

“Learning from and through work”, an alternative route to qualification



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A good number of young people leave the education system without qualifications. For most of them, coming as they often do from disadvantaged areas, from areas on the periphery of towns and cities or from rural areas, access to the formal education and training system cannot be taken for granted. For them, “Learning from and through work” may represent an alternative. Drawing on a study carried out in Argentina, France, Morocco and Senegal in the construction and public works sector, this edition of *Céreq Bref* focuses on the conditions that encourage the development and recognition of skills through “acquired from and through work”.



YOUNG PERSON
 NON GRADUATE
 ON THE JOB TRAINING
 INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON
 OCCUPATION IN THE PUBLIC WORK INDUSTRY
 KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION
 VALIDATION OF ACQUIRED SKILLS

The figures given in this paragraph are not all based on international statistical data. They are therefore not always strictly comparable between countries.

To enable each individual to gain a recognised qualification that helps to expand the opportunities for them to obtain decent work throughout their working life is a major challenge that echoes the UN’s Agenda 2030. This challenge becomes even more acute in the case of those young people who either did not attend school or left education early and entered the labour market, whether formal or informal, at a very young age. In the four countries investigated for the study (see box), the situation for such young people differs. These four national contexts can be sketched out with the aid of certain available indicators.

Since the 1990s, Argentina has seen a sharp rise in unemployment and in the “popular” subsistence economy because of successive crises, which have led to the development of welfare and employment programmes aimed in particular at young people and the least well qualified from low-income households. Approximately one young person in five in Argentina is neither enrolled in education nor in work. Almost 70% of the young people who have not finished secondary education are working in informal jobs, which account for 34% of all jobs [1]. In France, 14.4 % of young people aged between 18 and 24 were considered to be NEET in 2021, that is to say they were neither in employment nor in education or training (in formal ways, it should be added) nor in education or training. Of these, the share with lower secondary qualifications at best who have never worked was put at 20% [2]. These latter individuals, sometimes described as “vulnerable NEETs”, are the principal focus of public employment policy programmes. This group is sometimes extended to include illiterate

young people, who account for approximately 5% of young people in metropolitan France aged between 18 and 25 but almost 15% in Martinique and 29% in French Guiana [3]. The notion of “informal” economy in France is based on surveys that often target particular sectors and focus on undeclared work (2% of employees in 2020 in the sectors surveyed according to ACOSS, the national body responsible for collecting social security contributions [4]). In Morocco, almost 29% of young people aged between 15 and 24 [5] are regarded as NEETs. Starting in the 2010s, Morocco has launched a number of large-scale strategic programmes aimed at expanding the number of good quality jobs in order to meet young people’s expectations. However, informal employment is estimated to account for 36% of total employment [6]. Most of people in informal employment have no more than a primary school education, and one third of them are under 35 [6]. For its part, Senegal has seen a succession of growth and development plans and launched various initiatives to promote the employment and training of young people, often with a focus on self-entrepreneurship and access to credit. Illiteracy remains a significant problem in this country and almost 33% of young people aged between 15 and 24 are regarded as NEETs (cf. World Bank data 2017). The share of jobs in the informal sector is put at 69% of total employment [7], and approximately 40% of the workers in the informal economy are aged between 15 and 35 [8].

The observations made in the course of our study arise out of these contrasting contexts, which influence young people’s participation in formal initial vocational training (including block-release

1 Methodological reference points

This edition of Training & Employment is based on a study supported by the French Development Agency (Agence Française de Développement/AFD) and coordinated by Céreq. Carried out between 2020 and 2022 in partnership with CIS-CONICET (Argentina), INE-CSEFRS (Morocco) and ONFP (Senegal), the aim of the study was to compare the means whereby and the conditions under which skills are developed from and through work and are recognised” in Argentina, France, Morocco and Senegal.

The study builds on existing studies, both qualitative* and quantitative**, of informal learning in work environment. Strengthened by the lessons to be drawn from this earlier work, the investigations took place in two stages. In the first, the issues at stake and the contexts in which learning from and through work. takes place in each of the national frameworks were highlighted. To that end, a data collection grid was shared out among the four partners so that a non-exhaustive overview of each country’s labour market, education system and demographics could be compiled. Secondly, an exploratory survey based on semi-structured interviews following a common interview protocol was carried out by the respective national teams among young people with few qualifications, employers and institutional actors. In order to ensure the consistency of the observations carried out, we decided to investigate comparable work environments in the four countries, hence the choice of the construction and public works sector as the field of investigation. Regardless of the country, these environments have several common features, including the presence of young people with few qualifications at the beginning of their working lives and the pronounced impact of learning from and through work on skill development. The construction and public works sector is also a field in which (more or less completed) processes leading to the recognition of prior learning are carried out, whether or not they are at this stage still experimental. Analysis of all the information thus gathered enabled us to highlight common features, to identify the different forms they take in different contexts and to point up the contrasts.

