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Introduction

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NATIONAL POLICIES OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION: SOUTH KOREA

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General Historical Background of ALE and LLL

The development of adult and lifelong education in the Republic of Korea has been strongly associated with the country's rapid socio-economic transformation and evolving educational paradigms. In the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-1953), Korea faced widespread illiteracy and limited access to formal education. In response, the government implemented large-scale literacy campaigns and community-based adult education programs, which played a crucial role in national reconstruction and human capital development (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

During the 1950s and 1960s, adult education in Korea primarily focused on basic literacy, civic education, and agricultural extension programs. These initiatives were aligned with national development strategies and were often delivered through night schools, public campaigns, and workplace education programs. Adult education during this period functioned as an instrumental policy tool aiming at economic recovery and social integration (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of rapid industrialization, during which the scope of adult education expanded to include vocational and technical training. Government-led policies emphasized workforce development and productivity enhancement, leading to the establishment of vocational training systems and employer-based training programs. During this period, the concept of “social education” (*sahoe gyoyuk*) emerged as a precursor to the contemporary notion of lifelong education, reflecting a gradual shift toward broader

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educational objectives (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Following democratization in the late 1980s, the philosophy of adult education underwent a significant transformation. Lifelong education began to be recognized not only as an economic necessity, but also as a fundamental right and a key element of democratic citizenship. This shift resulted in the diversification of educational opportunities, including liberal education, cultural programs, and community-based learning initiatives (UNESCO, 2015).

A major milestone in the institutionalization of lifelong education in Korea was the enactment of the Lifelong Education Act in 1999. This legislation established a comprehensive legal framework for lifelong education, defining it as all forms of organized learning activities across the lifespan. It also clarified the roles of central and local governments and introduced key policy mechanisms, including lifelong education cities and national support systems (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Since the early 2000s, Korea has actively aligned its lifelong education policies with global frameworks promoted by international organizations such as the OECD and UNESCO. Participation in international initiatives, including the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), has enabled Korea to benchmark adult skills and refine policy directions accordingly (OECD, 2020).

In recent years, lifelong education policy in Korea has expanded to address emerging societal challenges, including population ageing, youth unemployment, digital transformation, and social inequality. Institutional support has been strengthened through national agencies, and digital learning platforms such as K-MOOC have been promoted to enhance accessibility. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the transition toward online and blended learning systems, underscoring the importance of flexible and resilient lifelong education infrastructures (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Overall, the evolution of ALE and LLL in Korea reflects a transition from a narrow focus on literacy and workforce training to a comprehensive and inclusive lifelong education system. This system now emphasizes not only economic competitiveness but also individual well-being, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

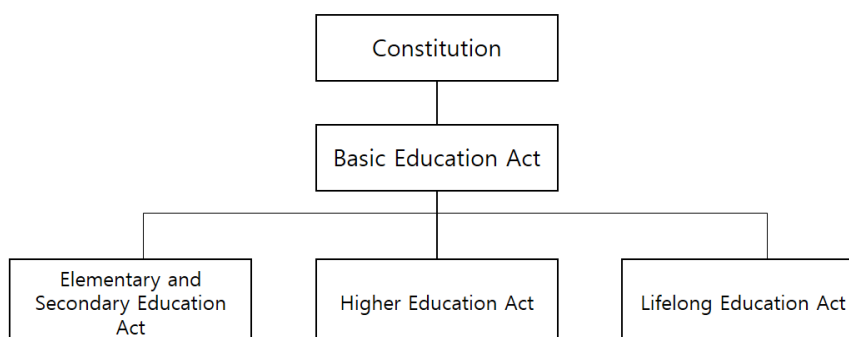
Current relevant national legislation pertaining to adult and lifelong learning (ALE) and lifelong learning (LLL)

Legal Foundations

Legal Framework: Article 31, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea stipulates that “All citizens shall have the right to receive equal education according to their abilities.” Furthermore, Article 31, Paragraph 5 of the Constitution emphasizes lifelong education by stating that “The State shall promote lifelong education.”

Lifelong education in Korea has a legal basis in the Constitution, the Framework Act on Education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Lifelong Education Act. Specifically, the State must promote lifelong education (Article 31 of the Constitution), and schools must strive to ensure lifelong education for the residents (Article 9 of the Framework Act on Education). Additionally, facilities of national schools may be opened to residents upon the decision of the school principal, whereas the facilities of public and private schools may be opened in accordance with the educational regulations of the city or province (Article 11 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act). Lifelong education based on this legal framework encompasses all forms of organized educational activities, excluding the regular school curriculum, such as supplementary education, adult literacy education, vocational skills enhancement education, liberal arts education, culture and arts education, and civic participation education (Article 2 of the Lifelong Education Act). The legal framework and content of lifelong education are presented in Figure 1 and Table 1.

Figure 1: The Position of Lifelong Education Act



Source: Byun et al. (2021), p. 8

Table 1: Legal Framework Related to Lifelong Education

Law	Clauses and Contents
Constitution	Article 31 All citizens have the right to receive education equally according to their abilities. The State shall promote lifelong education. Basic matters concerning the education system, including school education and lifelong education, its operation, educational finances, and the status of teachers shall be determined by law.
Basic Education Act	Article 3 (Right to Learn) All citizens have the right to learn throughout their lives and to receive education according to their abilities and aptitudes. Article 9 (School Education) Schools shall possess a public nature and, in addition to the education of students, shall endeavour to maintain and develop academic and cultural traditions and to provide lifelong education for residents. Article 10 (Social Education) All forms of social education for the lifelong education of citizens shall be encouraged.
Elementary and Secondary Education Act	Article 11 (Use of School Facilities, etc.) All citizens may use the facilities, etc. of national schools in accordance with the decision of the head of the school, to the extent that it does not interfere with school education, and may use the facilities, etc. of public and private schools in accordance with the educational rules of the city or province.
Lifelong Education Act	Article 2 (Definitions) “Lifelong education” refers to all forms of organized educational activities, excluding the regular curriculum of schools, including education to supplement academic qualifications, adult literacy education, vocational skills enhancement education, liberal arts education, culture and arts education, and civic participation education. Article 11 (Establishment and Implementation of Annual Lifelong Education Promotion Plans) The Mayor or Governor shall establish and implement annual lifelong education promotion plans (hereinafter referred to as the “Implementation Plan”) in accordance with the Basic Plan. In this case, they shall consult with the Mayor or Provincial Superintendent of Education.

