

## Research on the Construction of Adult Education Discipline System in Britain

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Received 18 April 2025; accepted 26 May 2025  
Published online 26 June 2025

### Abstract

Adult education discipline system in Britain has a significant role in the education system in the world and Britain is known as the hometown of adult education, which indicates that the construction of adult education discipline system of Britain is at the forefront of the development of adult education disciplines in the world. This paper mainly analyzes the construction process of British adult education discipline system from the following four aspects of scientific theoretical system, well-structured professional talent training, diverse professional organizations and associations as well as well-established guarantee system of discipline system construction. It is advised that the beneficial experience of British adult education discipline system construction should enlighten the improvement and development of China's adult education discipline system.

**Key words:** Britain; Adult education; Discipline system construction

Jiang, X. (2025). Research on the Construction of Adult Education Discipline System in Britain. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 30(3), 1-6. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13822>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13822>

### INTRODUCTION

In modern society, countries around the world are actively building a learning society and the lifelong learning system has become the future trend of educational

development. As an important part of lifelong learning system, adult education has been paid more and more attention by governments all over the world. Therefore, the construction of adult education discipline system has become a significant part of building lifelong learning system. Based on the researches of the academic scholars at home and abroad in judging the independence and maturity of a discipline, most of the researchers have the common understanding although they have different judgment criteria in judging the well-established discipline system. The basic elements include “scientific theoretical system, well-recognized representative scholars, influential representative works, professional talent training system as well as active academic exchanges.” (Zhu,2004) Based on the above criteria, this paper probes into the construction process of British adult education discipline system from the following four aspects: scientific theoretical system, perfect professional talent training, multi-type professional organizations and associations as well as well-organized guarantee system of adult education discipline system.

### 1. INTRODUCTION TO BRITISH ADULT EDUCATION

British adult education has experienced a long history and Britain is recognized as the earliest country in the world to carry out modern adult education. It enjoys the reputation of “the hometown of adult education in the world”, “the birthplace of modern adult education” and “the hometown of continuing education in the world”. The long history of its development provides sufficient brewing time and perfect conditions for the scientific construction of the discipline system of adult education in Britain. At the same time, the specialized development of adult education, highly open adult learning systems, rigorous quality assurance systems and a legalized adult education

management system ensure that the construction of the adult education discipline system in Britain is at the forefront of the world's adult education discipline development.

## 2. CONSTRUCTION OF ADULT EDUCATION DISCIPLINE SYSTEM IN BRITAIN

The construction of adult education discipline system in Britain will be probed into in this section for the following aspects of theoretical system, talent cultivation, professional organizations and associations as well as guarantee systems.

### 2.1 A Scientific and Comprehensive Theoretical System

Britain is one of the earliest countries in the world to conduct theoretical research on adult education. The construction of theoretical system of adult education has a long history and is quite effective. So far, it has accumulated relatively mature and rich theoretical researches of adult education, which has laid a solid theoretical foundation for the scientific construction of British adult education system.

In 1816, Thomas Pole first proposed the educational term "adult education" in his monograph *The Origin and Development of Adult Schools*, which is considered to have a groundbreaking significance as the concept of "adult education" officially ushered the historical stage of educational research. In this work, Thomas Pole had a detailed description of adult school education activities that differ from regular school education activities. In 1851, J.W. Hudson expanded the content and scope of adult education in the book *A History of Adult Education in Britain*, particularly providing a systematic discussion on the origin and development of adult education in Britain. J.W. Hudson explicitly stated that "adult education is not only limited to teaching activities conducted by teachers to students in the classroom, but also includes various forms of informal adult learning activities. These two professional works concerning adult schools and adult education vividly demonstrate the long history of adult education activities in Britain. With no doubt, Britain well deserves to maintain the gorgeous reputation as the "hometown of adult education in the world".

From the 1920s to the 1960s, the discipline of adult education was in the period of establishing and forming. The theoretical research of adult education also entered a new stage of development. Psychological research was combined with adult learning. "Theoretical and experimental research on the adult learning ability and the social status of adult education gradually emerged" (Liu,2009). In 1926, Robert Peers, a professor of adult education at the University of Nottingham, analyzed

the characteristics of adult learning from a different perspective by comparing the adult learning with adolescent education. The study further clarifies the position of adult education in the pedagogy system and indicates that "adult education should become an integral part of the whole education system alongside adolescent education"(Li,2010). This statement has a significant research meaning in that it expands the research scope of educational objects and it is quite innovative with far-reaching influence in British psychology field. In 1958, Robert Peers published the representative book *A Comparative Study of Adult Education*, which is an important reference for studying adult education in Britain and it is regarded as a milestone in the development of adult education in Britain. In 1962, Thomas Kelly published a monograph *History of Adult Education in Great Britain*, which is considered as the first monograph to discuss the evolution of adult education in Britain in detail since J.W. Hudson's book *A History of Adult Education in Britain* was published, and it is a classic academic book in the field of adult education.

