

Annual Progress Review (APR)

Detailed Guidance for Postgraduate Research students (Doctoral and MPhil), APR Panels, and Supervisors

1. Background and Context

This guidance supplements the universities regulations for APR outlined in the University's research degree regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree programmes available here: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/student-progress/pgr/activities/progress/> .

This guidance reflects improvements to the APR process which were introduced in the 2024-25 academic year and has been reviewed following feedback for the 2026-27 academic year.

2. Purpose of the Annual Progress Review

- To offer an independent review of academic progress, to provide feedback and suggestions to PhD students and their supervisors;
- To make a formal progress recommendation;
- To identify and seek to resolve obstacles to progress and to timely submission and completion, including obstacles related to academic and non-academic (e.g. health and wellbeing) impacts;
- To provide research and pastoral support for students, including towards their wider development as independent researchers.

Where a PhD student is in the first year of studies, APR Panels should consider issues arising from Project Approval, including Ethics Approval. All student research projects require ethical approval to be in place before any research work commences. To do this, students submit on online ethics form at the Project Approval stage, which is available at: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/research/research-governance/ethics/process/>. The student is informed by email from the Ethics Committee whether their project is categorised as low risk (and so can commence) or whether it might be high risk, in which case further information may be required by the Committee before the project can commence. (Detailed information on the ethical approval process and a link to the online ethics form is available at: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/research/research-governance/ethics/>.)

Failure to comply with this process will be considered a form of research misconduct by the lead supervisor and by the student. It is the research student's responsibility to maintain a record of ethical approval and to notify the appropriate Ethics Committee of an amendments to the approved protocol.

3. APR Briefing

If not already in place, the Academic Unit should give consideration to having an APR briefing for students (and colleagues Supervisors/APR Panel Members) in advance of the Annual Progress Review cycle so that all involved are fully aware of the requirements. It is recognised that the Annual

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Progress Review can cause anxiety and worry for students, particularly in the first year, and a briefing session may help to alleviate this.

Students cannot progress without completing their Annual Progress Review and **it is essential that students are aware of the requirements and that should submit their report with supporting documentation by the Academic Unit deadline.**

4. Completing an Annual Progress Review Report

In order for the Annual Progress Review process to be fully effective it is **strongly recommended** that students (and supervisors) complete their reports as fully, honestly and constructively as possible. For this reason, the student's report is automatically visible to supervisors (and *vice versa*). Should a student experience any issues/concerns while undertaking their research degree studies, support is available in their academic unit through their supervisory team who they should consult in the first instance, to try to resolve the issues that have arisen. If this is not possible, or if the problem persists, they (or a member of their supervisory team) should raise the issues in confidence with their Director of Postgraduate Studies or Head of Academic Unit, to ensure prompt action is taken to try to resolve the issues.

However, if a student's issues remain unresolved, they may bring these to the attention of the Dean of Postgraduate Studies/Graduate School in confidence by clicking a link in their APR form and completing a separate 'Confidential Issues Form (CIF)'. The student's Graduate School will contact the student separately, outside of the APR process, to discuss how they might wish to take their issues forward. The CIF form is available all year round within the PGR CoP and should only be used in exceptional circumstances where it has not been possible to resolve issues at local/Academic Unit level through discussions with the supervisory team, Director of Postgraduate Research or Head of Academic Unit. If it is completed at the time of the APR, its completion will not form part of the student's APR report.

If there are any issues/concerns that a supervisor wishes to raise directly with the Dean of Postgraduate Research but does not wish to share with their Student/APR Panel, they can do so by clicking a link in the Supervisor APR form and completing a separate 'Confidential Issues Form (CIF)'. Issues or concerns raised will remain confidential and the supervisor's Graduate School will contact them separately, outside of the APR process, to discuss their issues/concerns and how they might wish to take them forward. This form should only be used in exceptional circumstances where it has not been possible to resolve issues at local/Academic Unit level through discussions with the student, the Director of Postgraduate Research or Head of Academic Unit. Completion of this form will not form part of the Supervisory APR report.

4a. Documentation to be Submitted by the Student

All students are asked to complete a progress report and upload relevant documents to their student report in the Annual Progression section of the [PGR CoP System](#). Specific requirements in addition to the progression report may vary by Academic Unit and stage of study and the Academic Unit/Faculty will confirm the exact requirements in advance of the Annual Progress Review cycle.

