

SoongHee Han  
Seoul National University, Republic of Korea

SeonJoo Choi  
Seoul National University, Republic of Korea

## Adult Education in Korea: Key Issues and Current Challenges

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the distinctive patterns of adult education in the Republic of Korea, from the social and structural point of view. It reveals that Korea's adult education has shifted from the phase of the "social-education paradigm" to the phase of the "lifelong learning paradigm", which corresponds with transitions in the economic and social structures in the lives of adults. Ironically, the transition was accelerated by the inclusion of the Korean economy into the global capitalist system, and the shock of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 played a key role in boosting the role of lifelong learning in the society as a whole. The new streams reformulated the whole of Korean adult education, with highly developed legal support systems under the leadership of a government-led agency called the National Institute of Lifelong Education. Based upon legislative initiatives, adult education opportunities have significantly improved under several iconic programs such as Lifelong Learning City or the Academic Credit Bank System, etc. In spite of the distinctive achievements, however, Korea still has to address some key challenges such as huge intergenerational gaps in educational attainments, inequalities in lifelong learning participation, and limited public funding systems.

**Key words:** social education, lifelong learning culture, learning cities, learning society, adult education participation.

### Introduction

The republic of Korea has achieved remarkable economic development, democratization, and social development over the past 60 years. Especially The experience of educational development and transition into a learning society has captured the world's attention (Han, 2010, p.17). A UNESCO's report described characteristics of the Korean learning society as follows:

The Republic of Korea has already crossed the threshold between developing and developed countries, achieving a per capita income of over USD 20,000 in 2007, and already attaining membership of the OECD. The experience of the Republic of Korea in its development of adult education and lifelong learning may be regarded as the precursor of where other developing countries of the region may expect to be in the future (Ahmed, 2009, p. 27).

Korea's educational culture, especially as of the traditional era before the 19th century has adults as the subject of learning and education. The Josun Dynasty, which lasted for approximately five hundred years starting at the end of the 14th century, was a Confucian state centered on scholar officials where learning was a lifelong task. Noble class was the scholars who held political power and exercised decisive influence over kings and the people on the basis of their scholarly achievements. Learning for children were called "small (childish) learning" while learning for adults were "great learning". Education of adults was embedded in daily life as an integral part of the traditional teaching of Confucian doctrines through everyday lives, ceremonial routines at court, and cultural formalities. In such a lifestyle, there was no distinction between children and adults in learning and education, nor was there any age-dependent demarcation line in education.

The traditional learning culture, however, was interrupted by the invasion of imperial colonialism in early twentieth century. The modernization was a sudden and unpleasant transition. Newly implanted modern education system built upon exploitative colonial structure distorted the meaning and social practice of education. As the modern schooling system has been established under Japanese occupation, education become an exclusive system for children and youth. There were no rooms for adults. Education in this context was used for a colonial socialization adults were merely forced laborers for exploitation. Some popular adult education practices were conducted as a part of independent movement.

## **Adult Education: From Social Education to Lifelong Learning Framework**

### *Social Education Framework*

In Korea, education of adults has long been practiced under the setting of "social education" framework, which referred to education that takes place outside regular schooling. It was perceived as a compensational way to catch up on previously lost chances of obtaining a basic school education. Under the transplanted Westernized education system, school took prestigious stage in education structure while social education meant to be non-formal part, or as of a second tier shadow

of educational structure. Adult education was one of the second tier compensatory education practices, as usually found in many Asian countries, rather than that of an age-dependent distinction. In other words, adult education was not an independent sector of social practice, but represented a part of social charity or supplementary learning for people who were marginalized from the regular school system.

