

# Three Tales of Lifelong Learning as a Travelling Idea: Diffusion, Mimesis, and Translation

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## Abstract

Variants of lifelong learning have been discussed internationally since the early 1960s, yet cross-national adoption and implementation remained limited. It was only in the 1990s that the concept saw worldwide diffusion across countries and international organizations. Such diffusion is not to be confused with institutionalization and tells us little about how actors such as nation-states adopt lifelong learning in their specific contexts. Three scenarios of policy adoption and institutionalization have been widely discussed in the literature. One is diffusion, i. e., the formal (and often decoupled) adoption of ideas, the second scenario is mimesis, i. e., the unfiltered uptake of ideas, and, third, translation which describes a more complex process of partial and selective adoption. This contribution discusses these three theoretical perspectives and presents empirical data, both historical and more recent, on the diffusion, mimesis and translation of lifelong learning in a global perspective.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning; neoinstitutionalism; diffusion; mimesis; translation

## 1 Introduction: Lifelong learning as a Travelling Idea

This work rests on the assumption that notions of individual and collective progress represent enlightenment ideologies that contain a number of ‘traveling ideas’ which “built a bridge between the passing fashion and a lasting institution” (Czarniawska & Joerges 1996: 36). Education, including adult education, represents an instructive example of such traveling ideas. Education – in its structure, form and content – has diffused widely in the past two centuries and has become the pinnacle of the global knowledge society in the more recent period (Frank & Meyer 2020). Such formal diffusion of education, as a legal and systemic phenomenon, is undisputed among educational scholars and this work adds evidence of such diffusion for the idea of lifelong learning (LLL).

The 1960s and 1970s already saw the rise of concepts such as ‘permanent education’ (Council of Europe, CoE), ‘recurrent education’ (OECD) and ‘lifelong education’ (UNESCO), all of which revolved around the idea of the educationalized life-course. In the 1990s, organizations and nation-states had come to agree on a unified terminology, lifelong learning, which remains on the global educational agenda until today (see, for example, the 2015 Incheon Declaration).

The journey of such concepts as lifelong learning begs important theoretical questions familiar to many neoinstitutional researchers. Most importantly, how does it diffuse, that is, in which form and under which conditions? Diffusion may occur in a purely mimetic fashion, that is, templates are taken up in a rather unfiltered process. This assumption is often found in the so-called world society or world polity institutionalism mainly developed by John Meyer and his colleagues and students at Stanford University. In this perspective, in a highly scientized global educational discourse – awash with ready-made policy templates – rapid diffusion and mimesis have become more likely than ever before (Strang & Meyer 1991; Zapp & Dahmen 2017).

At the same time, it is a common finding among comparative education and organization scholars that ideas “morph as they move” (Cowen 2009: 315). In such a bricolage perspective, analysis pays attention to specific translation processes at various levels (Czarniawska & Joerges 1996; also Jakobi 2012; Sahlin-Andersson 1996). Researchers from this so-called Scandinavian neoinstitutionalist perspective often stress that an idea moves in time and space, but also through different ontological states: a moment and place witness an idea translated into an object, then translated into action. In repeating and formalizing such action, it may gradually stabilize into an institution, increasingly legitimate and taken-for-granted.

This contribution utilizes these three theoretical perspectives – diffusion, mimesis and translation – to empirically examine the manifold trajectories of lifelong learning across time, regions and countries as well as the various forms of policy implementation. I will present empirical data to support the presence of each of these perspectives and the widespread, yet diverse institutionalization and conclude with some thoughts on further research.

