

# Dalhousie School of Social Work Professional Suitability Policy<sup>1</sup>

**Approved by the Committee of the School March 2018**

## **Background**

The Dalhousie University School of Social Work is committed to the aspirations of the social work profession to advance social justice through critical inquiry and engagement in issues of equity related to people, animals, and the land. Moreover, the School of Social Work is committed to graduating students who meet the requirements of ethical practice, as defined by the CASW, in support of the communities they serve. Ethical principles form the foundation of these commitment.

Students enrolled at the School of Social Work are expected to demonstrate professional behaviours and qualities consistent with the CASW Code of Ethics as reflected in the Suitability Criteria listed below. Students who are in serious or repeated violations of the Suitability Criteria are at risk of exclusion from the program.

## **Purpose of Policy**

To build and sustain a school community that adheres to and reflects the core values and principles of the social work profession as detailed in the CASW Code of Ethics, and to meet the CASWE-ACFTS Standards of Accreditation 2.4.4 and 2.4.5.

**2.4.4:** The academic unit has a policy requiring that the performance of professional responsibilities of social work students be in accordance with the relevant social work codes of ethics.

**2.4.4:** The academic unit has a policy regarding the professional suitability of the students of the profession of social work. Students are made aware that serious or repeated violations of the Code of Ethics put them at risk of exclusion from the program on the basis of professional suitability.

These standards are in place to ensure that Schools of Social Work do not graduate students who are ill-suited for the profession by virtue of behaviour and attitudes at odds with social work values, and the skills and capacities demanded of the profession. That said, congruent with the core values of the profession, the School of Social Work acknowledges its responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of its community, including students, staff, and faculty members, in addition to the clients and staff of field placement agencies.

Students will be made aware of this policy upon admission, and they will be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the rights and responsibilities required of them in accordance with the CASW Code of Ethics.

## **Policy**

Students enrolled in the undergraduate and graduate programs at the School of Social Work are required to act in accordance with the Dalhousie University Student Code of Conduct and the social work values and principles found in the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2005):

Value 1: Respect for Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

Value 3: Service to Humanity

Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice

Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice

Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice

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<sup>1</sup> This policy draws on similar policies developed by the Schools of Social Work at Memorial University, the University of Windsor, and the University of Ottawa.

### Suitability Criteria

Students at Dalhousie's School of Social Work are required to demonstrate the following attributes and are expected to perform in all academic settings in accordance with the CASW's Code of Ethics. These criteria apply to all interactions between students, between students and staff, between students and faculty, between students and field supervisors, and between students and clients, in the context of their field placements.

#### ***Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons***

- Demonstrates a capacity to hear and an openness to viewpoints different from their own
- Assesses one's impact on others
- Demonstrates a willingness to encourage and facilitate inclusion
- Treats people with respect, honesty, fairness, and good faith
- Responds to and treats people in a manner that accords dignity and worth

#### ***Pursuit of Social Justice***

- Demonstrates a willingness to advocate against oppression and for social justice
- Acknowledges and understands the impact of Canada's colonial history and its on-going implications for Indigenous communities
- Connects the micro to the macro and demonstrates a capacity to contextualize
- Demonstrates an openness toward the experiences, perspectives, and practices of others
- Actively works toward cultivating the skills of critical self-reflection
- Demonstrates a commitment to intersectional allyship

#### ***Service to Humanity***

- Understands the multi-faceted harm of discrimination and oppression
- Deploys the principles of anti-oppressive practice
- Uses power responsibly and in the service of social justice

#### ***Integrity***

- Integrates and deploys professional values in the classroom, as well as in field placement settings
- Exercises judgement that is consistent with the values of Social Work and is congruent with relevant practice theory
- Identifies gaps in knowledge and skill, and makes efforts to fill those gaps
- Works constructively with supervisors and mentors
- Demonstrates an openness toward feedback on performance and demonstrates capacity for personal change
- Cultivates and exercises self-awareness
- Demonstrates a willingness to be challenged and take risks in professional development
- Engages professionally, assuming responsibility for decisions and respecting the time and labour of others
- Establishes clear boundaries in professional relationships appropriate to the practice setting
- Discloses, where applicable, previous relevant criminal infractions, criminal convictions, and/or allegations of professional misconduct under the CASW Code of Conduct