Source: Adapted from information retrieved from the Ministry of Government Legislation (n.d.) and reconstructed based on Byun, G. Y. et al. (2021, pp. 8-9).

Lifelong Education Act: The legal and institutional framework governing adult and lifelong education in Korea is primarily anchored in the Lifelong Education Act (1999, subsequently amended). This Act serves as the cornerstone of national lifelong education policy and establishes the responsibilities of central and local governments in promoting lifelong education.

Under this framework, lifelong education is defined as all organized educational activities undertaken throughout life, beyond formal schooling. The Act mandates the development

of national lifelong education plans, the establishment of dedicated institutions, and the provision of financial and administrative support. Table 2 below provides more detail.

Table 2: Basic Framework and Key Contents of the Lifelong Education Act

Chapter	Contents
Chapter 1 General Provisions	Article 1 (Purpose) Article 2 (Definitions) Article 3 (Relationship with Other Acts) Article 4 (Ideology of Lifelong Education) Article 5 (Duties of the State and Local Governments) Article 6 (Curriculum, etc.) Article 7 (Use of Public Facilities) Article 8 (Learning Leave and Tuition Support)
Chapter 2 Lifelong Education Promotion Plan	Article 9 (Establishment of Lifelong Education Promotion Plan) Article 9-2 (Investigation and Analysis, etc. regarding Lifelong Education Projects) Article 10 (Establishment of Lifelong Education Promotion Committee) Article 11 (Establishment and Implementation of Annual Lifelong Education Promotion Implementation Plans) Article 12 (City/Province Lifelong Education Councils) Article 13 (Cooperation with Heads of Relevant Administrative Agencies, etc.) Article 14 (City/County/District Autonomous District Lifelong Education Councils) Article 15 (Lifelong education City) Article 15-2 (Lifelong education City for Persons with Disabilities) Article 16 (Expense Subsidy and Support) Article 16-2 (Issuance of Lifelong Education Vouchers, etc.) Article 16-3 (Use of Lifelong Education Vouchers, etc.) Article 17 (Guidance and Support) Article 18 Statistical Survey of Lifelong Education, etc. Article 18-2 Establishment and Operation of Comprehensive Information System for Lifelong Education, etc.
Chapter 3 National Institute for Lifelong Education	Article 19 National Institute for Lifelong Education Article 19-2 National Centre for Lifelong Education for Persons with Disabilities Article 19-3 Human Rights Education for Persons with Disabilities in Lifelong Education Article 20 Operation of City/Provincial Lifelong Education Promotion Agencies Article 20-2 Establishment of Lifelong Education Facilities for Persons with Disabilities, etc. Article 21 Establishment and Operation of City/County/District Lifelong education Centres, etc. Article 21-2 Lifelong Education Courses for Persons with Disabilities Article 21-3 Operation of Eup/Myeon/Dong Lifelong education Centres Article 22 Promotion of Informatization-Related Lifelong Education Article 23 Learning Account
Chapter 4 Lifelong Education Instructors	Article 24 (Lifelong Education Instructor) Article 24-2 (Revocation of Qualification of Lifelong Education Instructor) Article 25 (Training Institutions for Lifelong Education Instructors) Article 26 (Placement and Recruitment of Lifelong Education Instructors) Article 27 (Expense Subsidy for Recruitment of Lifelong Education Instructors)

Chapter 5 Lifelong Education Institutions	Article 28 (Establisher of Lifelong Education Institutions) Article 29 (Lifelong Education in Schools) Article 29-2 (Lifelong Education in Credit Bank Institutions) Article 30 (Lifelong Education Facilities Affiliated with Schools) Article 31 (School-type Lifelong Education Facilities) Article 32 (In-house University-type Lifelong Education Facilities) Article 33 (Distance Learning University-type Lifelong Education Facilities) Article 34 (Applicable Provisions) Article 35 (Lifelong Education Facilities Affiliated with Workplaces) Article 36 (Lifelong Education Facilities Affiliated with Civic Organizations) Article 37 (Lifelong Education Facilities Affiliated with Media Organizations) Article 38 (Lifelong Education Facilities Related to Knowledge and Human Resource Development) Article 38-2 (Change Approval, Change Registration, etc. of Lifelong Education Facilities) Article 38-2 (Procedures for Processing Reports, etc.)
Chapter 6 Literacy Education	Article 39 (Implementation of Literacy Education, etc.) Article 39-2 Establishment of Literacy Education Centres, etc. Article 40 Literacy Education Program Curriculum, etc. Article 40-2 Establishment and Operation of Comprehensive Literacy Education Information System, etc.
Chapter 7 Management and Recognition of Lifelong education Outcomes	Article 41 (Recognition of Credits, Academic Qualifications, etc.)

Source. Adapted from information retrieved from the Ministry of Government Legislation (n.d.) and reconstructed based on Byun, G. Y. et al. (2021, pp. 10-11).

Relevant Laws and Institutions under the Lifelong Education Act: A lifelong education institution refers to a facility, corporation, or organization that provides lifelong education (Article 2, Subparagraph 2 of the Act). In other words, it refers to a provider of lifelong education services. The lifelong education institutions that may be established based on legal grounds are as follows in Table 3.

