INTERVIEW

Comics as Research, Comics for Impact: The Case of *Higher Fees, Higher Debts*

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Researchers have turned to comics as outputs incorporating their research findings. These comics are print and/or online publications that can lead to the wider adoption of research and enhance educational practices, widen public engagement, and improve the possibilities for research to influence public policy.

This article presents an interview with Professor Katy Vigurs about *Higher Fees, Higher Debts: Greater Expectations of Graduate Futures?*, a comic based on a research report produced for the Society for Research into Higher Education (2016).

In order to contextualize the interview, this article also provides an introduction to non-fiction comics research, and concludes with reflections on comics as a way of doing research. This article seeks to document and encourage further knowledge-exchange between the higher education sector and comics practitioners, and between researchers using comics in their research or as a means to disseminate their own research and those scholars who research comics as their main object of study.

Introduction

Comics have the potential to improve the quality of life of people who engage in comics creation or reading, and to transform attitudes, awareness, and behaviour around social issues; comics can create new opportunities for practitioners and audiences (Cardiff University 2014). Non-fiction comics, defined by Nina Mickwitz as 'comics which take the real (as an experiential and socio-historical category) as their subject' (Mickwitz 2014: 14; Mickwitz 2016) have been increasingly embraced within journalism (Priego 2009; Polgreen 2014; Wang 2016) medicine and health care

(Williams 2011, 2012; Farthing and Priego 2016a, 2016b) and law (Giddens 2015). Fairly recently, comics have been well received amongst science communication audiences and publishers as a form of science journalism, in particular (Diamond et al 2012; Keller and Neufeld 2014; Cho 2015; Monastersky and Sousanis 2015).

Researchers have turned to comics as valid outputs for displaying research findings in print and online publications that can lead to the wider adoption of such research and can influence public policy. By arguing that comics creation is a 'way of thinking', comics have also become academic outputs in their own right (Sousanis 2015a, 2015b; Labarre 2015). According to Erin Polgreen, 'comic book narratives can work across platforms, engage younger, more visually oriented readers, and transcend cultural borders,' (2014: 12). Polgreen cites cognitive scientist Neil Cohn: 'the evidence is fairly clear that sequential images (usually plus text) are an effective teaching tool' (2014: 13). Indeed, it is today almost common-place to state that comics and cartoons are valuable means of teaching multimodal literacy skills (El Refaie and Hörschelmann 2010). As Cohn notes, 'growing research suggests that sequential images combined with text are an effective tool of communication and education (e.g., Nakazawa, 2005; Nalu and Bliss, 2011; Short et al., 2013), beyond just being entertainment' (Cohn 2014).

Searching for uses of comics as ways to create and disseminate academic research by UK-based academics, I came across the work of Professor Katy Vigurs. She led the project that produced *Higher Fees, Higher Debts: Greater Expectations of Graduate Futures?*, a publication described as 'a research-informed comic. . . a graphic representation of a research report produced for the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) on the perspectives and experiences of university graduates who were part of the first generation to pay higher university tuition fees' (Vigurs et al 2016b).

This article seeks to document and encourage further knowledge-exchange between the higher education sector and comics practitioners, and between researchers using comics in their research or as a means to disseminate their own research and those scholars who research comics as their main object of study.

Methods

This interview was conducted on a shared Google document; it was coordinated on the the social media platform Twitter between 5 November and 3 December 2016. The interview was semi-structured and both interviewer and interviewee were given an opportunity to edit their contributions to the conversation. References and hyperlinks wre added by both interviewer and interviewee. The text of the interview has been shared below with informed consent and approval from the interviewee.

Higher Fees, Higher Debts: An Interview with Katy Vigurs

Ernesto Priego: *Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that preceded the comic?*

Katy Vigurs: I work at Staffordshire University in Stoke-on-Trent as Associate Professor of Higher & Professional Education. In terms of teaching, I lead a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme and supervise research degree students in the field of education. My main research interest at present is issues of inequality and disadvantage in relation to higher education finance reform (e.g. tuition fees, maintenance grants, student loans, bursaries, student debt).