This modern formation of adult education under the framework of “social education” proceeded in parallel with the construction of modern society. First, in the period of the 1960s and 1970s, Korea pursued a state-driven, highly compressed economic development, and a large number of people immigrated to urban cities to get jobs at factory, among many did not finished compulsory level of schooling. Korea’s industrialization at that time heavily relied on light industry like textiles that did not required high level of training and education. Works are more or less simple labour with some skills earned at the workplaces and were possible without any systematic occupational training. The most concerns were extensive working hours and high labour intensity. Securing working hours were main source of capital accumulation, and overtime work and nightshift were common to earn extra income. No private life or life enhancement were possible. The home was merely a place to reproduce the physical condition or a little break between the intensive working hours. The city of Ulsan, where Hyundai Motor Company and Hyundai Heavy Industries are located, shows a case of how the “life” was dominated by “work”. For example, the city’s traffic rush hours exactly matched the shift plans of these giant factories, and their wives had to leave home with carrying the crying babies on the backs, in order not to disturb their sleeping husbands after the night shift. Worker’s life was thoroughly controlled and managed by their work and it was hard to find additional time for enhancing private lives and personal development. It was a fundamental condition of adult education per se. In industrial parks, some factories operated affiliated special high schools to provide workers’ missing middle school or high school education opportunities.

Though no official statistics are available in adult literacy rate at that time, it is for sure that it was not so high since, in 1970, 73.4% of Korean adults did not complete primary education. The average educational attainment level of adults in the 1970s and 1990s, however, has increased from 5.7 to 9.5 years, and adult education moves another dimension. More demands on higher level education programs and continuing studies took the core part of the area.

## Adult Education Reframed with the Notion of Lifelong Learning

The reinterpretation of adult education within lifelong learning framework, away from that of social education, was stimulated paradoxically under the influence of the Asia Financial Crisis in 1997 (Han, 2008). The year was a critical moment that not only gave Korean society drastic shock but also restructured irreversibly. The IMF relief loan and accompanied structural adjustment programs changed the way in which the Korean society and labour market were interlinked with those of global society. Korea became a part of global capitalism, where the employment instability became a common phenomenon. On the one hand, the job market was dichotomized into the global vs. local labor market. Semi- or high skill global job markets were the places more experienced and learned labours were competing for. Foreign human resource development (HRD) companies stimulated high-end competence development programs to sell in the domestic training market, and more attention began to be put to the education of the adults. On the other hand, reemployment of the laid off since the 1997 shock and mass corporate bankruptcies became the national task. The government began to establish and implement various policies and measures to return the multitude of unemployed to the job market. For instance, the government proliferated the Unemployment Insurance System and began to apply it to all workplaces in October 1998. Entire or partial tuition fees for occupational empowerment programs were refunded from a part of the unemployment insurance fund. The refund has worked as a proactive measure to cope with the post-IMF unemployment issue and revitalized the market for adult education.

Adult education, its *raison d'être* and social roles were paid much attention almost for the first time. The financial crisis and subsequent employment instability brought about the issue of how to relocate the adults as the core of lifelong learning. Korean adults began to be called “lifelong learners” Apart from simple laborers, people were directed to invent their “Entrepreneurial Self” (Rose, 1998) to maintain a competitive edge in the job market.

In the late 1990s and from 2000 onwards, the ideological foundations of adult education were lifelong Learning and Lifelong Job Training. With the enactment of the Lifelong Education Act in 1999, formal and informal learning opportunities for adults increased drastically. Based on the law, many lifelong education providers have emerged such as commercial culture learning centers, university continuing studies, media organizations, civic groups, and corporate training facilities, etc. At the same period, the participation rate to higher education has dramatically increased. If borrowing Trow's term, Korean higher education has entered into the “universal” stage. As the numbers of young university

students has grown, adult non-traditional student population accompanied the trend. Now, adult education in Korea faced new stage called “lifelong learning.”

