



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
ENGAGING THE WORLD

TO: Senate

FROM: Joy Johnson
Chair – Senate Committee on Agenda and Rules (SCAR)

DATE: June 26, 2025

SUBJECT: Decision and Recommendations from the Ad Hoc Senate Grade Appeal

SCAR has reviewed S.25-110 (Decision and Recommendations from the Ad Hoc Senate Grade Appeal) and is forwarding it to Senate for information.

MEMO

ATTENTION Joy Johnson, Chair—Senate Committee on
Agenda and Rules

FROM Mary O'Brien, Chair—ad hoc Senate Grade Appeal
Committee (January 2025)



RE Decision and recommendations from the ad hoc Senate Grade Appeal

DATE June 19, 2025

A Senate Grade Appeal Ad Hoc Committee was formed as per S.C. 25-3:

- a. to hear the grade appeal submitted to the Chair of Senate on January 8, 2025, and
- b. to have all such powers of Senate as may be required to conduct the hearing and to make a final decision on the appeal.

As set forth in S.C. 25-3, the Committee has submitted this report on its decision to Senate for information. It is important to begin by highlighting a few unique features of this appeal: a lack of clear oversight for assignment and reconsideration of the grade; errors in the handling of the case; and a protracted timeline, with two years lapsing between the assignment of the mark and the appeal hearing. The Committee notes that its decision and recommendations are based on the extraordinary confluence of factors of this particular case and feels that it is important that this ruling not set a general precedent for the handling of future appeals.

The appellant in the case requested the following a) a re-evaluation of the final project for a course; and b) policy revisions to “[a]ddress systemic issues within SFU's grade appeal process to ensure fairness and transparency.”

Based on the submitted documents and witness statements, the Committee deemed that the assessment of the final project was inequitable and that there were procedural errors that contravene relevant sections of Policy T20.01 in the assignment and reconsideration of the student's mark.

Regarding the student's grade for the course, the Committee determined that it would be impractical and excessively difficult for an external reviewer to fairly assign a grade to this project, as there was not adequate supporting information from the instructor, including sufficient records or notes, and importantly, no pre-existing rubric that would enable assessment of the student's final project in a way

consistent with the assessment of other students' projects. For these reasons, the Committee determined that the grade assigned for the course should be based on the remainder of the material submitted and marked in the course. This ensures that the grade student receives "shall reflect demonstrated achievement in meeting course objectives" (Policy T20.01, section 2.1.1).

In terms of policy, the Committee recommends changes to Policy T20.01 as outlined on the following pages. More importantly, however, the Committee would like to recommend several shifts in practice that might be more likely to effect real and lasting change when it comes to the culture of grading at SFU. The key recommendations are as follows:

- the development of centralized processes (e.g., within faculties) for the oversight of appeal cases. This should include the creation of checklists or best practices and timelines to ensure that each case is handled appropriately and efficiently.
- formal training and mentorship to those in leadership positions tasked with the approval of course outlines. This should include best practices for reviewing and providing instructors with feedback on outlines and grading procedures with the goal of improving adherence to and understanding of university policy.
- regular guidance for faculty members in the creation of course outlines, syllabi and marking rubrics to ensure transparent and explicit communication of expectations.
- common messaging regarding the role of attendance and the handling of absences to ensure that structured, organized, and safe learning environments are created to facilitate optimal learning for all students. The Committee notes that "unwritten rules" and assumptions are currently in place in some units. Greater clarity should be provided in advance of the start of courses around the role of classroom attendance and participation in final marks while also acknowledging unavoidable absences due to illness or disability. (For example, UBC clearly states expectations for attendance across the university:
<https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/attendance>)
- adoption and publication of transparent grading scale(s), at the departmental or course level, possibly drawing upon CEE'S published grading scales (<https://www.sfu.ca/cee/teaching-resources/new-faculty-resources/faculty-guide-to-teaching/grading-policies.html>).

Recommended changes related to T20.01

- Clearer, more accessible language throughout the document.
- Clarification of the following:
 - 2.1.1 Grades shall reflect demonstrated achievement in meeting course objectives.

A clear definition of “course objective” should be provided, especially as related to “course outcome.” We recommend that there be a requirement that course objectives be listed on course outlines as they relate to the grading criteria.

