

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC BOARD
22 May 2024

Present: The Vice-Chancellor and President (in the Chair) and 263 members of Academic Board. This meeting was held using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Members were visible for the duration of the meeting.

NOTES

1. NOTES OF THE 15 FEBRUARY 2023 MEETING

The notes of the meeting of Academic Board held on 15 February 2023 were available at:

<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/executive/governance/academic-board/minutes/>

Matters arising from the Minutes:

The Vice-Chancellor provided an update on the motion received in in the 15 February 2023 meeting of Academic Board. The motion had proposed a review of the Student Support Plan (SSP) implementation in Schools, and had included suggestions for a more robust process which would ensure appropriate support was provided to disabled students to improve their learning experience.

The Vice-Chancellor reported that colleagues in the Student Health and Wellbeing service were leading a review of the Student Support Plan process which was seeking to address concerns highlighted around associated workload and reporting. The review included development of a digital platform to streamline the process of dissemination to students, academic units, and associated services, reducing timelines and enhancing communication and feedback. The review also included development of a common framework for creating adjustments, enhanced guidance, and was seeking to establish a shared understanding of what is reasonable in terms of adjustments in an educational setting through collaborative efforts, and structured feedback channels to verify implementation of support and adjustments.

2. MEMBERS OF COURT APPOINTED BY ACADEMIC BOARD

Reported that:

There were vacancies for two members of Court appointed by Academic Board to serve for three years until 31 July 2027.

University Executive Board had recommended to appoint Professor Darren Evans, School of Natural and Environmental Sciences, and Dr Murray Pollock, School of Mathematics, Statistics and Physics, to Court.

Resolved that:

Academic Board approve the appointment to Court of the above colleagues effective from 1 August 2024.

3. REPORT FROM THE VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT

Received an oral report from the Vice-Chancellor and President on key developments over the past year and future priorities for our University community.

The session was recorded and is available from:

<https://newcastle.sharepoint.com/hub/executive/Pages/Academic-Board.aspx>

1. The Higher Education Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) data for student start-ups for 2022-23 had been published showing areas of success relating to Newcastle University student start-ups and spin-out companies. Notably, the University had regained first position in the North East for Employment and had remained in first position in the region for both Turnover and Investment.
2. The University had received over £1 million in donations towards improving access, student experience and career development, including £60k from the Goyal Foundation to provide scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. The University had successfully been awarded Disability Confident Level 2 'Employer' status. This had involved conducting a self-assessment which demonstrated alignment in many areas including recruitment, providing adjustments, and consulting with disabled people.
4. The University had partnered with [the National University of Water and Environmental Engineering](#) (NUWEE), Rivne as part of the UK-Ukraine twinning programme, and after two years of collaboration it was noted that Newcastle University had provided support to NUWEE in several impactful ways, including organising a Summer School for Ukrainian academics and sharing extensive electronic library resources by granting NUWEE academics guest researcher status.
5. According to the most recent annual figures, University colleagues had been successful in securing almost £190 million from external funding bodies, which was an increase on the previous year's funding awards figure of £120 million.
6. Over 1,000 University alumni had participated in the recent NCL in Action 'Moving on Up' event, while 900 new alumni had attended recent graduation celebrations held in Shanghai.
7. The University had entered into an agreement for the five North East universities to formalise collaboration to benefit the region, including widening participation, policy, business support, and joint communications.
8. Within the global context, the current devastating conflicts and ongoing unrest was causing deep distress for many in the University community. Political uncertainty, financial challenges and the complexities around Academic Freedom and the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act were noted as priority considerations nationally and globally.
9. The University's strategic imperatives for Research, Education, Engagement and Place and Global had remained the same for 2023-24, building on the progress made in previous years in key areas including student experience, international student recruitment and research income.
10. Future strategic imperatives included diversifying income, configuring an infrastructure to achieve NetZero, ensuring students' requirements were met and ensuring colleagues' could find ways to avoid a pendulum swing between teaching and research while also maintaining and drawing upon a broad base of disciplines and expertise.

