

Canadian Collaborative Chat Reference Services Survey Report

Canadian Collaborative Chat Reference Services (CCCRS) Group
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Introduction

This report presents the key findings of an environmental scan survey of post-secondary collaborative chat reference services at four Canadian consortia (BC ELN, Novanet, OCLS, and OCUL) in 2022. The findings present commonalities, points of difference, and notable practices across a broad range of participation, policy, and operational categories at these services. For example, in the key findings, you will learn about how the services compare in terms of governance structures, hours of operation, and operator training. The findings are presented with the lightest possible interpretation to support the group's intention of objectivity.

Purpose and Background

The purpose of the environmental scan survey is to learn how collaborative post-secondary chat reference services in Canada operate, with a focus on commonalities, points of difference, and notable practices at the different services.

The survey was conducted by the Canadian Collaborative Chat Reference Services (CCCRS) Group. This group formed in 2020 to discuss issues of common interest and to share expertise, policies, and best practices with a focus on collaborative post-secondary chat reference service in Canada. Current group members are Carly Brake (Live Help at Novanet), Guinsly Mondésir (Ask a Librarian at the Ontario Council of University Libraries, Scholars Portal), Cristen Polley and Sydney Brogden (AskAway at the BC Electronic Library Network), and Lauren Rupert (askON at the Ontario Colleges Library Service). The group meets online at least once a year and communicates in between meetings via email.

The group often shares information about their services informally, in meetings or via email. The survey and this report are an opportunity to share and present this information in a consolidated and accessible format. Each group member that completed the survey can decide how they will use the full survey results and report. For example, they may use them to inform future service priorities, to learn about best practices or service models at peer services, or to understand the broader context of collaborative chat reference in Canada. The group may also use the results to identify areas to work on together when they meet.

Methodology

The CCCRS Group developed the survey questions collaboratively. Each group member completed the survey on behalf of their consortium between November and December 2022. Survey responses were recorded in Limesurvey, on Canadian servers. The group met in March and April 2023 to review the results, summarize the key findings, and prepare the report. To summarize key findings, each group member selected one or more survey question categories (e.g., Funding or Training) to work on. The group then met online to answer outstanding questions and provide additional information to clarify their survey responses. The draft report was reviewed and finalized by all group members.

Key Findings

The key findings present the results of the environmental scan survey. Group members aimed to summarize the survey results as objectively as possible and present commonalities, key points of difference, and notable practices rather than interpret the results or make recommendations. Key findings are grouped by categories, loosely based on the survey question categories.

General Service Information

The table below provides general information about the four services that participated in the survey and may be helpful to refer back to when reading the rest of the report.

Table 1: General Service Information

Consortium	Service Name	Member Locations	# of Members ¹	Membership	Opt-in?	Service Language
BC Electronic Library Network (BC ELN)	AskAway	British Columbia and the Yukon	29	BC ELN members (public and private universities, colleges, teaching universities, and technical institutions)	Opt-in with financial and staffing obligations	English
Novanet	Live Help	Nova Scotia and New Brunswick	13	All public universities in Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia Community College system, and Mount Allison University (New Brunswick)	Mandatory participation in staffing service as a Novanet member, with an exception for Université Sainte-Anne due to language limitations	English ²
Ontario Colleges Library Service (OCLS)	askON	Ontario	12	Publicly assisted college libraries in Ontario	Opt-in with financial and staffing obligations	English

¹ The number of participating institutions is current as of November 2022

² See the Opt-in column for more information about Université Sainte-Anne

Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL) / Scholars Portal	Ask a Librarian ³	Ontario	16	Universities or affiliated universities across Ontario	Opt-in with financial and staffing obligations	English and French
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Governance and Coordination

Respondents identified four levels of service governance and coordination in common:

1. consortial-level governance
2. service governance
3. service coordination
4. institutional coordination

