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### Recommended Citation

Lee, JungEun and Guy, Talmadge C. (2013). "Diffusion of Lifelong Learning Policy. The Case of Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Learning Outcomes," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2013/papers/29>

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# **Diffusion of Lifelong Learning Policy**

## **The Case of Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Learning Outcomes**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to understand the diffusion and adoption of lifelong learning policy discourses at the global and national levels by examining the policies of recognition of learning outcomes across 35 countries in Europe, employing content analysis and statistical analysis. Findings, conclusions and limitations are discussed.

### **Introduction**

Lifelong learning is being highlighted and discussed by policy makers around the world. International organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission (EC) have played critical roles in propagating lifelong education and lifelong learning policies to their member states since the early 1970s. A growing number of states have begun to appreciate the idea and attempted to adopt the policy idea of lifelong learning in national education policy since the late 1990s (UNESCO, 2012).

The concept of lifelong learning (Schuetze & Casey, 2006) suggests three related dimensions: *life-long*, *life-wide* and *learning* rather than education. *Life-long* dimension draws attention to time, implying that people should continue *learning* throughout their lives. *Life-wide* dimension notes that *learning* occurs in a variety of forms and in many different settings. Studies have shown that lifelong education policies have been diffused and adopted across countries, covering pre-primary, primary, tertiary and adult education (Jakobi, 2012). However, the ‘life-wide’ dimension has not been discussed in national policies.

The recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of nonformal and informal learning emphasize the value of knowledge and competence gained in all spheres of life beyond formal education. The policy concept of the RVA of learning outcomes is a good example to illustrate how the discourse of lifelong learning is adopted at the national level. By addressing the lack of research about diffusion and implementation of lifelong learning policies, this study examines the trends and patterns in diffusion and adoption of the global discourse on lifelong education with a focus on the policy of RVA of learning outcomes.

### **Lifelong Learning and International Organizations**

Global discussions of adult education and lifelong learning first occurred in the early 1970s. Lifelong education discourse began in the context of critical commentary on the quality of schools and higher education and gave rise to a new perspective on education (Lee, Thayer & Madyun, 2008). The Faure Report, *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* proposed “lifelong education as the master concept for educational policies” for both developed and developing countries (UNESCO, 1972, p. 182). The following year, the OECD published *Recurrent Education: A Strategy for Lifelong Learning* as a comprehensive educational strategy for all post-compulsory or post-basic education.

With the emergence of the knowledge-based society, advances of ICTs, and globalization during the 1990s, a neo-liberal discourse of lifelong learning with a focus on economic development began to be articulated (Borg & Mayo, 2005; Lee et al., 2008; Rubenson, 2004). UNESCO's *Learning: The Treasure Within* published in 1996 laid out four objectives of learning: (1) learning to know, (2) learning to do, (3) learning to live together, and (4) learning to be (UNESCO, 1996, p. 86). In the same year, OECD (1996) also published an outcome report of its high-level meeting, *Lifelong Learning for All*, addressing lifelong learning as a solution for the challenges posed by global and knowledge-based economies. UNESCO and OECD made strived to promote lifelong learning through publications that emphasize the value of lifelong learning as well as through declaration of world conferences (Forrester, 1998; Jakobi, 2012).

During the 1990s, the EC joined the discourse of lifelong learning announcing the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996. Since 1997, lifelong learning has been understood as the policy lever for improving economic growth and employability as well as social exclusion (Lee et al., 2008; Jakobi, 2012; Papadopoulos, 2002). In 2000, the EC reinforced the role of lifelong learning through the Lisbon Strategy, publishing *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning and Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*. The EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning provided a definition of lifelong learning and an overall framework as a comprehensive strategy for lifelong learning in the EU. These developments led to the adoption of a Council resolution on lifelong learning in 2002 and insisted that EU member states include acceding and candidate countries to comply.

