Introduction

This research project investigated overdue books at Leeds University Library. It explores reasons why library users return books overdue, assesses the library's overdues policies, and provides an evaluation of methods of encouraging timely returns. A mixed methods approach was used: library users were surveyed by questionnaire, while library staff participated in semi-structured interviews. Both staff and user viewpoints were taken into account when drawing conclusions and identifying service improvements.

Background

Although university libraries are increasingly providing electronic and digital content, the majority continue to provide a combination of electronic and print resources. Studies have found that, although students and researchers may have an increasing preference for electronic content, the majority still use both print and electronic resources (Zha *et al*, 2012; Folb *et al*, 2011; Rowlands *et al*, 2007).

While electronic resources can often be accessed by many users simultaneously, print books are restricted to use by one person at a time. In academic libraries, where large numbers of students often need to use the same core texts in a short space of time, this creates competition for print textbooks. Many UK university libraries are operating on reduced budgets and are less able to afford multiple copies of textbooks (Fearn, 2009). Libraries therefore need to ensure that books are returned by the due date, in order to keep books in circulation and enable access for as many users as possible (McMenemy, 2010).

This situation arises at a time when UK university students are paying substantially increased tuition fees (Coughlan, 2012). Students' expectations of university are also rising in line with higher fees (Taylor, 2011). These expectations are likely to include a well-stocked library with key textbooks available for use. If universities are unable to substantially increase their book purchases, they may need to focus instead on encouraging timely book returns so that resources can be shared as widely as possible.

Leeds University Library

Leeds University has 4 library sites and over 33,000 students (University of Leeds, 2012). The university charges the maximum £9,000 per year tuition fees for undergraduates. In 2012 it emerged that Leeds University collected the largest total amount of library fines of any UK university (*Guardian*, 2012). This national media coverage has led to criticism from students in the union newspaper *Leeds Student* (e.g. Anderson, 2011; Edmonds, 2012). As a goodwill gesture, the library donated one week's worth of fines to charity during the university's RAG (Raise and Give) week in March 2012 (Dearlove, 2012). It is evident that students are regularly returning books overdue, and that there is currently a backlash against fines. Therefore, investigating overdues at Leeds University Library provides a unique opportunity to evaluate current policies and identify areas for improvement in a library which has known issues with overdues and fines.

Aims and objectives

This study investigated staff and students' views of the current overdue books situation at Leeds University Library. Very little research on overdues and fines has been carried out at UK university libraries; this study aims to address this gap in the literature. By investigating the reasons why books are returned overdue, and assessing the library's current policies on overdue books, the study aims to identify ways in which the library can encourage students to return books on time, benefiting both the library and its users.

To achieve these aims, the following objectives have been identified:
1. *To identify the most common reasons why users return library books overdue.*
2. *To explore users' feelings and opinions on overdue books.*
3. *To explore staff and user opinions of existing library policies.*
4. *To gather staff and user opinions on a list of proposed changes to the library's overdues policies.*
5. *To compare staff and user viewpoints on overdues.*

Literature Review
There is very little research into overdues at UK academic libraries. The majority of recent research has been carried out in developing countries, where academic libraries are perhaps more reliant on printed texts than electronic resources. Other studies have focused mainly on public libraries. Common themes and issues in the literature are discussed below.

Overdues in academic and public libraries

The need to encourage users to return library books on time is common to both academic and public libraries. Overdue books are recognised as an inevitable part of library work; "Every library has a mechanism for retrieving overdue materials." Adomi (2003: 19). The inevitability of dealing with overdues is often portrayed as a source of much effort and frustration for library staff. Hansel & Burgin (1983: 150) refer to public libraries' "war" on fines, while Little (1989: 22) feels that attempts to manage overdues have an "air of desperation" about them. Kean & McKoy-Johnson (2009) describe disputes over library fines as a source of stress for both students and staff in academic libraries.

A primary concern for libraries is to keep books in circulation and enable access for as many users as possible (Bhatt, 2011; Murugathas, 2009; Flood, 2008; Adomi, 2003; Little, 1989). The ethical aspect of book circulation is highlighted by McMenemy (2010: 79) who states that penalising overdues can "encourage users to be more community-minded". However, another consideration is that in many cases overdue fines are a source of income for the library (Emojorho, 2004). At times, the aim of sharing resources fairly is at odds with the financial imperative to generate income.

Why do users return library books overdue?

Several studies explore the reasons why library users return books late. These include studies of public libraries (Little, 1989; Hansel & Burgin, 1983), medical libraries (Alao, 2002; Shontz, 1999) and academic libraries, mainly in the developing world (Bhatt, 2011; Murugathas, 2009; Udoumoh & Okoro, 2007; Adomi, 2003) and in one case, New Zealand (Anderson, 2008). There is very little research in UK academic libraries.

Common reasons for users returning their books late have been identified by several (Bhatt, 2011; Murugathas, 2009; Anderson, 2008; Alao, 2002). The most common reasons across multiple studies include:

- Forgetfulness; not remembering to either renew or return the book(s) on time.
- Inconvenience; users unable to get to the library on the due date, or found renewal systems inadequate or inconvenient.
- Necessity/perceived necessity; users needed book(s) for study, so kept them beyond the due date.

Other reasons identified included being away from university on the due date (Murugathas, 2009; Alao, 2002) or illness (Alao, 2002). Additionally, Anderson (2008: 63) suggests: lack of knowledge about library regulations; not knowing when/where to return or how to renew books; having lost or misplaced the book; having lent the book to a friend; or being reluctant to face library staff when returning the book late. These additional reasons for overdues were found to be far less common than the three main reasons listed above.

Overdues and demographics

Murugathas (2009) found that a higher number of female students than male students had overdue books at the time of being surveyed, while Alao (2002) found that more males than females had overdues. Both of these studies had relatively small sample groups, and Alao (2002)'s study had considerably more male respondents than female. Bhatt (2011) found few significant differences by gender or faculty of study in attitudes to overdues and fines. Anderson (2008) found that students in the Arts and Law faculties were more likely to have overdue books. Generally, evidence linking overdues with demographic information is rather patchy and unreliable.

Ways of dealing with overdues

The most common way of penalising library overdues is by charging fines. News articles often portray library fines as unfair, suggesting that universities in particular are making money at the expense of students (Cohen, 2012; Ralph 2011: 18). However, library literature takes a different view, highlighting the necessity of charging fines to ensure that books are kept in circulation (Bhatt, 2011; Murugathas, 2009; Adomi, 2003; Little, 1989). Adomi (2003) found that 60.5% of students surveyed did not support the scrapping of library fines, and Bhatt (2011) found that 78% of students agreed that fines were effective in encouraging timely returns. Murugathas (2009) investigated student opinions on ways of dealing with overdues at the University of Jaffna. The most popular suggestions were sending reminder notices and allowing students to renew books even if they were very overdue. Opinions on fines were divided, with 56% agreeing that fines were "helpful and welcome" while 34% agreed that fines were "not helpful and intensely hateful" (the remaining 10% were undecided).

