

Lifelong Learning Policies in China: The Role of University Continuing Education Programs

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Abstract

Lifelong learning has become a cornerstone of educational policy worldwide, and China is no exception. In recent years, China has elevated lifelong learning to a national strategy to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. University continuing education programs – encompassing adult education, online education, self-taught examinations, and open universities – play a pivotal role in this lifelong learning system. This theoretical review analyzes policy documents, statistical reports, and recent studies (2019–2025) on China’s lifelong learning initiatives and university continuing education. We synthesize data from government sources and scholarly research to evaluate how continuing education programs in universities contribute to national lifelong learning goals. The review finds that China’s government has been the primary driver in expanding lifelong learning opportunities through an extensive continuing education network. As of 2021, 1,725 higher education institutions offered continuing education, enrolling about 12.09 million adult learners – roughly 25% of all higher education students. Policies such as the Education Modernization 2035 blueprint reaffirm the goal of a learning society, and recent guidelines (2022–2025) emphasize shifting from expansion to quality improvement in continuing education. Continuing education programs have enabled a “second chance” for millions of adults to obtain higher qualifications, contributed to the massification of tertiary education, and increasingly leverage digital platforms to broaden access. University continuing education in China has significantly advanced lifelong learning, evidenced by positive outcomes like improved career prospects and personal development for adult learners. However, challenges remain in ensuring program quality, relevance to market needs, and learner engagement. The discussion considers reforms such as the 2022 termination of the separate online college pilot to integrate resources, the rise of open universities, and the need for innovative teaching models in adult learning. China’s experience illustrates that strong policy support and university initiative can greatly expand lifelong learning opportunities. As China transitions from an enrollment-driven approach to one focused on quality and inclusiveness, university continuing education programs

will remain central to building a learning society. This review offers insights into how policy and practice converge to sustain lifelong learning at scale, and what challenges must be addressed to further improve the system.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning; Continuing Education; Adult Higher Education; Open University; Policy Reform

1. Introduction

Lifelong learning refers to the continual acquisition of knowledge and skills throughout an individual's life, beyond initial formal education. It is widely regarded as crucial for personal development, employability, and social inclusion in today's knowledge-based economy. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 explicitly calls for countries to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". In China, lifelong learning has been embraced as a key strategy to cope with rapid economic change, technological advancement, and an aging population (Chen, 2023). Top leaders have stressed the importance of building a learning society where "everyone can learn whenever and wherever they want". Notably, President Xi Jinping and other officials have highlighted lifelong learning as essential to national rejuvenation, fostering a culture where citizens continuously upgrade their skills to avoid being "obliterated by the times" (Chen, 2023).

China's commitment to lifelong learning has deep policy roots. The National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) was the first to propose establishing a lifelong education system covering all citizens. Building on that foundation, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued China Education Modernization 2035 in 2019, which enshrines lifelong learning as a core principle for educational development (Central Committee of CPC & State Council, 2019a). An accompanying implementation plan (2018–2022) laid out concrete steps to "build a learning society" through expanding continuing education, developing open universities, and integrating various learning resources (Central Committee of CPC & State Council, 2019b). These policies underscore that lifelong learning in China is a state-led endeavor, aligned with national development goals. Indeed, China's approach is characterized by strong government guidance and broad public participation, forming a uniquely Chinese model of lifelong education (Wu, 2021). Over the past decades, China has built a comprehensive lifelong learning "service system" comprising formal schooling, community education, enterprise training, and family education, reflecting an inclusive vision of education for all stages of life.

Within this system, universities play a pivotal role in delivering continuing education to adults. University-based continuing education in China typically includes degree-granting adult higher education (part-time or night university programs), online education programs run by universities, the self-taught higher education examination system, and the network of radio and television universities now transformed into open universities. These offerings constitute a "parallel track" to the regular higher education system, aimed at those who did not attend full-time university or who need further training later in life. Historically, China relied on specialized institutions for

adult and distance education. The China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) system, established in 1979, was for decades the primary provider of distance higher education. In 2012, the government upgraded CCRTVU and several large provincial RTVUs into open universities, including the Open University of China (OUC), marking a new chapter for lifelong learning infrastructure. At the same time, since 1999 the Ministry of Education (MOE) had allowed 68 conventional universities to pilot “internet colleges” (also known as Institutes of Distance Education, IDEs) to offer online degree programs for adult learners. This dual system of single-mode open universities and dual-mode university IDEs expanded access tremendously and contributed to the massification of higher education. By 2020, distance education programs (open and online) accounted for roughly one-quarter of China’s higher education enrolment, providing opportunities to many who otherwise missed out on college. It is estimated that of China’s 890 million working-age adults, about 620 million have not received higher education, making continuing and distance education a vital pathway for upskilling this population. As researchers note, distance and continuing education in China have “made a great contribution towards advancing the process of popularization of higher education” by reaching those who failed the competitive national college entrance exam.