### **Confidentiality**

- Respects the importance of confidentiality and its centrality to positive therapeutic relationships
- Holds in confidence all material obtained in and through professional activities
- Holds in confidence any and all disclosures (of a personal or professional nature) in the classroom
- Respects people's right to privacy
- Understands the limits of confidentiality and is able to clearly communicate these limitations
- Seeks the necessary, appropriate supervision in navigating the limits of confidentiality

### **Competence**

- Communicates professionally both orally and in writing
- Remains up-to-date with relevant research
- Uses professional values and knowledge to guide efforts and decision-making
- Demonstrates an ability to critically evaluate outcomes of action and to modify approach as necessary
- Demonstrates a capacity to be punctual, dependable, and responsible in all tasks and efforts
- Is open regarding gaps in knowledge and limitations of skill-set
- Does not practice outside of skill-set and adheres to parameters of position
- Demonstrates self-direction where appropriate and assumes responsibility for one's own learning
- Deploys critical thinking skills
- Understands the importance of and strives toward a reflective and reflexive practice

### **Policy Application**

This policy applies to all students registered in Social Work at Dalhousie, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, upon their accepting the offer of admission.

The Dalhousie University School of Social Work requires that students admitted to the graduate and undergraduate programs conduct themselves in a professional manner consistent with the values and principles of social work with other students, faculty and staff, whether in field placement, in campus based or online classrooms, in electronic communication, and/or social media interactions. Serious and/or repeated violations of these values and principles puts students at risk of termination of field placement or dismissal from study at the School of Social Work. Any member of the School of Social Work community can bring forward to the Director a substantive concern regarding behaviours, biases, attitudes, and/or approaches incongruent with the CASW Code of Ethics.

In the event that a student is experiencing difficulties during the course of their studies, the School of Social Work at Dalhousie is committed to offering specific support by means of various interventions based on student needs.

That said, where a student has been found to have breached the Suitability Criteria as set out by this policy, in accordance with the CASW Code of Ethics, a range of sanctions may be imposed by the Director of the School of Social Work in concert with the school's Professional Suitability Review Committee, or depending on the nature of the infraction, the University's Discipline Appeal Committee.

The Professional Suitability Review Committee will convene under the following conditions:

- a. The student demonstrates behaviour contrary to the CASW Code of Ethics, as detailed in the Suitability Criteria above;
- b. Non-disclosure of criminal infraction or criminal conviction, and/or previous or existing allegations of professional misconduct;

c. Persistence and/or serious unethical behaviour which interferes with the ability to function within the learning environment (class room, field placement settings, and/or online course site), including but not limited to:

- Evidence that student is unable to exercise sound judgement
- Repeated and demonstrated inability to complete tasks associated with field placement and/or class room learning
- Evidence of persistent and/or inability to form and maintain professional relationships
- Evidence of discriminatory behaviour and/or attitudes
- Persistent lack of reflexivity concerning discriminatory behaviour and a lack of effort to change behaviour and/or attitudes identified as discriminatory
- Use of substances that interferes with ability to function within classroom, and/or field placement and impacts of capacity to provide safe, adequate care to clients
- Criminal behaviour (a charge and/or conviction for crimes such as physical assault, sexual assault, drug trafficking, or any other act that contradicts the profession's code of ethics and the suitability criteria listed above)
- Persistent and/or serious conduct that violates any Dalhousie policy in place intended to safeguard the well-being and safety of members of the student body, faculty, and staff

The committee will consist of 1) the Director of the School of Social Work; 2) two faculty members (one of whom will serve as chair); 3) one student representative; 4) one faculty member external to the School of Social Work, but from within the Faculty of Health.