Table 3: Classification of Lifelong Education Institutions Based on Legal Basis

Foundation		Institutions
Lifelong Education Act	Article 29	Schools (Elementary/Secondary Schools, Universities)
	Article 29-2	Credit Bank Institutions
	Article 30	School-affiliated Lifelong Education Facilities
	Article 31	School-type Lifelong Education Facilities
	Article 32	Corporate University-type Lifelong Education Facilities
	Article 33	Distance Learning University-type Lifelong Education Facilities
	Article 35	Workplace-affiliated Lifelong Education Facilities
	Article 36	Civil Society Organization-affiliated Lifelong Education Facilities
	Article 37	Media Agency-affiliated Lifelong Education Facilities

	Article 38	Knowledge and Human Resource Development Lifelong Education Facilities
Library Act	Article 2	Libraries
Museum and Art Gallery Promotion Act	Article 2	Museums, Art Galleries
Disability Welfare Act	Article 58	Welfare Centres for the Disabled
Youth Activities Promotion Act	Article 31	Youth Training Facilities
Worker Vocational Competency Development Act	Article 2	Vocational Competency Development Training Facilities (Polytechnics)

Source. Adapted from information retrieved from the Ministry of Government Legislation (n.d.) and reconstructed based on Byun, G. Y. et al. (2021, pp. 12).

Processes for Gathering Evidence to Create Policies

Policy development in the field of adult and lifelong education (ALE and LLL) in the Republic of Korea is characterized by a systematic and evidence-based approach, grounded in the integration of national statistics, research outputs, and international comparative data. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with key research and implementation agencies such as the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) and the National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE), plays a central role in collecting, analysing, and utilizing evidence for policy formulation (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

A primary source of evidence is national-level statistical data and surveys, particularly those measuring lifelong education participation rates, learner characteristics, and access disparities. The Survey on Lifelong education of Korean Adults conducted by KEDI provides regular empirical data on participation patterns across age groups, socio-economic status, and regions, offering critical insights into inequality and policy needs (Korean Educational Development Institute [KEDI], 2024). In addition, the Lifelong Education Statistics Data Book compiles comprehensive national data on lifelong education institutions, programs, and financial resources, supporting longitudinal analysis and policy monitoring.

Another key mechanism involves labour market analysis and skills forecasting, which are essential for aligning lifelong education policies with economic and employment demands. Korea integrates labour market data, including employment trends, skills shortages, and occupational transitions, into policy planning processes. These analyses are often linked to broader national strategies on human resource development and vocational education, ensuring that lifelong education contributes to workforce competitiveness and adaptability (OECD, 2020).

Policy formulation is further informed by program evaluation and pilot initiatives, which allow the government to test and refine new policy approaches before nationwide implementation. Evaluation results from lifelong education centres, voucher programs, and digital learning platforms are used to improve policy effectiveness and scalability. In addition, stakeholder consultation mechanisms, including expert committees, practitioner networks, and local government forums, play an important role in incorporating diverse perspectives into policy development.

International benchmarking constitutes another critical dimension of Korea's evidence-gathering system. Korea actively participates in comparative studies conducted by organizations such as the OECD and UNESCO. In particular, the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) provides internationally comparable data on adult literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills, which are used to diagnose national strengths and weaknesses and inform policy priorities (OECD, 2016). UNESCO's global monitoring frameworks, including the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), further shape Korea's lifelong education policies by emphasising inclusivity, equity, and sustainability.

Overall, Korea's policy development process in lifelong education reflects a multi-layered evidence system that integrates domestic data, program evaluation, stakeholder input, and international benchmarks. This approach enables the government to design policies that are both context-sensitive and globally aligned, while continuously adapting to changing socio-economic conditions.

Challenges Identified and Priorities for Action

A range of complex and interrelated challenges, including demographic change, youth employment, equity and inclusion, digital transformation, health crises, climate change, and the decentralization of local governance increasingly shapes Korea's lifelong education policies.

Digital Transformation: Digital transformation has become one of the most urgent policy challenges for adult and lifelong education in Korea. The rapid development of artificial intelligence, automation, robotics, and platform-based work is changing the skills required in both the labour market and everyday life. OECD analyses of Korea emphasize the need to strengthen adult learning governance, reskilling systems, and digital competencies in response to technological change (OECD, 2021). More recent OECD work on artificial intelligence and the Korean labour market also notes that AI exposure may affect workers

unevenly, with higher-skilled and digitally intensive occupations more likely to benefit than lower-skilled groups (OECD, 2025). Therefore, Korea's lifelong education policy increasingly needs to prioritize digital literacy, AI-related upskilling, and inclusive access to technology-based learning.

Demographic Change: Korea has one of the fastest rates of population ageing in the world. In 2024, the population aged 65 and over was reported at approximately 9.94 million, accounting for 19.2% of the total population (Statistics Korea, 2024, as cited in Seok-min, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Korea was projected to enter the category of a “super-aged society” in 2025, where the older population would exceed 20% of the total population (Statistics Korea, 2024, as cited in Seok-min, 2024). This demographic transition increases the demand for lifelong education opportunities for older adults, including health literacy, digital literacy, social participation, civic engagement, and second-career education. It also requires closer integration between lifelong education, welfare, employment, and community care policies.

Youth and Employment: Despite Korea's high level of educational attainment, youth unemployment, delayed labour market entry, and underemployment remain persistent challenges. OECD research has highlighted that Korea's youth employment rate has remained below the OECD average and that the transition from school to work is often prolonged due to labour market segmentation and young people's preference for stable employment (OECD, 2019). In this context, lifelong education policies are increasingly expected to support career transition, employability, vocational reskilling, entrepreneurship, and stronger links between higher education, vocational education, and local industries. Adult and lifelong education policies, therefore, need to move beyond general education provision and become more closely connected to employment pathways and regional skills systems.

