

## Regulatory governance of 'training markets', 'market failure', and 'quasi' markets: historical dimensions of the post-initial training market in The Netherlands

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### Abstract

*This article examines regulatory governance of the post-initial training market in The Netherlands. From an historical perspective on policy formation processes, it examines market formation in terms of social, economic, and cultural factors in the development of provision and demand for post-initial training; the roles of stakeholders in the long-term construction of regulatory governance of the market; regulation of and public providers; policy responses to market failure; and tripartite division of responsibilities between the state, social partners, commercial and publicly-funded providers. Historical description and analysis examine policy narratives of key stakeholders with reference to: a) influence of societal stakeholders on regulatory decision-making; b) state regulation of the post-initial training market; c) public intervention regulating the market to prevent market failure; d) market deregulation, competition, employability and individual responsibility; and, e) regulatory governance to prevent 'allocative failure' by the market in non-delivery of post-initial training to specific target groups, particularly the low-qualified. Dominant policy narratives have resulted in limited state regulation of the supply-side, a tripartite system of regulatory governance by the state, social partners and commercial providers as regulatory actors. Current policy discourses address interventions on the demand-side to redistribute structures of opportunity throughout the life courses of individuals. Further empirical research from a comparative historical perspective is required to deepen contemporary understandings of regulatory governance of markets and the commodification of adult learning in knowledge societies and information economies*

**Keywords:** market mechanisms; market failure; policy narratives; post-initial training; regulatory governance; stakeholders

## Introduction

Recent contributions to the literature have expressed reservations concerning the transformation of ‘adult education’ into a marketplace (Barros, 2012; Biesta, 2006; Boshier, 2012; Fejes, 2013; Milana, 2012). Such reservations are formulated in terms of the emergence of markets for educational goods and services, commodification of ‘adult learning’, and construction of subjectivities of adult learners as consumers. Largely regarded as new phenomena on the adult education landscape since the mid-1980s, both markets and commodification are interpreted as signifying change in policy vocabularies from ‘education’ to ‘learning’. Explanations focus on globalization, neo-liberal policies, declining importance of nation states in governance of adult education, cuts in public expenditure, and individualization of responsibility for learning. While markets and commodification are widely regarded as manifesting the ‘new educational order’ (Field, 2000) characterized by diversification of ‘learning arenas’ towards non-formal and informal learning (Hake, 2006), most attention has been devoted, however, to policy discourses articulating lifelong learning as ‘learning for earning’, employability, work-based learning, and post-initial training markets as key policy arenas in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Riddel, Markowitsch & Weedon, 2012; Aspin, et al. 2012).

This article adopts a longer term historical perspective on markets and commodification in an analysis of shifting historical contexts which have shaped the development of the post-initial training market in The Netherlands. Historical evidence emphatically demonstrates that markets and commodification have long been significant phenomena on the broader landscape of adult ‘learning’ in European societies. From a comparative historical perspective, this landscape is characterized by the social organization of adult learning—by others for adults, or by adults themselves—in terms of the cultural processes of disseminating and acquiring knowledge, skills and sensitivities. From the Protestant Reformation onwards, on the one hand, non-formal adult learning was organized on a non-profit basis by ecclesiastical authorities, philanthropic organizations, voluntary associations, corresponding societies, mutual improvement societies, and reading circles, etc. (Hake, 2011: 15). On the other hand, however, the invention of printing, growth of the book trade, and formation of reading publics opened up a market for the commercial provision of learning materials serving the informal learning needs of adults. These cultural practices of disseminating and acquiring knowledge, skills and sensitivities throughout Europe, and indeed elsewhere, have long been dominated by market forces, commodification of adult learning materials, and understandings of individual learners as consumers of commercially distributed learning materials. Given this emergence of capitalist systems of knowledge production and commercial distribution in printed form, the social relations of cultural production and consumption have been dominated from the seventeenth century onwards by tensions concerning the role of markets in disseminating cultural artefacts as commodities for sale (Hake, 2004; Johns, 1998; Raven, 2007). From this historical perspective, non-formal and informal adult learning have been organized at quite significant social distances from the historically specific cultural practices associated with state-funded forms of adult education in welfare capitalist states in the twentieth century. Hegemony of neo-liberal policies in the cultural arena constitutes an historically specific development of capitalist social relationships in the political economy of cultural practices involved in dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, skills and sensitivities (Fuchs, 2015).