Table 2: Four Levels of Service Governance and Coordination

	BC ELN / AskAway	Novanet / Live Help	OCLS / askON	Scholars Portal / Ask a Librarian
Consortium Governance	BC ELN Steering Committee	Novanet Board of Governance	OCLS Board	OCUL
Service Governance	AskAway Advisory Committee (10 voting members: four constituency representatives, three large university representatives, and three members-at-large. The Chair is one of the representatives)	Live Help Service Committee (site coordinators from each institution and Chair)	askON Steering Committee (Eight members: Six representatives from participating college libraries and two from OCLS. The Chair is one of the six representatives)	Virtual Reference Steering Committee (local coordinators meet monthly to govern collaboratively)
Service Coordination	AskAway Coordinator (employed by BC ELN)	Chair (volunteer, reports to Novanet manager)	Central Service Lead (employed by OCLS)	Virtual Reference Librarian (hired by Scholars Portal)
Institutional Coordination	Local Coordinators	Site Coordinators	Site Coordinators	Local Coordinators

³ An individual institution can change their name (e.g., the University of Toronto calls the service “Ask Us!”)

A notable variation is among the services' governing bodies, as some committees are representative bodies made up primarily of library directors or senior staff and others are composed of one site coordinator representative from each participating institution.

Each service has a coordinator at the level of the consortium. For BC ELN, OCLS, and Scholars Portal, this is a paid, central position hired by the consortium. However, Novanet's service coordinator is a volunteer role. Responsibilities common to the service coordinator roles include:

- Service administration
- Liaising with the vendor (e.g., LibraryH3lp)
- Collaborative scheduling (i.e., scheduling institutions; site coordinators are responsible for local scheduling)
- Student volunteer recruitment or auxiliary / contractor hiring
- Service provider training
 - Notably, Novanet site coordinators are responsible for in-house service provider training at their institution, as centralized training is not currently offered
- Creating documentation
- Addressing system-wide issues
- Project management
- Supporting governance
- Communications

Funding

Gathering in-depth information on funding models is challenging, as funding models can be complex. Additionally, respondents have different criteria as to what information can be made publicly available and which information remains private to participating institutions and governing bodies. All services are funded by member contributions, but the funding models vary. AskAway, askON, and Ask a Librarian use an FTE model; Novanet uses a model based on FTE as well as three other metrics.

Table 3: Service Funding

	BC ELN / AskAway	Novanet / Live Help	OCLS / askON	Scholars Portal / Ask a Librarian
Service funding	AskAway is member-funded (combination of AskAway Base Service Support Fees and Flexible Support Contribution funds), with occasional funding from the BC Ministry of Post-	Live Help is member-funded through Novanet's members; Live Help is funded under Novanet's core budget lines; Novanet's current funding formula model is based	Cost-recovery funding model includes a base rate, then each college pays an additional portion depending on FTE. Entirely funded by participating member	Ask a Librarian is member-funded.

	Secondary Education and Future Skills on an as needed-basis; provincial government contributes funding to the consortium.	on four metrics: numbers of circulation, number of physical items, university budget, university FTE.	institutions.	
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Staffing Commitments

Each service uses an FTE model to determine staffing commitments for participating institutions, with variation in how models are applied. Similar to funding models, gathering in-depth information on staffing commitments is challenging, as tiered models can be complex. Additionally, respondents have different criteria as to what information can be made publicly available.

Table 4: Staffing Commitment Models

	BC ELN / AskAway	Novanet / Live Help	OCLS / askON	Scholars Portal / Ask a Librarian
Staffing commitment models	Two five-tier FTE models (AskAway Base Staffing Commitments with set hours for each tier and Flexible Support Contributions to cover evening and weekend shifts via either funds and/or additional evening/weekend hours); some institutions also contribute volunteer hours	FTE model that allows some influence for usage at the institution and flexibility to minimally reduce shifts if an institution has fewer staffing resources	Three-tier FTE model with a range of hours for each tier	One service hour per week for every 1,200 FTEs

Evening and Weekend Hours

Within the staffing commitment models, evening and weekend hours are generally not treated differently than daytime hours. AskAway’s flexible support contribution is the exception. For scheduling purposes, some services may assign larger institutions more weekend hours and assign students and contractors to evening and weekend hours as well.

