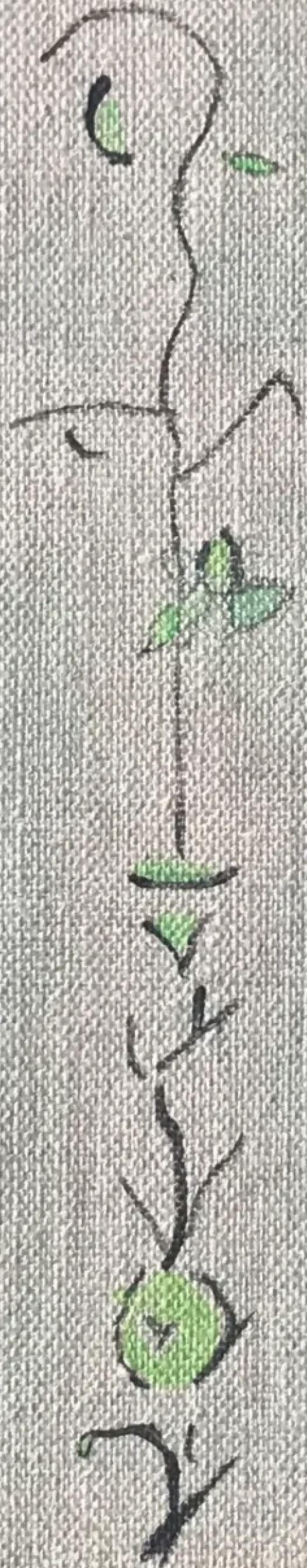


ISSN 2979-3343 (Online)

National Policies of Adult and Lifelong Learning and Education

Volume 2, Number 1

France



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Introduction

This report on national policies of adult and lifelong learning is one of a series commissioned by Research Network 4 of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Lifelong Learning Hub. It is published by the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CR&DALL), University of Glasgow, School of Education, 11 Eldon St, Glasgow G3 6NH, UK. It is a collaboration between the ASEM LLL Hub, CR&DALL, and the PASCAL Observatory's Centre for Lifelong Learning Ecosystems, Adi Shankara Institute of Engineering and Technology, India.

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Benoit Berthou, 2026.

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Citation

Berthou, B. (2026). National Policies of Adult and Lifelong Learning and Education: France. In the Series: Osborne M. and Shalini S. (2026). *National Policies of Adult and Lifelong Learning and Education*, Volume 2, Number 1, Glasgow: Centre for Research and Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning.

A catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

First published 2026

ISSN 2979-3343 (Online)

NATIONAL POLICIES OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION: FRANCE

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General Historical Background of ALE and LLL

Continuing education as an instrument of social justice was born at the end of the 18th century during the French Revolution, under the impetus of Condorcet, and the idea has become a reality in France over the centuries. Creation of major specialized institutions such as the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), of public establishments offering all levels of qualification (Agence nationale pour la Formation des Adultes, AFPA, 1946), and finally, reorganization of all universities in the 1960s, which were required to build continuing education centres, have been the principal means of development of the field.

All these initiatives have contributed to establishing the current Service Public de l'Emploi (Public Employment Service), whose objective is to promote inclusion and equal opportunities through vocational training. The mandatory opening of all so-called “national diplomas” (accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research) to continuing education and apprenticeships in 2018, preceded by the creation of the Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE, “Validation of Acquired professional Experience”, 1985) system (allowing the academic recognition of skills and knowledges acquired in employment situations) has progressively enabled the development of a rich certification offer for all types of audiences.

Gradually, individuals have been granted new social rights, which were included alongside social security in the 1946 constitution; the right to vocational training aligns directly with the philosophy of Condorcet's permanent education movement. However, the most

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significant development came after the social movements of 1968, in the form of a first agreement between social partners: representatives of employees and employers established a shared governance model (still in place today) and secured the inclusion of vocational training in labour law.

The 1970 law thus established the principle of private funding for continuing education, through a financial obligation placed on companies that gradually took the form of two mechanisms. A collective approach (the Plan de formation or “training plan”), initiated by the employer, aimed to achieve common objectives (skills development, diversification, etc.) common to all employees of a given company. And an individualized approach, initiated by the employee, was reaffirmed by the laws of 1984 and subsequent legislation through several mechanisms: *Congé Individuel de formation* (CIF, “Individual Training Leave”), *Droit Individuel à la Formation* (DIF, “Individual Right to Vocational Training”) and *Compte Personnel de Formation* (CPF, “Individual Training Account”).

