

Sector Developments

Ofsted publishes latest inspection statistics

Between 1 October and 31 December 2011, Ofsted undertook 84 full inspections and three full re-inspections of providers in the learning and skills sector. These included 23 colleges, 35 independent learning providers and 17 local authority adult and community learning providers. Inspection grades awarded for 'overall effectiveness' were as follows:

- Of the 23 colleges that were inspected, 1 was judged as 'outstanding', 8 were judged as 'good', 10 were judged as being 'satisfactory' and 5 were judged as being 'inadequate'.
- Of the 35 independent learning providers that were inspected, 1 was judged as 'outstanding', 15 were judged as 'good', 14 were judged as 'satisfactory' and 5 were judged as being 'inadequate'.
- Of the 17 adult and community learning providers that were inspected, 1 was judged as 'outstanding', 13 were judged as 'good', and 3 were judged as 'satisfactory'.

Is there anybody there?

The Ofsted consultation document 'A Good Education for All', proposes that from 1 September 2012, FE colleges and other providers should be subjected to 'no notice' inspections. Ofsted argues that this change will 'give a real reflection of the teaching and learning taking place'.

Nevertheless, Ofsted has recently acknowledged that there may be particular 'operational challenges' in conducting some inspections in the FE sector, and that some colleges and training providers may need to be given 'a limited degree of notice'. The reasons given by Ofsted for this apparent partial relaxing of the rules include, for example, the possibility that 'apprentices might be out in the workplace at the time of the inspection and inspectors could find it difficult to talk to trainees and employers in order to ascertain their views on the quality of education and training being provided'.

A spokeswoman for Ofsted said, 'We are aware of the differences in FE', and, with curiously strange degree of logic, went on to say that 'inspections might need to be conducted differently in the FE sector because colleges have lots of different sites'. She added that 'some colleges have separate training provider companies and offer education and work-based training together'. Presumably having reflected on what she had just said, she then retrenched from this position a bit by saying, 'But it will still be the shortest notice period possible'.

When asked how 'being given a limited degree of notice' might work, the Ofsted spokeswoman explained that, for example, 'It could be that the college is called prior to the inspection and asked if there will be any people there.' This, of course begs the question of what would happen if the answer was 'no', or if the telephone just rang out because the staff were, say, in hiding because of an earlier tip off. Presumably, inspectors would just pack up their laptops, PIC's, QSR's and change of underwear etc., and a bit like locusts, move on to the next unsuspecting provider.

First college to undergo a no-notice inspection is graded as 'outstanding'

In spite of the trepidation many colleges feel about the prospect of a 'no notice' inspection, Exeter College, the first further education college to undergo such an inspection, has been graded as 'outstanding'. The inspection was a pilot for the new 'no notice' arrangements and, clearly *not* having had the benefit of an earlier tip off, Exeter College's management received a Monday morning telephone call from Ofsted, just 45 minutes before the inspection was due to start. As is the case at present, the inspection lasted a full week. There would no doubt have been a few brown trouser moments along the way, but at the end of the inspection week, inspectors graded the college as 'outstanding' overall. Not only this, but the three contributory themes, 'student

outcomes', 'teaching and learning', and 'leadership and management' were also graded as 'outstanding'.

The no doubt mightily relieved college principal has now said that he thinks that 'no notice' inspections could be quite a good idea. Nevertheless, credit where credit's due. Well done Exeter College for such an excellent outcome.

Chief Inspector questioned by MPs on the latest Ofsted Annual Report

Below is given an extract of the 'uncorrected transcript of oral evidence taken before the House of Commons Education Committee at their meeting on 28 February'. The extract includes some of the questions asked of Sir Michael Wilshaw, the new Ofsted Chief Inspector, by members of the committee. The extract below specifically relates to the learning and skills section of the latest Ofsted Annual Report, along with the responses Sir Michael gave to these questions.

