

The UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
GOVERNING COUNCIL
Report #438 of the Academic Appeals Committee
May 5, 2025

To the Academic Board
University of Toronto

Your Committee reports that it held a hearing on March 28, 2025, at which the following members were present:

Academic Appeals Committee Members:

Alexis Archbold, Chair
Professor Mark Lautens, Faculty Governor
Luke Calabretta, Student Governor

Hearing Secretary:

Karen Bellinger, Associate Director, Office of Appeals, Discipline & Faculty Grievances

For the Student Appellant:

R.H. (the “Student Appellant”)

For the School of Graduate Studies:

Professor John Peever, Vice-Dean, Students

I. Overview

This is an appeal from a decision made on July 10, 2023 by the Graduate Academic Appeals Board (GAAB) of the School of Graduate Studies (SGS). The GAAB denied the appeal of the Student Appellant from a decision of the Graduate Department Academic Appeals Committee (GDAAC) of the Department of Medical Biophysics (“the MBP”) at the Temerty School of Medicine. The GDAAC recommended dismissal of an appeal by the Student Appellant of the MBP’s decision to deny the Student Appellant’s request to be allowed to make a third attempt to pass the oral examination and thesis required to complete her Masters in Science (M.Sc.) program.

The Student Appellant appeals the GAAB decision on medical grounds claiming that challenging personal and other circumstances leading up to and during her unsuccessful oral exams should be sufficient reason for the MBP to allow her to make a third attempt to pass the oral examination and thesis.

II. The Facts

The Student Appellant is an international student from China who enrolled in the thesis-based M.Sc. program in the Faculty of Medicine’s MBP in the Fall 2018 term.

a) Program Structure and Relevant Policies

According to MBP Graduate Student Handbook, students in the program are expected to complete 2.5 credits via course work and conclude their studies by writing a thesis and defending this thesis at an oral examination. The time limit for the program is three years, notwithstanding that the student may be considered for a maximum of three one-year extensions. Each student has a supervisor and a supervisory committee. The purpose of the supervisory committee is to recommend courses, advise on proposed research, and monitor the student's progress. A student and their supervisory committee are expected to meet at least once every six months. At each meeting, the committee will assess the student's progress since the last meeting and evaluate both the student's knowledge and understanding of their own research, and the student's general knowledge and understanding of the field. After each meeting, the supervisory committee must complete an assessment form on which the student may also add their comments.

Students in the program culminate their studies by writing a thesis and defending this thesis at a final oral examination. The student's supervisor and supervisory committee approve the written thesis and confirm their opinion that the student is ready to defend. The student is required to distribute a printed copy of their thesis to an examining committee (the supervisory committee plus two additional members) at least two weeks prior to the final examination.

During the examination, the student provides an overview of their thesis and answers questions from the examining committee. Under exceptional circumstances, the examining committee may choose to adjourn the exam. If this occurs, the committee must reconvene within 6 months, otherwise the examination will be recorded as a fail. Only one adjournment is allowed.

The Medical Biophysics Graduate Student Handbook (MBP Handbook) outlines the student's responsibility for making adequate progress towards degree completion as documented by reports from the supervisory committee. It also outlines the grounds upon which the department may consider that a student's registration should be terminated:

- The student is not making academic progress
- The student has several unacceptable grades
- The student has shown sustained lack of progress as documented on supervisory committee reports, e.g. two committee meetings which report unsatisfactory progress
- Inactivity

When a student is enrolled in the program for longer than two years, both the supervisor and student must notify the department chair propose a plan for degree completion.

Section 6.2.3. of the SGS Calendar outlines the process and associated timelines for students experiencing personal difficulties: "Students with health problems or other personal circumstances which may adversely affect their performance in, or their ability to complete coursework, examinations, or other departmental or graduate program assessments may request special consideration. Students with long-term needs are encouraged to register with Accessibility Services. Written requests, supported by a medical certificate or other appropriate evidence, must be submitted to the instructor or the graduate unit as soon as possible. If a medical certificate is submitted, it must confirm the student was adversely affected by health problems and must show the dates of illness and that the physician was consulted at the time of the illness. If a student is affected by health problems or other personal circumstances during an examination that affect the completion of the examination, the student must notify the instructor or invigilator immediately; that is, the student should not wait until the end of the examination. Such notification must be followed up with a written request for special consideration as above."

Both the MBP Handbook and the department website outline additional supports that are available to students experiencing personal difficulties. Examples include:

- Information about compassionate leave for urgent family situations
- Information about leaves for reasons such as serious health or personal problems
- Information about a stipendiary fund for students who must take leaves of absence due to health issues (physical and/or mental health challenges)
- English language writing support for graduate students, including non-native English speakers
- Crisis and support services

The SGS also publishes a list of resources available to graduate students, including:

- How to seek disability accommodations
- How to get support as an international student
- How to get training for improving speaking/writing skills
- How to access resources for mental health, health, safety and wellness issues

b) The Student Appellant's Academic Performance

The Student Appellant started her program in September 2018. She completed her coursework in accordance with the department's minimum standards. The Student Appellant identified a supervisor, Dr. Graham Wright, and together they formed her thesis supervisory committee, which included Dr. Wright plus Dr. Angus Lau and Dr. Anne Martel.

