

# NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

## COUNCIL

20 January 2025

**Present:** Pat Ritchie (Chair of Council), Professor Chris Day (Vice-Chancellor and President), Jasmine Banks (Education Officer, Students' Union), Linda Conlon, Leo David (President, Students' Union), Will Garton, Professor Nigel Harkness (Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Lisa Hunter, Alex Lamb, Bill MacLeod, Professor Rhiannon Mason, Claire Morgan, Dr Meiko O'Halloran, Emma Reay, Colin Riordan, Mags Scott (Deputy Chair of Council), Adam Serfontein, Nitin Shukla.

**In attendance:** Professor David Burn, Professor Stephanie Glendinning, and Professor Jo Robinson (Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors) for Item 39, Professor Judith Rankin (Dean of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) for Items 40 and 41, Professor Ruth Valentine (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education) for Item 42, Lindsey Lockey (Chief Executive, Students' Union) for Item 44, Dr Colin Campbell (Registrar), Justin Cole (Executive Director of External Relations), Nick Collins (Chief Financial Officer), Jackie Scott (Executive Director of People Services), and Dr Simon Meacher (Head of Executive and Governance Office).

**Apologies:** Derek Bell, Arun Harish, Anjam Khan, Marta Phillips, and Angela Russell.

## MINUTES

### 33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received in advance of the meeting.

### 34. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

Received the draft minutes of the meeting of Council held on 9 December 2024.

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

***Resolved that, subject to one minor amendment, the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 9 December 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed.***

### 35. HEALTH AND SAFETY

Received an update from the Executive Director of People Services.

Noted that:

1. The University was undergoing a Health and Safety Executive Inspection Visit by the HSE Biological Agents Unit on 20 and 21 January 2025.

### 36. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

Noted that:

1. The Chair had attended a recent meeting of Executive Board for a discussion about areas of synergy between Council and Executive Board that could be more fully developed and utilised for mutual benefit.
2. Discussions were underway regarding the content and format of the forthcoming joint Council and Executive Board away day, which would take place on Monday 31 March.

3. Members of Council were encouraged to attend a speed networking session alongside representatives of the Students' Union, taking place following the meeting.

### 37. 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. New Year's Honours

The following individuals associated with the University had been recognised in the New Year's Honours list:

OBE            Imtiaz Dharker. Chancellor of Newcastle University, poet, artist and filmmaker. For services to the Arts.

Christine Harrison. Emerita Professor of Childhood Cancer Cytogenetics in the Faculty of Medical Sciences. For services to children with acute leukaemia.

Liz Todd. Professor of Educational inclusion in the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences. For services to children and young people.

MBE            Alison Pamela Murdoch. Professor of Reproductive Medicine. For a career dedicated to fertility research

#### 2. Student Cost of Living

Council received an update on University support for the Student Cost of Living. A detailed discussion on this topic would take place at University-Students' Union Partnership Committee on 23 January, and a report of the discussion would be included for the next meeting of Council.

#### 3. Joint International Institute for Clean Hydrogen

A consortium of British universities, led by Newcastle, was exploring a collaborative project with partners in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to create a Joint International Institute for Clean Hydrogen. The project had been announced by the Prime Minister during a visit to the Gulf on Monday 9 December. Initially, Newcastle, Northumbria, Teesside, Durham and Cranfield universities would work with universities and research institutes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and industrial partners from both nations to accelerate progress towards Net Zero. The initiative aimed to educate the next generation of engineers, to develop research and create new businesses that will be key for achieving the transition from fossil fuels to sustainable energy resources. A delegation from the universities was set to travel to Saudi in the coming months to progress the project.

#### 4. 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Universities

The University was looking to become an early member of a network to support innovative universities that deliver societal impact in their local areas. The network drew

on a concept of 4th Generation Universities and was being coordinated by Elsevier. It included a small number of global universities where education and research had enabled societal benefit and had integrated global connectivity with local impact.

5. North Sea University Partnership

Newcastle University was one of four northern universities (alongside Durham, Leeds and York) to have signed a letter of intent to collaborate with four Norwegian universities on research and innovation priorities identified by the UK and Norwegian governments. In its initial phase, the collaboration would focus on two thematic research areas, reflecting areas of strength for all partners: North Sea: energy, green transition, marine research, and other relevant topics; and cultural heritage.

6. Coimbra Group

The University had received an invitation to join the Coimbra Group, the oldest European university network and one of the best regarded stakeholders at EU and international levels. The Coimbra Group had been frontrunners in supporting and leading the development of the European Universities Initiative, the reform of research assessment and the call for more equitable international partnerships. They had recently decided to add three new member institutions to their network of 40 research-intensive comprehensive European Universities and Newcastle University had been identified as a strategic candidate. The group's future aims included amplifying their collective voice on climate issues and sustainability development, on AI in Higher Education and on research security. The shared values and areas of focus between the group and the University suggested it may be mutually beneficial to investigate the opportunity to join the network.

