

Dalhousie defends free expression as student faces hearing over Canada 150 post



Masuma Khan poses in this undated handout photo. The fourth-year Dalhousie University student faces disciplinary action after another student lodged a complaint alleging her comments in an online post discriminated against white people.

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Dalhousie University firmly believes in freedom of expression and critical dialogue, the university said Friday, in response to questions about how it has handled a complaint about a student leader's comments on Facebook.

Masuma Khan, an executive member of Dalhousie's student union, is facing a disciplinary committee after another student complained that one of her Facebook posts condemning Canada 150 celebrations was racist against white people.

"The university considers both critical dialogue and freedom of expression as fundamental principles that should guide all of our work," said Arig al Shaibah, the vice-provost of student affairs, in a statement posted on the university's website.

"Universities must be places where diverse perspectives can be expressed, explored and examined, through meaningful, thoughtful, constructive and respectful dialogue."

An investigation by Dr. al Shaibah conducted over the summer found that the language and tone of Ms. Khan's Facebook post violated the student code of conduct's provision against demeaning, intimidating or harassing another person. Ms. Khan, however, did not target a specific group, Dr. al Shaibah concluded.

"At this point, f*** you all," Ms. Khan began the 150-word message. "I stand by the motion I put forward. I stand by Indigenous students." ... She signed off with the hashtags #unlearn150, #whitefragilitycankissmyass and #yourwhitetearsarentsacredthislandis.

Her message was written in response to another post by the Nova Scotia Young Progressive Conservatives that criticized a motion by the student union to not participate in Canada 150 celebrations. In a letter detailing the investigation, Dr. al Shaibah said "the choice of language and tone used in the Facebook post, particularly given that the respondent is an executive member of the Dalhousie Student Union (DSU), was very concerning. It certainly did not model, nor was it conducive to, the kind of respectful and constructive discourse which Dalhousie expects from all of its students ..."

Ms. Khan was told the issue could be resolved informally if she agreed to attend training sessions on coalition-building and wrote a reflection on what she learned. But Ms. Khan wants to defend herself in a formal hearing.

"For me, being in this situation, I made the decision [for] Dalhousie students: 'If you ever go through something like this, you shouldn't,'" she said in an interview. "If the university puts them through what they are putting me through, I want them to know that there is a way out and you can stand for yourself."

Because Ms. Khan did not agree to an informal resolution, the university had no choice but to convene a formal tribunal that will hear the case, the university suggested in its statement. Dalhousie wants the tribunal to direct Ms. Khan to attend the training sessions and reflect on the episode.

"[We] engage in efforts to resolve issues through informal, educational and conversational means. If individuals involved are not agreeable to informal means ... the [Code of Student Conduct] dictates that the matter must be referred to the Senate Discipline Committee for a hearing," the university's statement said. The case has once again raised questions about how universities strike a balance between encouraging robust debate and protecting students from the effects of hateful speech. That question has rocked campuses across North America as far-right speakers have clashed with protesters.

The current Dalhousie case, however, falls in a more unusual category where white students are complaining of reverse racism.

"Specifically targeting 'white people' who celebrate Canada Day is blatant discrimination on the basis of skin colour and ancestry," said the original complaint from Michael

Smith, a graduate student in history. "[Ms. Khan] also assumes that only white people celebrate Canada. Khan, who is ironically an immigrant herself, is attacking me and every other Canadian of European descent as promoting oppression and colonialism simply by virtue of our skin colour"

Ms. Khan was born and raised in Halifax.