

From Continuing Education to Lifelong Learning in French Universities

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Introduction

This article is a summary of the results of a survey carried out in 1999 on lifelong learning in four French higher education institutions. The survey was part of an international comparative analysis supported by the Directorate for Research of the European Commission under the TSER programme. The full results are disseminated separately (Jallade, 2000).

In France, the development of lifelong learning should be seen as the continuation of an old tradition of university continuing education. Since 1984, it has become an official mission of French universities, 'on the same level' as teaching and research, and is regulated by a legal framework adopted in the 1980s. Initiatives in this area are funded under the 1971 law on continuing education which introduced a payroll tax of 1.5% earmarked to that effect. To benefit from this source of financing, universities must compete with other training organisations. Companies are exempted from paying the tax if they have spent an equivalent amount on the training of their workers.

Adults in French Universities

In France, returning adults (adults seeking a second chance to enter university) are treated either as *initial* or FC (*Formation Continue*) students. The former are submitted to the same duties and regulations as younger students and they are included, but not recorded as such, in enrolment statistics. The latter benefit from a special status that gives them the right to APEAL (Accreditation of prior experience, achievement and learning), known in France as VAP (*Validation des acquis professionnels*). They can also benefit from the financing opportunities under the 1971 law (paid education leave, re-training as part of a company's training plans) or from unemployment offices.

The exact number of returning adults enrolled as initial students is not known and varies considerably, depending on the definition. According to a 1992 survey carried out in ten French universities (Béduwe & Espinasse, 1995), the percentage would be as high as 32% of total enrolments. But this survey overstates the case because, to qualify as an 'adult student', two of the following three criteria must be met: students must be overaged (over 27), they must have interrupted their studies and be active. But a short break in their course of study, say for one year, before entering the university or holding a part-time job are common features of

students in many countries. These are not sufficient criteria for them to be considered adult students. The third criterion — ‘overaged’ — may signal ‘late entry’ after having gained significant work experience, provided it refers to the age at the beginning of studies and not at the end. Using more restrictive criteria to define the adult student population would lead to a much lower figure, probably 10%. In any case, there are far more adult students enrolled as initial students than FC students, recorded as such. Both groups are increasing in number, but universities do not maintain adequate statistics about their socio-economic status and motivations for learning.

The Four Universities Surveyed

They were selected allowing for a balance between disciplines, geographical location and generation. The **University of Nanterre** consists of (i) eight strong disciplinary departments in human and social sciences, (ii) three semi-autonomous units specialised in industrial engineering, art and culture and librarian training and (iii) a continuing education department. Total enrolments add up to some 34,000 students. The **University of Lille-USTL** is one of the leading technological universities in the country, with two-thirds of its 20,000 students enrolled in sciences and engineering and one-third in social sciences. It does not have a continuing education department, but it does have a strong unit that is responsible for fostering and coordinating LLL courses which are on offer in almost all departments. **CNAM** is the only higher education institution devoted exclusively to active adults, employed and unemployed, who have a significant professional experience. With over 500 courses on offer in seven areas, it is one of the main providers of LLL in the country. **CNED** is not a university *stricto sensu*, but a large distance education centre with an expanding provision of higher education courses in psychology, art and design, foreign languages and business administration.

Selecting LLL Courses

LLL courses are defined according to the following four criteria: (i) **universalism**, i.e. they should be open to all, adults as well as initial students, with access requirements that leave room for APEAL; (ii) **new curriculum concepts**, i.e. curricula centred on learners’ needs which may depart from traditional disciplinary lines; in practice, LLL courses will be ‘demand driven’ rather than supply-driven; (iii) **flexible delivery**, i.e. alternative modes of learning (full- and part-time, distance learning, block sessions, apprenticeship, etc.) should be proposed so as to bring learning opportunities within the reach of all; and (iv) **innovative procedures of evaluation and certification**, i.e. procedures adapted to new curriculum concepts and flexible modes of learning leading to new degrees and diplomas.

