UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE HIGHER EDUCATION CORPORATION

SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL WORK

CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY

This policy was approved for use by the School Academic Committee – Health and Social Work on 08 July 2024 and supersedes all previous versions from that date.

SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL WORK CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY

Introduction

This policy document sets out the school policy relating to the use of information associated with practice/work-based learning. Section 1 is designed to inform students and academic staff within the school of the standards expected in relation to the management of confidential information. Section 2 details the procedure for dealing with breaches in confidentiality. Where the term student is used it refers to all students and learners.

Section 1:

Policy Guidance for Students

1.1   To facilitate the integration of theory and practice students will be asked to explore and reflect on a range of personal experiences they have had whilst in a practice and work placements including visits. This exploration may be within informal contexts such as student group discussions or within the context of assessment. Maintaining the confidentiality of information about service users, peers, assessors, mentors, staff, and organisations is an important part of professional practice and students should be made aware of the relevant code of professional conduct.

1.2   Details of information gained in a practice or work placement should only be disclosed on a strict need to know basis. This includes all information that is not in the public domain, this may relate to individuals, organisation or commercially sensitive information. If information collected whilst in practice or work placement forms part of an in-course assessment or online work, classroom, practice or online based discussions the details should be presented in such a way that confidentiality is maintained. Where information such as literature aimed at service users and public or organisational policy is presented that is already in the public domain, the student is permitted to divulge organisational details. If organisational information that is not in the public domain is included removal of identifying information must occur and this should be acknowledged in the text and any reference lists.

1.3   Students must maintain anonymity of all practice and work information, which might lead to the identification of individuals. In presenting service user identifiable information such as pictures, photographs, audiotapes or other images, students should ensure the information is anonymised so as not to identify an individual directly or indirectly. Anonymisation in this instance requires the removal of any detail or combination of detail that might support identification.

1.4   Students should additionally protect confidentiality by using pseudonyms for the names of both individuals and organisations. Students must acknowledge this action has been taken at the beginning of their presentations or written assignments. Where names of individuals and organisations have been erased or obliterated, the student must ensure no text is decipherable.

1.5   Students should seek guidance and support from their lecturers, placement assessors, supervisors, mentors or personal tutors if they require further clarity relating to the

processing of individual or organisational identifiable information.

Policy Guidance for Academic Staff

1.6   Where appropriate, canvas sites should make specific reference to the School Confidentiality Policy. Where exception from compliance to this policy is necessary owing to the nature of the assessment for the module this must be clearly articulated in the relevant canvas site. The circumstances that constitute an exemption must be made explicit. In such instances, it must also be made clear to students what constitutes a breach in confidentiality. An example where exemption may apply would be where a student needs as part of the assessment process to compile a practice learning log or a written record of achievement. In such a case, data would need to be anonymised in terms of service user information; however, it is acknowledged that, if the evidence must be verified by a practitioner, the signature of the practitioner would provide indication of the name of the individual and host organisation. A case for exemption would therefore apply as the signature is needed to ensure the assessment is valid.

1.7   Where it is necessary to obtain explicit written consent or permission from an individual(s), for example in a detailed case study or where photographs, images are to be submitted, the process should be clearly documented in the published assessment guidelines included within the relevant canvas site. Reference should be made to relevant codes of practice. Evidence of permission and consent should not be submitted but stored by the student in such a manner to demonstrate compliance with the relevant ethical committee guidance. In exceptional circumstances, access to stored consent forms may be required as part of the assessment process. All letters of correspondence associated with such work must be anonymised.

1.8   Programme Specifications should provide detail of any profession specific action that may need to be taken if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Student handbooks should specify clearly that any offence relating to a breach in confidentiality may also be dealt with in accordance with the Fitness to Practise Policy.

Section 2:

Classroom, Practice Based and Online Discussions

21.   Unless already in the public domain or where explicit consent has been gained, students must not make reference to the names of service users, assessors, mentors, staff and/or organisations in classroom, practice based and online discussions. It is the responsibility of the lecturer or practitioner concerned to agree and make clear the ground rules for in classroom, practice based and online discussions. Where breaches in confidentiality occur, the lecturer or practitioner should correct the error at the earliest appropriate opportunity and, if relevant, remind the whole student group of the nature and purpose of the confidentiality policy. The lecturer or practitioner should subsequently meet with the individual student(s) after the discussion to ensure they clearly understand the expected standard of behaviour. In exceptional circumstances, single or repeated breaches of confidentiality may be dealt with in accordance with the Fitness to Practise Policy.

Work submitted for Assessment

2.2   Breaches of confidentiality should be reported to the Associate Dean of School Academic Quality Assurance who will write to the student to reinforce the policy on confidentiality and advise the student that any further occurrences will be dealt with as an Assessment Offence. The relevant module leader is responsible for establishing if it is a first or repeated occurrence and for making the appropriate referral. Repeated occurrences should be referred to the School Academic Integrity Officer and the procedures in the Academic Integrity and Academic Misconduct policy (AS14 Appendix III) should be applied. In exceptional circumstances, single or repeated breaches of confidentiality may be dealt with in accordance with the Fitness to Practise Policy.

What would be considered a breach of confidentiality?

1   The inclusion of names or materials in a student's work (including appendices) that would allow any individual to be identified. The exception to these includes:
- Signatures of clinical staff that are required to sign official documentation in the practice placement areas.
- Names of mentors, practice supervisors and assessors and practice educators within the student's practice assessment documents.
- Acknowledgement of staff, family, friends, and colleagues who have supported students in the workplace or university i.e. Dissertation acknowledgements.

2   The inclusion of images, identification numbers, dates of birth, photographs and other privileged information that could lead to the identification of the individual being identified.

3   Distribution or discussion or the exchange of any confidential information on electronic social networking sites.

4   Identification of organisation information contained in policies, procedures, guidelines, audits, leaflets that are not in the public domain.

If organisational information that is not in the public domain is included removal of identifying information must occur. It will need to be acknowledged *in the text* as: 'number of day's absence has exceeded threshold (Name withheld, 2024). In the *reference list* this will appear as NHS Trust. (Name withheld, 2024). Sickness and Absence Policy.)

If it is necessary to name individuals within an organisation, then their anonymity must be preserved by changing their name to a fictitious one. The assignment must include a statement stating that this is the case, and this must be referenced against the appropriate Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies Code of Practice/Conduct.

What is not considered a breach of confidentiality?

In addition to a, b and c above the following is not considered a breach of confidentiality:

1) The naming of an individual where the information cited is in the public domain e.g. Professor Sir Chris Whitty, Sir Robert Francis.

2) Information that is in the public domain that a student includes in their work. The student must make sure that this is cited in the main body and referenced in the corresponding reference list correctly.

3) Where express permission has been given by an organisation that it is permissible to include their details. Evidence of this must be provided as part of the submission documents.