Historical studies of early forms of adult learning have predominantly focussed on the production, commercial dissemination, and consumption of printed texts, such as encyclopaedias, self-help books, and the earliest forms of distance learning through correspondence learning (Burke, 2013; Darnton, 1979; Yeo, 2001). From the seventeenth century onwards, itinerant book-pedlars and colporteurs knocked on doors to sell bibles, prayer-books, guides to good manners, almanacs, and popular reading materials for entertainment—especially tales of travel to 'exotic places' (Batten, 1978; Brophy, 2007; Fontaine, 1996; Salman, 2003; Spufford, 1985). Following the first commercial offer of a correspondence course in the American colonies in 1725, the market in correspondence learning expanded rapidly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries based upon railway networks and regular public mail systems (Kett, 1994; Wedemeyer, 1981). From the early nineteenth century, industrialization was accompanied by vocational and professional training courses for adults provided by employers, commercial providers of face-to-face and correspondence learning by public institutions, such as universities (Pittman, 2013), and 'proprietary correspondence schools' (Freeman, 1974). A Swedish newspaper carried an advertisement in 1833 offering the study of composition through the medium of the post (Oliveira & Rumble, 1992). The late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries witnessed rapid expansion of commercial provision serving adults' learning needs focused on vocational training together with self-help literature (Harrison, 1957; Rimke, 2000). In Sweden in 1898, Hans Hermod, who had initiated correspondence courses to learn English in 1886, established what is now known as Hermods NKI Skolan, one of the world's largest distance-teaching organizations (Rumble, 1989).

In addition to printed learning materials, the distance learning market expanded significantly in the early twentieth century when radio increasingly provided a technological basis for commercial mass media learning, while in the 1960s television and video cassettes stimulated the further development of multi-media distance learning (Collins, Hammond & Wellington, 2002; Casey, 2008). Since the 1990s, the market for self-help literature has enjoyed a renaissance (Field, 2000; McLean, 2013; McLean & Vermeulen, 2014), while internet and social media serve the commercial distribution of distance learning resources supporting 'personal learning environments' based on smart phones (LeNoue, Hall, & Eighmy, 2011). These cultural practices signify the rediscovery of the autodidact or self-directed learner as key consumers in the commodified e-learning markets of the twenty-first century.

Adult learning markets and commodification of learning, however, have not been uncontested historical phenomena. In different historical periods, some stakeholders questioned adult learning markets and called for regulation of commercial activities. Arguments favouring intervention were variously formulated in terms of moral standards, ethics, quality, exploitation, access, equity, consumer protection, or indeed straightforward political opposition to capitalist interests and profit-making in the cultural arena. This gave rise to issues of 'regulatory governance' of for-profit and non-profit organizations, accreditation of commercial and public providers, quality assurance, and protecting consumer rights of individual learners (Jordana & Levi-Faur, 2004). A recurring question raised by stakeholders in different historical periods has been market failure resulting in inequitable allocation of learning resources to specific groups of adult learners excluded from the marketplace. Interventions included measures to strengthen the demand-side of the market through consumer protection, and direct financial support, such as vouchers and learning cheques, for individual learners (Levi-Faur, 2011).

From this broader perspective of comparative historical analysis of markets and commodification of adult learning in terms of modernization processes in European societies, post-initial training markets have been fundamentally influenced by socio-economic development of urbanization, industrialization, labour markets, occupational structures, and changing skill-formation processes. In different European countries, policy formation processes have been influenced by long-standing national differences in political, constitutional, and legal arrangements with regard to centralized and decentralized regulation by the state, and regulatory governance of public and commercial providers in initial and post-initial training of the work-force. This article examines these historical processes in the specific national context of the development post-initial training in The Netherlands. As a national case-study of regulatory governance of learning markets, this article comprises historical description and analysis of how diverse stake-holders have influenced policy-formation processes with regard to the development of post-initial training in The Netherlands. More specifically, the historical narrative seeks to offer a critical reconstruction of policy discourses with reference to the development of regulatory governance of the Dutch post-initial training market. Drawing on policy narratives of stakeholders, this article constitutes a case study of the specific historical tensions that have been inherent to self-regulation of the market, hesitant emergence of regulatory governance, and the framing of state interventions to correct for market failure.

Different terms and definitions of post-initial training can be identified in the Dutch literature (CBS, 2010; SEO, 2010, SER 2012). Most commonly used are *post-initiël onderwijs* [post-initial education], *post-initiël scholing* [post-initial training], and *post-initiël beroepsonderwijs* [post-initial vocational education] (van der Meer & Smulders, 2014). The term ‘post-initial training’ is understood here as including: a) training activities at secondary and tertiary levels following completion of initial (vocational) education and training; b) acquisition of qualifications recognized by occupational organizations in different economic branches, including continuing professional development of practitioners, for example nurses, doctors, medical specialists, lawyers, etc., in the self-regulated professions; c) participants are engaged in paid employment or are seeking to join the labour market; d) training activities take place on a part-time basis in conjunction with paid work and/or other forms of social participation including unpaid work in households; e) providers include publicly-funded providers and commercial organizations; and f) adult learners are regarded as individual consumers who are charged tuition fees at market prices.