The Student Appellant's performance started positively but quickly declined. The supervisory committee observed that the Student Appellant appeared to frequently misunderstand, or understand only on a superficial level, or omit, or incorrectly contextualize scientific information that would be considered foundational for any other student in the program. The Student Appellant would promise to undertake a particular research-related task prior to the next meeting but would not do so.

At each meeting, the supervisory committee clearly identified areas for improvement and assigned the Student Appellant specific tasks to undertake before the next meeting. At each subsequent meeting, they also clearly documented the tasks that the Student Appellant had not completed, and work that was submitted incomplete and late.

The scores the Student Appellant received on her supervisory committee's assessment forms worsened until she ultimately failed her fifth committee meeting on February 3, 2021. The Student Appellant disclosed on the assessment form that she had experienced imposter syndrome and peer pressure, and these factors had affected her mental health. The Student Appellant's supervisor recommended to the Student Appellant that she seek mental health counselling and directed her to review the information on the department's website about mental health resources.

Due to problems with her study permit, the Student Appellant took a leave of absence for the Winter 2021 semester and re-registered for the Summer 2021 semester. During the Summer 2021 semester, the Student Appellant's committee continued to observe and document that she was not making satisfactory progress. The Student Appellant failed her sixth committee meeting on September 24, 2021. The committee noted on the assessment form their concerns that the thesis would not be completed in a timely manner and the

Student Appellant would not be able to successfully defend the thesis. The Student Appellant acknowledged these comments and indicated her belief that she would be able to make progress and would focus on her thesis.

The Student Appellant sought her first extension to December 21, 2021. The MBP agreed to the extension in consideration of the Student Appellant's difficulties with her study permit and in consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges that it generally posed to students.

During October 2021, the Student Appellant's supervisor and Graduate Coordinator met with her several times to discuss the option to withdraw from the program. However, the Student Appellant insisted that she wanted to continue to work on her thesis. The department chair met with the Student Appellant in November 2021 to discuss the option to withdraw and/or the possibility of the department terminating her registration.

The department chair ultimately communicated to the Student Appellant on November 23, 2021 that he intended to terminate her registration in the program in accordance with MBP policy. In her reply of November 24, 2021, the Student shared that she had found it difficult to work in the hospital and experienced some depression as a result of living far from home, although she confirmed that "it had been getting better and better" in recent months. The Student Appellant indicated her desire to receive a second extension, until the end of March 2022, to continue to work on her thesis.

The department chair met with the Student on November 25, 2021. At the meeting, he agreed to a program extension to enable the Student Appellant to complete and defend her thesis. The department chair encouraged the Student Appellant to continue writing and adhere to timelines. To ensure rapid and regular academic support to the Student Appellant, the department chair also required that the Student Appellant submit weekly updates to her supervisor (copied to the department chair). The department chair cautioned the Student Appellant that if she failed to follow this plan, he would seek to terminate her registration.

The MBP approved the extension to March 31, 2022, with the caveat that the Student Appellant complete the written thesis prior to December 31, 2021. On the extension form, the department also made note of the Student Appellant's decision to continue in the program despite their reservations: "There are significant concerns that the student may not finish in this timeframe, but it has been agreed with Chair that they should be given the opportunity to try."

The Student Appellant did not meet the December 31, 2021 deadline to submit her written thesis but instead submitted an incomplete draft on February 21, 2021. Notwithstanding the department chair's caution to the Student Appellant that he would seek to terminate her registration in these circumstances, the department chose not to do so in an effort to allow the Student Appellant to continue working.

In the lead up to the final examination on March 31 2022, the supervisor and supervisory committee offered support and constructive feedback and cautioned the Student Appellant that her thesis was not up to academic standards. The supervisor and supervisory committee observed that the Student Appellant continued to miss deadlines, reschedule meetings, submit incomplete work, and not incorporate feedback.

Nonetheless, and in accordance with the Student Appellant's verbally stated wishes, she attempted to complete and defend her thesis at an examination on March 31, 2022, the last day of the extension period. At the final examination, the Student Appellant made her presentation, and the examining committee questioned her on the contents of her thesis. The examining committee found that the thesis was

incomplete, with extensive “tracked changes” visible on almost every page; they also found that the Student Appellant’s answers to their questions were unsatisfactory. The examining committee voted to adjourn the meeting and reconvene in six months. The Student Appellant did not mention any personal or technological issues prior to or during the first attempt at the final examination.

Immediately following the Student Appellant’s first attempt at the final examination, she was verbally advised that the examination had been adjourned, that she would receive a list of the questions that the examining committee had asked during the first attempt, and that these questions would be the only ones posed during the second attempt. On April 11, 2022, the supervisor provided the Student Appellant with a copy of their notes from the final examination in which they had recorded the questions that each member of the examining committee had posed to the Student Appellant. The Student Appellant also received feedback from each of the examining committee members. In total, the Student Appellant received 16 typed pages of feedback so that she could use the next six months to revise her work. The MBP approved a second extension to the end of September 2022.

