



International Women's Day

At QAA we have our first female Chief Executive, Vicki Stott, who formally took up the role in November 2021.

We've come a long way in 25 years - in 1997 not one of the senior leaders was female, despite women making up more than half of the staff.

Today, our senior leadership team is much more representative of our staff in gender terms, although we would like to better reflect other characteristics to truly role model the diversity present in the sector overall. But today is International Women's Day and colleagues of all genders have been reflecting on the women who have inspired us. We hope you enjoy reading these as much as we enjoyed sharing them.



Vicki Stott, Chief Executive Officer,

I've been blessed to have worked with many inspiring women, all of whom are in the public domain and many of whom will be widely cited in articles similar to this, today.

I want to tell you about my Great Aunt Alison, who you'll likely to never have heard of.

As a teenager, Alison contracted polio, and spent a protracted time in hospital. She was an adventurous, rebellious spirit and, I suspect, a bit of a nightmare patient. Her regular visitors were encouraged to bring her cigarettes and whisky, and as a fairly small child, I enjoyed stories of wild bedside parties and brief escapes onto balconies/hospital gardens and so on.

By the time I knew her well, she was widowed and living alone in Fulham, in a wheelchair. She was by then working as a constituency secretary to Tufton Beamish, MP for Lewes (later Lord Chelwood). Lewes is quite a long way from London - she was an early pioneer for flexible, remote working. Her ability to get around the world outside her house was increasingly limited, but she charmed the world, including the bits of the House of Commons and later the Lords she needed, to come to her. She was a great collector of people. If you came to talk to her, you were inevitably persuaded to join her (and whoever else might be visiting) for a game of Scrabble and a bottle of wine (no matter what the time of day), and your views on politics, philosophy, the theatre, current affairs would be sought and rigorously explored. She was a great encourager and enabler, and if she was in your corner, as she was in mine, you were invincible. She helped you believe you really could do anything you set your mind to.

I lived with her for a while (she was given to believe I needed adult supervision and wouldn't accept it; I was given to believe she needed care and wouldn't accept it).

It was one of the happiest periods of my late adolescence and early adulthood). She encouraged research, engagement, debate. She provoked thought and exploration and was a wild and enthusiastic encourager of non-conformity. When I had my children, she knitted each of them a bright red, toddler-sized jumper so that I'd be able to see them from afar when they ran away, which she felt they should be encouraged to do often. She prompted me to be interested in the worlds of art, travel, exploration and knowledge. She was determined I should set my professional sights high and be confident in my ability to achieve and she lent me the confidence to wing it - a talent I think all professional women should develop.

She wasn't a public figure. She wasn't well known. But she was bold, brave, determined, and completely inspirational and I wish every young woman could have such an encouraging force for power in their background.

Stephanie Sandford, Director of International and Professional Services

‘ I am particularly grateful to my high school chemistry teacher, who taught me perhaps the most formative lesson of my early years and who oozed authoritativeness and kindness, whilst inspiring me to dare to think that the impossible was, in fact, possible. She taught me the power of harnessing self-belief and ambition, and in the process, transformed my performance at school and influenced my approach to life, which opened up a world of possibilities for me. ’

Dr Ailsa Crum, Director of Membership, Quality Enhancement and Standards

‘ I’ve been lucky to work with many inspirational people, occasionally serving more as a warning than a role model! But the best are wonderful story tellers, champions and great companions. It feels wrong to single out just one but I’m going to mention Jackie Kay, author and former Scottish Makar. Jackie exudes warmth, kindness and intellectual curiosity. She encourages us - her audience - to be the best version of ourselves, rewarding us with humour and humanity. ’

Tom Yates, Director of Corporate Affairs

‘ Many of the women I find inspiring managed to succeed on their own terms in industries that were not only male-dominated but notoriously misogynistic in culture. I’d name two: Joni Mitchell, one of the finest singer-songwriters, who never played the music industry’s game, and Rosalind Russell, a brilliant actress whose body of film work shows that she consistently refused to play Hollywood’s. ’

Dr Kate Mori, Academic Engagement Manager

‘ Christina Hughes - a woman of integrity, totally dedicated to supporting women in higher education, and just a generally all-round decent person. Christina recently founded [Women-Space](#) a UK-based career coaching and leadership company, to help the many wonderful women in higher education progress and flourish in their professional lives and careers. Having first met Christina on the subject-level Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Panel for Social Sciences, she has been a huge support both personally and professionally. ’

Alan Weale, Quality Manager

‘ I went to a school so small and rural that you had to choose biology or physics; you couldn’t take both. Girls inevitably chose biology and boys physics. The biology teacher was a woman and the physics a man. The biology teacher spoke to us all and was so enthusiastic about biology and where it could lead that I chose to buck the trend and take biology. It led to a career in nursing, followed by nursing education, followed by higher education. It was Miss Heron who wrote in my school report ‘Biology - Grade A. Excellent. Reliable with rabbits.’
Throughout the rest of my life I remained in touch. She died last year. Miss Heron, I owe my career and love of science to you. ’