- 2.1.2 The general procedures to be followed in arriving at the final grade shall be clearly communicated to students and the Chair in advance. This may include, in various combinations, such items as results on a mid-term examination, a final examination, frequent tests throughout the term, classroom attendance and participation, projects, term papers, essays, laboratory work, evidence of extensive reading and so forth.

We recommend that instructors be required to provide a grading scheme /breakdown of assignments and their corresponding grade weight in writing before the term begins. We recommend providing a link to a resource such as this: <https://www.sfu.ca/cee/teaching-resources/new-faculty-resources/faculty-guide-to-teaching/course-outlines-and-syllabi.html>

The expectation in 2.1.2 should be more clearly distinguished from that in 2.2.1: “The Instructor is responsible for providing the Department Chair (normally six weeks in advance of the start of the semester) with a course outline and a statement setting out the course requirements and how these will relate to course grades.”

- 2.1.3 Students shall be advised of the general manner in which a grade will be assigned for any specific work required throughout the term. For example, if an essay is to be graded for style, format or documentation, the student shall be informed of that.

It is unclear how and how much in advance of an assignment’s due date students should be informed. We strongly recommend that this information be a) provided in writing; and b) shared as early as possible. Having this information available at the time of course selection allows students to make more informed decisions. At the very least, this information should be part of the course outline and preferably also via marking rubrics. Alternatively, this should be communicated within the first two weeks of class so that a student understands what they are committing to prior to the drop deadline.

- 2.2.1 The Instructor is responsible for providing the Department Chair (normally six weeks in advance of the start of the semester) with a course outline and a statement setting out the course requirements and how these will relate to course grades. If circumstances subsequently require a change in those requirements, the Instructor will provide students

with a statement setting out those changes within the first week of classes. Course outlines usually should advise students how marks will be allocated among such activities as final exams, mid-term exams, tests, term papers, tutorial participation, projects, laboratory work and any other requirements.

The Committee recommends that any changes to the requirements be a) approved by the Chair; and b) shared in the course management system.

- 2.2.2 The Instructor will grade and return as promptly as possible mid-term, essays and other course requirements.

While understanding that there may be exceptional circumstances that affect the promptness of returning grades, the committee recommends that an outer limit be added to clarify the notion of “prompt return.” For example, “The Instructor will grade and return as promptly as possible mid-term, essays and other course requirements. Course assignments will normally be graded and returned within two weeks of submission.”

- 2.3.2 The Chair is responsible for considering requests from Instructors to assign letter grades on some basis other than that stated in 2.1.2 above and to approve those requests in which the evidence suggests the alternative approach is warranted.
- 2.3.3 In special cases (i.e., after the first week of classes), the Chair is responsible for considering requests from Instructors to assign letter grades on some basis other than that stated in 2.1.2, having considered the merits of the request, to approve or disapprove it.

The Committee recommends that the relevant differences between 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 either be clarified or that the two points be combined.

Clarity should be provided regarding how students are made aware of such changes.

- 2.4.2 A Student who is unclear about the requirements for a course, or about the basis on which a grade will be assigned, or who is concerned about the marking of a particular assignment, is expected to seek clarification or to express his/her concern to the Instructor in a timely manner, normally within 10 days of receiving the information.

Clarification should be sought in writing.

- 2.4.3 A Student who is seeking reconsideration of his/her final grade in a course is expected to raise his/her concern with the Instructor without delay, normally within 10 days of the release of the final grade.

Concerns should be expressed in writing.

- 2.4.5 In the event that a Student is unable to contact the Instructor, or does not receive a timely reply from the Instructor, or wishes to pursue further a request for reconsideration of a grade after receiving a response from the Instructor, the Student may present in writing his/her request and supporting reasons for it to the Chair. Such a request will normally be submitted within 60 days of the release of grades.

Consideration should be given to shortening the timeline for such requests along the lines of the guidance provided by UBC (i.e., three weeks after a grade is first available <https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/review-assigned-standing>) While it is unclear whether speeding up the process would lead to better outcomes, the Committee notes that delays cause problems.

- 2.5.1 At each step in the process of responding to a student request to reconsider or appeal a grade decision, the Instructor, Department Chair, Dean and Chair of Senate shall respond in a timely manner, normally within 10 days of receiving the request.

Clarification of 10 business days would be helpful.

- 2.5.3 A Student who is concerned that his/her request for reconsideration has been inappropriately addressed at the departmental level may convey his/her concern to the Dean. The Dean will review the events and...

Clarification of Dean to “Dean or designate” would reflect current practice.