NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC BOARD

13 May 2015

Present: The Vice-Chancellor (in the Chair) and approximately 140 members of the Academic Board.

NOTES

1. NOTES OF THE 14 MAY 2014 MEETING

The notes of the meeting of Academic Board held on 14 May 2014 are available at:
http://www.ncl.ac.uk/executive/governance/academic/minutes.htm

2. NOMINATIONS FOR HONORARY AWARDS 2015

2.1 Honorary Degrees

The Honorary Degrees Committee invites nominations in writing for next year’s Congregations. Any member of Academic Board, Court, Council and the Alumni Consultative Group may make a nomination and support for nominees for honorary degrees should be sought only from members of these bodies. Where several members make a joint nomination, one should be shown as the nominator and the others as supporters. The grounds on which the nomination is made should be clearly stated.

Principles for the award of Honorary Degrees can be found at:
http://www.ncl.ac.uk/congregations/ceremonies/honorary/nom_hongrad.php

Proposals should be sent in an envelope marked ‘Confidential – Honorary Degrees’ to Dr John Hogan, Registrar, King’s Gate by Friday, 28 August 2015.

2.2 Honorary Fellowships of the University

Court invites nominations in writing for the award of next year’s Honorary Fellowships of the University. Any lay member of Court and Council, the Alumni Consultative Group and members of Academic Board may make a nomination. Where several members make a joint nomination, one should be shown as the nominator and the others as supporters. The grounds on which the nomination is made should be clearly stated.

Principles for the award of Honorary Fellowships can be found at:
http://www.ncl.ac.uk/congregations/ceremonies/honorary/nom_honfell.php

Proposals should be sent in an envelope marked ‘Confidential – Honorary Fellowships’ to Dr John Hogan, Registrar, King’s Gate by Friday, 26 February 2016.

Please make it clear whether the nomination is for an Honorary Degree or an Honorary Fellowship.

When making a nomination for an honorary degree or honorary fellowship, this should be done in the strictest confidence and must not be discussed with the potential recipient. Successful nominations will be publicised following approval by the awarding body (i.e. Senate or Court respectively) in advance of the relevant honorary ceremony.
3. REPORT BY THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

Received an oral report by the Vice-Chancellor on current business.

Noted that:

1. The University had achieved only a modest improvement in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), moving up one place in the *Times Higher Education* rankings, and consideration was being given to the changes which should be made in order to make a more substantial improvement in future years.

2. There had been some significant individual achievements during the past year, one of the most notable being the work undertaken by Professor Doug Turnbull and his team which had succeeded in bringing about a change in legislation in relation to mitochondrial replacement therapy.

3. Rankings were important as they impacted upon the external impression of the University and the sector as a whole and could also have the effect of influencing policy. The University had dropped out of the top 200 institutions in the Times Higher Education world rankings and this would have an impact on how the University was perceived internationally.

4. Enhancing the University’s image and improving the quality of its research had been identified as the two main areas for improvement. The Raising the Bar Steering Group had identified a number of objectives which had been considered by the joint meeting of Senate and Council on 27 April 2015. As a result of this meeting, the Raising the Bar Steering Group now had a mandate to prepare an action plan which would be presented to the meetings of Senate and Council in October 2015.

5. One of the objectives recommended by the Raising the Bar Steering Group was to have as large a number of subjects as possible which featured amongst the top 50 in the world in their respective subject rankings. The target is to have at least 10 in this group by the time of the REF 2020 submission.

6. The University was currently ranked 16th in terms of Russell Group institutions and at the joint meeting of Senate and Council it was agreed that the University should aim to achieve a position in the top half of the Russell Group, which would mean moving to at least 12th position. Where Units of Assessment (UoAs) already achieved a top half position, other, more appropriate targets would be set such as achieving a top quartile submission or a top 50 position in terms of world rankings.

7. Within each faculty it was necessary for honest conversations to take place in relation to the current position of each UoA in terms of both REF and NSS performance. Funding would be available to support UoAs where it was identified that this would help with the achievement of University targets.

8. It had been identified that the Internal Quality Assessment (IQA) arrangements within each faculty had sometimes been inconsistent and insufficient external assessment had taken place. This would be addressed in preparation for the next REF return. There had also been insufficient 4* outputs and, in future, staff would be asked to focus on improving the quality of their research publications rather than increasing the quantity.
4. **QUESTIONS**

Members were invited to submit questions to the Vice-Chancellor ahead of the meeting. Three questions were received and answered as follows:

1. **Katherine Rennie, PhD, Clinical Trials Unit**

   ‘Newcastle University is currently an Athena Swan Bronze Award holder, yet there are aspects of current HR practice that are still awkward for women, particularly working parents, to comply with. One issue is TOIL (Time Off In Lieu). At Grade F, we are often required to work flexibly, at short notice. For part-time staff, this frequently amounts to women coming to work on their day off and may involve significant childcare upheaval. As this grade, however, I hope I speak for most women in saying that were are delighted to do so. Unfortunately, HR policy states that TOIL must be taken within 1 month. Given that the University requires Grade F staff to work flexibly, it would be far more flexible for staff in return if TOIL could be taken within 3 months (thus probably extending the period into a school holiday). If we are working extra hours, this generally reflects a period of increased productivity, meaning that it may not be possible to take TOIL within a month without significantly decreasing productivity on a project. Handing back a bit of autonomy/flexibility also contributes to a positive cycle of staff satisfaction and willingness to go the extra mile when required!’

