

# ***The Influence of International Lifelong Education Concepts on the Development of Lifelong Education in China and Its Promotion***

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**Abstract:** The concept of lifelong education has received strong attention from the international community since it was put forward. Under the impetus of many international organizations, countries have started to introduce and study the concept of lifelong education, which has gradually become the target of education policy reform in various countries based on pedagogical theory. The research theme of this paper is the influence and promotion of the international lifelong education concept on the development of lifelong education in China. This paper mainly compares the promotion of the lifelong education concept by three representative international organizations, the process of introducing the lifelong education concept into China and the development of lifelong education policies in China through literature research. The research consequences show that the development of the international lifelong education concept and the policies and practices of other countries in the international community have provided guidance and ideas for the development of lifelong education in China. In the process of introduction, Chinese scholars have increasingly focused on exchanges with international scholars, the construction of the discipline of lifelong education in China, the reflection of localization process and the practice in line with national conditions.

**Keywords:** lifelong education, international education, public policy, comparative education, education law

## **1. Introduction**

The concept of “lifelong education” was formally introduced by Paul Langeland at the International Conference on Adult Education held in December 1965 under the auspices of UNESCO [1]. In view of the differences in the understanding of the concept of lifelong learning and the different social, economic, political, cultural and educational realities and development needs of different countries, the practice of the concept of lifelong education has taken on various forms in different countries through different policies [2]. China began to introduce this theory in 1977, and the subsequent introduction and learning of related content evolved as China continued to develop, as did the goals, nature, content and values of China’s lifelong education policy. In the past decade, lifelong education has attracted more and more attention. Many scholars have conducted academic

research on lifelong education from different perspectives, such as the legislation of lifelong education, the practice of lifelong education policies in various countries, and the establishment of lifelong education disciplines. Building on previous research, this paper examines the impact and promotion of the international concept of lifelong education on the development of lifelong education in China. This paper sorts out the process of introducing lifelong education into China and the development of lifelong education policy in China. The introduction of the concept of lifelong education has led to the realization that the aim of education is the all-round development of the human being, that lifelong education research is aimed at better enabling people to develop their active learning skills in the process of being educated, and that lifelong education policies are constantly being attempted to build a learning society and better ensure that people can easily access the learning resources they need.

## **2. The Contribution of International Organizations to the Development of Lifelong Education**

### **2.1. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

Since 1623, when the English scholar Bacon first introduced 'pedagogy' as an independent science in his article "De augmentis scientiarum", research scholars have been changing their position on the value of education as times change, until today, 'education and knowledge are the common core interests of all mankind' has become the new value of education. Today, "education and knowledge are the common core interests of all humankind," has become the new value of education, and the important role of UNESCO in the global reform and development of education cannot be ignored [3].

Following the introduction of the lifelong education concept, UNESCO published in 1970 the monograph *An Introduction to Lifelong Education* by Langeland, and used the idea of lifelong education as explained in the book to explain the entire educational process at the plenary session held that year, thus gradually spreading the idea of lifelong education around the world.

In 1972, with the publication of *Learning To Be: the World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, UNESCO set out a new direction for education: "Education will evolve to encompass society as a whole and the individual throughout his or her life". For the first time, the concept of "lifelong learning and learning societies" was introduced [4]. At the same time, the book initiated member states to make lifelong education the leading idea in the formulation of education policies in the coming years, and proposed specific guiding principles, strategies, directions, etc.

The 21st century is the age of VUCA brought about by the explosion of information, deepening global interaction and the collision of diverse cultures. In order for individuals to better adapt to society, they need "learning to live together, learning to know, learning to do, learning to be" [5]. For the sake of the development of the world and the common destiny of all mankind, *Learning: The Treasure Within* in 1996 was extremely prescient in suggesting that lifelong education was the best option to meet the educational needs of the present age.

UNESCO's "Education 2030 Framework for Action" in 2015 highlights education as central and key to solving global problems and sets out the overarching goal which is to "ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education so that everyone has access to lifelong learning opportunities." [6]. At the same time, the new proposition of "sustainable change for the integration of all" provides ideas for the future development of lifelong education systems and learning societies around the world.