Today, China boasts one of the world’s largest adult higher education systems. According to Ministry of Education statistics, in 2021 there were over 12 million students enrolled in higher continuing education programs, accounting for about 25% of all higher education students in China. Continuing education programs are offered by 1,725 higher education institutions nationwide, including both dedicated open universities and regular universities with adult education colleges (China Daily, 2025a). These programs have become an integral part of China’s talent development and lifelong learning strategy. They serve diverse groups such as working adults seeking undergraduate degrees, rural and urban community learners pursuing personal enrichment, retirees taking courses in “universities for the elderly,” and professionals obtaining new skills and certifications. In short, university continuing education in China functions as a broad umbrella covering all forms of post-initial education and training.

The remainder of this paper reviews recent policy developments and research findings (mainly from 2019 onwards) concerning China’s lifelong learning policies and the role of university continuing education. We first outline the methodology of the literature and policy review. Then, in the Results section, we examine major themes including policy support and governance of continuing education, expansion and reforms in the university continuing education sector, and the outcomes/impacts of these programs. The Discussion section synthesizes the findings, highlighting successes (such as increased access and positive learner outcomes) and ongoing challenges (such as quality assurance and relevance). We also discuss future directions, especially the shift toward improving quality and leveraging digital technology under recent guidelines. By analyzing China’s experience, this review can provide insights for other countries seeking to strengthen lifelong learning through university continuing education, while also identifying areas where China’s approach continues to evolve. Ultimately, China’s case exemplifies how a concerted policy push, coupled with institutional innovation, can build a nationwide lifelong

learning system at scale – one that is now transitioning from emphasis on quantity to emphasis on quality and inclusion.

2. Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive literature review and policy analysis approach. We gathered information from official Chinese policy documents, statistical reports, and academic research published in the last five years (2019–2025). Key sources included: (a) national education policy and planning documents (in English or Chinese) that pertain to lifelong learning and continuing education; (b) publications by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and related agencies (e.g. guidelines, notices, and reports on continuing education reform); and (c) recent scholarly articles (both international and Chinese) focusing on adult education, distance education, and lifelong learning in China. To ensure up-to-date coverage, we prioritized sources from 2020 onward, while also reviewing seminal earlier policies for context.

The search strategy involved both English and Chinese-language databases. We used keywords such as “lifelong learning China,” “continuing education in China,” “adult higher education,” “open university,” and “lifelong education policy.” Sources like the China Ministry of Education’s official news portal, the State Council policy releases in English, UNESCO and OECD reports, and research databases (Web of Science, CNKI, etc.) were consulted. We also reviewed the profiles and publications of notable scholars in this field, including Dr. Xianghan Zhang (a specialist in continuing education policy) as suggested, to incorporate authoritative perspectives. For example, we identified several works by Dr. Zhang and colleagues addressing quality improvement in adult education and the importance of lifelong learning in China’s development.

In selecting academic literature, we included empirical studies, theoretical papers, and review articles that shed light on the role or effectiveness of continuing education programs within China’s lifelong learning agenda. Notably, we incorporated data from a 2024 quantitative study on student attitudes toward continuing education, a 2025 study on continuing education’s impact on older adults’ employment, and analyses of China’s open university system, among others. Policy analysis focused on reading and extracting key points from documents such as the Education Modernization 2035 plan, MOE guidelines (2022 and 2025) on continuing education management, and official statements on lifelong learning initiatives (e.g. the promotion of online learning platforms). These were examined to understand government objectives, reforms, and regulatory changes affecting university continuing education.

Data and content from the sources were triangulated to identify common themes and trends. In synthesizing findings, we paid attention to: (1) Policy goals and measures – what the government is aiming to achieve with lifelong learning and how university continuing education is mobilized; (2) Scale and enrollment – quantitative expansion and its outcomes; (3) Quality and governance issues – challenges identified (such as declining quality or uneven standards) and reforms to address them; (4) Technological and pedagogical innovation – the move to online platforms, digital resources, and new teaching models especially; and (5) Societal impact – evidence of how

continuing education programs have affected learners' skills, employment, and personal growth, as well as how they contribute to broader socio-economic objectives (like healthy aging and workforce upskilling). We used a narrative analytical approach to connect these aspects and to evaluate progress against policy expectations.

It should be noted that this study is a qualitative synthesis of existing sources rather than original field research. There may be limitations in the available data – for instance, detailed evaluations of program quality are not always public. Where possible, we cross-referenced multiple sources to ensure reliability (for example, enrollment figures from official reports were compared with those reported in research literature). The inclusion of both Chinese and English sources helps provide a balanced view, capturing how policies are portrayed domestically and how outcomes are assessed academically. Overall, by integrating policy analysis with recent research, the methodology provides a holistic understanding of the state of lifelong learning policies in China and the integral role played by university continuing education programs.

