Own-initiative continuing training in France: decline or renewal?

The vision of the growth of European societies, set out in the European Union’s White Paper “Teaching and learning: towards the learning society” highlights learning, access to skills and knowledge as the key issues in adapting Europe to the globalisation of economies and technological and social change. This vision has a policy implication: lifelong education. Lifelong education does not just cover the necessary mix, throughout life, of education, training and other social and economic activities. From the point of view of Europe, it has specific features.

In the first instance, the stress is placed on individual responsibility, motivation and initiative in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Individuals have to be the protagonists of their own training, i.e. they must be able to take those initiatives and make those choices that they consider necessary.

Second, lifelong education is seen as an answer or a counterpart to changes in employment. A more flexible labour market and more flexible employment in enterprises make it necessary for people to be more mobile and to be able constantly to adapt the skills and knowledge that they possess.

Lastly, the ways in which knowledge can be acquired have proliferated as a result of the growth of information and information technologies not just in society but also in training (multimedia training tools). Lifelong education is therefore in some ways an ideal which is more accessible nowadays because of the changes in access to information and knowledge.

Does this mean that lifelong education is a reality towards which we are moving?

Do past and present labour market and training system developments mean that individual initiative has a more important role to play in access to continuing vocational training? Do labour market changes, increasing flexibility and more precarious employment go together with the development of continuing vocational training? In other words, is lifelong education driven or is it inhibited by the actual changes in training and employment systems and what obstacles are raised?

This article attempts to answer these questions by examining the situation in France and focusing in particular on the role of individual initiative and the links between the labour market and vocational training.

The extent of own-initiative training

Over the last thirty years, both initial and continuing vocational training have grown substantially in France.

This development of continuing vocational training is set out in an agreement between the social partners dating from 1970 and in a 1971 law. According to its leading advocate, Jacques Delors, one of the main objectives of the policy of lifelong education that the law attempts to introduce is to allow “every man and woman to cope with the predictable and unpredictable changes that take place in professional life ... and to play a part in the fight for equal opportunities”.

One of the ways in which this objective of adaptation to change is achieved is by making it compulsory for enterprises to play their part in financing continuing
vocational training (1971 law) by paying wages during training as well as training costs (at present 1.5% of the gross wage bill). Enterprises can satisfy this obligation either by organising training for their employees by negotiating a training plan with personnel representatives in the enterprise, or by paying the amount of the levy to a mutual organisation so that it can then be used to organise training schemes in particular for small and medium-sized enterprises.

The second objective of equal opportunity is promoted by the individual right of employees to attend training during working time and at their own initiative. This is what is known as Congé Individuel de Formation (CIF - Individual Training Leave) (1976 codicil) which gives employees an opportunity to attend training without breaking their contracts of employment, while continuing to receive most of their pay and having their training costs reimbursed. Other systems play a part in achieving this objective. These include the supply of “social advancement” training which is financed by the State and offers training, often leading to qualifications, that people can freely attend outside working hours and at their own initiative. The higher education offered by the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (National Conservatory of Crafts and Trades) throughout France is a typical example of this training. In practice, the equal opportunity objective means that people who could not or did not want to continue their initial education have an opportunity to return to in-depth vocational or general education. This training is most often recognised by the award of a certificate identical to those awarded in initial education; people possessing this certificate can in principle make major career and social advances. Social advancement training has more to do, however, with a recognition of the crucial and growing role that initial education plays in helping people to move up the hierarchy of the various socio-occupational categories.

The development of continuing vocational training

The 1971 law on continuing vocational training placed employee training on a more dynamic footing so that it could meet the training needs of enterprises. The number of trainees financed by enterprises doubled in fifteen years: from 2 million in 1980 to 4 million in 1994. The finances involved are huge: FF47 million in 1994 (costs of running training and trainee pay). These expenses account for 3.33% of the wage bill of enterprises with over ten employees which is double the statutory obligation. This training is, however, of a short or very short type (the average length of the training schemes included in enterprise training plans is 42 hours) and is intended to help employees to adapt to job changes.

In line with this increase in the training effort of enterprises, the increase in unemployment from the end of the 1970s and the growing problems raised by the occupational integration of young people have led to the development of training programmes for young people and adults with labour market problems that are run by the State or the Regions and now accommodate two million people in comparison with one million fifteen years ago. The finances are huge in this case as well: FF33.3 billion in 1994. These training schemes are longer on average than the previous training: some 280 hours.

Taking continuing vocational training on its own, some six million people therefore attend State- or enterprise-funded training schemes every year out of an active population of some 18 million people.

