



Mutual Learning Programme

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Peer Country Comments Paper - France

A recently reformed career guidance system that promotes a more “strategic” approach to competence assessment

Peer Review on “Competence Assessment System: MyCompetence”

Sofia (Bulgaria), 28-29 November 2019



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1 Introduction

This paper has been prepared for the Peer Review on "Competence Assessment System: MyCompetence" within the framework of the Mutual Learning Programme. It provides a comparative assessment of the policy example of the host country and the situation in France. For information on the host country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Discussion Paper¹.

2 Situation in the peer country

2.1 In 2019, France's unemployment rate reached a ten-year low

The job market has turned a corner in France in 2019 with an employment rate that dropped below 9% to reach 8.5% in the second trimester². This is the most significant decrease since the financial crisis in 2008, reflecting recent reforms (revision of the Labour Code though in 2017³) led by the government to make the labour market more flexible. However, experts⁴ have expressed their scepticism about France's ability to further reduce unemployment, as the current rate may be described as the structural employment rate.

2.2 Skills mismatch appears as a major challenge to further reduce unemployment

As in Bulgaria, France experiences vertical and horizontal skills mismatches. A recent study published by France Stratégie (2018)⁵ has highlighted and quantified this phenomenon. Overall, only one person in employment out of three holds a certification or a diploma directly linked to their job profile. Skills mismatch are a major challenge in several economy sectors where individuals tend to be overqualified (vertical mismatch) or companies are struggling to find individuals with the right skill sets to fill in positions (horizontal mismatch). Technological change has made the issue of skills mismatch even more prominent, even though France tends to perform slightly better on these issues than the EU average.

Year	Vertical mismatch (⁶)		Horizontal mismatch	
	2008	2018	2014	2018
FR	20.7%	21.7%	27.3%	24.3%
EU-28	20.8%	22.7%	29.1%	29.1%

¹ Loukanova, P. (2019) Workforce Competence Assessment -in retrospect and in perspective, Host Country Discussion Paper – Bulgaria. Peer Review on "Competence Assessment System; MyCompetence", Sofia (Bulgaria), 28-29 November 2019. European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

² Insee, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4201123>

³ Key measures: capping the employee's compensation in case of litigation, increased capacity for smaller companies (below 50 employees) to negotiate social agreements with a staff representative regardless of his/her union membership

⁴ Patrick Artus, Research director at Natixis, has been campaigning for several years for a deep reform of the education and vocational training systems

⁵ France Stratégie, 2018, <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/publications/renforcer-capacite-entreprises-recruter> and France Stratégie 2019, <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/english-articles/which-companies-implement-skills-management>

⁶ % of people aged 20-64 with tertiary education and working in ISCO 4-9, whole economy (Eurostat experimental data)

Regarding vertical mismatch, the highest levels are seen in sectors of construction, wholesale and transport with respectively 32%, 40.5% and 48.5%⁷ of the labour force who is overqualified for the jobs.

Concerning horizontal mismatch, the last survey conducted in 2019 by the INSEE (the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) with 10 000 companies, representative of the industry, services and construction sectors reveal that up to 67% of the employers (construction) are facing challenges to hire. The lack of "right-skilled" applicants is mentioned as the stronger obstacle to hiring for most of the respondents.

Skills mismatches occur for various reasons. At macro level, this is explained by technological changes, changes of standards and procedures, inadequate initial education and training and/or lack of continuous training. On the other hand, at micro level, the lack of transparency and/or accessibility of labour-market-related information can contribute to reinforce mismatching between employers, workers and job seekers. The analysis should not only focus on the supply side.

The Workforce Competence Assessment System developed in Bulgaria seems particularly relevant to respond to the need of an increased and more direct dialogue between 'supply and needs', whereas France does not offer yet such an integrated tool. Recent reforms, including the creation in 2014 of a right to individual career counselling services (Conseil en évolution professionnelle) have put the emphasis on the need for more personalized intermediation and counselling to guide employees and jobseekers throughout skills assessment processes. However, only few companies are engaged in a structured skills-need identification process.

3 National policies and measures

3.1 Multiple tools and processes have been developed for companies and individuals since the 1990s

Several systems exist to assess skills needs at a company level and competences at an individual level. And even though some frameworks and tools are known and used at both levels, there is no systematic nor "standardized" approach to competence assessment in France.

At company or sector level, the development of a forecast management agreement for jobs and skills (Gestion Prévisionnelle des Emplois et Compétences) represents the most common way (since 2006) to evaluate existing skills and anticipate for future needs.

