

# NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

## COUNCIL

13 October 2025

**Present:** Pat Ritchie (Chair of Council), Professor Chris Day (Vice-Chancellor and President), Linda Conlon, Will Garton, Arun Harish, Professor Nigel Harkness (Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Ilsa Hartley (President, Students' Union), Alex Lamb, Bill MacLeod, Professor Rhiannon Mason, Claire Morgan, Dr Meiko O'Halloran, Marta Phillips, Emma Reay, Colin Riordan, Angela Russell (Honorary Treasurer), Mags Scott (Deputy Chair of Council), Adam Serfontein, Nitin Shukla, Gina Tindale (Academic Officer, Students' Union).

Derek Bell attended via Teams.

**In attendance:** Lucy Backhurst (Academic Registrar) and Kate Aitchison (Head of Student Health and Wellbeing) for Item 7, Professor Quentin Anstee (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Medical Sciences), Dr Colin Campbell (Registrar), Nick Collins (Chief Financial Officer), Jackie Scott (Executive Director of People Services) and Dr Simon Meacher (Head of Executive and Governance Office).

**Apologies:**

## MINUTES

### 1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Adam Serfontein declared an interest in relation to the University's Castle Leazes student accommodation redevelopment project (Item 6 on the agenda). Mr Serfontein is Chair of Hanro Property Ltd, which is considering options for a student residential-led venture elsewhere in the city of Newcastle. Mr Serfontein had been a member of the University's Castle Leazes Steering Group but would withdraw from any further discussion or involvement with the project.

A copy of the written text of this declaration of interest has been filed in the Minute Book.

### 2. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

Received the draft minutes of the meeting of Council held on 7 July 2025.

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

***Resolved that the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 7 July 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed.***

### 3. HEALTH AND SAFETY

Received an update from the Executive Director of People Services.

Noted that:

1. The University Health and Safety Committee would be meeting on 16 October 2025. The Committee would consider the University's Annual Health and Safety Report ahead of its submission to Council.

### 4. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

Noted that:

1. The Chair reported that Lisa Hunter and Anjam Khan had resigned as members of Council. Lisa Hunter had been appointed as Director of External Communications at the BBC, while Anjam Khan had taken retirement from the University. Both were thanked for their contribution to Council. A recruitment process would take place for new lay members of Council and an election would be held to find a new member of Council elected by academic colleagues.
2. The Chair had taken Chair of Council's action on behalf of Council to approve minor edits to the University's Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech, the final version of which had been published on the University's website on 1 August 2025 in accordance with Office for Students guidance.

## 5. VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS

Received the Vice-Chancellor and President's report. Highlights of this report are provided below.

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

Reported that:

### 1. Student Surveys

Council received an update on the University's performance in the National Student Survey of undergraduates and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey.

In the National Student Survey, the University's scores had increased across all themes, but benchmarks in all themes had increased more, leaving Newcastle in a weaker position in relation to its potential Teaching Excellence Framework performance. Newcastle was below benchmark for 5 of 7 themes and significantly below benchmark in four themes - Teaching on my course, Learning Opportunities, Assessment and Feedback, and Student Voice. Scores were above benchmark for Learning Resources and Academic Support. Newcastle was bottom of the Russell Group ranking for Teaching on my course, and 23<sup>rd</sup> out of 24 institutions for Learning Opportunities.

The University's performance in the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey was more positive, with scores above the sector benchmark for 8 out of 12 themes, and significantly above benchmark for Support and On-Campus Resources. Within the Russell Group, Newcastle was above the benchmark for 11 out of 12 themes.

It was noteworthy that in 2024/25 Newcastle had been the only Russell Group university that experienced significant long term (44 days) industrial action at the time when the National Student Survey was being completed by students. Analysis of the University's student compensation scheme had shown that 54% of final year students received compensation for disruption to studies.

To ensure transparent accountability for NSS results, and to ensure that insights were acted upon locally, Heads of Academic Units and Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors would be provided with 'TEF Scorecards' for their programme quota groups in October. The Vice-Chancellor had established a Student Experience Monitoring Group where the Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors would present to the Vice-Chancellor, DVC, PVC Education and Dean of Students, their assessment of their Faculty results, areas for focus in 2025-26, and their planned actions to address them. The sharing of good practice would also be considered.