Ian Mearns MP: *'Is the learning and skills sector in a good position to deliver what is required of it in the context of the Wolf Review?'*

Sir Michael Wilshaw: *'I am very concerned about the quality of provision in the learning and skills sector. You have seen the report and the number of colleges, particularly FE colleges that are not doing well. We have got to do something about that. It is quality of leadership, quality of teaching, overall quality of provision, attainment levels, and so on. It is a worrying sector.'*

Ian Mearns MP: *'I was at a conference in central London yesterday. It was suggested that careers information, advice and guidance work in schools was in chaos. That is going to be important for youngsters progressing into post-16 in particular, isn't it, in terms of where they go, how they get there and why they get there. Is that a concern from your perspective?'*

Sir Michael Wilshaw: *'A good school will have a good careers service. I have worked in plenty of good schools that employed good careers officers and made sure that youngsters knew what the progression routes were and what qualifications were necessary to go down a particular path.'*

Ian Mearns: *'The Wolf report shows that a high proportion of good colleges declined and a high proportion of satisfactory colleges did not improve over the last year of inspection. What were the main factors behind this?'*

Sir Michael Wilshaw: *'If you look at the issues that contributed to decline and failure, it is the same ones as for schools: poor leadership, low expectations, leaders not monitoring what is happening and using the excuse of size. We have got 10,000 students here. We are working on 25 different sites. We are working with employers here, and so on, using the complexity of FE as a cover for not doing what they should be doing, which is monitoring the quality of teaching.'*

So there you have it. Sir Michael thinks that the FE sector is 'worrying'. I daresay that the feeling will be mutual.

Schools failing to provide adequate advice and guidance on post 16 vocational options

A recent survey conducted by the Association of Colleges (AoC), shows that around half of schools that have their own sixth forms are providing pupils with 'poor, limited or no access to information about courses available in their local FE or sixth form colleges'. Problems identified in the study included schools refusing to allow college liaison officers to talk to pupils in years 10 and 11, refusing to distribute college prospectuses and preventing pupils from attending college 'taster' events. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the AoC study also found that schools *without* sixth forms were much more open to providing pupils with impartial information on post 16 options, than those with sixth forms.

The study will now be presented to the Department for Education (DfE) as evidence of the levels of objectivity of advice and guidance in schools, and both the AoC and the Association of Employment

and Learning Providers (AELP) have called on Ofsted to include a separate inspection grade in respect of the quality and objectivity of initial advice and guidance provided in schools and colleges.

SFA and NAS review of apprenticeships

A review of apprenticeships, and in particular short apprenticeships (defined as 6 months or less) was recently initiated by John Hayes, the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning. The review is being carried out jointly by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), and is scheduled to be completed in early April. The main findings of the review thus far, are as follows:

- The provision of 87 training organisation providers, sub-contractors and directly funded employers was deemed to warrant further review by the SFA and NAS.
- 29 of these cases have now been brought to a 'satisfactory conclusion'. However, the providers concerned will continue to be monitored by the SFA and NAS to ensure that similar issues do not re-occur in the future. The majority of these providers have responded to SFA/NAS concerns by changing their delivery models in order to be fully compliant with the new requirements scheduled to be implemented from August 2012. Others have ceased the delivery of frameworks that fail to meet the new requirements.
- So far, the review has identified 10 primary contractors and 3 subcontractors where the SFA and NAS have 'significant and unresolved concerns'. The SFA and the NAS have said that they 'will work closely with these providers to conclude a full investigation of the specifics of the cases and identify suitable resolutions, including improving, adapting or, if necessary, withdrawing provision'. As a result of this, 3 subcontractors and prime contractors have now decided to withdraw altogether from offering apprenticeship programmes.
- At least one case has been referred to the SFA's Special Investigations Unit because of ongoing 'irregularities'.

The review is claimed to have already resulted in significant improvements to apprenticeship programmes, or where this has not been possible, the withdrawal of inadequate provision. Commenting on the effectiveness of the review, the SFA said that 'It has been made clear to providers that contracts which meet funding requirements technically, but fail to meet the more comprehensive quality standards we expect of apprenticeships are not acceptable. The Agency will significantly tighten the contract and funding guidance from August 2012 to eliminate poor practice'.