At a company level, implementation belongs to HR services. Practical measures can vary from a company to another as there is no unique approach. However, some general guidelines have been produced at the national level (by the Ministry in charge) to ensure a minimum of consistency. HR services should at a minimum analyse available and existing resources, anticipate future needs, propose solutions to close/reduce gaps through career counselling and orientation services, including professional assessment, competence assessment and vocational training. Developing such an agreement is an obligation for companies over 300 employees, a possibility for smaller ones.

Sectoral approaches have also been developed for those industries that are undergoing major digital transformations (e.g. banking, media, retail industries) or are developing rapidly⁸.

At individual level (employee or jobseeker), a legal framework for competence assessment (called '*bilan de compétences*') was developed more than twenty-five years ago (law of 31 December 1991 on Vocational training and employment). The legislation

⁷ Eurostat experimental data, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/experimental-statistics/skills>

⁸ Such prospective planning has been conducted in 2017 for the digital economy, <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/debats/vision-prospective-partagee-emplois-competences-filiere-numerique-evaluation-perspectives>

defines a 'formal' assessment as 'a tool to analyse professional and personal competences, as well as aptitudes and motivations to build a professional development project'. Therefore, a competence assessment is a professional development tool available for any individual, regardless of his/her situation vis a vis the labour market. It is performed by an accredited provider, known as '*Centre de bilans de compétences*'. Social partners provide a regular updated list of providers at regional levels. This framework has been improved over years.

Finally, in the context of economic restructuring and rapid changes in competence needs, many other 'expert' assessment and/or self-assessment tools have been developed to assess various skills, competencies and/or abilities in order to respond to specific needs, either for a particular sector (e.g. banking, digital economy, food, etc.) or for a particular target group (e.g. young graduate students, migrants, etc.). Such tools are usually developed directly by HR services of large companies, PES, education providers, non-profit organizations or private HR consulting companies. In absence of a general framework, some of these tools are reasonably innovative in terms of format and/or content. For example, PIX is used to evaluate digital skills online, SKILLSEVAL to get an overview of specific skills needed for a job and how well a profile matches these needs in twenty minutes or CLEA to evaluate basic skills in writing, reading, calculation, etc.

On the basis of the format and the context, the objectives of a competence assessment may vary. For instance, through formal competence assessments (*bilans de compétences*) performed by external HR consulting services, beneficiaries get usually a better idea of their formal, informal, social and personal skills. They also receive suggestions for the future in terms of reorientation, need for the validation of certain skills or further training. These suggestions usually translate into an individual action plan that is discussed at the end of the bilan. Some competence assessments might be followed by a procedure known as Validation of Experience (VAE). VAE can lead to the recognition, through a formal diploma, of various vocational qualifications, including sectoral qualifications. Specific education and or training needs can be identified. However, there is no existing system allowing the employee or the jobseeker to be oriented towards online certified training.

Since 2014, the implementation of an "open-to-all" and free-of-charge Career Counselling Service (*Conseil en évolution professionnelle*) has improved the access to the competence assessment (bilan de compétences). Any "active" individual is now allowed to contact, at his/her own initiative, one of the five certified organizations⁹ to request personalized career counselling. In this context, a full bilan de compétences or other types of competence assessment with a restricted scope (for instance: assessment of some technical/specific skills prior to hiring or changing position) can be recommended. These recent reforms aim at empowering individuals to decide on their professional trajectory by improving access to orientation services.

3.2 Accessibility and coordination with other complementary workforce development tools could be improved

3.2.1 At company level

As stated by France Stratégie (2019), the forecast management agreements for jobs and skills (GPEC) have three major advantages for companies:

- First of all, it allows them to better manage the consequences of economic and technological changes, which can make certain skills obsolete within the company. As highlighted in a report issued by the Employment Advisory Council (Conseil d'orientation pour l'emploi, COE, 2017), the digital transformation is leading significant changes in employment. Content (some jobs are obsolete or will be in the next years whereas new ones, such as community manager, data

⁹ Pole emploi, APEC, Missions locales, OPACIF and Cap emploi

scientist, etc, have emerged) and structure (booming of start-ups, free lancers, entrepreneurs, etc.) are impacted. This makes necessary for employees to develop new skills including 'social', 'organisational' or 'problem-solving' skills (+33% between 1998 and 2013).

- Secondly, it contributes to a better identification of the skills needed by the company, to reduce recruitment difficulties and helps to value those skills that are already existing within the company. For instance, in the case of very specific skills it can be easier and more efficient to develop these skills internally as job seekers may be less likely to acquire such specific skills.
- Finally, it supports organisational changes, by making them easier to be accepted from the employees. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of having a convergence between the company's strategy and its skills management system (Ferrary and Trépo, 1999).

