**NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY**

**COUNCIL**

**9 December 2024**

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

**In attendance:** Chris Walton, Neil Gardner (Director of Strategic Planning and Change) for Item 8, Dr Colin Campbell (Registrar), Nick Collins (Chief Financial Officer) and Dr Simon Meacher (Head of Executive and Governance Office).

**Apologies:** Anjam Khan, Colin Riordan, Angela Russell

**M I N U T E S**

1. **WELCOME**

The Chair welcomed new members – Arun Harish, Meiko O’Halloran and Adam Serfontein – to their first meeting of Council.

18. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

19. **MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING**

 Received the draft minutes of the meeting of Council held on 14 October 2024.

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

 ***Resolved that the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 14 October 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed.***

Noted that:

1. Members expressed concern that student initiations were continuing to take place, with this in part reflecting greater awareness and comfort in reporting of events. Implementation of the student dangerous behaviours prevention action planwould continue to be monitored by University-Students’ Union Partnership Committee.

20. **HEALTH AND SAFETY**

Received the Annual Health and Safety Report.

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

Noted that:

1. Progress against the University’s Health and Safety Strategic Plan was good. All ten actions that had been identified for the first year of the plan had been completed as required. A further six actions had been identified following the receipt of unit annual reports, and of these, four had been completed.
2. The number of Occupational Health appointments related to musculoskeletal health concerns had reduced significantly as a result of earlier intervention, thereby preventing absence. Colleagues working from home were encouraged to complete a Display Screen Equipment Assessment.
3. The Health and Safety Executive had attended site on two occasions during 2023-24 but had not been required to issue an enforcement notice on either occasion.
4. Absence levels and trends were being tracked internally and would be included in future iterations of this annual report.

21. **CHAIR’S BUSINESS**

There was nothing to report.

22. **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 C. Copy filed in the Minute Book.]

Reported that:

1. Derek Nicholson

The University had with deep regret learned of the death of Emeritus Registrar, Derek Nicholson. Derek joined the University in January 1971 as an Assistant Registrar, and was Senior Assistant Registrar (Faculty of Medicine) from 1978 to 1983, when he was appointed as Registrar, a role he held for 19 years until his retirement in 2002. During his tenure, he served alongside four Vice-Chancellors: Laurence Martin, Duncan Murchison, James Wright, and Christopher Edwards. In 2005, Derek was one of the first recipients of an Honorary Fellowship in recognition of his service to the University. Although he retired in 2002, Derek remained an active and supportive member of the University community. He would be warmly remembered and very much missed by his many friends and former colleagues.

1. Sector Finances

An update to financial modelling from the Office for Students (OfS) had found continued pressures on the higher education sector in England. The analysis, which updated the OfS’s annual financial sustainability report published in May 2024, found reductions in the numbers of students entering higher education compared to forecasts. Without taking steps to address financial risks, OfS modelling suggested that nearly three quarters (72 per cent) of higher education providers could be in deficit by 2025-26, and 40 per cent would have fewer than 30 days’ liquidity.

The modelling was based on data submitted to the OfS in late 2023, and therefore could not take account of any revisions providers had made since then to their recruitment projections, or steps they had taken to address financial risks this year. Universities would submit new data to the OfS later this year.

The government had announced that from September 2025 both the maximum cap for tuition fees, and maintenance loans for students, would increase in line with inflation. These changes, as well as the increase in national insurance contributions for employers announced in the Budget, had been included in the OfS analysis. As Newcastle University was an approved (fee cap) provider with a Teaching Excellence Framework award and an Access and Participation Plan, the maximum fee that it could charge for undergraduate courses would **increase from £9,250 to £9,535.** Advice from the University’s Legal team had made it clear that inflationary price increases could be applied to both new and continuing students. Accordingly, Executive Board had agreed to recommend to Council that the University apply the fee increase from September 2025.

Parliamentary approval for the increase was expected to be given in January 2025, which would then allow the University to communicate the increase to both new and continuing students.

