Dear Professor Seasons and Committee –

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Course Evaluation Project Team (CEPT)’s draft report of 7 November 2016. There is much we agree with in the proposal, notably the overall framing of course evaluations as important but flawed indicators in teaching performance. In general, we do see the added flexibility of the cascaded model as helping us achieve our teaching objectives more conveniently, and helping us to better incorporate feedback into course design.

However, we do want to express our grave concerns with the CEPT team’s inattention to inherent systemic biases against female and visible minority instructors. While noted briefly in the report, no meaningful solutions were articulated. As the community moves towards a new system, including making scores more widely available to stakeholders, a broader conversation is necessary.

There is much existing scientific research to support the presence of these forms of explicit and implicit discrimination within student course evaluations (see for example the sources cited in the draft report: Gregor-Greenleaf 2008; Kulik 2001; MacNell, Driscoll and Hunt 2014; Ory and Ryan 2001; Sinclair and Kunda 2000; Spooren, Brockx and Mortelmans 2013; Theall and Franklin 2001).

In the opinion of the undersigned, this fundamental flaw outweighs any of the advantages (such as convenience) the previous system and the proposed cascaded model have. Although the course evaluation project team has proposed a number of changes to the current system, including a cascaded model, a greater number of surveyed questions and online evaluation submissions, none of these address the key issue of systemic bias in student course evaluations. The design of the new course evaluation instrument as well as student training and awareness programs (with few motivating factors for all students to engage and fully participate) do not solve this problem, most notably the issues related to implicit bias.

Additionally, because of this fundamental problem of systemic bias, we are of the opinion that using student course evaluations to help determine job performance, promotion and
merit awards contravenes the University of Waterloo’s MoA section 7 on anti-discrimination. Consequently, a new more equitable method should be devised, such as structured evaluation visits by designated tenured faculty members.

Recognizing the importance of evaluating performance in the classroom, we hope that the CEPT team takes this into account.

Many thanks and in the spirit of collegiality,

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