

Case Study: Ask Chat

Library services - University of the Arts London

Background

UAL is an Arts university in London consisting of 6 campuses and libraries: Camberwell College of Art, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Art, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion and Wimbledon College of Art. The Library Services also offer computing and software support through three staffed Learning Zones at Camberwell College of Art, Central Saint Martins and London College of Communication.

Our Ask Chat service is supported by Springshare, which we also use for our written enquiry and FAQ service (LibAnswers) and subject guides (LibGuides). The Library Services planned to inaugurate Ask Chat at the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year, however when Covid-19 lockdown restrictions were enforced in late March 2020, this project was fast-tracked and launched two months later on June 1st.

Case Study

This document explores the key challenges our Ask Chat service has experienced over the last year, the successes we have achieved throughout this highly collaborative project, and our plans to consolidate and improve the service for the 2021/22 academic year.

Figure 1: Ask Chat statistics from 1st June 2020 to 1st June 2021

Total Chats 01 June 2020 – 01 June 2021	6285 chats
Staff time dedicated to chats	34 days, 9 hours, 10 minutes and 56 seconds
Busiest months	October 2020 (818 chats received)
	November 2020 (1100 chats received)

The challenge of Covid-19

Our Ask Chat service is overseen by a cross-departmental working group of seven Library staff, including members of our systems team, senior managers and librarians. Formed in March 2020, the working group is also responsible for the LibAnswers written enquiry and FAQ service. During a short and intensive set-up period from March to June 2020, we focused on collaborative project work to support the planning, testing and implementation of Ask Chat. This work focused on setting

up Ask Chat and producing training videos, workshops and written guidance for the staff who would use it.

We worked in conjunction with staff across the Library Services to achieve these objectives and it was only through this collaborative effort that we were able to launch the Ask Chat service so quickly. Some examples are listed below:

Figure 2: Selection of collaborative projects undertaken in preparation for Ask Chat. April and May 2020.

Project	Team
Ask Chat widgets	Created by our Systems team with help testing from Customer Services librarians at CSM
Canned Messages	Short, FAQ-style messages that can be searched and pasted into Ask Chat in response to popular queries. These were initially compiled by the working group but were then opened for contribution by Library Services staff.
Training Videos	Working group members and Learning Zone staff at Central Saint Martins worked together during April and May 2020 to film and edit a series of training videos on the use of Ask Chat.
Libguide	This Ask guide for staff was created and populated by our Systems team and content is contributed by the Ask working group.
QR Codes	Posters displaying QR codes to Ask, our print module, Papercut, and our technical drop-in were created by Learning Zone staff and used across all sites upon our return to buildings in Autumn 2020.
Staff rota	Overseen by working group managers but reliant on the close collaboration of site managers across all six college libraries.
MS Teams Ask Support channel	An open forum dedicated to providing advice and guidance to Library staff covering the Ask Chat and LibAnswers rota. All staff can see this channel and support their colleagues. We use tags to target specific libraries and functional groups.
Ask Updates site	Attached to our MS Teams Ask Support channel. A live document containing formal Library updates and policy. Contributed to by library managers and working group members.

Having Ask ready for a return to the Library sites in September 2020 helped relieve staff and student anxiety surrounding access to our services. The QR codes meant that we were able to trouble shoot and resolve issues promptly without students needing to visit a service point. This is demonstrated in our statistics for October and November 2020 as although our libraries were open, these were the busiest months for Ask Chat.

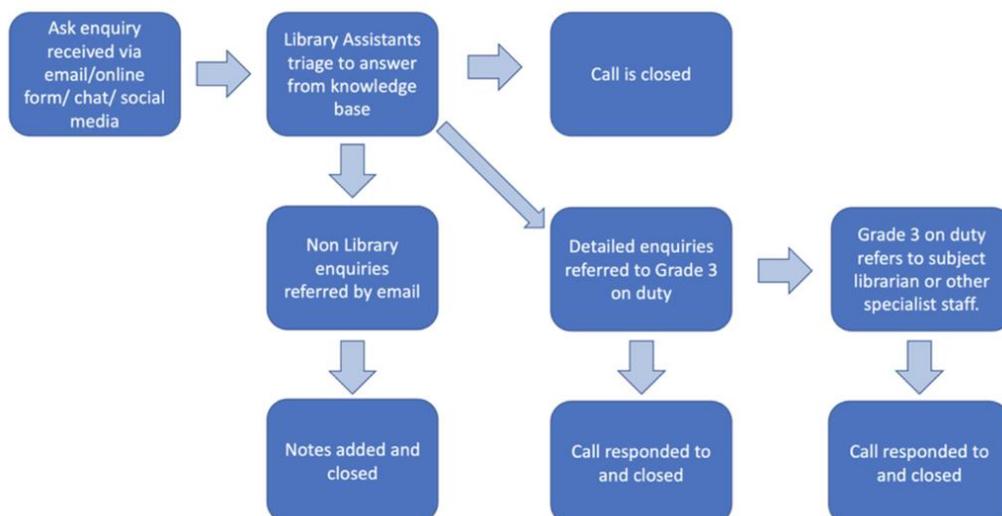
The Ask community at UAL

Staff on the Ask Chat rota are able to rely on a support, advice and referral system modelled on our face-to-face enquiry desk model. Library Assistants (Grade 2) triage chats and written enquiries. The majority of these are related to issues with library accounts, access to digital resources, purchase requests, and general questions around onsite study space bookings and printing queries. Library guidance, especially advice relating to our onsite facilities, often changes at short notice so library assistants can check our Teams channel for updates and ask for advice.

