

VAE, Skills and University Judging Panel

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This text is based on my position as a member of the VAE (accreditation of prior learning) judging panel, as co-designer of the skills assessment training module for research professors on judging panels as part of the training plan organised by the Conferences of Heads of Further Education Departments and my thoughts on the assessment of vocational training at university.

The text shall:

- address the notion of professional skills and qualifications in the university world
- address the suitability of research professors to accredit the professional (and social) skills their courses are supposed to teach
- address VAE training features to provide university judging panels and address assessment in general
- consider the type and form of recommendations in the event of partial accreditation

It is more or less accepted and understood in the university world that the VAE is a “breaking force”. It is a source of unbalance, innovation, resistance and interest or enthusiasm. It is a new system to incorporate into a rather conservative world which has been around for centuries. It embodies a new concept and new methods to include in a complex system, sometimes without great flexibility in the face of external forces whose effects can be hard to imagine *a priori*.

I What about skills and qualifications in the university environment?

1.1. Appearance of skills

The notion of “skills” is among the terms and concepts that recently appeared at university in the late 1990s, with the exception of the SCFC (Further Education Departments) and groups such as the IUT (University Institutes of Technology) and IAE (University Schools of Management) that have had long-standing relationships with business sectors. The notion appeared in several stages from several converging sources. It is a grassroots movement fuelling the logic of skills. It began life outside universities and in companies but gradually began to move into higher education.

It started with figures in VAP (accreditation of prior employment) and VAE following legislation in 1992 and 2002 with the creation of a VAP “teaching satchel” in 1993 containing a glossary of project terms, skills, employment, position etc. Next, it appeared during the vocational training procedure for certain titles, particularly the DESS (MA) and DU (university degree). Last but not least, it came in the Bologna Process (diploma supplement) and LMD (professional bachelor or masters’ degree) to register the DE (state diploma) and DU at the RNCP (French Inventory of Professional Certifications) following 2002 legislation which made skills references or a “record” compulsory.

Resistance to skills logic can be explained by the fact that universities have history and knowledge which made some suspicious of this new notion throughout this entire time. This misunderstanding had to be addressed before universities could understand and accept the concept. The notion had to be clarified in its multiple definitions and the evolution of skills had to be defined as a feature of qualification and not a competitor to it. Skills-based qualification implies nationwide, long-term recognition. The most important thing was to highlight the arbitrary refusal to recognise skills by a single company and refute its instability and obsolescence at the mercy of discretionary organisations.

It is worth remembering that the term and concept of “skills” was brought into fashion by the CNPF (French Employer Federation now called the MEDEF) in the late 90s at the Deauville conference. For a long time the term was rightly seen as a weapon against qualification, its national recognition and duration, as detailed in the work of Elisabeth Dugué and Lucie Tanguy.

The CNPF gave the following definition of skills in 1998: *“Professional skills are a combination of knowledge, expertise, experience and behaviour conducted in a given context. These skills are evident when used in a professional situation in which they are suitable. It’s up to the company to which they belong to identify, assess, accredit and develop skills.”* [1]. Although universities agreed to the first part of the definition, they could not accept that skills recognition or production could only belong to the business world. If we hold to this definition, universities are instantly relegated and removed from the scope hence the need to evolve the definition and/or consider that other sites and indicators, outside the observed professional situations, may produce, identify and accredit the aforementioned skills. This means choosing and enforcing or rather sharing (with the business world) definitions which are more compatible with the university world and the “skills” of panels in charge of issuing degrees. Yves Lichtenberger’s definition is similar to the following: *“skills, express the unique way in which an individual draws upon his resources and takes responsibility for the professional (or social) role he is given and its challenges.”* [2].

The more consensual first definition gives the learner the power to draw on his own resources giving him the ability to act and be competent without saying where his resources come from, so potentially from university, which gives him back his rightful place in the skills development process. Then again there’s Montmollin’s definition who believes skills are *“a balanced group of expertise and knowledge, typical behaviour, standard procedures and a type of reasoning that can be implemented with no new learning”* [3]. This definition again differs from that of the CNPF and argues that acquired skills, without stating the place and

circumstances, produce the ability to act. Both definitions entail the hypothesis or recognition that intellectual work is preparation for action and potentially in exchange, like a two-way street, accept that action, as a resource mobiliser, produces knowledge and implies the idea of university figures accrediting prior learning.