## **2.2. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Recurrent Education**

Lifelong learning is closely linked to labour policy and the job market. Therefore, to promote economic development, the OECD advocated the application of the concept of recurrent education in the working and educational environment throughout one's life. In 1973, *Recurrent Education: A Strategy for Lifelong Learning* was published. Later, it published *Lifelong Learning for All* (1996), *Knowledge Management in the Learning Society* (2000) and *Education Policy Analysis* series. The concept of recurrent education advocates the alternating cycle between learning, work and life in order to keep one's knowledge and skills up to date to adapt to and contribute to national economic development.

## **2.3. European Union (EU): Continuing Education**

At the end of the twentieth century, the European Union published important documents such as *Growth, Competitiveness and Employment: The Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21 Century*, *European Social Policy: A Way Forward for the Union* and *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* which repeatedly emphasized the importance of lifelong education in the EU, suggested that national education bodies should strive to develop lifelong education to meet the challenges of the new era for social and economic development and also provided basic guidelines for the development of education and training policies.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the European Union held a summit in Lisbon to analyse the shape of Europe in the new century with its wave of globalization and knowledge-driven economy and to set macro-strategic development objectives for the next decade. A key part of this was to adapt education and training systems to provide lifelong learning opportunities for all of society. In order to implement this strategy, the EU published *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* in November 2001, a declaration that sees lifelong learning as a social and systemic project and calls for a holistic planning of European lifelong learning policies, with all parts of society working together to serve the population with available resources [7]. Documents like *Bologna Process* (1999), *The Copenhagen Declaration* (2002), *European Qualification Framework* (2008) ensure the viability of educational cooperation by strengthening the mutual establishment of degree systems, mutual recognition of qualifications and quality assurance in the education of European countries.

In addition to conferences and books, educational programs are an integral part of the EU's lifelong education policy. For example, the "Comenius Programme" for pre-school and primary and secondary education, "Leonardo da Vinci Programme" for vocational education and training, "Erasmus Mundus" for higher education exchange, "Grundtvig Programme" for adult education, "e-learning programme" (*Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)*) etc. for modernizing the implementation of lifelong education [8].

## **3. The Influence of International Lifelong Education Concepts on the Development of Lifelong Education in China and Its Promotion**

### **3.1. The Context of the Era**

The ten-year Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, left China nearly two decades behind the developed countries in introducing the concept of lifelong education. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978 made the important decision to "shift the focus of work of the Party and the State to economic construction" and to implement the "reform and opening up" proposed by Deng Xiaoping. At that

time, China's social, economic and educational development received a strong impetus and the demand for talents became more and more urgent, thus providing new opportunities for the development of Chinese education. Since then, a new debate on the nature of education has been taking place in China's education sector. As China's political and economic reforms progressed, so did its education system. During this time, the international advanced educational concepts brought about by reform and opening up were also observed and studied in China, and the process of introducing and localizing the concept of lifelong learning in China began [9].

### 3.2. Initial Stages of Introduction

Since 1977, foreign educational materials have introduced 181 articles on lifelong education, including columns like "Theories of Lifelong Education" and "Implementation of Lifelong Education". While foreign theories of lifelong education have been introduced to China, the implementation of lifelong education policies in China has also been explored under the guidance of theories. Unlike Western countries where lifelong education theory is mainly promoted by the state and academic groups, individual Chinese scholars publish translations and introductory papers in magazines and journals through translation and research, journals. Some publishers began to publish translations of lifelong education, including Learning To Be: the World of Education Today and Tomorrow, An Introduction to Lifelong Education, etc. At the early stage of the introduction, the main focus was to review and analyse the influence of lifelong education theory in other educational fields and to briefly analyse the ideas of educators on lifelong education and their writings. The lifelong education ideas of Langeland and UNESCO were thus systematically introduced into China [10].