Altogether, some **30 LLL courses** out of the total provision were selected for in-depth examination. The major propositions which emerged from this empirical survey are summarised below. They draw heavily on the four case studies that were prepared in the framework of this project.

Reaching Out to Adults through APEAL

In France, APEAL was first encouraged by a 1985 decree which recognised prior experience **to obtain access to the various levels of university education** (first, second or third cycle) for those over 20 who had interrupted their studies for at least two years. But, once admitted, students are submitted to the same obligations as traditional students.

This first step, known as VAP 85 (*Validation des Acquis Professionnels*), was complemented by a law passed in 1992 (VAP 92) which aimed at **exempting applicants with at least five years' professional experience from some of the modules or credits normally required for a degree and from the corresponding examination** on the basis of qualifications acquired during their work experience.

In 1998, national statistics showed that close to 9,000 FC students entered French universities through VAP 85, but the number of beneficiaries of VAP 92 was much smaller at around 900 (Centre Inffo, 2000). These data suggest that APEAL (or VAP) has not yet become common practice in French universities. **Progress is significant with regard to using VAP to grant non-traditional access, but it meets with strong resistance when it exempts students from curricular obligations** (Jallade, 2000).

All the LLL courses that were examined at Nanterre and Lille are open to adult FC students and many use APEAL to facilitate the return of active adults to university. At the University of Lille, about 1,000 adult students admitted every year benefit from it. At the University of Nanterre, this figure is much smaller because APEAL is limited to the continuing education department and the professionally-oriented departments. Elsewhere, resistance to APEAL is strong, especially in the initial education departments organised along disciplinary lines.

But at both Nanterre and Lille, APEAL is used almost exclusively to **give adults with work experience, but without the required diploma, access to a certain level of study**. In other words, prior work experience is more or less accepted by academia to recognise a **potential for learning at a certain level**. But it is seldom used to exempt adults from certain curriculum requirements on the basis of knowledge acquired during working life. Despite the possibility offered by the 1992 law in this respect, **APEAL as a substitute for knowledge** which should be acquired through traditional learning meets with strong resistance.

Only one institution (CNAM) has a central unit which is equipped to use APEAL to exempt students from some of their curricular obligations on the basis of past experience and achievements. About 250 students benefit from the procedure set up by VAP 92 every year. CNED has no first-hand experience of APEAL.

Appropriate procedures to foster the use of APEAL in the admission process are a common concern. The organisational pattern adopted by the USTL, whereby a single unit is given responsibility for the University as a whole to act as an interface between outside clients/partners, be they adult students or their sponsors, while the delivery of LLL is jointly organised with all interested university departments, seems to be the most effective. Outsiders need a single 'window' to find their way in the 'jungle' of university courses and diplomas, a window where they can find advice, guidance and assistance, while the delivery of

LLL should mobilise teaching resources in all departments. When it is organised centrally, APEAL is more easily accepted and recognised by all the departments in the university than when it is only promoted by the department of continuing education. The experience of USTL shows that only a unit of significant size (15 advisers and as many supporting staff) is capable of supporting the extra costs of enrolling returning adults, including the use of APEAL.

Attracting returning adults to the University is one thing; mixing them systematically with younger students is another. As mentioned above, many adult students enrol as initial students and no specific provision is made for them. Directors of LLL courses are well aware of the pros and cons of a policy of 'mixing' FC students and there is no strong opposition to it. When there are few FC students enrolled in a course, they are usually mixed with initial students; or they can be mixed for some classes and separated in remedial classes. When there are many, special sections are set up for them.

In sharp contrast with other students, FC students can be charged heavy tuition fees and are eligible for financial support from various sources. Although this has contributed greatly to the development of university continuing education in France, it crystallised a dichotomy between two types of students, which is not healthy in the long run. In future, this special status should give way to a general process of recurrent education whereby it is customary for students to interrupt their studies after a first degree to acquire professional experience and then return to the university to obtain a higher degree later on in their lives.

