



Preventing and combating illiteracy

Summary of the CNFPTLV Report submitted to Mr Michel SAPIN, the French Minister for Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue, at the Council's plenary session on 16 December 2013 and to Ms George PAU-LANGEVIN, the Deputy Minister for Educational Success, on 10 February 2014.

On 31 May 2013, the Minister for Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue, and the Minister for Education asked the French National Council for Lifelong Vocational Training (CNFPTLV) to make proposals with a view to setting objectives and strategic priorities for preventing and combating illiteracy over the coming years.

From June to November, a working group reflecting the four-party make-up of the CNFPTLV was convened under the chairmanship of Danielle KAISERGRUBER. Drawing on previous reports on this topic (reports by IGAS [French Inspectorate General of Social Affairs] and IGEN [Inspectorate General of National Education] in 2012, the French Employment Guidance Council in 2010, and the French Council for Social Analysis in 2009), the working group carried out twelve interviews to supplement its study with practical feedback and analyses conducted at any moment in people's lives by different organisations in the field. The work was carried out in close cooperation with the French National Agency against Illiteracy (ANLCI) which represents 67 major organisations all dedicated to the same cause. The Agency took part in coordinating the studies and helped write the Report with the Ministries in charge of Education and Vocational Training, as well as representatives from the regions and social partners.

In 2013 the focus was on raising awareness and mobilising efforts to prevent and combat illiteracy, thanks to the impetus generated by declaring the fight against illiteracy a "*Grande cause nationale*". The high point of the year was the Conference on Illiteracy held in Lyon in November 2013, attended by many French and European institutions and associations working in the sector. These efforts now need to be pursued and given the requisite political and institutional support.

The Report requested by the two Ministries describes the situation and current trends regarding illiteracy, and concludes that an annual assessment would be desirable. It catalogues the actions currently taken to combat illiteracy at every age, from earliest childhood to the training of workers and jobseekers. To combat illiteracy, it is especially important to reinforce

coordination and to “(re)train” in basic skills. Lastly, regarding prescription, the Regions should take the lead as they already have responsibility for young people, jobseekers and vocational training.

Its strategic orientations and recommendations can therefore be grouped into four broad families of proposals:

- to reduce the illiteracy rate by 2 points by 2018, measure the rate in each region and assess the results of the actions undertaken.
- to concentrate on prevention among children and adolescents, and training for the over-45s and inhabitants of rural areas and disadvantaged urban areas;
- to develop and reinforce regional organisation and partnerships for preventing and combating illiteracy;
- to pool best practice and innovate in the fields of guidance, education and training.

Finally, in view of the social and economic importance of this issue for the coming years and in order to perpetuate the "*Grande cause nationale*", a National Day devoted to preventing and combating illiteracy could be held every year on 8 September, to coincide with International Literacy Day.

1

Reduce the illiteracy rate by 2 points by 2018, measure the rate in each region and assess the results of the actions undertaken.

The CNFPTLV Report takes a close look at those individuals most affected by illiteracy and the significant proportion of people in a situation verging on illiteracy, by statistical methods involving definitions and profiling.

Being illiterate means not having the basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic), even after having been to school in France, needed for being autonomous in day-to-day situations. It is a major factor of financial, social and emotional exclusion, originally identified in the 1980s by the charity ATD Quart Monde, which created the term "*illettrisme*" (illiteracy).

In France, 2.5 million people, i.e. 7% of 18-to-65 year-olds, were illiterate in 2011. In addition, 3.4 million people were verging on illiterate, either because French was not their mother tongue or because they lacked the basic skills. In all, almost 5.9 million people are not proficient in basic reading or writing skills.

2.5 million people suffered from illiteracy in 2011. The proportion is 2 percent less (i.e. 600,000 people) than in 2004, the reference year, when 3,100,000 people, i.e. 9% were concerned. The INSEE survey entitled *Information et Vie Quotidienne* (IVQ – information and everyday life) is based on the ANLCI's measurements of three skills: processing of the written word, arithmetic and oral comprehension. There was also a biographical module that recorded information about the individual's origins, their socio-economic situation, etc. This revealed some of the characteristics of the 2.5 million people suffering from illiteracy.