The article is based upon published sources in the public domain that address policy narratives of stakeholders articulated in parliamentary debates, legislation, reports of advisory commissions, policy documents and lobby work by interest groups. It is organized as follows. Section two examines the absence of state intervention during the early development of the post-initial market in The Netherlands. In section three, attention focuses on hesitant forms of market regulation through state intervention from the 1960s onwards. Section four looks at the impact of neo-liberal narratives articulating market deregulation, employability, emphasis on individual responsibility, and regulating the supply-side during the 1980s and 1990s. In section five, attention is focused on contemporary policy debates involving measures to strengthen the demand-side of the market in order to correct for allocative market failure. The conclusions argue the need for further empirical research to foster more informed understandings of the complex historical factors that impact on adult learning markets in the twenty-first century.

## Historical origins of non-intervention by the state and market self-regulation

As a consequence of the comparatively retarded industrialization of The Netherlands until the late nineteenth century (Griffiths, 1979), (re-)training the workforce long remained the preserve of Dutch employers and private (philanthropic) initiatives, together with the emergence of commercial training providers (Honingh, 2008). Post-initial training developed as an unregulated market served by employer-led work-place training, *mondelinge onderwijs* [courses of oral instruction] involving courses provided by self-employed teachers, and commercial correspondence courses organized by proprietary correspondence schools (Backx, 1994). Stakeholders regarded state intervention as both unnecessary and a threat to flexible provision of training in response to rapidly changing skill requirements resulting from technical innovations in production processes (Prak, Lis, Lucassen, & Soly, 2006). From the 1890s onwards, commercial providers became particularly dominant in providing correspondence courses to meet the post-initial training needs of the Dutch workforce (Wierdsma, 1990). Although the first law on industrial training in The Netherlands in 1919 introduced a system of government subsidies for initial vocational training schools, state support remained limited, more subsidies were requested than were honoured by the government (Wolthuis, 1990). Post-initial training continued to be the preserve of employers and commercial providers as major players in the post-initial market during the 1920s (Backx, 1994).



*Photograph:* Managing correspondence courses: Office of the Instituut voor Schriftelijk Onderwijs [Institute for Correspondence Education], Amsterdam, 1921

Publishing companies increasingly recognized correspondence courses as a potentially profitable market for their books serving as instructional materials. Furthermore, expansion of commercial and business administration services together with invention of the typewriter resulted in new occupations and significant growth of correspondence courses and oral instruction in type-writing, short-hand, foreign languages, book-keeping, and office management.



*Photograph:* Adult learners attending oral instruction in stenography by the commercial provider Instituut Schoevers, Amsterdam, 1915

During the economic crisis of the 1930s, limited Dutch state intervention focused on work camps for low-qualified unemployed men on social benefits, while employers and trade unions abstained from stimulating re-training programmes. Mass unemployment, however, provided a significant motivation for adults to enrol in correspondence courses to improve their chances of remaining in, or gaining, paid employment. This resulted in further unregulated proliferation of commercial providers in the Dutch market up to the Second World War. Occupation of The Netherlands by the German Third Reich in 1940 provided the foundation of the first state intervention in the post-initial training market. In 1942, the occupying forces ordered the Dutch government to implement compulsory registration of providers of correspondence courses. This measure was intended to control provision of correspondence courses by Jewish organizations, and, as a consequence, 3000 private providers, serving 150,000 fee-paying customers, were registered (Backx, 1994). Jewish organizations and individual Jewish teachers involved in correspondence learning were first registered, subsequently prohibited, and individuals eventually deported to concentration camps.

### **Hesitant steps towards state intervention**

In the immediate post-Second World War period, the Dutch state did not include post-initial training in its programmes for economic recovery and social reconstruction. Although the 1942 system of registration remained formally in operation, government concluded that no further regulatory measures were required. Other stakeholders, however, argued that mere registration of commercial providers of correspondence

learning was inadequate given their growing numbers and diversity. It was left to commercial providers themselves to propose a system of self-regulatory governance comprising inspection, quality criteria, and accreditation of recognized providers. In 1947, the Foundation for Inspection of Correspondence Education was established as a private self-regulating organization granting certificates to accredited commercial providers. Regulatory stakeholders involved were representatives of correspondence course providers, the association of Dutch local governments, and consumer organizations; the government belatedly appointed an official representative in 1949. Of 124 commercial providers seeking recognition in 1947, 37 were recognized by the Foundation. However, those refused recognition together with those who had not even bothered to seek recognition were able, nonetheless, to continue operating in the commercial market place (Backx, 1994).

During the early 1960s questions were voiced about this self-regulated governance of accreditation (Curzon, 1977). Confidence in self-regulation by the market was undermined by cases of abuse by some providers with regard to the ethics of their marketing strategies, misleading advertising, and high drop-out among fee-paying consumers. Commercial providers together with the Ministry of Education and Parliament expressed needs for quality criteria and consumer protection (Backx, 1994). This resulted in the 1973 Law on Accreditation of Correspondence Education Institutions which introduced regulatory governance based on public accreditation of commercial providers of correspondence learning. The Education Council, established in 1919 as the advisory body to the Dutch government, became responsible for accreditation.