Other studies have looked at the influence of library policy on fines. Hansel & Burgin (1983) found that longer loan periods ultimately led to more books being returned on time. Hannabuss (1993) also discussed the complex relationship between loan periods and overdues. Longer loans are more popular with library users, but do not create sufficient pressure to return books on time; short loan periods provide a sense of urgency, but users may find they do not have enough time to use the book so end up returning it overdue. Jacobs (1996: 140) found that many students using academic libraries

viewed short loan books as being "essentially unavailable to them". This contradicted the purpose of the short loan period, which was to make books available to more users.

Bede Mitchell (1988) has pointed out that most ways of dealing with overdues involve negative reinforcement (e.g. punishing users, usually with fines), and suggested instead using positive reinforcement (i.e. rewarding users who return library books on time). This method was trialled in Georgia Southern University, USA, but produced mixed results. There were only small improvements in undergraduate overdue rates, and this effect lasted only for the first semester (Bede Mitchell & Smith, 2005).

Some studies of overdues have recommended improving library reminder notices to reduce overdues (Alao, 2011; Anderson, 2008). It has also been suggested that text message reminders might be more "immediate and personal" as a way of alerting students to overdues (Walsh, 2009: 10). However, research by Leung (2007) found that sending reminder notices did not significantly improve overdue rates.

Behavioural and psychological factors

Zaki (1994) suggested that library users were selfish in their refusal to return overdue books, while other studies have found that strong competition to get hold of library books can lead to students keeping books past the due date (Murugathas, 2009; Alao, 2002). Anderson (2008) asked university students about their feelings when returning books late. The most common response (23% of respondents) was "annoyed".

Summary of the literature

Literature about overdues and fines in UK university libraries mainly consists of news articles which often take a negative approach, criticising universities for the amount of fines collected (Ralph, 2011) or attacking the perceived unfairness of fines (Beard, 2009). Few overdues studies have been carried out in English-speaking countries and virtually none have considered academic libraries in the UK, which highlights a gap in the literature.

Existing studies of overdues agree on three primary reasons for returning books overdue: forgetfulness, inconvenience, and an ongoing need to use the book (Bhatt, 2011; Murugathas, 2009; Anderson, 2008; Alao, 2002). The most common way of dealing with overdues is by charging fines. Students often recognise the need for fines, but also report that they dislike being fined. Links have been established between overdues and loan periods. The use of positive reinforcement to reduce overdues has been trialled (Bede Mitchell & Smith, 2005) but with inconclusive results.

The existing literature generally investigates the student perspective on overdues, while library staff perspectives have rarely been considered. Quantitative surveys are commonly used, although some studies have also incorporated data on book circulation and loan periods (Hannabuss, 1993; Little, 1989). Some articles are rhetorical in nature, questioning the meaning or the morality of library fines (McMenemy, 2010; Beard, 2009).

The literature about library overdues is patchy. There are several areas where further research could be carried out. These include: studies of public and academic libraries in English-speaking countries including the United Kingdom. Research into overdues at UK university libraries in particular would contribute to the debate over university library fines, and would provide a stronger evidence base for critiquing press coverage about library fines, and informing policy. As such, this study of Leeds University Library contributes timely new knowledge to the body of literature on overdues.

Methodology

Research for this study was carried out at Leeds University Library with the full knowledge and approval of library management. The study was carried out using mixed methods: a mainly quantitative questionnaire distributed to library users, and semi-structured interviews with library staff.

The survey method

Users may have some negative feelings associated with overdues and library fines, therefore an anonymous survey offered the opportunity for users to respond, without fear of being judged. The survey was piloted to ensure that the wording of the survey was clear and could be easily understood; some minor amendments were made to wording. The final survey contained eight questions. These included demographic questions, behavioural questions and attitudinal questions. Primarily closed questions were used, but two questions (Q4 and Q8) were open questions allowing for free-text responses. (Survey - Appendix 1.).

Sampling and distribution

Printed surveys were distributed at library enquiry desks at the three main campus libraries. This takes the sampling approach described by Fowler (2002: 12), wherein "Sampling is done from a set of people who go somewhere or do something that enables them to be sampled" (in this case, going to the library). One weakness of this approach is that users who visit the library less often, such as part-time or distance learning students, would have had less opportunity to pick up a survey. However, this was an unavoidable outcome of using print surveys rather than an online version (the latter was not supported by the organisation). Library staff offered surveys to users where possible, but did not supervise users as they completed the surveys so as not to bias results. A return box was provided at each library site for users to drop-off their surveys.

The surveys were available for completion for a two-week period between 14th May and 1st June 2012. This unfortunately coincided with an exam period for undergraduates, which could have influenced the response rate, and also the response content if students were stressed at this time.

Interviews

Interviewing was used to collect data from ten library staff, enabling detailed discussion about staff perceptions and experiences of dealing with overdues and fines. Each interview was based around a list of core questions, to ensure that the relevant topics were addressed, using supplementary questions to follow up relevant lines of enquiry (Appendix 2).

Library staff were recruited to take part in the study via SharePoint, the online staff bulletin, inviting staff with any experience of dealing with overdues and fines to take part in the study. The interview questions were designed to cover the same general topic areas as the user survey, but from a staff perspective.

Data analysis

Survey responses were entered into MS Excel spreadsheets to produce tables, charts and graphs. The qualitative data (e.g. responses to open questions) was analysed and coded into different themes which were then summarised in tables.

Interview data was transcribed from notes taken during interviews. The data was analysed interpretively, looking for common themes and areas of tension across all interview transcripts.

Results

This section is presented in two parts: firstly the results of the user survey, followed by the results of staff interviews. This is followed by a discursive comparison between surveys and interviews in the discussion.

Results of the user survey

Printed surveys were made available at Leeds University Library enquiry desks for a two-week period between 14th May and 1st June 2012. 200 surveys were distributed across three campus libraries. 183 completed surveys were returned by the closing date, of which 181 were usable. The results are presented below. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Q1. What type of library user are you? All respondents (n=181) answered this question. Responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of library user

Type of user	Frequency	%
Undergraduate student	157	87
Postgraduate student	15	8
University staff	6	3
Other	3	2
Total	181	100

Q2. Have you ever kept a university library book past its due date (so that the book became overdue?
All respondents (n=181) answered this question. Responses are presented in Table 2. The majority of respondents (80%) had returned library books overdue in the past. Due to the majority of respondents being undergraduates, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about which types of library user (if any) are more likely to return books overdue. 36 respondents (20% of the total) had no previous overdues.