3. Results

3.1. Policy Support and Reforms for Lifelong Learning in the New Era

The Chinese support for lifelong learning has intensified in the past five years, with a flurry of policies and guidelines aimed at strengthening continuing education. Lifelong learning is now explicitly framed as part of China's national development strategy, reflecting what one scholar called the "state-led promoting model" of lifelong. A significant policy milestone was the issuance of China Education Modernization 2035 in February 2019, which established "building a learning society" as a key goal for the education system by 2035. This high-level plan underscored that "lifelong learning for all" is essential for China to adapt to economic transformation and an aging demographic (Central Committee of CPC & State Council, 2019a). To operationalize these goals, the State Council released an implementation plan for 2018–2022 that, among other targets, called for expanding continuing education, developing open universities, and improving systems for recognizing learning outcomes (Central Committee of CPC & State Council, 2019b). These plans effectively cemented lifelong learning as a government priority, ensuring policy continuity after the 2010–2020 plan. As Xiao and Zhang (2022) observe, the central government has been the "biggest driving force" behind lifelong learning initiatives in China, which aligns all levels of the education system – including universities – with this national mission.

Concretely, recent years have seen a series of policy documents and actions geared towards reforming and upgrading continuing education. In 2022, the Ministry of Education issued a dedicated plan to promote the reform and development of continuing education (China Daily, 2025a). This plan candidly acknowledged persistent problems in the sector, such as "unclear positioning, underdeveloped standards, unsound systems and low-quality talent cultivation". To address these, it set out measures to clarify the role of continuing education within universities' missions, tighten quality standards, and innovate teaching methods – all with the aim of advancing high-quality development of this sector. The MOE's 2022 plan signaled a policy shift:

after years of rapid expansion, the focus would move to improving quality and relevance. Educational experts echoed this view; for instance, Yue and Xu (2022) noted that as China's regular higher education has expanded and the pool of potential adult learners shrinks, "the focus of continuing education needs to transition from scale expansion to quality improvement". This sentiment has been reinforced in subsequent guidelines.

A landmark reform occurred at the end of 2022, when the Ministry of Education announced the termination of the long-running pilot program that allowed elite universities to offer online degree education (Modern Distance Education, known as "network education"). Effective 2023, conventional universities would no longer independently host online education colleges; instead, continuing education at universities would be standardized and integrated. While MOE did not explicitly state the reason, analysts suggest it was to eliminate redundancy, curb profit-driven practices, and ensure more consistent quality control (MOE, 2022). Essentially, the open university system (headed by the OUC) would take on a greater role as the main vehicle for distance learning, while regular universities continue adult education through part-time programs that require the national adult college entrance exam for admission. This reform represents a consolidation of resources and a recommitment to "one system, one standard" for higher continuing education. It also reflects the government's resolve to protect the unique status of open universities as specialized providers – something noted as relatively unique to China's approach. Chen et al (2024) point out that unlike some countries where open universities have lost ground, in China the government actively supports OUC and its provincial branches to preserve a dedicated lifelong learning infrastructure.

In March 2025, new "Guidelines to Boost Continuing Education" were released, further underlining the policy support for this sector (China Daily, 2025a). These guidelines urge higher education institutions to make continuing education an "integral part of their talent cultivation and social service system," aligning programs with national development strategies and labor market demand. Universities are encouraged to develop new continuing education programs in high-tech and urgently needed fields – such as advanced manufacturing, AI, life sciences, green development, and services for an aging society – to upskill the workforce in line with emerging priorities. This shows a clear policy direction of using continuing education to support economic restructuring and innovation. The guidelines also call for eliminating outdated terminologies like "correspondence education" and unifying nomenclature under "non-full-time education," reflecting a modernization of the system's image. By standardizing admissions (all university continuing education students must take the national adult entrance exam) and unifying teaching requirements and certification, the government aims to raise the credibility of adult degrees. These moves address past criticisms that some adult programs were lax or substandard.

Overall, China's recent policies demonstrate a robust top-down push to enhance lifelong learning provision. The government not only expanded the infrastructure (through open universities and online programs) but is now refining it: closing quality gaps, updating curricula, and leveraging technology. Lifelong learning is framed as vital to national talent development, social equity, and even competitiveness. As one policy-watch article summarized, Chinese authorities see lifelong learning support – via online platforms, community colleges, libraries, etc.

– as essential to public well-being and the country’s edge in a fast-changing world. The next sections examine how university continuing education programs have evolved under this strong policy impetus and what outcomes have been observed.

3.2. Expansion and Evolution of University Continuing Education Programs

University continuing education in China has undergone remarkable expansion over the past two decades, contributing greatly to the country’s lifelong learning goals. By 2019, open and distance education institutions had produced roughly 10% of all higher education graduates in China since 1979. The mass expansion phase – especially from 1999 through the 2010s – saw enrollments in continuing education surge, helping China move from elite to mass higher education. In 2021, for example, distance and adult higher education students comprised about one-quarter of the nation’s 44.3 million tertiary students. The Open University of China (and its predecessor CCRTVU) alone has enrolled over 25 million students since its founding, and nearly 20 million have graduated, including large numbers of working adults and rural learners (Xiao et al., 2025). This scale underscores how vital university continuing education has been in providing second-chance and ongoing education opportunities. Many who missed out on college via Gaokao have obtained degrees later in life through these programs. As Zhang (2019) observed, adult higher education has “great promise” in China as a means to build a learning society and improve human capital broadly.