Equity and Inclusion: Equity remains a central challenge in Korea's lifelong education system. Participation in lifelong education differs by age, educational background, income, region, employment status, and digital access. The 2024 survey on Korean adults' lifelong education participation reported an overall participation rate of 33.1%, with a declining participation rate among older age groups (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2024b). These disparities suggest that lifelong education opportunities are not equally distributed across the population. Vulnerable groups, including older adults, low-income adults, migrants, women with interrupted careers, persons with disabilities, and adults in rural areas, require more targeted support. Policy priorities include expanding lifelong

education vouchers, strengthening local learning centres, improving digital accessibility, and designing programmes for underserved groups.

Decentralization and Local Political Dynamics: Another important challenge is the increasing role of local governments in lifelong education policy. Korea's decentralization of lifelong education has expanded the authority and responsibility of metropolitan, provincial, municipal, and district governments. This has allowed policies to be tailored to local needs, particularly through *Lifelong Education Cities* and *Community Learning Centres*. However, it has also created variation in policy quality, fiscal capacity, and local leadership. From Jun's perspective (Byun et al., 2021), lifelong education policy at the local level is sometimes shaped not only by educational need but also by local political strategy, including election pledges and mayoral or gubernatorial priorities. This interpretation is supported by research analysing local election pledges related to lifelong education cities, which shows that lifelong education has appeared as part of local government education policy commitments (Kim, 2021). OECD also notes that Korea's adult learning governance depends heavily on vertical coordination across levels of government and stakeholder partnerships through Lifelong education, Cities and local job creation programmes (OECD, 2021). Thus, a key policy priority is to strengthen evidence-based planning, reduce dependence on short-term political cycles, and ensure stable local financing and professional capacity.

Health and Pandemics: The COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the importance and fragility of adult learning systems (Jun, 2021). While schools and universities rapidly expanded online learning, adult learning systems faced uneven digital readiness and barriers to participation. The pandemic highlighted the need for flexible, blended, and resilient lifelong education infrastructures, particularly for older adults and vulnerable learners. It also reinforced the importance of health literacy, community resilience, and digital inclusion as core components of adult learning policy. Future policy should therefore incorporate crisis-responsive learning systems that can continue to operate during public health emergencies.

Climate Change and Sustainability: Climate change and sustainability are emerging priorities for adult and lifelong education. Korea faces increasing risks related to heatwaves, floods, wildfires, and other climate-related disasters. These risks are closely linked to population ageing and regional vulnerability. Recent reports on Korea's wildfire disasters have shown that older adults and older temporary workers can be disproportionately affected in disaster contexts (Park, 2025). Lifelong education can contribute to climate adaptation by promoting environmental literacy, disaster preparedness, community

resilience, and sustainable citizenship. Therefore, ALE and LLL policies should increasingly integrate sustainability education and local disaster-preparedness learning.

Vision Statements for ALE and LLL

The overarching vision of adult and lifelong education (ALE and LLL) policy in the Republic of Korea is to create a “learning society” in which all citizens have equitable access to learning opportunities throughout their lives. This vision, rooted in the Lifelong Education Act and successive national lifelong education promotion plans, reflects a shift from a narrow focus on education as schooling toward a broader conception of learning as a continuous, life-wide process (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

At the core of this vision is a commitment to equity and inclusion, ensuring that individuals across different socio-economic backgrounds, regions, and life stages can participate in meaningful learning opportunities. Particular attention is given to vulnerable populations, including older adults, low-income groups, and those with limited access to formal education. This aligns closely with international policy frameworks promoted by UNESCO, which emphasize lifelong education as a fundamental human right and a driver of social justice (UNESCO, 2015).

Another key dimension of Korea’s lifelong education vision comprises the enhancement of individual competencies and employability. In the context of rapid technological change and evolving labour markets, lifelong education is positioned as a critical mechanism for developing adaptable skills, supporting career transitions, and fostering innovation. This perspective reflects policy orientations advocated by the OECD, which highlight the importance of continuous skills development for economic resilience and competitiveness (OECD, 2020).

In addition, lifelong education policies in Korea emphasize social integration and active citizenship, recognizing the role of education in strengthening community cohesion, democratic participation, and cultural engagement. Lifelong education is also increasingly linked to broader national goals, including innovation, sustainability, and national competitiveness, as Korea seeks to build a knowledge-based and inclusive society.

Overall, Korea’s vision for lifelong education represents a comprehensive and multidimensional policy framework that integrates economic, social, and human development objectives while aligning with global lifelong education agendas.

Strategies for Implementation and Targets

The implementation of lifelong education policies in Korea is supported by a multi-level governance structure involving central ministries, regional and local governments, and a network of public and private institutions. This structure enables both national coordination and local adaptability, ensuring that policies are responsive to diverse regional and demographic needs (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

A central strategy is the expansion of Lifelong Education Cities and community-based learning systems, which serve as key platforms for delivering localized learning opportunities. Currently (March 2026), there are 206 Lifelong Education Cities (MoE, 2026). These initiatives promote the integration of education with community development, welfare services, and cultural activities, thereby strengthening the role of local governments and civil society in lifelong education governance.

Another major strategic priority is the development of digital learning infrastructure, including online platforms such as K-MOOC and various blended learning systems. These initiatives aim to enhance accessibility and responsiveness of learners, particularly adults with temporal and spatial constraints, for achieving digital competencies in modern society.

The Korean government also prioritizes support for adult learners in higher education, including flexible admission systems, part-time study options, and recognition of prior learning (RPL). In 2024, 5,915 adult students participated in the LiFE (Lifelong Education at universities for the Future of Education). These measures are designed to lower barriers to participation and to facilitate lifelong education pathways across formal and non-formal education sectors.

