

Council

20 May 2025

- Present:** Joe Docherty (Chair), Andrew Baldwin, Jonathan Bewes, Richard Dale, Oliver Foster, Nic Johnston, Anthony Jones, Denise Lievesley, Dan Lonsdale, Cheryl McEwan, Amir Michael, Cheryl Millington, Karen O'Brien, Nigel Perry, Corinne Saunders, Rob Senior, Mike Shipman, JJ Thakkar and Terry Toney
- In Attendance:** Michael Izza, Mark Jagger, Neil Scott, and Amanda Wilcox (all items), Mark Allen for Minute 86, Kieran Fernandes for Minute 87, and James Walsh (Minutes).
- Apologies:** Rebecca Askew, Leslie Ferrar, James Grierson, Philip Plyming, and Ari Sadanandom.

Minutes of a Meeting of Council held in The Hub, Mount Oswald

77. Welcome: on behalf of Council, the Chair welcomed Michael Izza to his first meeting of Council as an Observer prior to becoming a formal Lay Member from 1 August 2025.

78. Declarations of Interests in relation to Agenda Items

Noted: Amir Michael in relation to agenda item 87 (Financial Savings and Business Realignment), and Nigel Perry in relation to agenda item 93 (Governance and Nominations Committee Report).

79. Minutes of Meeting held on 25 February 2025 (C/24/58 Confidential)

Approved: the minutes of the meeting held on 25 February 2025.

80. Matters Arising

Noted:

- the reports from Finance and Governance & Nominations Committees (GNC) were in a different format for this meeting;
- in improving the efficiency of Council Sub-committee reports, a short covering report will be presented at Council with the minutes and any key documentation attached;
- the Sub-committee Chair will be asked to present the report and answer any questions.

81. Action Log and Schedule of Business (C/24/59 and C/24/60 Confidential)

Noted: the status of the Action Log and Schedule of Business.

82. Chair's Business (C/24/61 Internal)

Noted:

- activities undertaken by the Chair since the last meeting;
- in relation to the Parliamentary launch of the Universities for North East England (UNEE): the event had been superb with around 20 parliamentarians in attendance, along with the North East Mayor, and senior representatives from each university.

83. Vice-Chancellor's Report (C/24/62 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) staff were moving into Boldon House following its recent refurbishment, with feedback very positive, and the hope that a future meeting of Council could be held there;
- b) work to promote the University and some of its stellar research activity had concluded, ahead of the announcement of the QS World Rankings;
- c) in relation to international student recruitment, the following:
 - i) the whole sector was experiencing extreme volatility with international recruitment;
 - ii) an external organisation had been engaged to aid with conversion activity and the University was investing in scholarships and fee discounts to attract students from overseas;
 - iii) all departments were engaged in maximising recruitment and conversion activity, although it was likely that the current challenges were not an isolated incident but a medium term downwards trend;
 - iv) the publication of the Immigration White Paper and announcement of a possible surcharge on international student fees was particularly challenging. Rather than charging international students, the cost to the University based on current international student numbers would be around £11m.
- d) the local election results had seen Reform take control of Durham County Council and the University would recalibrate discussions in finding new ways to work together;
- e) Maundy Thursday celebrations at the Cathedral had been an excellent example of partnership working and had been very enjoyable, showcasing the City at its best;
- f) the University had been the convenor for the Coimbra Group Climate Symposium, where it had been agreed to sign the Coimbra Group's Durham Declaration on Climate and Sustainability.

84. Senate Report (C/24/63 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) Senate had agreed the University's Student Drugs Policy which had benefited from engagement with the Durham Students' Union (DSU), responding to guidance issued by Universities UK (UUK);
- b) technician staff were important in several departments and under the leadership of the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research Culture) a Technician Commitment had been approved by the University. Senate received an update on progress against the action plan, developed following approval of the Technician Commitment;
- c) in relation to the Online Programme Management the following:
 - i) Senate had highlighted concerns about the identified contractor in terms of restrictions over academic freedoms;
 - ii) Senate would receive further assurance that the University was not restricted in the academic content it could use, with the contract signed with the UK division of the contractor, where no concerns had been raised;
 - iii) degrees offered through online learning would meet the same quality assurance standards as those delivered in-person;
 - iv) initially income would be split 50:50 between the contractor and the University, although this would be reviewed over time in relation to developing a solely in-house provision.