Participation Challenges

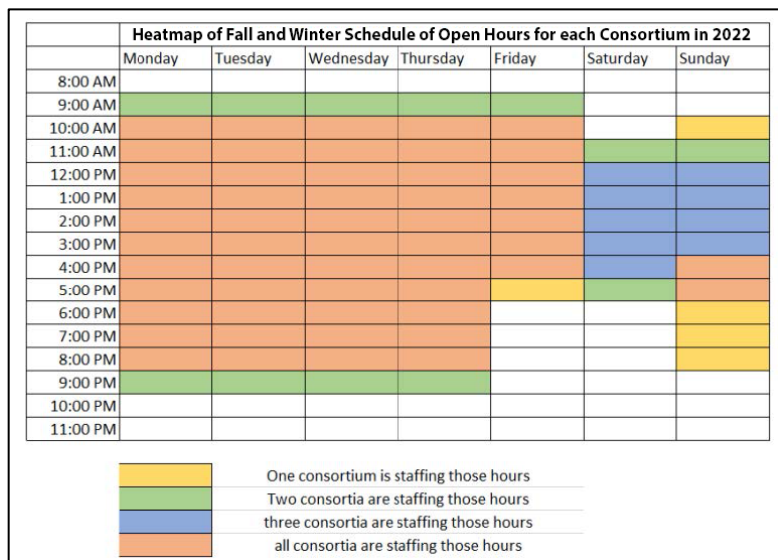
If an institution is unable to meet their service commitments, a variety of approaches are used. These in part reflect service agreements and participant responsibilities. Both AskAway and Ask a Librarian have formal processes in place if an institution is unable to meet their commitments, such as trading shifts temporarily or requesting a redistribution of shifts from one semester to another. If outside staff are hired to offset staffing gaps, these costs are absorbed by the institution facing the staffing shortage. askON participating institutions sign a service agreement to outline their financial and staffing obligations, and staffing issues are addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Novanet’s Live Help has mandatory participation, but the redistribution of hours can occur depending on several circumstances. For example, institutions that have heavy usage sometimes shoulder extra service hours. Another example is that Live Help exempts the French-language Université Sainte-Anne from having to provide service, as the service does not have enough operators who can provide consistent service in French. Service is still provided to students from Université Sainte-Anne; however, it is largely in English. It is understood that should a provider feel comfortable they will provide service in French if requested. For remaining staffing issues, they are addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Service Hours and Term Dates

Service hours and term dates at all four services are determined collaboratively, based on anticipated needs and/or by a committee. During the Fall (September to December) and Winter (January to April) terms, all services are open at least six days a week (Sunday to Friday) and for a minimum of 58 hours per week. During the Summer, the landscape for service hours is diverse, with some services keeping the same hours as Fall and Winter, some offering reduced hours, and some closing from mid-June to reopen in September.

Figure 1: Heatmap of Fall and Winter Hours for each Consortium in 2022



Intersession and After Hours

During intersession (e.g., the December break), there is a tendency among services to close. Another alternative is to offer reduced hours. For some of the services that close, participating institutions can decide to stay open and staff only their institutional queue to receive questions from only their students.

When the services are closed during intersession or after hours, students have alternative methods of contacting the library. They can browse the website where the chat is located to identify an alternative contact method (e.g., email, contact form, SMS, telephone number). Some services also offer 24/7 texting, where students can text requests after hours and operators will respond the next time the service is open.

Collaborative Scheduling and Staffing

At all four services, staffing levels (i.e., the number of operators per shift) are determined by the service coordinator, and then internal shift scheduling is up to the site coordinator at each institution. Staffing levels are determined based on a combination of historical chat usage, expected chat usage, and institution availability.

Each service reported between 200 and 400 active operators over the course of the year (2022). Operators include librarians, library technicians, library program students, and students. Daytime shifts, defined as from 9am or 10am to 5pm or 6pm, are generally staffed by institutional operators. BC ELN, Scholars Portal, and Novanet hire additional contractors to provide support on evening and weekend shifts. OCLS recruits student volunteers currently enrolled in a library program to staff evening and weekend shifts.

Notably, Ask a Librarian offers a concomitant operator approach where multiple operators from the same institution staff the service at the same time, with one dedicated to directional questions and others dedicated to research questions.