Since the 1960s, the discipline of adult education in Britain has entered a period of development with the remarkable features of interdisciplinary research. The combination of adult pedagogy with philosophy, psychology, management, economics and other disciplines has enriched the research content of adult education and gradually formed a systematic and perfect theoretical system of adult education. The main research products are the following: *Adult Education in a Free Society* (1962) by R. Lal; *Basic Adult Education by Using the Media* (1982) published by Anthony Kaye & Keith Harry ; *Adult Education and the Political System* finished by W. E. Styler (1984); monograph *Adult Learning in Social Environments* (1987) written by Peter Jarvis and other works such as *The Sociology of Adult and Continuing Education* (1989); *Adult and Continuing Education—Theory and Practice* (2002) and so on. With the emergence of the concept of lifelong education, the discipline system of adult education has been updated. The focus of adult education research is on lifelong learning for adults. The related research ideas are indicated in the following academic works such as *The Report of the Adult Education Committee on Lifelong Learning*"(1983), C J. Titmus's *Pergamon Encyclopedia of Lifelong Education* (1989) and so on. In summary, the theory and concept of adult education in Britain has been constantly enriched in the trend of "multi-disciplinary integration" as well as advocating academic idea of building a learning society and lifelong education. The theoretical system has been increasingly improved a lot.

### 2.2 Comprehensive Professional Talent Cultivation

In 1921, the University of Nottingham established the Department of Adult Education, making Britain one of

the earliest countries in the world to have adult education major in universities. Since then, British universities have successively set up adult education departments and adult education majors, undertaking the task of cultivating adult education talents for the country. With the increasingly prominent role of adult education in the economic and social development of Britain, the demand for well-trained professionals in British society is increasing greatly. Adult education major in British universities has the outstanding practical characteristics, attaches importance to learners' practical background and experience and the talent training goal is to cultivate advanced applied talents with great practical experience. Therefore, in the past ten years, British universities have successively set up master and doctor programs in adult education, even featuring the increasing number year by year. As a result, status of adult education discipline has been improved and a large number of professional applied talents with solid theoretical foundation and strong practical ability are cultivated, which significantly "lays a foundation for the improvement of professional quality and professional development of adult educators" (Chen,2016).

As the first country in the world to pay attention to the cultivation of professional talents in adult education, the Adult Education Committee of the British government successively published *Smith Report*, which puts forward the requirements for providing training for the teachers. It is suggested that universities should set up training centers, which emphasizes the important role of adult education. It is pointed out: "Adult education is a permanent need of the country. It is an integral part of the civil rights of people with permanent and lifelong features."(Chen,2006) Nottingham University is the pioneer in the establishment and development of adult education in Britain in that it is the first institute in establishing the Adult Education Department and instructing "Adult Education Diploma" and "Adult Education Certificate" courses. Since then many universities in Britain have successively established certificates, diplomas, and graduate courses related to adult education, aiming to cultivate teachers for the constantly developing adult education project in universities and British Workers Education Association.

After the publication of *the Russell Report* in 1973, the training of adult education teachers developed rapidly, with a particular emphasis on the training ways in which adult education work was conducted. In 1975, the UK Continuing Education Committee reported specific regulations on the training time and methods for newly hired adult education full-time teachers. In 1978, the British Teacher Training and Advisory Committee published a report emphasizing the importance of training part-time teachers. By setting up a three-level training system and adult education certificates as well as offering flexible and diverse courses, the training of British adult education professionals and talents can continuously meet

the needs of British social and economic development. Up to now, Britain has established a talent training system from bachelor's degree, master's degree to doctor's degree. The theoretical research and discipline system of adult education have been improved greatly. Moreover, it continues to integrate with the related disciplines and develop in depth from multiple perspectives.

### 2.3 Diverse Professional Organizations and Associations

By examining the construction of discipline system, domestic and foreign scholars hold different views and understanding. Different scholars have analyzed it from different angles and formed different views. Domestic scholars have pointed out that "to judge the maturity of a certain specific discipline, in theory, it depends on the maturity of its objects, methods, and theoretical system; in practice, it depends on the representative scholars, representative works, academic organizations and academic journals." (Tang&Qu,1993) Foreign scholars have pointed out that there are three indicators to measure the establishment of a discipline as an independent discipline in institutional form: the widespread offering of courses or series of lectures; establishing national academic organizations and publishing academic journals. (Guo,2011) Based on different understandings, scholars both domestically and internationally consider the establishment of professional academic organizations and associations as a necessary component of the discipline construction. There are various types of adult education organizations in Britain with different functions and these adult education associations and institutions are widely distributed in regions. Adult education associations and academic institutions complement each other and develop in a coordinated way to jointly promote the spread of British adult education teaching ideas and the development of adult education research works.