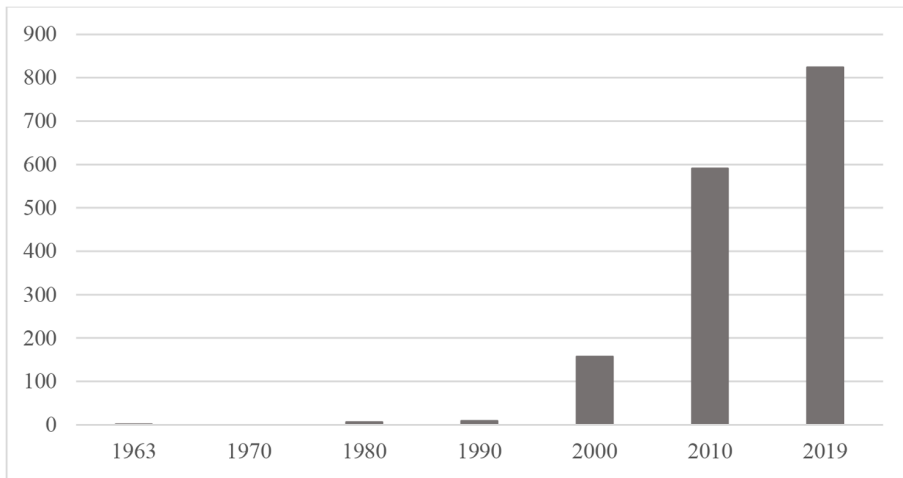
## 2 Lifelong Learning as Diffusion

In a neoinstitutionalist perspective, the rational adoption of a given innovation (be it an idea, a social or technological practice, organizational form or identity) is only half the story. Starting from the constructivist position of an externally-generated identity-formation, Strang and Meyer (1993: 493) identify theorization as the prerequisite and accelerator of diffusion processes. By theorization they mean “[...] the self-conscious development and specification of abstract categories and the formulation of patterned relationships such as chains of cause and effect.” These abstract cultural categories are made of actors whose cognitive map identifies reference groups that bound social comparison processes. In modern societies, individuals, organizations and nation-states are the main entities.

The underlying theorization suggests perceptions of strong similarity among adopters and their cultural linkages outstrip any direct relations in creating diffusion. Put simply, entities recognize each other as such, as they presumably share the same form and functioning. They seem to us as internally consistent – an impression that is reinforced by theoretical models replete with abstraction, simplification, typologies

and generalizations about cause and effect chains. These models can vary in complexity, but tend to higher levels of abstraction to allow for universal relevance across adopters, space and time.

Theorization is not necessarily scientific in the strict sense of the term, but is much more successful if so. With LLL, science has substantially contributed to its prominence. Figure 1 traces the proliferation of scientific publications dealing with LLL and related concepts. Starting in the mid-1990s, scientific attention to LLL has seen a striking momentum until today.

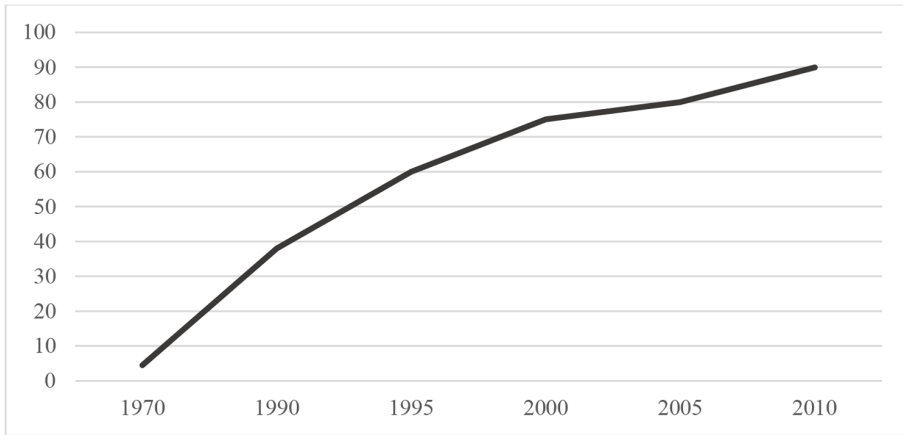


**Figure 1:** Scientific publications referring to lifelong learning in their title and abstract, 1963–2019 (Source: Scopus 2020)