However, the expansion was not without issues. During the growth years, some universities prioritized enrollment numbers over educational quality, leading to concerns about the rigor of adult programs. Common problems included relatively low admission thresholds (for-profit online colleges were motivated to maximize intake), shortage of qualified instructors for adult classes, outdated curriculum in some programs, and learners’ difficulties balancing work and study. Researchers have noted that adult students often faced conflicts between job and study, low attendance, and utilitarian attitudes (studying primarily for a diploma), all of which could undermine learning outcomes. According to Zhang (2019), there was a pressing need to shift focus from teachers’ teaching to adults’ learning – that is, to adopt learner-centered methods that engage adult students and address their specific needs. This call reflects a broader pedagogical reform requirement: moving away from lecture-heavy, exam-oriented approaches toward more flexible, interactive, and self-directed learning suitable for mature students. Some improvement initiatives have been undertaken; for example, universities have started enhancing academic support for adult learners and incorporating online learning tools to accommodate their schedules (Luo, 2022). Nonetheless, by the late 2010s it became evident that ensuring quality and relevance in continuing education was a major challenge even as quantity goals (widening access) were largely being met.

The government’s recent reforms respond directly to these issues. One pivotal change was the integration and standardization of online distance education mentioned earlier. Until 2022, dozens of universities ran their own online degree programs with varying quality. The MOE’s termination of the pilot effectively means that starting in 2023, any distance degree programs must adhere to unified national standards and likely be overseen by the open university system. This is expected to eliminate the more “commercial” online colleges that some universities had

and ensure adult students receive comparable education across institutions (Ministry of Education, 2022). The open universities, which operate under the guidance of the MOE, have been tasked to absorb and continue the mission of those programs. Notably, the Open University of China has been expanding its role: it now manages a national “Lifelong Education Platform” which offers online courses and resources to the public. By 2023, this platform had nearly 7 million registered users and had logged close to 60 million learning sessions, indicating massive usage. The OUC has also launched specialized branches, such as the Senior University of China in 2022 to cater to learners aged 60 and above. This “Senior University” quickly attracted millions of elderly learners, showing the demand for learning in later life and the system’s agility in creating programs for that demographic. Universities in many provinces likewise run colleges for older adults. These developments align with China’s policy to actively develop education for the elderly as part of lifelong learning, given the rapidly aging population.

Another evolution in university continuing education is the increased emphasis on career-relevant and high-tech fields. The 2025 guidelines encouraging new programs in areas like AI, big data, healthcare, and green technology have already spurred some universities to introduce adult degree or certificate programs in these cutting-edge subjects. For instance, some open universities and continuing education colleges now offer diplomas in e-commerce, cybersecurity, nursing for the elderly, and other fields aligned with social needs (China Daily, 2025a). This marks a shift from the earlier era where popular adult majors were often in basic disciplines like management or law; now the push is toward “urgent need” specialties including not only technical fields but also cultural heritage conservation, domestic services, and languages in short supply. Aligning continuing education curricula with labor market demand is expected to enhance the employability of adult learners and demonstrate the practical value of lifelong learning. Indeed, recent research by Qi (2024) found that a majority of adult students in continuing education believe their additional education improves their career prospects and personal growth, citing gains in professional knowledge and self-confidence. Many Chinese employers also recognize adult degrees for promotion, which incentivizes working adults to pursue further study (Qi, 2024).

The Corona Virus Disease pandemic in 2020 provided an unforeseen impetus for the digital transformation of continuing education. When campuses closed and in-person classes halted, universities had to shift adult education online almost overnight. This exposed shortcomings, such as insufficient online course content and untrained instructors for virtual teaching (Luo, 2022). However, it also accelerated improvements: universities upgraded their online learning platforms, invested in digital resources, and trained faculty in online pedagogies. As a result, by 2021–2022, the capacity for online delivery in continuing education greatly expanded. The MOE’s Smart Education of China platform (a national online learning portal launched in 2022) further boosted access by aggregating high-quality digital courses and making them freely available. This platform won a UNESCO ICT in Education Prize for its innovative approach to mass online learning. University continuing education programs took advantage of these developments – for example, many continuing education colleges now blend online and face-to-face instruction, offer MOOCs to their adult learners, and use learning analytics to track progress. Officials see

“digitalization of education” as a key strategy to support lifelong learning at scale. In fact, China’s 14th Five-Year Plan for education includes building a “national digital university” to centralize online learning offerings for the public. While details are still emerging, it suggests the government may create a virtual university entity to grant recognized credentials via online study, which could further integrate resources of various institutions. This could be transformative for lifelong learning, essentially providing a high-access route parallel to conventional universities.