The lead-up to the Student Appellant’s second attempt at the final examination was characterized by the same issues as before: delays, incomplete work, lack of incorporation of feedback, and lack of a polished written product. The Student Appellant’s supervisor continued to email and meet with the Student Appellant regularly throughout the summer of 2022, prompting her to submit revised drafts and incorporate feedback.

The final examination was scheduled for September 27, 2022 to allow the Student Appellant the maximum amount of time to complete her work in advance of her study permit expiration date of September 30, 2022.

Despite the requirement to submit a copy of the completed thesis to the examining committee no later than two weeks before the date of the exam, the Student Appellant provided a copy of her thesis on September 27, 2022, the date of the defense, five minutes after the final examination began. The Student Appellant offered no explanation to the examining committee about why it was late. Despite these unusual circumstances, the examining committee decided to continue with the oral questions and evaluate the written thesis if the Student Appellant’s presentation was deemed satisfactory. After asking their questions, the examining committee voted that the Student Appellant’s performance was Unsatisfactory. The Student Appellant did not mention any personal or technological issues during or prior to the second attempt at the final examination.

III. Decision

The Student Appellant challenges the SGS’s decision on medical grounds. She claims that challenging circumstances leading up to and during her previous two unsuccessful oral exams should be sufficient reason for the MBP to allow her to make a third attempt to pass the oral examination and thesis. The Student Appellant does not identify any errors in the GAAB’s decision.

The Student Appellant describes three challenging circumstances: 1) her mother’s cancer diagnosis; 2) COVID-related mental strain; and 3) technical issues during her second oral examination.

a) Mother’s cancer diagnosis

The Student Appellant claims that the profound emotional distress that she experienced because of her mother's cancer diagnosis negatively impacted her ability to focus on her studies and "hindered [her] cognitive functions and general enthusiasm for learning".

The Student Appellant did not raise this issue with her supervisor or make a request for an accommodation on the basis of her mental health. She has not supplied any medical documentation to support her claim. She raised this issue for the first time during her appeal of the GDAAC decision.

While your Committee is very sympathetic to the Student Appellant's circumstances, it notes that the Student Appellant's mother was diagnosed with cancer in July 2022. While this could have impacted her academic ability from that point in time until her exam on September 27, 2022, it does not account for the Student Appellant's failure over the several months prior to July 2022 to adequately complete her thesis and prepare for her oral exam.

The Student Appellant claims that she wasn't "fully aware of the appropriate channels for feedback and communication", however the GHB policies and materials are very clear about the options and her responsibility to raise any issues in a timely manner. In addition, she had more than one discussion with her supervisor and the Graduate Coordinator about available options and accommodations.

b) COVID-related mental strain

The Student Appellant claims that a waning job market as well as isolation from her peers, instructors, and her family had a negative impact on her mental health.

The Student Appellant did not make a request for an academic accommodation on the basis of her mental health at any time during her studies and raised this issue for the first time at this appeal. As noted, the Student Appellant has not provided any medical documentation to support her claim of mental health issues.

Again, while your Committee is sympathetic to the Student Appellant's circumstances, it notes that many other students experienced similar challenges during COVID, and the student had a responsibility to raise these issues at the time and request accommodations according to the MBP's policies. Again, the Student Appellant had more than one discussion with her supervisor and the Graduate Coordinator about available resources and accommodations. In addition, the MBP provided the Student Appellant with extensions totalling approximately one year in length in consideration of her challenges with her student visa and COVID-related issues.

c) Technical issues during the second oral examination

The Student Appellant claims that technical issues during her second oral exam negatively impacted her performance. She described hearing an echo during the Q&A portion of the examination that challenged her ability to comprehend and respond to "quickly articulated questions".

However, the examination committee reported that there was no evidence that there were technical issues or that the Student Appellant struggled to understand. The Student Appellant raised this issue for the first time during her appeal of the GDAAC decision. In addition, she was given the questions several months in advance and therefore should have been familiar with them.

The Student Appellant had a responsibility to raise this issue during the examination so that the examination committee could address it. However, even if there were no technical difficulties, the Student Appellant would have failed the examination anyway since the written thesis (representing the work completed prior to the examination) received a failing assessment.

IV. Conclusion

The Student Appellant does not identify any errors in the GAAB's decision. She has simply re-asserted similar evidence that she submitted to the GAAB with a request for a different outcome. Your Committee agrees with the SGS's submission that there is no evidence that the GAAB decision was unfair, improper, or failed to consider the issues the Student Appellant raised. In fact, the MBP approved extensions totalling over a year, provided consistent and extraordinary academic support, and made exceptions to its policies in consideration of the challenges the Student Appellant faced to support her to pass the program. Despite this, the Student Appellant failed to fulfill the responsibilities of graduate students and was unable to demonstrate that she met the academic standards of the department.

While this Committee agrees with the GAAB decision, it would like to note that there may be an opportunity for the MHB to improve its procedures to ensure that international students, especially those whose first language is not English, understand their responsibilities as graduate students to proactively raise issues impacting their ability to perform in the program. In addition to sharing this information verbally with students who are struggling, the program may consider following up by sending written email summaries of the information.

Appeal dismissed.