

## The “Big Society” needs adult learning!

Mary Ward Centre has survived for over 100 years on optimism and an enduring mission of promoting public education and social service. We have kept on speaking up for the importance of funding liberal adult education - even when, as in recent years, government thinking was moving in a different direction. And hasn't all that speaking up by the whole sector paid dividends in the first days of this new government? The three BIS ministers responsible for our patch have shown themselves to be well briefed and committed. It's a tribute to the effectiveness of all our sector's advocates, especially NIACE. The Inquiry is also such a rich source of evidence and argument, with its sensible proposals for rebalancing funding across the life course.

The challenge now is to further highlight those aspects of our work which resonate with the “Big Society”. Perhaps this government will also develop its own kind of Nu-Speak - with the last lot we all learned quickly enough to use the language of “Employer Responsive” and “Demand Led” when describing the exact opposite. But there are some deeper challenges ahead of us than this. It's important not to give up in our belief in public funding for Lifelong Learning.

Our optimism may be severely challenged in the next year or two – indeed there are enough people saying that all government funding for lifelong learning will be completely cut. I hope not. The Conservatives had promised to preserve safeguarded adult learning pots, which include some of the funding for Special Designated Institutions (SDIs) like ours, and indeed to invest another £100m in lifelong learning. It is for all of us to hold them to that pledge.

So, let's keep speaking up. If we believe that FE colleges should be funded for some “developmental” non-accredited provision in order to be properly responsive to local need and wider participation, let's say so! Let's keep explaining why it's important. Parks, libraries, museums, playcentres, adult education: in our increasingly atomised society these are key elements of the public realm where people from all backgrounds still engage together. Mary Ward in the 1890s called this “equalisation”, and was successful in pioneering at least some government funding for it. No doubt we still need to figure out together as a society the right mix of individual, employer, charitable and government funding. The Inquiry has made a start in collecting evidence about how best to do it. Although, as Alan Tuckett has often said, we still haven't fully won the battle for the hearts and minds of the electorate in supporting government funding, maybe the recent NIACE participation survey showing the increase in people recognising their own adult learning may indicate some growth not only in appetites for adult learning, but also in a wider recognition of its importance. I hope so.

We know that funded provision for people to study in formal groups with professionally qualified and inspected tutors is only a part of the great patchwork of activity across the country that NIACE members are involved in. Colleges like ours also need to collaborate with all sorts of other learning activities, including online networks like the School of Everything. Our Settlement has a Legal Centre which carries out financial education work and debt advice, funded by the Capitalise Project. The Transformation Fund has also enabled partners in Camden to reach out in many new ways, working with volunteers and community learning champions. But as Alan Tuckett also writes in the May 2010 *Adults Learning*, for people with the lowest levels of skills there is no substitute for well taught classes to be available alongside informal and self-organised learning. We would add that these classes should not be ghettos for any one particular group but be open to all, with variable fees as appropriate.

Of course, government funding isn't the only challenge. What are the other pressing issues for us in terms of fulfilling our mission and “equalisation”? They include energetically renewing the curriculum, fundraising for bursaries for students unable to afford fees and childcare, and thinking about how to deal with inter-generational injustice as the next generations cope with poorer pension entitlements, higher housing costs and reducing public services.

I wrote in *Adults Learning* in April 2009 that colleges like ours, which receive at least some government funding, must act as a “gene pool”, so that high quality formal delivery of flexible non-accredited adult education is not lost to practitioner memory. We don't claim that we're better than other places or other types of provision, but the privilege of funding puts the onus on us to ever improve the quality of our teaching and the depth and responsiveness of our curriculum. We're a haven and springboard for so many in their pressured London lives. We'll do everything we can to

continue our public service for the next 100 years. The biggest challenge to providers? Keeping hopeful and optimistic. Not being cynical. Nurturing the next generation of campaigners, students, organisers and teachers who will shape the future.

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*(Recent co-opted member of NIACE Strategy and Policy Committee)."*