The key changes in apprenticeships that will take effect from August 2012 include the following:

- All apprenticeships for 16-18 year olds will be for a minimum of 12 months duration
- New safeguards will be put in place to strengthen monitoring and reporting
- Arrangements for the subcontracting of provision will be made more robust and will be subject to increased scrutiny, including 'making public a list of all sub contracted provision with a contract value of over £100,000'
- The NAS will undertake an immediate review into all apprenticeship frameworks that are deemed to be 'a cause for concern'
- A new 'enquiry panel' will be established, that will report directly to the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, with the aim of addressing issues arising from poor quality provision as soon as it is identified
- New guidance on the implementation of quality standards in the delivery apprenticeship programmes will be published
- All apprentices will be given the opportunity to obtain Level 2 qualifications in English and mathematics

Controversial training company gives evidence to BIS Select Committee

The reasons for the establishment of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Select Committee Inquiry into Apprenticeships, include concerns expressed in respect of the extent to which public funding provided for the delivery of apprenticeships is being misused, and the extent to which the robustness and quality of some apprenticeship programmes is meeting the standards

expected. Following the publication of the National Audit Office's (NAO) own enquiry into apprenticeships, BIS has recently expressed further concerns at the extent to which some firms have engaged in 're-badging' existing employees as apprentices. (For example, Asda is alleged to have secured public funding for around 25,000 apprenticeships, apparently without creating a single new job.)

The BIS Select Committee has therefore called on a number of firms that provide apprenticeships for their employees and private training companies offering apprenticeship programmes on behalf of other firms, to give evidence to the Committee.

Elmfield Training Ltd is one of these firms. Apparently, a large proportion of the company's turnover is generated through apprenticeships delivered on behalf other firms (e.g. most of Morrison's apprenticeship programmes, many of which were of 12 weeks duration, are delivered by Elmfield Training). In the 2009/10 financial year, Elmfield Training returned pre tax profits of around £12.3 million on a turnover of £33.8 million, thereby producing a profit margin of roughly 36%. Around £3 million of this was paid as a dividend to one director (who owns 95% of the shares in the company) and it is alleged that around £6 million was used by this director to buy 'family homes' through the company. In addition, in May 2009, the firm was approved set up its own accreditation body, 'Skills First Awards', solely in order to validate its own qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks.

Elmfield Training claims that it is 'one of the UK's largest and fastest growing training providers'. If the allocation of SFA contracts is anything to go by, this is true. At the commencement of the 2010/11 financial year, the SFA had awarded Elmfield Training contracts worth almost £24 million. Within 6 months this allocation had almost doubled to nearly £43 million, (although this has since contracted to around £37 million in 2011/12). As a response to some of the questioning the firm has recently been subject to, it has been pointed out that the company's training programmes were inspected by Ofsted in July 2011 and were graded as being 'satisfactory'.

More questions on apprenticeships

So, over the last few months there has been a BIS Select Committee Inquiry into apprenticeships, an NAO inquiry into apprenticeships, an SFA/NAS review of apprenticeships, and now, presumably not wanting to be left out of the fun, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is also taking evidence on apprenticeships.

After the publication of NAO's report on apprenticeships last month, the PAC has held its own evidence session on apprenticeships. Those called to give evidence to the PAC included the BIS permanent secretary, the chief executive of the SFA, and the chief operating officer of the NAS. Issues raised by PAC members also included, (amongst other things), adult apprenticeships, the practice of re-badging existing training provision as apprenticeships and apprenticeships of a short duration.

And just for good measure, on 2 April, BBC's 'Panorama' will be presenting a special programme entitled 'The Great Apprenticeship Scandal'. No wonder the NAS chief operating officer is leaving to 'spend more time with his family'.

PAC report on bureaucracy in FE

Meanwhile the PAC has published its own report on bureaucracy in FE. The report concludes that 'progress in reducing bureaucracy has been too slow' and that there are 'too many funding organisations in further education of which none take responsibility for cutting red tape'. The PAC also said that they were 'frustrated' BIS does not believe it should be its job to reduce bureaucracy'. According to the PAC report, the failure of both of these points 'leads to a poor value and uncoordinated approach, particularly in the case of data requirements'.

In preparing the report, the PAC took evidence from BIS, the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) and the SFA and concluded that, 'differences between funding bodies in the information they demand create an unnecessary burden on training providers and divert money away from students'. However the report also warned that, 'moves by the funding agencies to simplify funding

systems and make them outcome-based must not be allowed to weaken safeguards over the proper use of public money’.