From an institutional perspective, the convergence of continuing education models is notable. Research by Chen et al (2024) comparing open universities and university IDEs found that despite different missions, their functions have become “isomorphic,” with both providing similar programs and learner experiences. The government’s role in this convergence has been important – policy has driven both types toward common standards and often encouraged traditional universities to learn from the open universities’ practices (and vice versa). Now, with the recent elimination of independent online colleges, most dual-mode universities have folded distance learning into their general continuing education divisions. This arguably streamlines management and reduces the previous perception that distance programs were a low-status sideline. It may also alleviate what Chen et al (2024) describe as an “identity crisis” for open universities, as their unique role is reaffirmed and protected even as traditional universities also serve adult learners. The continuing education ecosystem in China thus consists of a network of the Open University of China (with 44 provincial branches and numerous local study centers) and a large number of regular universities offering part-time adult programs under MOE’s guidance. These components together strive to fulfill the lifelong learning needs of the populace.

3.3. Outcomes and Impacts of Continuing Education Programs

Evidence from recent studies suggests that university continuing education programs in China have had positive outcomes for individuals and society, although there are areas in need of improvement. On the individual level, adult learners generally benefit from continuing education in terms of skills enhancement, career advancement, and personal fulfillment. For instance, a 2024 survey of students in two Chinese universities’ continuing education programs reported high levels of satisfaction and a “generally positive outlook towards lifelong learning”. Participants in that study agreed strongly on the importance of self-directed learning and felt that engaging in continuing education boosted their academic performance and job prospects. The majority had participated in activities like industry training or online courses and perceived tangible gains. Such findings reinforce the idea that continuing education can empower individuals for success in a dynamic job market (Qi, 2024).

Another significant impact area is employment, especially for middle-aged and older adults. As China’s population ages, lifelong learning is seen as a way to keep older workers employable and engaged. Tao and Ren (2025) analyzed national survey data (CHARLS) and found that participation in continuing education or training had a positive causal effect on employment outcomes for people over 45. Notably, they discovered that only about 1% of Chinese adults over 45 had engaged in continuing education in recent years – a very low participation rate – yet those who did showed higher odds of finding or retaining employment compared to peers who did not continue learning. This suggests a vast untapped potential: expanding continuing education

among mature adults could significantly support active aging and reduce unemployment or underemployment in that demographic (Tao & Ren, 2025). In line with this, the Open University of China's establishment of Senior Universities and widespread community education for seniors have provided learning opportunities that can improve elders' digital skills, mental engagement, and quality of life. While the primary goal for many older learners may be personal enrichment, there is a clear socio-economic benefit in terms of healthier, more active seniors who can even pursue "silver" entrepreneurship or new careers (Zhang & Li, 2025). Lifelong learning thus contributes to addressing the challenges of an aging society – a fact explicitly noted in government plans which call for developing education programs for older adults as part of the lifelong learning system.

For working-age adults, continuing education can facilitate career shifts and advancements in an economy that is upgrading rapidly. Many Chinese adults have used evening university or online college to obtain higher degrees while working. Employers in sectors like education, healthcare, and government often require formal degrees for promotion, so adult degree programs help employees meet those qualifications. There are anecdotal reports of blue-collar workers attaining white-collar jobs after earning adult college diplomas, and of rural migrants improving their employment options through distance learning. On a broader scale, Chen et al. (2023) note that organizations themselves benefit when employees engage in continuous learning, as it fosters knowledge sharing and innovation (their study of companies serving the elderly is one such example, where lifelong learning culture in enterprises leads to better services). This aligns with the government's call for enterprises to support staff training and corporate universities to emerge – essentially bringing lifelong learning into workplaces. Indeed, the rise of corporate universities in China (over 200 established in recent years) is complementary to public continuing education, indicating that lifelong learning is being pursued both by the state and by industry (Han et al., 2024). Corporate universities fill some skills gaps and provide more targeted training to employees, which was partly driven by dissatisfaction with the "knowledge provided by traditional universities" for practical business needs. The co-existence of public continuing education and in-house corporate education underscores a holistic trend: lifelong learning in China is becoming multi-faceted, with universities, enterprises, communities, and online platforms all contributing.

While the benefits are evident, the outcomes also highlight challenges. One ongoing concern is quality and perception of credentials. Historically, degrees earned through part-time or distance study were sometimes seen as less prestigious than full-time degrees. The government's efforts to unify standards (same admission exams, standardized diplomas, etc.) aim to reduce this stigma. As of 2021, new rules mandate that continuing education graduates receive certificates that do not overtly differentiate them from regular graduates, which could improve social recognition. However, ensuring academic quality on par with full-time programs remains a task. Some studies have critiqued that adult learners' academic performance can be weaker due to time constraints and inadequate support. Xiao et al (2025) observed a "lack of enthusiasm" among certain distance learners, attributing it to insufficient interactivity and support in some programs. This suggests that universities need to invest more in learner support services – tutoring, mentoring, and

motivating adult students. Encouragingly, a number of institutions have started doing so, for example by establishing online tutoring systems and local study centers where adult learners can get help. The OUC system is noted for its vast network of study centers providing face-to-face assistance, which has been linked to higher completion rates (Xiao et al., 2025). Going forward, adopting a more student-centered approach (as Zhang et al (2019) recommended) – focusing on adults’ learning experiences rather than just delivering content – will be key to improving outcomes like retention and skill acquisition.

