

# ***The History of the Dissemination of Lifelong Education Thoughts in the UK and Its Implications for China***

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**Abstract:** The concept of lifelong education is an important educational thought aimed at future education strategies. Modern lifelong education thoughts originated in the UK in the early 20th century, initially developed in Europe and the United States, and gradually spread to and influenced various countries in Asia. This paper reviews the history of the dissemination of lifelong education thoughts in the UK, utilizing historical-factor analysis to summarize the experiences and patterns of its historical development. It focuses on the pathways for the dissemination and absorption of lifelong education thoughts in China's adult education and higher education sectors in the near future, aiming to contribute to the goal of modernizing Chinese education.

**Keywords:** Lifelong education thoughts, Chinese lifelong education, British lifelong education, dissemination of lifelong education thoughts.

## **1. Introduction**

Entering the 21st century, countries have increasingly focused on enhancing their soft power centered on technology and talent while maintaining steady economic development, to boost their overall national strength. The level of education is a crucial indicator of a country's soft power. On the material level, most countries spare no effort in providing resources to support national educational development in areas such as economy, academic exchanges, discipline construction, and cooperative schooling. On the ideological level, countries continually innovate educational concepts based on the development of their own education systems and apply education theories that meet contemporary needs to guide educational practice. Since the reform and opening-up, China has actively engaged in cross-cultural exchanges and integration with countries worldwide, striving to learn from and utilize the advanced education systems and cultures of different countries. Among these, lifelong education thoughts, as a representative Western educational thought, have significantly influenced the innovation of educational concepts in China. Lifelong education thoughts first originated in the UK in the mid-1920s, flourished in France, and represent a modern educational trend in Europe and the United States that emphasizes integrating education throughout a person's life[1]. An educational thought, within different national education systems, forms subjective cognition and understanding aligned with its ideology, influencing the dissemination and absorption of this thought among specific ideological groups, reflecting its strengths and weaknesses culturally. Lifelong education thoughts are no exception. Therefore, analyzing and comparing the history of the dissemination and absorption

of lifelong education thoughts in China and the UK can provide relevant experiences and insights for the diversified and comprehensive development of education in China in the new era. Especially for China's higher education and adult education, lifelong education thoughts can cultivate high-quality talents for economic development across various industries, thereby enhancing overall national strength. Based on this, this paper uses historical-factor analysis and literature research methods to study the history of the dissemination of lifelong education thoughts in the UK and attempts to find insights into the dissemination and absorption of lifelong education thoughts in China, providing feasible suggestions for the penetration paths of lifelong education thoughts in China's higher and adult education.

## **2. Overview of Lifelong Education Thoughts**

### **2.1. The Proposal of Lifelong Education Thoughts**

The idea of lifelong education has existed since ancient human societies. People then realized that education should not be limited in duration but should be lifelong, spanning the entirety of a person's life. It was not until the 1920s that the nascent idea of lifelong education gradually developed and evolved into modern lifelong education thoughts. British adult educator A.B. Yeaxlee first proposed the idea of "lifelong education" in his "1919 Report on Adult Education." In the report, he pointed out, "Adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be universal and lifelong." [2] After World War II, peace and development became a consensus among nations, and educational development remained a top priority for national development. The challenge of breaking through traditional and relatively singular educational concepts, with innovative ideas driving the reform of educational practices, increasingly attracted attention from various countries. Against this historical backdrop and opportunity, UNESCO held the Third International Conference on Adult Education in December 1965 in Paris, France. French adult education theorist and activist Paul Lengrand presented an academic report titled "Education Permanente" ("Permanent Education") at the conference, stating that "lifelong education does not refer to a specific entity but rather a concept or principle." Following the conference, UNESCO translated "Education Permanente" into English as "Lifelong Education," marking the formal establishment of lifelong education as an international educational thought[3].

### **2.2. The Connotation of Lifelong Education Thoughts**

#### **2.2.1. Concept Definition**

Since the concept of "lifelong education" was first proposed, its connotation and extension have exhibited inherent particularities due to cross-cultural and international factors. Scholars from different countries have defined "lifelong education" from their perspectives, each possessing certain appropriateness, making it difficult to achieve a unified definition. The author believes that regardless of how the concept of "lifelong education" is defined, it has always developed based on Lengrand's definition. As a recognized foundational figure in lifelong education theory, Lengrand first provided a clear definition of "lifelong education" in his work "An Introduction to Lifelong Education": "Lifelong education is a series of specific ideas, experiments, and achievements. In other words, it is education in the fullest sense, encompassing all aspects and contents of education, developing continuously from the moment of a person's birth until the end of life, including the organic connections between different stages of educational development." [4]

Subsequently, theorists and scholars of lifelong education continuously enriched and deepened the concept of "lifelong education." For instance, in "Lifelong Education: The Dialectic of Repression and Liberation," Jearld utilized dialectical thinking to propose anti-systemic lifelong education theory.