Policy approaches for RVA of learning outcomes were promoted in accordance with the creation of a common qualification framework and first discussed in 2004. The European Parliament and the Council adopted the establishment of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) as a common device to translate and compare qualifications across Europe (EC, 2008). This adoption of EQF urged member states to develop National qualification frameworks (NQFs) and to relate their NQF to EQF by 2010 (CEDEFOP, 2009). Both UNESCO and OECD also placed a high importance on the RVA of learning outcomes as policy agendas for lifelong learning. Particularly, in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Adult Education in 1997 and 2009, UNESCO promoted the adaptation of the RVA of learning as policy agenda to the delegations of member states, which led to develop the guidelines for RVA of learning outcomes (UNESCO/UIIL, 2012). In addition, OECD has published issues on the RVA of learning outcomes. According to Jakobi (2012), OECD has attempted to disseminate and promote lifelong learning in the context of the EU.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

To better understand the worldwide dissemination of lifelong learning policies, this study draws on two different theoretical perspectives. Sociological institutionalism accounts for the similarity in principles and values that influence lifelong policy development across nations (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997). International organizations are key actors in disseminating the lifelong learning policy. A second perspective is a socio-contextual model that highlights societal context to explain the formation and implementation of policy (Berry & Berry, 2007; Jensen, 2004). Education is understood within broad contextual factors, e.g., political, economic or social characteristics (Bennett, 1991; Berry & Berry, 2007) which vary from one society to another (Ham, 2011). The diffusion of RVA policies helps to envisage the extensiveness and robustness of lifelong learning as policy approaches and discourse at the national. Scholarship that attempts to clarify the scope and definition of lifelong learning suggests a continuum of discourses from a minimalist view to a maximalist view (Duke, 2001; Hager, 2011; Wain,

2006). A minimalist view of lifelong learning envisions that learning occurs mostly in the formal and nonformal education, which is in accordance to the early OECD's concept on recurrent education. A maximalist approach views lifelong learning as the master concept for all educational planning, policymaking, and practice (Wain, 2006) and envisages a learning society (Hager, 2011). Since RVA policy concerns not only lifelong but also lifewide learning, it can serve as an example to posit the policy discourse of lifelong learning. Moreover, the formulation of social policies denotes a political and social ideology stance (Quigley, 2000). Griffin (2006) and Quigley (2000) suggested three social policy models: the market model that supports and fosters vocationalism, and minimal governmental intervention, the liberal-progressive welfare model that supports personal growth and involvement of institutions, and the social redistribution model that fosters justice and equality in society.

Guided by the aforementioned theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the current study addresses the following research question and hypotheses: what are the nation's characteristics that adopted and implemented RVA policies? H1: *Adoption of lifelong learning policies and RVA policies are positively associated with the individual countries' engagement in the international societies*; H2: *adoption of lifelong learning policies and RVA policies are positively associated with the individual countries' substantive national contexts*.

### **Data and Method**

We drew on cross-national data about lifelong learning policies from three different sources: (1) World Data on Education (WDE) compiled by the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) 6<sup>th</sup> (2006/2007) and 7<sup>th</sup> (2010/2011) editions, (2) national reports submitted for CONFINTEA VI and progress reports, and (3) the European Inventory on Validation of Nonformal and Informal Learning 2010 Country Report. These datasets are particularly useful for this study because the information is organized into a standardized format with specific sections on the basis of a common structure and questionnaires so as to facilitate comparison of data cross-nationally. Specifically, the WDE dataset examines whether a country has incorporated the discourse of lifelong learning as a component of policy principle. National background reports for CONFINTEA VI and European Inventory examines policy framework for lifelong learning and RVA policies. Our compiled data included 35 European countries<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Measures*

We operationalized dependent and independent variables that correspond to dimensions of lifelong learning policies as well as RVA policies as follows:

*Lifelong learning policies.* The lifelong learning policy was based on the national reports indicating whether a country adopted the lifelong learning policies (0=non-adopter, 1=adopter).

*RVA policies.* We created an index indicating that a country implemented RVA policies for each level of education (i.e., lower secondary, upper secondary, postsecondary, vocational, and other education. This index ranges from 0 to 5. The high value on this index indicates that a country has incorporated RVA in more diverse educational and non-educational contexts.