## **Lifelong Education Policy and System: Revitalization of Adult Education**

### *Lifelong Education Act and the National Institute for Lifelong Education*

Evolution of Korea’s adult education from the stage of adult basic education towards more diverse in learning society has been based on several key institutional systems related to lifelong education practice and legislation, which are, “Korea has a highly developed modern legal system that supports the continued implementation of lifelong education policies, as well as government agencies that handle the policy implementation exclusively” (Han, 2010, p.54). The Korean Constitution amended in 1980 stipulated the government’s obligation to promote lifelong education, putting emphasis on guaranteeing Korean citizens’ right to education during their lifetime. The Social Education Act to enforce the constitutional guarantee was enacted in 1982; as a result, the education-related law was dichotomized into the Education Act that covers schools and colleges, and the Social Education Act that covers adult and non-formal sector. By succeeding and replacing the Social Education Act, Lifelong Education Act(LEA) was promulgated in 1999. This name-change reflected the government’s intention to promote a lifelong learning society, going far beyond merely complementing the missing parts of school education. LEA has stipulated the liabilities of the state and local governments to promote lifelong education, master plans for the development of lifelong education, and enforcement bodies and lifelong educator.

The major amendment of LEA in 2008 launched National Institute for Lifelong Learning(NILE), a government-backed agency which has played a pivotal role in planning and administrating the systematic structure of Korea’s lifelong education. At provincial level also, the local governments began to run regional institutes for lifelong learning and city/country/district lifelong learning centers based on LEA. NILE has played a leading think tank in national planning, constructing new sort of programs, directing funding mechanisms, or training and certifying “lifelong educators”. It also works as a supervising agency for The Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS).

The most unique feature of Korean lifelong education policy is that it is “centrally planned and locally implemented” in accordance with the master plan under the government’s initiatives (Han, 2010). The LEA mandates the central and local governments promote lifelong education and establish the Basic Plan

on Lifelong Education Promotion (BPLEP) every five years. In 2013, the third BPLEP covering 2013 to 2017 year has been established. Formation of diverse lifelong education policies and successive policy implementation are underway according to those comprehensive plan. NILE has played a key role in establishing and implementing BPLEP.

## Policies for Promoting Lifelong Learning Culture

### *Lifelong Learning City Project*

Lifelong Learning City, an innovative initiative of municipalities, town, and cities that leveraged learning communities to promote community self-governance and civil participation is known as one of the most successful lifelong education policies in Korea. It made a lifelong learning anchored at local communities. The learning city initiative was launched in 2001 and has grown up in the last two decades. Up to now (2013), 118 out of 227 municipalities have been designated as learning cities by the Ministry of Education, which constitutes 52 percent of all municipalities nationwide. While the number of Japanese learning cities in 2010 was just about 5 percent in total, those of Korea was more than 40 percent at the same year. “While the cities in Japan declared themselves as learning cities on a voluntary basis, the cities in the Republic of Korea were officially designated and financially subsidized by the Ministry of Education” (Han & Makino, 2013, p. 456). This implies that the government-driven efforts had a strong impact in expansion of the initiative.

The learning city program was centrally planned and locally implemented under the local governments’ initiatives. The government subsidy was extremely small, each designated cities had to run a learning cities project based on their own regulations and matching funds. As of their local governance, the cities endeavored to provide more learning opportunities to the residents and to cope with the local problems, and the actual impacts were directly acknowledged by the citizens.

This program also has a significant meaning in that it provides new conditions for implementing lifelong education in the holistic ecological context of cities. As a learning ecological unit, the learning cities formed their own pattern of learning system that encompasses of many diverse dimensions: educational program provision, promotion of learning participation, public budget support, networks of all available resources within a city and an accreditation system for learning outcomes.

Winning the title of “learning city” was not only an important achievement of the city, but also a useful tool for elaborating local self-governance by the participation of the citizens. In light of the short history of the restored local autonomy and elections, “the learning cities programs was very useful in educating residents of cities to construct local citizenship” (Han & Makino, 2013, p. 456). Most education programs provided by the municipalities were not for enhancing vocational skills, rather for enjoying liberal arts and community culture. Indeed it was designed to meet the need of community building, which contrasts with European competence-based learning city experiences.