The term 'lifelong education' first appeared as a proper noun in 1980 in the Ministry of Education's "The Inservice Education and Training of School Teachers" [9]. Since then, the related terms have consistently appeared in government documents on education. During this period, lifelong education influenced the reform of Chinese education mainly in the form of ideas, specifically the following policies [11]:

#### (1)Literacy education

As the most important part of adult education at this stage, in the 1980s the State Council issued the Regulations on the Eradication of Illiteracy in 1988, based on the Instructions on the eradication of illiteracy in 1978, and introduced a series of related policies and laws to guarantee the implementation of literacy education.

#### (2)China Staff Education

In 1981, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) issued Decision on Strengthening Staff Education to improve workers' production skills and production safety. In November of the same year, the Ministry of Education also issued Notice on Several Issues Concerning the Work of Workers' Secondary School Culture Make-up Courses.

#### (3)Continuing Education

In 1987, the State issued Interim Provisions on Continuing Education of Enterprise Technicians and Interim Provisions on Continuing Education after University, which set out detailed regulations on the content, training objectives and specific implementation rules for the continuing education of employees and students.

#### (4)Adult higher education

In 1988, the National Education Commission successively issued the Interim Provisions on the Establishment of Adult Higher Education Institutions and the Several Provisions on the Trial System of Adult Higher Education, encouraging radio and television universities, staff colleges and universities, and ordinary universities to set up adult education institutions, and initially establish an adult higher education system.

#### (5) Self-taught higher education examinations

A series of laws and regulations concerning the Self-taught higher education examinations, such as Provisional regulations for the establishment of adult higher education institutions, transmitted after approval by the State Council to the Ministry of Education in 1981, Provisional Regulations on Self-Study Examination for Higher Education by the State Council in 1988, and Interim Provisions on Self-study Examination of Secondary Education by the State Education Commission of PRC in 1991, aim to make adult education through individual self-study, state examination and social assistance become an important means for individuals to acquire lifelong learning opportunities and to provide equal access to higher education for all.

During this period, lifelong education received attention as a new concept in policy, mainly linked to adult education. The relevant policies were oriented towards the values of practicality and effectiveness, and played a great role in promoting China's economic construction, providing the conditions for the transformation of the idea of lifelong education from theory to policy [12]. During this period, however, the concept of lifelong education in policy was vague, demonstrating only a limited role and impact, but with a relatively obvious utilitarian and instrumental character.

From 1992 onwards, the introduction of lifelong education theory in China entered a new stage. In addition to translations that combined introduction and internalization: *The Learning Model — A New Vision for Lifelong Education*, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, scholars began to systematically introduce lifelong education ideas by means of books. The works fell into two main categories: firstly, monographs on lifelong education that were categorized, summarized and analyzed according to the scholars' understanding; and secondly, monographs dealing with comparative pedagogy or foreign educational history that included a separate chapter outlining theories of lifelong education. In addition, the scope of introduction has become broader and deeper, with the introduction of more theories of lifelong education thinkers and more countries' historical origins, introduction and dissemination of lifelong education theories, and typical models e.g., the Scandinavian model in Northern Europe; the framework of the lifelong learning system and the national vocational qualification system in the UK etc. At the same time, the academic community is constantly reflecting on how to develop Chinese lifelong education theory in the process of introduction [10].

With further reform and opening up, in 1993, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council promulgated the Outline for the Reform and Development of Education in China. For the first time, lifelong education was officially written into an important national document and began to receive attention at the national level. The document stated that "adult education is a new type of education system in which traditional school education develops into lifelong education." In 1995, the Education Law of the People's Republic of China was promulgated, establishing the policy and legal status of lifelong education in the form of a basic law on education for the first time. In the same year, the Decision of the State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Accelerating Scientific and Technological Progress implemented the strategy of revitalize the country through science and education for the first time. Since then, lifelong education has been repeatedly included in the programmatic documents of national education reform and development and important documents of the CPC. Under the vigorous promotion of the policy, the co-ordination and communication of various types of education have been strengthened. In 1998, the official national document Education Promotion Plan of Action for the 21st Century used the concept of "lifelong learning system" for the first time and put forward the goal of establishing a lifelong education system. The same objective was re-emphasized in Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education, published in 1999, where "the use of modern distance education networks to provide learning opportunities for members of society" was proposed. During this period, the

concept of lifelong education was translated into policies at the national level, which were increasingly enriched by the development of theoretical research and the adoption of legislation to safeguard its status. Although lifelong education policy was still an important tool for economic, scientific and technological development and had a strong utilitarian character, policy documents with a social welfare character, such as community education and education for the elderly, were introduced one after another, support systems and service systems related to lifelong education also continued to develop, indicating that China was constantly implementing the construction of a lifelong education system, and that the goal of lifelong education was shifting towards “to provide individuals with lifelong learning opportunities”.