Table 2. Have you ever had overdue library books in the past?

User type	Yes	No	Total
Undergraduate	126	31	157
Postgraduate	12	3	15
University staff	5	1	6

Other	2	1	3
Total	**145**	**36**	**181**

Q3. If you have had overdue books in the past, what was the reason? 150 participants answered this question. As the question format was "Tick any that apply", the number of responses total more than the number of respondents. Responses are presented in Table 3. The most common reported reason for returning books late was forgetfulness: either forgetting to renew the book (67%), or forgetting to return the book by the due date (53%). A further 39% of users reported that they had not realised the book was overdue. A quarter of respondents said their books had become overdue because they had been unable to get to the library. 16% of users had been unable to renew their books.

Table 3. Reasons for past overdues (ranked frequencies)

Reason	User type				Total	
	UG	PG	Staff	Other	Freq.	%
Forgot to renew	86	8	4	2	100	67
Forgot to return	68	7	2	2	79	53
Didn't realise book was overdue	52	4	1	2	59	39
Couldn't get to library	28	5	3	1	37	25
Could not renew	19	3	1	1	24	16
Other	13	3	0	2	18	12
Personal circumstances	7	2	0	2	11	7
Lost book	3	1	0	0	4	3
Lent book to somebody else	4	0	0	0	4	3

18 respondents (12% of the total) ticked the "Other" option. Of these, 11 reported that they had returned the book late because they still needed to use it. Less common reasons included personal circumstances, e.g. illness (7%), having lost the book (4%) or having lent the book to somebody else (4%).

Q4. How do you feel if your library books become overdue? This qualitative question prompted respondents to enter free-text answers. 127 respondents (70%) answered this question. Comments were coded and classified into categories which are summarised in Table 5. Many comments fell into more than one category (e.g. complaining about fines *and* expressing annoyance) so were counted more than once.

Table 4. Feelings about overdue books: summary of comments (ranked frequencies)

Theme	Frequency
Emotions about overdues (other than annoyance) *e.g. stress, worry, guilt*	47
Annoyance about overdues *e.g. annoyed with self; annoyed with library*	40
Comments about fines *e.g. fines are too high; fines are justified*	35

Fairness/unfairness of overdues *e.g. unfair policies; system is fair*	25	
Neutral about overdues *e.g. not bothered; don't care*	15	
Miscellaneous	5	

Reported emotions about overdue books were varied, though on the whole were mostly negative. It is difficult here to separate the emotions attributed to overdues from the emotions caused by fines. Comments such as "Sad and poor" or "Nervous about the bill" suggest that many respondents were more bothered by the fine than by returning the books late. On the other hand, nine respondents felt guilty about their overdues. Annoyance, reported by several users, can mean several things: annoyance with oneself, annoyance with the library, or annoyance directed elsewhere (see Anderson, 2008). 25 users commented on the fairness or unfairness of library overdues. Of these, 17 felt that the overdues system was generally fair. However, 9 of these included qualifying statements, such as:

"I understand that it is only fair that we don't hog books but as an international student with the amount of fees I pay I expect to have access to all the books I need at whatever time for however long." (Undergraduate)

Q5. *Your experience of overdue books*. This question asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed, disagreed or were undecided on a list of statements designed to measure attitudes towards library overdues. 179 respondents answered Q5 (some did not provide a response for every statement, so some totals do not equal 179). The responses are presented in table 8.

Table 8. Experiences of overdue books (in order by most agreement)

Statement	Agree		Disagree		Undecided		Total	
	No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
I understand the library's rules about overdue books.	157	88	9	5	13	7	179	100
The library makes it easy to return/renew books on time.	147	82	19	11	13	7	179	100
I get annoyed with myself if my books are overdue.	126	70	42	23	11	6	179	100
I always try to return books on time in case someone else needs them.	115	64	43	24	21	12	179	100
If I really need a book I will keep it, even if it becomes overdue.	115	64	54	31	8	5	177	100
I get annoyed with the library if my books are overdue.	70	40	87	49	20	11	177	100
Personal circumstances often prevent me from returning books on time.	61	34	105	59	13	7	179	100
I avoid borrowing library books in case they	54	31	109	62	14	8	177	100

become overdue.								
It doesn't matter to me if my library books are overdue.	26	15	130	73	23	13	179	100

The majority of respondents reported that they understand the library's rules about overdues (88%) and that the library makes it easy to return or renew books on time (82%). Two statements were given identical numbers of "Agree" responses: 115 (64%) of users agreed with "I always try to return my books on time" and 64% also agreed with "If I really need a book I will keep it". Though not necessarily the same 115 respondents agreed with both statements, the figures suggest an overlap between the two apparently contradictory statements.

A high percentage of users (70%) indicated they felt annoyed with themselves when their books became overdue. A further 40% of respondents felt annoyed with the library when their books were overdue, suggesting that there is at least some overlap in the sources of annoyance. 31% of respondents indicated that they avoided borrowing library books in case the books became overdue. This suggests that a significant number of users are restricting their borrowing in order to avoid overdues.

The statement with the highest number of "disagree" responses (73%) was "It doesn't matter to me if my library books are overdue." This is concurrent with the high proportion of emotional responses to overdues reported in Q4 (see Table 4).

Q6. How the library can help. This question asked respondents to rate the perceived effectiveness of a list of existing library procedures for dealing with overdues. Options were: "Very effective", "Somewhat effective", or "Not effective". 179 respondents answered this question. Some did not give a response for every statement, so some totals do not equal 179. Responses are presented in Table 9 and Figure 1.

