

A Charter on Professional Conduct for Student Social Workers

Purpose

The Flinders University Charter on Professional Conduct for Student Social Workers (The Charter) sets out the expectations for student social workers, both on- and off-campus, throughout the course of their studies.

Policy Context

This Charter documents the shared and common expectations of professional conduct/behaviour across all settings including campus, online learning spaces, social media, placement-providing agencies, and in the wider community.

The Charter directly addresses the question of what is, and is not, professional conduct by providing concrete examples of observable behaviours. It is intended to be indicative, rather than definitive, and recognises the significance of *context* in relation to individual choices, actions and decisions.

Policy Scope

The Charter clarifies mutual expectations of student social workers and Flinders Social Work in order to guide discipline-specific decisions arising from assessment requirements and procedures in academic and field topics.

The Charter relates directly to the behaviour of student social workers including in relation to their peers, academic and professional staff, as well as the staff and clients of placement-providing agencies. It describes the expectations that Flinders University and external placement-providing agencies may reasonably hold in relation to the conduct of student social workers.

Importantly, expectations regarding professional conduct extend across on-campus and off campus and includes personal lives.

Assessment of professional behaviours should be embedded in all topics as a matter of course.

The Charter does not replace University policies and procedures in relation to student conduct in the areas of academic work (assessment and academic integrity), general

student behaviour, and work-integrated learning. Where a student is demonstrably in breach of university policies the appropriate process, as set out in the relevant policy documentation, will apply.

It is acknowledged that many placement-providing agencies will have formalised statements and/or principles setting out the professional standards and expectations of employees ('code of conduct'; 'code of practice'). While agency-specific standards also apply to student social workers on placement, they do not negate the expectations outlined in this Charter.

Brief definitions

Professionalism is conceptualised in relation to both Social Work specific requirements (Big P, or Professionalism) and professional behaviours more generally (little p, or professionalism).

Principles

The Charter sets out the principles and standards of appropriate professional conduct for student social workers. It commits to, and is grounded in, the core social work values identified by the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) in its Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010, pp. 12-13), namely:

1. Respect for persons;
2. Social justice; and
3. Professional integrity.

This Charter also recognises social work's commitment to the principles of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and aligned international conventions.

The Charter:

- reflects social work's central duty of care in relation to all matters concerning clients, their wellbeing and safety;
- reflects a commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of the clients of placement providing agencies;

- respects the work and related demands and responsibilities of practitioners in placement providing agencies;
- acknowledges that student social workers are primarily learners, not practitioners, and as such are not expected to function as an employee nor demonstrate that they are *fit to practice* on placement (the term 'fitness to practice' relates only to graduates);
- views student social workers as interactive agents, able to reflect and learn from their professional relationships across university, placement, and community settings;
- reflects the mutual obligation of both students and educators to conduct themselves professionally;
- recognises that while placement-providing agencies are, first and foremost, human service organisations, they also operate as important learning environments for practitioners and students alike; and
- commits to principles of natural justice, that is, to act fairly, without bias, and ensure that all parties are heard, when concerns are raised regarding the conduct of students and/or staff and/or placement providing agencies.

Foundations in The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics and Practice Standards

Underpinned by the AASW Code of Ethics, the AASW Practice Standards outline the professional practice expectations and responsibilities of all social workers and, in turn, inform the standards for social work education as set out in the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards ([ASWEAS](#)). In the ASWEAS, the AASW makes explicit the expected outcomes of social work programs through its summary of the nine attributes of Australian social work graduates ([ASWEAS 2024 p27- 29](#)).

The AASW Code of Ethics ([AASW 2020](#)) and the Practice Standards ([AASW, 2023](#)) provide the foundations for professionalism in social work. Of the three values identified as core to social work in the Code of Ethics, the third – *professional integrity* ([AASW, 2020, p. 10](#)) - is directly relevant here:

The social work profession values honesty, transparency, reliability, empathy, reflective self-awareness, discernment, competence and commitment.