Rapid development of 'second-chance' and 'second way' forms of adult learning during the 1970s and early 1980s led employers', providers' and consumers' organizations to demand that accreditation should be extended to include all forms of commercially-provided education and training, including oral instruction courses and increasing use of audio-visual mass media. The state-funded Foundation for Educational Research funded two large-scale research projects on correspondence learning and oral course instruction which focused on organizational forms of provision, motivations of adult learners, and market failure addressing in particular high levels of drop-out among enrolled adult learners. Given social-democratic inspired expansion of public funding for multi-media distance learning—the Open School and Open University—the state increasingly shared the need for further regulation of the supply-side of the market, and evaluative research projects were instigated. Discussion of regulatory interventions focused on the protection of consumers to ensure quality standards of all types of courses by commercial providers. A 1985 Law on Accreditation of Educational Institutions replaced the 1973 law governing only correspondence courses. Key areas of new accreditation processes involved quality standards for qualifications of teachers, methods of recruiting fee-paying consumers, contractual arrangements between providers and consumers with particular reference to tuition fees charged, transparency of examinations, and recognition of diplomas granted.

### **Traces of neo-liberalism: competition on the supply-side of the market**

Despite the 1985 law on accreditation of commercial providers, centre-right governments manifested continuing reticence concerning regulation of post-initial training. Following the economic crisis of the early 1980s, this was reinforced by neo-liberal questioning of public intervention in training the workforce. Issues raised

included neo-liberal themes of New Public Management (NPM) such as deregulation, autonomy, decentralization, privatization, and self-regulation by the market of supply and demand.

Resultant policy discussions focused, however, on the respective financial responsibilities of the state, social partners and individual learners for funding post-initial training. A 1983 report by the Wagner Commission (Wagner Commission, 1983), on innovation in the Dutch economy, emphasized a tripartite division of responsibilities between the state, social partners, and individuals in promoting 'employability' of the workforce. Tripartite governance was again stressed in a 1990 report (Rauwenhoff Commission, 1990) which argued that state responsibility for initial vocational training should be limited to a so-called 'start qualification' as a guarantee of entry to the labour market, while the social partners and individuals should be responsible for investments in post-initial training.

In terms of policy practices, priority was given to regulatory measures to increase transparency of the supply-side, stimulate public providers to operate in the market place, and create an equal playing-field for free competition between public and private providers. A 1987 report by the Social-Economic Council (SER, 1987), stressed the role of publicly-funded higher education institutions in providing post-initial for-profit 'contract training activities' for local employers. Legislation in 1989 enabled publicly-funded institutions to compete with commercial providers in order to expand the post-initial market. At the instigation of the social-democratic Minister of Education, the tripartite division of financial responsibilities formed the core of the 1993 policy paper, *Continue Learning* (Min. O&W, 1993). It argued that the state was responsible for initial vocational 'start qualifications', and that social partners and individual learners should bear an increasing share of investments in post-initial training in order to promote 'lifelong learning'. In 1995, a law implementing 'start qualifications' involved integration of initial vocational training and adult education and established Regional Educational Centres. These publicly-funded institutions were allowed to compete with commercial providers in the post-initial market place by providing for-profit 'contract training activities' for local and regional small and medium-sized companies. Furthermore, the 1995 law introduced a Central Register for Adult Education and Vocational Training involving accreditation of both commercial and public providers in the post-initial marketplace. Accreditation criteria included quality control, organization of provision, and consumer protection.

More importantly, within the newly established national qualification framework, courses provided by accredited commercial providers could henceforth lead to recognized public diplomas with civil effect, including higher education degrees, which were traditionally the preserve of publicly-funded educational institutions. Government assumed that competition between public and private providers would ensure quality of provision, while contributing to expansion of the post-initial training market. Other arguments for the Central Register included the government's objective of raising the training level of the Dutch workforce, while it hoped that accreditation of more commercial providers would reduce the need for public investments in additional publicly-funded providers. Furthermore, government assumed that commercial providers would engage in self-regulation of their sector in order to utilize new opportunities available to them. This was indeed the case, and a self-regulating platform of accredited providers, Platform for Accredited Private Educational Institutions [Platform van Aangewezen/Erkende Particuliere Onderwijsinstellingen], was immediately established. In effect, the 1995 law established a tripartite division of responsibilities between government, social partners, and training providers in the

expectation that competition between commercial and public providers would serve the expanding post-initial training market. New Public Management policies with regard to post-initial training in The Netherlands did not implement a neo-liberal project to hollow out the Dutch state. On the contrary, they contributed above all to new forms of state intervention in regulatory governance of the supply-side of post-initial training markets by promulgating competition between commercial and public providers, as was increasingly the case elsewhere in Europe.