Table 9. Effectiveness of current library measures (in order by most effective)

Library methods for dealing with overdues	Very effective		Somewhat effective		Not effective		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Online renewals system	164	92	12	7	3	2	179	100
24hr book return slots at Edward Boyle Library	121	68	31	17	27	15	179	100
Email reminders when books are due back	116	65	55	31	8	4	179	100
Charging fines for overdue books	92	51	48	27	39	22	179	100
Block users from renewing when they have very overdue books	78	44	51	28	50	28	179	100

Block users from borrowing when they have very overdue books	77	43	56	31	46	26	179	100
Short loan periods for popular books (e.g. High Demand)	76	42	56	31	47	26	179	100
Automated telephone renewals system	72	42	58	34	42	24	172	100

The library's online renewals system was rated the most effective method of preventing overdues, with 92% of respondents rating it as very effective and a further 7% somewhat effective. Book return slots were also rated very effective by a majority of users (68%), as were automated email reminders (65%). Charging fines for overdue books is more controversial, rated highly effective by around half of respondents (51%), somewhat effective by 27% and ineffective by 22%. This suggests the majority of respondents believe fines have at least some effectiveness in reducing overdues. Blocking library users from renewing or borrowing when their books are very overdue were similarly divisive.
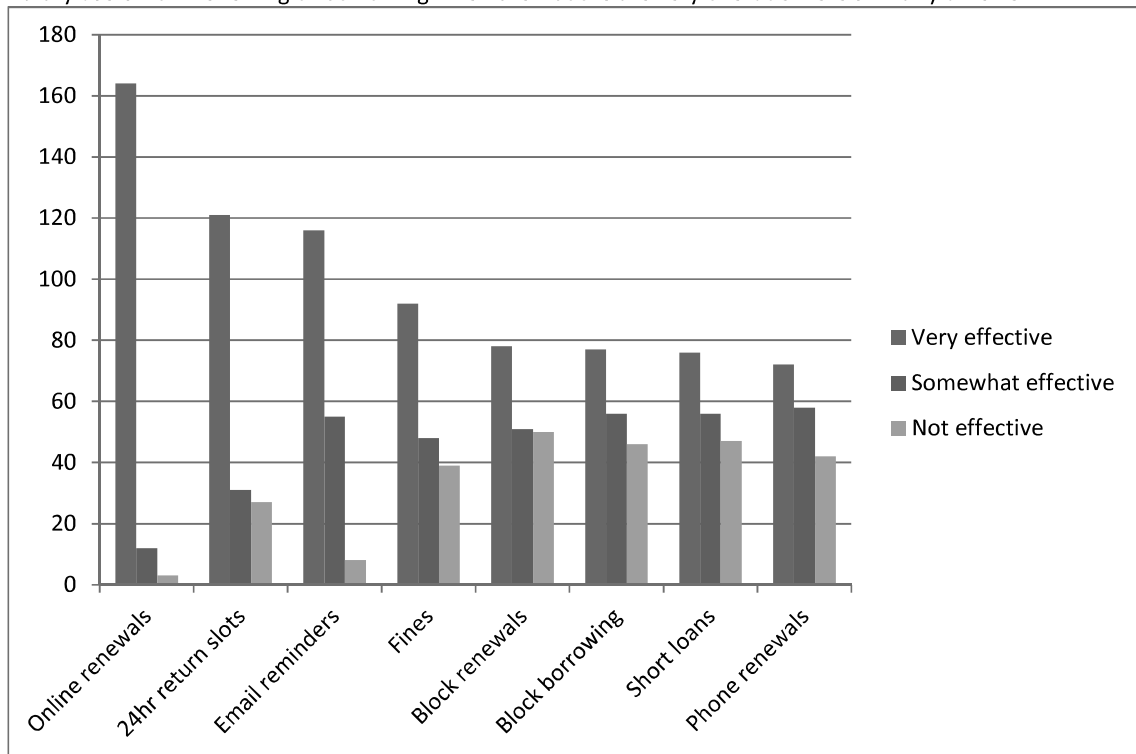
Fig. 1. Effectiveness of current library measures

Q7. What else could the library do to help? 172 respondents answered this question. Responses are summarised in Table 10 and Figure 2. The suggestion rated most effective was to introduce extended loans during vacation periods (87% very effective). Making more books available online was also a popular suggestion, with 79% of users rating this method as very effective and 17% somewhat effective. Text message reminders were rated as highly effective by 64% of respondents. Several suggestions were rated very effective by around half the respondents, including: rewarding users who return on time (53%); fines amnesty (52%); moving more books into High Demand (49%) and only charging fines on recalled books (49%).

Table. 10. Effectiveness of proposed measures for dealing with overdues
(in order by most effective)

Suggestion	Very effective		Somewhat effective		Not effective		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Extended loans during vacation periods	150	87	18	10	4	2	172	100
Make more books available online	136	79	29	17	7	4	172	100
Text message reminders when books are due for return	110	64	42	24	20	12	172	100
Reward system for users who return books on time	91	53	39	23	42	24	172	100
Fines Amnesty Week when any book can be returned without fines	90	52	49	28	33	19	172	100
Move more books into High Demand Collection	85	49	58	34	29	17	172	100
Only charge fines on books recalled by another user	85	49	56	33	31	18	172	100
Allow renewals even when books are very overdue	72	42	47	27	53	31	172	100
Make more books reference-only	55	32	58	34	59	34	172	100
Charge higher fines	24	14	50	29	98	57	172	100

Allowing renewals for very overdue books was given mixed ratings (42% very effective, 31% not effective). Opinion was similarly divided over making more books reference-only. Charging higher fines was universally unpopular, with 57% rating higher fines as ineffective. However, as with Q6, it can be difficult to distinguish between methods which are considered ineffective and methods which are disliked.
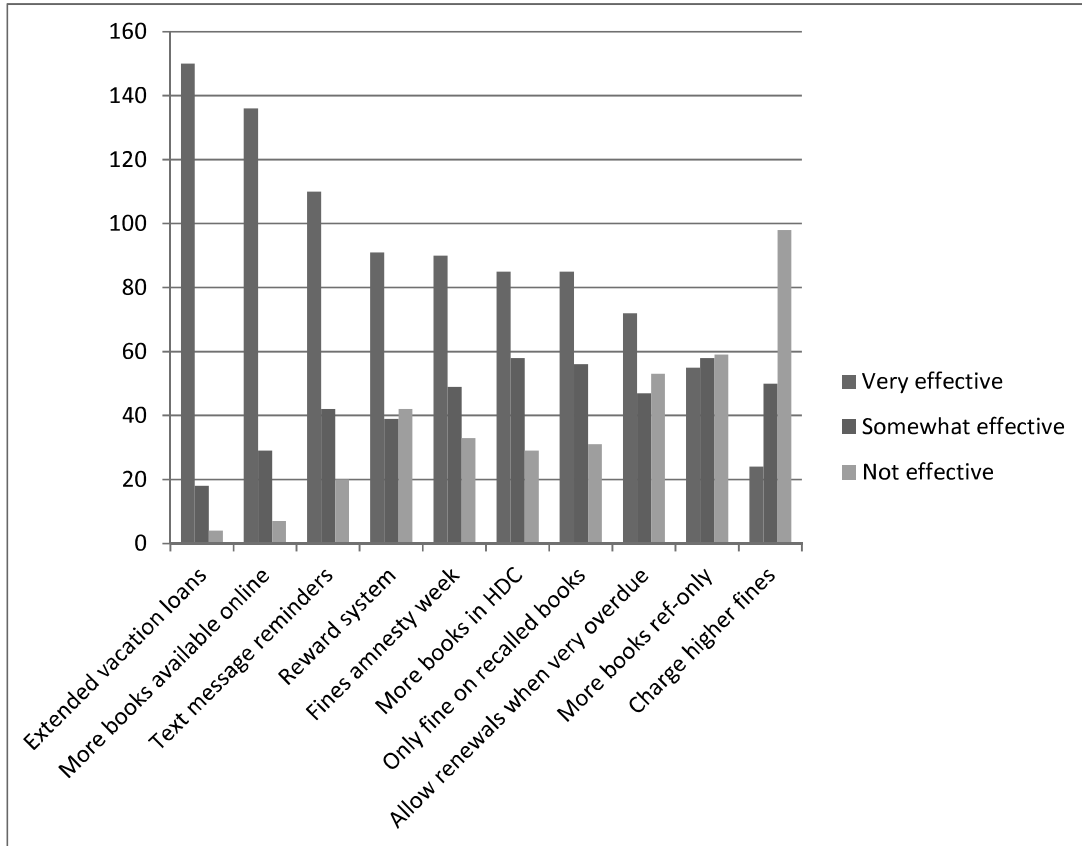
Figure 2. Effectiveness of proposed measures for dealing with overdues