* E. Bourgeois, M. Durand (eds.), *Apprendre au travail*, PUF, 2012.

D. Cristol, A. Muller, “Les apprentissages informels dans la formation pour adultes”, *Savoirs*, no 32, 2013.

G. Steffen, “Informelle Lerngelegenheiten im Stadtteil”, *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung*, Heft 2/3, 2010.

** C. Fournier, M. Lambert, I. Marion-Vernoux, “Apprentissages informels et ‘dynamique de travail’”, *Sociologies pratiques*, no. 35, 2017.

C. Fournier, M. Lambert, I. Marion-Vernoux, “Le travail au cœur des apprentissages en entreprise”, *Cereq Bref* no. 353, 2017.

and apprenticeship schemes) and the more or less marked presence of informal learning in work environments. Moreover, in those countries in which work is characterised by a greater degree of informality, processes of hybridisation occur with the various, more or less organised forms of more or less organised forms of informal or traditional apprenticeship that enable experienced craft and manual workers to transmit skills to young people. For the young people interviewed, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or areas on the periphery of towns and cities or rural areas, access or return to formal education or training cannot be taken for granted. Their entry into the labour market often involves precarious work. In the construction and public works sector, most workers are recruited for limited periods of time, often for just as long as the construction site is to be in operation. These situations call into question the scope (and the current limits) of the systems for developing and recognising skills. More inclusive systems that encompass and interweave formal, non-formal and informal pathways prompt us to reconsider the various routes to qualification, and notably the contribution of “learning from and through work” leading to a recognised qualification, which can expand the opportunities for decent

work. The survey conducted in Argentina, France, Morocco and Senegal serves to highlight – above and beyond the socio-economic differences – the common factors in the development of skills through work-based learning.

Favourable sectoral dynamic and personal motivation: two driving forces

Among the factors conducive to learning from and through work, the dynamic of the occupational sector and the young people’s personal motivation emerge as fundamental. Those sectors facing recruitment difficulties are more inclined to take on young people with no qualifications and to consider training them “on the job” so that they can quickly become operational by acquiring skills. This observation applies in particular to the construction and public works sector, which recruits a high share of workers with low levels of qualification. Moreover, the reasons why young people with little knowledge and few skills seek access to work influence the opportunities for and the intensity of learning. Above and beyond the initial motivation for seeking paid work, which is common to all four countries, whether it be to become independent of family (often cited in Argentina and France) or to contribute to family resources (more commonly cited in Morocco and Senegal), a declared commitment to the sector has a favourable effect on the potential for work-based learning. This is the case, for example, when that commitment reflects a desire to “replicate” and to perpetuate a family’s craft or trade (as can be seen in Senegal, for example). On the other hand, entering the sector by default, seeing it as a “dead end” or in the hope that an alternative more in keeping with the young person’s preferences will eventually present itself, often tarnishes the motivation to progress in the occupation.

Foster interactions in order to learn from and through work

Regardless of the country, interactions with other, experienced workers emerge as the first vector for learning. Such interactions involve “imitation” by reproducing gestures, approaches and procedures, or verbal exchanges using technical language, particularly when instructions are being given, sometimes with the aid of diagrams or drawings. The language issue is a crucial factor here, since the number of different languages spoken on site may hamper exchanges. It is not uncommon for workers employed on the same site, or even in the same team, to be from different countries (in France they may be from North Africa or Portugal as well as France itself) or to be of the same nationality but to speak different languages. In Morocco, many young workers come from the south of the country and speak one of the Berber languages. Those of them who have not been educated have no command of Arabic (the official language of instruction), which is the language used on construction sites. The linguistic diversity is even greater in Senegal, where there are several national languages,

