfang) und gelten als archetypische Fälle, da es zwischen den beiden Ländern, aber auch in den Ländern selbst Unterschiede gibt. Viel Fingerspitzengefühl ist gefordert, wenn es um die Beschreibung der französischen Validierung von empirischen Lernergebnissen, der weniger bekannten Validierung von persönlichen und beruflichen Lernergebnissen sowie der Validierung von Hochschulbildungssystemen ebenso wie der Externenprüfung in Deutschland, des Systems zur Anrechnung von Studienleistungen, der Kompetenzvalidierung und der Bereitstellung von Validierungsmodellen für MigrantInnen geht.

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