Members of the social work profession:

- Apply knowledge and skills in ways that prioritise the needs of others over personal gain.
- Responsibly use power and authority in ways that serve humanity.
- Make considered and ethically accountable professional decisions.
- Maintain a high quality of professional conduct and behave with dignity and responsibility.
- Ensure ongoing professional competence by participating in and contributing to their own life-long learning, education, training and supervision, and that of other social work practitioners and students.

While this conveys the *spirit* of social work as a profession, it is less effective for providing specific guidance and feedback to student social workers. Thus, the challenge for us, as social work educators, is to translate – or operationalise – these more generic principles in ways that contribute usefully to our thinking about and assessment of student social workers.

Components

The elements of professionalism covered in the ASWEAS graduate attributes encompass both social work specific (e.g. understanding of and commitment to social work values and ethics) and more generic (e.g. effective communication skills) aspects.

Professionalism, or '*Big P*' *Professional Conduct*, concerns professional conduct as it relates to Social Work as a profession, thus acknowledging the range of expectations that go 'beyond the personal moral obligations of an individual' (Professions Australia, 2016).

Professionality – or '*little p*' *professional conduct*– relates to professional behaviours more generally, that is, broader understandings of 'appropriate' workplace behaviours.

'Little p' professionalism is closely related to, but nonetheless distinct from, the 'Big P' realm. For example, 'little p' professionalism might be conceptualised in terms of personal qualities –honesty, reliability, and so on – and related behaviours (such as punctuality,

respectful communication, etc.). These qualities and behaviours are clearly inherent to but do not, in and of themselves, constitute Big P Professionalism. This distinction, while subtle, is critical; in practice, however, it can be difficult to disentangle one from the other. Thus, the standards outlined in this Charter reflect the interrelatedness of the 'little p' and 'Big P', by recognising the importance of both to Social Work education and to social work practice more generally.

Professional conduct, for the purpose of this Charter, is conceptualised in terms of three dimensions or domains:

1. dealing with tasks/work.
2. dealing with others; and
3. dealing with oneself.

1. Dealing with tasks/work

The elements of professional conduct in this domain include:

❖ Organisation and Time Management

For example:

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| ✓ Plans for and meets deadlines | – Fails to manage workload |
| ✓ Distinguishes between higher and lower priority tasks and acts accordingly | – Rushes or cuts corners in order to complete work |
| | – Displays consistent poor timekeeping |

❖ Effort and Initiative

For example:

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| ✓ Shows interest and initiative, is curious and asks questions | – Appears uninterested and disengaged |
| ✓ Actively looks for things to do/be involved in | – Waits to be told what to do |
| ✓ Introduces self to workers/peers | – Needs frequent reminders |
| ✓ Follows through on tasks and activities | – Uses mobile phone or other devices for personal reasons during class and/or placement time |
| ✓ Able to work independently (relative to stage of development) | – Fails to honour commitments |

❖ Responsibility and Accountability

For example:

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| ✓ Attends University and placement-related appointments and activities reliably and punctually | – Is consistently late or absent without leave |
| ✓ Respects and adheres to placement agency's policies and practices | – Takes leave without approval |
| | – Uses agency resources for personal purposes |
| | – Ignores regulatory and legal requirements |

- ✓ Is aware of and adheres to relevant regulatory, legal and ethical obligations
- ✓ Recognises and manages actual and potential conflicts of interest and duties
- ✓ Applies social work values, knowledge, evidence and skills consistently and openly
- ✓ Participates in ongoing social work learning activities
- Ignores social work values, knowledge, evidence and skills in agency work
- Fails to take responsibility for ongoing learning

❖ Information Management

For example:

- ✓ Is able to produce coherent written communication appropriate to the circumstances
- ✓ Records and reports information accurately
- Engages in misleading verbal or written communication (regarding what is said and what is not said)
- Fails to keep appropriate records
- Uses social media/technology inappropriately (including public expression of discriminatory views)

