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Picturing the pandemic in higher education: A conversation.

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Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: This illustrated conference conversation between colleagues will discuss processes and challenges of revisualising survey data as a graphic narrative and its legitimacy in HE research. Its focus is *Five 'Survive' Lockdown*, a graphic novella by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas, narrating the experiences of five female academics in the UK between March and September 2020. The novella draws on data collected via an online survey for a research project investigating the experiences of academic and professional services staff in one post-92 university, during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The conversation, between two female academics, will explore the decision to revisualise statistical data in order to highlight complexity, and the affective. It will examine the shaping of the narratives to represent the asymmetric impact of lockdown on women and specific ways in which it disadvantaged female academics. The session will include a Q&A.

Paper: *Five 'Survive' Lockdown* is a graphic novella by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas, narrating the experiences of five female academics in the UK between March and September 2020. The novella draws on data collected via an online survey for the research project *Living and working in lockdown: what's gender got to do with it?* (Carruthers Thomas 2020). The latter investigated the experiences of academic and professional services staff in one post-92 university, during the first COVID-19 lockdown (March 2020-June 2020). In this illustrated conference conversation between colleagues, Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas (Birmingham City University) as researcher/author/artist and Professor Martha Caddell (Heriot Watt University) as 'reader', will discuss processes and challenges of revisualising survey data as a graphic narrative and its legitimacy in HE research.

The origins of the survey research and *Five 'Survive' Lockdown* lie in a confluence of factors in early 2020. Firstly, Kate is an interdisciplinary researcher specialising in gender, inequalities and contemporary higher education, with an interest in spatial theories and creative methods. Secondly, as a female academic, she lived and worked from home during the first lockdown – and beyond - and communicated with academic colleagues, in diverse home environments, adapting working practices, homeschooling, taking on additional care responsibilities, while managing the risks and crises of the virus. Thirdly, soon after lockdown was imposed on March 23, 2020, literature rapidly emerged

describing and analysing the multiple ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic was exposing and exacerbating inequalities in societies at large (Ascher 2020; Connolly *et al.* 2020; Ferguson 2020 *inter alia*). The pressures of working from home, home schooling children, increased care responsibilities and restrictive measures such as shielding and self-isolation, were judged to particularly disadvantage working women. Fourthly, Kate's role as an Athena Swan (gender equality) lead at Birmingham City University meant she had broad perspective on gendered issues of career development in HE and the potential for coronavirus 'skewing a playing field that wasn't ever level in the first place' (Kitchener 2020).

Academic and professional services staff in the post-92 UK university were invited to respond to the online survey which was launched on 10 June and closed on 10 July 2020. Questions concerned household arrangements, working environments and challenges, feasibility and impact on working practices, work/life balance, professional development and well-being. 543 staff completed the survey, equivalent to 20% of the university's workforce; a response rate considerably higher than anticipated. 67% of all respondents identified as female, 46% as academic. Standard data analysis reports were carried out through the survey software and given the size of the sample, statistical expert, Dr Emma Bridger, conducted additional statistical analysis to establish statistical significance. Findings reflected the asymmetric impact of lockdown, well-documented in national literature, with female staff experiencing a disproportionately negative impact of working from home. In addition, female academic staff were more likely to report a negative impact on their capacity to conduct research and write for publication; this was particularly acute for female academics with children. Findings and recommendations were summarised and reported to relevant groups and stakeholders across the participating university. It was widely agreed that they provided a valuable snapshot of the extraordinary circumstances of March–June 2020 and raised key issues for gender equality.

For a qualitative researcher usually engaged in smaller-scale interpretive enquiry, the project provided an unexpected opportunity to learn more about online surveys and statistical analyses. But …. something was missing. Without the 'immersion in and entanglement with the minutiae of the data' (McLure, 2013:174-175) Kate felt detached from its complexity, from the particular and the affective. Her decision to revisualise the data, ie: 'transforming research data, visual or otherwise into new multimodal creative outputs' (Mannay, 2019:659) offered the opportunity for an extended process of analysis and representation; a repeated revisiting of the data, from different angles and dimensions, thereby bringing the data to audiences differently. The result of this process is *Five 'Survive' Lockdown*, a graphic novella in a 'comic' format. The eight chapters track five, sometimes overlapping trajectories through lockdown and against a backdrop of the unfolding pandemic. It took over six months to create on the page and longer to bring to publication, becoming a historical document even as it was created, as the pandemic, its pressures, disruptions and asymmetrical effects, continued into 2021. Kate and Martha's conversation will include the experience of working with and reading data 'on the move'.

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