In "The Foundations of Lifelong Education," Dave summarized 20 fundamental characteristics of the concept of lifelong education, comprehensively and systematically interpreting its connotation.[5] In 1972, the International Commission on the Development of Education of UNESCO published "Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow," further developing the concept of "lifelong education" and increasingly promoting its importance and dissemination.[4]

At the same time, under the influence of lifelong education concepts, UNESCO, as an important international organization, established the Institute for Lifelong Learning and defined "lifelong learning" as a significant extension of the concept of "lifelong education." In its official handbook on lifelong learning, UNESCO stated, "Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, encompassing learning activities by people of all ages in all life contexts through various means, collectively meeting a range of learning needs and requirements." [6]

In summary, the diversification of the definition of "lifelong education," and the deepening interpretation of its concept by different scholars, has allowed the concept of lifelong education thoughts to spark new ideas through cross-cultural communication and dissemination in the 21st century. This illuminates the path of educational reform between countries and continuously revitalizes education with hope and vitality.

### 2.2.2. Main Perspectives

Different lifelong education theorists have proposed their understandings of the concept extension of lifelong education. Although these views differ, they revolve around the core theme of "lifelong education." Generally, the main perspectives and key points under the concept of "lifelong education" can be summarized as follows:

**Time and Space Dimensions of Education:** Lifelong education emphasizes that education should span a person's entire life in terms of time. In terms of space, it emphasizes that everyone, regardless of the country or region, should have equal opportunities and rights to receive and practice lifelong education.

**Human and Social Development:** Lifelong education inherently includes the requirement for lifelong learning by learners to achieve free and comprehensive human development. This promotes the construction of a learning society and the formation of a lifelong learning system, harmonizing the relationship between individuals and society and driving social progress.

**Educational Methods:** Lifelong education does not have specific educational content or methods but fully respects the personalized educational needs of learners.

**Educational Process:** It emphasizes the scientific, unified, and holistic nature of the educational process.

**Ultimate Goal of Education:** The ultimate goal of lifelong education is to satisfy people's aspirations for a better and more harmonious life. Its specific goals include two aspects: cultivating new individuals and achieving the democratization of education.[1]

In summary, the main perspectives within lifelong education thoughts emphasize the concept of lifelong learning and the construction of a learning society. They have clear educational objectives and, in the process of achieving these objectives, fully respect human subjectivity.

## 3. The History of the Dissemination of Lifelong Education Thoughts in the UK

### 3.1. 1920s to 1960s: A Small Rose with a Fragrant Scent

The "Encyclopedia of Education" points out that the term "lifelong education" first appeared in 1919 in the UK.[7] It can be said that the modern concept of lifelong education originated in the UK, inspired by adult education. As early as 1919, the British Adult Education Committee mentioned the concept of "lifelong education" in the "1919 Report on Adult Education." B.A. Yeaxlee, a pioneer of

adult education in the UK, was an early user and advocate of the concept of lifelong education, using it in his 1926 book "Lifelong Education." However, because he used it for religious purposes, the concept did not gain much traction at the time.[4]

Moreover, due to various historical reasons, the thoughts of lifelong education did not widely disseminate internationally before the 1980s. From a reverse thinking perspective, since the concept of "lifelong education" originated in the UK, it began to spread and diffuse domestically through possible pathways before developing into a thought or ideology. This had a certain impact on the British populace. Due to the close cultural ties between Europe and America, the British populace then further disseminated lifelong education thoughts across the European and American continents, gradually integrating these thoughts into their educational fields, forming ideologies that align with their national educational realities and promoting their educational development. These ideologies subsequently guided educational systems and practices. Therefore, before lifelong education thoughts became a strategy-oriented educational trend for the future, they had already influenced the educational fields in Europe and America. At least in the UK, they had started to spread, be accepted, and absorbed, initiating educational concept innovation and challenging traditional educational concepts and systems.