Yet, only a fourth of private sector companies implement a skills management approach and practices differ significantly from one economic sector to another. For instance, almost 70% of the companies in the financial and insurance sector have developed a skills management system, while only 32% in the transportation sector, 18% in the construction sector and 14% in the hotel industry¹⁰. Another study, conducted in 2015 by the National Council of Vocational Training (CNEFP), has highlighted interesting patterns among the 4,500 surveyed companies from all sectors and all sizes. Smaller companies, between 3 to 49 employees, barely practice competence assessment, whereas larger companies do it on a more systematic basis. Different factors can explain such discrepancies, such as the size of the company itself, the existence of a proper HR department, the focus on innovation and the challenge to hire highly qualified individuals account for a significant share of the results. This analysis would be a good start to develop online services similar to MyCompetence, targeting smaller companies as a priority.

3.2.2 At individual level

About 70,000 individuals take a bilan de compétences every year but even though this tool is open to all, several factors tend to limit its access:

- the cost: a cost of several thousand euros may refrain people to take it, although it can be covered by the employer, the social partners (for those with a job) or by the Region (for unemployed people registered with PES);
- the duration: the process is quite long as it goes over several months, up to one year; and
- the "complexity": a bilan de compétences includes several steps, some preparation work and some "homework" throughout the process.

As a consequence, certain groups of individuals (primarily the low qualified and the long-term unemployed people) tend to exclude themselves from this intensive process (process duration, administrative complexity and/or level of commitment requested). In fact, most beneficiaries are employed at the time they start the assessment.

Also, as explained above, there are many bilans de compétences providers. Guidelines have been developed at the national level to ensure a minimum level of consistency over the country. As a minimum, full bilan de compétences must include three phases (preparation, assessment, conclusion) and have a total duration of 24 hours max over a period of several months.

¹⁰ France Stratégie, April 2019, <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/sites/strategie.gouv.fr/files/atoms/files/fs-na77-2019-gestion-competences-avril.pdf>

In practice, as recently highlighted by the national cross-sector jobs and training committee (COPANEF)¹¹, these guidelines are too broad to ensure a high-quality service. Weaknesses could concern:

- the excessively standardised process, followed by some providers to define the initial objectives of the assessment;
- the lack of coordination between the assessment and other actions that might be taken in the course of the individual's professional development plan;
- the lack of training/experience of some of the staff in charge the assessment;
- the lack of follow-up and orientation counselling after the assessment has been performed.

The recent introduction of the Counselling for Professional Evolution may be an opportunity to reinforce bridges between the different existing tools to increase the level of qualification, but also to better match the actual skills needs on the labour market.

Having a more homogeneous approach across the country, materialized through a digital platform such as MyCompetence might also be a suitable answer.

Additionally, a new concept of an individual grant for employment and training (Capital emploi formation), has been discussed among experts (Institut Montaigne, 2017). This model could bring some answers to the weaknesses of the overall vocational training system as it would promote closer coordination between counselling, personalized coaching and vocational training, including for competence assessment and ensure better outcomes and long-term positive impact on human capital development.

4 Assessment of success factors and transferability

4.1 The rationale behind setting up an integrated digital platform

Skills mismatch challenges could be dealt with an integrated approach that combines sector level information, skills and competences classification (ROME¹² in France) and competence assessment tools. This appears to be a promising practice to help HR departments of SMEs to professionalise their recruitment and/or management processes and improve the definition of their skills needs. Self-assessment tools can support employees and jobseekers for identifying skills gaps and training opportunities.

However, as mentioned in the host country paper, maintaining a high level of quality of this multi-dimensional system can be difficult. It requires good cooperation and collaboration, ahead of designing the system, between several key stakeholders in the areas of employment, qualification, education and vocational training.

The situation in France, where roles and responsibilities in these areas are shared among a multitude of public and private authorities, makes it difficult to envision a similar online system in the short term.

4.2 A system accessible to everyone

A potential weakness of the online model might be the level of accessibility. Although the service offered in Bulgaria is free of charge, which is a key success factor, platform users may encounter other obstacles. They need to know how to navigate, operate,

¹¹ COPANEF, Comité interprofessionnel pour l'emploi et la formation (interprofessional committee for employment and training)

¹² ROME, Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois is the French referential for jobs (similar to EPSO at the European level)

search and proceed to access the right information and to successfully use the proposed self-assessment tools.

In France, about 13 million individuals have a limited (or very limited) access/usage of digital tools. Low-qualified individuals represent a larger share of this group.