Council noted the NSS results with disappointment and observed that NSS scores showed that there had been a long-term decline in student satisfaction in key areas of the undergraduate education experience. This was a fundamental reason why the University had committed to the Education for Life Strategy 2030+, and in particular the development of the Leading Edge Curriculum to address student satisfaction with teaching, learning and assessment. The poor NSS scores and student feedback had been used to help frame the strategy, with the goal of enhancing student experience across all programmes. Council did also observe, however, that the wider student experience at Newcastle was highly rated in other national rankings.

It was suggested that the University needed to have a suitable performance management approach to hold colleagues accountable for National Student Survey results. Members agreed that more standardisation and coordination of assessment and feedback at programme level would be beneficial, and some key assessment policy requirements of the Leading Edge Curriculum had been implemented early to have an impact from 2025/26. Academic units were being asked to monitor compliance to allow Heads of Academic Units to act if expectations were not being met. This was an institutional change in culture and accountability.

Regarding the student voice, Executive Board had agreed to establish a University task and finish group during 2025/26 to address key weaknesses with an initial focus on engaging students with feedback mechanisms and closing the feedback loop. The University and Students' Union had jointly commissioned an external review of student representation, which had completed the discovery phase and was now moving on to identify recommendations for change.

Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee would consider controls and treatments in relation to the strategic risks for Education and Student Experience, and Council would discuss the student experience in more detail at its forthcoming joint meeting with Senate and joint away day with Executive Board.

## 2. Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)

Published on 23 September 2025, the latest KEF results showed an impressive performance with the University's overall score rising to 30 out of a possible 35, from 29 last year. The University performed strongly in regeneration and development, supported by the work of its National Innovation Centres and multi-partner initiatives such as the Arrow programme, highlighting its role in driving regional growth and supporting local communities. Engagement with business remained another key strength, underpinned by strong partnerships between Newcastle University and companies of all sizes. Intellectual property and commercialisation also showed sustained impact, with the spin-out portfolio expanding and licence income rising by nearly 20% over the assessment period.

## 3. Athena Swan Gold Award

The University had reached a significant milestone in its commitment to gender equality by being awarded the prestigious Athena Swan Gold Award, for demonstrating progress in priority areas over a prolonged period. One of the areas recognised was the 'Women into Leadership' programme which involved the establishment and development of a mentoring programme, supporting representation in academic promotions, and increasing female representation in senior committees. Another area where the University had successfully introduced change is in the Returners Support programme which was commended by Advance HE as a notable example of innovative good practice towards gender equality.

4. Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2026

The Vice-Chancellor reported that in the latest rankings the University had climbed 13 places to 144th, its second highest place ever, and was ranked 65<sup>th</sup> overall for research excellence, as well as 5<sup>th</sup> in the UK for industry funding and recognitions.

5. Student Recruitment

Council received an update on the University's 2025/26 student intake. Undergraduate numbers were ahead of budget plans, and measures had been put in place to support expanded and enhanced scholarship offers for 2026/27 entry to help sustain undergraduate growth. Postgraduate taught numbers were down 25-30% on the previous year and at the lower end of budget and contingency plans. Tactical interventions on scholarships for international students were planned for 2026 entry.

6. Sir Terry Farrell

The University was deeply saddened to hear of the passing of Sir Terry Farrell, a visionary whose influence on architecture and urban planning has left an indelible mark both in the United Kingdom and across the globe. As a Newcastle University Architecture graduate, Sir Terry remained a passionate advocate for architectural education throughout his life. Expressing his enduring pride in and support for the University, he generously donated his extensive archive to the University in 2018. The Farrell Centre, which opened in 2023, is a space dedicated to public engagement, critical debate, and innovative thinking about the built environment.

7. AI Growth Zone

Universities across the region, skills providers and industry leaders were committed to fast-track planning, investment and site development for the North East's AI Growth Zone. Thousands of jobs were set to be unlocked as a coalition including British AI firm NScale, local universities and leading skills providers joined forces to support the build of the North East's new AI Growth Zone. With new roles expected including in construction through to energy to cutting-edge AI the new taskforce would create training and apprenticeship routes that ensured the benefits were felt across the region.