### **Employability, lifelong learning and strengthening the demand-side of the market**

From the mid-1990s into the early twenty-first century, dominant social-democratic policy narratives on post-initial training re-formulated employability in the language of 'lifelong learning'. In January 1998, a cabinet committee report, *Lifelong Learning: The Dutch initiative* (Min. OCW, 1998), marked the integration of labour market policies, post-initial training, and lifelong learning with employability as its core concept. This report utilized 'employability' on 43 occasions in 12 pages as the government's primary argument for lifelong learning. 'Employability' was defined as the: '...*individual capacity to find and keep jobs*' (Min. OCW, 1998, 7). Key ministries in the Inter-Departmental Employability Committee and the Labour Foundation—representing the social partners—subsequently refocused Dutch employability discourse in terms of lifelong learning. In December 1998, the social partners committed themselves to an Employability Agenda Platform, and the *Employability Agenda* was agreed in June 1999. Following reports by the Social-Economic Council (SER, 2002;) and the Education Council (Onderwijsraad, 2003), the social-democratic cabinet announced an *Action Plan on a Life Long of Learning* in 2004 which was followed by the appointment of a Task Force on Life Learning with responsibility for concrete policy proposals.

However, since the 2004 shift to centre-right cabinets, led by Christian Democrats and Liberals respectively, less attention has been given to the broader implications of lifelong learning for training the Dutch workforce as a whole. Policy narratives have turned towards integration of the low-qualified employed and unemployed in the Dutch labour market by improving their participation in post-initial training. Such phenomena are not new, but have been repeatedly identified as structural problems of the Dutch system of post-initial training by OECD, independent research, and advisory committees serving Dutch policy-makers. These structural problems have increased in intensity as consequences of the impact of demographic change, the pension crisis, and raising the age of retirement to 67; together with the identified growing gap between the higher-qualified and the low-qualified in Dutch society in the context of lifelong learning policies.

Lifelong learning narratives now address this growing body of evidence of market failure in delivering post-initial training to significant sections among low-qualified employed and job-seekers. In particular, these include employees in small companies, the low-qualified, and older workers over the age of 45. Although successive governments Dutch governments in the past twenty years have employed diverse policy instruments to involve these target groups in the post-initial training market, such measures primarily involved stimulating employers to invest more in the training of their low-qualified and older employees. Measures focused on tax incentives and reducing the social costs of employing these groups of workers and retaining them in

the force work through retraining. Fiscal incentives, such as tax deductions of personal costs of training, also targeted individuals to encourage their own investment in training.

Policy narratives addressing reintegration of low-qualified employed and unemployed in the labour market have increasingly articulated demand-side interventions to encourage participation in the post-initial training market. In 2005, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Work jointly established a Project-Directorate on Learning and Working to undertake projects to this end. Appointed for 2 years, the Project-Directorate focused on local initiatives combining training with reintegration in the labour market, and it established a system of accreditation of prior learning. In 2008, the Project-Directorate established a *Think-tank Learning and Working*, which produced a report entitled *Time for Development* (Min. OCW, 2009). The report proposed legal recognition of rights to training for low-qualified individuals who should be provided with personal training budgets, individual learning accounts, vouchers, or training cheques. It marked a significant reminder of policy debates about paid educational leave during the 1970s and educational vouchers during the 1980s, while similar arguments played a significant role during social-democratic experiments with individual learning accounts (ILAs) during the early 2000s. The Project-Directorate was disbanded in 2011.

With accession of the current Liberal/Social Democrat government in 2012, policy narratives have focused increasingly on demand-led approaches (Onderwijsraad, 2012; SER, 2012). Emphasis is placed on tailor-made funding of individual participants in training among low-qualified, unemployed, and older workers. Recent reports have repeatedly reiterated arguments for vouchers, individual learning accounts, and learning cheques (SER, 2012). It is argued that potential individual learners should be able to choose post-initial training courses they themselves wish to follow independently of employers' priorities, and that these preferences should be activated with self-managed 'learning credits'. It is significant that commercial providers in the training market support such instruments to strengthen the demand-side, but regard them as the government's responsibility, and thus a question of public funding (SEO, 2010).

While the 2012 report by the Social-Economic Council argued that individual workers should be able to express their needs for training, it also pointed out, however, that they themselves as consumers need to be more aware of the importance of the personal returns to training (SER, 2012). This is a clear reminder of both the rights, but also duties, of individuals to engage in a 'learning culture' as expressed in the 1998 policy report *Lifelong Learning: The Dutch initiative*, which argued that

All people, young and old, are firstly and naturally responsible for themselves. You have to learn to take care of yourself, and, therefore, you must want to acquire the knowledge and skills to do that. Those who do not participate will be reminded of their responsibilities. (Min. OCW. 1998: 9).