To equally reach out anyone who might need to assess his/her competences, some assistance services should be provided or on-line training on how to use such a system should be developed (training sessions could be offered by the PES for instance).

4.3 Orientation and counselling services: a key success factor at every stage of the journey

Besides the 'political' and 'institutional' feasibility of such an integrated system in France, another question regards the orientation and counselling services to support the elaboration of a professional project.

Research projects¹³ highlight the relevance of professional guidance for individuals in long-term unemployed looking for a job or for employed people experiencing burnout. When asked about the profile of the employees who request a formal competence assessment, providers answer that a large portion of their public belong to the second category. For both groups, the interpersonal relationship with their "coach" as well as the psychological support they may receive throughout the competence assessment process seems to be key. These dimensions should not be neglected while considering the development of additional online tools and resources.

5 Questions

- How does such a digital integrated platform articulate with more traditional professional counselling?
- Are there any specific actions planned to address digital literacy issues while implementing such an online platform at a national level?
- Do the job description models include soft skills or only specific and transferable skills?
- Do we have an idea of drop-out rates for people who start a session at any stage of MyCompetence (self-assessment or training) and are we able to compare these results with more traditional methods (for instance regarding training)?

¹³ See 2019 experimentation by Pole emploi to measure the impact of strengthened monitoring, personal and professional counselling of unemployed individuals on their likelihood to find a job.

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Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country

- Unemployment has reached an historical low in France but experts are concerned about the country's ability to reduce it further
- Skills mismatch are a major challenge in several economy sectors where individuals tend to be overqualified (vertical mismatch) or companies are struggling to find individuals with the right skill sets to fill in positions (horizontal mismatch)
- Technological change has made this issue even more prominent

Assessment of the policy measure

- At a company level, a forecasting tool for competences and skills (GPEC) helps anticipate future competence needs and identify internal known and unknown, used and unused skills of the workers in place
- At an individual level, recent reforms have facilitated access to orientation and counselling services to challenge, introspect and develop a professional project, assess existing competences, potential gaps and advise on additional training whenever needed
- Such a 'à la carte' system is respectful of each individual and specific needs. But it makes it more challenging to reach a level of homogeneity in terms of quality of the service, as opposed to MyCompetence

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- Setting up an integrated platform including sector level information, skills and competences referential, job descriptions and training modules is appealing, in particular to address recruitment issues experienced by smaller companies.
- Personalised counselling should be developed along with other "digital" (or non - digital) tools to help individuals, whether are they looking for a job or for a career change, to make the appropriate choice in the best conditions (ex: training)
- Accessibility: one potential weakness of this model is the limited accessibility of it. Not from a financial perspective as the service is free but more from a technical perspective as the individual must learn how to navigate, how to operate, how to search and how to proceed for instance to access self-assessment tools.

Questions

- How does such a digital integrated platform articulate with more traditional professional counselling?
- Are there any specific actions planned to address digital literacy issues while implementing such an online platform at a national level?
- Do the job description models include soft skills or only specific and transferable skills?
- Do we have any idea of drop-out rates for people who start a session at any stage of MyCompetence (self-assessment or training) and are we able to compare these results with more traditional methods (for instance regarding training)?

Annex 2 Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	CLEA https://www.certificat-clea.fr/le-dispositif-clea/le-referentiel/
Year of implementation:	2015
Coordinating authority:	The Ministry of Employment and Workforce Development.
Objectives:	<p>Target: job seekers or employees without a diploma.</p> <p>Objectives: Identify, test and certify a set of basic skills in 7 areas of knowledge and professional competences.</p> <p>CLEA enables individuals to establish a list of skills, strengths and eventually, weaknesses, and develop, with the assistance of a PES worker, an action plan to fill in the skills gap, including participating in short trainings sessions.</p> <p>After the training, additional testing is conducted to validate the new skills.</p> <p>The certificate is delivered by an independent jury.</p>
Main activities:	<p>CLEA is a free, open to all, competence assessment tool (a series of questions and quiz). It is specially designed to acknowledge the professional skills of low-qualified workers of jobseekers.</p> <p>Depending on the training need to pass the test, the process will take between a few months (no additional training needed) up to 5 years (max)</p> <p>Seven areas of competences are evaluated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being able to communicate • calculation, reasoning • using a computer • collaborate, working with a team • taking initiatives, working alone • being willing to learn • knowing the basic rules in terms of hygiene, safety and environment.
Results so far:	In 2018, about 20 000 applications have been registered for CléA including almost 2 500 in Ile-de-France. Among this last group, 985 have obtained their certificate, 1 327 training sessions have been prescribed.



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