



## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Faculty Council of December 18, 2018

**From:** Professor Jason Foster  
Chair, Academic Appeals Board

**Date:** November 20, 2018

**Re:** **Annual Report of the Academic Appeals Board to Faculty Council for the Period of September 2017 to September 2018**

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### REPORT CLASSIFICATION

This is a routine matter for Faculty Council's information.

### ACADEMIC APPEALS BOARD RESPONSIBILITIES

To hear appeals of undergraduate students against decisions of the Standing Committees of Council relating to petitions for exemptions from the application of academic regulations or standards and to make rulings on such appeals.

The Academic Appeals Board (AAB) shall report annually to Council at the regular fall meeting indicating the number of appeals brought in the previous year and the disposition of those appeals. No information identifying appellants may be included in the annual report.

### SUMMARY OF APPEALS AND DISPOSITIONS

In the 2017-18 academic year, the AAB considered ten (10) appeals on decisions made by the Committee on Examinations. The table below shows the number of appeals heard over the past four (4) academic years:

Academic Year	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Number of appeals	20	24	13	10

*Table 1 – Number of Appeals Per Academic Year*

The appeals considered in 2017-18 can be further categorized as:

- Two (2) for considerations on final examinations.
- Eight (8) for special consideration regarding Faculty policies.

In eight (8) of the appeals, many of which introduced new documentation or elicited additional information during the hearing, the AAB found cause to intervene.

The specific remedies granted were:

- Standing deferred exams for two (2) cases.
- Permission to enrol in two (2) courses the student had been unofficially auditing.
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- Permission to enrol in five (5) courses when the student was only permitted to take one (1). Permission to retain credits for three (3) courses. Retroactive withdrawal (WDR) issued for one (1) course, which the student must take again.
- Retroactive withdrawal from one (1) course.
- Permission to return to studies (aka probation relief).
- Retroactive withdrawal for one (1) course.

The AAB found insufficient grounds to intervene in the remaining two (2) appeals and rendered decisions of “no action” in these instances.

In the last academic year, no appeals to AAB decisions were submitted to the University’s Governing Council Academic Appeal Committee.

## **CONTINUING TRENDS WITHIN APPEALS**

### *Diversity of Membership*

In past academic years, the Board struggled to schedule hearings that achieved quorum due to the limited availability of its members. As relayed in last year’s report, in response to these challenges, the AAB worked with the Office of the Dean and the Engineering Society to increase the number of AAB members. Through these discussions, the size of the student representative pool was increased. This increase helped improve the scheduling of hearings, however, challenges remain.

In support of the Board’s goals to expand the diversity of its membership, the Board now has one female faculty member. We intend to increase that number in the coming years through targeted requests to the departmental and divisional chairs. Unfortunately, there are fewer female student representatives on the Board in 2018-19 than in previous years.

### *Declining Numbers of Hearings*

As is documented in Table 1, the number of appeals heard by the AAB continues to decline. This is in spite of the existence of an appeals information page on the Current Engineering Undergraduates website and continued promotion of the petitions process (which references appeals on the petition page) through social media and the Engineering Student e-News.

Anecdotally, students remain largely unaware of the appeals – and petitions – process, and assume that the decisions of Standing Committees are final. We will continue to explore ways of making more students aware of the appeals process, including through discussions with the departmental and divisional academic advisors. While mentions of the petition process are regularly promoted in the Engineering Student e-Newsletter, the November 2018 issue also included a specific mention of the appeals process as well.

### **EMERGING TRENDS WITHIN APPEALS**

#### *Domain and Tacit Knowledge*

Both turnover and the increased number of students within the AAB has demonstrated the volume of domain and tacit knowledge necessary to participate fully in the appeals process. While each hearing includes at least one representative from the Registrar's Office, members of the Board can easily become lost in acronyms, specific details of Faculty and University policies, and references to past AAB discussions.

Discussions within the Board on this issue have explored balancing the value of codified knowledge and history, with the risk of developing a de facto "How to win an appeal at AAB" guide. Given that the AAB is intended to consider each appellant's circumstances on their own merits, a codified record of past decisions is currently not seen as appropriate.

#### *Knowledge Transfer between the AAB and Other Standing Committees*

One possible explanation for the drop in the number of AAB appeals is that the Examination Committee has implicitly incorporated the results of past hearings into their decisions, resulting in fewer appealable petitions. Unfortunately, there is no formal nor semi-formal mechanism to determine whether this is the case; ad-hoc conversations among committee members is currently the mechanism for such knowledge transfer.

## **PLANS AND GOALS FOR 2018-19**

### *Improving the Gender Balance of the Student Members of the AAB*

As mentioned above, while the overall number of students on the Board has risen in 2018-19, the number of female students on the AAB has dropped. We will work with the Engineering Society to improve the gender balance on the Board.

### *Revisions to the AAB Manual*

Given the upcoming changes to the Faculty Constitution, revisions to the AAB Manual were deferred to the current academic year. Specific areas of focus for the revision include:

- Clarifying the composition of a hearing panel such that it must include at least one faculty member (where currently a panel consisting entirely of students is permitted).
- Clarifying – with support from the University’s lawyer – whether or not appellants can record hearings.
- Establishing a formal mechanism for transferring knowledge to other Standing Committees of Faculty Council.

### *Decisions and Suggested Preparation for an AAB Hearing*

Discussions within the Board on whether or not to provide increased substantiation to appellants when their decisions are released – a goal set for the 2017-18 academic year – concluded that such substantiation would not be appropriate given the Board’s mandate. However, from those discussions a draft set of more general “preparation points” (e.g. “provide a timeline of key events”) for appellants began to develop. We intend to codify these points and propose their inclusion on the Current Engineering Undergraduates website.

## **PROPOSAL/MOTION**

For information.