7. Research and Innovation

The North East's reputation for world-class space research and innovation had been recognised with the announcement of £2.5 million from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). The funding had been awarded to a consortium of academic, civic and industry partners who together would form the North East Space Communications Accelerator (NESCA), a collaboration between Northumbria, Durham, and Newcastle universities, the North East Combined Authority, Space North East England, and the North East Space Leadership Group, as well as 14 industry partners. Over the next four years NESCA would build on recent investment in space skills, research and innovation in the region, creating new opportunities for knowledge exchange that lead to quality impact, including high-skilled jobs and economic growth.

8. Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Faculty of Medical Sciences

Professor David Burn had announced his intention to step down from the role of Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Faculty of Medical Science. David will retire from the University at the end of July 2025 having been in the role for eight and a half years and would take over the role of President of the International Parkinson and Movement Disorder Society at the end of September 2025.

Subject to Council's approval, in keeping with Statute 12, a selection committee would be convened and chaired by the Vice-Chancellor with an equal number of members appointed by the Council and the Senate to make recommendations as to the appointment.

***Resolved that Council approve the appointment of a replacement Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Faculty of Medical Sciences.***

9. Risk Appetite

At its meeting on 26 November, Executive Board had endorsed a revised version of the University's Risk Appetite Statement. The statement was subsequently discussed by Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee at its meeting on 4 December. As the institution's authority with responsibility for risk assessment, Council was being asked to approve the statement.

***Resolved that Council approve the risk appetite statement.***

10. Colleague Success

Professor Bethan Davies (School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology) has been awarded the prestigious Richardson Medal by the International Glaciological Society (IGS) in recognition of her outstanding work to make the science of glaciology more accessible and inclusive.

Sandip Nandhra (Population Health Sciences Institute) has been awarded an NIHR Health Technology Assessment grant for a randomised controlled study of Acute Limb Ischaemia worth £2.3m.

11. Due Diligence

Council received an update on the University's due diligence procedures used to establish whether the risks of collaboration or engaging in some activities were proportionate to the potential benefits.

12. Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act

The Government had confirmed that key provisions of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 would be brought into force, giving the Office for Students the power to investigate complaints over breaches of free speech from academics, external speakers and members of universities, as well as issuing fines. The Act would require all universities to have robust codes of practice to ensure the protection of free speech. Elements of the Act which risked leaving universities vulnerable to disproportionate costs for legal disputes would be removed. An updated version of the University's Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech would be brought to Council for approval.

13. Artificial Intelligence

The Government had unveiled an AI Opportunities Action Plan to boost its role in developing and deploying artificial intelligence. Newcastle University was well positioned to respond to the initiative with the National Innovation Centre for Data, and as the lead of a national AI hub funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

38. **RISK MANAGEMENT**

Received an update on risks relating to the University's strategic objectives.

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

Noted:

1. There had been no change to the strategic risk scores since the December 2024 meeting of Council.

***Council confirmed that it had received sufficient assurance that the risks facing the University were being managed appropriately.***

**39. BUSINESS CASE FOR WORKFORCE RESIZING**

The Deputy-Vice-Chancellor introduced a discussion.

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

Noted that:

1. Council considered a business case setting out the University's approach to achieve the financial savings set by Finance Committee and agreed by Council in December 2024.
2. As a result of the direct impact of wider funding challenges for the UK higher education sector, coupled with the more recent impact of a fall in international student numbers, the University had embarked on a range of mitigations and cost-saving measures to underpin the financial stability of the University. The business case was the next step in supporting long-term sustainability.
3. A two-year programme of activity was planned, with the business case addressing the first phase of the programme in proposing a 5% reduction in the size of the workforce. The aim was to achieve as much of this as possible by voluntary means. However, recognising the possibility of compulsory redundancies and as per the University Delegation of Authority Regulations, which require Council to approve any business case which may result in 40 or more redundancies, formal approval to proceed was being sought from Council.
4. The University was taking a proactive and increased granular approach to monitoring the material impact of student recruitment conversion rates. The risk of further reductions in international student numbers over the next two years and the need to build financial protections into plans had been included in the revised Medium Term Financial Plan approved by Council in December.
5. Additional detail on non-pay actions for 2025-26 would be provided as part of the budget-setting and approval process.
6. In addition to financial sustainability, the two-year change programme would address capacity to invest in new academic programmes, student demand, research and innovation specialisation, new education modalities, and people, as well as operating structures and processes, and optimisation of the estate. Council would have an opportunity to consider this in detail at its forthcoming away day and future meetings of Council.
7. Whilst a reduction in pay costs was a priority, the University would continue to protect the student experience, ensure that it could operate effectively across all services, and strive to remain an attractive and inclusive place of employment.
8. A full Equality Impact Assessment on the business case had been completed and made available to members of Council.

***Resolved that Council approve the business case, and agreed permission to proceed with a redundancy process should the desired savings not be achieved through voluntary means.***

**40. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION, AND GENDER PAY GAP**

The Executive Director of People Services introduced a report.