In terms of laws and regulations, the British government promulgated the "Education Act of 1944," which stipulated the implementation of compulsory education for ages 5 to 15 and provided full-time and part-time education for those beyond compulsory education age. The Act also proposed reforms in teacher education and higher education. Thus, it can be seen that these provisions began to show the infiltration of lifelong education thoughts. Through the establishment of educational laws and regulations, ideologically reinforcing different social groups from top to bottom, this also represents the positive and prominent role that lifelong education is gradually playing, from the government to society to individuals. Meanwhile, the construction of a modern national education system laid a solid foundation for the dissemination and absorption of lifelong education.

### **3.2. From the 1960s to the 1980s: Careful Cultivation, Awaiting Full Bloom**

After World War II, while nations around the world were actively restoring and developing their economies, they also placed considerable emphasis on education. From the perspective of lifelong education's temporal dimension, European and American countries first legislated to protect basic and compulsory education, gradually strengthening the continuity between primary and secondary education, as well as reforms in higher and vocational education. In the latter half of the 20th century, responding to the wave of economic globalization and the third technological revolution, countries began focusing on the internationalization of higher education. In December 1965, after decades of accumulation and dissemination, Paul Lengrand, then serving at UNESCO, presided over the third UNESCO International Conference on the Promotion of Adult Education. During the conference, the proposal "On Lifelong Education" was formally introduced, marking the first systematic presentation of lifelong education thought in the international community. This elevated lifelong education to the level of an educational principle, significantly promoting its spread and adoption worldwide.

[5]Meanwhile, the UK urgently needed to recover from the economic wounds of the war and emphasized national leadership across various fields, including education. A critical aspect was clarifying the educational responsibilities of both national and local governments and gradually formalizing and institutionalizing the national education system through legislation. Building on the modern national education system established by the Education Act of 1944, the UK leveraged the continuity of education to gradually integrate lifelong education concepts into adult education, vocational education, and continuing education, thereby more precisely nurturing talent across various sectors. In summary, during this period, to better utilize education to promote national economic recovery, the UK emphasized the systematic, scientific, and coherent nature of education,

while also rationally distributing educational responsibilities between central and local governments to ensure the effective functioning of various parts of the education system.

### **3.3. From the 1980s to Present: Blossoming Prosperity**

Since the 1980s, the term "lifelong education" has frequently appeared in British policy documents. After the Labour Party came to power in 1997, education, including lifelong education, was considered one of the core driving forces for national development[8]. Concurrently, lifelong education thought began to spread widely on an international scale, achieving more diversified development. As the origin and advocate of modern lifelong education thought, European and American countries continued to learn from the UK's experience in spreading, absorbing, and integrating these ideas. Simultaneously, with the accelerated pace of globalization, internationalization, and educational modernization, and under UNESCO's vigorous promotion of lifelong education, many Asian countries, including China, actively sent students to study in the UK and promoted cultural exchange and integration between the UK and Asian countries. During this period, the evaluation of British education by international students continually improved. Influenced by the UK's lifelong education concepts, these students willingly practiced and promoted these ideas, becoming advocates for lifelong learning. Upon returning to their home countries, they became "ambassadors" of lifelong education, contributing to its spread globally. Notably, the UK, while promoting lifelong education concepts, adeptly combined them with its national development realities, forming distinctive laws, regulations, and national qualification frameworks. This helped cultivate lifelong learning-oriented talent, providing high-quality human resources for social development. These individuals, with strong learning abilities and a commitment to lifelong learning, could adapt to the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape and maintain strong competitiveness in the labor market, highlighting one of the significant implications of spreading lifelong education thought.

Entering the 21st century, competition in technology and talent has become increasingly fierce. To adjust and adapt to these changes, ensuring social structure stability, economic level improvement, and avoiding talent shortages, the UK Department for Education issued several acts, including "21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential," constructing the framework for contemporary lifelong education policies in the UK[8].

## **4. Implications of the Lifelong Education Movement for Adult Education and Higher Education in 21st Century China: A Historical-Factor Analysis Approach**

Historically, the United Kingdom was the first to complete the Industrial Revolution and establish and perfect the capitalist system. Against this social backdrop, the UK has a long-standing history of educational development, with a relatively mature and advanced education system[9]. According to relevant data, from the 2019-2021 academic years, the UK, as one of the top eight study destinations worldwide, received a leading number of Chinese students compared to other student-sending countries. Through educational exchange and cooperation, China and the UK have continuously influenced each other and promoted the internationalization of their respective educational systems. Moreover, the UK has been at the forefront of propagating and practicing the concept of lifelong education globally. Therefore, a review and analysis of the history of lifelong education dissemination in the UK can provide valuable insights for China, guiding its own educational development. Based on this, it is appropriate to compare the history of lifelong education dissemination between China and the UK.



