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 professionality).

**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 (refer AASW, 2015, pp. 10-13).

The AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010) and the Practice Standards (AASW, 2013) 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, 2010, p. 13) - 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’ professionality 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:*

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

❖ **EFFORT AND INITIATIVE**

*For example:*

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

❖ **RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

*For example:*

- ✓ Attends university and placement-related appointments and activities reliably and punctually
- ✓ Respects and adheres to placement agency’s policies and practices
- ✓ Is aware of and adheres to relevant regulatory, legal and ethical obligations
- ✓ Recognises and manages actual or potential conflicts of interest and duties
- ✓ Applies social work values, knowledge, evidence and skills
- • Is consistently late or absent without leave
- • Takes leave without approval
- • Uses agency resources for personal purposes
- • Ignores regulatory and legal requirements
- • Ignores social work values, knowledge, evidence and skills in agency work
- • Fails to take responsibility for ongoing learning
consistently and openly.
✓ Participates in ongoing social work learning activities

❖ 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) communication and in a timely manner
✓ 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

• Is generally non-communicative or fails to communicate appropriately
• Communicates in ways that are unclear and/or disrespectful
• Does not listen to or demonstrates disregard for the views and opinions of others
- **Privacy and Confidentiality**

  **For example:**
  - 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
  - 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

- **Respectful and Ethical Behaviour**

  **For example:**
  - Maintains appropriate personal boundaries at all times
  - Recognises and is sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others
  - 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
  - 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 electronically or in relation to social media
  - Is dishonest (overtly misleading or 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 & 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:

✓ Is receptive to feedback
✓ 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

• Has difficulty engaging with or receiving feedback, both/either formal (eg assignment feedback, supervision, mid-placement assessment) and informal (eg peers, tutorials and other educational settings, class interaction, etc.)
• Avoids, is resistant to, or fails to engage with supervision

❖ COMPETENCE

For example:

✓ Recognises limitations of own competence
✓ Identifies situations which are outside of their scope, knowledge or skill base
✓ Recognises when personal experience and/or reaction may

• Displays overconfidence or confidence out of keeping with abilities / experience
• Fails to seek/follow guidance
• Refuses help when it is clearly required
negatively impact on performance / practice
✓ Requests supervision / assistance when appropriate/necessary
✓ Modifies practice in response to own limitations (including illness, impairment)

• Undertakes tasks/client work, etc without communication with appropriate staff/supervisors
References