The rate of illiteracy increases with age (53% of those who are illiterate are over 45 years old). The proportion is nearly 4% among young people from 16 to 25. Then the rate increases steadily to 5.5% for 26-35 year-olds, 7.5% for 36-45 year-olds, 8% for 46-55 year-olds and 12% for 56 to 65 year-olds.

60% of illiterate individuals are men. 9% of all men whose early schooling took place in France are illiterate compared with only 6% of women. However, more women than men have numeracy difficulties. In all, an estimated 16% of the population suffered from severe or

considerable **numeracy difficulties** (inumeracy) in 2011, or more than five million people.

Half of illiterate individuals are in employment. Half of all companies have employed at least one illiterate person. But few of them are aware of this, which implies that these people develop effective coping strategies. While women are less frequently illiterate than men, in terms of employment, the consequences of literacy difficulties are more severe for them than for men.

10% of jobseekers are illiterate, compared with only 6% of those in employment. AFPA identifies illiterate trainees in its vocational training courses, though it finds that they succeed just as well as the literate trainees because they develop coping strategies enabling them to find intelligent and effective solutions.

Lastly, 18% of the illiterate are retired, 14% are on training courses or inactive, and 8% are home-makers.

The geographical distribution of illiteracy is unequal. The rate is higher in rural areas and in disadvantaged urban areas (ZUS). In the latter, illiteracy rates can reach 10%. In the Picardy and Nord-Pas-de-Calais Regions, the rate is 11%, much higher than the average for mainland France of 7%. Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur with 6% and Haute-Normandie with 8% are close to the national average. Ile-de-France, on the other hand, is considerably lower, at 4.5%.

Rates are very high in France's Overseas Territories. 23% of the population of Réunion Island, 20% of that of Guadeloupe (for the year 2008) and French Guiana (2011), and 14% of the population of Martinique (2006) are affected by illiteracy. In New Caledonia, 18% of the adult population is affected (2013). During the Defence and Citizenship Day, organised every year by the Ministry of Defence to replace military service for all 18-year-olds, it has been found that 4.4% of young people in mainland France have severe difficulties, compared with 15 to 20% in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion Island, up to 30% of young people in French Guiana and a half of all young people in Mayotte.

It is also necessary to take into account those who are in a situation "verging on illiteracy", which encompasses close to 3.4 million people who have difficulty with writing. Among these, 1,480,000 people who were not educated in France (the "FLE" or *Français comme Langue Etrangère* population, for whom French is a second language) have severe difficulties with French and 1,880,000 people have difficulties that cannot be qualified as severe.

The objectives set for 2018 are to reduce:

- the level of illiteracy in mainland France to 5 %,
- the rate of illiteracy in all mainland regions (for those in which the difference can be measured) by 2%,
- the gap between Overseas Territories and the national average by 5%, in accordance with the plans of the Inter-ministerial Council for Overseas Territories (CIOM).

2

Concentrate on prevention among children and adolescents, and training for the over-45s and inhabitants of rural areas and disadvantaged urban areas.

The Report concludes that it is crucial to have an action plan focusing on basic skills. An ambitious programme to combat illiteracy should take into account the 5.9 million people in difficulty, coordinate the multitude of players and be backed by sufficient funds. It would be necessary to include combating failure at school with vigorous training schemes for teachers and information campaigns directed at families, together with action for learners, and for workers both at work and during (re)training.

Preventing illiteracy has become a real priority for the French Education system thanks to the mobilisation of public opinion, increasing involvement by institutions and, more recently, with the commitment given by the Ministry of Education. The “Peillon” Act of 8 July 2013 makes clear undertakings on this topic. Time is of the essence, because failure at school leads to illiteracy, followed by rapid loss of skills. These difficulties often appear at a very early stage in a child's education. Thus, 11.5% of pupils have difficulties in mastering basic French language skills at the end of Year 6 of primary school (French *CM2* – 10 to 11 years old) and 20% at the end of the compulsory school system (PISA 2009). The Report recommends supporting families lacking a good command of reading, writing and arithmetic, as soon as their children enter the school system (pre-school, primary school, middle school), by developing Educational Initiatives for Families (AEF) which establish links between the school and the families.