1.2 Degrees and skills

The skills approach raises another issue: designing and building degrees. To illustrate, degrees were designed as programmes i.e. with content meaning almost exclusively in terms of knowledge. However, degrees were designed in relation to the teaching body's research areas based on the knowledge available in the aforementioned body and often without really addressing "to do" abilities at the end of the learning process. Essentially, with some exceptions, they had no stable relationship with the business world. These degrees were therefore often designed without questioning the relationship or similarity with target qualifications except in terms of output levels 3, 2, 1 etc. They didn't prioritise the implementation of knowledge nor did they encourage instant and heavy involvement in activities to conduct in the business world although I must underline that some did focus on this area.

Therefore, skills implicitly define a new project for the university. It's no longer about sharing and providing or producing *abrupto* knowledge that's rather theoretical, often abstract and with no obvious link to the business sector. It's no longer about almost exclusively building on intelligence (cognitive area) and encouraging skills development with no immediate need to apply them but rather transferring "practical" and "action" skills. This breaks away from the hypothesis that intellectually well-trained students are by definition versatile and skilled, which I believe is often true. A new project outside the norm that should be highlighted, let's remember that medicine or legal studies are also "practical" and designed for action. This means that universities have to address real work, work experience and therefore skills and qualifications production. This leads university figures to ask: what expertise is required? What could the knowledge I'm teaching be used for? What is the practical purpose of my lessons? For universities in general, there's been a real change of paradigm surrounding skills.

1.3 Risk of skills

The very real danger of the skills logic is that it may pull university standards and knowledge towards a more trivial reality based on the usefulness of knowledge with a focus on tools, in the best methodological case, to the detriment of objective criticism and theoretical ability. Moving from learned knowledge to active knowledge comes with the risk that universities may see the appearance of a sense of "disqualification" or incompetence as they have not been trained for this type of transfer technically, culturally or ideologically. We could slip from knowledge with a universal (university) dimension or goal to in-situ and contextualised

knowledge. This change could result in the devaluing of certifications, depreciation of knowledge and disqualification of universities.

It's a legitimate fear in terms of vocational training at forced march if we are to believe certain observers since other examples do exist, although they are not all equal. Let's look at what Moncef Marzouki, former President of the Tunisian Human Rights League, said: *"In the 1960s and 70s, there was an incredibly high level of debate in Arab universities (...). The Arab university acted as both a "grammar school" for ideas and a place to learn to act (...). Unfortunately, from the 1980s, the main function of the university as a space to protest began to decline (...). In spite of themselves, they were turned into "business schools" thus losing their role as a school of life and even more so as sites of political training"* [4]. It would be worth addressing some people's legitimate fears. Such caution should at least make us think about the limits or risks of the non-distanced use of vocational training and skills as described by Rachel Béliste and Jean-Pierre Boutinet: *"in several countries, courses themselves and frames of reference for degrees increasingly take into account the labour market's expectations, posing major challenges to the integration and learning of scientific knowledge in increasingly vocational courses"* [5].

II What about the suitability of research professors?

Skills clearly break away from the standard university ideal and beg a new question: what are skills? Which qualifications and jobs does this degree prepare people for? Which content should be included? Lots of new questions arise for many which were clearly "imposed"[6] on universities in the form of injunctions: no debate, no preparation, no training etc.

2.1 Be or become suitable

Being suitable for research doesn't mean being suitable for work and the business world as, aside from the IUT and SCFC, relationships between universities and the business world were very poor or non-existent. It's worth questioning how suitable universities are to produce and accredit skills based on teacher training, their relationship with knowledge, their professional experience (outside teaching and research) and their knowledge of the business world and socio-economic environment. This knowledge is often partial and often comes from images, books or even anecdotes. This type of a priori and objective inventory doesn't make the research professor automatically suitable to accredit professional skills rather than skills development. The professional role of research professors is to produce knowledge based on research through their teaching which often involves research that's more fundamental than applied, which is left to other figures. In this context, the "skills, qualifications, vocational training" injunction causes a major split in universities, a counter-epistemological split. The nature of knowledge to acquire is often considered, rightly or wrongly, as less noble and the University (with a capital letter) becomes a technical and professional place of learning in this vein. The change in the aim of university work should be seriously addressed to avoid the risk of bending to the pragmatism and utilitarianism of Business Schools.

