SOCIETY of GRADUATE STUDENTS

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Dear Richard Florizone,

Dalhousie University President and Vice-Chancellor

The Executive of the Society of Graduate Students (SOGS) of Western University are writing to express concern regarding Dalhousie University’s decision to pursue disciplinary action against Masuma Khan, Vice President (Academic and External) of the Dalhousie Student Union and a woman of colour, for expressing a political opinion on her personal Facebook page.

We have decided to speak out on this issue because an attack on academic and personal freedom at a Canadian university sets an unacceptable precedent. Khan spoke honestly about our country’s problematic history of colonialism, an issue with which our own government continues to struggle. Even if the content of what an individual has to say is unpopular or viewed as unpleasant, the pursuit of truth in an academic setting relies on the institutional protection of every student’s right to express themselves.

Dalhousie University’s actions in Khan’s case appear to be an overreaction. Understandably, Dalhousie has been subject to increased public criticism stemming from the 2015 incident with its Dentistry students. When news broke of incitements to violence and criminality within the “Class of DDS 2015” Facebook group, Dalhousie University spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to deal with the fallout.[[1]](#footnote-1) The result was little more than “boys will be boys”. To date, their only punishment, despite their gleeful discussions of raping their female colleagues, was to participate in educational workshops and group discussions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is therefore shocking that Dalhousie University would follow a remotely similar course of action[[3]](#footnote-3) in these two extremely different situations. It is particularly concerning since Khan was attempting to publicly express her frustration at a system ultimately designed to silence her voice as a woman of colour. The SOGS Executive stands in solidarity with Masuma Khan and echoes her sentiments that it is inappropriate for Dalhousie University “to tell racialized students how they can talk about their lived experiences.” The University’s decision to discipline Khan for expressing a legitimate political opinion is out of step with the values of academic freedom and political expression. It is especially unsettling that Dalhousie University wishes to escalate Khan’s case to disciplinary action given that Dalhousie’s Dentistry students, who engaged in hate speech, were only granted access to restorative justice methods.

We strongly recommend that Dalhousie University administration be required to partake in diversity training, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by racialized students in order to ensure that they are able to express their political opinions—especially pertaining to their lived experiences as racialized members of Canadian society—without fear of reprisal.

We trust that the Dalhousie University Senate Disciplinary Committee will make the right decision in the case of Masuma Khan, and in future cases of political expression and dissent.

Sincerely,

The SOGS Executive

1. <http://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/dalhousie-s-dentistry-scandal-a-costly-lesson-in-communications-1.3212800>    [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/men-involved-in-dalhousie-dentistry-scandal-apologize-for-postings-1.2259817> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/dalhousie-student-leader-faces-backlash-for-criticizing-white-fragility/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)