NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY
COUNCIL
1 April 2020

Present: Mr Paul Walker (Chair of Council), Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Caroline Austin, Professor Catherine Biggs, Mr David Bird, Mr Tom Caulker, Mr Pablo Charro de la Fuente (Education Officer, Students' Union), Mrs Linda Conlon, Professor Nicola Curtin, Dr Stacy Gillis, Mr Jonathan Glass, Dame Teresa Graham, Mr Stephen Lightley, Dr Sara Maioli, Ms Claire Morgan, Mrs Heidi Mottram (Vice-Chair of Council), Ms Dianne Nelmes, Professor Sir Mike Rawlins, Mrs Angela Russell, Professor Julie Sanders (Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Mr Nitin Shukla, Miss Katie Smyth (President, Students' Union), Ms Angela Woodburn, and Ms Vicky Wright.

This meeting was held using a remote video conferencing platform. Members were visible for the duration of the meeting.

In attendance: Mr Richard Dale (Executive Director of Finance), Dr John Hogan (Registrar), Ms Louella Houldcroft (Acting Head of Corporate Affairs), Mrs Adrienne McFarland (Executive Director of People Services), and Dr Simon Meacher (Executive Office & Governance Manager).

Apologies: Mr Jeff McIntosh

M I N U T E S

56. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

57. MINUTES

Received the draft minutes of the meeting of Council held on 10 February 2020.
[Circulated with the agenda as Document A. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 10 February 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed.

58. HEALTH AND SAFETY

Noted that:

1. The Health and Safety update for this meeting of Council would be provided as part of the Vice-Chancellor’s report to the committee on the University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

59. CHAIR’S BUSINESS

Noted that:

1. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chair had agreed that this meeting of Council would be held as an online videoconference.

2. On behalf of Council, the Chair thanked all colleagues for their huge efforts to help students and keep the University running during this unprecedented time.
60. **VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT’S BUSINESS**

Received the Vice-Chancellor and President’s report. Highlights of this report are discussed below.

[Circulated with the agenda as Document B. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:

**COVID-19**

Council received a comprehensive update from the Vice-Chancellor on the University’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was recognised that this was an extraordinarily serious crisis facing the University and society generally. A paper detailing the major challenges and risks to the University was provided for Council’s information. At this extraordinary time, it had been agreed that the Strategic Risk Register would be suspended and the University’s focus would be placed upon the risks and issues identified by COVID-19. The University would work to mitigate these risks wherever possible. The University’s Emergency Management Team had been meeting regularly since late January 2020 to focus exclusively on the COVID-19 crisis. Since the middle of March, and extended Executive Board group (including, among others, the President of the Newcastle University Students’ Union, communications and IT colleagues, and campus union representatives) had been meeting regularly to consider the issues raised by COVID-19, what action to take, and how to communicate with colleagues and students. Council had been kept well-informed of the University’s handling of the crisis, receiving each of the updates provided to colleagues.

As it had been from the outset, the University’s first priority was the safety of its staff and students. Appropriate consideration had been given to business continuity, the remote delivery of teaching, how to proceed with assessment, support for students remaining on campus, and maintaining research activity and the estate. Detailed work was also being undertaken on supporting the national and local effort to combat the pandemic, through making facilities available to NHS staff, and volunteering initiatives involving students and staff. The University had also reoriented the work of its Engagement and Place team to provide advice to charities and community and voluntary organisations that had been adversely affected as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

With respect to final year undergraduates and taught postgraduates, it was the University’s intention to stage end of year assessments online for all students, however as most if not all other universities were likely to do, the University was considering the introduction of a ‘safety net’ policy. For undergraduates this would guarantee that that each student’s academic average for the year 2019-20 or for their final year average was no lower than the average of their marks for all assessment up to and including Semester 1 assessment in 2019-20. The policy would be considered by Senate shortly.

Executive Board, at its meeting on 31 March, had given extensive consideration to the impact of the crisis on the financial sustainability of the institution. The University was in a relatively strong position with regard to liquidity but losses were expected due to the need to refund students’ accommodation charges, loss of commercial income, recovery of some research grants, and increased IT expenditure as a result of the move to remote working. A range of short-term measures would be implemented to protect cash balances going forward, primarily focused on reducing non-pay expenditure. Consideration would be given to optimising the use of University endowments and to potential approaches to previous donors. Further measures would also be necessary to help mitigate against an expected fall in income for 2020-21 by optimising student recruitment, in light of an expected negative impact on the retention and recruitment of international students, and an unknown impact on home recruitment in the absence of A level assessment in summer 2020. The University was working with sector
representative bodies to lobby the UK government on three fronts: to introduce a financial settlement compensating institutions for loss of income, for clarity about research funding continuity, and to make the country as attractive as possible as a destination for international students.

Council would receive a report on financial scenario planning for 2020-21 and 2021-22 at its next meeting in June 2020.

The University would monitor its response to the COVID-19 crisis, reflecting on the lessons-learned and taking feedback from stakeholders. A report on this matter would be submitted to Council when the current crisis had passed.

Industrial Action

The most recent period of Industrial Action by members of the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) had concluded on 13 March 2020. A total of 260 colleagues had reported taking strike action resulting in significant disruption to teaching and assessment in some, but not all, academic units. Although officially UCU members were continuing to take Action Short of a Strike until the end of April 2020, the University understood that this had not hindered the move to remote delivery of teaching during the current COVID-19 crisis. The focus of the UCU’s dispute with employers on pensions, pay and casualisation, remained unresolved, and the debate about pensions was likely to intensify in light of the economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The latest valuation of the Universities Superannuation Scheme taken at the end of March 2020 was likely to show an increased deficit.