Missed Shifts

If an institution is missing from or has missed their shift, services have policies and procedures in place. Generally, if an institution is missing, an operator on the shift will contact the service coordinator and/or the site coordinator to find coverage and follow-up. The following tools to automate the process or manage expectations on the service were noted:

Issue report form:

- Ask a Librarian has an issue report form that operators can use to report issues on the service, including a missed shift
- When a missed shift is reported via the form, an email is automatically sent to the service coordinator and the institution identified in the report

Canned message in LibraryH3lp:

- As part of their policy for missed shifts, askON operators have the option to send a canned message to users to communicate that service might temporarily be slower than expected due to a temporary staffing shortage

Students

At all services, students and other users can access the service via embedded widgets or links on various library and institutional pages. Beyond chat, Ask a Librarian and askON offer the ability for users to connect with the service via texting. Institutions promote the service via visible service widgets on library websites and via other means such as in instructional sessions, at the research desk, and with promotional materials including posters and social media. Some services provide centralized marketing and promotional materials that institutions can use.

Student needs and satisfaction are assessed via informal feedback, primarily gathered through a voluntary exit survey. Participating institutions can access these results for their own interpretation and use.

Transcript Review

Two of the services undertake a transcript review. Ask a Librarian (OCUL) has an internal committee composed of seven site coordinators that conducts a transcript review, using a sample, every two years to assess the quality of chat responses. At askON, transcript analysis takes place every three years and is contracted to an external body. Novanet conducts individual transcript reviews with operators who are new to the service. At AskAway, participating institutions can choose to access and review transcripts at the local level.

All services encourage participating institutions to review chat transcripts. If a participating institution wants to conduct research and requests access to anonymized transcripts, services either have or are in the process of developing policies or procedures to make the data available.

Technology

Across the responding services, the current software used for collaborative chat reference is [LibraryH3lp](#). While this is the software used for the chat service for all four consortia, individual uses for the software varies. For example, AskAway uses the knowledge base functionality to develop and share FAQ resources with service providers and coordinators, and askON uses LibraryH3lp's private or group chat features for operators to chat with one another while on-shift.

In addition to LibraryH3lp, services use a variety of tools and software as follows:

- Statistics and reporting:
 - LibraryH3lp

- Operator backchat:
 - Campfire
 - LibraryH3lp
- Collaborative scheduling:
 - Google Calendar, Sheets, Docs
 - Microsoft Excel
- Training and meetings:
 - Zoom
 - Teams
 - Canvas
- Documentation and communications:
 - InDesign
 - Sharepoint
 - Constant Contact
 - LimeSurvey
 - PBworks wiki

Training and Documentation

All services offer training at least once a year. The majority hold training three times a year, in line with the beginning of each term of service (e.g., in September before the service opens), with some offering supplemental training if a need is identified by participating institutions. Three of the services offer centralized training provided by the service coordinator. One consortium relies on the site coordinators to provide training to operators at their institution with the assistance of the service coordinator as needed. Most services offer training solely online, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Ask a Librarian offers in-person training and makes recordings of the sessions available.

Table 5: Topics Covered in Training

	BC ELN / AskAway	Novanet / Live Help	OCLS / askON	Scholars Portal / Ask a Librarian
Introduction to the service and hosting institution/body	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Introduction to LibraryH3lp	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Operator documentation (e.g., Ask Wiki)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Collaborative staffing tools (e.g., guest logins, backchat)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Service policies and procedures	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Staffing (e.g., collaborative scheduling, staffing expectations, division of hours, hours of operation)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
User information (e.g., privacy, how users access the service)	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Chat reference best practices (e.g., reference interview, RUSA guidelines)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Responding to inappropriate behavior or difficult patrons (e.g., pranks, harassment, blocking users)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Emergency situations (e.g., user crisis, service failure)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Contacts (e.g., support, institutional contacts)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Texting service (e.g., how to respond)			Yes	Yes
Promoting the service	Yes			
General research tools (e.g., OMNI, ALMA/Page 1+)		Yes	Yes	Yes
Research tools for health and science				Yes
Research tools for business				Yes
Using Wikipedia				Yes
Accessible public service (e.g., how to help the public)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Up your sharing game				Yes
Hands-on practice with a partner (e.g., conduct a reference interview, answer chats, find articles, use canned messages, use guest logins, etc.)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Documentation is either created by the coordinators at participating institutions or the service coordinator. Notably, askON's Steering Committee creates governing documentation.