4. QUESTIONS

The following question was submitted by Professor Nick Megoran, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, in advance of the meeting.

1. Academic freedom is the lifeblood of the university in a democratic society. Recently it has come under unprecedented pressure from a variety of sources including pressure groups (both inside and outside universities), national government policies, university brand management agendas, and external funders (including illiberal governments). This is seen particularly over contentious issues like foreign wars and identity politics. How are we as a university actively protecting academic freedom in this difficult context?

Academic freedom is one of our core values as a University. It is the principle that academic staff are free - within the law - to question and test received wisdom, and put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or the privileges they may have at their university.

Academic freedom is distinct from, but also linked to, freedom of speech. As a University, we take seriously our obligation to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is protected.

In terms of **our work to actively protect academic freedom**:

- We are a signatory of the Magna Charta Universitatum which is a declaration and affirmation of the fundamental principles on which the mission of universities should be based. The Magna Charta is based on three principles, the third of which relates to academic freedom as it upholds the university as 'a site for free enquiry and debate, distinguished by its openness to dialogue and rejection of intolerance'
- These principles were updated in 2020 to include additional text relating to academic freedom, and the most recent version of the Magna Charta of which we are a signatory, includes the following statement: 'As they create and disseminate knowledge, universities question dogmas and established doctrines and encourage critical thinking in all students and scholars. Academic freedom is their lifeblood; open enquiry and dialogue their nourishment.'

We actively engage nationally with discussions around academic freedom and freedom of speech, including the most recent Office for Students consultation which will close shortly.

Academic freedom is also actively promoted in our academic governance processes, and our University Policy and Procedures:

- Our Academic Senate discussed definitions of discrimination in January and in our discussions and in our communications to our wider colleague community, we clarified that our endorsement of definitions of discrimination, that is antisemitism and Islamophobia, does not interfere with our commitment to academic freedom. We also clarified that our University policies and processes do not place constraints on academic freedom and freedom of speech within the law.
- Academic freedom is a fundamental consideration for our research partnerships and funding and we work closely with a range of organisations to ensure that collaborations and partnerships do not pose any risk to academic freedom. Our trusted research and due diligence policies provide guidance for our researchers and provide a framework for evaluating risks.

The disclosure of foreign influence was likely to happen via the [Foreign Influence Registration Scheme](#) which is part of the National Security Act (rather than the Freedom of Speech Act). It was noted that a recent episode of [Shadow War](#) and a subsequent Radio 4 programme had included discussion of issues international students had encountered around free speech while at University.

The following questions were taken from members of Academic Board during the meeting.

2. Kelechi Dibia, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, asked:
How can we possibly pull off better engagement and collaboration with the community and voluntary sector with all the third people that they support, without any key front-facing role that connects the university with the 3rd sector?

The University's Engagement and Place team are dedicated to ensuring robust collaborations and networks within the community. In reference to matters surrounding Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), the University currently has a Dean of EDI and discussions are underway regarding creating an executive-level post to lead EDI matters across the University community.

3. Renga Mysore, NUIT, asked:
Is there a long term strategy to increase the number of (short term) online courses offered by NU, to improve engagement globally and to improve finances?

Yes, online provision is under discussion and plans are in progress. Short-term online courses will be offered in the first instance and the offer will be expanded to eventually include full-time degree programmes, at the undergraduate and post-graduate level, provided entirely or partially online.

5. HONORARY FELLOWSHIPS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Court invited nominations in writing for the award of next year's Honorary Fellowships of the University. Any member 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 are made should be clearly stated.

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

Proposals should be sent to Dr Colin Campbell, Registrar, King's Gate, in an envelope marked 'Confidential – Honorary Fellowships' or via email (colin.campbell@ncl.ac.uk) by Friday, 2 August 2024.