I've just finished a research project for the Society for Research into Higher Education which investigated the impact of student debt on graduate expectations and decision-making. This project saw us interview 50 final year undergraduates in 2014, all of whom had paid the lower tuition fees (£3000 per year). We then interviewed a comparable group of 50 final year undergraduates in 2015, the difference being that these students had paid higher tuition fees (£9000 per year) and incurred much higher levels of debt. We were then able to conduct a comparative analysis to assess in what ways changes to the student finance system are affecting final year students' expectations and decision-making about what they do and where they go after graduating. The SRHE research report (Vigurs et al 2016a) was deposited at STORE – Staffordshire Online Repository.

EP: *How did you get interested in comics?*

KV: I became interested in comics for research dissemination and public engagement purposes last year when I came across an example of a research-informed comic

strip, by illustrators Chloe and Owen Roach, to communicate the findings of the 'At What Cost?' a study on the financial costs of homelessness conducted by Nicholas Pleace (Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, UK) for Crisis UK, the national charity for single homeless people (Pleace, 2015). The comic strip of Kelly's story can be seen on Crisis UK's blog (Say 2015; **Figure 1**).

I thought it was a powerful, engaging and efficient way to communicate an important message that stemmed from research findings. The use of the comic genre and being in a digital format meant that it had the potential to quickly reach a much wider audience than a traditional research report on its own.

When we were analysing the students' interview transcripts for the SRHE project, we commented several times on how visual the students' descriptions were of financial anxieties. For example, one interviewee described the debt as 'hanging there like a black cloud'. However, as we had not foreseen this when writing the original funding application, and as none of the research team had had previous experience of translating research findings into graphic representations, we were initially limited in what we could do with this.

My university then put out a separate funding call in relation to preparations for the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise (HEFCE 2016). I decided to propose a research dissemination strategy that would centre on translating a number of students' stories from the SRHE study into visual vignettes about student debt and graduate futures. The bid was successful and I then asked my colleague Dr Alke Groppel-Wegener (an artist herself and based in the Faculty of Arts) for advice on how to turn the idea of visual vignettes into a reality. Alke introduced me to Gareth Cowlin who runs the BA Cartoon and Comic Arts course at Staffordshire University and Gareth suggested I pitch the idea as a live brief to his final year students. This saw me give out one anonymised interview transcript and ask for students to respond with a graphic interpretation of the interviewee's story.