The educational system must make every effort to ensure that initial learning is better assimilated. The Inspectorate General for National Education reports an “educational breakdown” in primary schools, noting various deficiencies: inadequate links between French language work (reading, for example) and other disciplines; a “lack of pupil monitoring” in terms of reading skills; inadequate teaching of “writing technique”; too little use of digital tools; no training for primary-school teachers in cognitive sciences, learning mechanisms or in the sociological and psychological understanding of pupils.

Another approach would be to detect risks of illiteracy at every stage of a school career using assessment tests in Years 5 (*6^{ème}*) and 7 (*4^{ème}*), and for young apprentices. It is essential to detect vulnerabilities (dyslexia, families that are not proficient in the French language, etc.) and to implement specific and lasting support schemes.

Digital resources can be useful tools in both preventing and combating illiteracy. Illiteracy among young people today is bound to be different compared to that of previous generations because of the more intense use of digital devices. Digital tools allow access to a greater range of resources, contribute to a greater choice of teaching methods and the customisation of learning paths with a view to developing the independence of pupils. They can encourage the continuation of learning outside classroom time. Digital tools can enhance teaching practices and develop both the independence of and interaction between pupils.

However, digital tools can only contribute effectively to reinforcing basic skills if the teachers involved have received appropriate training in how to use them. There is a danger of allowing the development of “e-illiteracy” (*illectronisme*) and thus widening the gap between those who know how to use digital tools and those who have had no training. In this mission, the “Academic Digital Delegates” (DANs) and the school inspectors have an essential role to play in implementing specific training policies.

The French system of “Adapted Military Service” (SMA) provides a good example in the way it takes global responsibility for school drop-outs in overseas France. SMA is aimed at young people in French Overseas Territories and Municipalities (DOM-COM) aged between 18 and 26 who dropped out of school (30 to 40% of these young people are illiterate, and 60% leave school without the French General Certificate of Secondary Education [*Brevet des Collèges*]), as well as the long-term unemployed and young people at risk of becoming socially excluded (25% of trainees from disadvantaged urban areas). It provides them with a vocational curriculum, a revision of key skills for work situations and support for professional integration.

Regarding adults, there are several players and sources of funding involved in current initiatives. To meet the needs of companies (notably VSEs) more effectively, specific support for using the Reference List of Key Professional Skills (RCCSP) has been developed by the National Agency against Illiteracy for use in certain professional sectors, particularly the cleaning industry. It is important to capitalise on this type of sector-specific initiatives that acknowledge the acquisition of literacy skills.

At the interprofessional level, the Joint Fund for Career Protection (FPSPP) launches calls for projects backed by €54 million, and supports initiatives to combat illiteracy by financing the teaching costs and salaries of employees undergoing training.

The “Key Skills” programme, run by the Regional Directorates for Business, Competition, Consumer Affairs, Labour and Employment (DIRECCTE), is due to be taken over in the near future by the Regions. This programme, with a budget of €50 million, is aimed at people who need to develop key skills to join the job market. More than 90% of trainees are active job-seekers or simply unemployed. However, the course is also open to employees on integration through work schemes or on state-subsidised contracts, and people who do not want their employer to know they are illiterate.

The Personal Training Account created by the Act of 14 June 2013 on employment protection is suitable for this type of re-training for key skills. It sets out the rights of individuals, and key skills training schemes should be eligible.

The OPCAs (which collect and mutualise mandatory contributions for training purposes) are a key support organisation in this respect. They inform and disseminate best practice, notably among VSEs and SMEs. For people unused to the classroom, it is important to emphasise that it is possible to (re)learn at any age. On-the-job training, based on the actual vocational skills used in the workplace, is particularly appropriate: all the representatives of business in the Working Group emphasised that these people “cannot be trained outside their environment”. Training is based on a situation, a gesture, or professional texts.

