

Lifelong Learning in France and in Europe

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The French population¹ is ageing with 15,2 million people aged over 60 years, or approximately 23 percent of the total population of 65,3 million. In 2030, 20 million French people will be more than 60 years old, and 15 million less than 20 years, the most dramatic increase will be observed in people over 75 years old (x 3) and over the age of 85 (x 4). This is due to the dual effect of a lower mortality and the continued decline in fertility since the 19th Century, even if it is now stabilized at 2,01 children by women. For almost 20 years, life expectancy increased by one quarter every year. The time of life without disability will increase and the average age of onset of dependence is estimated at 85 years.

The 20 or 30 years of life after retirement – in France, the statutory retirement age was 62 (2011) – are gradually differentiated: 60-75 years "active seniors", 75-85 years "poly-mini-disability and frailty " but autonomous, and people over 85 years who may be facing dependency. However, old age does not correspond to an homogeneous public, including opportunities available to advance one's knowledge. In fact, France is expected to experience one of largest increases in employment rates among persons aged 55-64 years² – more than 20% increase, compared to a European average of approximately 16% – between 2010 and 2060; although that may be due to the fact that the country currently has one of the lowest employment rates for those aged 55 – 64 in Europe – 41,4% against 49.1% for the whole of the European Union in 2009³⁻⁴.

Lifelong-learning is defined by wikipedia¹ as the “ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons”. Within France, and throughout Europe generally, older adults have access to different types of lifelong learning opportunities: such as volunteering, increasing social interactions,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lifelong_learning

general adult education classes (i.e. learning another language, computer skills), and finally professional development or on-the-job training.

French Regulations to Protect Older Workers

Mandatory regulations have recently been enacted by the French government to require employers to meet older workers' needs, including training, and to reduce barriers. In 2002, the French government passed a law requiring the recognition by universities of prior informal and work-based learning (RPL, also known as "Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience" or VAE) and other professional qualifications. The law effectively organised RPL at a national level, although universities can develop their strategy of recognition on their own, and includes competence-based awards and individual assessments. However, many organisations fail to use or finance the RPL procedure.

Another French law, passed in 2004, grants individuals the right to lifelong-learning ("Droit Individuel à la Formation, DIF), entitling all employees to access a maximum of 120 hours of training/educational sessions over a 6 year period (20 hours/year) during work or free time. DIF is financed entirely by the employer (1% of the budget is obligatory), and the cost of the learning is not considered part of the salary, therefore individuals aren't taxed on this benefit.

At the beginning of June 2006, the French prime minister presented a national action plan (National Action Plan for Seniors Employment) to reach an employment rate of 50% among people aged from 55 to 64 years and improve the conditions for older workers². The plan was enforced between 2006 and 2010. In addition, the French Law for the Funding of Social Security ("Loi pour le Financement de la Sécurité Social", LFSS), enacted in May 2009, protects elders from forced retirement and requires employers to encourage senior employment – often focused on skills or professional development -- or pay a penalty of 1% of earnings/profits³.

French and European Innovative Lifelong Learning Models

² <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2006/08/articles/fr0608019i.htm>

Although not yet widespread, we have begun to see pockets of experimentation, out of the well-established processes for adult education, regarding lifelong learning for elders throughout France. These lifelong learning opportunities for older persons can be found in both public and private settings, and sometimes may be financed jointly by public and private sources.

Skills Training

Public: The European Commission established a Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) in November 2006 to increase transnational education and training activities throughout 31 European countries, reaching almost 900,000 European citizens and 50,000 organisations³. Financed publicly by the European Union, most of the programmes are delivered through national agencies; in France, the national agency responsible for managing projects and dispersing funds is the “Agence Europe Education Formation France”⁴. The LLP combines four well-established sub-programmes ([Comenius](#) for schools, [Erasmus](#) for higher education, [Leonardo da Vinci](#) for vocational education and training, and [Grundtvig](#) for adult education). However, except for the Grundtvig programmes – which have shown to support active ageing and intergenerational learning – participation decreases substantially for both lower-skilled and older adults. The midterm evaluation of the LLP programme acknowledges that more “progress towards a lifelong learning approach as opposed to one based on educational sectors is still quite limited”, which may be a factor of insufficient budgets and other mobility-related barriers⁵.