Another outcome to monitor is how effectively continuing education programs align with evolving economic needs. The recent emphasis on programs in STEM fields and vocational skills is promising, but it also requires updates to curricula and faculty training. Some universities may lack instructors with cutting-edge industry knowledge for fields like AI or green technology in their continuing ed departments. Partnerships with industry and use of external experts could help bridge this gap. There have been positive examples: e.g., some adult education programs in engineering have engaged industry professionals as adjunct lecturers, and open universities have collaborated with tech companies to develop course content. Moreover, China’s new Vocational Education Law (2022) encourages integration of vocational and continuing education, so that adults can obtain practical skills certifications more easily. This legal change is meant to elevate the status of vocational learning and facilitate lifelong skill training. In implementation, we might see more crossover where universities offer not only academic degrees but also short-term vocational courses for adult learners. These micro-credentials could be especially valuable for those looking to upskill without committing to a full degree. The concept of a “credit bank” is also being explored in China, wherein learning credits from various continuing education experiences (degrees, MOOCs, professional trainings) can be accumulated and transferred. If realized, this would significantly enhance the flexibility of lifelong learning pathways. Indeed, since 2019 the OUC has been piloting a national credit bank for lifelong learning, and tens of millions of people have already earned credits through the self-taught examination system that could potentially be recognized more broadly.

Finally, at the societal level, the expansion of university continuing education has likely contributed to broader gains such as improved literacy rates, greater social mobility, and a more informed citizenry. While hard to quantify directly, China’s human capital improvements over the last decades coincide with the availability of adult education. The literacy rate among young and middle-aged adults is now nearly 100%, compared to much lower in the 1980s – adult education campaigns (like TV university courses) played a part in that progress. Many rural and marginalized individuals have benefited from second-chance education via radio/TV universities and online programs, which supports poverty reduction and social equity goals. The State Council (2025) noted that providing affordable lifelong learning (through public platforms and community learning centers) is crucial for equity. Lifelong learning opportunities in community schools, for example, enable migrant workers in cities to take evening classes, and enable retirees to pursue learning, which enhances their quality of life. In short, the societal impact of university continuing education in China is multi-dimensional – economic, social, and cultural. It helps build a culture

that values self-improvement and “learning how to learn,” which is foundational for innovation and civic participation in the long run.

4. Discussion

China’s experience with lifelong learning policies and university continuing education offers valuable insights into how a nation can scale up education for all ages. The findings of this review highlight a dynamic interplay between policy mandates and institutional responses. The government’s strong top-down support has been a double-edged sword: it enabled rapid expansion and resource mobilization, but it also led at times to uniformity and compliance-driven implementation that might overlook local needs. As China enters a new stage of high-quality development, the continuing education system faces the task of transitioning from an extensive to an intensive growth model – focusing on improving educational quality, learner experience, and outcomes, rather than merely increasing enrollment. This transition aligns with the broader shift in China’s education policy from expanding access to balancing access with excellence (OECD, 2019).

One key theme in the discussion is the integration of lifelong learning into the mainstream education system. Unlike some countries where adult education is marginal, China has increasingly integrated continuing education into universities’ core functions. The 2025 guidelines explicitly tell universities to treat continuing education as a fundamental part of talent cultivation, not a sideline. This elevation in status is important. It means, for example, that faculty promotions might count continuing education teaching, or that universities devote budget and technology to their continuing ed divisions. We see initial signs of this integration: many universities have merged their continuing education college with online education offices, indicating a more unified management. The challenge will be to maintain the flexibility and innovation that adult programs often require, within the bureaucratic structure of universities. Adult learners differ from traditional students – they need more flexibility in scheduling, more practical curricula, and support services tailored to working life. Universities must adapt by perhaps hiring faculty with industry experience, offering courses in the evenings/weekends, and providing credit for experiential learning. In other words, the pedagogical model must shift from the conventional lecture-exam system to one that is learner-centered and competency-based. This echoes Zhang (2019)’s call for focusing on “adult learners’ learning” rather than just delivering content. Some universities have begun innovating – for example, using case-based and project-based learning in MBA programs for working adults, or flipping classrooms so that online lectures are watched at the student’s convenience and in-person sessions (if any) are used for discussion and mentoring. These practices should be expanded.

