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# Fines: a survey of SCONUL libraries



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Up until October 2004 I had always worked in higher education libraries that had a policy of charging users for overdue items. When I joined Southampton Solent University (then Southampton Institute) it was refreshing to discover that, very much against the normal trend, the library did not charge fines but instead used a different system to enforce borrowing regulations. Since October 1994 the library has used a penalty points system that charges students points for overdue books at the following rates:

Short loans – 75 points on day one, 150 on day two, 200 on day three

One week loans – 3 points a day

Three week loans – 1 point a day.

Once 200 penalty points are accrued students are banned from borrowing items for 30 days, though mitigating circumstance, such as sickness, are taken into account. Students can still have access to library materials on a reference basis and access to electronic resources is unaffected. Such points schemes appear to be rare in the UK, with –as far as I am aware– only the University of Southampton and the University of Stirling using a similar scheme. However, penalty points (often called demerit points) appear to be quite commonly used in Australian libraries such as the University of South Australia and Flinders University.

Quite soon after I took up the post it became apparent that –as with other libraries– there was pressure to maximise the income generated. Accordingly I began the task of reviewing our policy on fines. The process began by reviewing the literature but it was surprising to discover how little there was of a recent nature with much of it dating back to the 1980s and hardly any that applied to UK higher education libraries.

This lack of recent evidence led me to decide it would be useful to explore the current situation

on fines/penalty points systems. A questionnaire was designed and then sent out via lis-sconul in late February 2005. Responses were collected by March with the analysis being completed by April. In total 54 librarians responded to the survey and the questions and responses follow.

## 1. Do you charge fines? 54 librarians responded to this questions

YES = 96.3% (52)      NO = 3.7% (2)

The use of fines is normal practice in libraries. Only two libraries (3.7%) out of 54 used a penalty points systems rather than monetary fines.

### 1.1 Fine charges:

Ordinary loans per day - 54 responded

Short loans per hour - 47 responded

No Charge	= 5.5% (3)	10p	= 2.1% (1)
5p	= 1.8% (1)	15p	= 4.3% (2)
10p	= 50% (27)	20p	= 2.1% (1)
15p	= 3.7% (2)	25p	= 2.1% (1)
20p	= 16.6% (9)	30p	= 6.5% (3)
25p	= 7.4% (4)	40p	= 6.5% (3)
30p	= 3.7% (2)	50p	= 45.6% (21)
40p	= 1.8% (1)	60p	= 2.1% (1)
50p	= 7.4% (4)	75p	= 2.1% (1)
50 Euros	= 1.8% (1)	£1	= 21.7% (10)

Per day - £1.50 = 2.19% (1)

£2.00 = 2.19% (1)

Fine rates for normal loans ranged between 5p and 50p a day. The commonest charge levied was 10p a day (50%). Short loan fines ranged between 10p to £1 an hour with daily charges of £1.50 to £2 being cited too. The majority of libraries charged fines of 50p an hour (45.6%) for short loans.

### 1.2 Do you charge different rates for different users (e.g. part-time students)?

52 responded

YES = 1.9% (1)      NO = 98.1% (51)

Most libraries (98.1%) do not charge different rates for different types of user e.g. part-time students. However, one respondent stated that research students were exempt from such charges.

### 1.3 Do you fine staff? 52 responded

YES = 88.5% (46) NO = 11.5% (6)

The majority of libraries fine staff as well as students. Only 11.5% imposed no charge on staff.

### 1.4 What income do you derive from fines? If you are able to please indicate how much income you raise per annum: 47 responded

0 – 10,000	=	17%	(8)
10 – 20,000	=	2.1%	(1)
20 – 30,000	=	10.7%	(5)
30 – 40,000	=	4.2%	(2)
40 – 50,000	=	2.1%	(1)
50 – 60,000	=	4.2%	(2)
60 – 70,000	=	10.6%	(5)
Over 70,000	=	48.9%	(23)

Income raised from fines ranged from under £10,000 to over £70,000 with one library disclosing a figure of £128,000 per annum. Nearly half (48.9%) of libraries stated they raised over £70,000 a year.

### 1.5 Do these funds go straight into library budget? 52 responded

YES = 80.8% (42) NO = 19.2% (10)

Most libraries seemed to view the income generated from fines as being important to their budgets. Income generated from fines was in many cases included as part of an income generation target.

There were some differences in where the funds went to, though the majority went directly into the library budget. Some libraries said the money collected went to general university funds or direct to finance rather than the library.

The use made of money collected was commented on by a few respondents. The areas cited were:

staffing – 3  
book fund- 2  
equipment and furniture –2

One library mentioned that funds were used for capital improvements such as the development of a learning café.

### 1.6 Has the income derived from fines meant that the normal library budget has been proportionately reduced? 52 responded

YES = 26.9% (14) NO = 73.1% (38)

The majority of libraries (73.1%) stated that fine income had not meant their budgets had been proportionately reduced. 26.9% said that this income had affected their budgets and led to a reduction.

### 1.7 Please can you state how the money is collected: 52 responded

Cash payment	=	98%	(51)
Electronic	=	32.6%	(17)
Other	=	28.8%	(15)

Other methods include: Cheque payment = 28.8% (15)

Cash was the most favoured means of collecting fines with 98% favouring that method. Electronic payments are clearly becoming increasingly popular with nearly a third (32.6%) of respondents saying they took payments in that format. Other methods cited included telephone payments via finance departments and cheques, the latter method being mentioned by 28.8% of respondents. Some libraries mentioned plans to introduce more flexible payment methods including Switch payments.