Four students, Emily Moore, Brad Sharples, James Wightman and Azzuro Zito submitted work, and their ideas and different styles were so good that I decided to hire them all to work on turning the written research report into a research-informed comic. The resulting comic can also be downloaded from the Staffordshire Online Repository (Vigurs et al 2016b) (**Figure 2**).
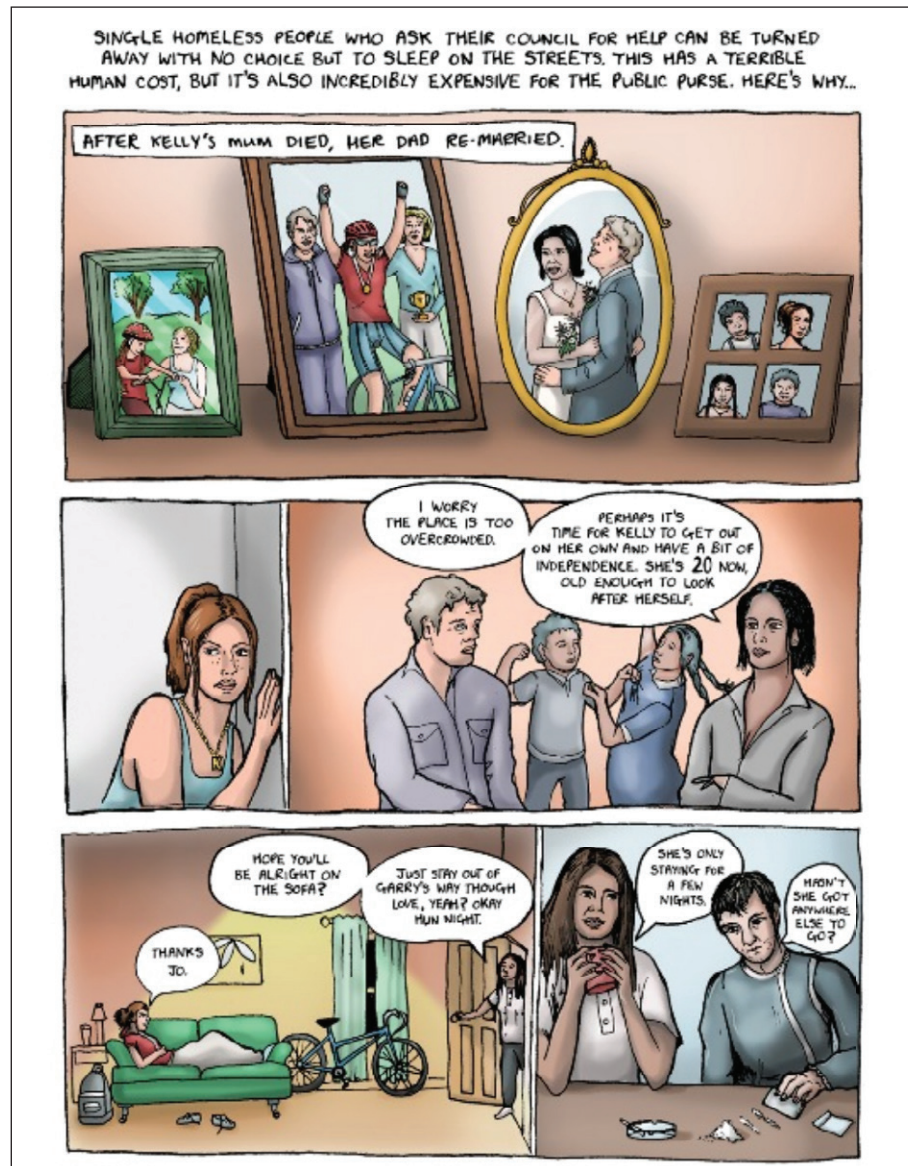
Figure 1: Chloe and Owen Roach (a), fragment from Kelly's story (in Say 2015), a comic based on Crisis UK's research report 'At What Cost?' (Pleace, 2015).
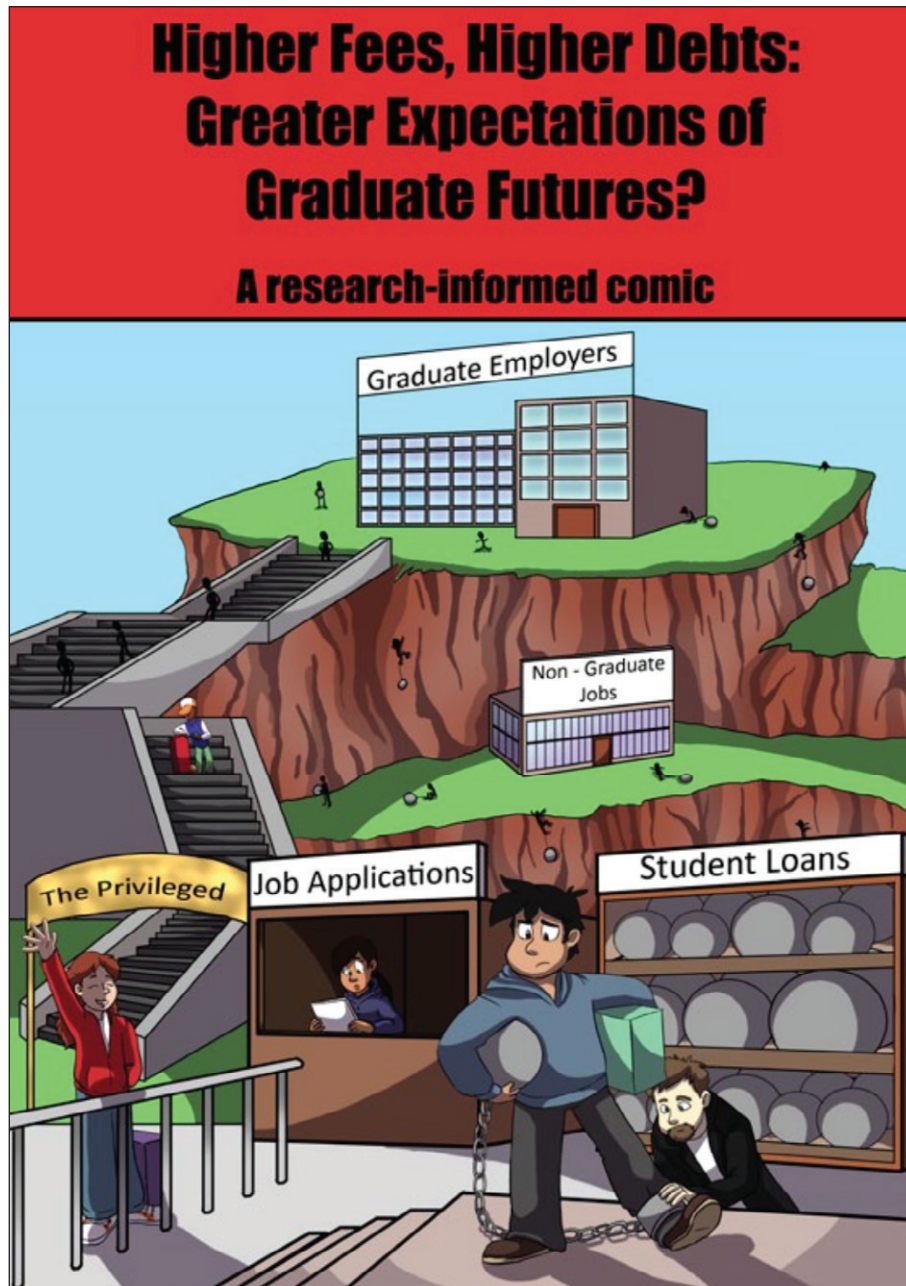
Figure 2: Cover of *Higher Fees, Higher Debts: Greater Expectations of Graduate Futures?.* The publication is composed by research-informed comics work by BA Hons Cartoon and Comic Art students Emily Moore, Brad Sharples, James Wightman and Azzuro Zito (Vigurs et al 2016b).