SFA encourages sub contractors to apply for direct apprenticeship contracts

Clearly not discouraged by having to attend the occasional select committee or two, the SFA is now encouraging private training organisations to bid directly for apprenticeship contracts worth at least £500,000 as part of a one-off funding pilot. The SFA says the pilot is designed to examine:

- ‘The appetite of large subcontractors that have the capacity to move to a direct contractual relationship with the agency’
- ‘How organisations can be funded directly when it is not possible to reallocate provision from under-performing providers’
- ‘Methods for the potential introduction of a structured long term process to introduce new entrants to the education and training market’
- ‘How the SFA can be provided with access to additional capacity to deliver high quality learning opportunities to communities and businesses across the country’
- ‘How funding requirements for 2012/13 can be more accurately assessed’

Firms submitting successful bids will receive funding for 16 months to deliver full apprenticeship frameworks aimed at learners of all ages. The caveat to all this is that in order to be eligible to receive funds, firms have to be able to demonstrate that they can begin the delivery of their programmes in April 2012 and can ‘recruit at least 25% of their predicted learners by August 2012’.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) say they are, ‘very supportive of the pilot’ and agree that ‘large subcontractors should be offered a direct contract by the SFA’.

A4e (Action for Employment) under further investigation

Yet another investigation has been launched into alleged fraud committed by the troubled firm, A4e. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has announced that it has recently been made aware of an allegation of attempted fraud in relation to a significant ‘Mandatory Work Activity’ contract. The contract in question apparently involves arranging four-week placements for the ‘long term unemployed to help them prepare to get back into work’. Placement activities include such things as maintenance work on houses, renovating furniture and working with various charities. Allegations of fraudulent activity apparently include such things as A4e staff ‘routinely being asked to forge trainee signatures on blank time sheets’. A4e has 5 other large ‘Work Programme’ contracts which it would seem are also alleged to have ‘irregularities in respect of delivery’.

Given that the firm is already under investigation by the police for alleged fraud in relation to other ‘Welfare to Work’ type contracts, it came as a surprise to many observers to learn that the SFA has recently confirmed that A4e has been awarded further contracts worth around £30 million. These new contracts are in respect of the delivery of prison education programmes in London and the east of England. The contracts involve providing basic education to prisoners in area such as numeracy and English, and helping prepare them to find jobs on release. The London contract alone is said to be worth around £15million.

This move appears to have provoked anger in some government circles. For example, Margaret Hodge, the Chair of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, said ‘I find it astounding that, at a time when one government department is investigating a company for systemic failures, another department is awarding the same company new contracts.’ She went on to say, ‘You just couldn’t make it up.’

Partly in response to the criticism it has received, the SFA has now sent in its own auditors to assist with the ongoing investigations into alleged irregularities at A4e apparently dating back to 2010. A spokesperson for the SFA reassuringly said ‘In the current context the SFA is being vigilant and continues to monitor the situation very closely.’ Apparently this failed to convince TV’s ‘Newsnight’, who proceeded to televise an ‘A4e’ special.

The total UK income for A4e in 2011 is estimated to be between £140 million and £160 million, all of which came from government contracts. The owner of A4e, who in that year apparently received 87% of the £11 million paid in dividends to the company's five shareholders, was the Prime Minister's former adviser on 'troubled families'. However, she resigned from this role when the various fraud allegations made against the firm began to emerge. Recent rumours that she has now been invited to act as the Prime Minister's adviser on 'troubled training companies' have so far proved to be unfounded.

Increase in the National Minimum Wage (NMW) for apprentices announced

At the other end of earnings the spectrum, the independent Low Pay Commission (LPC), has recommended that the NMW for apprentices be increased by 5p per hour to £2.65. This increase will come into effect on 1 October 2012. Other changes in the NMW from that date are as follows:

- The adult NMW will increase by 11p per hour, to £6.19 an hour
- The rate for 18-20 year olds will remain unchanged at £4.98 an hour
- The rate for 16-17 year olds will remain unchanged at £3.68 an hour

Those aged 16-20 who are unemployed can take consolation from the fact that both the government and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) believe that freezing the NMW rates for this age group will encourage employers to take more of them on.