In addition, strengthening vocational education and training (VET) systems is a key strategy for aligning lifelong education with labour market needs. Policies focus on reskilling and upskilling programs, industry-education partnerships, and workforce development initiatives supported by employment and training policies.

Capacity building of lifelong education professionals is also emphasized as a critical component of effective policy implementation. Training programs, certification systems, and professional development initiatives are provided to enhance the quality of teaching, program design, and institutional management.

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

Governance Structure of Lifelong education in Korea

The governance structure of adult and lifelong education (ALE and LLL) in the Republic of Korea is characterized by a multi-level, decentralized framework. It is supported by a tripartite institutional system consisting of administrative bodies, deliberation and coordination bodies, and dedicated support and implementation agencies. This governance model reflects a systematic effort to balance centralized policy direction with localized implementation, ensuring both national coherence and regional responsiveness (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

At the central level, the Ministry of Education serves as the principal authority responsible for the overall planning, coordination, and regulation of lifelong education policies. The Minister of Education formulates the National Lifelong Education Promotion Plan, which provides the overarching strategic direction for ALE and LLL across the country. To support policy deliberation and inter-ministerial coordination, the government has established the National Lifelong Education Promotion Committee, composed of vice-ministers from relevant ministries. This committee functions as a high-level decision-making body that reviews key policy issues and ensures alignment across sectors.

At the regional level, encompassing metropolitan cities and provinces, local governments play a crucial role in translating national policies into actionable plans. Mayors and governors are responsible for developing and implementing annual lifelong education action plans based on the national framework. Notably, the governance system assigns primary responsibility for lifelong education to general administrative authorities rather than educational superintendents, reflecting a policy emphasis on integrating lifelong education with broader regional development strategies. Within this structure, Metropolitan and Provincial Lifelong Education Councils are established to deliberate on policy directions, coordinate implementation efforts, and monitor outcomes.

At the local level, including municipalities, counties, and districts, local governments are directly engaged in the delivery of lifelong education services. These authorities establish Local Lifelong Education Councils and operate lifelong education centres, which function as key platforms for providing accessible and community-based educational opportunities. Through these mechanisms, local governments adapt national policies to local contexts, enhance participation among residents, and address region-specific learning needs.

Overall, Korea's governance system for lifelong education demonstrates a vertically integrated yet decentralized model, in which responsibilities are distributed across different levels of government while maintaining strong central coordination. This structure enables effective policy implementation, promotes local innovation, and supports the expansion of lifelong education opportunities across diverse communities.

Tripartite System: Administration, Coordination, and Support

The lifelong education system in the Republic of Korea is operationalized through a tripartite institutional framework consisting of administrative structures, deliberation and coordination mechanisms, and dedicated support and implementation agencies. This system enables the effective translation of national lifelong education policies into practice while ensuring coordination across different levels of governance (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

The administrative system is organized across three levels—central, regional, and local governments—each of which is responsible for policy formulation, implementation, and resource allocation within its jurisdiction. The central government establishes national policy directions and legal frameworks, while regional and local governments adapt and implement these policies according to local conditions. These administrative entities collaborate through both vertical coordination (between levels of government) and horizontal coordination (across sectors and institutions), thereby ensuring policy coherence and operational efficiency.

Complementing this structure is the deliberation and coordination system, which functions through consultative bodies established at each administrative level. At the national level, the National Lifelong Education Promotion Committee reviews major policy issues and ensures inter-ministerial coordination. At the regional and local levels, Metropolitan and Provincial Lifelong Education Councils and Municipal or District Lifelong Education Councils perform similar functions. These bodies are responsible for reviewing and approving five-year master plans and annual implementation plans, as well as monitoring and evaluating policy outcomes. Through these mechanisms, policy decisions are subjected to systematic deliberation and continuous feedback.

The third component is the dedicated support and implementation system, which consists of a network of specialized institutions that facilitate policy execution. At the national level, the National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) provides strategic support, research, and program development. At the regional level, institutes for lifelong education support

program planning, training, and coordination. At the local level, lifelong education centres and community learning centres serve as frontline institutions delivering educational services to citizens. Since the implementation of the Third Lifelong Education Promotion Plan (2013-2017), this support system has been further expanded to include township-level lifelong education centres, thereby establishing a comprehensive nationwide delivery system that enhances accessibility and strengthens the realization of the right to lifelong education for all citizens (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Overall, this tripartite system provides a structured, yet flexible governance mechanism, enabling Korea to integrate policy planning, coordination, and implementation within a coherent lifelong education framework.

Role of Lifelong Education Cities

A distinctive feature of Korea's decentralized lifelong education system is the Lifelong Education City initiative, which has become one of the most influential mechanisms for implementing lifelong education policy at the local level. The initiative was first introduced in 2001 with only three pilot local governments, and it has continuously expanded over the past two decades. As of 2026, a total of 206 local governments have been officially designated as Lifelong Education Cities by the Ministry of Education, demonstrating the nationwide institutionalization of local lifelong education governance in Korea (MoE, 2026).

Within these cities, lifelong education is understood not merely as educational provision but as a broader community development strategy. Local governments design and implement learning programs based on regional socio-economic characteristics and community needs while integrating education with broader policy areas such as welfare, culture, employment, and civic participation. This integrated approach enables learning-based responses to complex local social challenges.

Lifelong Education Cities also play an important role in fostering multi-stakeholder governance by connecting municipalities with universities, civil society organizations, local industries, and community groups. These partnerships increase the diversity and local relevance of learning opportunities while strengthening social capital and community engagement.

The continuous expansion of Lifelong Education Cities reflects Korea's broader policy shift from a centralized and supply-driven education model toward a decentralized and demand-responsive governance structure. In addition, several Korean cities participate in UNESCO

Institute for Lifelong Learning's Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), linking Korea's domestic lifelong education policies with international learning city movements.