Broader Involvement and Communities of Practice

The coordinator of each service participates in conferences and collaborative groups beyond their consortium. Opportunities for participation vary across provincial library associations and additional opportunities are available in the broader Canadian and North American context. For example, service coordinators regularly participate in North American Virtual Reference Group (Collaborative VR) online meetings and have participated on the planning committee for the North American Virtual Reference Online Conference (NAVROC). Additional participation and/or attendance includes the ALA Virtual Reference eForum, the Reference and Users Association (RUSA) of the ALA, the Distance Learning Service, and the BC Academic Libraries Section of the BC Library Association. At Novanet, the service coordinator position is volunteer based, leaving limited capacity and availability for additional involvement.

Discussion

The intention of the survey and report is to provide broad, high-level information across the four services to serve as a starting point of understanding and comparison. The survey participants noted that only a small handful of Canadian provinces are represented in the findings. As a group, we are not aware of other post-secondary collaborative chat reference services in Canada, but there are other institutions in the country that offer chat reference (e.g., University of Saskatchewan).

Additionally, the topics covered and responses provided were not intended to be comprehensive. Consortial services and in some cases, participating institutions, are able to share different amounts of information about funding models, staffing levels, etc. If an institution or individual is interested to learn more, we hope that this report serves as a starting point to open conversations and generate ideas.

Appendix A: Definitions

Operator: Operator is the term used in this report to describe the people who staff the service and respond to chats from students. Other terms that services may use include service providers, librarians, and library staff.

Service coordinator: Service coordinator is the term used in this report to describe the person or people responsible for coordinating the service at the consortial level. Other terms that may be used include service lead.

Site coordinator: The site coordinator is the term used in this report to describe the person or people responsible for coordinating the service at the institution. Other terms that may be used include local coordinator and institutional coordinator.

Students: In this report, the term students is used to represent all patrons who use the service, including faculty, instructors, researchers, staff, and community users. Other terms include guests, users, visitors, and patrons.

Appendix B: Survey Questions

All survey questions were answered using either a short or a long free text field.

1. Your name
2. The name of the consortium you're representing in this survey.
3. The name of the chat reference service you're representing in this survey.
4. What days of the week and hours is the service open?
5. How are these days and hours of service determined?
6. Is the service closed during intersession?
7. How do patrons contact their library when the service is closed?
8. How many institutions participate in the service?
9. What types of institutions can participate?
10. Is the chat reference service an opt-in service for consortium members? Or, are members a part of this service by default of their participation in the consortium? Please comment.
11. Are there processes in place for institutions that are unable to meet their staffing, financial, or other commitments to the service? If so, what are they?
12. How is the service governed? In other words, who or what body oversees and guides the service?
13. How is the service funded?
14. How is the service coordinated and administered at an operational level?
15. How do participating institutions provide staffing commitments?
16. Are evening and weekend shifts defined differently from daytime shifts? If so, how are evening and weekend shifts defined?
17. Are evening and weekend shifts staffed and/or included in any commitment models differently from daytime, weekday shifts? If so, how?
18. Who staffs the service? In other words, what are their roles?
19. How many active operators staff the service yearly?
20. How are staffing levels determined?
21. Does the service have policies or procedures in place for missed shifts? If so, what are they?
22. Does your consortium hire auxiliary or contract operators to staff the service? If so, what does this look like?
23. Does the service undertake any transcript review? If so, please share the details.
24. If an institution wants to publish a paper and needs (anonymized) transcripts, is there a policy or procedure in place for making them available?
25. What software and applications does your service use and for what purposes?
26. What services do you offer in addition to chat reference?

27. How do participating libraries provide service operators at other libraries with guest login access to their resources?
28. Who provides training for operators?
29. Who creates documentation for the service?
30. How many training sessions are offered yearly?
31. Is training offered online, in-person, or both? Why?
32. What topics are covered in training?
33. Who does onboarding for new operators?
34. In your role as service coordinator, do you participate in conferences?
35. Are you part of a virtual reference association / group? If so, please name them.
36. How do students and other users access the service?
37. How is the service promoted and made visible to students? What is the consortium's role in this?
38. How are student needs and satisfaction assessed?