Own-initiative training

What is the position with training that adults attend at their own initiative outside of working hours or by taking individual training leave?

38,200 people took individual training leave in 1994. The average length of this leave was 1075 hours and the average cost was FF114,000. The number of adults attending training at their own initiative is much greater, however, than the number of people taking individual training leave. Current estimates place this figure at around 500,000 people. Exact figures are difficult to calculate and require an ex-

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2) Individual training leave was attended by 21,000 people in 1986, 25,000 in 1990 and 30,000 in 1992.
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amination of the people attending the various existing training institutions.

For instance, over 160,000 of the people registered with universities, i.e. some 12% of overall numbers, are adults attending traditional university courses or are registered at their own initiative for continuing training schemes. The Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), the oldest body offering higher education for adults in the form of evening classes, also accommodates over 90,000 people in Paris, its fifty or so associate centres throughout France and its specialist vocational institutes (Pieuchot, 1996). The Ministry of Education’s vocational lycées, organised as local networks (known as GRETAs) provide a substantial proportion of adult manual or non-manual worker training at the request of enterprises. In 1993, however, over 35,000 adults registered for this training at their own initiative. Many local authorities also organise vocational training. The city of Paris, for instance, has for many years been organising evening classes in a wide range of occupational, cultural and artistic subjects. Over 25,000 people attended this training in recent times (Nicolas & Tremblay, 1996). The Phylotechnique associations in Paris and its immediate area alone accommodate 10,000 trainees per year. Over 200,000 people are registered at their own initiative for correspondence courses at the National Distance Learning Centre (CNED). Many are young people who left the education system prematurely and want to obtain an upper secondary education certificate or enter one of the many public service competitions.

Six million people on one side compared with half a million on the other: own-initiative continuing training accounts for a small and declining proportion of all continuing training. While it accounted for close on one quarter of trainees in 1980, it now accounts for no more than 8% (Berton, 1996).

There are very clear-cut differences between these 500,000 people and people who attend training in their enterprises or under programmes to combat unemployment. Their labour market mobility is particularly marked. They enter training strictly at their own initiative and their reasons for doing so have to be seen as part of an individual career plan whose achievement depends on the use of training as a resource. Admittedly, individual initiative may in some cases play a part in training financed by enterprises and the training schemes offered under programmes to combat unemployment. This is, however, marginal. The main aim of the training forming part of human resource management in enterprises is to adapt the largest possible number of people to the needs of the enterprise and the jobs that they occupy. This training is not organised to any great extent to meet the needs of people’s own career paths. Individual initiative plays a more important role in the training offered under public employment policies. In order to attend this training, however, people have to be in a particular situation, i.e. unemployed. It offers no more than short-term help for people who are in a crisis situation.

In summary, while the resources channelled into continuing training have grown substantially over the last twenty years, little of this increase has gone into own-initiative training which has become very peripheral within continuing vocational training as a whole. Continuing training has developed in two main ways: either at the initiative of enterprises and or as a result of public policies to help with occupational integration or to combat unemployment.

The links between training, the labour market and employment

The development of continuing training in France outlined above has gone together with several very marked changes in the role of training and its links with the labour market and employment.

Enterprises and continuing training

The 1971 law gives enterprises a very important role. Training started to be managed in a much more rigorous way by enterprises during the 1980s. The term
“investment in training” reflects the steps that enterprises have gradually taken to step up efficiency. Enterprises have in particular tried to define precise training objectives based on an analysis of jobs, the skills required by these jobs and the skills that their employees possess. Increased competition and the constraints that competitiveness places on enterprises have consequently not just entailed increased expenditure but have also given training a much more economic role. It has gradually been realised that training is a factor in industrial efficiency as it makes it possible to adapt the labour force to the changes in skills brought about by changes in technology, changes in production organisation and the need for quality. This economic role of training, very widespread in industrialised countries, has been left to a large extent to the discretion of enterprises, bearing in mind the continuing vocational training responsibilities attributed to them by the 1971 law. This has led to the development of continuing vocational training schemes focusing chiefly on the short-term adaptation of employees to job changes in the enterprise and therefore to the development of specific skills and qualifications. Training schemes set in motion by enterprises have become shorter and are organised in a way that tends to disregard or marginalise employees’ individual initiative so that the closest possible links, controlled and organised by the enterprise, can be forged between training and employment. Employers’ and trade union organisations have also organised a supply of training to meet these short-term needs. Measures to meet medium-term needs have been largely in the area of initial vocational training. Enterprises have managed training in a more specific way that is more in keeping with short-term economic interests with the result that any training to meet medium-term career plans or not connected with immediate objectives has been disregarded. This is a breakaway from the past. Twenty-five years ago, when the 1971 law was being adopted, employees and their employers were working to timescales that were similar enough for them to negotiate how the resources that the enterprise had by law to pay were to be used. This common horizon no longer exists and the main responsibility for financial resources lies with employers.