### 3.3. Stages of Continuing Development

After entering the twenty-first century, the introduction of lifelong education theory in China has entered a new stage. In addition to the previous fields of adult education and education history, other educational fields such as higher education, vocational education and career education have also introduced lifelong education theory at this stage. In addition to scholars, professional organizations and institutions were also involved in the introduction [13]. New vehicles for introduction include international lifelong education forums and networks, such as the China Lifelong Education Network and related local websites. In addition to the study of lifelong education theories from more developed countries, developing countries also began to receive attention at this stage (India, Thailand, Tanzania, Malaysia, Brazil, North Korea, etc.), and the scope of the introduction ranged from the national level to cities or regions. In addition to the ideas and writings of some educators on lifelong education, attention is being paid to the ideas of international organizations and schools of thought [10] [14].

Since the 21st century, China’s economic, social and cultural development has entered a new stage, and the change in the mode of development has prompted workers to develop the capacity for continuous learning to meet the needs of industrial transformation. The need to transform simple labour into high-quality innovative talents has become more and more urgent. In addition to reaffirming the goal of “forming a lifelong learning society for all”, the report of The 16th CPC National People’s Congress included the key concept of lifelong learning, “promoting all-round human development”, as a goal of education development for the first time. On this basis, the “Scientific Outlook on Development” was proposed in 2003, and “adhering to a people-oriented approach” and “all-round human development” became an important national strategy. In addition, national policy documents in 2004, 2006 and 2007 continued to focus on the establishment of a lifelong education system and a learning society, such as developing distance education and continuing education, improving the quality of education and ensuring people’s access to quality education.

In the first decade of the 21st century, lifelong education policy has continued to receive national attention, the construction of a lifelong education system is being explored, and a learning society has become the goal of social development.

After 2010, academic exchanges between China and the rest of the world in the field of lifelong education have become increasingly close. During the introduction process, Chinese scholars and academic institutions are increasingly focusing on collaboration with foreign scholars, journals, and institutions, indicating the internationalization of the lifelong education theory. The content of the introduction is further integrated with the theoretical construction of lifelong education in China, for example, by conducting research and analysis on the lagging domestic theories [13]. Other researchers have conducted systematic research on the dissemination, development, internalization and localization of lifelong education theories in China and have sorted out and reflected on the process from the introduction of theories and research to their entry into national policy. In addition,

scholars have begun to focus on the integration of theory and policy with the context of Chinese educational practice in the process of introduction to bring its practical utility into play.

With the development of society, the rapid development of science and technology led by information technology, the accelerated transformation of the mode of economic development, and the increasingly fierce competition for talents, the only way to adapt to the new requirements of social development is to continue learning, update concepts and upgrade knowledge, and the objectives of China's lifelong education policy are therefore focused on the construction of a learning society. "The Outline of the National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)" promulgated by the Central Committee and the State Council of the Communist Party of China in 2010, proposed the construction of a complete system of lifelong education as an important measure for the strategic goal of "basically realizing the modernization of education and basically forming a learning society by 2020", and put forward specific ideas, such as "The development of academic and non-academic education will be coordinated, vocational and general education will communicate with each other, and pre-vocational and post-vocational education will be connected". In addition, the document also includes in its outline platforms to help build a flexible and open lifelong education system, such as "lifelong learning bridges" and online service platforms. At the same time, it aims to build a comprehensive lifelong education system by increasing the availability of educational resources for different types of education and providing more access to education. The right to education is also guaranteed through policy planning and legislation, and the vulnerable groups involved in education include the elderly, ethnic minorities, community residents, people with disabilities and ex-prisoners, etc. [15].