8. Teaching Excellence Framework

The Office for Students (OfS) was consulting on a new quality assessment system and a revised Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) aimed at improving education and providing students with a clear view of the quality of teaching and learning. Under the new proposals, the OfS's existing assessment activity covering the quality of courses, academic support, the resources the institution offers, how it assesses its students, and how it engages students in the development of courses, would be integrated with the TEF and include the regulator's assessments for student outcomes. The revised TEF would run on a cyclical basis, with the frequency of an institution's assessment dependent on its rating and ongoing risk monitoring. The first cycle of assessments would focus on undergraduate provision, with plans to include postgraduate taught provision from the second assessment cycle onwards.

9. Transnational Education

At its meeting in July 2025, Council had agreed that the University should explore the establishment of one or more Joint Education Institutes (JEIs) in China. Since then, the University had received approval from the Ministry of Education in China to look to establish two Joint Education Institutes simultaneously. In the first instance the University

hoped to offer a range of undergraduate degrees in sciences and engineering across the two JEIs with student numbers increasing incrementally with each year's intake over the following 3 years. The programmes would be taught in English and the students would spend the full 4 years of the degree in China. Members of Council would have the opportunity to review draft business cases and risk assessments prior to final submission.

#### 10. Transformation Programme

Work on the 'Next Generation Newcastle' Transformation Programme had been progressing since the previous meeting of Council in July. A new University Leadership Group had been convened, made up of over 80 academic and Professional Services leaders in the organisation, to work on the narrative for change, as well as the focus and design of the programme. This was now being tested with an external partner to ensure that it drew on sector best practice and was set up for success. Meanwhile, work was ongoing on transformation workstreams relating to professional services and estates optimization supported by external partners. A full update on each workstream would be provided at the December meeting of Council, and Senate would be given an update about the Transformation Programme and the new University Leadership Group supporting this process at its next meeting in November.

#### 11. Heat Network Extension

Following a successful application to Round 9 of the Green Heat Network Fund, Executive Board had approved the acceptance of a grant offer of £2.228m towards the Phase III heat network investment project. With a total projected cost of £5.584m, the project included a further phase of heat network extension to Kensington and Park Terrace student residences and the Drummond Building, and a new renewable energy installation to serve the extended network. Executive Board had recommended that, as part of the approved capital plan, the University commit capital funding of £3.356m towards the remaining projected project cost. In line with the University's Financial Regulations, Council endorsement was required as the total financial envelope for the project exceeded £5m.

Council asked to be provided with assurance that the project and cost would not be redundant at a future point as part of disposals linked to the optimisation of the University's estate.

***Resolved that Council approve the recommendation from Executive Board, subject to the above assurance being provided to Finance Committee.***

[Secretary's note: the Chief Financial Officer confirmed to Finance Committee on 20 October 2025 that the Drummond Building was highly likely to be in use for the next 10 years but that even if the building was to close, the heat network would continue to benefit the wider campus.]

#### 12. Pro-Vice-Chancellor Global

The Vice-Chancellor reported that the University had appointed strategic academic leader, Professor Li Li, as its new Pro-Vice-Chancellor Global. Currently Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Global Engagement in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Exeter, Professor Li would take up their appointment in January 2026.

#### 13. Retirement Benefits Plan

***Council approved the appointment of Elaine Nylander as an independent Trustee***

***of the RBP Pensions Scheme.***

**6. CASTLE LEAZES**

The Chief Financial Officer introduced a presentation and discussion.

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

[Adam Serfontein was not present for this item.]

Noted that:

1. In March 2024, following a series of regular updates to Council on the project, Council provided formal approval for the University to enter into a legally binding Framework Agreement with Unite Students to redevelop Castle Leazes via a joint venture (JV) arrangement. The JV arrangement was subject to the following four key conditions all being met satisfactorily:

- receipt of planning and other permissions for the redevelopment;
- appointment of a main contractor with an agreed construction contract sum;
- securing the necessary external finance; and
- mutual confirmation that the project is deemed to be financially viable.

The University currently anticipated to satisfactorily meet all the conditions prior to the next meeting of Council in December.