Another aspect of the debate which relates to an ethical position is: do research skills provide sufficient skills to train people other than researchers? This implies that the vocational training degree movement and skills production affect the professional profile of research professors, their training and even more ontological questions: what am I skilled in? How do I develop my skills? It also requires the acquisition of a new work culture and the acceptance of a change in higher education role, outside PhD studies. Less perceptible but not without foundation, we must mention fear of the business sector's control over degree content and research projects, over the research teams' autonomy and independence. This tension further increases the risk of breaking with the university tradition of autonomy in degree content and auto-defined research areas. This legitimate fear was highlighted recently by recent texts (LRU) which feed into ideological resistance and justify the distance some desire between Education and Work.

2.1 For a *modus vivendi*

The question of skills also raises a philosophical and epistemological question that we can formulate as follows: are all skills and knowledge meant for action? If so, what type of action: action in the workplace or action in the social/community arena? The injunction to produce skills would only affect the business world. Is that really the goal of secular higher education? In other words, can or should all university knowledge produce skills (and if so, which?), should they aim exclusively at producing professional skills? In this case, what about intellectual skills? What about social and community skills? What about humanism and universalism?

It is therefore urgent and vital to readdress the notions of skills and qualifications without rejecting them *a priori* but adding and including another dimension aside from action in the working environment: a social and community dimension. This issue involves analysing these concepts, deconstructing them and reconstructing them to rewrite programmes in a training/certification frame of reference without denying or treating with disdain the emancipating ability of knowledge whether it be general, technical or scientific. Essentially, the concept of skills has to be reviewed and seen from a university point of view, meaning a critical point of view, to define a *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* which provide the ability to gain knowledge and produce skills that can be observed and assessed.

III VAE and university judging panels

Measuring academic knowledge and assessing skills gained from experience are two different spheres which require VAE judging panels to use different methods, define different criteria and design different indicators. That's no mean feat in an environment where assessment is

far from being a “science” and where assessment methods usually come from a process of reproduction rather than theoretical thought.

3.1 A changing position

The fact remains that assessing knowledge and the experience of producing knowledge is, even for assessment theorists, a very real fundamental and theoretical question which, aside from methods, requires members of the judging panel to change their identity and position. We do not judge the standard and level of experience by *evidence* as we measure knowledge by *testing*. Aside from the aforementioned ethical stance, this again raises the question of the university’s suitability to accredit professional experience. Before discussing the panel’s skills in assessing experience, universities should agree that transferred knowledge can produce skills recognised outside the university realm where they are produced and that knowledge from experience is of equal value, although of a different nature, to academic knowledge. It is also worth highlighting that in the modern world, professional recognition and qualification are as important as academic background.

In terms of the VAE, in the case of a completed accreditation, research professors have to accept that they have no hold, no control *a priori* on the candidate’s production of skills and knowledge but must consent, in their dominion, to academically and *a fortiori* professionally accredit them. This is a major change to the position of the professor/judge who was once involved in the knowledge acquisition/production process, sanctioned it and may have produced hypotheses about how this knowledge was used in society.

There’s a dialectical reversal with the VAE: the professor is no longer responsible for knowledge acquisition and must share the idea, by hypothesis, that experience produces real knowledge with the “duty” to accredit it academically as a member of the panel. The question is therefore not of assessment technique for the assessor which can always be resolved but is in fact a question of ethics and a radical change in position which deeply affects the university tradition.

3.2 Training university panels

To reach judgements of excellence and decisions free of suspicion, university panels, including professionals, must have access to ad hoc training as standard. Aside from assessment knowledge, it should [7] include information about legal texts related to the VAE and the spirit on which it is based and justified. Training should also address concepts at the heart of the prior learning accreditation process i.e. notions of skills and qualifications, standard posts, frames of reference etc. and provide the keys to analysing the work with, if possible for observation purposes, access to companies where the certification is in place.

Moreover, to continue this Prévert-style list, training should inspire joint consideration of the logic of “evidence” and not “testing”, of the aforementioned reverse assessment position and of the VAE assessment which no longer involves just judging the candidate’s skills in terms

of experience but also, and perhaps especially, their potential to have the desired certification and competently fulfil the desired job role. Therefore, it's not about judging things word for word by trapping the candidate in an up-to-date endless frame of reference but rather about assessing skills and not knowledge (established by hypothesis) with this in mind: what does or did the candidate do and not what does he know.