A member of the School of Social Work will not be disqualified from sitting on the committee for the sole reason of previous contact with the student.

Students may be asked to not attend class, field placement, and/or other school activities until the review is complete.

### **Review Protocol**

A formal review of a student's suitability for the practice of social work can be requested by a faculty member and/or field instructor. In the request, concerns regarding the student's suitability will be detailed. The request will be reviewed by the director and the chairperson of the Professional Suitability Review Committee who will decide whether or not a review hearing is warranted. In the event that a hearing is warranted, the student will be notified and a copy of the request provided to them within five days. In addition to providing the student with a copy of the request, it is the responsibility of the Review Committee Chair to provide the student with the following information:

- That the allegation against them could lead to a sanction
- The composition of the Review Committee
- A copy of the School's Policy on Professional Suitability
- The time, date, and location of the hearing
- The student's right to an advocate
- The student's right to the information / evidence presented against them
- The student's right to an appeal

The review hearing will take place within three weeks of the original request submission. The student must be informed as soon as possible of the time, date, and location of the hearing, to a minimum of ten days in advance.

The student is permitted to raise concerns regarding any member of the Review Committee with the director. Concerns may include, but are not limited to potential bias and/or conflicts of interest. In such an event, the director will raise the issue with the Committee Member, who in turn, will be provided with an opportunity to respond. If the concerns are deemed justified, the Committee Member will recuse themselves and an alternative will be sought.

Under special circumstances, and where safety is a concern, the Director of the School is entitled to take immediate measures, including temporarily removing the student from academic activities.

During the review, the information concerning the student's suitability will be presented by the faculty member and/or field instructor who requested the review. Any and all written information used to document or dispute the case must be circulated, at least one week in advance, to both parties. Individuals who have relevant information or perspectives to contribute will be invited to attend the hearing and to present their information.

The student is entitled to an advocate, and information pertaining to accessing an advocate must be provided to them in writing by the director of the school in their communication with the student concerning the nature of the concern brought against them and the review hearings process.

During the hearing, the student will have the opportunity to ask questions and present their position regarding the concern brought against them. Provided that this information is circulated to the committee and the faculty member and/or field instructor, the student will also have the opportunity to provide evidence in their defense. That said, where information is of a personal and private nature, the student may request that this be shared only with the Review Committee.

Following the conclusion of the formal review, the Committee chairperson, in consultation with the committee, will meet privately to discuss the case and its outcome. A letter indicating the final decision, as well as the rationale for the discussion and a course of action will be written and provided to the student within two weeks of the hearing. The letter and relevant documentation will be placed in the student's file.

During this process, all communication will be delivered by email to the student's Dalhousie email address (dal.ca)

The formal review may result in a number of possible sanctions. These may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 1) The student will continue in the program with no conditions
- 2) The student will be given a written reprimand
- 3) The student will be referred to appropriate campus resources
- 4) The student will continue in the program but with conditions. These conditions will be monitored by the Director of the School, and must be met for the student to remain in the program.
- 5) The student may be required to temporarily withdraw from the program and/or repeat portions of the program of study, including field placement hours

- 6) The student will be required to withdraw from the program—in which case, a letter detailing the rationale behind the expulsion will be provided to the student. This letter will also indicate the conditions, if any, under which the student may be readmitted.

### **Appeals**

The student has the right to appeal any decision brought forward by the Committee, and must be informed by the Committee Chair for their right to do so.

### **Confidentiality**

Pursuant to the CASW's Code of Ethics, the Dalhousie School of Social Work is committed to meeting the highest standard in respect to maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of student information. This extends to students subject to review for issue related to professional suitability. That said, the school is equally responsible in protection of the public and service users. Therefore, in matters related to professional suitability, the school must balance its responsibility to the student in question and to others in the learning environment and community. Information, then, will not be kept confidential if it raises concerns about the student's capacity to engage professionally in accordance with the CASW Code of Ethics. To this end, where necessary, the School of Social Work reserves the right to share information concerning the case with the University or a third party.