

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

COUNCIL

31 March 2025

Present: Pat Ritchie (Chair of Council), Professor Chris Day (Vice-Chancellor and President), Derek Bell, Linda Conlon, Will Garton, Arun Harish, Professor Nigel Harkness (Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Lisa Hunter, Alex Lamb, Bill MacLeod, Professor Rhiannon Mason, Dr Meiko O'Halloran, Marta Phillips, Emma Reay, Colin Riordan, Angela Russell, Mags Scott (Deputy Chair of Council), Adam Serfontein, Nitin Shukla.

In attendance: Professor Ruth Valentine (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education) for Item 53, 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: Jasmine Banks, Justin Cole, Leo David, Anjam Khan, and Claire Morgan.

MINUTES

47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

48. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

Received the draft minutes of the meeting of Council held on 20 January 2025.
[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 20 January 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed.

49. HEALTH AND SAFETY

Received an update from the Executive Director of People Services.

Noted that:

1. There been a RIDDOR reportable incident on 5 March 2025. The injured person was moving a server cabinet on castors to a new location within a server room in the Devonshire Building. A full investigation was underway and had already established some gaps in risk assessments and training provision/attendance. Actions would be completed to cover any gaps identified.

50. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

Noted that:

1. There was nothing to report.

51. 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. Voluntary Severance Scheme

The Executive Director of People Services had written to all colleagues on 27 March 2025 following the deadline for acceptance of Voluntary Severance offers. Although the savings required from Professional Services colleagues had been achieved, for Academic colleagues, the accepted offers combined with the outcomes of the previous voluntary severance scheme left a gap of around £5.7m which needed to be addressed before the beginning of the next financial year. The Newcastle University branch of the University and College Union, which was taking industrial action on the grounds that compulsory and/or voluntary redundancies had not been ruled out, had written to members of Council, and a response was being prepared by the Chief Financial Officer. However, in keeping with the plan approved by Council at its meeting on 20 January, proposals were still being developed and would be subject to the collective consultation process with trade unions. Any proposals for entering a redundancy process would be discussed with them at the end of April.

Senate, at its most recent meeting on 19 February, had requested a special meeting of Senate to consider the impact of any redundancy proposals on the academic character on the institution and make representations to Council in keeping with Statute 52(2). A business case for redundancies, when and if that action was implemented, would include the necessary level of granular information to support a Senate discussion, and could therefore inform Senate's recommendation to Council on the matter.

2. Industrial Action

The University and College Union had called on its members to take 14 days of discontinuous strike action (which had ended on 27 March) and a continuous period of action short of strike (ASOS) running through to 10 August. The University's priority was to protect the student experience and service delivery as much as possible. An Education Continuity Group was meeting on a regular basis to direct mitigating actions in subject areas that were affected by strike action. The University also had arrangements to work with professional bodies to mitigate the impact of industrial action on students' ability to secure professional qualifications.

3. Pro-Vice-Chancellor Humanities and Social Sciences

Professor Jo Fox had been appointed as the new Pro-Vice-Chancellor Humanities and Social Sciences. Professor Fox would join the University from the University of London, where she was Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research and Public Engagement and Dean of the School of Advanced Study. She would take up her new role from 1 June 2025.

4. Freedom of Speech

The University of Sussex had been fined by the Office for Students (OfS) after an investigation found that governing documents failed to uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom as well as failings in the university's management and governance processes. The investigation concluded that the university breached two OfS conditions of registration (E1 and E2) pertaining to the content and approval of a Trans and Non-Binary Equality Policy Statement. Following the investigation outcome, the sector had been encouraged to firstly, review staff and student facing EDI policies (and policy statements) to identify any provisions which went further than legislative definitions of harassment or inappropriate behaviour, and to consider whether they should be retained

and whether they were capable of being justified as a proportionate interference with free speech; and secondly, to check that EDI policies (and policy statements) had been adopted in accordance with the governance framework, including the scheme of delegation.

Newcastle University's governance documents were tightly defined, including the statutes, the scheme of delegation and the code of practice for free speech. In light of the Sussex case and regulatory judgement, however, policy statements that interfere with governance documents would be considered a breach of condition E1. Therefore, a further review of colleague and student policies would take place.

An updated Code of Practice and external speaker policy had been approved by Council in summer 2024, however implementation was paused due to the government pause to the commencement of the 2023 Freedom of Speech Act. Although promised guidance from OfS was still awaited, an amended Code of Practice was ready to follow the approval process. Once this had been approved and implemented, the University would inform the OfS that a key governance document had been updated and that it had taken reasonably practicable steps to ensure that related policies and procedures had been (or would be) updated accordingly.

5. Retirement Benefits Plan

Following the resignation of Jack Hunter (Deputy Director of Estates) as a University-nominated Trustee Director, management had recommended the appointment of Jess Fogarty (Head of Internal Audit) as Trustee Director for a term of 5 years.

Resolved that Council approve the appointment.

[Secretary's Note:

Leadership of Culture and Inclusion

Following the meeting, Council approved, by circulation, a proposal from the University to advertise for a Dean of Culture and Inclusion for a period of 12 months. The role will replace the current Dean of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, and Dean of Research Culture and Strategy posts, the terms of office of which are both due to end in July 2025.]