In 1903, the British Workers Education Association was established, which formed alliances with various universities to carry out the workers' education movement. With the continuous improvement of social economic level, working class continues to grow and develop. As a result, broad masses of working people have the rising rights and demands for education. In order to provide educational chances and improve educational conditions for more and more workers and those who have lost educational opportunities as well as carry out adult education activities more effectively with the purpose of better meeting their educational needs, the British Workers Education Association has continued to grow and develop. By 1907, it has established 74 branches all over the country. At the same time, the British Workers Education Association pays attention to cooperation with universities and government departments, innovates the forms of adult education activities, which includes successively establishing the system of "tutor guidance classes",

holding adult education lectures all over the country and offering practical short-term courses. Adult Education Association has greatly promoted the development of adult education in Britain with flexible and diverse adult education activities, which has made great contributions in the process of integrating adult education into the national education system.

The British Adult Continuing Education Association plays an important role in promoting the development of British adult education by providing cooperation, consultation and information services for the development of adult continuing education. The British Adult Continuing Education Association was named “British Adult Education Association” when it was founded in 1921, and it was merged with the National Adult Education Foundation in 1949 to become “National Adult Education Association”. In 1983, it was renamed “British Adult Continuing Education Association”. As a national professional organization of adult education, it strengthens exchanges and cooperation with international adult education institutions by taking a series measures. For example, it regularly publishes publications such as *Adult Education Research* and *Adult Learning* to promote the theoretical and practical research of adult education, displays the research results of adult education disciplines, popularizes the experience of adult education, updates the latest developments of adult education research in the world. It is shown that it has already become a platform for adult educators and researchers in Britain and even the world to learn, cooperate and communicate with each other.

The full name of UK is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland which is composed of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Specific Adult education professional organizations have been set up in specific regions to adapt to their respective regional characteristics and needs to meet the adult learning demands of different regions. The specific professional organizations are the following such as Northwest Territory Adult Education Association, Northwest Territory Public Library Adult Education Committee, Central and East Territory Adult Education Council, Scottish Adult Education Association, Northern Ireland Adult Education Association, Ireland Adult Education Association, etc. These regional professional adult education organizations generally hold regular meetings, organize adult education-related academic activities, cooperate jointly with other regional and international adult education organizations to promote the exchange of adult education information and experience. Scottish Adult Education Association and Ireland Adult Education Association also regularly publish *Scottish Adult Education* and *Adult Education Review* magazines respectively and publish the related academic works to promote academic instruction and research communication in adult and continuing education.

## 2.4 Complete Adult Education Discipline Guarantee System

Britain’s adult education system and facilities are based on laws and regulations, which legally guarantees the effective implementation of various adult education policies. As early as 1924, Britain formulated the world’s first law on adult education, i.e. *Adult Education Regulations*, which makes the formulation of adult education system as the national strategy and puts forward that a complete adult education system is the responsibility of building a welfare state. *The 1944 Education Act* officially incorporated adult education into the national education system, clarifying the position of adult education in the education discipline system, while emphasizing the integration of adult education in Britain with local practical need and ensuring that adult education courses are adapted to the actual educational needs of the local people. (Guo,2011)*The Industrial Training Act* promulgated in 1964 along with *the Employment and Training Act* promulgated in 1973 specifically stipulated adult education and training in Britain, which provides a legal basis for adult vocational training in Britain. In 1975, the Ministry of Education promulgated the *Regulations on Extended Education*, which further defined the scope of the extended education as all post-secondary education except for universities. What’s more, it is stipulated that the extended education should be under the unified leadership of the local education bureaus. After the promulgation of *the Education Reform Act* (1988) and *the Expansion and Higher Education Reform Act* (1992), the scope of the institutions who implement adult education in Britain has been further expanded. Expanded education colleges, adult education colleges, adult education centers and some voluntary organizations, such as labor education associations, have all become British adult education institutions, providing guarantee for the effectively and orderly development of adult education activities in Britain. In 2000, the British government officially implemented the *Learning and Skills Act* and set up Learning and Skills Advisory Committee to be responsible for the adult education policy formulation, funding approval, evaluation and other matters. At the same time, an Adult Learning Inspection Group was set up to conduct visiting, inspection and evaluation of the adult education activities. In 2003, the white paper on adult education—*Skills Realize Our Potential in the 21st Century* was published, which puts forward the specific goal of improving the quality of national education from the perspective of the government.