*International organizations.* To measure a country's affiliation with international organizations, we drew on (1) the country's memberships in (a) UNESCO, (b) OECD, and (c) EU (0=non-member, 1=member) and (2) the country's participation of high-level international meetings of CONFINTEA V and CONFINTEA VI (0=non-participation, 1=participation)

*Sociocultural contexts.* To control for the country's socioeconomic and educational conditions, we included (1) the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, (2) adult literacy rate, and (3) EFA Development Index (EDI).

### Analytic Plan

First, we performed descriptive statistics to identify the characteristics of nations that implemented RVA policies. Second, we conducted logistic regression analyses to identify predictors of likelihood of implementing RVA policies.

### Results

Figure 1 shows the worldwide diffusion of policies over the past two decades, 1991 to 2012.

the 1990s when the international organizations officially announced the RVA as part of lifelong learning, a growing number of countries adopted the RVA. Interestingly, a dramatic increase in the number of countries that adopted RVA policies occurred around 2004-2008. As discussed earlier, this was the time when EU started to reinforce adoption of RVA policies across EU member states, suggesting that the policy discourse of lifelong learning may affect the adoption of RVA policies and member states' efforts to keep legitimacy of EU society and is consistent with Jakobi's (2012) argument that lifelong learning became a "functional necessity" in a knowledge based economy. (p. 32).

#### Characteristics of the nations that adopted RVA policies

Table 1 shows that among 35 European countries, almost all (91%) adopted lifelong learning policies. Only three in five (63%) countries placed current priority for policy action. With regard to RVA policies, 83% of countries had policies on RVA of learning outcomes.

Table 1.

Description of dependent and independent variables

Variables	M	SD	Variables	M	SD
Lifelong learning policy Adopter	0.91	(0.28)	EU Member States	0.77	(0.43)
Lifelong learning policy Implementer	0.63	(0.49)	UNESCO Member States	0.97	(0.17)
RVA policy Adopter	0.83	(0.38)	Participation in CONFINTEA V	0.71	(0.46)
Lower Secondary	0.06	(0.24)	Participation in CONFINTEA VI	0.66	(0.48)
Upper Secondary	0.17	(0.38)	OECD Member States	0.69	(0.47)
Post-secondary and Higher	0.40	(0.50)	EFA Development Index	0.98	(0.02)
Education			Adult Literacy Rate	0.98	(0.03)
Vocational Education and Training	0.80	(0.41)	Public Expenditure on Education of GDP (%)	5.18	(1.26)
Adult Education	0.23	(0.43)	Employment (%)	52.99	(7.53)
under development	0.14	(0.36)	Unemployment (%)	9.70	(5.35)
			Economic Development (GDP per capita, logged)	9.71	(0.92)

Source: Authors' count based on data from UNESCO XXXX (2012), World Data on Education (WDE 7th Ed), UNESCO's Statistical Yearbook series; World Bank's World Development Indicators (N=29)

*Influence of international organizations.* Table 2 shows the association of international institutions with the adoption of lifelong learning policies and RVA policies. Membership in the EU, UNESCO and OECD was associated with the adoption of lifelong learning policies. However, in terms of adopting RVA policies, participating in the high-level meeting where policy agendas were discussed and adopted was significantly related to adopting these policies. Given that the RVA policies were first discussed as policy agenda for the future in the CONFINEA V in 1997 and later in the CONFINTEA VI

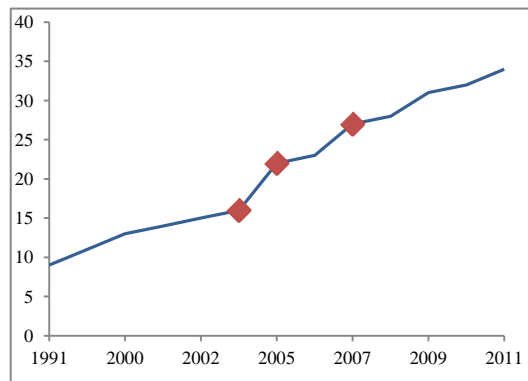


Figure 1. The diffusion of RVA policies (1991-2012)  
Source: National Progress Report for CONFINTEA VI

in 2012 which led to adoption by 144 UNESCO member states, the results of Table 2 may indicate the influence of international society on dissemination of policy ideas.