2. Dealing with others

The elements of professional conduct in this domain include:

❖ Communication

For example:

- ✓ Communicates clearly, coherently and respectfully
- ✓ Understands and responds to verbal and written (including electronic)
- Is generally non-communicative or fails to communicate appropriately
- Communicates in ways that are unclear and/or disrespectful

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| <p>communication and in a timely manner</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Recognises and responds appropriately to non-verbal cues ✓ Responds appropriately to exchanges/encounters in the University (e.g. tutorials, online forums and discussions) and field placement settings (e.g. interviews, meetings) ✓ Interacts respectfully with peers and others including University and placement agency staff ✓ Works collaboratively with others in team and group settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Does not listen to or demonstrates disregard for the views and opinions of others |
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❖ Privacy and Confidentiality

For example:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Demonstrates appropriate behaviour with confidential information in both classroom and field placement settings ✓ Respects the rights and privacy of clients at all times, including confidentiality of records | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Discusses client and/or agency details in public areas or through social networks/social media – Fails to respect the rights and choices of people who use services |
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❖ Respectful and Ethical Behaviour

For example:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Maintains appropriate personal boundaries at all times ✓ Recognises and is sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Behaves in ways that discriminate, offend and/or harm others (or that have the potential to do so) – Blurs or violates personal-professional boundaries including |
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- ✓ Is aware of the personal/emotional implications of the client/worker relationship
- ✓ Is respectful to others including fellow students, University staff, clients, agency staff, etc.
- ✓ Engages and relates appropriately in individual and group settings including tutorials, supervision and online/in-person learning
- electronically or in relation to social media
- Is dishonest (overtly misleading by omission)
- Accuses staff or clients of improper behaviour or motivations without evidence or without regard for the other person
- Shows lack of regard for confidentiality (clients, peers, agency) e.g. discusses client details or agency business in public areas or online social networks

3. Dealing with oneself

The elements of professional conduct in this domain include:

❖ Reflective Insight and Self-Management

For example:

- ✓ Has insight into impact of values, prejudices, etc. on own behaviour and interactions with others
- ✓ Copes with own emotions and behaviour when interacting with others
- ✓ Deals calmly with uncertainty
- ✓ Dresses appropriately for the circumstances/setting
- ✓ Engages in appropriate self-care activities
- ✓ Considers implications of prescription or other medications on own capacity and performance
- Shows lack of self-awareness particularly regarding impact of own behaviour on others
- Fails to recognise and take responsibility for feelings/behaviour
- Overlooks the impact of own beliefs, values and assumptions on ethical and other decision-making
- Is under the influence of alcohol and/or other drugs during university class time and/or placement

❖ **Supervision and Feedback**

For example:

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| ✓ Is receptive to feedback | – Has difficulty engaging with or receiving feedback, both/either formal (e.g. assignment feedback, supervision, mid-placement assessment) and informal (e.g. peers, tutorials and other educational settings, class interaction, etc.) |
| ✓ Responds positively and non-defensively to questioning, suggestions and alternative views | |
| ✓ Seeks out and explores feedback and uses this as a basis for improvement | |
| ✓ Is willing to be self-reflective and self-corrective | – Avoids, is resistant to, or fails to engage with supervision |

❖ **Competence**

For example:

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| ✓ Recognises limitations of own competence | – Displays overconfidence or confidence out of keeping with abilities/experience |
| ✓ Identifies situations which are outside of their scope, knowledge or skill base | – Fails to seek/follow guidance |
| ✓ Recognises when personal experience and/or reaction may negatively impact on performance/practice | – Refuses to help when it is clearly required |
| ✓ Requests supervision/assistance when appropriate/necessary | – Undertakes tasks/client work, etc without communication with appropriate staff/supervisors |
| ✓ Modifies practice in response to own limitations (including illness, impairment) | |

References

Australian Association of Social Workers. (2023). *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards*. Retrieved from <https://www.aasw.asn.au/education-employment/higher-education-providers/asweas-2024/>

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