Amrita Narang, Quality Enhancement and Standards Specialist

‘ The two women I’d like to mention are first, of course, my mother - a living example who epitomises ‘carpe diem’. No grand things but the smallest of gestures that make the grandest of difference in one’s life! She’s a game changer in that sense!
Second, Maria Popova, a Bulgarian-American writer of literary and arts commentary. A thoughtful writer. Her plethora of works makes me want to pause and take note of life. ’

Chrystalle Margallo, Member of the QAA Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SSAC) and Project Administrator at London Metropolitan University

As a daughter of Filipino immigrants in the UK, it was never a secret that education is important to our family. Entering the education system as a child posed various hurdles and microaggressions along the way, however I did not let this hinder me from my goal and vision, despite constantly having my intelligence and capabilities questioned and judged by how “Good” my spoken English is or by society reinforcing gender conforming norms to guide my subject choice.

I had invaluable role models in my Mother and my Grandmother. My Mother showed me courage and tenacity. Whilst having me at the age of 20, she was able to achieve her dreams and become one of three people in the UK to be a qualified Scientist and Sleep Physiologist. My Grandmother is a Doctor of Business and was the first female Vice Chancellor of Letran Calamba University in the Philippines where she also developed the graduate school. She has relentlessly encouraged me to be the best and always strive for knowledge. Their examples are testimonies along with mine as I continue my career and journey following their footsteps.

Caroline Turnbull, Acting Director of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

My desire to become an engineer was sparked and supported by my Dad, who encouraged my love of understanding how things worked. I was inspired by early female engineers including Lillian Gilbreth, pioneer of industrial engineering and psychology, often called the ‘Mother of Modern Management’. Unfortunately, while working in industry and as an early career academic, female role models were often difficult to find, encouraging me to get involved with organisations like Equate Scotland to change perceptions regarding engineering as a career option for women.

Dr Clare Parks, Quality Enhancement Specialist

‘I’d be hard pushed to single out any one inspirational woman (so many!) but I’ve always liked the quote, “Women hold up half the sky” (former chairman of the Chinese Communist Party).

Holly Thomas, Quality and Enhancement Specialist (Wales)

When I was little and asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would say that I wanted to be a scientist and work with my mother. Despite pursuing a different career path, her career still inspires me. She recently retired after almost 40 years in science working as a researcher in labs and later as an advocate for women in STEM, whilst supporting family and friends, and mentoring early career scientists.

Millie Crook, Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development

I’ve had the pleasure of working alongside many awesome women. My very first HR Director was (and still is!) fabulous in every sense of the word – passionate, courageous, supportive, funny, professional and oh so glam. She had a huge influence on my career and is still someone I look up to and go to for advice now. She showed me that being a successful woman in business can be rewarding as well as fun.

Rachel Hill-Kelly, Assistant Company Secretary

‘ I have been lucky to find inspiring women both younger and older everywhere, but two that inspired and supported me personally are my grandmother, who moved hundreds of miles from home to set up a school for deaf children and would always say: “c’mon, you got this kid”. Also my English teacher, Ms Ford, who inspired the best work from all her students. And of course, Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s attitude to everything! ’

Stephanie Stephenson, Marketing and Events Manager

‘ Life is a journey, throughout mine I’ve drawn inspiration from incredible women who believe in who they are, what they can achieve and have driven change. So, when I vote (the Pankhursts); read (Brontës); overcome barriers (Tracey Edwards); encounter discrimination (the trainer early in my career so passionate about equality); and celebrate the newest woman in my life (my transgender god-daughter) - I thank them all for the inspiration to believe and go for it too. ’

Dr Deb Adair, 8th President of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), joined our celebration to highlight four women who have inspired her:

‘ Unsurprisingly for a woman who has spent a (too-fast) professional lifetime in education, my inspiration has come from women who have themselves been educators of various stripes. Ms Virginia Reel was a high school teacher who set expectations for writing that were new to me. Ms Reel gave me the lowest grades I had ever received, but she also taught with persistence and support and showed me what good writing looked like and the effort it took - and it changed me. As a first-generation college student of limited means, my initial experience in higher education was at a junior college where I also worked for the Chair of the English Department. Dr Grace Scheer identified an essay opportunity for a full scholarship to Boston University and she encouraged me to that successful conclusion. That opportunity - and her example of outreach to put me on a pathway for success - changed me.

At an intermediate point in my career, I took a stop-out from higher education to run my county’s literacy council. Its mission was to educate adults in basic English language literacy. Ms Patricia Haney was an intake coordinator and beloved mainstay at the council whose profound compassion for those struggling to read and write showed me what it really meant to help people. She changed my perspective. And, much later in life, I had another opportunity to engage with an extraordinary woman who showed me what it looked like to influence others diplomatically, supportively, and encouragingly. Dr Julie Porosky-Hamlin, who was a senior vice president at the University of Maryland University College and whose still-active professional and scholarly work has been in quality assurance and non-traditional higher education, provided an example of an elegant, understated, and oh-so-diplomatic way of interacting with education professionals that inspires me in my everyday work.

These four women have shown me that there are many ways to make differences in people’s lives if only we are genuine in our engagements, hard-working, and respectful of both the challenges and contributions of others. ’

Published - March 2022