

Lakehead University School of Social Work - Professional Suitability Policy

Rationale

The Lakehead University School of Social Work has an obligation to protect the safety and well-being of the students, staff and faculty as well as clients and staff of those organizations in which students carry out their Field Placements. The very nature of Social Work education and practice places Social Work students in a position of trust in relation to the vulnerable or disadvantaged groups with whom they work. As such, it is imperative that student behaviour and conduct is reflective of the core values and ethics of professional Social Work practice both inside the classroom and while in their Field Placements.

In order to ensure competency and professional suitability of our graduates, Lakehead University School of Social Work follows the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Standards of Accreditation (2012) expectation that, "The academic unit has a policy regarding the professional suitability of the student for 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 unsuitability." (SB/M 2.4.5)

Recommendations regarding concerns pertaining to professional suitability (such as impaired judgment, non-academic misconduct or breach of the Social Media Policy (Appendix S) could include continuation in the program, with or without conditions or dismissal from the School of Social Work.

Criteria for a Professional Suitability Review of a Student¹

Lakehead University School of Social Work reserves the right to assess a student's suitability under the following circumstances. This list is not exclusive of other behaviours of misconduct.

- Concealment of relevant information or distortion of the truth on the Application for Admissions to the School of Social Work or on the Placement Planning Forms and Documents;
- Serious and/or persistent conduct that contravenes Lakehead University policies, regulations, rules and procedures, including in particular the Code of Student Behaviour and Disciplinary Procedures
- Serious and/or persistent breaches of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) and Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice; including but not limited to:
- Evidence that a student cannot effectively exercise judgment with regard to professional boundaries with clients and/or colleagues;

¹ Based on criteria outlined in Barlow, C. & Coleman, H. (2003). Suitability for practice guidelines for students: a survey of Canadian social work programmes. *Social Work Education*, 22(2), 151-164. DOI: 10.1080/0261547022000058206

- Evidence of persistent and/or serious inability to form professional relationships;
- Persistent and/or serious medical condition that affects the ability to function within a professional context;
- Evidence of discriminatory behaviour or harassment that contravenes the Ontario Human Rights Code (as related but not limited to race, ancestry, origin, ethnicity, citizenship, creed, gender, sexual orientation, religion, marital status, age, socio economic status, political affiliation, disability or diagnosis);
- Persistent abuse or misuse of substances that interferes with the ability to function within a professional context;
- Evidence of criminal behaviour, including charges or convictions for criminal offenses such as physical assault, sexual assault, drug trafficking or any crime that may threaten the safety and well-being of vulnerable client groups in Field Placement settings; and
- Persistent or serious conduct that contravenes the policies of the university or of the Field Placement setting which cannot be resolved through feedback or negotiation and/or the Field Education Advisory Committee.

Criteria for Membership of Professional Suitability Committee

The committee shall consist of:

- Chair of the committee – faculty member; would designate alternate if directly involved with concern
- 2 Faculty members – not directly involved with concern
- 1 Field Education Coordinator – not directly involved with concern
- 1 Community representative – registered Social Worker experienced with Field instruction

Procedure for Review of a Student's Suitability for the Practice of Social Work²

Most concerns are resolved through a discussion between the student and the faculty member or Field Education Coordinator and Field Supervisor, and/or the Field Education Advisory Committee. However, occasionally it is necessary to have an additional discussion and review of the concerns. In some instances, a concern is resolved by a student withdrawing from a course (including a Field Placement) without penalty. There are time limitations related to course withdrawal.

This procedure outlines two levels of review, an informal review and a formal review. A student may be asked not to attend class, Field Placement and/or other school activities until the review process is complete. If a student is asked not to attend a class and remains registered in the class, arrangements will be made for course material to be covered.

Informal Review

² Based on procedures of McMaster University, School of Social Work Professional Suitability Policy

When a faculty member or Field Coordinator has concerns about a student's suitability for the practice of Social Work, the faculty member shall request a meeting with the student to discuss the concerns.

When concerns are identified about a student by another student, the student who identifies the concerns shall discuss the concerns with a faculty member or Field Coordinator who, depending upon her/his assessment of the complaint, shall request a discussion meeting with the identified student.

Following these meetings, the Professional Suitability committee will be consulted to determine whether to initiate an informal or formal review.

The request for an informal review meeting may be verbal or written. The faculty member, and/or student may invite another person to be present for the meeting to act as an observer or support.

The informal review will seek to determine the student's suitability for the practice of Social Work and may result in:

- a fuller understanding of the situation and no need for further action;
- an agreed upon plan outlining actions the student will take to address the concerns and the establishment of a date to review the student's progress; and/or
- a decision to proceed to a formal review

The faculty member will summarize in writing the results of the informal review and will provide the student with a copy of the written summary.