Q8. Any other comments. Q8 invited users to provide free-text responses with any other comments about overdue library books. 45 users (25% of total respondents) answered this question.

Library fines attracted the most comments. 10 respondents thought the library should reduce the amount of fines charged, impose a cap on fines, or stop charging altogether. A further 4 respondents felt the library should reduce or abolish fines on overdue books which are not recalled. Two respondents thought the library should regularly donate a percentage of fines to charity.

Fifteen respondents offered alternative suggestions for dealing with overdues. Of these, 6 felt that the library should purchase more print copies of textbooks. Two users commented on the library's attitude to overdues and fines. One suggested that the library should "Cut the false trying to help attitude and actually do something instead of robbing students". Three users reported that their personal circumstances (work placements, part time study and mental health issues) contributed to their books becoming overdue.

Results of staff interviews

Interviews were carried out with ten library staff. The interview questions were designed to cover the same topics as the user survey and to provide a contrasting staff perspective. A summary of staff responses to each interview question is provided below.

What do you think are the main reasons that library users return their books overdue? All staff felt that there were several possible reasons for books becoming overdue; these often depended on the type of library user. Two broad categories emerged based on the library staff experience. Firstly, there were forgetful and disorganised users (usually undergraduates studying for their first degree and living away from home for the first time). Secondly there were users with ongoing problems, such as part-time or distance learning students, disabled students, and those with financial or academic difficulties. Attitudes to the second type of user were varied, often combining sympathy with frustration. Several interviewees said that they were willing to waive fines for students with ongoing difficulties, particularly for disabled students.

Demand for key textbooks was an issue identified by most staff members. Some librarians said students kept books out of desperation and asserted that "really selfish people are in the minority". However, one staff member (recently a student) had encountered "vindictive" library users who would keep a book simply to prevent others from using it.

A broader factor in dealing with overdues was the large student population at Leeds University. Librarians felt that the sheer number of users made it impossible to chase individual students with overdues. Instead, the library "relies on users to come to us". Library staff were often perplexed as to why users did not contact the library when they were unable to renew books online, as the delay in reporting the problem usually led to increased fines. A "head in the sand" mentality was frequently mentioned.

Some interviewees had previously worked in much smaller libraries and felt that personal relationships with users were a deterrent to overdues. It seemed students in small libraries felt more accountable to known individuals, whereas Leeds University libraries might seem rather "faceless" or "bureaucratic" in comparison.

How effective do you think our existing overdues policies are? All staff members interviewed thought email reminders were useful in preventing overdues. However, there were some disadvantages, mainly that reminders are only effective if users check their emails regularly. Additionally, long term library users were thought to be overly dependent on reminder emails. Most staff members felt it was primarily the user's responsibility to manage their library account.

The online renewals system was mentioned as a useful way of preventing overdues. However, some staff noted that students who were unable to renew books online often assumed this was due to technical problems and would continue trying for several days, rather than contact the library. User instruction was a point of contention: some thought students were overwhelmed with library information too early in the term, while others felt that the necessary information was available but that students did not bother to look for it.

Some larger issues relating to overdues were also identified. A few librarians mentioned the recent negative publicity about library fines and felt that Leeds University libraries had an "image problem" as a result. One manager suggested that students did not realise the library's goal is to get books back into circulation rather than to collect the maximum fines. It was also felt that staff were

more approachable and helpful than students gave them credit for. Most participants felt staff behaviour was generally effective in dealing with overdues.

What do you think about the following suggestions for encouraging returns on time? Users were given the same list of suggestions as used for Q7 in the user survey. The pros and cons for each suggestion are summarised in Table 11 below.

Table 11. The pros and cons of methods for encouraging returns.

Suggested strategy	Pros	Cons
Text message reminders	• Students "check their phones more often than their emails". • More likely that reminders will be seen in time to renew.	• Need to keep contact details constantly updated. • Outdated; most students have smartphones which can easily be used to check email. • Users with several books checked out may receive multiple texts; annoying.
Move more books into High Demand Collection (HDC)	• HDC books less likely to be overdue as fines are higher and no renewals allowed. • It is obvious to students that HDC books are subject to stricter rules: clearly labelled and kept in a separate area with signage.	• HDC only useful to those who live on campus; problematic for part time and distance learning students. • HDC is "abused" by a minority of students who hide books. • Students may run up higher fines on fewer books. • Space restrictions in HDC shelving area.
Make more books available online	• No due dates for e-books, so no overdues or fines. • Most e-books can be accessed by multiple users simultaneously; reduces competition. • E-books cannot be stolen or vandalised.	• Not all titles available in e-book format, or prohibitively expensive. • E-books often "a nightmare" for visually impaired students; not compatible with screen-reading software. • Usage statistics for e-books often "disappointing".
Make more books reference-only	• Reference books cannot be borrowed so do not generate fines.	• Reference books more likely to be hidden or have pages ripped out. • Unlike HDC, reference books located in unstaffed areas so "harder to keep an eye on". • Reference books are "unpopular" with students and faculty librarians.
Charge higher fines	• May encourage more users to return books on time.	• Higher fines would be hugely unpopular with most students.