In 2012, the report of The 18th CPC National People's Congress proposed that the premise for the development of "improving the lifelong education system and building a learning society" was to provide preschool education, nine-year compulsory education, senior secondary education, modern vocational education, higher education and continuing education, and "The state council about vigorously develops vocational education decision" in 2014 proposed "building a flexible learning system conducive to vocational education and training for all workers", and the goal was changed from improving workers' production skills to "serving the learning of all people, learning lifelong, and promoting the construction of a learning society". "The 13th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development", which was issued in 2017, proposes goals that are closer to the essence of lifelong education, such as "focusing on the learner, focusing on the cultivation of abilities, and promoting the all-round development of people." In 2019, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued China Education Modernization 2035, which, on the one hand, aims to ensure that the education development plans previously made are realized by 2020 and, on the other hand, establishes the goal for the next 15 years: "to achieve overall modernization of education and move into the ranks of education powerhouses". This phase saw a change in the value orientation of lifelong education policy, which shifted from a focus on practicality for socio-economic development to an emphasis on the all-round development of the person, social equity and democracy, and the pursuit of harmony between economic and social development and human development [12]. The "people-centred" approach is one of the basic principles of lifelong education policy at this stage. At the same time, the development of different types of education and the establishment and development of support systems for the lifelong education system have ensured the effective implementation of relevant policies, and the legislative process has become more urgent. The move towards legalization of lifelong education policy in China is not only a practical need to improve the education legal system, but also a necessary condition for the construction of a lifelong education system.

#### 4. Discussion

China has not yet introduced a lifelong education law at the national level, but efforts to develop a lifelong education law have never stopped. The Ministry of Education, as an important department in China's education reform and development, has made many preparations for lifelong education legislation. 1999 saw the promotion of the establishment of pilot learning communities in the more economically developed regions. 2003 saw the study and drafting of "Lifelong Education Act", 2004 saw the promotion of a system for the certification and accumulation of credits for part-time education and training, and the construction of a public resource platform for lifelong learning through general universities and radio and television universities. In 2005, the construction of learning enterprises, organizations and cities was promoted. 2008 and 2009 saw the speeding up of the drafting of "Lifelong Education Act", based on the experience of the pilot projects. 2010 saw the strengthening of the construction of lifelong learning networks and service platforms, and the exploration of the establishment of a system for the certification of learning outcomes and a "credit bank". 2011 saw the launch of a pilot project for the construction of an open university. In 2012, the construction of a public service platform for lifelong learning, examination and evaluation was promoted; in 2013, the first global conference on learning cities was jointly organized with UNESCO; in 2015, a pilot scheme for the certification of different types of learning outcomes and the accumulation and conversion of credits was launched; in 2016, the Open University was guided to launch a pilot scheme for credit banking, and a framework document for the mutual recognition and conversion of credits was issued. In 2016, the Open University was guided to launch a pilot credit bank, issue a framework document to guide the system of mutual recognition and transfer of credits, and launch a pilot project on the accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes.

According to the website of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, in 2014, the Research Report on National Lifelong Learning Legislation, etc. were formed, and experts were organized to draft expert suggestions for the lifelong learning law. However, considering that the soundness and improvement of the legal system of lifelong education still needs more practical experience and theoretical achievements to support it, and that the legal systems in other fields of education need to be enacted or revised as a matter of priority, the drafting of the lifelong education law has not yet entered the legislative plan at present. In the legislative plan of the 13th CPC National People's Congress, the projects in education include the formulation of a law on preschool education, the revision of the law on vocational education, the regulations on academic degrees and the law on teachers. At present, the revised vocational education law has been submitted by the Ministry of Education to the State Council for consideration, in which it has been clarified that the state has established a vocational education credit bank system, a qualifications framework and other systems. At the same time, the degree regulations and the teachers' law, which are being revised, will also strengthen the content related to lifelong education.