Table 2.

Chi-square test of association between international influences and adoption of lifelong learning and RVA policies

	Lifelong Learning Policy				RVA of Nonformal and Informal learning outcome			
	Non-Adopter	Adopter	Total		Non-Adopter	Adopter	Total	
<b>EU</b>								
Non-member	1 (2.9)	1 (2.9)	2 (5.7)	<b>11.606**</b>	0(0)	2(5.7)	2(5.7)	1.624
Member	0(0)	27 (77.1)	27 (77.1)	df=2	4(11.4)	23(65.7)	27(77.1)	df=2
Candidate	2(5.7)	4(11.4)	6 (17.1)		2(5.7)	4(11.4)	6(17.1)	
Total	3(8.6)	32(91.4)	35 (100)		6(17.1)	29(82.9)	35(100)	
<b>UNESCO</b>								
Non-member	1(2.9)	0(0)	1(2.9)	<b>10.98***</b>	0(0)	1(2.9)	1(2.9)	0.213
Member	2 (5.7)	32 (91.4)	34 (97.1)	df=1	6 (17.1)	28 (80)	34 (97.1)	df=1
Total	3 (8.6)	32 (91.4)	35 (100)		6 (17.1)	29 (82.9)	35 (100)	
<b>CONFINTEA V</b>								
No participation	2 (5.7)	8 (22.9)	10 (28.6)	2.333	5 (14.3)	5 (14.3)	10 (28.6)	<b>10.641***</b>
Participation	1 (2.9)	24 (68.6)	25 (71.4)	df=1	1 (2.9)	24 (68.6)	25 (71.4)	df=1
Total	3 (8.6)	32 (91.4)	35 (100)		6 (17.1)	29 (82.9)	35 (100)	
<b>CONFINTEA VI</b>								
No participation	2 (5.7)	10 (28.6)	1234.3)	1.527	5 (14.3)	7 (20)	12 (34.3)	7.732**
Participation	1 (2.9)	22 (62.9)	2365.7)	df=1	1 (2.9)	22 (62.9)	23 (65.7)	df=1
Total	3 (8.6)	32 (91.4)	35100)		6 (17.1)	29 (82.9)	35 (100)	
<b>OECD</b>								
Non-member	3 (8.6)	8 (22.9)	11(31.4)	<b>7.159**</b>	4(11.4)	7(20)	11 (31.4)	<b>4.172**</b>
Member	0 (0)	24 (68.6)	24(68.6)	df=1	2(5.7)	22(62.9)	24 (68.6)	df=1
Total	3 (8.6)	32 (91.4)	35(100)		6(17.1)	29(82.9)	35 (100)	

N=29, \*p<.10, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.001

*International and sociocultural influences on RVA policies.*

Table 3 presents the results of logistic regression analysis to identify a potential international influence and sociocultural influence on adoption of RVA policies. Model 1 includes GDP per capital, EDI, and adult literacy rate variables and showed that the index and adult literacy rate were significantly associated with the likelihood of adopting RVA policies. In Model 2, we additionally included the variable of participation in the CONFINTEA V. Participation in CONFINTEA V was significantly related increased likelihood of adopting RVA policies. This result suggested the international influence on the likelihood of adopting RVA policies. Yet the EDI and adult literacy rate were no longer significantly related to the likelihood of adopting RVA policies when controlling for participation in the CONFINTEA V. This suggests that the relationships between EDI, adult literacy rate, and the likelihood of adopting RVA could be explained by participation in the CONFINTEA V. We surmise that countries with higher GDP capita and adult literacy rate may be more likely to participate in the CONFINTEA V and thus more likely to adopt RVA policies. In sum, results suggested that the diffusion of policies on RVA of learning outcomes may be partially influenced by global society trends.