### 1.8 Have you had to employ extra staff to deal with money collection?

51 responded

YES = 3.9% (2) NO = 96.1% (49)

The vast majority of respondents (96.1%) stated that they did not employ more staff to cope with money collection. One library stated that they employed 1.5 staff to collect cash and this included dealing with fines income.

### 2.0 If you answered no to question 1 (i.e. you don't charge for fines) please state what other system you use:

#### 2.1 Penalty points: 2 responded

YES = 100% (2) NO = 0% (0)

Of the two libraries using a non-fines system, both used a penalty points system.

Out of the total number of respondents only 3.7% (2) of libraries use a non-fines scheme

## 2.2 Invoice/handling fee: 16 responded

YES = 87.5% (14) NO = 12.5% (2)

Handling charges were an approach used by many libraries (87.5%). The amounts charged ranged from £2 to a maximum of £10. The most common charge was £5 used by 50% of libraries responding to this question.

## 2.3 Suspension of services: 22 responded

YES = 100% (22) NO = 0% (0)

All libraries that responded to this question used suspension of services. Once a certain level of fine is reached borrowing was normally stopped until debts were paid off, though one library mentioned that renewals were permitted but no new loans. The level at which a block on services was applied ranged between a £3 threshold up to £20. The most common blocking level quoted was £10.

Three respondents mentioned that blocks to computer accounts were also used.

## 3.0 If you had a choice would you wish to carry on with a fines system?

53 responded

YES = 94.3% (50) NO = 5.7% (3)

A clear majority (94.3%) of libraries favoured carrying on with their existing fines system. The major reasons cited were that:

- Fines work
- They help get reserved books back
- Overall book availability is improved
- The income is important

Major factors helping fines to work well were:

- Suspension of services until payment is made
- A clear and robust system
- Provision of online and phone renewals
- Consistency in applying fines but with room for discretion too due to mitigating circumstances
- Full support of the organisation e.g. from managers, Principal
- Support of students and student unions for higher fines being introduced

On the negative side the following comments were made about fines:

- They create a negative image
- Frequent conflicts to deal with
- Fines can be viewed as a hire charge and books are still not returned
- May favour richer students who can afford to keep books out and pay fee
- Academic staff can be difficult to collect fines from
- Cash handling can be problematic

One respondent stated that a non-fines system created the best relationship they had encountered between users and the library.

## 4.0 Do you see any conflicts with charging fines and current higher education issues e.g. widening participation, top-up fees? 54 responded

YES = 22.2% (12) NO = 77.8% (42)

The majority of respondents (77.8%) saw no conflict with charging fines and current higher education issues. However, some respondents felt there were some potential conflicts, though the point was forcibly made that students could avoid any debts incurred by returning items on time. It was noted that staff frequently had to make judgments on ability to pay as some students were clearly better able to afford fines. Some students had objected to paying fines on top of existing fees while one respondent said there was a small danger of student drop-outs due to debts.

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**5 Please indicate which of the following statements you agree/disagree with:**

<b>Monetary fines –</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
5.1 Improve book availability	92.6% (50)	3.7% (2)	3.7% (2)
5.2 Increase books being stolen/ mutilated	1.9% (1)	64.1% (34)	33.9% (18)
5.3 Lead to student debt/retention	14.8% (8)	62.9 (34)	22.2% (12)
5.4 Fine collection is time-consuming	28.3% (15)	67.9% (36)	3.7% (2)
5.5 Important for generating library income	69.8% (37)	28.3% (15)	1.8% (1)
5.6 Ensure students return items on time	88.3% (38)	9.3% (4)	2.3% (1)

Most respondents felt fines improved book availability (92.5%) while most believe that fines aided prompt book returns (88.3%). Many respondents (64.1%) believe that fines had no impact on books being stolen or mutilated. A majority of respondents (67.9%) did not feel fine collection was time consuming and also stated that fines were important for income generation (69.8%).

<b>Non-fines system (e.g. penalty schemes) –</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
5.7 More equitable system	56.7% (21)	18.9% (7)	24.3% (9)
5.8 Effective in books being returned	7.8% (3)	21.9% (8)	71% (27)
5.9 Increases books being stolen/ mutilated	5.5% (2)	22.2% (8)	72.2% (26)
5.10 Administration is time-consuming	39.4% (15)	5.2% (2)	55.2% (21)

As there was limited practical experience of non-fines system many respondents were unclear about the effectiveness of such methods. A majority (56.7%) felt that a non-fines system was more equitable. Most libraries were unsure whether such systems were more effective in getting books returned (71%) or had any impact on book mutilation and theft (72.2%). Just over half (55.2%) of respondents were unsure whether such systems were time-consuming though 39.4% felt they might be.

- The backing of college/ university management for fines is important

**CONCLUSION**

To date no decision has been made to introduce library fines at Southampton Solent but the survey reported above has provided valuable information to inform our debate. We have also begun a process of consulting with our students to seek their views on this contentious issue.

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**6.0 Additional Comments**

Further comments included the following:

- Conflicts can occur with users – and training would be useful for dealing with such confrontations
- Some student unions provided valuable support for the use of fines
- Many libraries look favourably on extenuating circumstances and will reduce or help users pay off fines over a period
- Suspension of services until fines are paid was regarded as being crucial
- Some libraries use fines for other breaches of regulations e.g. noise, use of mobile phones
- Some libraries send out warning emails before items become overdue
- During exam time higher fines may be desirable to stop items being kept out with complete disregard for other users