The Education Law, revised in 2015, guides localities to explore local legislation first and accumulate experience for national legislation. Fujian Province promulgated the Regulations on the Promotion of Lifelong Education in Fujian Province in 2005, while Shanghai, Hebei Province, Zhejiang Province, Taiyuan City and Ningbo City have also enacted regulations on the promotion of lifelong education. In addition, the state has actively conducted research on legislation on lifelong education. Since 2013, the Ministry of Education has organized legislative research on lifelong education law and commissioned relevant universities, scientific research institutions and industry enterprises to carry out research on the subject, and has now formed a preliminary "Lifelong Education Law (draft)" and related demonstration materials.

According to the data, the current national institutional documents to promote the development of community education, elderly education, learning city construction and continuing education for



workers include the Elderly Education Development Plan (2016-2020) etc. Meanwhile, local legislation on lifelong education is progressing at a fast pace. At present, a total of seven provinces and cities, including Fujian, Hebei, Yunnan, Shanghai, Taiyuan, Chengdu and Ningbo, have introduced regulations on the promotion of lifelong education. To date, 42 institutional documents have been issued by some provinces autonomous regions and municipalities, municipalities with independent planning status and important cities, and 157 prefecture-level municipalities have issued documents on promoting community education and accelerating the construction of a learning society, accounting for nearly half of the total number of 333 prefecture-level municipalities nationwide. The local lifelong education regulations and systems established by each prefecture in accordance with local conditions have been adapted to the development of local lifelong education, played a positive role in meeting the lifelong learning needs of all and building a learning society, and also provided experience and reference for the whole country in formulating lifelong learning laws and regulations.

## 5. Conclusion

The introduction of lifelong education has evolved from a simple reference to a foreign term in the early 1980s to the study of lifelong education in modern education and then to the emergence of national education development goals in government policy and practice. The subjects of introduction have accordingly moved from individuals to academic groups, organizations to the state. In terms of discipline building, the introduction has broken the confines of Chinese pedagogy, which was confined to schooling, and the value of education has been judged in a more diversified manner, with outcomes no longer being the only factor in measuring the value of education and the process of education being given more importance.

As the concept of lifelong education and lifelong learning gradually takes hold in China, the value of education in human development, economic growth, social solidarity, democratic participation and international cooperation is increasingly recognized. The concept of education has changed from promoting socio-economic and development to a holistic, people-centred approach to development. Individual initiative in learning and the right to learn are given greater importance, and the guarantee of the right of every citizen to learn becomes one of the objectives of lifelong education policy. The theory of lifelong education advocates the concepts of "the holistic nature of the educational process", "the individual's own education" and "learning to learn", inspiring people to value independent learning and self-education. The theory of lifelong education, which was first introduced only in the field of adult education, has now been taken up by the entire education sector. In addition, lifelong education has become more focused on non-formal and informal education outside of formal education, has gradually shifted its focus from in-school students to society as a whole, and has increased its focus on disadvantaged groups, aiming to provide a platform for the holistic development of individuals.

Although the construction of a lifelong education system in China started late, government support for the establishment of a lifelong education system has been increasing. Since 1995, the Education Law has proposed to "build and improve the lifelong education system". This goal has appeared repeatedly in Chinese policies and laws, and has become one of the goals of China's education reform and development. In addition, national policies have been increasingly supportive of community education, elderly education, continuing vocational education and other related areas of lifelong education. However, there is a lack of experience at the practical level and policy planning is not clear. For example, in the Education Law and other policy documents, the construction of a lifelong education system is only proposed at a macro level, without specifying specific implementation measures. The practice of lifelong education requires the mutual integration of resources from schools, society and government. With frequent references to lifelong

education in policy documents at the national level, local governments have responded positively and introduced relevant local regulatory provisions, providing institutional safeguards for the concrete implementation of lifelong education activities. However, it is undeniable that it is a challenging task to balance the administrative power of the government with the problems that may arise in practice and maintain good effectiveness. The review article mainly uses the literature and government policies as a reference source. No experiments or data have been used to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of the policy and no new recommendations have been made in relation to the specific groups mentioned in the policy. Future research will examine specific groups mentioned in the policy in conjunction with relevant statistics.

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