In response to an advisory commission report (Min OCW, 2014a), the current cabinet announced a package of demand-side measures in October 2014 to strengthen the 'learning culture' among adults, including vouchers, to increase levels of participation in the post-initial training market. It specifically referred to encouraging higher levels of flexible part-time participation in post-initial training courses provided by publicly-funded higher education institutions. (Min. OCW, 2014b). In 2015, the government indicated to Parliament its willingness to consider financial support for part-time adult learners in higher education (Min. OCW, 2015a). On the same date, the Minister of Education invited the Socio-Economic Council to continue in providing her department

with advice concerning a 'long-term agenda devoted to skills and learning' (Min. OCW, 2015b). In terms of the political economy of a 'lifelong learning culture' and structures of opportunity to participate in the Dutch post-initial training market, the *Het Financieele Dagblad* [The Financial Daily] suggested, in March 2015, that lifelong learning in The Netherlands is a 'hollow phrase' and in practice 'bankrupt'; *'while lip-service is given to it, when something does happen it concerns minor adjustments on well-known territory'* (FD, 2015).

### **Regulatory governance of post-initial training: free or quasi-markets?**

What have been the results of long-term transformations of the post-initial training market from its laissez-faire origins in the nineteenth century towards the current context of regulatory governance involving key stakeholders as regulatory partners? From the early 1990s into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, a policy repertoire of strategies, measures and instruments regulating the Dutch post-initial training market was constructed by a 'grand coalition' of the state, employers, trade unions together with commercial providers. Cumulative results of measures to encourage competition between private and public providers has resulted in a supply-side of the market where 84% of provision is in the hands of commercial providers with for-profit motives, while 16% is provided by publicly-funded institutions. Together these providers serve a post-initial market with an annual turnover of € 3.4 billion. On the demand-side of the market, 15.7% of Dutch adults aged 16-64 participate annually in post-initial training compared to the European Union average of 9%, while the government has set a target of 20% within the Europe 2020 programmes. This involves 1.5 million participants per annum among the employed, self-employed, and unemployed adult population.

The overall consensus articulated in recent policy statements, advisory committees' reports, and independent research is that the Dutch post-initial training market on the whole performs well. In particular, it is argued that the supply-side of the market offers an adequate and varied range of provision in order to satisfy the need for post-initial training in the labour market (SEO, 2010). This is seen as a result of an adequately functioning supply-side with minimum government regulation and without the need for public funding of the post-initial training effort. Approximately 8000 private providers are members of the National Council for Training and Education (NRTO), the national platform for recognized commercial providers of post-initial training. These accredited providers range from large—increasingly multi-national—companies offering correspondence education, management consultancy firms, small training companies and self-employed trainers. Publicly-funded post-initial training activities are organized by higher education institutions—universities, especially the Open University, and higher professional education institutes—and in very small measure the Regional Education Centres. Their activities range from providing part-time Bachelor degree courses, post-initial Master degrees, dual courses combining part-time study with work, and associate degrees.

NRTO, representing private providers, claims that it successfully meets the post-initial training needs of young working adults. Empirical evidence suggests that this may indeed be the case, but is also indicative of one of the key sources of allocative market failure. It is evident that the market is failing to deliver adequate training to those who are employed by small companies, are low-qualified, or older than 45, although they are increasingly regarded as in serious need of such provision. With regard to age, it is clear that younger workers are far more likely to participate in post-

initial training than older workers. While 34% of the 25-34 age group participate in training, this is 7.6% among those aged 55-64. Despite arguments that the post-initial training market is on the whole in a healthy condition, there is adequate statistical data indicating that it is characterized by a serious degree of allocative market failure (Buisman & van Wijk, 2011; SEO, 2010; SER, 2012). This has raised questions as to why the operation of the post-initial training market has not resulted in the expansion of the supply-side in order to meet the demonstrated unmet 'needs' on the demand-side of the market (Golsteyn, 2012).

In addressing the supply-side of the Dutch post-initial market, current policy-related narratives are largely articulated in terms of potential market failure arising from barriers to free competition between private and public providers. This is regarded as a question of establishing a level playing-field for all providers and transparency of free competition in the market place. On the one hand, commercial providers endeavour to create maximum freedom of manoeuvre in securing as large a share of the market as possible. This undue influence of commercial providers can result in 'regulatory capture' of the market by societal stakeholders participating in the system of regulatory governance. They regard themselves as hampered in this endeavour, however, by public providers operating without the need to realize profit. Despite their dominance in the marketplace, commercial providers express reservations about false competition by public providers because these misuse public funding of their regular educational activities as 'hidden subsidies' thus enabling them to reduce their operating costs and under-cut commercial providers. It is also questioned whether public providers demonstrate the entrepreneurial mentality needed to operate effectively in the free market.

