



In these austere times it is difficult not to feel pessimistic about the future. The economic news seems universally bad, the Euro crisis seems interminable, the housing market is stagnant, there are more than one million young people out of work and public spending is set to fall even further over the next few years. Participation in learning has declined, both in the publicly subsidised sphere but also in the workplace where the economic crisis has hit employer spend on training as well. A recent Institute of Fiscal Studies report suggested that public spending on education is set to fall from 6.4 per cent to 4.6 per cent of UK national income over the next four years.

So there are many reasons to feel gloomy and worried, but I believe that there are reasons to be optimistic and hopeful as well.

In England and in Wales we have government ministers who understand adult

learning. This support and understanding will be important as the funding cuts really start to bite. There is strong support too from opposition parties for this view of education.

The wider reform of public services set out by the UK government is heralding a new localism which may bring a new lease of life to adult learning. The reforms involve the removal of top-down targets and controls and the softening of centralised accountability. The idea is that services should no longer look 'upwards' to be accountable, but should look 'outwards' towards their service-users, stakeholders and communities. This should be music to the ears of adult educators because of the potential freedoms and flexibilities which follow.

NIACE, with our partners in the college sector, has been working on this agenda for over a year now. Colleges are the biggest

Reasons to be cheerful

These are difficult times but there are opportunities too as well as signs that the sector is responding positively to the challenges it faces, says **DAVID HUGHES**

education and who have a commitment to it which we should not take for granted. Both Vince Cable and John Hayes are passionate supporters of learning for more than simple economic and utilitarian reasons. One only has to listen to their speeches at this year's Adult Learners' Week events to understand their appreciation of the social, personal, family, community, health and wellbeing benefits of

providers of education to adults so our joint inquiry – with the Association of Colleges and the 157 Group – on the role of colleges in their communities (published in November and discussed by Baroness Sharp, chair of the inquiry, in this issue) was important in setting out a range of recommendations for how this part of the system can and should respond to the new localism. The basic proposition is