The Grundtvig projects effectively engage elders and improve the capacity of education and training systems. For example, many of the Grundtvig programmes throughout Europe focus on improving the skills and competencies needed for information and communication technology (ICT) – such as the “Learning Partnership E-Com+45 Grundtvig” project for all workers over age 45, and the intergenerational “Simulating ICT Learning for active EU elders” (SILVER) project³.

The Department of Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, also located within the European Commission (EC) European Social Fund, has engaged in many projects

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme>

⁴ www.europe-education-formation.fr

since 1957 throughout France, training older workers on job skills, such as use of information technologies⁵.

Joint: AGE Platform Europe is a European network of around 165 organisations of and for people aged 50+ representing directly over 30 million older people in Europe since 2001⁶. Its work is co-financed by its organizational members and by the European Commission. In their attempt to create an “Age-Friendly European Union by 2020,” they list what they have identified as best practices throughout Europe on topics such as employment & active ageing and education & lifelong learning. Specifically within France, they identified a few Grundtvig-funded programs, in addition to “Générations & Talents” – an intergenerational programme of Alcatel-Lucent and APEC (a French recruitment agency) revolving around skills development and mentoring/knowledge sharing.

Adult Education

Joint: The University of the Third Age (U3A) – started in France at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Toulouse in 1973 – aims to provide continuing education and various cultural activities for seniors in order to “prolong active life”. Since its formation, the model has now expanded throughout Europe – and other places, like Australia and the US. In 1993, it became known as “Union Française des Universités Tous Ages” (UFUTA⁷) encouraging intergenerational exchange, in-person meetings, and less emphasis on formal registration and graduation processes. The U3A model, with the exception of one or two locations, is now open to anyone regardless of age or degree, and can use various names (such as "University All Ages", "Inter-Ages", "For All", "Retirement and Free Time", "Third Time", "Permanent" etc). In some locations, U3A is offered as a virtual community⁸ – in other words, an online learning community of older people – with less curriculum structure and more group interaction, therefore making the model more accessible for those who live in isolation (due to geography, health/physical ailments, etc.).

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/social/esf_projects/result2.cfm

⁶ www.age-platform.eu

⁷ <http://www.ufuta.fr>

⁸ <http://vu3a.org/>

However, in France, the model has remained in-person and linked with either local universities or associations, and are currently available in 41 French towns. While most U3A programs are privately funded, the UFUTA programs are dependant on public funding from the Ministère de l'Éducation nationale. For example, TRANS-INNOV LONGEVITY "TIL" project⁹ was certified on March 13, 2012, "Excellence in innovative training" (IDEFI) by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. TRANS-INNOV LONGEVITY (TIL) models an innovative cross-training inter-university project for both initial training and training throughout life. It leverages a system of educational excellence based on national and international academic networks, like that of UNF3S.

TIL promotes access to new audiences in new degree university courses, offering a wide variety of models and learning paths, built on multi-and transdisciplinary skills, around a structured but flexible design

IDEFI-TIL is an innovative educational project applied to business in longevity.¹⁰

Private: Some organisations have been developed by older persons themselves. For example, Old Up¹¹ focuses on intergenerational interactions of their members and training older persons for useful daily functions – including how to use the new technologies (i.e., create a Facebook account, call friends and family using Skype), how to cope with death, illness, children, etc.)

In addition, other virtual communities throughout Europe have also emerged¹², which are online community promoting active ageing through the use of ICT; however, most of these forums remain small.

Volunteering

The use of older persons – who are often more experienced, knowledgeable and motivated – for volunteer activities has the positive impact of improving quality and capacity of the programmes.

