

Dalhousie drops disciplinary hearing over student's Facebook post

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Dalhousie University will not hold a disciplinary hearing in the case of Masuma Khan, the student leader who wrote a Facebook post in which she used profanity while criticizing the 150th celebrations for Canada's Confederation.

Concern over hateful and violent social-media messages Ms. Khan was receiving, as well as a growing sense that a disciplinary process would not lead to respectful and constructive campus dialogue, prompted the decision, said Arig al Shaibah, the vice-provost of student affairs.

"It was undermining the values of respect, inclusion and safety," Dr. al Shaibah said. "We are seeking to reduce harms with this course of action."

For the past week, Dalhousie has been at the centre of a relentless national storm over how it handled a student complaint that alleged a Facebook post Ms. Khan wrote was discriminatory against "white people who celebrate Canada Day." An informal coalition of free-speech advocates and Indigenous and anti-racism activists have supported Ms. Khan, and accused the university of abandoning its commitment to diversity and to freedom of speech.

The case showed the university the need to help students talk to each other constructively about inclusion and respect, Dr. al Shaibah said.

"This is not about a single complaint, it's about how these issues recur on our campus. We need to pro-actively think about how we engage with one another face-to-face and get away from having a vitriolic discourse on social media," she said.

Since the controversy broke, Ms. Khan has received violent, misogynist and racist messages, and threats that she said in past interviews had her family worried for her safety.

The decision to end the process will likely give the university some time outside the spotlight to examine how it could have addressed the issue better. But it is not clear if it will close Ms. Khan's case.

"Masuma will be considering her legal options for holding the university accountable for the harm it has caused her during this process," said Nasha Nijhawan, the lawyer from Nijhawan McMillan Barristers, who took on the case pro bono.

Ms. Khan, a fourth-year student of international development, said the cancellation of the disciplinary hearing scheduled for the end of November also means she no longer has a chance to explain why she was so impassioned in her post.

The controversy stemmed from the decision by the Dalhousie Student Union to pass a motion condemning Canada 150 celebrations over what the union saw as an erasure of the country's troubled and exploitative relations with its Indigenous people. While that motion passed by a wide margin, it led to a heated online discussion between those who believed a student union had no business wading into politics and Ms. Khan, who wrote: "I stand by Indigenous students. ... Be proud of this country? For what? Over 400 years of genocide? Over 400 years of assimilation? ... The stealing of land? The intergenerational trauma. No, not today privileged white people."

Her Facebook post began with the words "At this point, f*** you all," and ended with the hashtag "#whitefragilitycankissmyass."

The complaint about the message led to an investigation by Dr. al Shaibah, who concluded that Ms. Khan did not target white people, but violated a provision of the student code of conduct that prohibits "unwelcome" or "persistent" actions that make another person feel "demeaned, intimidated or harassed."

One of the few student representatives to vote against the original motion condemning Canada 150 celebrations said she was disappointed that the university would not proceed with the hearing.

"It's hypocritical to have a code of conduct that they don't have the courage to enforce," said Mary MacDonald, the representative for students with disabilities. Diverse political views are missing from this campus debate, Ms. MacDonald added.

"They would argue there is diversity that you can see with your eyes," she said. "But there isn't diversity that you can hear with your ears."