Overall, Lifelong Education Cities represent a core institutional mechanism through which Korea operationalizes lifelong education at the local level, contributing significantly to the development of community-based learning ecosystems, policy decentralization, and the realization of a learning society (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Role of Regional Support Institutions

Regional support institutions play a pivotal role in Korea's lifelong education governance system by bridging national policy and local-level implementation. Within the multi-level governance structure, these institutions function as intermediary organizations that not only translate national policy directions into regionally appropriate programs but also support local governments and learning providers (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

At the core of this system are the Regional Institutes for Lifelong Education, which are established at the metropolitan and provincial levels. These institutes perform a wide range of functions essential for the effective operation of lifelong education policies. First, they are responsible for developing and dissemination of lifelong education programs, ensuring that educational content is aligned with both national priorities and regional needs. Second, they provide information and guidance services, including the management of lifelong education information systems and the provision of counselling and advisory services to learners and institutions.

In addition, regional institutes play a crucial role in the training and professional development of lifelong education practitioners, contributing to the enhancement of instructional quality and institutional capacity. They also engage in monitoring, evaluation, and research activities, collecting data on program effectiveness and policy outcomes, which are then used to inform policy improvement and strategic planning. Furthermore, these institutions facilitate coordination among local governments, lifelong education centres, and other educational providers, thereby strengthening the coherence and integration of lifelong education systems at the regional level.

Importantly, regional institutes operate in close collaboration with the National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE), forming a vertically integrated support system. Through this

structure, national policies are systematically implemented and adapted across different regions, ensuring both consistency and flexibility within the lifelong education system.

Involvement of Social Partners

The governance of lifelong education in Korea has increasingly expanded beyond government institutions to include a wide range of social partners, reflecting a shift toward more participatory and collaborative policy approaches. These social partners include civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private sector enterprises, and cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, and community centres (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

These actors contribute significantly to the delivery and diversification of lifelong education opportunities. Civil society organizations and NGOs often play a key role in reaching marginalized and underserved populations, providing community-based programs that address local needs. Private sector enterprises contribute through workforce training, skills development initiatives, and industry-education partnerships, thereby linking lifelong education to labour market demands. Cultural institutions, meanwhile, provide accessible and informal learning environments that support cultural engagement and community participation.

The involvement of social partners also promotes innovation and flexibility within the lifelong education system. By incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise, these stakeholders help to develop more responsive and context-sensitive programs. In addition, partnerships among government, industry, and civil society enhance resource sharing and improve the overall effectiveness of lifelong education initiatives.

Despite this expanding role, Korea's lifelong education system remains primarily government-led, with public institutions continuing to play a dominant role in policy planning and coordination. However, there is a growing emphasis on strengthening participatory governance and multi-stakeholder collaboration, particularly at the local level. Efforts to institutionalize stakeholder engagement—such as advisory committees, partnership programs, and community-based governance structures—are expected to further enhance the inclusiveness and sustainability of lifelong education policies.

Influence and/or policy linkages to supranational organisations

The development of adult and lifelong education (ALE and LLL) policies in the Republic of Korea has been significantly influenced by engagement with major supranational organisations, particularly UNESCO, OECD, and, to a lesser extent, the World Bank. These organisations have contributed both normative frameworks and empirical evidence bases, which have informed Korea's policy direction, institutional design, and strategic priorities in lifelong education. Korea's approach reflects not only policy borrowing but also selective adaptation, aligning global agendas with national socio-economic contexts.

UNESCO Influence

UNESCO has played a foundational role in shaping the conceptual and normative basis of lifelong education policy in Korea. UNESCO's advocacy of lifelong education as a fundamental human right and a central component of sustainable development has been widely reflected in Korea's policy discourse and institutional frameworks. Korea has actively participated in UNESCO-led global initiatives, including the International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA), which provide international platforms for dialogue, policy exchange, and agenda setting in adult learning and education.

In particular, Korea's implementation of the Lifelong Education City initiative demonstrates a strong alignment with UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), coordinated by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. With the addition of three newly designated Korean Learning Cities in December 2025 – Gangdong-gu (Seoul), Anseong (Gyeonggi Province), and Yanggu (Gangwon Province) – the total number of Korean cities registered in UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) increased to 59 (Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 2025). Korea hosted the GNLC international conference in 2021. These initiatives emphasize inclusive, equitable, and quality learning opportunities across the lifespan, as well as the integration of learning into community development and urban governance. UNESCO's Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education has also influenced Korea's policy priorities by reinforcing the importance of access, equity, and social inclusion within lifelong education systems (UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021).

Through these engagements, Korea has not only adopted UNESCO frameworks but has also contributed to international knowledge-sharing by disseminating its own policy experiences, particularly in the development of learning cities and community-based learning systems.

OECD Influence

The OECD has exerted a strong and sustained influence on Korea's lifelong education policies through its evidence-based analytical frameworks and comparative policy recommendations. Korea's participation in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) has been particularly significant, providing internationally comparable data on adult literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments (OECD, 2016).

Findings from PIAAC and related OECD analyses have informed national policy priorities, especially in areas such as workforce development, skills upgrading, and digital literacy. The OECD Skills Strategy has further guided Korea in strengthening its adult learning system by emphasizing the need for coordinated governance, effective use of skills, and continuous learning opportunities across the life course (OECD, 2020).

Moreover, OECD has encouraged Korea to align lifelong education policies with evolving labour market demands (OECD, 2021). As a result, Korean policy has increasingly focused on enhancing employability, promoting reskilling and upskilling systems, and integrating digital competencies across education and training sectors. This reflects a broader shift toward positioning lifelong education as a key instrument for economic resilience and innovation.