EP: *What have been the main challenges in the process of 'translating', or, as you call it on the publication, 'visually interpreting' research into comics, and how did you go about them?*

KV: I think the main initial challenge was my lack of experience of research translation in this form. I didn't know the language, the processes, the time, the costs. I felt that my creative imagination was somewhat limited by what I did not know. This was daunting. However, this is why Alke was so important in starting to expand my horizons in terms of working to re-genre the research report. She was the perfect boundary-spanner between traditional academic textual outputs and more visually creative ones. She also helped me to tap into her networks to talk with other academics based in the Arts Faculty about the idea to visually represent the report's findings in some way. This really helped. She acted as a disciplinary 'translator' between myself and Gareth Cowlin in our first meeting, which supported me to communicate what I wanted to achieve and to understand Gareth's ideas and perspectives. This built a really strong foundation for the project to move forwards.

The next challenge was working with each undergraduate artist to turn a student's interview transcript into a two page comic strip. Initially I gave the artists anonymised copies of the transcripts and asked them to have a go at representing them graphically without any researcher input or scaffolding. I now realise that this was too open as a brief. What the artists thought were interesting or significant in the transcripts were not always the same as what I thought. Thinking about issues of interpretation became as important at this stage as when the research team conducted the data analysis for the original project. The artists and I had to work together as a creative editorial team (we met as a group two or three times) to discuss the overall framing and format of each comic strip, so that there was some level of coherence and commonality between the different strips. I also worked individually with each artist to develop a storyboard and script for each student's 'story' which was based on the original interview transcript. This was an extra level or layer of work that I had not anticipated, but it was really important for the development of the comic as a whole (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: 'Tahira', in *Higher Fees, Higher Debts: Greater Expectations of Graduate Futures?* Art by James Wightman (Vigurs et al 2016b).

The artists were brilliantly professional and so skilled. I was able to learn a lot from them in terms of the design process and they also helped me to see the interviewees' stories in a new light. I would argue that any initial translation challenges were short-lived. We developed an incredibly productive working relationship that benefited the research project in terms of widening the scope for public engagement and I would also say it's the best professional development I've ever had.

EP: *Allow me to be devil's advocate for a second. . . there might be some who may think we 'dumb down' research if presented in comics form. What would you say to them?*

KV: I don't agree. I think that the comic form can bring social research findings alive. Such visual and graphic representations can help a wider range of readers to empathise with research participants' experiences and to understand some of the underlying factors and potential implications. The research-informed comic can also

prompt emotions (such as anger, frustration, confusion) that might be less likely or less obvious when reading the same information in a written report.