While this may be overstating the case somewhat, the way in which continuing training is currently organised by enterprises gives priority to training for the most stable and highly qualified employees of larger enterprises and gives rise to specific skills rather than general skills that can be put to use in the labour market.

The link between training, promotion and mobility

The most striking fact in the long term is the gradual disintegration of the link between training and upward career mobility. At the beginning of the 1970s, 55% of employees who had attended training at the initiative of their enterprise moved up the career ladder (change of occupational grade or greater hierarchical responsibility) following this training. The figure for 1993 is no more than 9% (Podevin, 1995). The link has also disintegrated for employees attending training at their own initiative. At the end of the 1960s, 35% of these employees moved up the career ladder at the end of their training, whereas the figure is now 11%. Increasing numbers of young people are, moreover, using this training to find a first or another job: 17% now as against 3% twenty-five years ago.

The very rapid growth in the number of precarious jobs (fixed-term contracts, temporary work) and changes in the structure of employment (employment in industry has fallen sharply, whereas service-sector employment has grown) have led to a sharp rise in forced occupational mobility. Four and a half million employees changed jobs between 1988 and 1993, in comparison with three and a half million between 1980 and 1985. This mobility has had the most impact among the youngest age-groups and among workers in sectors undergoing major restructuring. 29% of employees aged under 45 and 38% of employees of private enterprises changed jobs between 1988 and 1993 (source: INSEE’s vocational training and qualification survey, 1993).

Paradoxically, the most mobile groups have far fewer opportunities for continuing training. Between 1988 and 1993, 42% of employees who continued to work in the same public-sector enterprise received training at the initiative of the enterprise...
Training and unemployment

While the economic situation and the control of continuing training by enterprises have therefore played a part in marginalising employee initiative and training of the social advancement type, the constraints of unemployment and the problems raised by the occupational integration of young people have meant that the State has not been able to counterbalance this trend.

Training and individual initiative

While continuing vocational training has grown considerably in overall terms since the beginning of the 1970s, it has also undergone far-reaching change. This overall change is out of kilter; however, with the types of continuing training that are most in keeping with European approaches. It seems that fewer people are attending training at their own initiative than in the past. The systems set up by the public authorities and the social partners are stagnating or declining and the initiatives launched by the social partners are producing only limited results. Lifelong education seems therefore to be based on a double paradox: on the one hand, stable employment promotes training and mobility discourages it and, on the other hand, career advances are less often brought about by continuing vocational training. In practice, we are moving away from rather than towards the opportunities that lifelong education offers.

However, everything is relative. There is an ongoing demand for training from individuals during their working lives. The nature of this demand has changed, however, since it is now shaped by new occupational routes.

Occupational routes and training

People attend training, which takes up their time and income, for a variety of reasons. This is borne out by the study of own-initiative trainees in the institutions mentioned above (Correia, 1996; Fond-Harmant, 1996).

In the 1960s and 1970s, people attended training during their working lives so that they could obtain a significant career promotion. At that time the main objective was to obtain the highest possible qualification as it was felt that qualifications enabled access to a higher occupational grade. Promotion from technician to engineer after obtaining an engineering diploma in continuing training was an archetypal example. This 1960s- and 1970s-style training for career or social advancement (Terrot, 1983; Thuiller, 1977), predominant twenty years ago, has now taken a back seat. This type of training was in keeping with the industrial model of the 1960s and 1970s. The labour management methods of that time, based on fairly stable employment, encouraged promotional mobility within large enterprises or outside in markets of an occupational type. The length of training, which could
be as much as a few years if it was necessary to combine training with work, was not therefore a deterrent since people were in stable employment and were very likely to be promoted when their training was complete.

This model has given way to the more flexible labour market typical of small enterprises and the services sector which is growing rapidly and bringing about new occupational routes and new uses of training.

The horizons of some employees’ working lives have been greatly foreshortened, in the sense that they can no longer predict how their careers and professional lives will develop in the long term. Many people are therefore giving themselves shorter-term objectives. The continuing training that they attend is structured around these objectives. Once these have been achieved, they set themselves new objectives that may entail a further cycle of training if they feel that this training will allow them to make headway.

Other people, often young employees, undergo a succession of disappointing work experiences as a result of constant changes in the content of their work brought about by rapid changes in jobs. Training is then used as a way of looking for and finding a more interesting job.