All supervisors are required to submit a report outlining the student's progress since their last APR.

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4b. Student Support Plan (SSP)

APR Panel members do not automatically have access to a student's SSP (Student Support Plans). If a student thinks it is relevant and useful to share their SSP with their panel members, they should include this with their submission. This may be useful in the context of discussions during the APR Panel meeting about challenges to progress and support mechanisms in place. Note, that the APR Panel will not offer opinions on the content of the SSP, but awareness of it may be useful for the APR Panel to contextualise progression and the APR Panel's decision-making process. The student may also wish to provide further information in relation to their SSP in their student report for the APR Panel's consideration.

5. Addressing Concerns or Obstacles

The Annual Progress Review is a University requirement to formally monitor the progress of a student's research project and provide an opportunity for feedback and review, independent from the supervisory team, to provide the student with feedback and help the student's timeline to remain on track.

Concerns or obstacles that might threaten timely thesis submission cannot be dealt with constructively if APR Panel members (and PGR Directors) are not made aware. It is essential therefore that any concerns – on the part of student or supervisors – are identified. If students are having problems with supervisors, which have not been addressed through the usual channels, they are encouraged to document these in their student report. Likewise, if supervisors have concerns about student progress, which have not been addressed through the usual channels, they should note these on their report forms. Although it is preferable to resolve any issues through the APR process, if students or supervisors do not feel this is possible, they can raise issues separately, and in confidence, by completing a 'Confidential Issues Form (CIF)', as described above.

6. The APR Panel Meeting

APR Panel members will be provided with relevant documentation from students and supervisors in advance of the meeting. If the documentation is unavailable the Academic Unit/APR Panel should determine whether the process should continue, or whether revised deadlines should be set. In some cases, it might be appropriate for the APR Panel to make a recommendation without the documentation, if there is no reason for the student's lack of engagement with the process, as this would be evidence of not progressing. The APR Panel could make a resubmission or withdrawal of registration outcome, depending on previous circumstances.

The APR Panel meeting is not an extension to supervision, it is an independent review of progress. The meeting is an opportunity for students to discuss their project with subject colleagues, and to enable an accurate assessment of progress. The APR Panel meeting may be academically challenging and will require the student to discuss their project and progress in detail, but it is supposed to be supportive and constructive. The APR Panel meeting should not deflect students from their projects or ongoing supervision.

6a. APR Panel Meeting Recommendations

- A student should have the opportunity at each APR to orally present to their APR Panel;

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- Students are given the option to upload their Student Support Plan (SSP) to share with their Progress Panel. In its written report, the APR Panel is asked to comment on any personal circumstances, health and wellbeing needs and/or disability support needs that are discussed with the student. Please note that the APR Panel is not required to offer opinions on the content of the SSP, but awareness of it may be useful for the APR Panel to contextualise progression and the APR Panel's decision-making process;
- APR Panel members are encouraged to explore with students in the meeting possible options for mitigations and additional support as they think necessary. However, APR Panel members are requested not to *recommend* specific mitigations (extensions, interruptions) in the written APR Panel report;
- APR Panel members should explore with a student, their opportunities for wider training and professional and personal development towards becoming an independent researcher, and to comment on any advice or recommendations in their APR Panel report.

In the meeting, the APR Panel should explore the following:

- Whether the project still has clear aims and objectives;
- Whether progress indicates that the research project will meet the standards for the award and be completed by the maximum candidature date for the programme;
- That the student has (or can acquire) the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes to complete the project successfully;
- That sufficient resources are available to complete the project;
- Whether the supervisory relationship is working well and whether either the student or the supervisor's report raise questions that need discussing;
- Whether the student wishes to raise any personal circumstances, health and wellbeing needs and/or disability support needs;
- Whether the student feels their opportunities for wider training and professional and personal development towards becoming an independent researcher are being met;
- Whether there are any risks to the successful completion of the project.

At the end of the meeting, the APR Panel should invite the student to raise any issues or questions which have not been covered in the prior discussion. Students can flag confidential concerns or issues with supervision, in which case they can be signposted to the 'Confidential Issues Form (CIF)' (described above).

Students may raise issues at the APR Panel meeting that they have not recorded in their submitted report. In these cases, the APR Panel should discuss with the student how these should be taken forward and include a reference to these in the APR Panel report.