New Curriculum Concepts

Most LLL courses surveyed for the purpose of this article are built around new curriculum concepts which are characterised by (i) a combination of disciplines leading to clusters of competences or generic occupations, (ii) a strong concern for clients' career strategies in the labour market, i.e. social promotion, job change, protection against changing job structures in companies, etc; (iii) a modular structure, with learning modules often structured according to disciplines, but aiming at a transdisciplinary objective; and (iv) a significant amount of work-based learning in the form of practice periods in companies as an integrated part of the curriculum. Outside partners (companies, public agencies, regional bodies) are sometimes involved in curriculum conception.

There are many ways of combining disciplines for occupational competences. The 30 courses selected in this survey can be classified in the **following clusters** by decreasing order of frequency.

The first focuses on the **competences required to run private companies**. This cluster in business management is on offer in the four institutions surveyed.

The second is geared to a specific labour market function, namely **human resources development and personnel management**. These 'transdisciplinary' courses derive knowledge from various disciplines, namely economics, law, education, psychology and social sciences, in varying proportions, to train human resources and specialists for all sectors, public, private and non-profit.

A third cluster can be considered as **specialisations in existing disciplines, mostly engineering** (courses for communication engineers, production

engineers, pharmaceutical specialists, engineers who are specialised in the rehabilitation and maintenance of buildings). They were created to respond to new training needs felt by individuals at various points of their career and/or to new jobs in high demand from companies. One may assume that they fill a gap, as they are seldom on offer in initial education departments.

A fourth cluster focuses on **computer science** in its various applications: Internet/Intranet management, small systems and networks, basic computer literacy.

In the fifth cluster, which is mainly found in CNED, **traditional disciplinary lines** are more visible: psychology, astronomy and astrophysics, history of art and music, foreign languages.

What emerged most clearly from the survey is that **LLL courses are always a response to demand**, be it expressed by individuals or non-university institutions. Hence, it runs counter to the 'ivory tower' syndrome. One may discuss *ad nauseam* to know whether this demand comes from the 'market' (some may condemn it!), from the users of public education services (it makes it harder to ignore!), or from individuals looking for a second-chance education (this is highly respectable!).

Judging from our sample of courses, the prevailing curriculum conception is clearly **demand-driven**, functional, transdisciplinary and specialised. LLL opportunities on offer reflect first and foremost a **broad range of client needs**. Thanks to its long experience in surveying its clients' needs, CNAM is able to identify the following career objectives (Correia, 1998):

- (i) occupational career management: courses are aimed at broadening one's professional activity and providing access to a double competence. The objectives pursued are knowledge to face change. Obtaining a formal degree is not the main concern;
- (ii) social promotion: the course offers the possibility to become an engineer or to obtain a professional position. This is a long-term objective where obtaining a degree is a must;
- (iii) job change: as their career develops, people identify knowledge gaps and anticipate new learning needs, sometimes because they feel blocked or threatened in their present jobs/companies;
- (iv) insertion in working life: those facing difficulties because they have a general profile are seeking 'professionalised' modules to improve their employability;
- (v) occupational orientation and search for a sector that corresponds to tastes: people 'try' out various courses until they are satisfied with the general orientation and content.

The fact that LLL provision is more developed in disciplinary fields where an '**outside reference**' is strong, such as business studies, engineering or education sciences, confirms the importance of demand. In fields where the development of the discipline through research is the unique reference for teaching, LLL meets with strong resistance.

The challenge is to find the ways and means to make sure that university organisations which are, by essence, 'sticky', are capable of meeting changing and emerging demands from outsiders. The interviews carried out in the framework of

this study give the impression that **many individual course directors have travelled far down the road of responsiveness**, far more than is sometimes suspected at the national policy level. They have few inhibitions in designing and marketing their 'products', in selecting their clients or users, and in accommodating the modes of delivery to the specific needs of returning adults.