#### 4.1. Horizontal Factor Analysis

A country's educational development is inseparable from its internal and external social and historical contexts. Internally, it includes the political, economic, and cultural development of the country. Education, as a vital part of the national cultural system, interacts with other systems, influencing and constraining each other, thus shaping the formulation of educational policies and the reform of educational institutions. Externally, rapid technological advancements and changing demographics subtly alter the educational ecosystem, continuously achieving new dynamic equilibriums through various stages.

Lifelong education, as a new form of education, is naturally influenced by both internal and external factors in its dissemination environment. Two crucial factors affecting the dissemination of the lifelong education movement are the economy and culture. Economically, the level of a country's economic development is directly proportional to the effectiveness of lifelong education dissemination. Culturally, both implicit and explicit cultural dissemination can effectively promote the spread of lifelong education.

Combining two critical viewpoints of the lifelong education movement, firstly, education should span a person's entire life, and secondly, education aims to achieve a better life for individuals. This aligns with China's plan to build a strong educational nation and realize educational modernization. Moreover, the fundamental task of "moral education" in China emphasizes human development, reflecting a humanistic educational concern. Overall, the lifelong education movement makes people aware of the importance of lifelong learning and building a learning society, encouraging them to use accessible educational resources to enhance their quality of life, persist in learning at different stages of life, and improve themselves. For China's adult and higher education, practicing lifelong education is crucial to cultivating and supplying high-quality lifelong learning-oriented talents for various industries, thereby promoting economic development, which, in turn, facilitates the promotion and dissemination of the lifelong education movement. Additionally, people can deepen their understanding of lifelong education through community libraries, book clubs, and other activities, creating conditions for a better life they aspire to.

Specifically, China can learn the following from the UK:

##### 4.1.1. Creating Student-Centered Learning Classrooms

Modern educational perspectives consider students as active learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge. The lifelong education movement emphasizes achieving a balance between individuals and society, advocating for the enhancement of learners' abilities and acquisition of necessary skills for work and study to realize their value. Compared to China's "cramming" teaching methods in the 1980s and 1990s, the foundational education stage in China has gradually shifted to student-centered classrooms, emphasizing students' active learning. However, in adult and higher education, increasing population often leads to neglecting individual learners' needs, resulting in a homogenized, institutionalized, and low-humanistic education. Moreover, the integration of Chinese education with international standards requires talents that meet job demands. These factors may cause teachers to deviate from the original intention of lifelong education, instead focusing on imparting knowledge and skills for future jobs and society. Therefore, teachers need to lead by example, instilling the concept of active and passionate learning in students.

##### 4.1.2. Establishing a "Dual-Benefit Balance" Lifelong Education System

Influenced by humanism and the lifelong education movement, the UK prioritizes students' needs and care, understanding learners' and potential workforce's future learning and job expectations through various forms, and timely adjustments. Similarly, China emphasizes the fundamental task of "moral

education" to cultivate high-quality talents for the world and the future. Therefore, China needs to enhance its efforts to achieve a "dual-benefit balance" in adult and higher education, balancing economic and humanistic benefits, thus ensuring the lasting influence and vitality of the lifelong education movement in these fields.

## **4.2. Vertical Historical Analysis**

When lifelong education began to be promoted internationally through policies and legislation, China was going through a challenging period. Consequently, the lifelong education movement appeared around Chinese learners nearly 20 years later than in most countries. Before the reform and opening up, China missed a crucial period for disseminating the lifelong education movement due to a lack of close educational connections and cooperation with Western countries. Despite the widespread international dissemination of the lifelong education movement after the 1980s, the faster economic development of Western countries resulted in more efficient dissemination and promotion of these ideas. Therefore, in the late 20th century to the late 1990s, China began to promote the lifelong education movement nationwide, characterized by a clash between traditional educational concepts and lifelong education. Traditional concepts believed education ended when entering the workforce, contradicting the lifelong education movement. Since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China has made rapid progress in both domestic development and international exchanges. Education has gradually connected with service trade, evolving into a mature education industry. The 20th National Congress report emphasized "moral education" as the fundamental task of national education, aiming to provide satisfactory education for the people, strengthen teacher ethics, cultivate high-quality teachers, and promote respect for education. The report also called for digital education and the construction of a learning society and country [10]. However, challenges remain, such as the unclear relationship between lifelong education and traditional national education systems, the direction of adult education transformation, and institutional barriers in integrating various educational resources. [11] Therefore, China should follow the UK in the following aspects:

### **4.2.1.Utilizing Higher Education Internationalization as a Bridge to Broaden Lifelong Education Dissemination Channels**

Higher education internationalization is an inevitable trend in educational development. Higher education plays a crucial role in linking basic education with vocational and adult education. Internationalization broadens educational resources and information sources and serves as a key channel for disseminating the lifelong education movement. Leveraging higher education internationalization can absorb excellent foreign ideas and promote widespread dissemination of lifelong education.