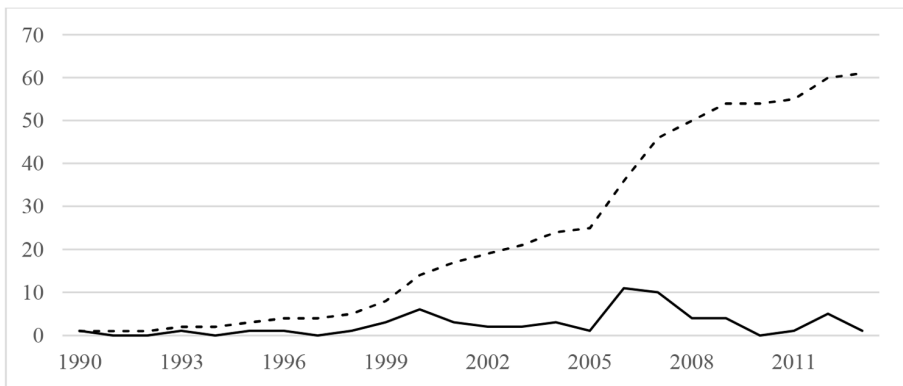
Theorization involves the identification of adopting populations, which supposedly share a similar identity and social practice. They are homogeneous in a theoretical perspective and receive their respective script of how to act appropriately. Thus, all nation-states would be considered equally apt and in need of adopting LLL. The consequence of such theorized receptibility has seen strong empirical support. Jakobi (2006) traced the uptake of LLL in official policy documents. Similar to the diffusion in science, country diffusion accelerated considerably in the 1990s.

The diffusion of LLL is not limited to nation-states. Zapp and Dahmen (2017), tracing the diffusion of LLL across a sample of  $N = 61$  intergovernmental and non-governmental international organizations (IOs), find the same pattern of intensified concept-travelling since the 1990s.

At the same time, such formal diffusion tells us little about concrete policy reforms, legislation and initiatives ‘on the ground’. One may even argue that such rapid and widespread diffusion can only occur if the substance of diffusion is a highly abstract and theorized template with little reference to local or country-specific conditions. In an extreme scenario, formally-adopting actors do not ‘walk the talk’ and the concept remains decoupled from real action (Bromley & Powell 2012).



**Figure 2:** Cumulated % of countries referring to lifelong learning (Source: Jakobi 2006; extended; own account)



**Figure 3:** International organizations referring to lifelong learning, 1990–2013 (N = 61; own account)

### 3 Lifelong Learning as Mimesis

If diffusion in world society is conditioned by theorization, it is imperative to elaborate on the ‘theorists’. World society scholars have highlighted the role of IOs as agents of wider cultural goods or ‘rationalized others’ – a reference to Mead’s generalized others who serve as a fund of expectations of how to act in world society (Meyer et al. 1997: 165). IOs derive much of their authority from the fact that they accumulate much rationalistic and universalistic knowledge within their bodies. This knowledge, in turn, is generated by its highly professionalized and scientific personnel (Zapp 2017). The high degree of rationalization in IOs may facilitate the strikingly homogeneous, if not identical elaboration of LLL models. Analyzing N = 252 official documents from a

sample of  $N = 88$  organizations, Zapp (2015) found strong evidence of mimetic diffusion in IOs' theorization of lifelong learning:

- (1) LLL is depicted as geographically universal, i.e. global, in that all organizations emanating from all continents have picked up the idea and apply it within their area context;
- (2) organizations representing countries varying 1 to 100 in economic, demographic, educational or other socioeconomic indicators, state that LLL is a viable means to solve problems quite similar to these represented by the indicators in which they differ. Put differently, the whole development continuum reflected in the UN Human Development Index, from bottom to the top, is treated with the same language and the same hope and is proposed highly similar reforms;
- (3) there is no cultural pattern discernible. Language, religion, history – none of these aspects make for a specific LLL concept. Where LLL is given some 'cultural flavor', culture becomes just the source as to why LLL is perfectly suitable to the Asian or the Muslim world and Confucian or Koranic imperatives are translated into a modern LLL imperative, while getting rid of the 'wrong' traditions from that primordial culture;
- (4) LLL might be called a concept of educational radicalization. The whole life–course – and, peculiarly enough, even before (e.g. prenatal cognition and health) – becomes educationally–structured. Temporal universality is also implied when LLL is depicted in terms of an anthropological continuity: learning has always happened (it is the human condition) and will determine our future.

Interestingly, such mimesis occurs beyond functional evidence or even despite evidence of failure largely displaying the ideological character of the phenomenon and the process. Mimesis is not institutionalization, but rather the epistemological and ontological prerequisite of institutionalization. Just as with education, and much more radicalized now, LLL is backed by a highly rationalized and highly normative epistemology – the dream of a better society achieved through education – ascribing ultimate ontological status to the individual actor and its aggregation in a national and, increasingly, global society.