Current relevant national legislation pertaining to adult and lifelong learning (ALE) and lifelong learning (LLL)

Stability has characterized the last five years, as the country has not undergone any reforms since the enactment of a new law in 2018. This situation contrasts sharply with the preceding period (2018-2009), during which three successive reforms were implemented. We appear to be dealing with a successful public policy, as evidenced by the very comprehensive datasets published annually by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE, 2025).

According to the survey conducted from September 2022 to March 2023, the professional training needs of the French population are generally being met. 49% of active (employed or looking for employment) individuals reported not wishing to undertake any training in the past 12 months, while 43% had completed some training, and 8% did not have the opportunity to do so. While seemingly marginal, this figure remains significant (we are talking about a country with 30 million employed individuals).

Those data highlight the public success of an initiative (DARES, 2025): the *Compte Personnel de formation* (CPF, or Individual Learning Account). Established by the 2018 law and operational since November 2019, it allows all private-sector employees, as well as self-employed individuals, freelancers, and the unemployed, to benefit from financial support.

This takes the form of a personal ‘training account’ automatically credited by the employer with €500 each year, up to a maximum of €5,000.

These funds are strictly designated for training purposes and are tied to the individual. They cannot be transferred to a third party, and employees retain access to them regardless of their professional situation - whether they change employers or experience unemployment. It is defined as a social right, aligning with the first of the European pillars of social rights (the right to lifelong learning).

According to the 2024 Activity Report of the Caisse des Dépôts (the French state’s public financial institution, 2025), 40.1 million people currently hold a CPF, available to all workers operating in France, regardless of nationality. Since 2019, 8.6 million training courses have been funded (1.4 million in 2023 alone).

Extent of devolution of powers in ALE and LLL to regions and cities, and to social partners

Within the French lifelong learning landscape, the issue of devolution remains highly problematic within a system that diverges significantly from that of other European, American and Asian countries.

- A national VET operator. In this regard, French legislation reflects a very clear choice, symbolized by the creation of ‘France Compétences’ (literally: ‘Skill France’). This agency manages the registration of training programs in a national directory (thus determining their eligibility to the CPF and part of their funding) and also acts as an arbiter for financing apprenticeship contracts, determined according to labour needs without any geographical bias.
- Social partners in a governance role: the professional branches (comprising both the employee trade unions and employers’ professional organizations) play a key role in the governance of France Compétences. This involvement ensures the management of professional training actions, related accordingly to employment needs. It should be noted that their means of action were simplified (and undoubtedly reinforced): eleven *Opérateurs de Compétences* (OPCO, literally skills operators) grouping hundreds of professions that are responsible for negotiating (among other priorities) training rights and recognition within employees’ career paths. Previously, this

responsibility was fragmented across a hundred operators, making the current structure more streamlined and cohesive.

Therefore, there has been a shift in public authorities' role, which has been stripped of all power, particularly that of regional governments. Previously, regions approved the creation of apprenticeship groups based on territorial needs and accredited the *Centres de Formation d'Apprentis* (CFA, i.e. Apprentice Training Centres) responsible for the management of their program. Those can now be established without any prior authorization and are funded based on a national *cost-per-contract*. Determined by France Compétences, this cost (collected by the training organization) is allocated for each training program based on the employment needs identified by each professional branch.

Faced with this new landscape, public authorities appear to be reorganizing to address evolving training needs.

- Local governments, whether municipalities or intermunicipal bodies, seem to readily take the lead in providing training for retirees. Through the facilities they manage, particularly libraries, they frequently offer programs designed to help retirees master new technologies (introductory courses on computer skills, social media, etc.) or gain an understanding of contemporary society. Additionally, they actively support *universities of leisure time* (formerly called *universities for the elderly*, or *universities for senior citizens*) organized within universities or other institutions.
- Local, territorial (départements) or regional authorities seem to be actively involved (jointly or separately, depending on the situation) in promoting inclusion. A prime example is their strong support for the *Diplôme d'Accès aux Etudes Universitaires* (DAEU, literally *University Access Diplomas*). This certification allows young adults (aged at least 21) and all types of adult target groups without a *baccalauréat* (the French high school diploma, level 4 of the European Qualifications Framework) to obtain a qualification that opens the door to higher education.
- Regions seem to want to play a structuring role. They have heavily invested in the development of *Campus des Métiers et des Qualification* (CMQ, literally *Campus of professions and qualifications*), innovative organizations designed to host and develop training programs within specific sectors regardless of education levels. The Versailles *Métiers du patrimoine* campus (Heritage professions Campus), located directly in front of the famous palace, offers a range of programs: vocational *baccalauréats*, master's degrees in Heritage valorisation skills, national certifications

such as *stonemason*, and it even hosts PhD students. While appealing, this model has not yet been evaluated regarding its impact and effectiveness.

