

# Foreword

---

The present volume studies an important topic in contemporary highly-skilled societies: the issue of adult learning. Various societal trends in Western societies call for new forms of learning that fit less well in the ‘standard’ life cycle in which an initial educational phase in early life was followed by an employment career until (early) retirement. Rather than seeing the educational phase as a clearly demarcated life stage between early childhood and the transition to adulthood, we tend to see present-day life courses as more blurry, with periods of mixed statuses of schooling and work, and, relevant for the present volume, re-entry into learning as adults. Important societal trends include globalization, technological change, and aging workforces. Through globalization and technological change, low- and medium-skilled workers need to obtain skills that can keep them in work. Globalization has particularly affected labor market opportunities of the low skilled, as low-skilled work is often outsourced to developing countries. Both the low and medium skilled are further threatened by technological developments that may automate their job tasks, making their skills redundant. Moreover, through the exponential character of technological developments, skills acquired in initial education become obsolete more rapidly than was the case decades ago. So even among those who have obtained valuable skills in education, continued forms of formal and non-formal learning need to be organized in order to keep up with these changes. The aging workforce has made the need for prolonged working lives more urgent, and training is a way to increase participation rates of older workers in the labor force.

Thus, the volume takes up an important research question, with clear relevance for the scientific community, policy makers and politicians. The project is timely, with a preponderance of calls for ‘lifelong learning’ in Europe and beyond. Moreover, what is especially important is that the book takes an approach towards adult learning in the context of life courses and inequality. Echoing other studies by Hans-Peter Blossfeld and associates, a life-course approach is embraced, which helps to see the enrollment patterns in formal and non-formal adult learning as structurally determined and associated to differences in advantage in further careers. In other words, whereas the lifelong learning field tends to see adult learning mostly as an

avenue towards economic growth, the current volume complements this view with a perspective in which social inequalities are, at least in part, shaped by opportunities and constraints of different groups of workers in different phases of the life course.

One particular strength of the book is that patterns of entry into adult learning, and the returns to adult learning in further careers, are studied in a comparative perspective. Societies differ substantially in many respects, concerning the economy and various institutions. The book examines the relevance of national institutions with regard to the educational system, the welfare state, and employment systems. The book is highly informative on how different institutions are able to deal with the increased need for skill acquisition over the life course, and how institutions affect inequalities in access to adult learning and in the returns to them. However, the book also clearly demonstrates that existing typologies of institutional arrangements are ill-suited to explain cross-national variation in enrollment patterns and returns to training. It is highly relevant to see that training can help to create human capital among groups that most need them, but it is also striking to realize that especially the well-educated benefit from training in many countries. The so-called Matthew effect implies that, across the life course, adult learning magnifies inequalities in labor market opportunities between skill groups; implying that it offers an educational explanation to cumulative advantages in addition to social-class-based and organizational explanations of growing differences from early adulthood to retirement.

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in education and inequalities, in life courses, in adult learning, and in the economics of work careers. Scientists and policy makers alike will learn a great deal from the abundance of empirical evidence, using many different sorts of data of many different countries.

Herman G. van de Werfhorst  
*University of Amsterdam, Netherlands*