### *Lifelong Learning Festivals*

Since 2001, the Korean government annually have held the National Lifelong Learning Festival in order to promote learning culture in general. This nationwide event aroused the interest in lifelong learning and a great deal of citizens participated in this festival to share their works or performance as results of individual or collective learning. Also, during the festival, National Lifelong Learning Awards that recognize excellent lifelong learning practices contribute to create a warm atmosphere. While the government took initiatives in promoting lifelong learning at first stage, recently many municipalities began to host their own lifelong learning festivals for the residents, which leads to building a strong learning culture and pattern of civil participation at local community level.

## **Establishment of Academic Certification System**

### *Academic Credit Bank System*

With the increase of educational attainment of Korean adults, which approached approximately the level of junior college degree in the early 2000s, the needs of adult education began to move up to the level of higher education or the equivalent education programs. The Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) is an institutional response for such a changing demand. ACBS is an open education system which recognizes diverse learning experiences acquired not only in school but also out of school. The accumulation of ACBS credits up to 80 or 140 credit hours, student can obtain an associate or bachelor's degree. Degree is conferred by The Ministry of Education in general or the president of the university or college in specific cases when the earned credits from the institution are over the half of the total credits. It is National Institute of Lifelong Education (NILE) that accredits and approves the credits and the institutions that provide the higher level

courses. There are various institutes which can give formal credits such as university continuing studies units, public vocational training institutes, and private vocational training institutes.

Sixteen years after its launching, ACBS have expanded rapidly. For example, the registered ACBS learners are about 1 million, more than forty hundreds of people have obtained bachelor or associate degrees up to now. Currently ACBS offers 208 kinds of standardized and approved course syllabuses, which are provided by 570 accredited educational institutes that are eligible to open the courses (NILE, 2013).

ACBS reflects rather rigid and closed college system in Korea. As part-time learning and credit transfer are relatively not easy, adult and non-traditional learners are hard to find their seats on campus, ACBS as an alternative terrain of credit program outside universities were invented. In this sense, it is a bridges or a ferry that connects the school-based credential society to a learning-oriented competence society (Kim, 2014). Of course, ACBS fails to keep rigorous quality controls, flexibility enough to meet the needs of employers, or public recognition from dominant elite universities and colleges. How to address the side effects of the rapid expansion in quantity remains an important task to challenge the way in which it keeps ACBS a qualified public educational system.

### *Lifelong Learning Account System*

Lifelong learning account system (LLAS) is another RVA (Recognition, Validation and Accreditation) system of learning which was recommended with ACBS by the Presidential Commission of Education Reform in 1995 heading for open and lifelong society. It was designed as an overarching management system incorporating each individual's all kinds of learning outcomes in lifetime into one record. On the basis of legal statement in Article 23 in the Lifelong Education Act, LLAS, known as a learning history management system for individuals, documents the various learning experiences of an individual learner and accumulates the information in the individually-assigned online learning history management account to help the learner design his or her learning in a systematic manner. This also allows the learning outcomes to be coordinated with academic abilities or qualification/credentials, or to be used as employment data (Han, 2010). Presently, LLAS is at a very early stage, and still not clear how to construct the identity, methods to keep records, and how to utilize the outcomes.