Members of Council discussed the proposed increase in tuition fees, noting that the official stance of the Newcastle University Students’ Union was to oppose the increase and lobby for a more sustainable long-term solution to the financial challenges facing higher education in the UK. Council requested that the University communicate clearly why it was raising the fee, particularly for continuing students, and explain how it was investing in the student education experience.

***Resolved that Council approve the increase in home undergraduate tuition fees for new and continuing students to £9,535 per annum from September 2025.***

1. Student Admissions

At its meeting on 22 October 2024, Executive Board had received a report on the University’s student number position for 2024 entry. For international applications, the University had maintained a level of optimism given strong application, offer and acceptance levels for taught postgraduate places, however, conversion towards the end of the cycle was much lower than projected as external factors, together with a drop in the University’s QS ranking, impacted international student behaviour. For home student recruitment, Newcastle’s market share remained stable, and data indicated that applications through the PARTNERS programme and supported entry routes aligned to skills gaps played a key part in this positive position. At taught postgraduate level, UK applications dropped further, a trend that continued sector-wide.

1. Universities for North East England

The five universities in North East England had responded to the UK Government’s priorities for higher education reform, indicating their commitment to work together and with others to drive growth. A launch event had taken place on Monday 25 November for the newly formed ‘Universities for North East England’ (UNEE) partnership, attended by the vice-chancellors of Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland, and Teesside universities, who outlined their vision for greater collaboration to improve access for disadvantaged students. They also restated their commitment to community engagement, social responsibility, and fostering positive societal impact.

1. Knowledge Exchange Framework 4

The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) was designed to demonstrate and highlight the broad scope of universities’ engagement with society and the economy. KEF 4 results had been published on 18 September 2024. The University’s performance was strong and had improved year on year. In addition to “working with the public”, “IP and commercialisation” and “working with the public sector,” the University was now in the top quintile for “Working with Business.” This meant that the University was achieving the highest possible ranking in four out of seven perspectives.

1. North East England Doctoral Landscape in Biosciences

Newcastle University would lead North East England Doctoral Landscape in Biosciences (NEEDL) in partnership with the universities of Durham, Northumbria, Teesside, Sunderland, and with industry. NEEDL had received around £6m from UKRI’s Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and had the goal of widening participation for bioscience students, enabling equitable access to research careers.

1. Research and Innovation

Experts at Newcastle University were co-leading a consortium to help tackle inequalities in maternity care and outcomes. Working together across the North East, the consortium aimed to achieve better, fairer maternity health and care by delivering high-quality impactful research, and through developing the next generation of researchers and practitioners. Nine UK universities had been selected to make up the new NIHR Challenge Maternity Disparities Consortium. A total of £50 million had been given by the NIHR, of which Newcastle was leading £25 million. The research carried out by the consortium would focus on inequalities before, during and after pregnancy. Professor Judith Rankin (Professor of Maternal and Child Health, and Dean of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion at Newcastle University) had been appointed as the Consortium co-lead for Research and Capacity Development.

1. Faraday Institute Conference

The University had recently hosted the Faraday Institute Conference 2024 which had brought together the Energy Storage community of academics, industry organisations, policymakers, and funders from the UK and around the world. The three-day event in September highlighted the latest battery storage research from around the world, and helped to raise the visibility of UK scientific excellence in energy storage against the backdrop of Newcastle and the North East of England’s drive towards net zero emissions through vehicle and battery manufacturing, research, and electrification.

1. Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement

The Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement (CNUA) was established in 2021 as a civic university agreement between Newcastle and Northumbria Universities, working with local partners to benefit the city. A joint meeting on 19 September 2024 involved both Vice-Chancellors and key leaders to discuss progress and next steps, particularly in the priority areas of Social Mobility, Skills Agenda, and Students as Partners. The universities were working together on a range of shared priorities including health and care skills pathways, promoting the city as a destination to international students, and working together to achieve Net Zero. The collaboration had been cited as a model of good practice by the Civic Universities Network.

1. Colleague Success

Jo Baker (School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences) had been announced as the winner of the national ‘Three Minute Thesis’ (3MT®) Judge’s Choice award for her presentation describing ongoing research into phonological awareness intervention.