Institutions are slower to adapt to the changing and increasing heterogeneity of demands from the adult population. Despite many individual initiatives, course provision is still very much 'supply-driven'. 'Mainstreaming' these initiatives in overall university policy is the challenge.

Generally speaking, LLL reflects a reorganisation of knowledge away from traditional disciplinary lines. When 'disciplines' (and disciplinary 'tribes') are strongly embedded in the university structure, LLL courses are not easily accepted.

Does the spread of LLL courses represent an epistemological challenge that is likely to upset the traditional organisation of knowledge along disciplinary lines? There is little evidence, if any, in this survey to support this. True, most LLL courses are organised on a transdisciplinary basis and aim at 'functional' objectives rather than the command of a discipline, but they are often structured in modules that are themselves 'disciplinary'. In other words, they do not devalue disciplinary components; they transcend them by gearing them to the building of personal competences over a lifetime.

Flexible Course Delivery

The interviews with course directors carried out in the framework of this survey show that, in the four universities examined, significant efforts were made to make course provision more flexible by promoting alternative modes of delivery.

Generally speaking, LLL is characterised by modes of delivery that are more flexible than in initial education, making room for alternative modes of learning, such as full- and part-time attendance, day or evening classes, block sessions, distance education, self-learning, and apprenticeship, i.e. alternated university- and company-based learning. Due consideration paid to the employment status (employed full- and part-time or unemployed) and obligations of adult learners is essential to bring LLL within their reach.

Thus, the course in the management of small businesses at Nanterre, which lasts 1,200 hours, can be taken in one year on the basis of full-time attendance (960 class hours + 240 of in-company training), or spread over 18 months with a longer practice period for the unemployed, or for two or three years on a part-time basis. Some LLL courses in telecommunication engineering and business management offered by the USTL feature five different modes of learning, namely (i) the traditional 5-year mode for young students enrolled after the *bac*, (ii) an intensive two-year mode on a full-time basis for returning adults, (iii) the same as above preceded by a one-year foundation course, (iv) a three-year apprenticeship mode for students who already have a *bac*+2 level and some work experience, and (v) a distance education mode spreading over three years for people with a higher technician level. The second mode better suits the needs of the large telecom company which can release people for a year (the six-month practice period can take place in the company) than those of a small company which cannot afford to do this.

The trend towards flexible delivery to attract and retain learners is a also key concern of CNAM whose traditional adult clientele enrolled in evening courses has been dwindling noticeably in recent years as a result of the constraints of modern urban life. Clients want shorter courses that are organised differently, often in block intensive sessions which are compatible with their professional occupations. But some course directors at CNAM signal the potential loss of the 'group' effect on learning as a result of the individualisation of learning. Offering various modes of learning for the same course can also be costly in terms of staff and organisation. The potential of distance education is not fully used. It is constrained by the need to provide well-organised periodic tutoring to limit drop-out rates. There is also a growing awareness at CNAM that only good, highly-motivated students can cope with the significant amount of self-learning resulting from the intensive use of distance education technology. Still, a timid attempt at shortening the duration of courses and/or facilitating periodic movements between university and working life can be noted.

There is little doubt that the concern for flexibility leads to wider student choice and better quality of service. It reflects a new 'consumer power' whose demands are increasingly taken into account by the institution. At the postgraduate level, it is part of a strategy to attract and retain students in professionally-oriented courses and competition between departments within the university can be fierce.

Innovation in Student Evaluation and Certification

A periodical **evaluation of student achievements** is facilitated by the modular structure of most of the LLL courses reviewed which enables learners to progress towards full certification. But some new features of LLL curricula require specific attention when it comes to evaluation. One is work-based learning which is not amenable to traditional (i.e. academic) forms of evaluation. In this area, the general tendency is to make sure that, during their practice period, learners implement a 'project' with clearly-identifiable objectives and outcomes. Evaluation of projects are usually carried out by tutors in the company and in the university. The weight given to the project in the total marking tends to be higher in engineering and related occupations than in the humanities. Hence, the role of non-academic personnel in learners' evaluation tends to be more prominent than in traditional evaluation.