## Korea's Adult Education in different perspective

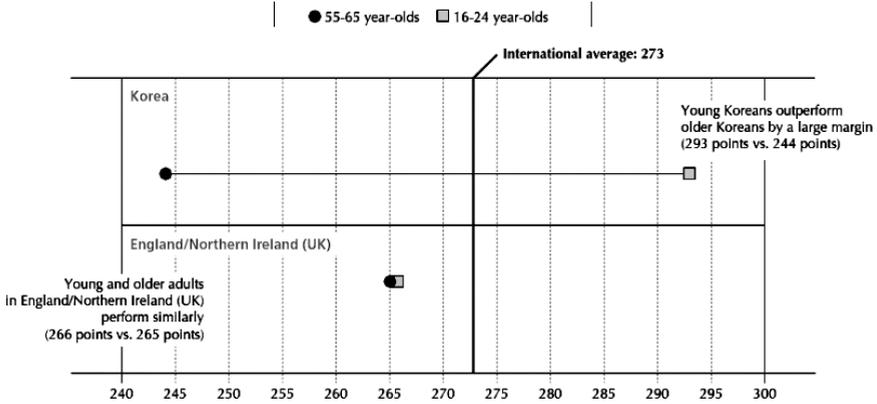
### *Imbalance under the Lifelong Learning Umbrella: The Gap between School Education and Adult Education*

*Learning Through Life*, published by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in the UK in 2009, was a meaningful report requiring a fundamental rethinking of the way in which the budgets are distributed according to the four age cohorts: 18+/ 19-24/ 25-49/ 50-74/ 75+ as the distribution paths of the annual lifelong education budget of £55 billion among the government, industries, and individuals. The report describes the necessities of and methods for a drastic reorganization of the current system of adult education to achieve the ultimate goal of a "learning society" (Schuller & Watson, 2009). In order to do that the report continuously finds the way in which adult education is interlinked with initial schoolings and well balanced between the two sectors.

Korea faces the same problem. Adult education is still a shadow of school education and constitutes the periphery of the regular educational system. From the viewpoint of lifelong learning support within the framework of lifespan development, the imbalance between school education for the young and adult education is a serious issue.

The imbalance reflects not only the budgets and resources, but more seriously the existing gap of educational attainments and competence level, clearly seen in the outcomes of PIAAC report. Indeed the PISA and PIAAC is indicative of the current status and limitations of adult education within Korea's educational system. PISA is an assessment tool for measuring the achievements of the 15-year-old population who have completed nine years of compulsory education in reading, math, and the sciences. Korea's youth has always demonstrated top performances among the OECD member countries. In 2009, for example, they ranked 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> in reading and math, respectively, and 2<sup>nd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> in science. Unlike these PISA results, the assessment of the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) placed Korean adults in the mid-low range among the participating countries, causing a huge social sensation. The educational gap between the older generation and the younger generation is huge.

Figure 1 below shows the generational gap via the PIAAC survey. In the UK, the gap in language ability between the younger and older generations was just 1 point, almost non-existent. In contrast, the gap in Korea is substantially larger. While the performance level of Korean adults aged 55–65 is 3<sup>rd</sup> from the bottom, Korean youth aged 16–24 ranked top 2<sup>nd</sup> after Japan (OECD, 2012).



**Figure 1:** Literacy skills gap between older and younger generations  
*Mean scores in literacy*

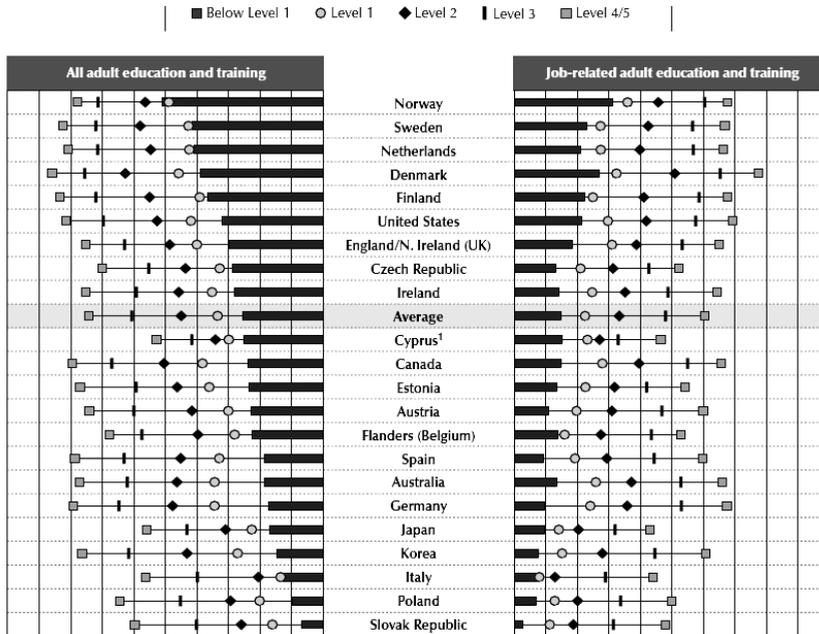
Source: OECD (2013, p.31)