Open training schemes, available to anyone, irrespective of age or employment status, are an invaluable resource for enabling equality of access to training without stigmatisation and offering customised courses.

The CNFPTLV proposes to open its Programme for Investment in the Future (PIA) to include the fight against illiteracy. As part of the National Loan Scheme (“*Grand Emprunt*”) launched in April 2009, although neither of the “Training” sections cover illiteracy in the strictest sense, projects that both satisfy the technical requirements and promote innovative schemes with which to combat illiteracy could well be eligible for funding by the PIA.

Lastly, the Report states that it would be useful to raise the profile of training organisations that are active in the fight against illiteracy.

3

Develop and reinforce regional organisation and partnerships for preventing and combating illiteracy.

To cooperate effectively in the French Regions in the fight against illiteracy, it is necessary to coordinate the players and to professionalise the teams on the ground. The CNFPTLV proposes that the ANLCI should maintain permanent representatives in the regions and that Regional Plans to Combat Illiteracy should be placed under the control of the Regional Coordination Committees for Employment and Vocational Training (CCREFPs).

The ANLCI fulfils an essential mission of coordination, technical oversight and pooling of resources, with a budget of €7 million. Its achievements serve as a reference and are used by all players irrespective of geography or business sector as a basis for a wide range of different types of well-functioning partnership. The ANLCI has set up some very effective associations to support official activities and has also involved NGOs. This dedicated structure has been providing a common platform and support for decision-makers and operators working directly in the field since 1998 (under its present name since 2001). Depending on priorities, and on political and budgetary choices, the ANLCI's illiteracy representatives are posted or seconded in the regions in different ways: SGAR (12 positions), CARIF-OREF (6 positions), DRJSCS (3 positions), Regional Education Authorities, DIRECCTE and CRDP (1 position), other entity (2 positions). The regional ANLCI representatives are usually dependent on the regional context and the positions taken by local institutions. The Report recommends that, in order that the "training, employment, economic and illiteracy" aspects be better taken into consideration, along with the wide variety of players involved, illiteracy representatives should be placed within a State-Region body, with permanent links with representatives of business and labour. The role of illiteracy representative could thus be entrusted to the CARIF-OREF and formalised by an agreement between the State, the Regions and the ANLCI, annexed to the Regional Plan to Combat Illiteracy and thus become an integral part of the CPRDFP (Regional Development Plan for Occupational Training).

The Region becomes the authority responsible for organising the fight against illiteracy. At present, the CCREFPs have no specific competence in matters of illiteracy. At the regional level however, they are the only multipartite bodies associating all the players from the different branches (State, Regional Council, representatives of business and labour) and with a joint presidency, shared by the State and the Region. Because of their regional significance, their responsibilities, the fact that they include elected officials with responsibility for preventing and combating illiteracy, the fact that their role is to encourage cooperation and optimise coordination, that illiteracy affects all social groups and that two thirds of sufferers are in the active population, the coordination committees could very well have a role to play in this matter, in the future.

Under the Regional Plan to Combat Illiteracy, the areas most heavily affected by unemployment and poverty, rural areas and disadvantaged urban areas, require more intense measures. The burden of illiteracy found in these areas makes it more difficult to break out of a vicious circle of inferiority and social shame, by limiting access to the world of work and training; making it more difficult to benefit from the possibilities of active participation in clubs or unions; raising obstacles to the use of goods and services; and by restricting discussions within the family of educational (monitoring progress at school and help with homework) or cultural issues.

Several Regions have made notable achievements, including the Centre, Ile de France and Basse Normandie, as well as in overseas France.

The [Regional Council of the Centre Region](#) has developed a scheme for the acquisition of basic knowledge, called “Visas Libre Savoir” (Free Visas to Knowledge). The scheme is open to all and consists of short-term training courses covering the key skills for becoming independent in daily life and finding or keeping a job.