Another crucial aspect is the use of technology and digital learning to support lifelong learning. China’s investment in educational technology has significantly benefited continuing education. The rapid deployment of online platforms during COVID-19 demonstrated that many adult programs can be effectively delivered or supplemented online. This mode is especially suitable for adults who cannot attend campus regularly. The MOE’s Smart Education Platform and

upcoming “National Digital University” initiative present opportunities to create a more open, on-demand learning ecosystem. If high-quality courses from top universities are made freely available and credentials granted through a centralized digital university, it could dramatically widen participation in lifelong learning. However, bridging the “digital divide” remains important – not all adult learners, especially older or rural ones, have equal digital access or skills. Empowering older adults to use online learning platforms is an area needing attention (Bridging the digital divide for older learners has become a focus, as noted by some studies in China’s context). The government’s recognition of this – by establishing community digital learning centers and senior-friendly interfaces – is encouraging. Digital transformation of education, as Vice Minister Chen Jie stated, is seen as “an inevitable choice to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The discussion here supports that view: technology, if used wisely, can personalize learning, make it more flexible, and reach learners who previously were excluded. China’s case shows a rapid uptake of EdTech in continuing education, but ongoing efforts are needed to improve digital content quality and interactive engagement (simply watching recorded lectures is not enough for deep learning).

Quality assurance and credibility of qualifications form a further discussion point. There is evidence that China is tightening oversight of continuing education programs: standardizing entry exams, curricula frameworks, and requiring institutions to regularly evaluate teaching quality. The MOE has set up mechanisms to monitor continuing education providers – for instance, universities must periodically report on their adult program outcomes, and poorly performing programs can be sanctioned. This is critical to maintain the social value of adult credentials. The phasing out of separate “network education” certificates (which used to explicitly label the mode of study) in favor of unified diplomas is a strategic move to eliminate discrimination against adult learners. In the long run, skills and competencies should matter more than whether one studied full-time or part-time. The success of China’s lifelong learning policy will, therefore, depend on whether employers and society at large accept and respect the outputs of continuing education. So far, the trend is positive – many public sector jobs, for example, now openly accept adult education degrees in hiring criteria where they once might not have. Continued communication and success stories can further validate the system. Additionally, implementing a robust credit bank and qualification framework (as being explored) can allow mixing and matching of learning from different sources, which can improve quality by introducing competition and choice. If a learner can get credits from various universities or online providers and combine them towards a degree, institutions will need to maintain high standards to attract learners. This could drive up quality across the board.

From a global perspective, China’s model illustrates how government initiative can rapidly build a lifelong learning infrastructure, especially in developing contexts. Other countries can learn from China’s large-scale use of open universities and online education to democratize access. The flip side is ensuring that quantity does not trump quality – a lesson China is currently grappling with. The emphasis on shifting to quality in continuing education is very much in line with international best practices, which suggest that adult learning should be relevant, learner-centric, and outcomes-focused (UIL, 2020). China’s policies now resonate with these principles,

talking about aligning programs with market demand, improving teaching methods, and providing better support to learners. For instance, the guidelines to “consider employment competitiveness of disciplines” when approving new adult programs show a pragmatic approach to link lifelong learning with economic needs. This ensures that continuing education is not happening in a vacuum but is tied to real skills gaps and opportunities. A potential area for further improvement is encouraging innovation in program delivery – such as modular courses, stackable certificates, and partnerships with MOOCs. While China has embraced MOOCs (with platforms like XuetangX and hundreds of Chinese MOOCs online), integrating them into formal continuing education (for credit) could be expanded. Some Chinese universities have begun accepting MOOC certificates for credit in adult programs, but a more systematic approach could be beneficial.

Another aspect for discussion is the cultural dimension: Lifelong learning in China carries not just economic importance but also cultural significance as part of the idea of a “learning society”. The government promotes not only degree-oriented continuing education but also community-based learning, reading campaigns, and lifelong education for personal enrichment. This holistic approach is commendable – learning is positioned as a public good that contributes to personal well-being and social harmony (China Daily 2025b). Universities have responded by organizing non-formal education events, public lectures, and free online courses for the community. For example, many universities during the pandemic offered free online classes to the public on topics like health and entrepreneurship. Such outreach strengthens the universities’ role as knowledge hubs in their communities and fosters a culture of learning beyond enrolled students. The concept of “universities for the third age” (elderly colleges) booming across Chinese cities is a testament to this cultural shift – learning is increasingly seen as a lifelong pursuit and a lifestyle choice, not just a means to a job. The waiting lists for senior citizen college seats in some areas (reportedly, many open university branches have more applicants than they can accommodate) indicate how deeply the idea of learning at any age has taken root. This is an important soft outcome of policies: the normalization of adult and elderly education in society.

Despite the generally positive trajectory, challenges and questions remain. One challenge is ensuring that rural populations benefit as much as urban ones. While online technologies can bridge distance, disparities in internet access and in educational facilities mean rural adults might still have less opportunity. The government has launched pilot lifelong learning programs in some rural communities (e.g., “farmers’ night schools” and e-learning stations in villages). Continuing education colleges could partner with rural schools or agricultural extension agencies to reach more rural learners. Another challenge is motivation – how to incentivize adults to engage in learning, especially those mid-career who may not see immediate benefits. The employment studies suggest that even if opportunities exist, participation can be low (only 1% of older adults were participating in formal learning per Tao & Ren (2025)). This calls for stronger advocacy and perhaps linking learning with other social benefits (for instance, offering training vouchers, or integrating learning achievements into professional title evaluations). Moreover, as automation and AI reshape the job landscape, reskilling and upskilling will become continual needs. University continuing education must stay agile to provide training for new types of jobs that

emerge. The current push in China for digital skills training (such as coding, e-commerce, etc.) is a step in that direction. It might also be worthwhile for China to develop more short-cycle and micro-credential programs, which international trends show are effective for adult learners who cannot commit to long programs.