Defra and the devolved governments had appointed Professor Hayley Fowler (School of Engineering) to the Adaptation Committee of the Climate Change Committee. The Committee was comprised of experts in the fields of climate change impacts, science, environmental economics, conservation, public health, and business, and provides independent, expert advice on preparing for and adapting to climate change to UK and devolved governments and parliaments.

Professor Lindsay Pennington (Population Health Sciences Institute) had been made a Fellow of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

On Wednesday 23 October, the Royal College of Physicians welcomed fellows, members, and guests to its prestigious 2024 Harveian Oration, given by Newcastle University Professor Avan Aihie Sayer (Professor of Geriatric Medicine) on the subject of translational ageing research.

1. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

During a visit to Saudi Arabia this week, the Prime Minister had announced the establishment of a new Joint International Institute for Clean Hydrogen, to be backed by a consortium of Saudi and British universities, including a leading role for Newcastle University. A formal proposal, subject to the University’s due diligence procedures, would be brought back to Council.

23. **RISK MANAGEMENT**

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

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

 Noted:

1. Several peaceful protests on campus involving students had taken place. This included a peaceful sit-in by students representing Newcastle Apartheid Off Campus.
2. As previously reported, the University had seen a lower-than-expected international student recruitment intake in the new academic year and it was expected that numbers would remain flat for the next academic year and may not recover going forward. Executive Board was considering mitigations as well as the longer-term implications of this development. A detailed discussion of this topic would take place at Council’s away day in March 2025.

***Council confirmed that it had received sufficient assurance that the risks facing the University were being managed appropriately noting that further discussion would take place at the upcoming meeting of Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee.***

24. **STRATEGY PERFORMANCE**

The Deputy-Vice-Chancellor introduced a discussion.

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

Noted that:

1. Council received a summary of the progress being made against the Vision and Strategy referenced against the high-level key performance indicators used to measure progress. The KPI update was accompanied by each Faculty’s strategic review of 2023-24, detailing performance against their strategic priorities and KPIs.
2. Each Faculty was scheduled to provide a forward-looking update focusing on student experience at upcoming meetings of Council.
3. The progress status for Participation and Awarding Gap (under Education) had changed from Yellow to Amber, reflecting a widening of the awarding gap between Black and White students and a substantial widening in the awarding gap for entrants from Low Participation Neighbourhoods. Further analysis would be carried out to provide the University with a better understanding of the disparities behind the data.
4. Research income had increased, and the number of research awards was at its highest ever level. The University’s target remained growing research income to the average of its peer group over five years, however.
5. Student Experience remained at Red. It was suggested that supporting measures and targets for this KPI were no longer suitable as a strong indicator of what the University wanted to achieve through its revised Education Strategy.
6. A full review and updating of institutional key performance indicators would take place in the coming months, with input from Council at its away day in March 2025. The review also aimed to align key performance indicators and strategic risk register.

25. **FINANCE REPORTS**

The Chief Financial Officer introduced a report from Finance Committee.

 [Circulated with the agenda as Documents Fi and Fii. Copies filed in the Minute Book.]

Noted that:

1. Executive Board, with support from Finance Committee and Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee had recommended to Council that it had reasonable expectation that the University had adequate resources to continue in operation for the foreseeable future and should continue to adopt the going concern basis when preparing the annual accounts. The University was considered to be a going concernon the grounds of: its strong current and forecast liquidity position (supplemented by the availability of a £75m committed Revolving Credit Facility; a revised financial plan demonstrating a deliverable mitigating plan in response to adverse student recruitment numbers in 2024; and the assessment of plausible downside financial risks.

1. Both Finance Committee and Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee had reviewed the University’s financial statements for 2023-24. Although external audit work on the financial statements was continuing, no issues of significance had been flagged. Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee would reconvene to consider final sign-off of the statements on 22 January 2025.
2. The University was required to submit an updated five-year financial forecast to the Office for Students by the end of January 2025. The revised medium-term financial plan, which replaced the version signed off by Council in June 2024, proposed a revised financial strategy to reflect a cautious outlook, particularly concerning international student recruitment. Assumptions for flat student numbers result in a slower recovery of tuition fee income, delaying the University’s earlier projections for returning to an operating financial surplus. Adjustments to staffing levels and pay assumptions are being implemented, with a focus on aligning costs to anticipated income levels. Operating expenses are under strict controls, with discretionary spending reductions in place.