If an enquiry requires detailed research support, it is referred to an on-call Librarian (Grades 3 or 4) via Ask Chat's internal chat function. On-call librarians are also able to support with other complex enquiries, including prank chats.

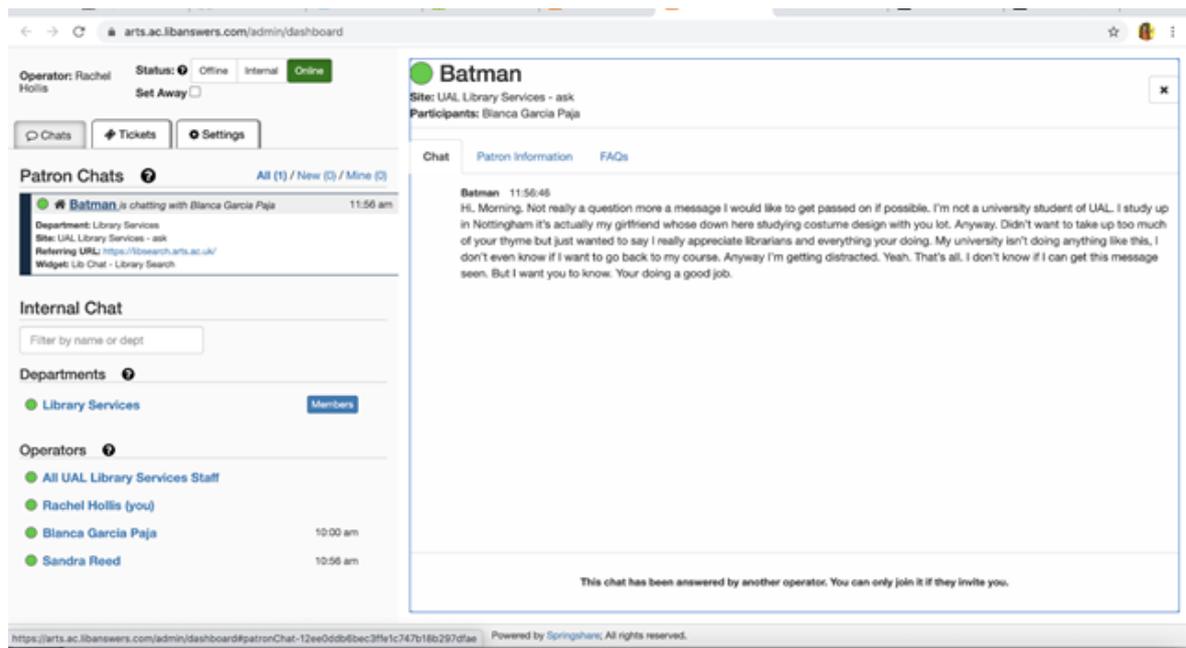
There is a clear route of referral to functional teams dealing with systems, e-resources or site-specific issues, where staff on Ask Chat can use tags on our Teams channel to pin-point specific staff for questions. Senior managers are available on our Teams channel every day to support the delivery of Ask Chat and LibAnswers.

Figure 3. 2020/21 UAL Library Service's Triage model for Ask enquiries



Our support and referral system has been hugely positive for the service. The community of staff willing to help their colleagues with quick answers to chat-related queries is always evident and this has allowed us to be a responsive and inclusive service. Library Assistants have reported that they feel working on Ask Chat has been a good development opportunity. It has enabled them to respond to a wider range of queries as well as up to their own level of competency, with the option to ask for help or refer as needed. The positive engagement of staff is reflected in the feedback polls we received over the past year, where 96.6% of chats rated were considered either good or excellent. Feedback is not compulsory, so these numbers are based on the 31% of polls that were answered.

Figure 4. An example of feedback received via Ask



Managing Ask Chat collaboratively: our plans for 2021/22

Whilst the Library's plans for a blended service for the Autumn 2021/22 term are still being cemented, we are using this time to reflect on how Ask can complement our physical enquiry services. We know that online chat is a popular way for students who are onsite as well as off to contact us. The QR codes on student spaces offer immediate assistance with no need to move away from their desk or less rely on face-to-face interaction. This not only helps people who don't want to move from their study space but it also benefits those who feel nervous asking for help.

Keeping Ask Chat at the centre of our blended service will be key to ensuring success throughout 2021/22. We will do this by adapting our triage model to support onsite staff at physical enquiry desks through our Teams chat. Additionally, we will continue to build and consolidate our staff knowledge base, ensuring that FAQs, enquiry templates, canned messages and our Teams Updates site are populated in anticipation of busy periods or times in which specific Chat themes will arise. Another move towards a proactive Library service will be through the analysis of past Ask Chat statistics and transcripts. The information we gain from these will inform changes to our service in advance and allow us to communicate these promptly to staff in non-core teams such as the evenings and weekends.

The Ask working group will continue its collaborative ethos by expanding to form a larger Ask Operational Group, providing a space for staff of all grades to contribute their ideas and support to the running of Ask Chat and LibAnswers. Additionally, preparations for the coming year will allow us to gather and process staff reflections on Ask Chat, incorporate a further tier of senior librarians and managers into our referral support system and carry out training over the summer. This will help transform Ask Chat from a prompt and reactive response to the need for a comprehensive online enquiry service during the pandemic, to an embedded service for the future.

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