World Bank and Other International Organisations

Although Korea is no longer a recipient of financial assistance from the World Bank, its historical engagement with international development frameworks contributed to the establishment of a strong human capital foundation at the early stages of national development. The emphasis on education and skills development promoted by the World Bank and other international organisations played a role in shaping Korea's long-term investment in human resource development.

In recent decades, Korea has transitioned from a recipient to a donor and knowledge-sharing partner, actively participating in international cooperation initiatives. Through bilateral and multilateral programs, Korea shares its experiences in lifelong education policy, vocational education, and human capital development with developing countries. These efforts include participation in capacity-building programs, policy consulting, and international training initiatives supported by global institutions.

Such engagement reflects Korea's evolving role in the global education landscape, contributing not only to domestic policy development but also to international policy diffusion and cooperation.

Policy Convergence and National Adaptation

Overall, Korea demonstrates a high degree of policy convergence with global lifelong education agendas, while simultaneously maintaining a strong emphasis on national adaptation. International frameworks laid down by UNESCO, OECD, and several other organisations have been selectively incorporated into Korea's policy system, ensuring alignment with global standards without compromising domestic priorities.

This hybrid approach—combining global policy models with localized implementation—has enabled Korea to develop a comprehensive, flexible, and internationally benchmarked lifelong education system. By integrating normative principles such as equity and inclusion with data-driven strategies for skills development and economic competitiveness, Korea has positioned lifelong education as a central component of both social development and national innovation.

Financing of ALE and LLL

The financing of adult and lifelong education (ALE and LLL) in the Republic of Korea is characterized by a mixed, multi-layered funding structure. This involves central government expenditure, local government contributions, private sector investment, and individual participation. This diversified financing model reflects the cross-sectoral nature of lifelong education, which spans education, labour, and social welfare domains (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Overall, public expenditure on education in Korea remains relatively high compared to GDP among OECD countries. According to OECD data, total public expenditure on education in Korea has remained approximately at 4.5-5.0% of GDP in recent years, placing Korea close to the OECD average (OECD, 2020). However, the proportion specifically allocated to adult and lifelong education remains comparatively modest. Lifelong education expenditures are typically embedded within broader education budgets, vocational education and training (VET) systems, and labour market policies, rather than being categorized as a distinct budget line.

In terms of the proportion of spending, it is generally estimated that ALE and LLL account for less than 1% of total public education expenditure in Korea. This reflects a common international pattern in which formal schooling continues to dominate public education funding, while adult learning receives relatively limited direct investment (OECD, 2016). Nevertheless, when indirect funding through employment insurance, vocational training programs, and local government initiatives is considered, the overall scale of lifelong education investment becomes more substantial.

A key feature of Korea's lifelong education financing system is the significant role of local and regional governments. With the expansion of decentralization and the development of Lifelong education Cities, municipal and provincial governments have increasingly assumed responsibility for funding community-based learning programs. Local governments allocate financial resources to operate lifelong education centres, develop regional programs, and support community initiatives. While exact proportions vary across regions, local governments are estimated to contribute a substantial share of operational funding for lifelong education services, particularly at the community level (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2024a).

In many cases, lifelong education programs are financed through a co-financing model, in which central government policies provide strategic direction and partial financial support, while local governments contribute matching funds for implementation. This model enhances local ownership and responsiveness while maintaining alignment with national policy priorities. However, it also creates disparities in resource allocation across regions, depending on local fiscal capacity and administrative priorities.

In addition to public funding, the private sector plays a crucial role in financing lifelong education, particularly in vocational education and workforce development. Enterprises invest in employee training programs, both as part of mandatory requirements and as voluntary human resource development strategies. These investments are supported by government mechanisms such as the Employment Insurance System, which provides subsidies and incentives for employer-led training and individual skill development (Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2023).

Individuals also contribute to the financing of lifelong education, especially in non-formal and informal education contexts, including private training programs, online learning platforms, and professional development courses. To address inequalities in access, the government has introduced targeted financial support measures, such as lifelong education vouchers and subsidies for disadvantaged groups, aimed at reducing financial barriers and

promoting inclusive participation (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

In summary, Korea's lifelong education financing system reflects a hybrid model combining public, private, and individual contributions, with increasing decentralization toward local governments. While the overall level of investment in lifelong education remains relatively limited compared to formal education, ongoing policy efforts are focused on expanding access, improving efficiency, and strengthening the alignment between lifelong education and socio-economic development.

The role of sectors and involvement of community stakeholders

The provision and governance of adult and lifelong education (ALE and LLL) in the Republic of Korea are characterized by the active involvement of multiple sectors and community stakeholders, encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal learning domains. This multi-sectoral approach reflects the recognition that lifelong education extends beyond institutional education and requires the participation of diverse actors across society (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Formal Sector

The formal education sector continues to play a central role in the lifelong education system, particularly through the expansion of opportunities for adult learners. Universities have increasingly established continuing education centres and lifelong education institutes, offering both degree and non-degree programs tailored to adult learners. Flexible admission pathways, including part-time enrolment and the gradual expansion of recognition of prior learning (RPL) systems, have lowered barriers to participation and facilitated re-entry into higher education. In 2024, 5,915 adult students participated in the LiFE (Lifelong Education at universities for the Future of Education).

Vocational colleges also contribute significantly by providing skills-oriented and practice-based programs that are closely aligned with labour market demands. These institutions support workforce development by offering training programs that enable individuals to acquire new competencies or upgrade existing skills. In addition, specialized adult education institutions deliver structured lifelong education programs targeting diverse populations, including older adults, career changers, and marginalized groups. Together, these formal

institutions form the backbone of Korea's lifelong education system, linking education with employment and social mobility.

