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Doctoral College Annual Progress Review - Detailed Guidance

For Postgraduate Research students, progress panels, and supervisors

1. Background and context for 2024-25

This guidance supplements the universities regulations for Annual Progress Review 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/>

The University PGR Strategic Development Plan (2022) included a review of PGR Policy and Procedure across the University. The PGR Annual Monitoring Review (AMR) process was reviewed in 2022-23, with improvements introduced from 2023-24. A review of the Annual Progress Review (APR) process was initiated at the beginning of the 2023-24 academic year. The Doctoral College led discussions with PGR staff and students across the University around the strengths and weaknesses of the APR process, which had been unchanged for >20 years. The aim was to explore improvements that would make the APR process more contemporary, more efficient and less bureaucratic for both students and staff, in keeping with the 'Decisive Newcastle' initiative, but no less rigorous.

This guidance reflects improvements to the APR process which are introduced from 2024-25 and includes the following as examples of good practice:

- A student should have the opportunity at each APR for a face to face (in person or virtual) meeting with the APR Panel
- A student should have the opportunity at each APR to orally present to their APR Panel
- Where possible, APR Panel members should be assigned at the start of a student's research degree studies for continuity throughout the programme
- APR Panel members should consider the academic progress of a student, alongside the wider development of a student and/or any pastoral issues a student may be experiencing and impacting on progress

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, panels should consider issues arising from Project Approval, including whether Ethics Approval has been sought where necessary.

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Documentation to be submitted by student

All students are asked to complete a progress report and upload relevant documents to their student report in the Annual Progression section of PGR CoP within NU Reflect.

Specific requirements in addition to the progression report may vary by Academic Unit and stage of study and your 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.

Change from 2024-25: Optional SSP. Panel members do not automatically have access to 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 panel meeting about challenges to progress and support mechanisms in place. Note, that the panel will not offer opinions on the content of the SSP, but awareness of it may be useful for the panel to contextualise progression and the panel's decision-making process.

Change from 2024-25: 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 Studies 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 Studies 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 Studies or Head of Academic Unit. Completion of this form will not form part of the Supervisory APR report.

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Change from 2024-25: If not already in place, the Academic Unit should give consideration to having an APR briefing for students (and colleagues Supervisors/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 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 all reports are completed and submitted with supporting documentation by the Academic Unit deadline.**

If documentation is not submitted by the student or the supervisor by the deadline, the Academic Unit/Annual Progress Review Panel should determine whether the process should continue, or whether revised deadlines should be set. In some cases, it might be appropriate for the Panel to make a recommendation without the documentation, if there is no reason for the student's lack of engagement with process, as this would be evidence of not progressing. The Panel could make a resubmission or withdrawal of registration outcome, depending on previous circumstances.

3. 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 help the student's timeline to remain on track.

Concerns or obstacles that might threaten timely thesis submission cannot be dealt with constructively if 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.

4. The Panel Meeting

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/Annual Progress Review Panel should determine whether the process should continue, or whether revised deadlines should be set. In some cases, it might be appropriate for the Panel to make a recommendation without the documentation, if there is no reason for the student's lack of engagement with process, as this would be evidence of not progressing. The Panel could make a resubmission or withdrawal of registration outcome, depending on previous circumstances.

The 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 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 panel meeting should not deflect students from their projects or ongoing supervision.

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Changes from 2024-25:

- A student should have the opportunity at each APR to orally present to their APR Panel;
- Students are given the option to upload their Student Support Plan (SSP) to share with their Progress Panel. In its written report, the 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 panel is not required to offer opinions on the content of the SSP, but awareness of it may be useful for the panel to contextualise progression and the panel's decision-making process;
- Panel members are encouraged to explore with students in the meeting possible options for mitigations and additional support as they think necessary. However, panel members are requested not to *recommend* specific mitigations (extensions, interruptions) in the written panel report;
- 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 panel report.

In the meeting, the 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 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 panel meeting that they have not recorded in their submitted report. In these cases, the panel should discuss with the student how these should be taken forward and include a reference to these in the panel report.

5. Annual Progress Review Panel and School Recommendations

Following the panel meeting, the 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 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 decision 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. 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 outcome 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 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 outcome 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 Progress Panels believe that continuation at doctoral level is not a possibility.

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

- *submit immediately for the Master of Philosophy; or*

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- *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 Review Panel have 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.

6. Mid-Year Review of Academic Progress

Change from 2024-25

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 .