This large age-dependent performance gap among Korean adults is consistent with the inter-generation educational gap. The high performance of the younger generation can be ascribed to the expansion of schools driven by the educational fever of Korean parents. On the contrary, Korean adults aged 50 and older were deprived of good-quality education. According to the survey results of the “Korean Social Indicators 2012,” the average year of schooling completed among the population aged 50 years and older, as of 2010, was 9.1 years, corresponding to the junior high level. Moreover, there is a distinct inter-gender difference, with 10 years for males and 7.7 years for females; in other words, average Korean women in the older generation did not even finish compulsory education level. This indicates a failure of the public lifelong education system of providing a second change for performance improvement to older adults that had been deprived of the chances of regular education. There has been no *repechage* (from French, literally, second chance) to make up educational disadvantage.

These intergenerational gaps in educational level are manifested in inter-generational conflicts and communicational barriers, which act ultimately as a decisive stumbling block against the growth of civil society. Participatory democracy and citizens’ learning patterns are considered to be closely associated with one another. Thus, there is an urgent need to put greater effort into providing a larger spectrum of opportunities for the older generations who did not benefit from regular education to participate in lifelong learning programs, thus contributing to the maturing of civil society.

### Inequality in Adult Education Participation

Korea also sees double-faces lifelong learning. In spite of optimistic vision of lifelong learning for all, the dual accumulation of advantages and disadvantages is still ongoing. Korea shows a big inequality in adult education participation



**Figure 2:** Participation rate in adult education, by literacy proficiency levels  
*Percentage of adults who participated in adult education and training during year prior to the survey, by level of proficiency in literacy*

Source: OECD (2013, p. 208)

Figure 2 above shows the internationally compared rates of adult participation in lifelong learning according to literacy level. In the cases of the countries showing high rates, namely, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Finland, the rates are equally high among those belonging to the population groups with low literacy rates. In contrast, the participation rates in Korea widely vary among the groups with different literacy levels; while almost 80% of those with a high literacy level participate in lifelong education, the rates drop sharply as the literacy level decreases, with level 1 and lower showing only a 15% rate of participation in lifelong education. It shows a big structured inequality in learning opportunities. The current provision of adult education in Korea is structured

in the way that educational disadvantage is accumulated, which finally is linked to the reproduction of socio-economic inequality throughout life.

It is noteworthy that despite the low rates of participation in lifelong learning among Korean adults, the average hours of participation in lifelong learning are long. Specifically, while 36.1% of Korean adults participated in lifelong learning during working hours, their average length of time for participation was 268.9 hours, the highest level among the PIAAC participating countries. This inconsistent participation pattern between rate and length implies that there is a structural inequality wherein long-term learning opportunities are given to a limited number of adults who have stable employment status and high positions in the occupational hierarchy.

To correct the inequality in adult education participation, the government must adopt proactive measures to enhance their participation rates of the vulnerable groups, such as the poorly educated, the elderly, and the unskilled workers.

### Conclusion

Korea's adult education experienced a shift in patterns from the early-phase "social-education paradigm" to the late-phase "lifelong learning paradigm" with the changing adults' mode of existence in Korea's modern history.