		• Likely to generate further negative publicity in campus newspaper etc. • Fines only a deterrent to poorer students; wealthier users will pay the fines in order to keep books longer.
Reward users who return books on time	• Recognises that many students make the effort to return books on time. • Students could earn better borrowing rights or "build up credit" against future fines.	• Not being fined **is** the reward!" • Rewards users for a minimum standard of behaviour; "all must have prizes" culture.
Allow renewals even when books are very overdue	• Prevents users building up "unnecessary" fines resulting from forgetfulness. • Blocking online renewals causes students to panic and keep the books, causing more overdues and higher fines. • Should be acceptable for books which are not recalled or in High Demand.	• Blocking online renewals alerts users to problems on their library account. • It is the user's responsibility to contact the library and "negotiate" with staff to renew their books. • Unsure whether the library management system can differentiate between recalled and non-recalled books.
Only charge fines on recalled books	• Recalled books should be the priority as they are needed by other users. • Focusing on recalls highlights the moral incentive to return overdues (as opposed to financial incentive of a fine).	• Not everybody who needs a book will recall it (e.g. part-time students who are rarely on campus). • Not clear whether library management system can identify which books are recalled when charging fines.
Vacation loans	• Would benefit international students who are unable to return books during vacations.	• Vacation loans were abolished several years ago as they caused so many complaints. • Disadvantages postgraduates and academics who are on campus all year round.
Fines Amnesty Week	• Shows that the library is more concerned with getting books back than with collecting fines. • Might help to get long-term overdues resolved, e.g. invoiced books which are "just sitting in people's houses". • Could work if timed correctly.	• Could create more short-term overdues if students wait for the amnesty to return their books. • Would mainly benefit "undeserving" students with many overdues and large fines. • A lot of extra returns and re-shelving work during amnesty week.

Can you suggest any other ways of managing overdues at Leeds? Overdues were seen by all staff as an inevitable part of library work. One manager commented, "If there was a perfect solution, someone else would have found it by now." However, some potential improvements were identified:

Dedicated overdues management team
A dedicated team who would personally contact students with multiple overdue books. This would help to overcome some of the problems of the library appearing "faceless" and relying on users to initiate contact.
More positive publicity
This could publicise the library's rules about overdues and fines, and possibly take a "how to avoid fines" approach, emphasising that the library wants to help students return their books.
Get academic departments involved
It was thought that students take their lecturers more seriously than library staff, and that escalating the issue might force students to deal with their overdues and fines more promptly.
Examples from other universities
Several staff members had recently visited York University Library and reported that a new overdues policy is due to be implemented at York for the academic year 2012/13. The outcome of this policy change could be influential for overdues policies at Leeds (Appendix 3).

Any other comments about overdues at Leeds University Library? One staff member wished to stress that interactions with users at the library enquiry desk were an important opportunity for user education and that library staff should always try to help users prevent overdues. Two interviewees were keen to stress that specific groups of library users, such as healthcare students or disabled students, faced their own particular set of difficulties and should be dealt with sympathetically.

There were also several comments about the library's perceived "bad reputation" regarding fines, which many staff felt was unjustified. It was pointed out that fines "league tables" did not take student numbers into account, and that Leeds students may be more prone to overdues or have the means to pay the fines.

Discussion
Themes and issues arising from the results analysis are discussed below.

 Reasons why users return their books overdue
In the user survey, the most commonly reported reason for returning library books late was forgetfulness. This is concurrent with several studies which all found that forgetfulness was among the most common causes of overdues (Murugathas, 2009; Anderson, 2008; Alao, 2002). 39% of users also reported that they had not realised their books were overdue. This is surprising as all Leeds University library users are sent email reminders about overdues. Previous studies have suggested introducing or improving automated reminders to reduce overdue rates (Alao, 2011; Anderson, 2008). However, Leung (2007) found that reminder notices did not significantly reduce overdues. Further, 31% of respondents reported that they find email reminders only "somewhat effective" in preventing overdues. That said, overdue rates might be substantially higher without reminder notices.

Some of the reported reasons for overdues are open to interpretation. One librarian noted in interview that students often "perceive themselves as being very busy," but this is a subjective viewpoint. For example, the "personal circumstances" reported by 7% of users might mean anything

from severe personal problems to mild inconvenience in returning books. Perhaps some users try to present themselves as being blameless with regard to overdue books, an example of social desirability bias (see Fisher & Katz, 2000).

In interviews, library staff understood that the lack of available textbooks created competition among users and increased the likelihood of overdues. This concurs with the 11 respondents in the user survey who stated their book had become overdue because they still needed it. Staff also recognised that for some students, the need to use a book outweighs the cost of the fine. As one undergraduate wrote in the survey, "Sometimes a small fine is worth it if someone has recalled the book and you still need it!"

Interviews also revealed that the very large student population at Leeds University was a concern for staff dealing with overdues. The size and number of library sites, along with the emphasis on online services, was thought to make the library seem "faceless". One survey respondent described the library system as "impersonal". Individual staff members, however, saw themselves as friendly and willing to help. Some staff had friendly relationships with particular types of user, such as those who worked closely with disabled students, mature or part-time students. In these cases, library staff were able to counteract the perceived bureaucracy of the library system and deal with users as individuals.

Users' feelings about overdue books

Responses indicate that overdues are often an emotive issue for library users. Many users reported feeling annoyance, worry, guilt and stress when their books were overdue. 70% of users agreed that their annoyance was directed at themselves, while 40% reported that they were annoyed with the library, and several users were annoyed with both themselves and the library. Others expressed frustration with library policies, particularly about the amount of fines charged.

The reservations system was also a cause of frustration, often because a book was recalled while the user still needed or was unable to return it. Conversely, users were also unhappy when their book was fined for being overdue even though it was not recalled by somebody else. Librarians made a similar distinction between "necessary" fines (to encourage a user to return a recalled book) and "unnecessary" fines (on less popular books which the user simply forgot to renew).

Responses also raise the possibility that some users' behaviour is affected by the competition for library books. 64% of respondents agreed with the apparently contradictory statements "I always try to return my books on time" and "If I really need a book I will keep it". Perhaps some users would ideally like to return their books on time, but in situations where there is an urgent need for the book, self-interest prevails and the user will keep the book past the due date.

Current policies at Leeds

The majority of users agreed that they understood the library's rules about overdue books (88%) and that the library makes it easy to return or renew books on time (82%). However, as Anderson (2008) points out, students may think they understand library rules better than they actually do. Library staff often commented that users who were unable to renew their books online (a problem reported by 16%) did not seem to understand the reasons for this and would keep trying to renew for several days rather than contact the library.

The online renewals system was in fact highly rated by users (92% rated it "very effective"), but staff were more critical, mainly because they felt it was not clear to users why their online renewals failed. Email reminders were rated quite highly by students (64% rated them "very effective"). While staff felt the reminders were necessary, they pointed out that reminders are only useful if they are

received and acted upon before the due date. Students' failure to check their email regularly was seen as a contributing factor, which would also help to account for the high number of overdues attributed to forgetfulness or oversight.