Finally, the social protection organizations (especially *France Travail*, literally *France employment*, the agency that takes charge of the unemployed individuals) play a critical support role that should not be overlooked. Their effort aligns with a broader policy of upskilling.

- Low-qualified ‘active’ individuals (in an employment situation, but without a high school diploma or *baccalauréat*) receive an annual CPF top-up of €800 (instead of €500).
- Unemployed individuals (whose CPF are, by definition, not funded by their employers) benefit from an additional allowance from *France Travail* to supplement their existing training rights.

This latter measure addresses a clear need. According to the INSEE survey (2025), 75% of the unemployed individuals reported not participating in any training (of any type) in the past 12 months, despite 20% expressing a desire to do so.

Influence and/or policy linkages to supranational organisations

The French vocational training and adult education system is part of a long tradition of organization (or even self-management) of the various trades and professional branches. Supranational organizations thus had only limited influence, except for the EU. This is firstly because the European Qualification Framework is incorporated in the National Directory of Professional Certifications (the French National Qualification Framework): any degree falling under the *Licence Master Doctorat* (BMD) system is thus eligible for the financing methods described above and recognized within the collective agreements that manage career advancement and remuneration of professional branches.

Secondly, at a more conceptual level, French and European policies have always maintained a strong proximity. Thus, the *Plan d’Investissement dans les Compétences* (skills investment plan, launched in France between 2018 and 2022) seems to echo the skills policy of the European Union, while the generalization of the CPF model is considered at the level of the European Union.

European university alliances could, however, be game changers (Osborne, 2025). By bringing together various types of public institutions (universities, engineering schools, business schools, etc.) alongside private institutions or those managed by professional associations, they aim to foster synergies within European partners².

Financing of LLL

In terms of public policy, France, under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, appears to have made a strategic choice: to reform and democratize both the financing of and access to vocational training. In this regard, the gamble seems to have paid off: CPF has become a household term, discussed even in family meals- whereas previously, people would have said “*I quit and that’s it*” to express dissatisfaction with their job (CENTRE INFFO, 2025). This is, in my opinion, far from insignificant: lifelong learning has become part of the public consciousness, and we have undoubtedly entered a new culture of learning. However, the system has blind spots that raise doubts about its long-term sustainability.

Regarding beneficiaries, it is notable that underemployed individuals are insufficiently considered. This is particularly evident in the case of part-time workers, who receive half of the annual funding in their CPF account, despite the fact that this situation is often involuntary and is not intended to be permanent. Furthermore, retirees are excluded from the CPF system, as eligibility is tied to activity. Even though municipalities and other public authorities often step in, there remains a clear social demand for training opportunities among this demographic.

At the systemic level, it seems we are dealing with an effective mechanism that has become a victim of its own success. Massive fraud has been observed, stemming from the CPF’s very structure, which allows users to bypass intermediaries (employers or social services) to directly purchase training. The aim is clear: lower barriers and empower employees to choose their professional future (the title of the 2018 law). However, this comes at a cost to the nation, even if government communication remains discreet on the subject. A 2021 report by *Traitement du renseignement et action contre les circuits financiers clandestins* (TRACFIN), literally Intelligence processing and action against clandestine financial

² As the development officer of an alliance, I can attest to the fruitful dialogue they enable tuition fees for initial training (i-vet), funding models for vocational training (c-vet), and broader conceptions of lifelong learning. While divergences are evident, the pursuit of convergences is enlightening, potentially foundational for shaping a European vision of lifelong learning.

networks, estimates losses at €43.2 million for the current year (Ministère des finances, 2022). Fraud includes identity theft, fake training programs and even partial kickbacks of CPF funds to individuals. In response, the government introduced a ‘co-payment’ requirement, a mandatory fee for beneficiaries. Re-evaluated at €102.23 on January 1, 2025, this symbolic amount (often waived for social reasons) aims to correct unfortunate deviations. These may indeed have jeopardised the future of an initiative whose deployment was anticipated on a European scale, and which could have made it possible to address lifelong learning on a continental scale.

The fact remains that we are faced with a public policy for lifelong learning that is both effective and costly. A French Senate report (2025) estimates the CPF expenditures financed by France Compétences at €1.9 billion (down from €2.7 billion in 2021).

The role of sectors and involvement of community stakeholders

One might have expected that the 2018 law and the system it established would spark significant resistance from employers. After all, it broke away from the existing logic: formalizing a training plan for all employees and having the right to accept (or reject, with a limit of two refusals) their *droit individuel à la formation* (individual right to training).