In summary, the discussion suggests that China's university continuing education programs have substantially furthered the country's lifelong learning aims by widening access and now pivoting to improve quality. The system's strengths lie in strong policy backing, vast scale, and increasing integration of technology. Its weaknesses involve uneven quality and still-evolving pedagogy, which are being addressed through reforms. As lifelong learning becomes ever more critical in the face of rapid societal changes, China's experience underscores that policy commitment must be matched by institutional innovation and learner-centered practices. The continued evolution of university continuing education – in China and elsewhere – will likely focus on creating flexible, high-quality learning opportunities that cater to diverse needs throughout life. China's journey in this realm offers both inspiration and caution: it shows what can be achieved in expanding lifelong learning, and it highlights the importance of continuously adapting policies and programs to ensure that lifelong learning is effective, equitable, and truly lifelong in spirit.

5. Conclusion

China's pursuit of a learning society through lifelong learning policies has led to the rapid development of university continuing education programs as a central pillar of adult education. This review has traced how, in the last five years especially, China's policy landscape and university practices have evolved to strengthen lifelong learning opportunities. Several conclusions can be drawn:

First, policy leadership has been decisive. The Chinese government elevated lifelong learning to a strategic priority and implemented supportive policies – from the Education Modernization 2035 plan to specific MOE guidelines in 2022 and 2025 – that expanded and reformed continuing education. This top-level commitment ensured funding, legitimacy, and integration of continuing education within the national education system. Other nations can observe that strong government vision, coupled with clear policy frameworks, is essential to embedding lifelong learning in the education agenda.

Second, universities have responded by massively expanding continuing education provision, making higher learning accessible to tens of millions of adult learners. Through open universities, distance education colleges, and part-time programs, universities in China have provided educational opportunities to those who otherwise would have no pathway to advanced education. The sheer scale – with a quarter of higher education students enrolled in non-traditional modes – illustrates that lifelong learning need not be peripheral; it can be a core function of higher education in a populous country. The outcome has been a more educated workforce and populace, contributing to China's human capital development and social equity. Many individuals improved their careers and life trajectories via continuing education.

Third, the recent shift from growth to quality is a critical transition. As enrollment growth plateaus, Chinese policymakers and educators recognize that the success of lifelong learning will be judged by its quality and effectiveness. Reforms such as unifying standards, closing subpar online programs, updating curricula, and leveraging technology are steering the continuing education system towards higher quality. Early signs are positive – for example, the integration of online technologies has increased flexibility and the new guidelines have driven universities to align programs with labor market needs. Continuing education is becoming more professionalized and outcomes-oriented. Challenges like ensuring active learner engagement, maintaining academic rigor, and improving public perception are being addressed through these measures. Over time, one can expect China's adult education degrees to gain parity in reputation with traditional degrees, especially if quality improvements continue.

Fourth, lifelong learning in China is increasingly inclusive and diverse in its offerings. Not only do programs span general academic degrees, but they also include vocational skills training, community education, and learning for leisure and personal growth (such as senior citizen education). This comprehensive approach means lifelong learning policy is not just about economic utility but about enriching people's lives and fostering a culture of learning. China's establishment of learning platforms and community learning centers provides a model of how to reach learners outside formal institutions. The case of Jiangsu Province, which built an integrated lifelong learning platform combining online/offline and covering different education types, demonstrates how local innovation can implement national policy effectively. It also underlines that lifelong learning systems function best when they involve collaboration among schools, workplaces, and community organizations.

In conclusion, China's university continuing education programs have played an indispensable role in realizing the country's lifelong learning objectives. They have expanded the scope of who can receive higher education, from young school-leavers to mid-career professionals to retirees. The Chinese approach – characterized by government stewardship, large-scale open universities, integration of technology, and ongoing reforms – offers a distinctive example of system-building for lifelong learning. Its achievements are evident in greater educational attainment across the adult population and enhanced workforce skills, while its evolving reforms show a commitment to sustainability and quality improvement. The experience also yields lessons: it emphasizes the importance of balancing expansion with quality, the need to adapt governance as systems grow, and the value of embedding lifelong learning in cultural values (so that individuals are motivated to continue learning).

For policymakers and educators outside China, the implications are clear: lifelong learning opportunities can be dramatically widened through supportive policy and innovation, but maintaining standards and relevance is an ever-present task. As the world faces rapid technological change and demographic shifts, the imperative for lifelong learning is universal. China's journey over the past decade exemplifies both the possibilities and the challenges in making lifelong learning a reality at national scale. With continued efforts to refine and adapt its continuing education programs, China is poised to move closer to its vision of a learning society –

one in which education truly becomes a lifelong endeavor for all citizens, and one that fuels the nation's development in the years to come.

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