School X

At its meeting on 4 March 2020, Senate had considered a proposal for the establishment of a tenth school in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, a locus for multidisciplinary research and teaching to be known as ‘School X’. In accordance with Senate Standing Order XIII, Senate had resolved to recommend to Council the establishment of the new school with effect from 1 August 2020. The establishment of the school and appointment to the headship would be cost-neutral.

Resolved that Council approve the establishment of School X.

IntoUniversity

At its meeting on 25 February 2020, Executive Board had agreed in principle to donate £70k of University funds to support the establishment of an IntoUniversity centre in Newcastle. IntoUniversity (an entirely separate entity from INTO University Partnerships) provides local learning centres in disadvantaged communities, supporting young people to gain a place at university. As IntoUniversity was an educational charity, and Newcastle University was an exempt charity, the donation of University funds required approval by Council as the trustees of Newcastle University. Council supported this initiative as part of the University's broader engagement with the Widening Participation effort and commitment to social justice as a civic university.

Resolved that Council approve the donation of £70k to IntoUniversity.

Office for Students – Student Protection Plan and Refund and Compensation Policy

At its meeting on 4 March 2020, Senate approved a revised Student Protection Plan. As a condition of its registration with the Office for Students, the University was required to have a Student Protection Plan and to update this on a regular basis in consultation with students. Senate had welcomed the light-touch changes to the plan. An equality impact assessment
would be incorporated into the regular review process. Council was reassured that the University remained fully compliant with the commitments made in its Student Protection Plan throughout its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A response to a small number of queries regarding the Refund and Compensation Policy raised by Council would be considered by the University outside the meeting.

Travel and Expenses Policy

At its meeting on 17 March 2020, Executive Board had approved a revised University Travel and Expenses Policy. Core principles of the revised policy, which applied to all colleagues, students, and lay members of Council, were ensuring value for money and minimising environmental impact. An equality analysis had been conducted for the revised policy and would inform ongoing work on these issues. A communications plan will be developed to accompany the launch of the policy at an appropriate time. Queries raised by Council members seeking clarification about the wording of aspects of the policy relating to colleague welfare and carbon emissions would be considered by Executive Board and the policy would be modified if agreed. Amendments would be reported back to Council.

NU London

At its meeting on 17 March 2020, Executive Board had considered how best to progress the negotiations with INTO University Partnerships (IUP) in relation to the future of NU London in the current context. Negotiations were unlikely to progress quickly given the emergency planning activities absorbing capacity of both IUP and the University. Having considered a number of options, Executive Board agreed that there was a compelling case to suspend undergraduate recruitment in 2020 on the grounds of insufficient applications, and judged that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic would make future viability even less likely. Further decisions will not be made until a more stable situation is reached.

Athena SWAN

The University had been successful in having its Athena SWAN institutional level Silver award renewed. Council congratulated the University on this achievement and recognised the significant team effort that had been involved, which had been led by the Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

Academic Health Science Centre

The University, in a collaborative bid with the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals Trust and Newcastle City Council, had been successful in being awarded Academic Health Science Centre status. Council offered its congratulations on this prestigious achievement.

Academy of Social Sciences

Council extended its congratulations to four members of staff who had recently been awarded Fellowship of the Academy of Social Sciences – Professors Alexandra Hughes and Professor Janice McLaughlin (School of Geography, Politics and Sociology), and Professor Liz Todd (School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences).

61. NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY

Received a report from Professor Suzanne Cholerton (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education).

[Circulated with the agenda as Document C. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:
1. The report highlighted the actions being taken in response to the University’s performance in the 2019 National Student Survey. It was important to acknowledge the efforts of many colleagues in working to address priorities for improvement. Much momentum had been generated and this would need to be maintained.

62. NU VOICE EMPLOYEE SURVEY FINDINGS

Received a report from Mrs Adrienne McFarland (Executive Director of People Services).

[Circulated with the agenda as Document D. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:

1. The report highlighted the key findings from the University’s 2019 employee survey. The results had been considered in depth by Executive Board and had been circulated to faculties and units.

2. Not all schools had yet communicated the main results from the survey.

3. One of the main cross-cutting areas of concern identified in the survey results was inappropriate behaviour. In response to this finding, the University was consulting on a draft behaviour framework and was refreshing its Leadership and Management Development Offer for implementation in September 2020. It was noted that colleagues had demonstrated very positive behaviours in responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

63. REPORT FROM FINANCE COMMITTEE

Received a report from the meeting of Finance Committee held on 18 March 2020.

[Circulated with the agenda as Document E. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:

1. The report covered the Quarter 2 management information, an update on the University’s two main investment managers, and the financial report for the six months to 31 January 2020.

64. ANNUAL REPORT ON STUDENT CASEWORK

Received a report from Professor Suzanne Cholerton (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education).

[Circulated with the agenda as Document F. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:

1. The report covered the operation in 2018-19 of the University’s Student Procedure Casework, including Appeals, Complaints, Disciplinary, PEC requests, Admissions Complaints and Fitness to Practise Cases.

2. As reported to Council previously, in light of recent high-profile cases a major review of student policies was currently underway.

3. There was a need to understand if there were groups of students that through casework were disproportionately affected or bringing forward issues for consideration. The University’s Race Equality Charter work would pick up on these issues.

65. SUMMARY REPORT FROM SENATE, 4 MARCH 2020

Received a report from the meeting of Senate held on 4 March 2020.
[Circulated with the agenda as Document G. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]