More pragmatically, training should "train" members of the panel to read and understand VAE files based on joint criteria and indicators and the research and formulation of recommendations in case of a partial accreditation, not necessarily considered as a return to university. It could also address forms of questioning during the interview (compulsory in higher) which is neither a viva nor a test but a time to measure the value of the candidate, a complementary space to test (or check) evidence and a time to confirm the decision (hypothetically formulated by each member before the panel).

We recognise that the role of a member of the VAE university panel demands some form of vocational training for assessment figures. It would be worthwhile including knowledge of the legal side of further education as the only way to adapt recommendations to the candidates' training options. We could also add observation techniques for careers and expected skills to adapt degrees (evolution and obsolescence) and develop skills to build and maintain relationships with professional partners. Let's not forget the techniques required in support and mentoring (based on recommendations).

We must recognise that as it is, this sort of training and mobilisation of figures falls under educational utopia. There's no doubt that this is how to move forward.

3.3 Assessment indicators

We couldn't end this text about "VAE, Skills and University Judging Panel" without suggesting some assessment criteria and indicators. I believe these could be built and based on the typology put forward by Agnès Veilhan from Paris-3-Sorbonne Nouvelle, the three Ps: Pathway, Project(s), Potential[8] but must be independently defined by each university bearing in mind the compulsory equality in treatment, the only guarantee of the value of university certifications issued by the VAE or not. This battery of assessment tools should help analyse the candidate's pathway, outline significant features (activities, duration, duties, implemented knowledge and methodology etc.) and their skillset. It should also make it easier to understand project/s: certification project and project/s for other purposes and enable the correlation between pathway and project/s in terms of compatibility and logic. These measurement tools should "allow" the understanding of the candidate's potential through their pathway (evolution) in relation to the project: feasibility and suitability of the issue of the desired certification or provide recommendations in relation to the realistic chances of success in space and time. A "comprehensive", in the sense used in sociology, procedure should be adopted.

When all is said and done, university skills assessment cannot prevent the acquisition of key skills at the base of university courses such as the sense of criticism and detachment and,

based on the level of certification, the methodology and ability to research and develop skills without producing a “standard” university-style dissertation. This involves identifying social and professional situations and/or experiences which could produce the desired skills. Reasoned and supported assessment is not and never will be an exact science and it is inappropriate to be more demanding with VAE candidates than with those from pre-service and in-service training.

Conclusion

The issue of the VAE and assessing prior learning requires or has required a major change in universities and some of their values. It has led to new positions and methods for teaching staff and members of the panel who must learn new assessment skills and focus on reviewing the pathway and potential rather than individual performance. It encourages basic consideration to achieve a “renewed” conception of certifications and build a new and equal relationship with the business world. Universities must overcome these obstacles to keep their rank and prestige, without abandoning their values in the modern world, with the goal to produce high value and high capacity knowledge for students and apprentices. This is the challenge and VAE can help us. I share this belief with Isabelle Cherqui-Houot who says that universities “*mostly believe that the work they have done in terms of systems for the VAE, support and judging panel have the ability to boost their traditional educational methods for students*”[9].

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[1] Medef (1998), International Training Conference, Deauville, October.

[2] Lichtenberger Y. (1999), *Travail et changement* review, n° 245, ANACT. The text in speech marks is my words.

[3] Montmollin (de) Y. (1984), *L'intelligence de la tâche, Eléments d'ergonomie cognitive*, Berne, Peter Lang.

[4] Marzouki M., 2009, interview with Geisser V., *Dictateurs en survis*, Paris, published by L'Atelier.

[5] Bélisle R., Boutinet J.-P. (2009), dir., *Demandes de reconnaissance et validation d'acquis de l'expérience*, Quebec, Laval University Press, p. 2

[6] I'm using "in" here because these questions feel like they haven't been asked but rather imposed and implicitly imposed.

[7] I'm using "should" too much and my text is becoming very "advisory" but how could it be otherwise?

[8] See article by A. Veilhan in bibliography.

[9] Cherqui-Houot I., *Actes de validation à l'université : un modèle entre le savoir, la personne et le collectif* in Bélisle Rachel., Boutinet J.-P. (2009), dir., *Demandes de reconnaissance et validation d'acquis de l'expérience*, Quebec, Laval University Press, p. 87.