   **Response:**

   The University is supportive of flexible working for staff wherever practical. The current policy does allow for management discretion on when TOIL can be taken. In the light of the question however, Staff Committee will review the application of the policy at its May meeting.

   There is also to be an increased focus on diversity issues. Council and Senate have agreed to establish a post of Dean of Diversity and it is hoped that an appointment will be made in the near future. The matter raised above is an example of the type of issue the Dean of Diversity will be asked to keep under review.

2. **Professor Michael Taggart BSc, PhD, FSB, Institute of Cellular Medicine**

   ‘In support of openness and good research practise, will Newcastle University follow the lead of 572 academic-related organisations (including The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, HEFCE, University College London, the University of Edinburgh, MRC Laboratory of Molecular Cell Biology, EMBL) in signing the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (http://am.ascb.org/dora/)?’

   **Response:**

   Following internal consultation, the general consensus is that the University should probably sign this but, prior to making the decision, University Research Committee will be asked to give this matter further consideration at one of its forthcoming meetings.

3. **Richard Harrison, Head of Learning and Teaching Development**

   ‘Does the Vice-Chancellor agree with Steven Homans’ comments in his recent blog that the University needs to ‘untangle the concept of parity of esteem for research and teaching’, and if the Vice-Chancellor does agree what does he thinks this means for the University in practical terms?’

   **Response:**
It is important to provide Professor Homans’ full quote to set it in its right context. On the 30 March 2015 Professor Homans wrote about the SAgE Faculty Executive Board away-day to discuss the ‘Raising the Bar’ agenda. Professor Homans rightly notes that Raising the Bar is not meant to suggest that everyone is not working hard enough or that the University does not value everyone’s contribution. Rather, Raising the Bar reflects the need to raise ambition.

The SAgE Faculty Executive Board concluded that it needed to focus on three areas:

- Recruitment and retention: trying to attract and retain the very best people in our respective fields. We all need to be potential recruiters and talent spotters.
- A renewed focus on quality of outputs.
- “Finally, we see the need to untangle the concept of ‘parity of esteem for research and teaching’. At a basic level this statement is unhelpful, since it implies that there are two different work-streams. As we grow the quality of our research this needs to be seamlessly integrated into teaching. To put it another way, the majority of our academic staff need to be engaged in both activities.”

https://stevehomans.wordpress.com/

The vast majority of the University’s lecturers, senior lecturers, readers and professors will continue to undertake teaching and research. Engagement arising from these core activities and feeding back into teaching and research will continue to be a critical part of the University’s mission as a world-class civic university.

The following responses were provided to additional questions from the floor:

4. Will the University be seeking to use teaching-only posts to improve the University’s performance?

Response:

There are some staff who undertake research-only contracts and it is possible to have teaching-only contracts but it is the expectation that most academic staff should engage in both teaching and research.

5. In relation to the REF, the need to improve quality of publications rather than increase the quantity, was emphasised. Could the new Conservative government change the emphasis here and introduce quantity metrics?

Response:

This is possible. The introduction of legislation in relation to Higher Education was postponed during the coalition government and following the election of a majority Conservative government, changes could now be made to the regulatory environment. This could result in changes to the role of HEFCE, which is the body which oversees the REF which, in turn, could lead to changes being made to the REF itself. The Conservative manifesto made reference to the possible introduction of an assessment exercise for teaching similar to the REF.

6. The presentation highlighted that within SAgE multi-school UoAs performed badly relative to single-school UoAs. How will this be addressed for future rounds of the REF?

Response:
Where a number of schools contribute to a UoA it is important to establish meaningful links and strong synergies. There are no plans currently to make any major structural changes in light of the results but separate strategies will be prepared for multi-school UoAs in future rounds of the REF.

7. Plans have recently been approved to move the cavitation tunnel, currently located in the boiler house, to a new location in Blyth. This will have consequences for current research and a European project. How will the University ensure that its students and clients are not affected by the move?

Response:

Executive Board approved the relocation of the cavitation tunnel at its meeting 28 April 2015. The tunnel will be relocated to purpose-built accommodation and will provide the opportunity to develop new collaborative research and consultancy links with marine industries. It is intended that the new facilities will allow for increased investment and an expansion in the research activity undertaken by the School of Marine Science and Technology, which, in turn will provide additional opportunities for students. Steps will be taken to minimise disruption.

8. How does the Vice-Chancellor envisage the Professional Support Services contributing to the Raising the Bar agenda?

Response:

All staff should be in a position to contribute to the Raising the Bar agenda no matter what role they perform. Research Enterprise Services is already responding to this by reviewing research and innovation processes to remove duplication. This is an example of steps which can be taken by the Support Services to ensure the University is in the best place possible prior to the next REF.

The Vice-Chancellor ended by thanking all staff and students for the successes enjoyed by the University over the past year.