52. **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 January 2025 meeting of Council.

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

53. **ANNUAL STUDENT CASEWORK REPORT**

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education introduced a discussion.

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

Noted that:

1. There had been a significant and sustained increase in students pursuing their Complaints and Academic Appeals through all available levels of the procedure, including Level 3 request for review (51% increase from 2022/23 and 131% increase from 2021/22) and subsequent complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education ('OIA'; 56% increase from 2022/23).
2. Reports of antisocial behaviour and noise nuisance had continued to decrease following a sustained effort by the University to develop and maintain key community partnerships in this area.
3. The number of student complaints received during 2023/24 had been significantly (39%) higher than in 2022/23. Many of these complaints related to the Marking and Assessment Boycott, which ended at the beginning of the 2023/24 academic year, to the University's investments in companies linked to Israel and the defence sector, and the conduct of individual colleagues in relation to the student encampment.
4. Despite accounting for only 10.5% of the University student population, Chinese students submitted 31.5% of all academic appeals in 2023/24 (an increase from 25.5% in 2022/23), and were also the subject of 31.8% of all academic misconduct investigations. Council discussed the need for academic units to provide clear and consistent information around assessment and feedback procedures and expectations.
5. Council reflected on the high volume of Personal Extenuating Circumstances (PEC) requests, and ways in which the University could raise awareness of what PECs were for, as well as be more proactive in making adjustments for students at the beginning of their degree programme.

Resolved that Council approve the annual report.

54. REPORT FROM FINANCE COMMITTEE

The Honorary Treasurer introduced a report.

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

Noted that:

1. Council received the University's Quarterly Financial Report for the quarter ending 31 January 2025. At the end of January, the University reported an underlying Q2 surplus of £4.7m; however, the full year forecast was a deficit of £3.2m, compared to the original budgeted surplus of £4.9m.
2. Excluding the estimated impact of Voluntary Severance exit costs, staff costs were forecast to be favourable by year end. Other operating costs were significantly reduced in three months to 31 January because of tighter cost control measures.
3. Finance Committee took a proactive role in the monitoring of University financial covenants. Details of this monitoring would be made more prominent in future iterations of the quarterly reports to Council.
4. The Office for Students had requested interim financial management information from registered providers; however, the University's position had not changed significantly since the main regulatory reporting point in December 2024.

5. Finance Committee had received an update from the Chief Financial Officer and the Deputy Vice Chancellor on the proposed transformation programme to reduce costs, protect cash reserves, and realign the University's financial framework to address immediate challenges while ensuring long-term sustainability. Phase one was currently underway and measures in place such as recruitment freeze and limits on discretionary spend had shown the required progress.
6. The second phase of the programme will focus on structural and strategic changes to ensure long term financial resilience. These include strengthening international student recruitment pipelines, optimising academic structures for better efficiency, transforming professional services, exploring transnational education opportunities, and reviewing estate rationalisation to reduce operational costs while generating additional revenue. Council's input on the transformation programme was invited as part of the programme for the joint Council-Executive Board Away Day, which also took place on 31 March 2025.

55. REPORT FROM AUDIT, RISK AND ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

Received a report from the meetings of the Committee held on 22 January and 13 March 2025.

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

Noted that:

1. The Committee had received updates from Deloitte, on the indicative external audit plan for 2024-25, from the Chief Financial Officer on four strategic projects, and on progress against the 2023-24 Internal Audit Plan.

56. REPORT FROM NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE

Received a report from Nominations Committee.

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

Noted that:

1. Following the retirement of an existing lay member, there was a gap in the skills matrix for Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee for an individual with significant IT/cyber expertise.
2. The Chair of the Committee had recommended the appointment of a replacement, Tony Taylor, who was currently IT and Business Change Director for Greggs plc. Members of both Audit, Risk and Assurance and Nominations Committee had been consulted and were supportive.

Resolved that Council approve the appointment of Tony Taylor as a lay member of Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee from 1 April 2025.

57. REPORT FROM UNIVERSITY-STUDENTS' UNION PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEE

Received a report from University-Students' Union Partnership Committee.

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

Noted that:

1. The Committee had considered a final proposal detailing plans for a restructure of staffing at the Students' Union. The restructure aimed to improve operational efficiency and to provide an 11% saving on salaries and related costs.

2. There would be a reduction in staffing for certain student-facing activities, such as volunteering opportunities and financial advice. Support for these activities would continue to be available via signposting and third-party delivery.
3. There would be six Sabbatical Officer roles in future years, with the introduction of a combined “Academic Officer” role supporting both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Sabbatical officers for 2025-26 had been announced at an election ceremony on 7 March.
4. The Committee had received a presentation on cost of living support measures for students, and the annual report from the Changing the Culture working group which oversees the University’s response to tackling harassment and sexual misconduct.

ROUTINE BUSINESS

58. **COUNTER-FRAUD, ANTI-CORRUPTION AND ANTI-BRIBERY POLICY**

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

Resolved that Council approve the policy.

59. **SUMMARY OF THE MEETINGS OF SENATE, 15 JANUARY AND 19 FEBRUARY 2025**

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

60. **REPORTED BUSINESS**

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