CNED distance education specialists are developing new computerised evaluation tools to lower the costs. The widespread use of these tools could lead to greater standardisation in evaluation at the expense of 'individualised' evaluation. But on the other hand, flexibility in modes of learning may result in 'individualised' progression of learners, with negative effects on group learning and evaluation.

When it comes to certifying knowledge, providers of LLL courses in French universities have a choice between (i) national degrees, (which are almost the exclusive form of certification in initial education), (ii) *ad hoc* university diplomas and (iii) some other forms of certification. There is an unhealthy dichotomy between university diplomas that are responsive to labour market demand but lack national status recognition on the one hand, and national degrees which draw their legitimacy from disciplinary knowledge on the other.

Certification of knowledge acquired in LLL courses rests on a varying blend of national degrees and university diplomas, the former being more frequent at Lille and CNAM, and the latter at Nanterre. At this University, the certification policy rests on a mix of national degrees and university diplomas. Attitudes towards the latter vary strongly across departments. In the continuing education department, they are viewed as a way to make flexible and specialise the scale of official degrees and, therefore, of encouraging adults to return to university. Efforts are made to improve their visibility and credibility in the labour market, either by seeking *homologation* by a special commission under the Ministry of Labour or a transformation into national degrees. Other forms of *ad hoc* certification are used to reward short courses for adults.

The certification policy at the **USTL-Lille** keeps to national degrees in all the courses surveyed, but one leads to a university diploma which is homologated by the Ministry of Labour. In a way, this policy is less flexible than at Nanterre, but it is successful in promoting both quality and responsiveness. This is partly due to the importance of engineering courses and degrees which are regulated by a powerful national commission, the CTI (*Commission des titres d'ingénieur*). Another reason is that the basic choice at Lille has been to make learning time and progression routes more flexible to accommodate adults, rather than to innovate with new diplomas.

The **CNAM** certification policy rests on three pillars. First, there are full-scale CNAM degrees which are not national degrees, but are homologated on the same scale as national university degrees. Obtaining them requires several years of study, especially for employed people. They are its flagship, but demand is declining. Second, there are the *certificats de compétence*, introduced a few years ago for shorter courses that last about two years. They were created to reward specialised courses at any level or as 'intermediary' steps in the process of obtaining full degrees. And third, the modules composing any given course can be recognised and capitalised to obtain a *certificat* or a degree.

These attempts at making the certification of CNAM courses more flexible have not yet been fully satisfactory. First, CNAM *certificats* lack visibility among employers. Students confuse them with degrees and expect some sort of positioning in the traditional hierarchy of degrees. Because they are transdisciplinary, some professors look at them with suspicion. Second, their *raison d'être* is to respond to new and increasing demands such as second competences, career changes, or professional training before entry into working life. But some are organised around the existing provision of modules and their innovative nature is lost. Third, professors' time and efforts are still directed towards the long courses leading to full-scale degrees. Fourth, these new forms of certification, usually introduced as a result of an individual professor's initiative, are isolated. They are not part of an articulate certification policy implemented by CNAM as an institution.

The coexistence between national degrees and other, more recent and lesser known modes of certification at Nanterre and CNAM is not easy. Many academics still believe that the latter are an open door to lower standards of excellence. They have yet to be convinced that they are a new mode of rewarding different forms of excellence.

Because it is not a higher education institution *stricto sensu*, **CNED** is not habilitated to deliver degrees or diplomas. Courses are certified by the partner

university which selects the most appropriate mode of certification for the course. Its capacity to innovate in this respect is greatly limited. However, CNED can deliver an *attestation of attendance* for its 'free' courses, (those aimed at personal or professional enrichment) which can be freely used by its holder.