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

Noted that:

1. The Annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Gender Pay Gap (GPG) summary report provided an update on the University's progress against its Public Sector Equality Duty Equality Objectives, and on its EDI priorities for the year ahead. A summary with key findings of institutional equality and diversity data (for the period 1 August 2023 – 31 July 2024) and key findings of institutional Gender Pay Gap data (covering the period 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024), was also provided.
2. Both the median and mean gender pay gap had increased since the previous year. A population shift across the quartiles was the major factor in the median and mean pay gaps increasing since 2023.
3. Council suggested that future versions of the report should include a narrative and action plan covering how the University was addressing Gender Pay Gap data, as well as more information on how the report content benefits colleagues and how EDI behaviours were embedded across the institution.

***Resolved that Council approve the Annual EDI and Gender Pay Gap report.***

#### **41. ATHENA SWAN**

The Executive Director of People Services introduced the draft University Athena Swan application.

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

Noted that:

1. The draft Institutional Athena Swan application and action plan covered the five-year period from 1 April 2025 to 31st March 2030 and included a comprehensive set of actions to be implemented over that period. Following discussion at Executive Board it had been agreed to apply for a gold level award.
2. The action plan had been devised in relation to the current financial climate and included assurance that specific actions could be completed and delivered in alignment with financial sustainability.
3. Council endorsed the University's ambition in seeking a gold level award.

#### **42. ASSURANCE OF ACADEMIC QUALITY AND STANDARDS**

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education introduced the annual report on the assurance of academic quality and standards, and the University's degree outcomes statement.

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

Noted that:

1. The annual report provided a summary of the operation of the University's framework for the management of academic quality and standards, in order to demonstrate that the University was meeting national regulatory requirements in this area.
2. The Office for Students (OfS) had continued to undertake a series of targeted 'quality assessments' of providers across the sector where there were concerns around their meeting of the B conditions. These reports and the Office for Students thematic reflections

on their work to date had been published. The Quality Assurance Agency published in the summer a new Quality Code for higher Education 2024, which was currently being implemented.

3. The increase in the number of programme withdrawals, as noted in the report, was partly an administrative decision (moving long-term suspensions to withdrawn status), but also a decision to streamline programme choice for students who often reported that the choice was overwhelming due to the large number of programmes offered. Benchmarking indicated that streamlining the University's offer would also align us with partner institutions.
4. With regard to degree outcomes, institutional-level degree awarding patterns in 2023-24 had been similar to pre-Covid levels. More variation was found in relation to the patterns at a level of an academic unit as would be expected, and within these there were likely to be further disciplinary differences, particularly in large and multi-disciplinary academic units.
5. The University Education Committee had endorsed the use of an internal benchmark as proposed to identify variations in degree outcomes over time and agreed that this should be included in the Committee's developing operational KPIs.
6. The international degree awarding gap was noted, including the reduction in the gap in 2023-24. Further analytical work would be required to understand and address any contributing factors.

***Resolved that Council approve the annual report on the assurance of academic quality and standards.***

#### **43. REPORT FROM AUDIT, RISK AND ASSURANCE COMMITTEE**

Received a report from the meeting of the Committee held on 4 December 2024.

Noted that:

1. The Committee had considered the audited consolidated Financial Statements of Newcastle University for the financial year ended 31 July 2024 and considered the accompanying report from the Director of Financial Control to Finance Committee along with a report from Executive Board on Going Concern. As noted at the December meeting of Council, Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee had agreed to recommend the 2023-24 Integrated Annual Report to Council for approval, subject to the completion of the work of the external auditor.
2. The Chair of Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee reported that the final report from the external auditor had since been received by the University. No changes were required to the Financial Statements, and final sign-off would take place before the end of the week.

#### **44. NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY STUDENT'S UNION IMPACT REPORT**

Received a presentation from the Chief Executive and the President of the Students' Union.  
[Circulated with the agenda as Document J. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:

1. Despite challenges during the 2023-24 academic year, including on-going inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, students continued to maintain high engagement with the Newcastle University Students' Union (NUSU) and remained positive about their experiences, with 98

per cent of students satisfied or above, and 89 per cent agreeing they would recommend NUSU to a friend.

2. Key highlights of the year had included the impressive performance of sports teams with recognition given to the leaders of University sports clubs and the NUSU team who facilitated and supported the delivery of all student-led sport at Newcastle University.
3. A Strategic Review would be undertaken during the 2025-26 academic year and the NUSU leadership team would seek to gather and analyse feedback from students in a more data-driven way to support the review.
4. Sector benchmarking remained an area of development for students' unions, to ensure partner institutions had useful comparison data and consistent measurement standards to encourage shared and best practices.

## **ROUTINE BUSINESS**

### **45. ANNUAL REPORT ON RESEARCH INTEGRITY**

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

### **46. REPORTED BUSINESS**