Public: The “Grundtvig Senior Volunteering Projects” are available to all European citizens aged 50+ years, and funds projects between 2 organizations in 2 different

⁹ <http://u-til.org/>

¹⁰ <http://til.cerimes.fr/index2.php>

¹¹ <http://old-up.eu>

¹² <http://elearningeuropa.info/>

countries over a 2-year period. A large percentage of participants in Europe thought the experience increased their technical skills (43%) and language skills (just under half). During 2007 and 2009, France led another Grundtvig project, “Transfert de Competences Acquises et de Savoirs Techniques (TCAST), which offered the opportunity for younger generations to benefit from the technical skills and knowledge of older skilled artisans who are retired or about to retire. Another Grundtvig program that France partnered in, “Seniors in Action”, trains older people with specific skills to informally educate school pupils³.

Private: The Lire et Faire Lire programme, started in France in 1999, provides older persons the opportunity to read to younger children³. While the program has successfully expanded across the country, there remains difficulty in recruitment of older volunteers since time-frames and locations may not be ideal.

Related Lifelong Learning Activities

Many European organisations, both governmental and private, have begun to draw attention to the importance of lifelong-learning for older persons, including multiple opportunities for professionals working with elders to learn more about the need to include, educate, and/or train older persons.

Public: The European Union's “Cedefop”¹³ (the European Centre for Development of Vocational Training) has held conferences in Brussels the past two years (“Learning Later in Life: Uncovering the Potential of investing an Ageing Workforce” in 2011, and “One Step Up in Later Life: Learning for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity” in 2012), with the aim of educating the public and professionals working in the field on why and how to continue engaging, educating, and training older persons.

Health literacy of older adults is another important area to improve the status of older workers. For example, the “Empowering Health Learning for the Elderly”¹⁴ (EHLE), offered through the European Commission's LLP, has partnered with Italy, France,

¹³ www.cedefop.europa.eu

¹⁴ www.ehle-project.eu

Spain, and the Netherlands to improve training so that professionals will be better able to educate elders to live healthier lives.

Private: Road Scholar/Elderhostel¹⁵, is an international organisation that offers travel and learning experiences – sometimes referred to as “leisure learning” – to adults age 55+ throughout the world. Although it began in the United States in 1975, it has since expanded offices to other locations, including France.

Issues to Consider to Address Best Interests of Older People

Many elders do not think about their future. If ILC Centres want to influence policy related to lifelong learning, the following must be considered:

- ✧ *The recruitment of retirees is a strategy that is being increasingly turned to in France, particularly in these employees' former workplaces.* Return-to-work situations may be available, since some organisations recognize the contribution that retirees can make in their capacity of “expert resources” having experience-based knowledge to pass on. However, as Aline²Chamahian discovered⁶, major gaps still exist for older persons in access to training. Since many retirees work on a contract basis, they are often at risk of being excluded from internal training programs.
- ✧ *Older workers tend to report considerably more work-related health problems:* On average, in Europe in 2007, 16.8% persons aged 45-54 years report at least one work-related health problem, which decreases to 15.8% among those aged 55-64 (although this excludes France). Policymakers should consider health promotion campaigns in the workplace (or other locations) in order to improve the general health of older persons, reduce absenteeism associated with such problems, and prolong potential working lives².
- ✧ *Responding to the economic vulnerability of the elderly:* The French have one of the lowest poverty rates for elders (9.7%), compared to 15.9 % of Europeans aged 65 years or more living below the poverty line in 2010¹⁶. However, the parallel link between the lengthening of life and increased resources is broken; in 2005, the average standard of living of pensioners was

¹⁵ www.roadsscholar.org

¹⁶ <http://www.inequalitywatch.eu/spip.php?article99&lang=en>

10% lower than that of active people because of the discontinuity of employment. Multiple lifelong-learning (educational and job training) opportunities should be encouraged for this population to keep them financial stable.

- ✧ *Trend of New technologies:* Beyond the generational and cultural reticence which will decrease with time, and their high cost, knowledge of ICT is increasingly becoming required to advance in the workplace. Training of new technologies should be a priority when developing lifelong-learning programmes.

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