



## **MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Faculty Council of October 31, 2023

**From:** Professor Donald Kirk  
Chair, Academic Appeals Board (Undergraduate)

**Date:** September 15, 2023

**Re:** **Annual Report of the Academic Appeals Board (Undergraduate) for the Period of September 1, 2022 to September 1, 2023**

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### **REPORT CLASSIFICATION**

The Academic Appeals Board (Undergraduate) reports directly to Faculty Council. This is a routine matter for Faculty Council's information.

### **ACADEMIC APPEALS BOARD RESPONSIBILITIES**

To hear appeals of U of T Engineering 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 AAB(U) shall report annually to the 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 & DISPOSITIONS**

During the 2022-2023 academic year, the AAB(U) considered 26 appeals on decisions made by the Undergraduate Assessment Committee (UAC), which is up from the 23 considered during the previous cycle and the 10 considered from 2020-2021.

In addition to the 26 appeals considered by the AAB(U), 13 appeals (up from five the previous cycle) were resolved at the UAC level (each appeal is first sent back to the UAC for a second review before proceeding to the AAB(U) if the UAC's original decision stands).

The following table shows the number of appeals heard over the past nine academic years:

Academic Year	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
No. of Appeals	20	24	13	10	20	18	10	23	26

*Table 1 – Number of Appeals Per Academic Year*

The appeals considered during the 2022-2023 academic year can be further categorized as the following:

- 12 for considerations on final examinations. An increase compared to the two considered in the previous cycle.
- 12 for special consideration regarding Faculty policies. A decrease from the last cycle that heard 21 special consideration cases.
- 2 for considerations on term-work.

In seven of the 26 appeals, many of which introduced new documentation or elicited additional information during the hearing, the AAB(U) found cause to intervene. The specific remedies granted were:

- Retroactive withdrawal (“WDR”) from a course and probation relief (1).
- Special sitting for a final examination deferral (2).
- A change from earned grades to assessed grades (1).
- Probation relief and nine-year graduation limit extension (1).
- Retain credit for a course (1).
- Re-take of the CSWA certification to receive a grade increase (1).

The AAB(U) found insufficient grounds to intervene in the remaining 19 appeals and rendered decisions of “no action” in these instances.

In the last academic year, one appeal to an AAB(U) decision was considered by the University’s Governing Council Academic Appeal Committee (AAC).

## **UPDATES, TRENDS & OBSERVATIONS WITHIN ACADEMIC APPEALS**

### ***Overall Upward Trend in Number of Appeals***

For the past two years, the AAB(U) has observed an increasing trend in the volume of submitted appeals for Board deliberation. Notably, the recently concluded 2022-2023 cycle experienced a peak in the number of appeals reviewed by both the UAC and AAB(U) for consideration over the course of the past nine academic years. Consequently, this has led to the AAB(U) scheduling hearings more frequently to address the higher number of appeal cases.

### ***Final Examination Appeals Regarding Deferred Exams and Assessed Grades***

The AAB(U) has noticed an increase in final examination appeals concerning requests for deferred exams from students who received an assessed grade due to missing a final examination. This past cycle, the Board heard eight cases pertaining to this issue, resulting in a heightened volume of final examination appeals in comparison to previous cycles. It is worth noting that the AAB(U) has consistently rendered a 'no action' decision for these cases due to insufficient justification.

Concerns have been raised by members of the Board regarding the frequency of cases sharing this same subject matter and that by the time these cases reach a hearing, the Board's capacity to assist students is constrained. In most of these cases, students submit their final examination petitions and appeals with the intention of taking the deferred exam during the deferred exam period immediately following the term in which they wrote their final exam (i.e., February for Fall Term exams and June for Winter Term exams). However, due to the procedural requirements of appeals being reviewed by UAC before reaching the AAB(U), the student's requested deferred exam period has passed by the time the AAB(U) convenes for a hearing. Consequently, the Board can only grant deferred exam accommodation for the next sitting, which are typically scheduled for the ensuing term if the course is offered, or in the following year if the course is exclusively offered during a specific term. Granting such requests places an additional academic burden on the student, who must shadow the course throughout the term and prepare for the final exam while balancing their other courses that term. This scenario raises concerns among AAB(U) members, particularly the student members who have experienced a similar situation, as this may negatively impact the student's performance in their other courses during that term.

In light of these concerns, the AAB(U) would like to collaborate with the UAC and academic advisors to ensure that students are aware that AAB(U) hearings are scheduled within 90 business days, potentially rendering their requested deferred exam period unfeasible. It is important that students are well-informed about this timeline to ensure they make informed decisions.

### ***Virtual Hearings***

The AAB(U) continues to conduct virtual hearings that each last for a one-hour period. Hearings are currently held via Microsoft Teams meetings (using both audio and video). Decisions are being communicated to students via PDFs delivered by email.

### ***Membership Turnover Timelines***

The Board faced difficulties in scheduling hearings that achieved quorum due to conflicting availability during the Summer Session. We have had much appreciated participation by Professors Francis Dawson (ECE), Harry Ruda (MSE) and Elham Marzi (ISTEP). Additionally, we appreciate the active participation of the student representatives from the 2022-2023 membership list, including Mihir Agarwal (Year 2 CivE), Matthew Du (Year 2 MechE), Amy Huang (PEY EngSci), Vashish Ramoutar (Year 4 ChemE), Aman Patra (Year 3 ECE).

The membership turnover date for the AAB(U) is September 1 each year. Faculty members and student representatives were identified earlier in the summer, as such the Board was able to host the onboarding session for new members earlier and have a smooth transition period between membership cycles. We are excited to welcome more Faculty members to the Board for the 2023-2024 cycle.

### ***Continued Increase in Case Communication & Complexity***

In line with updates from previous years, increases in case communication and complexity are likely due to the efforts of the UAC to resolve student appeals within that committee. As such, the cases heard by the AAB(U) have become subjectively more complex. This has impacted the time taken at hearings and the amount of preparation undertaken by the Secretary and the Registrar's Office.

Since the start of the cycle, we have requested more supporting documentation from the appellant, such as their course syllabus and grading details. This is to help the appellant be better prepared for any questions the AAB(U) may ask during the hearing. The request for additional supporting documentation is currently communicated by the Recording Secretary and is sent to the Academic Advisor.

Towards the end of this year's cycles, members requested more information on grades for cases relating to specific courses and final examinations. As such, the Recording Secretary now requests the term-work report from the Registrar's Office, Advisor and/or Course Instructor to provide to the attending members as part of the case's documents folder if the case relates to an individual course.

### ***Sensitivity to Cultural and Gender Issues***

During the summer, the Board consulted with Marisa Sterling, Assistant Dean, Diversity, Inclusion and Professionalism, U of T Engineering, on how to enhance the support for appellants who experience discrimination, harassment, or sexual violence. This consultation was beneficial for the Board to identify the steps to take during such cases and which university resources are the best to direct the appellant to. Following this consultation, the AAB(U) updated their onboarding material to further emphasize the importance of sensitivity toward the type of questions asked to the appellant and the importance of making sure the questions do not make the appellant uncomfortable.

### **RECOMMENDATION FOR FACULTY COUNCIL**

For information.