Charging fines was a divisive issue among users; 22% felt that fines were not effective, while 27% saw fines as somewhat effective. However, it is necessary to distinguish between policies which are "not helpful and intensely hateful" (Murugathas, 2009: 8) and those which are effective but disliked. Library staff saw fines as being in the latter category, although it was noted that fines are only a deterrent to those who can't afford to pay them. This was seen by some as contributing to inequality among a student population which is perceived as relatively wealthy.

Short loan periods (e.g. High Demand Collection) evoked mixed opinions: 42% of users rated them very effective, 31% somewhat effective, and 26% not effective. This was reflected in staff concerns that High Demand books were not useful to part-time or distance learning students, and that a minority of library users hid or stole books from the High Demand area. Similar concerns were raised by Jacobs (1996: 140) who found that many university library users felt short loan books were "essentially unavailable to them". While short loan books are intended to increase circulation this is not always the case in practice.

Proposed suggestions for improving the overdues system

The suggestion rated as most effective by library users was to introduce longer loans over university holidays: 87% ranked this as "very effective". However, this suggestion was unpopular with library staff, many of whom recalled that the library used to have a vacation loans system which was abolished several years previously after a large number of complaints. Vacation loans were perceived by staff as unfairly benefiting undergraduates (who constituted 87% of survey respondents). One librarian suggested that Leeds as a research-led university should be catering more for academics and postgraduates who are on campus throughout the year.

Making more books available online was rated as very effective by 79% of users and somewhat effective by 17%. However, a librarian who regularly worked with e-books stated that actual usage statistics were often disappointing. Other staff concerns were that not all books were available electronically, and others were prohibitively expensive; e-books are also problematic for visually impaired students. While e-books are a good solution to overdues in theory, there are several practical considerations involved.

Text message reminders were rated highly effective by 64% of users. Several staff thought text reminders were more likely to be received promptly by users, as suggested by Walsh (2009). However, one librarian felt this idea was outdated, as many library users have smartphones which can just as easily be used to check email reminders.

A reward system for users who return books on time was rated very effective by 53% of users. Some library staff were amenable to this idea, while others felt "Not being fined is the reward [for returning on time]!" It is worth noting that when a reward system was trialled by Bede Mitchell & Smith (2005), it did not significantly reduce overdues. A fines amnesty week was rated very effective by over half of users (52%), but staff had concerns that if users knew an amnesty was forthcoming, they would keep their books for longer, thus increasing short-term overdues.

Allowing renewals when books are very overdue, and only charging fines for recalled books, were suggestions very popular with staff but less so with users. 49% of users believed that only fining recalls would be very effective, and 33% somewhat effective. Staff felt that focusing on the timely return of recalled books could encourage users to be more considerate, as it was evident that the book was

required by somebody else. Allowing renewals when books are very overdue was also supported by most staff, as this was linked to the issue of blocked online renewals for overdue books, which staff felt was confusing to users and often led to larger fines. However, only 31% of users thought allowing renewals would be very effective, and 27% somewhat effective.

There was only patchy support among users and staff for moving more books into High Demand. Making more books reference-only was unpopular with both users and staff. Charging higher fines was highly unpopular with users, ranked as ineffective by 57% of survey respondents. Staff thought that, while increasing fines might well reduce overdue rates, it would create resentment against the library and generate further negative publicity. As such, staff and users were in agreement that increasing fines was not advisable for the foreseeable future.

Additional staff suggestions for improving overdue rates included: a dedicated overdues management team; more positive publicity; and reporting students with persistent overdues to their academic departments.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the findings from the user survey and interviews with library staff. These are discussed in the context of the research objectives.

Objective 1: To identify the most common reasons why users return library books overdue.

The most common reported reasons for overdues were: forgetting to renew the books, forgetting to return the books, and not realising that books were overdue. Other issues included being unable to get to the library and failed attempts to renew books online. Some users had problems with overdues because of personal difficulties. Staff felt that the large student population was a barrier to dealing with overdues.

Objective 2. To explore users' feelings and opinions on overdue books.

It is difficult to untangle users' emotions about overdues from emotions about fines; for many users these are one and the same. There were many negative emotions attributed to overdues and fines, which are perceived by many as unfair and expensive. Many users expressed a desire to return books on time which was hampered by their perceived need to keep the book past the due date.

Objective 3. To explore staff and user opinions of existing library policies.

Most users understand library policies and feel that the library makes it easy to return or renew books on time. Email reminders and online renewals are valued by staff and users, yet the high percentage of overdues attributed to forgetfulness suggests that reminders are not always effective. Staff felt that users often did not understand the library policies that prevented them from renewing online, leading to confusion and higher fines. Library fines were generally unpopular with users, while staff thought that fines were effective but disliked.

Objective 4. To gather staff and user opinions on a list of proposed changes to the library's overdues policies.

Students thought longer loans over vacations would be effective in preventing overdues, but library staff felt vacation loans unfairly benefited undergraduates. Purchasing more e-books was a popular suggestion from users, along with text message reminders. Staff were more eager than users to allow renewals for overdue non-recalled books and to reduce or abolish fines on non-recalled books.

Charging higher fines and making more books reference-only were universally unpopular with both users and staff.

Objective 5. To compare the staff and user viewpoints on overdues.
Library staff have a good understanding of the reasons why users return their books late and have developed strategies for dealing with different types of user. While users felt that they understood library policies about overdues, staff identified some areas of confusion, mostly relating to online renewals. Staff and users often differed in their opinion on existing library policies. Issues of staff/user relationships also came to light, as many staff felt that users did not realise librarians were there to help and not to collect the maximum amount of fines.

Limitations of research
User surveys gathered responses from 181 users, only a small percentage of Leeds University's 33,000 student population. The majority of respondents (87%) were undergraduate students, so the findings are not generalisable to the wider user population. The survey may have had an improved response rate if carried out at a different of year, and an online survey format would have been more desirable had permission been given.

Recommendations for managing overdues at Leeds University Library
The following recommendations have been identified as a result of this research, specifically related to Leeds University Library, though they may have interest for other university libraries operating in a similar context.

- *Consider implementing policies which distinguish between recalled and non-recalled books.* The reservations system is a cause of complaints from students and staff. To allow renewals of overdue non-recalled books would make online renewals easier and help to avoid fines caused by forgetfulness. Focusing on the return of books which are demonstrably needed by other users might help to emphasise the ethical or community-minded aspect of overdues.

- *Promote use of e-books.* E-books, while expensive, can help alleviate demand for popular texts and can bypass overdues and fines. User enthusiasm for e-books is not currently reflected in usage statistics; library staff could address user concerns and offer help with using e-books. Popularity of e-books may also rise with the increased use of e-readers such as Kindles.

