

Report: Investigation into Alleged Facebook Groupchat
Published: 12 February 2016

On 2nd February 2016 the College Tribune published an article under the headline '*UCD Facebook Chat Rating and Sharing Photos of Girls they have Slept with Highlights 'Toxic' Lad Culture*'. The article refers to 'a private Facebook groupchat with as many as 200 members is active among male students in UCD, in which members share and rate stories and pictures of girls they have slept with... The alleged group is understood to be made up of predominantly Agricultural Science students'.

The University immediately instigated an investigation:

- 1) To investigate the circumstances and veracity of the report published in the College Tribune
- 2) To reach out and identify any students victimised by inappropriate social media postings with a view to providing supports as required
- 3) To identify the existence of the named site or other similar sites and to identify any students involved in posting inappropriate images of others without their consent
- 4) To determine, as far as possible, any illegal activity and refer on to the relevant investigation authorities
- 5) To determine whether there have been breaches of the Student Code or University policy on respect and dignity, and to pursue appropriate disciplinary action.

The investigation was chaired by Professor Mark Rogers, Registrar and Deputy President and included Professor Bairbre Redmond, Deputy Registrar and Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Professor Alexander Evans, Dean of Agriculture and Head of UCD School of Agriculture and Food Science.

I am presenting the findings of the investigation as the Chair.

In making any determination, I recognise that identifying the 'UCD Facebook groupchat rating and sharing photos of girls they have slept with ...' is the only mechanism for assuring a definitive outcome. The failure to identify such a site, no matter how intensive the investigation, could not represent absolute proof that such a site did not exist. Therefore, the investigations conclusions are based on taking all best efforts to locate the activity and reports on those efforts and their outcome.

In addition to establishing facts, I have formed an opinion in relation to the background context and history that supports the conclusions we have drawn.

Process of Investigation

The investigation has taken internal and external expert advice in relation to the possible tracing of relevant online activity and the potential for finding the existence of, and the contents within, any discussion forums that may be operating within the remit of the University.

In striving to be fully data protection compliant, the University does not monitor students' personal communications with social media sites on the University network. The University has been in

contact with Ward Solutions, an independent IT Security firm, regarding this allegation and they have confirmed that “to determine any information relating to the use of social media (beyond what is publicly available), a court or legal order is required to the social media provider”.

The investigation included interviews with

- The joint editors of the College Tribune
- The journalist who wrote the article (the reporter)
- The source “Sarah” quoted by the article
- Members of the Students’ Union (SU)
- The auditor of the Agricultural Students’ Society (Ag Soc)
- Year group representatives in the UCD School of Agriculture and Food Science, including those students managing the individual year Facebook pages
- Other relevant UCD students
- The student who initially brought the allegation to the attention of the SU in December.

In addition, the investigation sought, through the Dean of Agriculture, information on a confidential basis from students of the School of Agriculture and Food Science, and through social media from the entire student body of approximately 27,000.

The University Student Advisers were also consulted to ascertain if they had been made aware of any information relating to this allegation.

The investigation examined a range of online material, records and “screenshots” of various postings from the social media sites Facebook and Yik Yak. Yik Yak is a social media application for smartphones which allows users to anonymously create and view discussion threads within a specific radius (termed "Yaks"). These anonymous posts only last a number of hours on the application and are then deleted permanently.

A number of relevant emails were also examined.

Findings

1. On the matter of the circumstances and veracity of the claims made in the College Tribune article of 2nd February 2016 that ‘a private Facebook groupchat with as many as 200 members is active among male students in UCD, in which members share and rate stories and pictures of girls they have slept with... The group is understood to be made up of predominantly Agricultural Science students’. I find that the evidence cited in the article was based on hearsay from anonymous comments on Yik Yak by a quoted source to the College Tribune. I further find that the editor and reporter of the article were aware that the source quoted in the article was basing her information on hearsay. The claims in the article have been fully investigated and have been found to be unsubstantiated.
2. On the matter of identifying any students victimised by inappropriate social media postings, despite our efforts, I sought evidence of, but did not find any student who had come forward in recent weeks seeking support for this or any related incident from the regular or other University Services.

3. On the matter of the existence of the alleged private Facebook groupchat with as many as 200 members, the investigation found no evidence of the existence of such a group where UCD students were posting nude photographs of female students and then rating them.

While the investigation has spoken to a number of students who had heard that there were postings on Yik Yak (between 26th and 31st December 2015) giving specific details of an alleged UCD Facebook chat site where photos of naked students were being exchanged, I have been unable to find any student or other individual who had any first hand sightings of these specific postings.