Non-Formal Sector

The non-formal sector in Korea is highly developed and constitutes a vital component of the lifelong education ecosystem. This sector includes lifelong education centres, community education programs, cultural institutions such as libraries and museums, civil society organizations, and religious institutions. In 2025, there were about 5,000 to 5,500 lifelong education institutions nationwide (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025). These entities provide flexible, accessible, and community-based learning opportunities, often tailored to the needs of specific groups and local contexts (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Non-formal learning institutions are particularly important for reaching marginalized and underserved populations, including older adults, low-income individuals, migrants, and those with limited access to formal education. Through programs focusing on literacy, cultural engagement, health, and social participation, these institutions contribute to both individual development and community cohesion. Their flexibility in program design and delivery allows them to respond quickly to emerging social needs.

Informal Learning

In recent years, informal learning has gained increasing recognition within Korea's lifelong education policy framework. Informal learning occurs through everyday experiences, including workplace learning, online communities, self-directed study, and digital platforms. The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly enhanced opportunities for informal learning, enabling individuals to access knowledge and skills outside traditional institutional settings.

Government policies have begun to acknowledge the importance of informal learning pathways, particularly in relation to digital literacy, lifelong skills development, and flexible learning trajectories. Efforts are being made to link informal learning with formal recognition systems, including the development of frameworks for validating non-formal and informal learning outcomes. This reflects a broader shift toward a more inclusive and learner-centred lifelong education system.

Stakeholder Involvement and Consultation Mechanisms

The governance of lifelong education in Korea increasingly emphasizes the importance of stakeholder participation and collaborative governance. Various mechanisms have been established to facilitate engagement among government agencies, educational institutions, industry, and community organizations. These include policy advisory committees, public hearings, expert consultations, and partnership initiatives involving academia and industry.

At the local level, community-based governance structures play a significant role in promoting participation and ensuring that lifelong education policies reflect local needs. Partnerships among local governments, civil society organizations, and educational institutions contribute to the design and implementation of context-sensitive and inclusive programs.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in achieving effective coordination and meaningful participation among diverse stakeholders. Differences in institutional capacity, resource availability, and policy priorities can hinder collaboration. Therefore, strengthening governance mechanisms, enhancing stakeholder capacity, and fostering sustained partnerships are critical priorities for improving the effectiveness and inclusiveness of lifelong education policies.

The tracking of the effective implementation of policies

The effective implementation of adult and lifelong education (ALE and LLL) policies in the Republic of Korea is supported by a multi-layered monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, which combines national statistical surveys, institutional assessments, and program-level evaluations. These systems are designed to ensure accountability, enhance policy effectiveness, and support evidence-based policy refinement (Ministry of Education & National Institute for Lifelong Education 2025).

Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

Korea has established a comprehensive set of mechanisms to monitor and evaluate lifelong education policies across different levels of governance. A key component of this system is the national lifelong education participation survey, conducted regularly by the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI), which provides data on participation rates, learner characteristics, and access patterns across socio-demographic groups (Korean

Educational Development Institute, 2024b). These data serve as primary evidence for assessing policy reach and identifying gaps in access.

In addition to national surveys, institutional performance evaluations are conducted to assess the effectiveness of lifelong education centres, regional institutes, and other educational providers. These evaluations examine program quality, management efficiency, and service delivery outcomes. At the program level, specific initiatives and pilot projects are evaluated to determine their effectiveness, scalability, and alignment with policy objectives.

Furthermore, national agencies such as the National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) operate integrated data systems that collect and manage information related to lifelong education participation, program delivery, and institutional performance. These systems enable both quantitative and qualitative analyses, supporting continuous monitoring and policy adjustment.

Indicators of Success

The effectiveness of lifelong education policies in Korea is assessed using a range of quantitative and qualitative indicators, reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of ALE and LLL. One of the most important indicators is the participation rate in lifelong education, which provides a measure of the extent to which individuals engage in educational activities across the lifespan. Adult participation in lifelong education in Korea has shown substantial fluctuation over the past two decades. Participation increased steadily from 29.8% in 2007 to 41.7% in 2019, reflecting the expansion of national lifelong education policies and learning infrastructure. However, participation declined sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching 28.5% in 2022, before gradually recovering to 33.7% in 2025. These trends suggest both the growing institutionalization of lifelong education and the vulnerability of adult learning participation to external social disruptions (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2024).

In addition, employment-related outcomes, including job placement, career mobility, and skills acquisition, are used to evaluate the contribution of lifelong education to economic development. Indicators related to access and equity, such as participation rates among disadvantaged groups, regional distribution of learning opportunities, and digital access, are also critical for assessing inclusiveness.

Other key indicators include learner satisfaction, program quality, and institutional effectiveness, which provide insights into the quality and impact of learning experiences.

Moreover, regional disparities in access and participation are monitored to identify inequalities and inform targeted interventions.

Korea also utilizes international benchmarking frameworks, particularly those developed by OECD and UNESCO, to evaluate its performance in a global context. Comparative studies such as the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and UNESCO's Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) provide valuable reference points for policy evaluation and improvement (OECD, 2016; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021).

Challenges in Evaluation

Despite well-developed monitoring systems, several challenges remain regarding the evaluation of lifelong education policies in Korea. One of the primary challenges is the difficulty of measuring informal learning outcomes, as such learning occurs outside formal institutional frameworks and is often not systematically documented.

Another significant issue is the fragmentation of data across sectors, as lifelong education activities are distributed across education, labour, and welfare systems. This fragmentation can limit the integration and comparability of data, making comprehensive evaluation more difficult. In addition, a lack of longitudinal data restricts the ability to assess the long-term impacts of lifelong education policies on individuals and society.

Furthermore, there is an increasing recognition of the need to move beyond quantitative indicators toward more qualitative and impact-based evaluation approaches, which may better capture the broader social, cultural, and personal outcomes of lifelong education. Strengthening evaluation frameworks in these areas is essential for improving policy effectiveness and ensuring that lifelong education contributes to sustainable and inclusive development.

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