Organisational Issues

The four institutions surveyed in this report illustrate four different organisational modes of addressing LLL in French higher education:

- promoting an institution specialised in LLL for returning adults along the CNAM pattern,
- promoting LLL in a specialised university department (and in a few semi-autonomous units) like at Nanterre,
- fostering the delivery of LLL in all university departments with appropriate support services from a central unit, like at the USTL-Lille,
- developing higher education, degree-level provision in a distance education centre like CNED.

At **Nanterre**, the design and delivery of LLL courses, as well as the tasks connected with returning adults, are confined to a specialised department and two other vocationally-oriented units. LLL courses are only offered in exceptional cases by the large initial department of social sciences, usually at the postgraduate level. At **Lille**, LLL courses provision exists in almost all departments and benefits from the backing of a central coordination unit which is also responsible for the admission, counselling and financing of returning adults. The latter, more effective model can emerge only when LLL has become an institution-wide objective which is accepted by all the departments and units. To achieve this, strong institutional leadership, coupled with effective support services, are required.

At **Nanterre**, LLL provision is often the result of individual fragmented and uncoordinated initiatives. Because it often rests with individuals, it is fragile and its long-term sustainability is unclear. Despite the presence of an active continuing education department and the commitment of some autonomous units to LLL provision, the University has not yet adopted a coherent strategy in this area. Persisting opposition, mixing ideology and conservative academic attitudes, prevails in many social science departments, preventing the adoption of an institution-wide policy. At **Lille**, where LLL has gradually become an objective that is shared among departments, these tensions have been largely overcome.

Most **CNAM** students are adults between 25 and 40 years of age with some two years of higher education when they enrol. As an institution, CNAM is faced with the difficulty to meet the rising heterogeneity of adult demands for learning. Again, individual initiatives to meet the challenge do exist, but they are not openly and adequately supported by an institutional strategy that would be in line with the huge potential of this institution. Its fragmented organisational structure (the 'chair' system, the specialised institutes and the regional centres) and a weak management seem to be largely responsible for the slow institutional response to the rising demand for LLL.

During the interviews carried out for this survey, many promoters of LLL courses complained that their efforts were neither recognised nor rewarded. Course directors are often individual 'believers' in LLL who complain that they have to swim 'upstream' in an institution that does little to support their efforts. The fact that some people are more responsive to adults' needs than the institutions to which they belong should not come as a surprise. The history of French universities is full of 'innovative individuals' combating the 'inertia of the system'.

Institutionalisation

The process of institutionalisation, which is sometimes called '**mainstreaming**', consists in organising these limited and often fragile experiments into a university policy. Despite the official status conferred on LLL by the 1984 Law, it is still seeking legitimacy in French universities. The often-made proposal that it should be raised to the status of a 'Vice-Presidency' may help, but this top-down approach cannot replace grass-roots (and less visible) efforts to support, nurture and liaise what already exists. LLL will only gain full acknowledgment when existing courses have reached a 'critical mass', supported by appropriate organisational arrangements within the university.

To achieve this, two conditions must be fulfilled. First, a **strong and steady commitment of university leadership** is required to give appropriate impulses and overcome the natural tendency towards fragmentation in most universities. Second, the provision of well-organised guidance and counselling services targeted to adults and their sponsors is crucial. The experience of USTL shows that **these support services should be organised centrally at the university level** so that teaching departments are relieved from these tasks (even though their cooperation is necessary) and concentrate on course design and the delivery.

At present, the government is focusing on new legal arrangements to encourage the use of APEAL by universities. Although this may be useful, the central issue lies more with the internal organisation of universities *vis-à-vis* working age students than with new legal instruments. **The government should therefore focus its efforts on assisting universities in building up such a unit** which would become the central locus of university policy *vis-à-vis* returning adults. Needless to say, it should be given financial and staffing autonomy.