7. Annual Progress Review Panel and School Recommendations

Following the APR Panel meeting, the APR Panel will make one of the following **formal recommendations**:

- Proceed - the candidate's performance is satisfactory and the candidate can proceed to the next stage.**

The APR Panel should provide a short justification of the decision.

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- ii. **Proceed with Concerns** - the candidate's overall performance is satisfactory, and the candidate can proceed to the next stage, but the APR Panel has some concerns, which the student and Supervisory Team should address.

This recommendation implies the student is broadly on track but there may be aspects requiring further work, for example: the research questions may need refinement; the academic contribution might need further development etc. APR Panels should be very specific about the issues to be addressed and how they should be dealt with, so at a subsequent review performance against the tasks set can be monitored. There should not be any serious questions about the nature of the research project or the student's progress on it because this would imply that a further review should be conducted.

- iii. **Re-submission** – the candidate's performance is unsatisfactory and a further progress review will be held normally within two months (full-time students) or four months (part-time students) to determine whether progress will be recommended.

This recommendation implies that the problems/issues are more substantial and significant enough to warrant a follow-up review within two months (full-time students) or four months (part-time students) and cannot be dealt with within the normal supervisory arrangements (Recommendation ii).

- *The student may not be working or writing at MPhil/Doctoral level*
- *Progress may be significantly behind the proposed research plan*
- *The project might be significantly flawed in some way e.g. over-ambitious, unclear, unfocused, descriptive or insufficiently analytical.*
- *Issues highlighted at earlier stages remain outstanding*

When this recommendation is chosen, the student will often be required to work intensively, under supervisory guidance, on a particular problem. The requirements of the review should be clear and unambiguous including making clear to the student what work needs to be done. The APR Panel comments are critical as they will guide the student and supervisory team about the improvements required in order to satisfy the APR panel at the re-submission APR.

The outcome from the re-submission needs to be unambiguous, it is not possible for the student to remain under continuous review. They must be progressed or have their registration withdrawn. Though of course there may be further, less serious issues for the student to continue to address with their supervisors.

- iv. **Downgrade to MPhil (for Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy (Integrated) students only)** – the candidate's performance is unsatisfactory and a submission for a MPhil examination is recommended.

This recommendation should normally only be considered following a previous 'iii Re-submission' decision, and should be chosen where despite remedial actions, the student is not producing work at doctoral level, and therefore submission for an MPhil is appropriate. When taking this decision please consult the Doctoral and MPhil assessment criteria, which can be found in the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes](#).

This is a significant decision and should only be made where the APR Panels believe that continuation at doctoral level is not a possibility.

Where the APR Panel recommends downgrade to MPhil (Recommendation iv), the normal expectation is that the student will be able to either:

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- *submit immediately for the Master of Philosophy; or*
- *submit for the Master of Philosophy following a period of pending submission, which should be up to one year following the date of the decision to downgrade.*

The student will not normally receive an additional period of minimum candidature (i.e. all their primary data should already be collected) and there will be no expectation of an upgrade back on to a Doctor of Philosophy at a later stage.

v. Withdrawal of Registration – the candidate’s performance is unsatisfactory and no submission for an MPhil or Doctor of Philosophy examination is recommended.

This is a serious decision and should be made with care. In this instance the student’s progress is clearly unsatisfactory, they have had an opportunity to undertake a further review following a ‘iii Re-submission’ decision, and this has had no discernible impact on their progress. It is important where this decision is made that the supervisors have had an opportunity to comment on the performance of the student during the period of further review and the APR has considered the performance of the student more widely and indicate why they have chosen this recommendation, rather than write up for the Master of Philosophy.

8. Mid-Year Review of Academic Progress – Extraordinary Progress Review

If a student is failing to make satisfactory academic progress at times other than during the normal APR cycle, an **Extraordinary Progress Review (EPR)** will be held. This would be different to the usual APR as it would be initiated by the Academic Unit (usually Director of Postgraduate Studies) normally following concerns from the supervisory team.

The student and supervisory team would be asked to respond to the specific concerns leading to the Extraordinary Progress Review (e.g. mid-year review of progress, capability concerns etc), rather than undertake the full Annual Progress Review.

Any queries regarding this guidance should be directed to doctoralcollege@ncl.ac.uk .