I have found evidence of only one anonymous Yik Yak posting around this time which purports to be from an agricultural science student claiming that “I don’t even partake in what’s happening, I personally only have sent 3 photos and a story or 2”. However the anonymity of this social media site does not allow me to ascertain whether this posting is genuine or fraudulent. Similarly, while there are hearsay allegations of others making similar claims, no evidence was presented or found.

One image was presented to the investigation taken from an Agriculture Science 2018 Class Facebook, posted 30 November 2015. This image appears to be an amateur photograph of a model posing in a bikini; it has been verified that this image was taken from a publically accessible site in the UK. From the evidence available to me, I cannot ascertain the details of the responses posted to this image, but it was ‘liked’ by more than 64 students, both male and female. The image appears to have been on the class Facebook site for up to five weeks and I was informed that it was removed on or about 4 January 2016. I would have expected that administrators of the Facebook class group should have been more vigilant in monitoring irrelevant and inappropriate traffic on their site.

4. On the matter of illegality, I find that no material discovered as part of this investigation warrants referral to An Garda Síochána.
5. On the matter of breaches of the UCD Student Code and the University’s policy on dignity and respect, I will refer students and members of the University community to the applicable disciplinary procedures where appropriate.

Consequently, the specific allegations made against Agricultural Science students are not upheld.

Commentary

In relation to this case, I am disappointed that neither the College Tribune nor the Students’ Union passed information relating to the allegation to the University when the matter came to their attention between 28 December 2015 and 5 January 2016. If the allegations had been substantiated, this would have delayed offering a response to any victims. When the student representatives in the School of Agriculture and Food Science became aware of the Yik Yak conversation in late December, they checked student Facebook pages and removed a post on 4th January. The Students’ Union was aware of this action, but this information was not passed on to the College Tribune.

In my email to all students (9 February) I reminded them that the University expects each one of them to respect the dignity of others at all times and to uphold standards both individually and among their peers. This standard is not confined to matters of an explicitly sexual nature but also includes vulgarity in language, bullying, harassment and discrimination.

At a societal level, we are all aware of the way social media has amplified inappropriate behaviour, particularly where there is inadequate monitoring by group administrators or where sources can be anonymous. Studies are showing the negative impact of such behaviour on students' well-being. While neither UCD nor any other university can control public social media use by its students, we do monitor elements of public social media and step in whenever unacceptable behaviour comes to our attention. Thankfully we also witness a considerable amount of responsible peer moderating among the students themselves and insults aimed at students' personal appearance or other even more serious comments are quickly challenged and condemned. UCD is a community with values of excellence, integrity, collegiality, engagement and diversity and we will continue to foster an environment where everyone has the expectation that they will be treated with respect and dignity.

Recommendations

1. That any student or member of the University community who comes across illicit and/or explicit material on University-related sites should immediately bring this to the attention of the University authorities through the Student Advisers or other staff or faculty.
2. That, as a community, each one of us adopts a zero tolerance attitude towards offensive postings which will help set a standard on social media.
3. That the student newspapers, the Students' Union and any other student bodies and representatives who receive any information on potential criminal activity on University-related sites should immediately notify An Garda Síochána and the University authorities.
4. The University Management Team Student Experience Group, will be authorised to review the accessibility of the policies and procedures of the University that are in place to protect students.
5. That the student newspapers, the Students' Union and any other student bodies and representatives who receive any information on potential breaches of the student code and/or the policy on Dignity and Respect, should immediately notify the University authorities.
6. That the Group Administrators of Facebook groups linked to the University take responsibility for monitoring and moderating postings and comments to ensure that offensive material does not appear and ban posters who submit any such material.
7. That, given the subsequent widespread public reporting of up to 200 students involvement in the activity under investigation as fact rather than as allegation, the College Tribune publish an online clarification that there was no first hand evidence for the allegations and that the report was entirely based on anonymous hearsay on Yik Yak.

UNIVERSITY INVESTIGATION

Timeline

The timeline of the investigation is outlined below. In addition, through interviews and available evidence, we have established the events surrounding the writing of the article in the College Tribune.

CHRONOLOGY OF RELEVANT ACTIVITIES FROM 2ND FEBRUARY 2016 (PUBLICATION DATE OF COLLEGE TRIBUNE ARTICLE) TO 12TH FEBRUARY 2016. A PRE-PUBLICATION CHRONOLOGY APPEARS LATER.

Date	Event
2 nd February	A University Student Adviser brought the College Tribune article to the attention of University Relations (the UCD Communications Office). The Media Relations Manager contacted one of the College Tribune editors to establish the veracity of the report – specifically the sharing of “girls’ nudes”. The editor contacted the Politics & Innovation editor of the College Tribune (referred to below as the reporter) who had written the article. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The editor confirmed that he stood over the source.
3 rd February	The UCD Director of Communications brought the matter to the attention of the Dean of Agriculture, who undertook to investigate. The UCD Director of Communications met with the Deputy Registrar who brought the matter to the attention of the University legal department.
4 th February	The Dean of Agriculture met with the Auditor of the Agricultural Students’ Society (Ag Soc) and with the President of the SU. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The President of the SU informed the Dean that he was aware that a picture of an anonymous ‘model’ had been circulated.
4 th February	The Deputy Registrar alerted the Dean of Agriculture, the Director of Communications, and University Solicitor that they should meet to review this situation.
4 th February	The University issued the first statement in response to a media query on the evening of Thursday 4th February.
5 th February	The Dean of Agriculture issued a general email to all students in the School asking for them to come forward in confidence to him personally with any information, as a matter of urgency.
5 th February	The University posted on both Facebook and Twitter in order to make all Agricultural Science Students aware of the investigation and to encourage anyone with information to come forward in confidence to the Dean.
7 th February	The reporter contacted the Deputy Registrar by email on Sunday 7 th February and asked to meet the following day. She arranged a meeting with both her and the Deputy President and urged him to share any evidence that he had to substantiate the allegations in his article. <ul style="list-style-type: none">
8 th February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reporter forwarded a number of screen shots from Yik Yak and the original communication emails with the SU, the existence of which the University was unaware. <p>One of these undated Yik Yak posts purports to be from an Agricultural Science student, claiming that ‘I don’t even partake in what’s happening, I personally have only sent 3 photos and a story or 2’.</p>
8 th February	The Dean of Agriculture met with the Auditor of Ag Soc.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The auditor made the Dean aware of one posting by an Agricultural Science student on the Facebook group “Agricultural Science 2018” site which had been posted on 30th November 2015. This image appears to be an amateur photograph of a model posing in a bikini; it has been verified that this image was taken from a publically accessible site in the UK. This woman has subsequently been identified, she is British and has no connection with UCD. This post was ‘liked’ by more than 64 students, both male and female, the photograph was ‘rated’ by at least one student.
8 th February	<p>The Deputy President and Deputy Registrar interviewed the reporter, one of the editors of the College Tribune and their source “Sarah” separately.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reporter confirmed that the article was based on information provided by “Sarah” and on her recollection of the discussions taking place on Yik Yak. The editor confirmed that they stood over the story. “Sarah” provided a text she had sent to the reporter. She indicated that she had no direct knowledge of the original posts on Yik Yak but had entered the discussion on Yik Yak at a later date and had expressed her concern only to be aggressively abused and insulted by other participants. This is confirmed by screenshots provided by the reporter of some of the Yik Yak threads. “Sarah” confirmed that she had made it clear to the reporter that she could only provide hearsay support in relation to the allegation. The text to the reporter confirms this. “I wasn’t on Yik Yak when the original yak was posted but I heard that someone posted on Yik Yak about a couple of group chats on Facebook with around 200 ag science involved, all from different years, where they shared stories about girls they had sex with, shared girls’ nudes, and then posted the girls’ facebook pages where theyd all rated them out of 10. Yik yak blew up after that as so many people were understandably outraged, but I was surprised that a majority of the yaks were people saying that not all ags were involved and that they shouldn’t all be labelled as disgusting for what was happening. It seemed like everyone was either completely against all ags or trying to defend them. There were also people saying that the student union pres was involved but im not sure if that was just people getting confused with the scandal from the last year or not. I commented on a few of the yaks at..” <p>I note some inconsistencies between the information provided by “Sarah” (above) to the reporter, and the contents of the article.</p>
8 th February	<p>The Deputy President and Deputy Registrar met with the President of the SU and the SU Graduate Officer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> They confirmed that the SU was first contacted about the allegations on Yik Yak on the 28th December 2015 by a UCD student and had responded that they were not aware of the allegations, and evidence of illegal activity should be given to An Garda Siochána. They confirmed that they had not brought the allegation to the attention of the University.
9 th February	<p>The Dean of Agriculture met with the Auditor of Ag Soc, representatives of 2nd year Agricultural Science students, and the student who had admitted to posting the photo of the model posing in the bikini.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> They indicated that they had no knowledge of the alleged Facebook groupchat.

9 th February	The Deputy President wrote to all students regarding this matter and the investigation.
10 th February	<p>The Deputy President and Deputy Registrar held separate meetings with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The student who initially brought the allegation to the SU on the 28th December - Auditor of Ag Soc (also representing 4th year Agriculture Science students) - One class representative of 3rd year Agricultural Science students - Two representatives of 2nd year Agricultural Science students - Two representatives of 1st year Agricultural Science students - The student who had admitted to posting the photo of the model posing in a bikini - The student who contacted the SU on 28th December 2015 regarding the Yik Yak posts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In all meetings with student representatives, the students confirmed that they had sought out and failed to find any indications of the alleged Facebook groupchat site as described, and had no knowledge of its existence. • The student who made the initial contact with the SU on 28th December in regard to allegations about a supposed Facebook page, provided confirmation of his contact with the SU and indicated he had not witnessed the start of the discussions on Yik Yak on this topic.
10 th February	The Deputy President and Deputy Registrar, met the President of the SU and the SU Graduate Officer.
11 th February	The Deputy President and Deputy Registrar met the reporter to review details of the information forming the basis of the article. They requested that the College Tribune provide clarification of the hearsay nature of the allegation.
11 th February	<p>The Deputy President and Deputy Registrar met the joint editors of the College Tribune with the reporter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to discuss the basis of the article - to determine if they had any additional information helpful to the investigation - to confirm that the College Tribune had not brought the allegation to the attention of the University - to request clarification indicating the hearsay nature of the allegation and they said they would consider the request.
12 th February	This report was published and the University remains open to accepting any evidence of this activity, or related activity occurring on University-related online media and will investigate and take appropriate action.

PRE-PUBLICATION CHRONOLOGY AND COMMENTARY - 28TH DECEMBER TO 2ND FEBRUARY 2016

Date	Event and Comment
Days before 28 th December 2015	Second hand hearsay information was received revealing that at some point prior to the 28 th December, a discussion thread started on Yik Yak that included comments that were disparaging of Agricultural Science students. We cannot confirm how or when this began as the only information we have is through indirect reports from some of the interviews of the investigation.

	<p>The details of the beginning of this thread are not available so the accuracy of the subsequent report of the allegation which was based on a secondary report of the original post, cannot be established.</p> <p>One screen shot of an anonymous Yik Yak post (date unknown) purports to be from an Agricultural Science student, claiming that “I don’t even partake in what’s happening, I personally have only sent 3 photos and a story or 2”.</p> <p>As this post is anonymous, its accuracy cannot be substantiated.</p>
28 th December 2015	<p>A UCD student tweeted and followed up with an email to the SU asking them “to confirm or deny allegations about a supposed Agricultural Science Facebook group in which girls’ nude photos are shared and discussed.”</p> <p>Neither the student nor the SU brought this allegation to the attention of the University.</p>
28 th December 2015	<p>The UCD Students’ Union Communications and Research Assistant replied to the UCD student advising him to approach the Gardai if he suspected that any illegality had occurred.</p>
29 th December 2015	<p>A 3rd year Agricultural Science student noticed the Yik Yak discussion and reviewed the Agricultural Science year group Facebook pages. This student alerted the President of the SU that there was a photograph on the Facebook group “Agricultural Science 2018” that should be removed. This was a photograph of a model in a bikini.</p>
31 st December 2015	<p>The reporter attempted to join the Facebook group “Agricultural Science 2018” but was denied access.</p>
4 th January 2016	<p>The President of the SU phoned the 2nd year Agricultural Student representative and asked him to delete the picture of the model in the bikini from the Facebook group “Agricultural Science 2018”. The class representative did this.</p>
5 th January 2016	<p>The reporter emailed the President of the SU, asking what action he intended to take on the matter of the alleged group site. This e-mail was replied to by the President of the SU on the 25th January. This information was not brought to the attention of the University.</p>
5 th January 2016	<p>The reporter contacted a first year student “Sarah”. The reporter identified “Sarah” through some of her tweets in relation to the allegations made on Yik Yak.</p> <p>The article was based on a report from this student who had been told about (but had not witnessed at first hand) a discussion on Yik Yak alleging that a Facebook site existed where students were sharing stories about girls they had sex with, shared the girls’ nudes, and then posted the girls’ Facebook pages where they would rate them.</p> <p>She told the investigation that she had not witnessed the initial discussions on Yik Yak about the alleged Facebook group. The reporter and editor went to publication based the on this hearsay, without any first hand evidence.</p>
15 th January	<p>The reporter sent an SMS text to the SU, again looking for a response to the alleged website. The President of the SU indicated by SMS text that he would respond as soon as possible.</p>
25 th January	<p>The President of the SU responded to the reporter by email saying that if the reporter should contacted the Gardai if he suspected that any illegality had occurred. This information was brought to the attention of the University.</p>

2 nd February	The College Tribune published an article on page 14 (Politics page) of their edition of 2 nd February headlined: <i>UCD Facebook Chat Rating and Sharing Photos of Girls they have Slept with Highlights 'Toxic' Lad Culture.</i>
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Signed: Professor Mark Rogers, Deputy President and Registrar
Dated: 12th February 2016