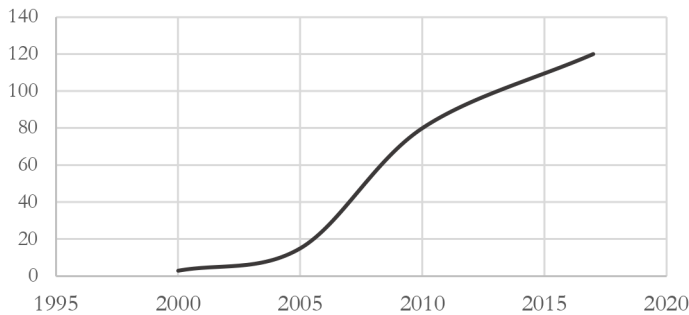
## 4 Lifelong Learning as Translation

Formal diffusion and mimesis are hard to capture empirically other than through an analysis of the formal (e.g. nominal, legal or constitutional) adoption and such assumptions need to be put in the perspective of international and intra-national implementation. Below the macroscopic analysis of large-scale trends, other neoinstitutionalist strands focus on lower-level adoption processes (Czarniawska & Joerges 1996; Campbell 2004; Suárez & Bromley 2016).

In our context, lifelong learning has seen various interpretations according to the national contexts in which uptake occurs. For example, Jakobi (2006) identifies six different substantive and contextual categories of LLL found cross-nationally: (1) awareness; (2) foundations; (3) background; (4) adult education; (5) competitive workforce and (6) others such as literacy, family education, higher education.

In the (1) case, states seek to raise the awareness among their citizens that knowledge becomes more important in modern economies. Such statements do not specify how LLL policies might look like and remain rather superficial in their message. In a (2) type of statement, countries declare that they want to strengthen the foundations for LLL. This can happen at different educational levels. For instance, Sweden mentions early childhood care and education and Norway speaks of basic education, while Belize and Botswana refer to secondary and vocational education. For LLL to (3) serve as a background concept, countries had to state that it is the “principle of their education system” (Jakobi 2006: 119). These principles can be seen as goals attached to education or as elements woven into laws and development programs. In a (4) interpretation, countries understand LLL as a synonym for further or continuing education. In Kuwait, for instance, a network of educational institutions (ministries, universities etc.) provides post-basic education in Islamic studies, sciences, language and history. LLL is also (5) framed in terms of competitiveness in the knowledge economy. Korea equates to the “lifelong learning society” with “high quality human resources” and the Estonian Law on adult education is seen in the context of permanent change and economic development (Jakobi 2006: 122). The (6) category includes meanings of LLL that can mostly be found in less industrialized countries. Here, LLL can be non-formal education (Angola), literacy (Chad, Iran) or access to higher education (Sudan).

In addition to these conceptual interpretations of LLL, we find diverse national educational reforms linked to the concept. First, there have been regulative efforts and programs to put LLL into practice. Countries such as Japan, Estonia and Australia introduced Lifelong Learning Laws that guarantee adults to continue their studies, establish new educational administration and widen the learning options for participants. A second measure consists of new funding mechanisms for adult learning. Countries like the UK, the Netherlands or Brazil have established learning accounts and new funding schemes to increase participation (Jakobi 2012). Finally, Zapp and Ramirez (2019) identify striking cross-national adoption of national qualification frameworks (NQFs) since the 1990s that stimulate, categorize and assess learning in adult life. Data, based on official ministry websites, shows that between 2006 and 2016 more than a hundred countries adopted NQFs, now including 120 states worldwide. If we include countries for which no date could be found and those with NQFs in preparation, the number climbs to almost 150 countries (CEDEFOP 2013) (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Cross-national adoption of national qualification frameworks (cumulative; own account)

Yet, even within a fairly standardized policy implementation such as NQFs, there are a number of considerable differences. Some QFs include both vocational and HE qualifications, others only one of each. Again, others are directly linked to one or more regional QFs such as the European QF. At the same time, qualification frameworks, together with large-scale assessments, all have in common to introduce the new language of competencies into the (adult) education discourse (Zapp 2018). Often, these competencies and skills are meant to facilitate standardized measuring and testing, yet remain subject to highly controversial debates both among scholars and policy-makers (Biesta 2009).