which are themselves broken up into various dialects. On the other hand, learning from and through work can also be stimulated by exchanges within solidarity networks based on proximity of background (family, region) and a shared common language, as was observed in Morocco and Senegal. Young workers may also benefit from membership of an occupational community, as is the case with the *Compagnons du Devoir*, a French organisation of craft workers and artisans. In terms of work organisation, pairing young workers with experienced colleagues is a practice found in all four countries and generally proves to be effective. In France, it is common practice for a young person newly arrived in a company to be paired with a more experienced colleague whom he assists by carrying materials, handing out tools and so on while at the same time observing them at work. Little by little, the experienced worker involves the novice more and more until they are able to carry out the tasks independently. In Argentina, it is the “capataz” (the equivalent of a foreman in France) who is usually tasked with organising support for young workers. The “capataces” have some freedom to act on their own initiative, which they use to a greater or lesser extent to design work processes from which the young workers can learn; they often place young workers under the wing of a more experienced worker who becomes a sort of informal tutor, acting as both guide and point of contact. In Senegal, the practice of “doubling up” involves allocating two workers to the same work station. The pairs thus established are usually made up of a young, unqualified worker and a foreman with solid work experience, although they may also be composed of a young, newly qualified person fresh out of school and a more experienced but not necessarily qualified worker. In Morocco, the tradition of the *maâlem* (in Arabic literally “he who has skill or is a master”) still exists; this is an honorific figure linked to the traditional apprenticeship system to whom young people from lowly family backgrounds were entrusted in order that they should learn a trade. Today, however, the diminishing number of *maâlamins* on construction sites are reluctant to pass on their skills for fear of seeing their jobs taken from them once the young workers have acquired the necessary skills, particularly since they receive no additional remuneration for their role as trainers.

Periods of reflection and diversification of tasks: two levers used in various ways

Reflecting on the work done consolidates the assimilation of new skills and enables young workers to envisage those yet to be acquired. Such periods of reflection, which often occur unexpectedly during discussions with colleagues, could be further institutionalised. Very often, these periods of discussion are neglected or even seen by employers as unproductive. Nevertheless, a new skill that has been consolidated is actually a guarantee of a young worker’s increased

effectiveness and hence of time saved in achieving a better quality of work. As is often the case, the *Compagnons du Devoir* in France stand out as an exemplary model: young workers meet each evening in order to discuss the work done in the course of the day and improve their practices. In Senegal, when mistakes are detected, the possible ways of correcting them are discussed during site meetings. Regardless of the country, the progressivity and diversity of the situations to which young workers are exposed are also factors in the development of learning. In this respect, if an employer is considering offering a young worker stable employment, he will be more inclined to put in place a training programme leading to a qualification and an increase in skill levels structured around a variety of tasks to be completed, “challenges to be met” and solutions to be found. However, young people are too often required to practice their trade within narrow segments of activities as a result of practices that differ from country to country: the massive use of subcontracting in Argentina, agency work and the parcelling out of tasks in France, the confinement of less skilled workers to basic tasks in Morocco, the competition between qualified and unqualified workers not managing to hold certain jobs in Senegal, and finally the priority attached to immediate productivity and profitability.

The use of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) remains limited

The recognition of skills acquired at work by means of arrangements for the evaluation and validation of skills remains a key issue that was highlighted by the institutional actors interviewed in the four countries investigated. Implementation of these RPL arrangements is based on measures which, in the case of Argentina and France, enjoy the advantage of a national regulatory framework. This is not yet the case in Morocco or Senegal which, despite several experiments conducted in this area, are still waiting for draft bills enshrining their implementation to be promulgated. In Argentina, the national system for the certification of vocational skills, the early experiments with which date back to 2004, operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Labour, in collaboration with the jointly managed occupational organisations in the sectors concerned, which are authorised to issue vocational skills certificates within the RPL framework. These certificates differ from the vocational qualifications issued by the Ministry of Education, and there are no cross-over points between the two. While they are recognised within work environments, their social value is less well regarded by young people and their families. The assessment of candidates, which is organised by the employee’s trade union and employer, is based on a socio-occupational interview and observation of the worker’s performance at the workplace. Trade union delegates play an important role in the circulation of information about the assessment procedures. In the French RPL system, which was reformed again at the end of 2022 on its 20th anniversary,

➔ Further reading

[1] [Encuesta Permanente de Hogares \(EPH\), Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos \(INDEC\), Republica Argentina, 3t 2018.](#)

[2] Q. Francou Q. (2020) "[Les "NEET", des ressources et des conditions de vie hétérogènes](#)", INJEP, Analyses & Synthèses, n°31.