Table 3. International/Sociocontextual influence in the likelihood of adopting RVA policies: Logistic Regression Results

	Model 1	Model 2
GDP	1.62 (1.28)	1.67 (1.38)
EDI	<b>-232.59*</b> (139.69)	-307.91(228.64)
Adult Literacy Rate	<b>144.58</b> *(80.52)	174.81(120.65)
Participation in CONFINTEA V		<b>5.40</b> *(2.81)
N	29	29
-2 Log likelihood	17.058	8.223
R square	.349	.734
Chi-square (sig.)	6.211(.102)	15.046(.005)

\* p<.01

EDI

to the



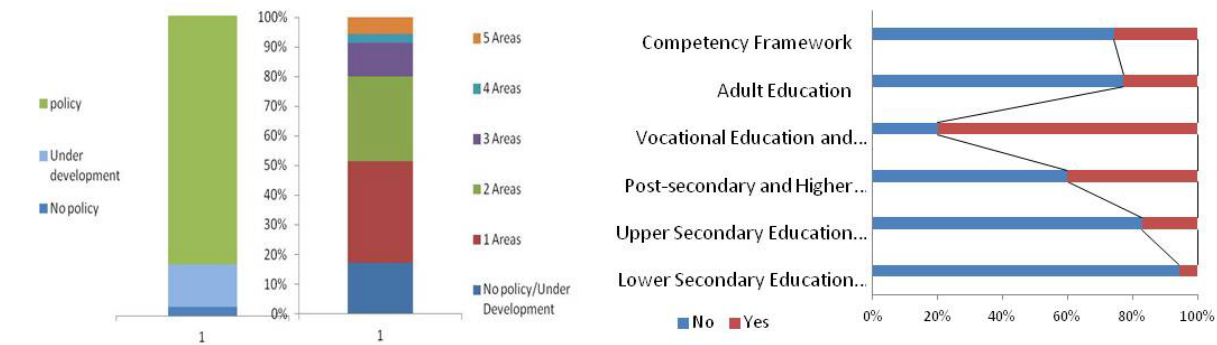


### Extensiveness and Robustness of Lifelong Learning Discourse

From the content analysis of policies on RVA of learning outcomes (see Table 1), it was noted 83% of EU countries have RVA policies. Figure 2 shows the differences in the extent and areas of RVA policies available across countries. Not surprisingly, the area where most countries have implemented RVA policies was shown as vocational education and training (VET) followed by post-secondary and higher education. Hager (2011) argued that many industrialized countries, influenced by the discourse of OECD, tend to adopt a minimalist view of lifelong education mostly in the area of vocational and post-secondary education. The patterns of Figure 2 seem to confirm his argument. On the other hand, countries that have RVA policies in more than 3 areas, e.g., Norway, Denmark, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Sweden and Luxembourg, provide flexible education systems and recognize learning outcomes beyond the formal education sector. Maximalist perspective of lifelong learning envisage a learning society that implies “a redirection of formal education provision, and highlights the importance of informal learning” (Hager, 2011, p. 20). These countries seemingly have lifelong learning policy discourse close to maximalist approach. Considering that the three Nordic welfare countries, such as Norway, Denmark and Sweden are showing the maximalist view, we associate a maximalist approach with liberal-welfare model of social policy. It can be argued that the broader the lifelong learning discourse is, the less likely

Figure 2. Trends of RVA policies in 35 European Countries

is to adopt a market-driven social policy.



### Conclusion

Findings indicate that the diffusion of lifelong learning policies across countries as well as adopting and implementing policies on RVA learning outcomes is partially influenced by global society. The analysis of RVA polices across countries implies a possible prediction of lifelong learning discourse of individual countries from maximalist to minimalist perspectives. The analysis of RVA policies also provides probable accounts for how a social policy model is related to lifelong learning policy discourse. With regard to the statistical analysis, small sample might decrease the statistical power.

Notes: 1. Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland