

Email from Registrar and Deputy President

12 Feb 2016

Dear student

On 2 February 2016 an article in the student newspaper, The College Tribune, alleged 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 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.

Following the investigation, the specific allegations made in the article were not upheld.

The investigation took 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.

The investigation sought, initially 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 investigation also interviewed 28 individuals and went through a large amount of online and other documentation.

Although this investigation is concluded, I am not so naïve as to believe that the university community is immune to this type of activity. If you have been affected by the inappropriate sharing of private information on social media, the student advisors and wider University support services are available to you.

In addition, if you see illicit and/or explicit material on University-related sites, you should immediately bring this to the attention of the University authorities and/or an Garda Síochána.

The full report is available on my website: www.ucd.ie/registrar. The following is a summary.

Findings of the report

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', the investigation found 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. It further found 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, the investigation sought but did not find any student has 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.

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. The investigation stated that it 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, the investigation found 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, the investigation will refer students and members of the University community to the applicable disciplinary procedures where appropriate.

Commentary on the investigation

Every student asked to assist the investigation did so. And with this level of co-operation I was able to bring this investigation to a timely resolution.

In relation to this case, the investigation expressed disappointment 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.

In my email of 9 February I reminded you that the University expects each one of you to respect the dignity of others at all times and to uphold standards both individually and among your 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.

The investigation made the following 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.

Sincerely

Professor Mark Rogers

Registrar and Deputy President