With the CPF, employees have an inalienable right to training. They no longer need the permission of their employers but rather seek an agreement for leave or flexible work arrangements, along with contributions to their CPF to cover training costs.

A shift in work culture? Millennials, Gen Z, Gen X...discover the expectations of your young employees: France Travail (2025) directly addresses the question. And it seems clear that a different culture of professional training is encouraged: employer contributions are facilitated (a credit card or a bank transfer in the company's name is sufficient, and more frequent). Training is expected to be conceived as a project-based extension of the traditional annual ‘professional development review.’

Beyond the CPF, French companies have strongly embraced another form of professional training: apprenticeship, which combines on-the-job training with classroom-based learning and has seen significant development since 2018. According to the Ministère du travail (Ministry of Labor, 2025a), France surpassed one million apprentices by 2024. This model offers undeniable benefits for youth employment (apprentices under 30) and career translation (professionalization contracts for those over 30).

Despite its virtues, the system is far from financially balanced: France Compétences (2023) acknowledges having allocated €21.6 billion to apprenticeship funding in 2021. This represents a deficit (compared to revenue collected from businesses) estimated by Jeanne Boyer and Eric Nunès in a leading newspaper, such as *Le Monde* (2026), at €15 billion. Is it a subsidy to the private sector or an investment in the nation's skill development? The debate is likely to intensify in the coming years. Yet no one can deny that France has experienced a true vocational training big bang over the past decade.

The tracking of the effective implementation of policies

As evidenced by the data I have gathered, this public policy on vocational training is subject to constant evaluation and recurring debates. Its cost, moreover, 'almost mechanically' makes it a subject of public debate, raised publicly during the annual budget vote (Ministère des Finances, 2026) in the National Assembly. Nevertheless, I would like to offer several points for consideration in conclusion.

A political consensus on vocational training? Strangely, given its cost, the public policy on vocational training initiated over the last 10 years has never been the subject of heated political debate. At most, the idea of an *employee-entrepreneur* being forced to become master of their professional destiny was criticised... But, from the far left to the far right, the creation of a new social right to training has not fundamentally sparked debate, whereas the reforms to pensions and unemployment insurance provoked very violent demonstrations. Should we see this as the emergence of a form of national lifelong learning concern, capable of grasping the evolution of the world of work and the ageing of our population?

What role for universities and public institutions? Like all stakeholders in lifelong learning, universities and public institutions benefited from the opportunities created by the public policies, but to varying degrees. The development of apprenticeships, for example, was spectacular and benefited from the expertise of universities. These long programs (more than 400 hours per year, spread over several years), directly integrated with professional environments (and thus enriched by research activities), can be seen as a valorisation of our traditional bachelor's and national master's degrees. However, the same cannot be said for short, skill-focused programs aligned with the funding capacity of the CPF. The role of the university in vocational training remains an open question.

The validation of prior learning and experience (VAE) is struggling to modernize. France was a pioneer in this area, offering a system that allows individuals to apply for university

certifications based on skills and knowledge acquired through professional activity. While fully operational, the system's success remains limited: 251,000 diplomas obtained this way in 20 years, with approximately 10,000 per year in the last three years (Ministère du travail, 2025b). This has prompted a reform plan based on two pillars:

- Simplification: VAE can now grant targeted access to a training program, allowing candidates to enter classrooms in specific courses that will be evaluated according to the traditional procedures, whereas previously separate procedures were required.
- Enhanced visibility: creation of a national portal (France VAE) to improve accessibility and awareness.

However, despite addressing the two major identified obstacles (complexity and lack of visibility), the implementation of this reform is still pending. This delay is regrettable, given that the need for a streamlined procedure to bridge the gap between the professional and academic worlds becomes increasingly evident in the era of European university alliances.

Adult career guidance may be a political blind spot. While data and feedback from industry stakeholders suggest the current French system for vocational training is effective, a critical gap remains in adult career guidance, or more precisely, professional development counselling. The legislature acknowledged this issue in the 2018 law, which created the *Conseil en évolution professionnelle* (CEP, literally Career Development Advisory Service). Awarded through regional public contracts, this service is entrusted to several operators but seems to contradict the very philosophy of the CPF. This creates an obvious blind spot: facilitating access to training without valuing employees' reflection on their career trajectories. There's a paradox that the Ministère du Travail's communication (2025b) fails to conceal: a significant portion of CPF funds is used for *bilans de compétences* (skills assessments), training programs specifically designed to help employees position themselves within the job market.

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