***Resolved that Council approve:***

1. ***Approve the Medium-Term Financial Plan***
2. ***Approve the consolidated Financial Statements of the University for the financial year ended 31 July 2024, subject to completion of the work of the external auditor.***

26. **ANNUAL REPORT FROM AUDIT, RISK AND ASSURANCE COMMITTEE**

Received the annual report from Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee.

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

Noted that:

1. In respect of the year ended 31 July 2024, it was the Committee’s opinion that the University’s arrangements for risk management, control and governance, sustainability, economy, efficiency, and effectiveness; and management and quality assurance of data were effective and could be relied upon by Council. The Head of Internal Audit’s report had provided reasonable assurance but completion of the work of the external auditor was still awaited.
2. In line with its terms of reference, Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee had received and considered assurance on a variety of topics from various sources, including the University’s management, the University’s Internal Auditors, and the External Auditors, and believed that the procedures undertaken by the Committee provided a reasonable basis for the expression of this opinion.

***Resolved that Council approve the Annual Report of Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee.***

27. **REPORT FROM AUDIT, RISK AND ASSURANCE COMMITTEE**

Received a report from the meeting of Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee held on 10 October 2024.

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

Noted that:

1. The Committee had received an update on Capital and Strategic Projects and Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC), information security governance and cyber security programme delivery progress.
2. The report of the Committee’s external effectiveness review had been received. It was noted that the Committee was operating in line with best practice, with a strong and diverse membership, constructively challenging meetings, and a culture of openness. A list of recommendations and suggestions would be reviewed for implementation.

28. **REPORT FROM NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE**

Received an update from the meeting of Nominations Committee held on 18 November 2024

Noted that:

1. The Committee had reflected on the membership profile of Council in relation to diversity, skills, and experience. There was a potential gap for a member with expertise in IT, and there would be a need for a member with senior corporate legal experience in the near future. The need to enhance gender and ethnic diversity criteria should also be built into the next recruitment exercise.

29. **REPORT FROM UNIVERSITY AND STUDENT’S UNION PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEE**

Received a report from the meeting of University and Students’ Union Partnership Committee held on 14 October 2024.

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

Noted that:

1. The Committee had received the annual NUSU Impact Report for 2023-24. Students continued to maintain high levels of engagement with NUSU and remained positive about their experiences, with 98% of students satisfied and 89% agreeing that they would recommend NUSU to a friend.
2. The NUSU Operational Plan was considered. A strategic refresh and financial review was being undertaken in order to position NUSU to be responsive to changing needs and challenges. A plan for restructure and budget projections would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee in January.
3. The committee had also reviewed the relationship agreement between the University and Students’ Union.

30. **ACCOMMODATION RENTS**

 The Chief Financial Officer introduced proposals for the 2025-26 academic year rent.

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

 Noted that:

1. The University proposed the retention of a progressive ladder of rents to ensure University accommodation remained attractive and affordable for first year students, whilst commensurate with the wider market.
2. The rent ladder featured a clear demand-led pricing structure with varying rent increases across the portfolio to provide a choice of weekly price points, recognising and balancing the cost of living for students and the increasing costs incurred by the University.
3. For 2025–26 the University was also including laundry in the rental pricing in response to student demand.
4. The Newcastle University Students’ Union had been consulted but did not support the proposals because of their concerns about the impact of the increase on students struggling with the cost of living. It was agreed that the University-Students’ Union Partnership Committee would discuss the cost of living for students and what the University was doing to address it.

***Resolved that Council approve the proposed rent ladder for the 2025-26 academic year.***

**ROUTINE BUSINESS**

31. **SUMMARY FROM THE MEETING OF SENATE: 13 NOVEMBER 2024**

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

32. **CHAIR’S CIRCULAR**