In addition, the constant rise, particularly rapid since the beginning of the 1990s, in the initial educational level of young people leaving the education system has shaken up the requirements needed to enter the various social strata. Many young people consequently feel that the job that they are in is not in keeping with their initial training. For them, training is then a way of combating the feeling that they have been downgraded.

For some employees, training is not of immediate use. They form a group with different motivations. Some feel that their jobs are threatened, others are looking for jobs and others would like to be better situated in their professional environment. For all these people, training is a way of accumulating knowledge that they can convert, when the time comes, into occupational skills.

**Individual initiative and the new labour market**

While none of these routes or uses of training are new, they seem to have become much more important over the last ten years. The relatively linear paths of long-term social and career advancement have been replaced by a whole range of different paths themselves involving training that is more diversified in terms of its length, organisation and content. Between the most stable employees, who benefit most from training organised by enterprises, and groups with major labour market problems who benefit from public funding from the State or Regions, there is now a considerable gap that is occupied by a working population that is very mobile in the labour market but for whom access to continuing vocational training raises genuine problems. It is this latter population that is gaining importance within the training that people attend at their own initiative discussed above, while in contrast the population in the most stable employment is gradually accounting for less and less of this group.

Examination of the occupational and training routes of people who attend training at their own initiative shows that the reasons for attending training are changing. The population attending this kind of training reflects the current changes in the labour market and the new roles that training can play in helping people to achieve their career plans. The different ways in which these people are using training point to the existence of training needs that are not connected with either the immediate needs of enterprises or the needs of groups with major labour market problems and which cannot therefore be satisfied by training organised by enterprises or by programmes to combat unemployment. These needs have been shaped by changes in the labour market and the development of the role that training plays in occupational mobility. These people do not just want to obtain promotion in the enterprise in which they are stably employed but rather to find a better job or a job that they prefer in terms of salary, working conditions, personal interests, etc. They also want to be in control of their mobility and its occupational development and the risks and

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opportunities of the labour market and to use the resources that are available to them: time, money, the available training supply and possibly public assistance schemes.

Obstacles to the development of lifelong education

The population that has coped best with labour market changes and more generally the population that is most mobile in this market and is accounting for an increasing proportion of the labour market, faces problems of access to vocational training because of the way in which it is currently organised. This is probably because there are obstacles to individual initiative in the area of training. These obstacles are of at least three types: working conditions, the training supply and the link between employment and training.

Over the last fifteen years, working conditions have changed to such an extent that it has become increasingly difficult to attend training at one’s own initiative. A number of factors have played a part in this. The pressures of work have risen sharply as the various surveys available show. Employees are rarely allowed to change their working hours so that they can attend training. Combining the effort required by a job with the effort required by training is another major obstacle even though working hours have become shorter. If own-initiative training is to be revitalised, new compromises will have to be found between individual initiative and enterprise measures that make it easier to combine work and training.

The existing supply of continuing training is often unable to offer training schemes matched to a range of occupational routes. The polarisation of the supply into long-term training leading to qualifications and very short training, the fact that people with different needs are offered the same curricula, the failure to take account of any professional experience that has been acquired, etc., are relatively well-known shortcomings on the part of the supply. The introduction of more modular training and personalised training routes, the validation of academic and professional experience, the organisation of training outside or during working hours and the development of guidance during working life are all slow processes that entail a radical overhaul of continuing training in France whose organisation has long been modelled on initial education.

However, a further obstacle that is more difficult to overcome may well curb the development of lifelong education: the link between employment and training. An initial aspect of this link has to do with the increasing importance that is attached to certificates and initial education in social attitudes, enterprises’ recruitment practices and career prospects. An initial education certificate is a necessary filter in any access to a social or occupational category. Continuing training and its certificates are seen only as “back-up routes” or “second chances” that are of less value and importance in the labour market. The most efficient investment is considered to be the investment in initial education.

A further aspect of the link between training and employment lies in the relationships between training levels and employment grades, between the use of continuing training and chances of promotion and between training levels and reduced risks of unemployment. These relationships are tending to become confused. While there may be fewer opportunities for forging a career in an enterprise, it is often the case that training is no longer seen as providing protection against unemployment. There is a growing gap between what employees can expect from training in order to plan their careers and their employers’ needs from the point of view of adapting production systems or labour organisation. In the near future there may well be a crisis of confidence in the usefulness and interest of all forms of training.

There are consequently many obstacles in the way of the development of lifelong education. They have probably become worse in recent years. Reversing this trend and re-balancing the French system by giving a more important role to individual initiative in training will therefore be a very difficult task.


