



**MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Faculty Council (October 31, 2019)

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

**Date:** October 15, 2019

**Re:** **Annual Report of the Academic Appeals Board to Faculty Council for the Period of September 2018 to September 2019**

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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 2018-2019 academic year, the AAB considered twenty (20) appeals on decisions made by the Examinations Committee. The table below shows the number of appeals heard over the past five (5) academic years:

<b>Academic Year</b>	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
<b>Number of appeals</b>	20	24	13	10	20

*Table 1 – Number of Appeals Per Academic Year*

The appeals considered in 2018-2019 can be further categorized as:

- Eleven (11) for considerations on final examinations
- Nine (9) for special consideration regarding Faculty policies

In thirteen (13) of the appeals, many of which introduced new documentation or elicited additional information during the hearing, the AAB found cause to intervene. Three (3) cases were referred back to the Examinations Committee based on the new evidence.

The specific remedies granted were:

- Assessed grade change
- Probation relief and waiving of the requirement to repeat passed courses
- Retroactive withdrawal status in three (3) courses changed to SDF
- Grades shifted from midterm to final exams in four (4) courses + no action on remaining in POST despite an insufficient sessional average
- Permission to enroll in one (1) non-core, non-repeat course in Fall term + waived loss of course credit in one (1) course due to term average
- Permitted to retain two (2) SDFs given two (2) missed make-up final exams
- Granted WDR in three (3) courses + permission to resume studies in the Fall term
- Changed WDR designation to INC
- Substitution of a final exam grade in an equivalent course, for a term grade

The AAB found insufficient grounds to intervene in the remaining four (4) 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.

## **IMPLEMENTED INITIATIVES**

### *Onboarding of Student Members*

In response to the high rate of turnover among student members of the Board due to their one (1) year term, the AAB instituted a set of short onboarding meetings with as many of the student members as could attend. These meetings involved the members, the Board Chair, the Board Secretary, and the Faculty Registrar, and were semi-formal discussions that focused on process and terminology. The meetings also allowed the members to share their interest in being part of the Board, and to begin to identify some of their, and the Board’s, biases.

The Engineering Society VP Academic also undertook some informal orientation with those members who could not attend the other meetings.

### *Instructions on Appealing to Governing Council*

At the request of Governing Council, decision letters from the Board now include more detailed instructions on how to appeal to the Governing Council Academic Appeal Committee. Previously the letters included a link to the appropriate web page.

## **CONTINUING TRENDS WITHIN APPEALS**

### *Diversity of Membership*

The Board continues to struggle to schedule hearings that achieve quorum due to the limited availability of its members, especially over the summer months. This year we instituted evening meetings in an attempt to meet our mandated timelines. Meeting quorum is an ongoing challenge that shows no sign of abating. Of note is that the Engineering Society has been able to provide a larger pool of students this year than in past years.

The gender balance on the Board has improved with four (4) female voting student members out of six (6) total. Unfortunately, we continue to have only one (1) female voting faculty member out of five (5) total.

### *Variation in the Number of Hearings*

As is documented in Table 1, the number of appeals heard by the AAB seems to have “rebounded” this year. However, this rebound is in part due to a small number of students who have submitted multiple (up to seven (7)) appeals.

One potential explanation for the lower number of AAB appeals over the last few years is an increase in the tacit information exchange between the AAB and the Examinations Committee. Informal conversations between the Chairs of the two committees have informed deliberations at the Examinations Committee level. The full appeals process includes an additional review by the Examinations Committee when new information is submitted by appellants, and this year the Examinations Committee resolved twelve (12) such appeals before they reached the AAB.

## **EMERGING TRENDS WITHIN APPEALS**

### *Unanticipated Consequences of Selected Policies*

A number of appeals this past year involved Faculty policies that were put in place to demarcate specific timelines for resolving (e.g.) SDF designations. Those policies do not anticipate that the initial remedy may be unsuccessful due to legitimate circumstances. Because of the demarcation and their mandate, the Examinations Committee is not in a position to deviate from policy and as such these cases are heard by the AAB.

### *Increases in Case Communication and Complexity*

Likely due to the efforts of the Examinations Committee to resolve student appeals within that Committee, the cases heard by the AAB have become subjectively more complex this year. This has impacted the time taken at the hearings, and on the amount of preparation undertaken by the Secretary and the Registrar's Office. The Secretary has also noticed a significant increase in the amount of back-and-forth communication with students on matters of process, and a perceived increase in the students' need for reassurance as they navigate the appeals process.

### **PLANS AND GOALS FOR 2019-2020**

#### *Revisions to the AAB Manual*

Given the imminent release of changes to the Faculty Constitution, revisions to the AAB Manual will take place during 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 legal counsel – whether appellants can or cannot record hearings

#### *Expanding the Potential Pool of Faculty Members*

To help expand both the number and diversity of the Board members – and as part of the revisions to the AAB Manual – we will approach the Dean's Office to determine whether faculty members from (e.g.) ISTEP, and from each of the programs in Electrical and Computer Engineering, Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, and Civil and Mineral Engineering, can be added to the Board membership.

### **PROPOSAL/MOTION**

For information.