Official: FE colleges in England are now private sector institutions too

Although some 'wet' politicians and civil servants now seem to a bit jittery about the potential long term consequences of such things as the creeping privatisation of the health service in England, and the escalating costs to the taxpayer of the schools, hospitals and other public projects built and funded through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), others draw attention to the cracking success private sector firms are having in forcing down the prices consumers pay for gas, electricity, and water and for the use of our railways. No doubt bearing this success in mind, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has reversed its earlier position on the legal status of FE colleges in England and has declared that from April 2012 onwards they are to be regarded as being part of the private sector.

This change in status, combined with the new freedoms to be given to FE colleges as a result of the 2011 Education Act, has inspired some of the more 'business minded' colleges to consider radical 'new business models', such as converting themselves into John Lewis type mutual organisations. Others are contemplating going the whole hog by becoming public companies and raising funds by issuing shares in return for dividends paid from future surpluses.

Presumably in preparation for this brave new world, some colleges have taken the bold step of airbrushing the word 'college' from their names altogether (although with so many schools now being called 'colleges', I don't suppose it will matter all that much). All this heady stuff tends to make just looking to 'share services' seem a bit tame, I can tell you.

Continuing with the theme of 'new business models', I wonder if any corporation has yet considered using the new freedoms to alter its articles and instruments of government, in order to convert itself into a church. The college name could perhaps be changed to something like, say, 'The College of the Immaculate Holy Sisters of Misery', and instead of insisting being called 'Principal *and* Chief Executive', the principal would simply be called the 'Reverend Principal' (or perhaps Principal *and* Archbishop). Then, a bit like you see in America, they could make regular appearances on the various satellite and cable religious television channels, encouraging true believers to enrol at the college and offer increased chances of salvation in return for a donation to college funds (all major credit cards accepted). You could even have BTEC music students in smocks singing gospel songs in the background. Some of you might say that this is taking things a bit too far, but as 'new business models' for FE go, it's still worth thinking about, if you ask me.

EMAs to be reintroduced in London?

Although they were retained in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) for 16-19 year olds in full time education in England were scrapped in 2010. Ken Livingstone has now pledged to reinstate a 'London wide EMA of up to £30 per week' if he is elected as the next Mayor of London. Mr Livingstone claims that since the £560 million EMA grant was replaced by the £180 million bursary scheme in that year, around 85,000 young people living in the nation's capital no longer receive any form of weekly allowance to help them with their studies. Mr Livingstone claims that the £80 million that would be needed to re-introduce EMA's in London could be found in part by bringing together existing bursary funds currently held by colleges and local authorities. Interestingly, Boris Johnson is not opposed to the idea, either.

It probably won't have escaped your attention that if Mr Livingstone wins the mayoral election and honours his pledge, (or if Mr Johnson wins and introduces something similar) this would leave 16-19 year old students in the rest of England as being the only young people in the United Kingdom who are unable to access EMAs. There just has to be an equality issue in here somewhere.

Guidance on FE Loans issued

BIS and the SFA are working with the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) to help colleges and training organisations prepare for the introduction of FE Loans in March 2013. The SFA will shortly be issuing detailed formal guidance to colleges and training organisations, setting out how the FE loans system is expected to operate. In addition, the guidance will provide information on the roles and duties of colleges and training organisations in respect of how students applying for FE loans will be dealt with. However, prior to issuing formal guidance, the SFA has published a broadsheet that aims to provide answers to questions on FE loans raised thus far. These answers include the following:

- FE loans will *not* be means tested
- FE loans are available to any individual who meets the criteria below, irrespective of their current employment status
- FE loans are available to those aged 24 or over at the start of their course, and who are resident in the UK
- FE loans are available to anyone who has not previously had an FE loan to do the same type and level of qualification.
- FE loans will be administered by the Student Loans Company (SLC) in a similar way to that in which HE loans are administered
- Applications for FE loans can be made in respect of the following qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks:
 - Apprenticeship frameworks at level 3 or above
 - GCE A levels
 - Access to HE courses
 - All other FE qualifications at level 3 or above

Some observers have expressed dismay that fees for FE courses are being increased at a time of record unemployment. For example, Gordon Marsden MP, the shadow minister for FE, has argued that women in their 30's and 40's, people from ethnic minorities and people with disabilities will be particularly deterred from participation in FE by the introduction of higher fees and that the introduction of student loans will not help the situation. Meanwhile, the publication by BIS of the equality impact assessment for the FE loans system has been delayed until May.