From the year 2000 onwards, the expansion of educational opportunities for adults in Korea has mainly been based on lifelong education policies. Korean lifelong education could be pursued in a stable and continuous manner by clearly defining the policy-making bodies in charge of lifelong education and establishing a separate legal groundwork for its implementation. Within the framework of the policies, such as those regarding lifelong learning cities, a variety of practical education programs for adults were provided and the expansion of a lifelong learning culture could be achieved.

Even though Korea's transition from literacy to a learning society has captured the world's attention, it has yet to tackle many tasks and cope with contradictions. For example, under the Korea's deep-rooted academic elitism, lifelong learning policies and practices need to pursue more the vision of learning society rather reinforcing the academic elitism-based society. Furthermore, efforts should be undertaken to enhance the participation rate from the current level of 30% to the level of the average of OECD at least. Decreasing learning inequality is also a critical problem to address.

## References

- AHMED, M. (2009). *The State and Development of Adult Learning and Education in Asia and Pacific: Regional Synthesis Report*. Hamburg: UNESCO.
- HAN, S. (2010). *Lifelong Learning and Adult Education Policy*. Seoul: Korean Educational Development Institute.
- HAN, S., & MAKINO, A. (2013). Learning cities in East Asia: Japan, the Republic of Korea and China. *International Review of Education*, 59(4), 443-468.
- HAN, S. (2008). The lifelong learning ecosystem in Korea: evolution of learning capitalism? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27(5), 517-524.
- KIM, S. (2014). The Korean Approach to Validation for Lifelong Learning. In R. Duvekot, D.J. Kang, & J. Murray (Eds.), *Linkages of VPL* (pp. 165-175). Netherlands: European Centre for Valuation of Prior Learning.
- NILE (2013). *Academic Credit Bank System DB*.
- OECD (2013). *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*. OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en> (September, 2014).
- ROSE, N. (1998). *Inventing our selves: Psychology, power, and personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SCHULLER, T., & WATSON, D. (2009). *Learning through life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

SoongHee Han

Nacionalni univerzitet u Seulu, Republika Koreja

SeonJoo Choi

Nacionalni univerzitet u Seulu, Republika Koreja

## Obrazovanje odraslih u Koreji: Ključni problemi i savremeni izazovi

**Apstrakt:** Članak analizira različite modele obrazovanja odraslih u Republici Koreji, sa društvene i strukturne tačke gledišta. On otkriva da je obrazovanje odraslih u Koreji napravilo pomak od faze “modela društvenog obrazovanja” ka fazi “modela celoživotnog učenja”, što je u skladu sa tranzicijom u ekonomskoj i društvenoj strukturi života odraslih. Ironično je da je ta tranzicija ubrzana uključenjem korejske ekonomije u globalni kapitalistički sistem, a šok usled Istočnoazijske finansijske krize 1997. godine je bio presudan u unapređenju uloge celoživotnog učenja za društvo u celini. Novi tokovi su preoblikovali celokupno obrazovanje odraslih u Koreji, uz jaku podršku razvijenog pravnog sistema na čelu sa agencijom kojom je upravljala vlada, tzv. Nacionalnim institutom za celoživotno obrazovanje. Uz zakonsku podršku, mogućnosti za razvoj obrazovanja odraslih su značajno unapređene kroz nekoliko popularnih programa poput “Grada celoživotnog učenja” ili “Akadenskog kreditnog sistema” i sl. Uprkos izuzetnim dostignućima, Koreja ipak mora da se pozabavi ključnim izazovima kao što su ogroman međugeneracijski jaz u dostizanju obrazovnih ciljeva, nejednakost u učešću u celoživotnom obrazovanju i ograničen sistem javnog finansiranja.

**Ključne reči:** socijalno obrazovanje, kultura celoživotnog učenja, gradovi koji uče, društvo koje uči, participacija u obrazovanju odraslih.