- *Consider a one-off Fines Amnesty.* A well-publicised amnesty may help to get long-term overdues returned, and to demonstrate that the library's main concern is to get books back rather than collect large fines. Regularly donating a percentage of fines to charity could also send a positive message.

- *Investigate the use of text message reminders*. Would they make any difference to students with smartphones, and could they succeed where email reminders have had limited success?

- *Use positive publicity to improve user perceptions.* The library could counteract negative publicity about fines with more positive messages, such as a "How to avoid fines" page on the

library website. Publicity could be used to explain overdues policies and also encourage students to contact the library if they have problems.

Further research
Overdues literature is currently lacking in geographical diversity and in the use of qualitative research methods. As this study has identified that overdues and fines are an ongoing concern in university libraries, more up-to-date research might be carried out in other UK academic libraries.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey distributed to library users:

Overdue Books at Leeds University Library

Purpose of the survey

This survey is part of a study carried out for an MA dissertation at Sheffield University.

The purposes of the study are:
1. To find out the reasons why books are returned overdue at Leeds University Library.

2. To evaluate the library's existing policies on overdue books.
3. To identify suggestions for the library to improve its policies on overdue books.

The study has been given ethical approval by Sheffield University Information School.

If you have any questions about the survey or the study, please contact Rachel Davies (r.b.davies@leeds.ac.uk).

All responses are anonymous, and you can withdraw from the study at any time.
Please return this survey to a return box in the library.

Consent to participate in this survey

Please tick Yes if you consent to participate in the survey.
Yes □
No □

Q1. About you

What type of library user are you?
Undergraduate student □
Postgraduate student □
University staff □
Other (please state) □

Q2. Overdue library books

Have you ever kept a university library book past its due date (so that the book became overdue)?
Yes □
No □

Q3. Reasons for books becoming overdue

If you have had overdue library books in the past, what was the reason?
 Tick any that apply.

I forgot to return the book □   I did not realise the book was overdue □
I forgot to renew the book □   I had lent the book to somebody else □
I couldn't get to the library □   I tried to renew the book but couldn't □
I had lost or misplaced the book □   Personal circumstances (e.g. illness) □
Other (*please give reason*) □

Q4. Your feelings about overdue books

How do you feel if your library books become overdue?
Please write in your answer here:

Q5. Your experience of overdue books

Please read the following statements and tick whether you agree or disagree.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
I understand the library's rules about overdue books.	☐	☐	☐
I avoid borrowing library books in case they become overdue.	☐	☐	☐
Personal circumstances often prevent me from returning/renewing books on time	☐	☐	☐
I always try to return library books on time in case somebody else needs them.	☐	☐	☐
It doesn't matter to me if my library books become overdue.	☐	☐	☐
If I really need a library book I will keep it, even if it becomes overdue.	☐	☐	☐
The library makes it easy to return or renew books on time.	☐	☐	☐
I get annoyed with myself if my library books are overdue.	☐	☐	☐
I get annoyed with the library if my books are overdue.	☐	☐	☐

Q6. How the library can help

Please rate the library's ways of helping you to return or renew books on time. How effective do you think each method is?

	Very effective	Sometimes effective	Not effective
Email reminders when books are due back	□	□	□
Blocking users from borrowing when they have very overdue books	□	□	□
Blocking users from renewing when they have very overdue books	□	□	□
Shorter loan periods for popular books (e.g. High Demand)	□	□	□
24-hour book return slots at Edward Boyle Library	□	□	□
Charging fines for overdue books	□	□	□
Online renewals system	□	□	□
Automated telephone renewal system	□	□	□

Q7. What else could the library do to help?

Please rate the following ideas for other ways the library could help you to return/renew books on time. How effective do you think each idea would be?

	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective
Text message reminders when books are due back	□	□	□
Put more books in High Demand section	□	□	□
Make more books reference-only	□	□	□
Make more books available online	□	□	□

Charge higher fines	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐
Reward system for people who return books on time			
Allow renewals even when books are very overdue	☐	☐	☐
Only charge fines on books which are recalled by somebody else	☐	☐	☐
Fines Amnesty Week when any book can be returned without fines	☐	☐	☐
Extended loans over holidays (e.g. Christmas, Easter)	☐	☐	☐

Appendix 2. Interview questions

1. What do you think are the main reasons that library users return their books overdue?

2. We [library staff] already do various things to try and help users to return books on time. How effective do you think our existing overdues policies are? How could we improve?

3. Some of my ideas for encouraging returns on time include:

Text message reminders when books are due back
Move more books into High Demand
Make more books reference-only
Make more books available online
Charge higher fines
Reward users who return their books on time
Allow renewals even when books are very overdue
Only charge fines on recalled books
"Fines Amnesty Week" when any book can be returned without fines
Longer loans over vacations

What do you think about these ideas? Any pros/cons?

4. Can you suggest any other ways we might help users return their book on time?

5. Anything else you would like to add about overdues at Leeds University Library?

Appendix 3. Guide to existing overdues policies at Leeds University Libraries
Borrowing
Borrowing rights depend on user type. Postgraduates and academics can borrow 25 items, undergraduates 15 items, and external users (e.g. SCONUL members) 4 items.
Users will be blocked from borrowing when one or more of their existing loans is more than 3 days overdue, or as soon as a High Demand Collection item is overdue. Borrowing is also blocked when the user's fines exceed the maximum limit of £50 for postgraduates and academic staff, or £30 for undergraduates and external users.

Renewals
Renewals can be done online, by automated telephone renewal or in person.
Users will be blocked from renewing all of their loans if any items are more than 3 days overdue or if a High Demand Collection item is overdue. Renewals will also be blocked if the user's existing fines are over the maximum limit (as above).
The online and phone renewal systems do not explain the reason for the block; the user is advised to contact the library if this occurs. At this stage, the renewal block can be overridden by a staff member, or will be automatically removed once the overdue items have been returned.

Fines
Overdue fines are charged at the following rates:

Loan type	Charge
Standard loan	30p per day
7-day loan	40p per day
3-day loan	50p per day
1-day loan	£1 per day
4 hour loan	50p per hour

Reminders
Automated email reminders are sent to all library users prior to the due date and after the item becomes overdue. Once an item is more than 60 days overdue, an invoice is generated and sent to the user by post.
If an item is recalled (i.e. reserved by another library user), the borrower is notified by email and usually given 7 days to return the book.

High Demand Collection (HDC)
High Demand Collection items are available for loan periods of 3 days, 1 day, or 4 hours (depending on the item). They cannot be renewed or recalled.