Thus, mainstreaming LLL provision is the challenge and resistance is still strong. The four universities reported difficulties in staffing LLL initiatives. Many university professors expressed only mild interest, to say the least, in teaching LLL courses and were not keen to take on the extra work connected with returning adults. The statutory definition of professors' conditions of service, still expressed in teaching hours, and the exclusive reliance on research achievements to govern career progression are an obstacle to the mobilisation of professors' time for LLL. More deeply, there is still a widespread concern that LLL may lead to a deterioration of scholarship standards. The common practice to resort to professionals outside the university to teach LLL courses has positive consequences in terms of mobilising up-to-date 'expertise', but it also has adverse effects because it prevents LLL from becoming part of the mainstream activities of the university teaching staff. Non-teaching staff are usually recruited on fixed-term contracts that are not suited to career development.

In this connection, there is little doubt that **the regulations governing the use of academic staff are an obstacle to 'mainstreaming' LLL provision.** It has been said again and again that assessing professors' duties according to the number of hours spent in front of students does not reflect actual practice and is ill-adapted to the new functions of the members of the academic profession, especially those connected with the development, design and delivery of new LLL courses. The situation of non academic personnel required to staff units working with adults (counsellors, evaluators, ...) is not settled either. Here too, appropriate staffing policies to equip these units in order to give them credibility are urgently needed.

Costs and Financing

Promoting flexibility in provision to reach out to adults means extra costs to the University that are not met by state subsidies. Giving new missions to (already under-funded) universities 'by decree' without appropriate financial incentives is a self-defeating course of action. Some significant steps aimed at encouraging universities to engage in LLL have recently been taken by the government in the form of call for tenders targeted to LLL provision, but they fall short from requirements. What is needed is a 'big bang' in favour of all universities which are willing to engage significantly in LLL. The four-year development contract negotiated between the Ministry and each university could be the vehicle for identifying new LLL courses, estimating their development costs and negotiating co-financing.

At present, these costs are largely met by learners or their sponsors. At Nanterre, Lille and CNED, LLL courses are sold to learners at a price that is close to their costs and these prices can be quite high, especially in technology courses. They vary enormously according to duration, levels, modes of learning, disciplines and other criteria. This practice is in sharp contrast with the very low and uniform tuition fees charged to young students enrolled in state subsidised initial higher education. Efforts are made to differentiate the price of LLL according to work status (employed or unemployed) and the financing secured by learners. An important function of LLL course directors is to secure the right blend between fee-paying and subsidised students in order to balance their costs. The situation is different at CNAM, since it can afford to charge low fees because it is fully subsidised by the State.

Financing Returning Adults

A key bottleneck issue in implementing LLL for adults is the financing of their opportunity costs (i.e. their present income or salaries) which are much higher than those of young students. Developing part-time courses, block sessions in the evenings or one day per week, distance education to enable them to keep working part-time is part of the solution. Off-the-job learning by adults needs specific financing initiatives. The introduction of paid education leave (*congé individuel de formation/CIF*) during the 1970s was one of them. It is financed under the 1971 law but is not as widespread as its proponents expected when it was launched. Developing the sponsoring of working adults by their companies in the framework of training plans is another, provided courses are short, because companies are not

keen to release their staff for long periods. These two schemes do not address the issue of LLL for the unemployed.

In France, adults who wish to engage in LLL can draw on three sources of financing to pay for tuition and/or income maintenance. The first is the AFR (*allocation de formation-reclassement*), which is a state subsidy granted by unemployment offices to the unemployed, provided they attend at least 20 hours per week. The second is paid educational leave (CIF) which gives right to a higher subsidy, but eligibility is linked to 30 hours of class attendance per week, if taken full-time. This is ill-adapted to university courses, including self-learning, company-based learning and distance education. CIF can also be granted on a part-time basis. There are some 500 CIF holders enrolled at USTL-Lille.

