

Title: Yikking the Yak: how anonymous social media posts may assist in the identification of student support needs

Abstract: In higher education teaching/tutoring practice there has always been concern for students and their learning. Reflecting on current practice within the University, this is intended to improve teaching and support strategies, methods and assessment strategies and to offer the broadest ranges, and most appropriate methods, of support to students. Yik Yak is a relatively new (launched November 2013) social media app which enables people to post anonymously in short message format similar to a text or twitter. It differs by offering an up-down voting system which can mean that messages (yaks) can disappear if they are not popular. Yaks can be deleted by any user and tend to have a limited lifespan. This transience may also add to the freedom of expression users feel. There is an opportunity to use this to facilitate appropriate student support and staff action during times students find stressful has arisen. As Yik Yak allows anonymous comment to be made users may feel free to express things they might otherwise hide. The literature on student support describes the way students appear to have differing support needs throughout the year. It tends also to agree that support services are reactive rather than proactive (Scott and Phillips in Eisenstadt and Vincent 1998) (Smith, 2007). If there were a way to record these needs anonymously, the University would have the opportunity to best target resources according to these needs. Whilst support service staff do record their interactions with students, there are ways in which early intervention by teaching staff and personal tutors may prevent the need for services (such as counselling) by becoming aware of the seasonal issues which arise. The question, then, is how to do this without students feeling pressured to contribute or unable to tell a staff member exactly what is going on.

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