When concerns are identified by a field Supervisor and/or student, the field education coordinator will be involved with both parties to resolve field placement concerns at the time they arise. If the placement situation is unresolvable and the placement is terminated early by the student or the placement agency, the situation will be reviewed by the field coordinators and/or the Field Education Advisory Committee who will follow the process outlined in the Field Education Manual. Should the Field Placement Advisory Committee determine that the student placement issues violate the OCSWSSW Code of Ethics, contravene the policies of the university or of the field placement setting, or do not honour the affiliation to ethical professional standards of practice, the student may be referred to the Professional Suitability Committee. The recommendations of the Field Advisory Committee will be provided to the student in writing. The Field Education Advisory Committee review shall be considered the 'Informal Review' by the Professional Suitability Committee.

Formal Review

A formal review of a student's suitability for the practice of Social Work will be requested in writing by the Professional Suitability committee. The request will be addressed to the

Director of the School of Social Work with a copy of the request provided to the student. The concerns regarding the student's suitability for practice will be outlined in the request. The Director of the School of Social Work will provide, within one week of the request, written notification to the student and the Professional Suitability committee of this decision. If there is a decision to hold a formal review, the review will be scheduled for a mutually acceptable date, normally within three weeks of the written original request.

The Formal Review will be chaired by the Director or delegate. Members of the Professional Suitability committee and the student will attend. At the discretion of the Director or delegate, additional people may be required to attend the review:

- a program chair or director other than the one chairing the Review.
- faculty members, Field setting employees, students or any individuals who have relevant information or perspectives to contribute to the discussion
- the student may choose to have a person accompany them to act as an observer or support.

During the review, the information relating to the concerns about the student's suitability for practice will be presented by the Professional Suitability committee. Any individuals in attendance who have relevant information or perspectives to contribute to the discussion will present their information. Relevant documentation, if available, will be reviewed. The student will have the opportunity to ask questions and present his or her position regarding the concerns. Suggestions regarding possible remedies or sanctions will be considered. The student may request that only the Director or delegate hear information of a private nature. In this situation, the Director or delegate may ask all other parties to leave.

Following the conclusion of the formal review, the Director or her/his delegate in consultation with the Professional Suitability committee will decide upon a course of action. A letter stating the decision, the reasons for the decision and a plan (when one has been developed) will be provided to the student within two weeks of the formal review. A copy of this letter and relevant documentation will be placed in the student's file.

All written communications will be delivered by post or university email. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the School has her/his most recent mailing addresses.

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

1. The student will continue in the program with no conditions;
2. The student will be referred to appropriate campus resources. Depending on the nature of the concern, the student may be referred to the Student Accessibility Services (SAS), Student Health and Counselling Centre (Thunder Bay campus), The Wellness

Centre (Orillia campus), Harassment and Discrimination Officer, Gender Issues Centre, Aboriginal Services, or other resources established by university policies governing student conduct. The student may be referred to or requested to seek out a community resource to help them address the concern;

3. The student will continue in the program with conditions. These conditions must be met in order for the student to remain in the program. The conditions will include establishing a plan with goals, a time line, a description of how progress will be monitored and how the student will be evaluated. The conditions may involve a referral and attendance at counselling, advising and/or medical services. They may include attendance at workshops, courses or volunteer work. The student will report, with documentation, to the Director or delegate, within an agreed upon period of time, how she/he met the conditions. The student may be required to temporarily withdraw from the program or from Field Placement until the required conditions are met; or

4. The student will be required to withdraw from the program. The student will be given a written letter explaining the reasons for the withdrawal and the conditions, if any, under which they may be apply to be readmitted.

Appeals

The student will be informed that she/he has the right to appeal and should consult the Lakehead Appeals process outlined in the Code of Student Behaviour and Disciplinary Procedures.

<https://www.lakeheadu.ca/faculty-and-staff/policies/student-related/code-of-student-behaviour-and-disciplinary-procedures>

Confidentiality

The School's responsibility is to protect the public and future service users and matters of confidentiality are articulated in that context. The School is committed to meeting the highest standard of ethics with respect to maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the personal student information that we collect, use and disclose. The School of Social Work strives to protect the privacy rights of our students even when that student has been subject to a review of professional suitability as defined by this policy. However, the School will balance the student's confidentiality against the School's duty to protect others. Therefore, information disclosed will not be kept confidential if the information raises concerns about a student's capability of assuming professional responsibilities related to Social Work practice. It should be noted that the School of Social Work reserves the right to share information with the University or a third party as required by law.