The third source is the *plan de formation* drawn up by companies and financed under the 1971 law. Eligible adults are chosen by the company. The amount of the subsidy depends on various factors, but it can be substantial, especially for engineering training. Fourth, local authorities can be approached by universities for LLL funding. These various sources of finance grant different subsidies. This explains the differentiated pricing policy mentioned above.

From the legal viewpoint, adults who are engaged in professional life, whether they are working or looking for work, are considered *stagiaires de la formation professionnelle* when they enrol, and they become eligible for one of these sources of finance. They are recorded as FC (*formation continue*) students. Recruiting FC students or an appropriate mix of FC and traditional students for LLL courses is the first duty of course directors who can spend a lot of time helping applicants to present their dossier to the relevant financing agency because procedures to secure grants can be time-consuming. There is little doubt that the 1971 law has played a crucial role in mobilising substantial resources for university-based LLL.

Many need help from course directors, who complain that they spend a lot of time on fund-raising, sometimes at the expense of educational tasks. All LLL course (or continuing education department) directors hold strong views about the extra costs linked to LLL, and there is widespread concern that government (and in some cases university) authorities do not appreciate its financial implications correctly. To be sure, calls for developing LLL, whether they come from government or university authorities, are seldom accompanied by additional allocations to department budgets or by in-kind support (facilities and equipment). University budgets do not have specific lines for LLL spending. In the long run, everybody understands that it cannot be financed in full by taxpayers along the same lines as traditional higher education and that its costs will have to be shared among learners, companies, regional bodies and public agencies. Some expect that the emergence of fee-paying LLL will set a breach in the sacrosanct principle of free higher education.

But universities must compete with private training bodies, especially for non-degree-level courses. These bodies complain about unfair competition from universities who can charge less because part of their expenses (on premises, heating, overheads and the like) are borne by university budgets. Universities are ill-equipped to defend themselves against these allegations because, as a rule, they lack the accounting system that would enable them to identify the **overhead costs** borne by the institution (included in the Ministry's subsidy) and the **extra costs** entailed by LLL courses.

Prospects for Improvement

In the medium term, prospects to improve significantly the staffing and resource situation of LLL in French universities are slim. As far as teaching staff is concerned, unions strongly oppose a redefinition to make professors' conditions of service more in line with the multiple activities of modern university professors. They stick to a fixed number of teaching hours defined centrally and uniformly for all levels and disciplines. Recommendations to improve the situation of support staff stand a better chance of being adopted.

The sharp dichotomy between fees charged to young and adult students is not healthy either. Prospects for raising fees charged to young students in the way the Blair government did in the UK are slim. Prospects for rationalising and/or decreasing fees charged to adults in some courses are better. Economies of scale are possible in some courses where the number of students enrolled is small. Savings could be achieved by reducing the duration of courses though the systematic use of APEAL. Initiatives in this area would be welcomed by company human resources directors who are always keen to reduce the absence of staff due to training and to recognise the value of knowledge acquired through experience.

Overall, the issue of who pays (or should pay) for lifelong learning remains unsolved in France, and the recent lessons from international experience (OECD 1999) do not give much solid evidence, except that there is a strong case for encouraging greater private contribution from individuals and employers. In the French context, the latter will object that their contributions through the 1971 law (which finance the CIFs and company training plans) are already substantial and higher than for many of their foreign competitors. Public agencies outside the Ministry of Education, such as employment offices, contribute to LLL for the unemployed. Local governments are still hesitant to give grants to individuals for LLL in universities.

What is certain, however, is that LLL cannot be subsidised in full by taxpayers, along the same lines as traditional higher education. LLL costs will have to be shared among various contributors and by those who will benefit from it. Admittedly, this sort of blanket statement is of little help to those who are confronted with the balancing of LLL budgets on a daily basis, but it signals the challenge to come.

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