The promulgation and implementation of the bills and acts have legally determined the status and role of adult education in Britain, stipulated the responsibilities and accountabilities of the central government, various

departments and sections in central and local regions for adult education. It is clearly stated that these regulations, laws and acts provide institutional and legal guarantees for the construction of the discipline system of adult education in Britain.

Multiple adult education activities in Britain also have received various government funding support, which provides stable financial support for the construction of the British adult education discipline system. *The Education Act* promulgated in 1944 specifically stipulated the funds for adult education activities: the educational funds for primary, secondary and continuing education were provided by local taxes, while the insufficient part was subsidized by the state government. In 1998, the British government published the Education Green Paper—*The Age of Learning*, which puts forward the slogan of “investing in learners” and established the basic principles of the development of adult education supported by government. In accordance with the principles, in 1999, a new Learning and Skills Committee was set up and allocated 5 billion pounds as the start-up fund to carry out various adult education projects and educational activities. At the same time, the British government promises to fully support the establishment of a national lifelong learning program in terms of policies and funds and to create industrial universities and distance learning networks nationally that meet various learning needs. Complete legal system and sufficient funding sources provide necessary guarantee for the development of British adult education discipline system in a scientific, autonomous, systematic and practical direction with the ultimate goal of the promotion and improvement of the construction adult education discipline system in Britain.

### 3. REFLECTION ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION OF ADULT EDUCATION DISCIPLINE

The construction and development of British adult education has a valuable reflection and suggestion in the establishment and construction of Chinese adult education discipline. The construction of adult education specialty in China began in the 1990s. Reflection on the experience of adult education discipline system construction in Britain, China should promote a scientific and systematic theoretical system of adult education. The followings are the effective and valuable measures should be taken: probing into a set of systematically theory system, improving the training system of adult education professionals and talents, promoting the adult education professional organizations and associations as well as building various forms of the adult education guarantee system, which creates a scientific, practical, reflective and independent adult education discipline system.

The first step to be taken should be the establishment a scientific and comprehensive theoretical system for adult education. Constantly deepen the understanding of the connotation of adult education concepts. It is necessary to clarify the relationship between adult pedagogy and continuing education, vocational education, lifelong education and other concepts in that clarifying their respective connotations and extensions, in order to accurately define the research scope of adult education disciplines. At the same time, it is important to adopt updated disciplinary construction concepts, emphasizing disciplinary integration and collaborative research and optimizing research methods to promote the construction of the theoretical system of adult education discipline.

The second measure that needs to be taken is the professional talent cultivation system for adult education. The new century has put forward higher requirements for the development of adult education disciplines, urgently requiring various types, levels, and sufficient numbers of adult education talents. It is urgent to strengthen the construction of master’s and doctor’s programs in adult education to cultivate high-level and advanced adult education talents. Strengthening the training of adult educators and perfecting the training system are the basic facilities to meet the leap of adult education in quantity and quality in China.

What’s more, promoting the construction of adult education professional organizations and associations is the basic foundation for the implementation of adult education in China effectively and successfully. Multiple forms of academic activities and seminars organized and carried out by national and regional adult education academic associations are of great significance to the development of adult education disciplines. Further expanding the autonomy of adult education professional organizations, innovating and building diversified organizations and increasing investment in them will be conducive to promoting the exchanges, communication and cooperation among different adult education organizations of all types and levels.

Finally, it is critical to establish a sound adult education guarantee system. Strengthening the legislative work of the Basic Law on Adult Education is the first step. Then, it is necessary to accelerate the legislative process of the Basic Law of Adult Education to provide basic legal guarantee for the discipline construction of adult education in China. Moreover, as far as the necessary funds in the construction of the discipline is concerned, the state government should formulate relevant policies and regulations to increase the government’s investment in adult education disciplines on one side, and at the same time non-governmental organizations should provide funds into local adult education organizations through taking flexible and diverse measures on the other sides, which ultimately the central and local governments should

make joint efforts to speed up the construction of China's adult education discipline system successfully.

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## CONCLUSION

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Just as the saying goes: "Stones from other mountains can polish jade", the experience of British adult education is valuable to the improvement and further development of Chinese adult and continuing education. With the increasing popularity of digital and artificial intelligence, the methods and ways of adult education have been varied and changed a lot. Diverse instructing methods such as distance education, online education, MOOCs, micro-courses and shared classrooms make adult education more flexible and convenient. It is evident that a scientific and comprehensive theoretical system is the foundation of the stable construction and continuing improvement of the discipline. What's more, comprehensive professional talent cultivation, diverse professional organizations and associations as well as complete adult education discipline guarantee system definitely function together to ensure the vibrant and dynamic construction and development of the adult education discipline.

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