Less of an educational system, more of a combat zone

Competition between education and training providers in England seems to be increasingly escalating into outright war. Different types of schools (faith, trust, studio, UTC's, academies, etc.) are already competing intensely with each other for post 11 pupils. General FE colleges, specialist colleges, private trainers and sixth-form colleges are battling with each other for 16-19 students, and now universities, general FE colleges and more recently, sixth-form colleges, are all fighting each other for higher education student numbers.

As an example of this increased competition, Leeds Metropolitan University, the self styled 'University of the North' and one of the largest franchisors of higher education to FE colleges, has announced that it is ending virtually all of its HE partnerships with FE colleges. The university has said that, from now on, it intends to carry out all its HE franchise activity with private companies and overseas education bodies. Increasing competition between universities and colleges for a limited number of student places has meant that this is a pattern being repeated across the country, with many colleges finding it very difficult to find new university partners to enable them to continue with their HE provision. As further evidence of this, the AoC reports that around 14% of colleges have seen their franchised HE provision withdrawn by their university partners this year, with a further 30% expecting that their provision will be terminated by their HE partners by 2013.

On the other hand, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has allocated more than half of the new 'margin' HE places (i.e. those with annual fees of less than £7,500) to 155 FE colleges (including 65 FE colleges that were not directly funded in 2011/12), with the remaining places being distributed to 35 higher education institutions (HEI's). In total, HEFCE received bids from 203 institutions for a total 36,000 'margin' places. Actual allocations to universities and colleges were scaled down by HEFCE to the maximum of 20,000 places using a combination of quality assessments and pro rata reductions.

Nevertheless, it appears that the increase in student number allocations to the FE sector may be in danger of being wiped out by the reduction in HE franchised numbers with the unintended consequence that the move to increase HE in FE may eventually result in less HE in FE.

As a further complication, competition for HE places is now taking place not only between HEI's and FE colleges. Sixth Form Colleges are also entering the HE market, and some have been allocated their own HE student numbers for the first time. Next year, sixth-form colleges will, between them, be offering around 300 HE places.

University and Colleges' Union (UCU) General Secretary re-elected

Sally Hunt has retained the post of UCU General Secretary in the recent election. She defeated her only opponent Mark Campbell by a margin of 6,835 votes winning 73 per cent of the total votes cast. Her majority in the recent election was five times greater than when she was elected as UCU's first general secretary in 2007. Ms Hunt won the previous election by 1,346 votes, although more candidates stood during that election.

What's in a name?

On 1 April 2012 the YPLA becomes the Education Funding Agency (EFA). This is not a joke.

And finally.....

For reasons that are a bit difficult to understand, Angus College (not Angus *the* College) in Scotland decided to celebrate the recent International Women's Day by arranging to give a red rose (*not* a red nose) to all female members of staff. However, one female lecturer at the college objected to this, arguing that, irrespective of the motives for the 'gift', giving female staff a red rose was reinforcing sexist stereotypes and was, in effect, demeaning an event that was primarily intended to celebrate the past political activism that had resulted in women being given the right to work, the right to vote and the right to hold public office (although not, it would seem, the right to turn down a gift of a red rose).

Anyway, after refusing to accept the rose and then publicly speaking out against the gesture, she was apparently summoned to attend a meeting with the college management 'to discuss her objections'. She subsequently refused the instruction to attend the meeting on the quite reasonable grounds that she had not been given prior notice and she had not been given the opportunity to bring a union representative with her. However, because she refused to attend the meeting, she was then suspended. This gave the management of Angus the College, sorry Angus College, the dubious distinction of suspending a female member of staff on International Women's Day, simply because she had exercised her basic right to express disagreement with their preferred way of celebrating it.

Mind you, given that a red rose is typically regarded as an English emblem, I don't suppose that handing out red roses to anyone who is Scottish, male or female, would have gone down all that well either, no matter what day it was. If the college management really did want to present female staff with something to mark International Women's Day, I would have thought that, say, a thistle, or a haggis, or vouchers for free bagpipe lessons, might have caused a lot less trouble. You wouldn't get this sort of thing happening on International Men's Day, I can tell you.

Alan Birks – March 2012

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