Approved: the Close Personal Relationships between Staff and Students Policy as presented.

85. Students' Union Report (C/24/64 Internal)

Noted:

- a) the DSU had been pleased to see that the proposed marking and assessment boycott had been cancelled by the University and College Union (UCU);
- b) in relation to the Supreme Court ruling on trans people:
 - i) many students had been upset by the outcome and although the law would be obeyed, the DSU would campaign against the decision;
 - ii) the Chair of Council had attended an online Committee of University Chairs event where this decision and the outcome of the Sussex University freedom of speech case had been discussed. The Chair would discuss the implications with GNC prior to Council in July.
- c) the DSU had undertaken a lot of work to encourage students to vote at the recent local elections and would ask the new administration to continue to improve student housing across the City;
- d) ahead of the NSS results being published in July, the recent DSU all student survey had noted a drop off in recognition of what the DSU did for second and third year students, which needed further investigation;
- e) in relation to the University Professional Services (PS) Savings: the movement of student PhD vivas online did not seem to be inline with the programme handbook, but would be followed up by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education);

Closed Minute

87. Waterside Business Case Update (C/24/66 Confidential)

Received: a presentation on the Waterside Building Update

Noted:

- a) the Waterside building was purchased in June 2022 based on a 10-year business case which would recoup investment in the building;
- b) the business case involved developing several income streams; with building utilisation and the second phase of the relocation of the remaining staff from the Business School not part of the original business plan;

Closed Minute

- d) the presentation by the Executive Dean for the Faculty of Business covered the following areas: the opening of the Waterside Building; the origins of the Business School; the Business School vision; current strengths and opportunities; how the Waterside linked with the Aykley Heads and Net Park developments;
- e) future opportunities may be found in greater direct links with businesses, possibly around support for business incubation;
- f) explanation of the progress made against the business case was included in the report, but could have been made clearer, with recognition that the business case may need to change to respond to the external environment.

88. Financial Savings and Business Realignment (C/24/67 Confidential)

Received: a presentation on Financial Savings and Business Realignment: Voluntary Severance Scheme (VSS) Position and Next Steps

Noted:

- a) Council had seen a copy of the all-staff email which had announced that it was likely that the £15m PS savings target would be met through voluntary measures;
- b) the presentation by the Deputy-Vice-Chancellor (DVC) & Provost covered the following areas: background on the agreed savings target; where the current VSS process was at; proposed next steps; trade union engagement; key milestones;
- c) in discussion the following:

- i) noting the number of PS staff leaving the organisation, it would be important to embed new ways of working and changes to delivery models by the start of the next academic year;
- ii) the DVC had held weekly meeting with PS leaders to encourage thoughts over what activities could stop or be delivered in different ways with a reduced staff resource;
- iii) financial forecasts involved a prediction of likely under expenditure through recruitment vacancies, however, the identified £4m PS vacancy saving was not a case of double-counting;
- iv) although the UCU had undertaken 5-days of strike action, many staff were confident and supportive of the approach adopted by the Executive to deliver PS savings through voluntary means;
- v) the Executive would continue to monitor staff morale, turnover, and sickness absence which may be impacted by the VSS process;
- vi) the academic VSS was open until June and may need re-invigorating to achieve the necessary reduction in expenditure;
- vii) with the new University Strategy required for 2027, this may be a useful refocussing of staff energies.

Closed Minute

89. Capital Plan Update 2025/26 (C/24/68 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) with the need to reduce expenditure the Capital Plan had been scrutinised in detail by the Estates & Capital Planning Sub Committee, UEC, Estates & IT Sub-Committee (EISC) and Finance Committee;
- b) recognising that several major building projects and renovations had been achieved, it was likely that future estates investment could be scaled down and focus on mission critical activity;
- c) included in the Capital Plan was urgent work on the Banner student records system;
- d) EISC had been supportive of the revised Capital Plan, recommending that any new Strategy focussed on reducing the University Estate further and understanding better space utilisation of existing assets;
- e) changes to the Capital Plan did not undermine any health and safety requirements, with a major refurbishment of fire doors about to conclude.