### **4.2.2.Strengthening and Improving Educational Legislation to Facilitate Lifelong Education Penetration**

The UK started promoting the lifelong education movement earlier, leading to earlier legislation. Consequently, lifelong education dissemination in its national education system became standardized and institutionalized sooner. China's formal lifelong education laws emerged in the late 20th century. Despite this, China has advantages in spreading and absorbing lifelong education, such as newer adult education and cross-border higher education services, allowing continuous exploration and research. Strengthening and improving educational legislation can make these fields more institutionalized and standardized.

#### 4.2.3. Establishing a Lifelong Education System in Line with Chinese-Style Education Modernization

The 20th National Congress report stated that Chinese-style modernization involves a large population and coordination of material and spiritual civilizations. Chinese-style education modernization is inherently part of this[10]. Population growth leads to significant regional educational disparities and contradictions between personalization and unification in education. As China has achieved comprehensive poverty alleviation and significant material progress, corresponding spiritual progress is needed. Education is the most important means to promote spiritual civilization. With the foundation of universal and balanced compulsory education, a lifelong education system suitable for Chinese-style education modernization should be established. In this system, learners in formal education and the workforce can find the significance of lifelong education for their group and contribute to building a learning society. Ultimately, the efforts of various learners will consolidate the awareness of a "lifelong education community."

### 5. Conclusion

The UK has been advancing and developing lifelong education for several decades ahead of China, primarily due to its early establishment of a capitalist system and the relatively rapid post-war economic recovery and development. Driven by the economic system, the cultural system also stabilized and developed in an orderly manner. Entering the 21st century, with China's accession to the World Trade Organization, international educational cooperation increased, accelerating economic development, making China the world's second-largest economy in recent years. Under the dual impetus of international educational exchanges and domestic economic development, lifelong education has also become a basic national policy in China. At the same time, China has an absolute advantage in spreading the concept of lifelong education, which is its large population base. This allows for a wider and relatively faster dissemination of lifelong education concepts. In other words, policies, activities, and other practices based on the concept of lifelong education can be implemented more quickly and effectively.

Currently, China places great emphasis on high-quality development in the cultural and educational fields and the construction of a learning society, ultimately aiming to become a strong educational country. On one hand, building a learning society is an important way to improve the overall quality of the population and a significant manifestation of practicing lifelong education and establishing a lifelong education system. It can integrate the informal and formal education systems within the social education system, fostering a good social learning atmosphere and making the structure of the learning society more compatible with the structure envisioned and required by lifelong education. On the other hand, the high-quality development of education should focus on the high-quality development of talent. Adhering to and practicing the concept of lifelong education is not only an important standard for measuring high-quality talent but also a crucial process for enhancing the international perspective of high-quality talent. Therefore, under the dual impetus of lifelong education as a basic national policy and the goal of becoming a strong educational country, China should conduct relevant background investigations from a macro social level to introduce more scientific and reasonable policies to ensure the operation of the lifelong education system. It should also consider individual development, and for formal school education, choose lifelong education activities and practices targeted according to the characteristics of various levels and types of education to achieve better results. At the same time, we should also recognize some shortcomings in development. For example, in some newly poverty-alleviated areas, to prevent returning to poverty, the focus is on economic development rather than education, making it difficult to ensure the enrollment rate in higher education, let alone the promotion and practice of the concept of lifelong



education. Moreover, in many universities, most students' learning is solely employment-oriented, and the awareness of lifelong learning is not solid.

In summary, there are many aspects of the UK's legislation, promotion, and implementation of lifelong education that China can learn from. In the future, the development of national soft power and cultural confidence will rely not only on school education but also on the increasing number of practitioners of lifelong education concepts in society. China should not only reasonably draw on the UK's experience but also firmly base its approach on the country's actual conditions, localize the policies it adopts, ensure the feasibility of promotion methods, and improve the supervision mechanisms during implementation. Efforts should be made to create a lifelong education system with Chinese characteristics, enabling all citizens to achieve better and more comprehensive development through the practice of lifelong education concepts.

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