Public and private providers compete, furthermore, for sizeable publicly-subsidized contracts to serve 'public' objectives rather than pursuing 'private' interests. On the one hand, this involves European funding to support interventions in the labour market including training initiatives supported by the European Social Fund and the Regional Fund. There is potential misuse of these funds by providers with both private and public providers having been found guilty of serious fraud, while more stringent controls have been introduced to prevent this in future. Furthermore, availability of ear-marked government subsidies for projects providing (re-) training for specific target groups is also a major cause of concern with regard to free competition. The Project-Directorate for Learning and Work was an example of this specific mechanism with reference to activities focused on local projects to promote training schemes for reintegrating the unemployed in the labour market, and the establishment of a national system for Accreditation of Prior Learning. Both were organized on market principles involving a system of accredited public, private non-profit organizations, and commercial providers in competition for contracts to carry out the work involved. The supply-side of the market is regarded as potentially distorted by this extensive subsidy landscape which comprises a maze of more than 1400 different regulations governing such subsidies. This can have significant consequences for the pricing policies of public and private providers in the market and undermine free competition for government contracts. These issues give rise to questions about the so-called level playing-field where competition between public and private providers has effectively been orchestrated by state intervention, despite traditionally professed reluctance to intervene in the market. By seeking to regulate the market, state interventions to create market conditions may indeed have contributed to market failure.

Within the long-standing framework of the 'polder-model' for social dialogue, with shared but divided responsibilities between different regulatory actors, the most

significant development has been the growing emphasis on stimulating the demand-side of the training market and individual responsibility for investments in employability. Questions are increasingly raised, however, with regard to growing confusion between 'individual demand' as expressed by consumers of post-initial training and the organization of 'collective demand' by the social partners. When the social partners are increasingly regarded as responsible for collective expression of individual training needs, the interests of consumers are not necessarily voiced by individual consumers themselves. While provision of post-initial education is directed at individual consumers, the Training and Development Funds organized by different sectors of the economy are very important collective purchasers of post-initial education. Jointly organized by the social partners, these funds are governed by collective bargaining agreements. With regard to funding of individual participants in post-initial training, for example, the costs of 61% of participants are paid for by third parties, more specifically by their employers, rather than by individuals themselves. This also involves the availability of paid educational leave in working time for employees with 42% of participants in training having access to paid educational leave for an average 5.4 hours per individual per annum. Funded by a compulsory pay-roll levy contributed by employers, this system is largely based upon purchasing the services of commercial providers often in the form of tailor-made training activities especially for large companies.

Although policy narratives persist in asserting that the post-initial training market is a free market, recent advisory committees and independent research have questioned this argument. The post-initial training market in The Netherlands manifests the key characteristics of 'quasi markets' introduced elsewhere in Europe during the last two decades to implement regulatory governance of education and social-welfare systems (for example: Blom, 2001; Bradley & Taylor, 2002; Struyven & Steurs, 2005; Maroy, 2009; Bradley & Taylor, 2010; Denters et al, 2013). These quasi markets are designed to secure the benefits arising from the supposed efficiency of free markets, while retaining the benefits of equitability of individual rights guaranteed by public responsibility. However, both the supply and demand-sides of these quasi markets manifest potential market distortions arising from the very system of regulatory governance established in order to stimulate competition in meeting training needs (Honings & Karsten, 2007). The tripartite system of regulatory governance of the post-initial training market in The Netherlands has constructed a 'quasi market', which gives rise to the question as to whether the quasi post-initial training market itself is a source of market failure, thus inhibiting appropriate interventions by regulatory actors to correct for market failure. This perhaps identifies the ultimate conundrum of neo-liberal policy practice which conflates public and private interests into individual responsibility for lifelong learning in the marketplace, while regulatory governance in practice is orchestrated by political actors in quasi post-initial training markets.

### **Conclusions: The pursuit of knowledge under difficulties**

This article addressed the historical development of the post-initial training market in The Netherlands. Within the broader context of modernization in European societies from the industrial revolution to post-industrial information economies of the twentieth-first century, historical description and analysis in different historical periods focused on regulatory governance of this market. Primary findings of this study demonstrate that policy formation processes have long been characterized by questions concerning the free market, commodification of learning, and problems associated with market failure.

The article has argued that the post-initial training market in The Netherlands, has not been primarily inspired by the implementation of neo-liberal policies since the 1980s. The evidence provided by this specific national study demonstrates that markets and the commodification of adult learning are long-standing historical phenomena, which have characterized diverse and manifold forms of post-initial training since the early eighteenth century during the historical transformation from correspondence learning, to distance learning, and e-learning.

Key findings demonstrate that regulatory governance in The Netherlands has been characterized by distinct periods of contestation between conflicting interest-groups, shifting coalitions between societal stakeholders, and political settlements supporting marginal state regulation in order to correct for potential market failure. Throughout the nineteenth century, retarded industrialization of the Dutch economy contributed to a *laissez-faire* period dominated by a free market and the total absence of state intervention. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that state intervention in the market was hesitantly recognized in response to the rapid expansion of multi-media distance learning, accreditation of commercial providers of correspondence learning, and consumer protection to prevent market failure. During the 1980s and 1990s, neo-liberal policy narratives primarily focused on market deregulation, employability, and the responsibilities of individual learners as consumers in the post-initial training market. In practice, this resulted in a tripartite system of regulatory governance that encourages competition between commercial and public providers in a quasi-post-initial marketplace.