2. Agreement on appropriate pedestrian and cycle access to the re-developed site had been reached with The Freeman of Newcastle and the City Council which included the installation of a new footpath. This had, however, caused a significant delay to the original programme timeline. The first year of full occupation, which had been expected to be 2028/29, was now expected to be 2029/30. One aspect of visible progress had been the completion of the demolition of the old Castle Leazes accommodation. This had been managed successfully by Unite and the main contractor.
3. Planning permission for the redevelopment and the installation of the new footpath had been confirmed on 3 September 2025 after a lengthy process, and following a competitive tender process in 2024, a main construction contractor had been appointed. The final contract was being reviewed by external legal services who would provide a written report to the University summarising the key terms.
4. With regard to debt finance, a preferred lender had been recommended, and the University was in the process of agreeing the final contract following agreement of Heads of Terms. The headline loan terms were favourable to the initial financial model assumptions, however, underlying contractual terms and conditions were being reviewed by external legal services.
5. A comprehensive financial model had been developed, tested (including downside scenarios) and agreed with Unite at the point of the Framework Agreement which included a target threshold test for viability. This condition was highly dependent on the certainty of build costs, programme timescales and debt finance terms.
6. In addition to the items described above, the key risk to highlight at this stage was the timing of building safety approvals and the potential for challenge to planning decisions. These items could impact programme timescales as approval was required in order to commence any work on site. Recent engagement with the Building Safety Regulator had been very constructive and the University currently expected to receive approval by the end of October.

7. To maintain programme, it was now necessary to commence the early stages of construction prior to all JV conditions being met. The initial stage of construction was limited to the piling of building foundations, which were currently scheduled for early November in order to stay on plan. Commencing construction would also trigger other mandatory payments including Community Infrastructure Levy, the footpath licence costs and other sundry costs. In June 2025, Council had approved a net cash investment into the JV of up to £65m, subject to key conditions being met satisfactorily. The early construction costs were all anticipated JV costs, and therefore in effect within the current approval. However, the delay has meant they now need to be incurred prior to the final formation of the JV in order to maintain progress.
8. It was suggested that senior University leaders should communicate widely with colleagues about the value of the Castle Leazes redevelopment to the University, in terms of benefit to students and income generation, to support understanding.

***Resolved that, subject to further consideration and agreement at Finance Committee, Council approve up to £8m of capital spend to maintain the progress of the project programme.***

## **7. HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL MISCONDUCT**

The Registrar introduced a discussion.

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

Noted that:

1. A new Office for Students ongoing condition of registration placing a duty on all Higher Education providers to take reasonable and appropriate steps to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct had come into force on 1 August 2025.
2. Council received an update on the specific requirements set out by the regulator, evidence of the University's compliance against each requirement, and ongoing actions needed to ensure continued compliance and alignment with sector best-practice. Council noted that the University was compliant against all requirements. Several actions went above and beyond compliance and were yet to be formally completed.
3. As part of the 2025 National Student Survey, the OfS had conducted an additional Sexual Misconduct Survey, whereby a follow-up set of questions was provided to all NSS respondents regarding their experiences of sexual harassment and misconduct during their time in Higher Education both within and outside of the University. Initial sector and provider level detail was provided in September 2025 and had been analysed by the University. Newcastle's response rate of 13.3% was higher than the sector average, and the results indicated that there was a higher prevalence of unwanted sexual behaviour at the University when compared with the rest of the sector. The information would allow the University to further target activities to address the specific areas highlighted as opportunities for enhancement in its analysis of compliance.
4. In considering the survey results in depth, the University-Students' Union Partnership Committee had encouraged open conversations with Northumbria University to explore whether and to what extent there was a city-wide issue with harassment and sexual misconduct.
5. The University was working proactively to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct by making sure everyone in the University community knows what is expected of them and the types of behaviours that are and are not acceptable. All members of the University community receive appropriate training. All students are required to undertake online

training on consent and bystander awareness at registration, and all colleagues are required to complete training on prevention of harassment every three years.

**8. REPORT FROM NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE**

Received a report from the meeting of Nominations Committee held on 24 September 2025  
[Circulated with the agenda as Document E. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:

1. The Committee had considered a case for the appointment of a new lay member. A recruitment exercise for the appointment of two additional new lay members of Council with expertise in legal and communications would commence in early 2026.
2. The current Senior Independent Governor would come to the end of their term on Council in July 2026 and was not eligible for re-appointment. A replacement Senior Independent Governor would need to be appointed next year.
3. The Committee resolved to determine the scope of the University's next tri-annual external governance review once the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) had published their updated Code of Governance in early 2026.

***Resolved that Council approve the appointment of Sir Nigel Wilson as a lay member of Council from 1 August 2026 until 31 July 2028.***

**ROUTINE BUSINESS**

**9. SUMMARY FROM THE MEETING OF SENATE: 17 SEPTEMBER 2025**

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

**10. CHAIR'S CIRCULAR**