**Lost in translation: When ideas travel through time.** A particular case of translation occurs when phenomena are considered in their historical evolution. Time is perhaps the most important explanatory proxy variable in all these processes. Ideas need time to move, even under ideal conditions of seamless digital communication. However, while locales matter, at times more, at times less, in explaining the remaining variance in models and their resulting adoption, time needs to be considered as an important proxy that represents underlying political, social and cultural change. For example, a different strand of neoinstitutionalism, the so-called historical institutionalism, stresses timing, path dependence and ideas in order to explain institutional change (or inertia) (e. g. Mahoney & Thelen 2009). It is important to stress that ideational change does not only mean that ideas matter in explaining change, it can also mean that ideas themselves change over time. Rarely noticed in longitudinal research on policy diffusion and translation is the rather curious observation that, over time, particular features of an idea are sometimes, deliberately or not, lost.

This also holds for LLL. Earlier versions of LLL still bore education in their name. The OECD's recurrent education (e. g. OECD 1973; 1975), UNESCO's lifelong education (e. g. UNESCO 1970; 1972) and the Council of Europe's permanent education (e. g. CoE 1969; 1970) were all conceptualized around a *system*. What did policy designers motivate to name their concepts lifelong *learning* instead of *education* in the 1990s? Rivera (2006: 118) recalls this "American and English-speaking anomaly with regard to the UNESCO-developed concept of lifelong education, that we say 'lifelong learning', a phrase meant to suggest the absence of system and the presence of the learner as final authority in the educational transaction." The same observer remembers the

UNESCO conference on lifelong education in 1976 where most European participants approved of lifelong education, while those from the UK, the USA and Australia stressed “the importance of the individual’s capacity and responsibility for learning”, as expressed in the notion of lifelong learning (Rivera 2009: 284). For many observers such a difference is not merely a terminological quarrel. Instead, the priority of learning over education since the 1990s would reflect both the increasing commodification and marketization of education, and the shift away from the system, state, society and collective responsibility toward the individual (Duke 1999; Field 2006; Griffin 1999; Gruber 2007).

## 5 Conclusion and Outlook

Lifelong learning has seen striking worldwide diffusion since the 1990s both at the level of national and international organizations’ discourse. Such diffusion is facilitated by its strongly theorized character that spells out the benefits of more education for individuals and societies alike across national economic, cultural and social differences. As a substantive lightweight, the notion flows easily and quickly and in a mimetic process across the most similar adopters, i. e. international organizations.

Such a focus on diffusion and mimesis provides little insight into whether LLL remains a decoupled phenomenon where formal structure is disconnected from real activities. However, in an increasingly data-based, goal-driven, monitored and multi-stakeholder international arena concerned with accountability, such non-action may become rare. Instead, it is more likely to assume that organizational actors (including nation-states) uptake these templates. At the same time, a new form of decoupling, between ends and means, may become salient (Bromley & Powell 2012). Since the 2000s, the global educational discourse has seen the production of many more goals and related monitoring instruments aided by growing data availability (Zapp 2020). With such heightened ambitions increasingly dominating the international community, it remains to be seen whether and to what extent national settings permit policy-makers to comply with these growing demands, both in developed and developing countries.

Instead, it may remain true that LLL and other educational ideas will see specific translation outcomes reflective of the wider political and economic discourse in which the policy uptake is embedded. In this case, both the neoliberal slim state, the growing twin emphasis on human capital but also on human rights will impact on the future of LLL (Schuetze 2006; Schuetze & Casey 2006). They have already altered not only the formal conceptual shell of lifelong learning (instead of education) and it remains the task of future adult educational research to also examine the policy implications that come with it. This research task echoes long-standing debates in neoinstitutionalist research about cross-national isomorphism and convergence of policies on one side versus persistent national path dependencies and ongoing translation of these policies on the other. With the growing role of international organizations, international com-



parison and large-scale assessment as well as supranational governance (e. g. within the EU) further convergence in educational policies – comprising both educational goals and content – can be expected, perhaps to the dismay of those who believe particular national legacies such as humanistic principles, public provision and an educational curriculum beyond labor market demands should still have their place in (or in spite of) the global knowledge economy.

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