EP: *I totally agree. It seems to me we need to break down silos, not only between researchers and the public but also between institutions, disciplines, departments. In which ways would you say comics could contribute to this kind of "impact"?*

KV: Well, I'm already convinced of the value that can be created when researchers and comic artists work together on producing and curating research-informed materials for public engagement and dissemination, but I'm now also thinking that comics as social research method (in terms of data collection and probably analysis too) could be a really interesting development. I'm going to look for future opportunities that can involve a comic-based researcher in a project team from the beginning of a study, rather than just at the end for engagement and dissemination purposes. I think this sort of interdisciplinary working could be really fruitful! I'll let you know when I've had chance to give it a go!

EP: *I definitely look forward to it! We've also been working along those lines too and hopefully soon there will be many more of us being aware of each other and collaborating— I hope many more of us will eventually become more visible within 'non-comics' networks.*

KV: It would be an interesting exercise to map the networks of a number of academics in both 'comics' and 'non-comics' circles to look at where points of creative collision and collaboration could easily take place. As a personal starting point, I'd be really keen to meet those in 'comics networks' who are interested in visually representing issues that link to topics like higher education, social class, unemployment, schooling, poverty, etc. I wonder if there's a special issue or edited book of some kind to be developed that pairs academics from both 'comics' and 'non-comics networks' to write/illustrate pieces on different aspects of social disadvantage? I'd definitely be interested in such a cross-disciplinary project.

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues at Staffordshire University, Dr Alke Groppel-Wegener and Gareth Cowlin, for their help and support on the research-informed comic project. I also want to thank the four student artists (now graduated) for their excellent work and for teaching me much about the comics process. And a big thank you to Staffordshire University for providing the funding to make the comic happen! It was a huge, collaborative initiative, and it was definitely worth it.

Further Reflections

Projects like *Higher Fees, Higher Debts* (Vigurs, K, Jones, et al 2016b) show that researchers not previously involved professionally within comics studies recognise the potential of comics' multimodal affordances for research and educational communication. Vigurs and her team are not alone. During the last REF exercise in the UK, at least 15 Impact Studies of comics or cartoons used within and for research were submitted to different Units of Assessment (including Art and Design, Business and Management Studies, Classics, Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management, Education, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Metallurgy and Materials, English Language and Literature, Modern Languages and Linguistics, Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts, Philosophy and Physics (HEFCE 2014a, 2014b). An important emphasis on these case studies was the educational and public engagement uses of comics, which can in turn contribute to a body of evidence of research's public impact beyond academia.

Though there are differences between presenting comics as a primary output of research and using comics to disseminate research produced in more 'traditional' forms, both processes imply the recognition of the specific affordances of comics as a form. There is still much to do in terms of enhancing knowledge exchange practices between comics and academic communities. Previous research has found that further efforts are needed to establish the processes, literacies and affordances required to forge stronger links between higher education and comics producers (Farthing and Priego 2016a).

Moreover, there is a need for better understanding of both the inner-workings of research and scholarly practices in different disciplines (such as authorship cultures and peer review and citation practices) and the specific practices and discourses of comics making (this includes best practices of authorial attribution in comics work). *Higher Fees, Higher Debts* reveals that comics can be used to foster institutional interdisciplinary collaboration and to contribute to the development of students' programme-specific skillsets. Strictly speaking, the comic displays formal limitations that will be apparent to experienced comics readers, making a case for future knowledge-exchange activities between comics scholars, comics practitioners, students and researchers interested in using comics to communicate their research. In terms of research data management, there is still work to do in order to ensure that research outputs distributed online as comics or multimedia form enable text searching, copying and pasting and are optimised for search engine/repository discoverability. The text in comics published as flat images, unless it is published in outputs with fully detailed metadata and text encoding, runs the risk of remaining undiscovered and uncited (Walsh 2012).

As a research-informed publication in comics form, *Higher Fees, Higher Debts* should be considered not merely as a public engagement or dissemination mechanism, but as an academic output on its own right, to which the artists contributed significantly. It constitutes valuable evidence that comics in higher education go beyond the relatively limited confines of comics scholarship, and makes an important contribution to the increasing corpus of non-fiction comics informed by research.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests. The author is editor-in-chief of *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship.* The editorial processes were managed by another editor and complied with the guidelines on ethical editing and research established by the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) and the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO).

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