The results also identified convincing empirical evidence that the post-initial training market fails to deliver the appropriate goods and services to meet the demand-side needs of low-qualified and in particular older workers who are now expected to remain longer in the labour market. In the past decade, potential market failure has returned to the agenda in policy narratives addressing evidence of systematic allocative failure by the Dutch post-initial training market to deliver training to specific groups. These comprise those who have been targeted by government policies articulating demand-side interventions to strengthen unmet individual needs in gaining access to the labour market via participation in the post-initial training arena. Despite reiteration in successive policy reports of the important role played by the Dutch post-initial training market in delivering lifelong learning, it is perhaps necessary to pose more fundamental questions about regulatory governance and responses to the problematic role of the post-initial training market in lifelong learning policies in The Netherlands.

Within the overall modernization process in European societies and the social organization of adult learning, markets and the commodification of learning have been characterized by the commercial availability of learning materials—print, audio-visual, digital—serving diverse formats of non-formal and informal learning. Although this particular study has focused specifically on longer-term development of the post-initial training market in The Netherlands, the implications of these findings suggest the need for further empirical research into the historical and contemporary dynamics of markets and the commodification of adult learning on the broader landscape of adult learning beyond the world of post-initial training. Five key areas of further research can be identified that address the commercial character of diverse forms of adult learning serving the learning activities of autodidacts and self-directed learners.

Firstly, research needs to investigate historical and contemporary dynamics of markets in the commercial provision of learning resources in serving non-formal and informal self-directed learning activities undertaken by adults in order to acquire knowledge, skills and sensitivities for their personal, social, and vocational development.

Such research can serve to recover the world of independent and self-directed learning efforts undertaken by autodidacts which is fundamental to understanding the historical and contemporary dimensions of independent self-directed learning, correspondence study, distance education, and distributed personal learning environments in Web-2 society (Atwell, 2007; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Secondly, historical research should address implications of technological innovations for the social and economic organization and delivery of non-formal and informal learning in different historical and societal contexts. These include activities of publishers in producing self-help and self-improvement literature, developments in the infrastructure of correspondence study, significance of the type-writer, radio, and television for the development of multi-media distance learning, and, more recently, the impact of internet on e-learning and smart-phones for commercial delivery of personal learning environments (Moores, 2012; Fang, 2014). Thirdly, research needs to address historical and contemporary dynamics of regulatory governance of learning markets with special reference to the responsibilities of for-profit, non-profit private and public providers of learning materials for adults. Research should address state regulation of providers, but also explore the involvement of societal stakeholders, in particular the social partners, in regulatory regimes based upon self-regulation and co-regulation of markets (Maroy, 2008; Ozga et al, 2011). Fourthly, further research is required that examines in greater detail key historical questions as to how regulatory stakeholders have constructed understandings of 'market failure' in different historical periods, and how this influences contemporary regulatory policy repertoires for interventions in learning markets. Such research should focus on the political economy of how public authorities have historically intervened and continue to intervene in the marketplace in order to correct for allocative failure of markets. This should address the limited and contingent delivery of education and training by commercial providers in the market, and explore state responsibilities for structures of opportunity enabling equitable access for all to lifelong learning (Tuijnman, 2003; Watts, 2008; Stern & Ritzen, 2012; Nijhof & Streumer, 2012). Finally, research is also needed which explores the 'cultural materiality' of the 'commodification' of adult learning. This involves studies of the social organization of disseminating and acquiring knowledge, skills and sensitivities manifested in cultural practices associated with historical and contemporary cultural forms of commercially provided adult learning with particular reference to correspondence learning, multi-media distance learning, and personal learning environments based on Web-2 technologies and social media (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006; Lee, 2008; Fenwick & Edwards, 2013; Zürcher, 2015).

The comparative historical perspective can contribute significantly to more empirical understanding of the social, political, economic and cultural factors that have historically shaped the emergence of learning markets, commodification of learning resources, and calls for state intervention to regulate the market. In the late eighteenth century, classical liberal economists, such as Adam Smith, may have advocated the workings of the marketplace for the efficient distribution of goods and services including education, but they were also convinced of the need for appreciable government intervention in the learning marketplace by way of subsidies or vouchers (West, 1982). This was based on their empirical observation that while the poor may have been convinced of the benefits of education for both themselves and their offspring, they were too poor to purchase learning in the marketplace (West, 1964).

In 1830, a prominent spokesman of self-help learning, George Craik, reported several hundred biographical sketches of individuals involved in '*...pursuit of knowledge under difficulties*' who were engaged in '*...self-education without a master*', and who turned to any learning materials they could lay their hands on, including the

marketplace (Craik, 1830). Almost two hundred years later, much remains to be recovered of the history of commercially-provided learning materials in the marketplace. Further empirical research is vital to establishing more nuanced historical and contemporary understandings of markets, commodification and learners' subjectivities in the digital world of adult learning in the twenty-first century, where capitalist forms of cultural production and consumption pervade the world of personal learning environments and the cultural practices of autodidacts in learning to live their lives.

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