Anyone can be eligible for up to eight “Visas Libre Savoir” (adults or young school-leavers over 16). An unusual feature of the scheme is that anyone can benefit and there are absolutely no pre-conditions to be met. The scheme is used by close to 25,000 people a year.

The [Basse-Normandie Region](#) decided to create, as part of the CCREFP, an Illiteracy Commission bringing together all the players active in preventing and combating illiteracy. It also set up a Regional Observatory on Illiteracy as a resource for the players and to enable them to target the areas most in need. In addition, a scheme to improve practices for professionals combating illiteracy has been initiated through a regional professionalisation programme funded jointly by the State and the Region.

In [Ile-de-France](#), training is primarily for new arrivals and those of foreign origin, who have received little or no schooling in their country of origin. The Region also provides a programme entitled “Avenir Jeunes” (For Young People and the Future) closely integrated with their career plans.

[Overseas](#), Sub-Prefects with responsibility for young people and social cohesion supervise activities for preventing and combating illiteracy.

4

Pool best practice and innovate in the fields of guidance, education and training

The CNFPTLV considers it essential to combine the issue of illiteracy with the topics of employment, guidance and training. This means making detection and prevention tools more easily available, pooling best practice, and raising awareness among guidance professionals; and also encouraging innovative initiatives and partnerships between the education and training sector and the research sector.

[Raising awareness and developing the resources for all guidance professionals](#) at any age and irrespective of official structure (the French labour exchange system – “*Pôle Emploi*”, local youth missions, the OPCAs, etc.).

Career guidance centres play an essential role in the fight against illiteracy. It is primarily during guidance phases that it is possible to identify and arrange assistance for people with difficulties with the written word and language. While many initiatives are being pursued in this field, it is important to continue with efforts to raise awareness, develop resources and improve the professionalism of all those with responsibility for guidance, reception, information and assistance.

[As the Regional Service for Careers Guidance and Advice on Professional Mobility grows](#), if the illiteracy aspect is not sufficiently taken into account, there is a risk that guidance for all will become a source of social inequality and exclusion.

Similarly, while self-service centres and online services offer vast possibilities regarding the availability of information and access to services, they risk exacerbating the exclusion of those on the wrong side of the digital divide. It is important to ensure that these services are fully available to the illiterate via a combination of different media (the Internet, telephone services, but also television, videos or audio media).

Through the roles assigned them in the different official texts, and through their mission to inform about training, to act as observatories, and to ensure the professionalisation and assistance of agents on the ground, [the CARIF-OREFs are meant to contribute to raising awareness, and developing and providing resources for all professionals](#) with responsibility for reception, information, guidance and assistance.

Lastly, the Report considers that greater use should be made of the results of [neuroscience](#) research into the psychic and neuronal mechanisms involved in learning. More use should be made of current developments in the cognitive sciences for developing innovative teaching methods, to help overcome difficulties in acquiring basic skills.

CONCLUSION

It is therefore indispensable for regional schemes to combat illiteracy and regional plans to develop career guidance and vocational training to work more closely together and coordinate their activities. In the context of plans for future decentralisation and the White Paper for mobilising the Regions for growth and employment and promoting territorial equality, it is essential to continue the existing dynamic, maintain the commitment of all players and the conviction that illiteracy issues can be an important part of the responsibility of the next generation of CPRDFPs.

The fight against illiteracy is vital in itself but the issue is also revelatory of inadequate qualification of the active population and difficulties within the French educational system, which seems unable to carry all who follow it through to the necessary level of skill to achieve employment and live fully the life of a citizen. For this reason, the fight against illiteracy must continue and be reinforced in the coming years while also becoming increasingly integrated in national and regional initiatives aimed at offering more equal access to lifelong learning and training.

Finally, in view of the social and economic importance of this issue for the coming years and in order to perpetuate the "*Grande cause nationale*", [a National Day devoted to preventing and combating illiteracy could be held every year on 8 September](#), the same day as International Literacy Day.

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