Agreed: the revised Capital Plan 2025/26 as presented.

90. Finance Committee Report: 30 April 2025 (C/24/70 Confidential)

Thanks:

- a) in the absence of the Chair of Finance Committee, Jonathan Bewes presented the report;
- b) on behalf of Council, the Chair of Council thanked Jonathan for all his contributions as a Council Member prior to the conclusion of his term of office on 31 July 2025. The Chair spoke warmly of Jonathan's commitment to the University, his family links, and the reassurance he provided to the Chair of Council during Jonathan's time as Chair of Finance Committee.

Noted:

- a) the matters discussed by Finance Committee at its meeting on 30 April 2025;
- b) Quarter 2 forecast had not included the VSS provision and that expenditure would be included this year, this would result in the year end cash position being less than

the forecast provided to the Office for Students (OfS), although the OfS would likely agree that an earlier reduction in expenditure was preferable.

91. Council Assurance on Teaching and Research (C/24/69 Internal)

Noted:

- a) following changes brought about by the Higher Education Research Act in 2017, responsibility for teaching and research had moved from Senate to Council;
- b) the Senate Effectiveness Review had highlighted that Senate did not fully understand the change in responsibility, although Council did receive assurance from Senate about the quality of teaching and research provision;
- c) the Chair of Council had requested a summary of how Council received assurance from Senate and thoughts about how that might be enhanced;
- d) the paper proposed receipt of an annual report from the Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Education and Research which highlighted: the key actions undertaken in the previous academic year; the measures for assessing the quality of provision; the enhancements planned for the forthcoming academic year;
- e) external accreditations should be included to further assure Council of the quality of teaching and research, noting that these were not OfS ongoing conditions of registration;
- f) taking the report to Senate would further enhance understanding of the role of Senate.

Agreed: Senate to receive details of the Assurance Report, including Council's recommendation for the receipt of an annual report on the quality of teaching and research. **AW**

92. Audit and Risk Committee Report: 3 April 2025 (C/24/71 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) the matters discussed by the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) at its meeting on 3 April 2025;
- b) in relation to the Risk Appetite Statements, the following:
 - i) the Statements encouraged a good discussion at ARC, with a lot of work being done in context of each statement;
 - ii) the cyber security appetite of cautious, was reflective of the devolved operating model for systems which were not under central control. However, it was recognised that a lot of work had been undertaken in this area to control these risks under the Distributed IT Operations (DITO) model.

Agreed: the Risk Appetite Statements as presented.

93. Ethics Committee Report: 20 March 2025 (C/24/72 Confidential)

Noted: the matters discussed by the Ethics Committee at its meeting on 20 March 2025

94. Governance and Nominations Committee Report: 1 May 2025 (C/24/73 Confidential)

Noted: the matters discussed by GNC at its meeting on 1 May 2025

Agreed:

- a) the exceptional extension of Nigel Perry's term of office for a third and final term until 31 July 2027;
- b) to close down the work of the Governance Review Implementation Group.

95. People and Organisational Development Committee Report: 7 April 2025 (C/24/74 Internal)

Noted:

- a) the matters discussed by the People & Organisational Development Committee (PODC) at its meeting on 7 April 2025;
- b) the PODC continued to reflect on the value it was adding to the University, recognising how it could provide helpful input in developing policies, noting that the PODC had raised the matter of staff morale in relation to the recent VSS;
- c) the findings of the Diversity Pay Gap Report.

96. HR Report on Key Staffing Matters (C/24/75 Confidential)

Noted: the report for information.

97. Register of Sealings (C/24/76 Confidential)

Noted: the Register of Sealings for information.

98. Business Agreed by Circulation since the last Meeting (C/24/77 Internal)

Noted: action taken by-circulation in approving the appointment of a new Chief Operating Officer.

99. Dates of Future Meetings

Noted: the dates of future meetings: 15 July 2025