[3] [L'évolution de l'illettrisme en France, Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Illettrisme \(ANLCI\), www.anlci.gouv.fr, 2018.](#)

[4] [Observatoire du travail dissimulé, rapport du Haut conseil du financement de la protection sociale, 2020.](#)

[5] [Les NEET au Maroc, analyse qualitative, Observatoire national du développement humain \(ONDH\), Maroc, 2021.](#)

[6] [Enquête nationale sur le secteur informel, Haut-commissariat au plan \(HCP\), 2014.](#)

[7] [Rapport sur le recensement général des entreprises, Agence nationale de la statistique et de la démographie \(ANSD\), 2016.](#)

[8] [Diagnostic sur l'économie informelle au Sénégal, Organisation International du Travail, Genève, 2020.](#)


[9] A. Chatagnon, C. Fournier, F. Kogut-Kubiak, I. Marion-Vernoux, M. Sgarzi, [Les apprentissages dans le travail des jeunes peu qualifiés. Etude comparative Argentine, France, Maroc, Sénégal. Restitution des entretiens](#) (France), Céreq Études n° 43, 2023.

[10] A. Chatagnon, C. Fournier, F. Kogut-Kubiak, I. Marion-Vernoux, M. Sgarzi, [La contribution des apprentissages dans le travail dans l'accès à la qualification reconnue pour les jeunes sans bagage initial : un enjeu de justice sociale, Rapport technique, Agence Française du Développement, à paraître.](#)

any individual, regardless of the length of their experience, can be awarded any of the certifications (or part thereof) registered in the National Directory of Vocational Qualifications. Candidates are assessed on the basis of a written application describing their activities and the skills acquired that are relevant to the certification being sought; depending on the certifying body, this written application may be supplemented by role-play scenarios and an interview with the assessment panel. This arrangement is based on a highly normalised system for the construction of certifications and their recognition at national level by a quadripartite regulatory body (state, social partners, regional councils). In Morocco, starting in 2007, sectoral experiments have been launched by the public authorities and the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises, notably in the mechanical engineering and construction and public works sectors. The Moroccan RPL system is more restrictive, since the certificates issued within its framework pertain solely to the occupational sectors concerned, which raises the question of their transferability. The launch of these experiments was preceded by a considerable effort to commit to paper reference frameworks for jobs, occupations and skills in virtually all the occupational sectors in Morocco. In Senegal, finally, one of the experiments that has been conducted is part of a vast programme initiated by the public authorities to integrate informal apprenticeship into the wider vocational training system. One of the programme's main objectives is the certification of skills acquired through practical training in a production unit, better known under the name of "updated apprenticeship". This experiment, in which three sectors were involved (automotive engineering, clothing and construction), led to the award of a vocational specialisation certificate, which since 2019 has been included in the national register of vocational training qualifications. Whatever the arrangements put in place for the validation of acquired skills or the experiments conducted within the construction and public works sector, the same observation applies to all four countries, namely that very few of the employees and employers interviewed were aware of them. However, once the arrangements had been explained to them, most of them concurred with the view that RPL had positive effects on skill development, employability, the raising of wage

levels, career management, workforce loyalty and the reduction of training costs. Nevertheless, some employers oppose it, on the grounds that possession of a qualification is not, in their view, a guarantee either of expertise or of the possession of certain behavioural skills. They also fear that their employees might leave for rival companies or that they will have to accept higher wage bills. In France and Argentina in particular, the improvements that interviewees would like to see in these RPL systems included better information and greater awareness among the target groups, a simplification of the application process, stabilisation of the sources of funding and better support for applicants. These are all challenges to be met by the promoters of RPL, including the actors at sector level and employers, as well as the trade union organisations that are heavily involved in promoting RPL, as we saw in Argentina. For their part, the stakeholders in Morocco and Senegal still await the political decisions that will enable them to make the experiments already conducted more widely applicable.

●— Stimulating support, varied work situations, the construction of a well-designed pathway for employee development and progression and opportunities to reflect on the work done are some of the key elements of an approach to the promotion of multiple forms of learning. Nevertheless, any new skills acquired currently struggle to obtain recognition. They very often remain subject to employers' assessments, who may (or may not) make use of them as a lever for the management of human resources (employee loyalty, employee motivation, promotion, award of bonuses etc.). The formalisation of skills through RPL certainly constitutes the ultimate goal in all the countries, particularly if it is accompanied by forms of regulation concerned with career progression and pay initiatives. In the absence of these conditions, more pragmatically, it is still appropriate to implement some intermediate tools, more flexible forms of recognition of more limited scope, leading for example to recognition within an industry, a sector, a group of companies or a labour catchment area etc., and capable at the same time of making individuals' career trajectories more secure. The observations carried out in the four countries are evidence of the advances that have already been made and of the considerable progress that remains to be achieved by pursuing them further. ●

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