Collaboration within the Australian Humanities

An Interview with Dr. Kylie Brass

In early 2012, Marco Ceccarelli and James Smith had the opportunity to interview Dr. Kylie Brass, Policy and Projects Manager for the Australian Academy of Humanities. Dr. Brass is involved in many different Humanities-based research and policy tasks as part of her position, and corresponds with a wide range of scholars and policy makers. In this interview, Limina asked Dr. Brass about the Academy, her role and responsibilities, some of the activities that she is currently engaged with and her experience and opinion on a range of research and career based topics.

Dr. Kylie Brass, what position do you currently fill in the Australian Academy of Humanities?

I’m the Policy and Projects Manager at the Academy of the Humanities – in this position I connect up policy and research business. There are many other tasks in the mix too, such as website management, writing grant applications, drafting content for media releases, organising seminars and workshops, copy-editing, and statistical analysis. The policy side of my role takes in research and drafting policy submissions – the most recent of which was a response to the review of the national research priorities. This was a hugely important submission because the ‘refresh’, as it’s referred to, is scoping in a stand-alone humanities, arts and social sciences priority for the first time. We hope. It involved some very intense and rewarding co-authoring with some Fellows of the Academy, and comes on the back of tireless advocacy by the Academy over more than a decade. The projects side of my role takes in ‘all of the above’ plus I’m currently managing our ARC-funded study, Humanities Connections, which is all about developing new activities to support professional development, closer collaboration, improved research application outcomes, and policy research in the humanities.

Maybe I should also explain what the Australian Academy of the Humanities does more generally? A large number of people who engage with the Academy do so through our grants and awards programmes – our publication subsidy scheme, for example, and our travelling fellowships. But our work also includes policy advocacy, we run workshops and symposia, and we’re a ‘learned’ society – one of Australia’s four Learned Academies – established in 1969 to advance scholarship and public interest in the humanities in Australia.

I work with a small team of people out of an office in Canberra. The Academy is an independent, not-for-profit organisation comprising 500 plus Fellows, who have been elected by their peers in recognition of the excellence and impact of their scholarship in fields including archaeology, art, Asian and European studies, classical and modern literature, cultural and communication studies, languages and linguistics, philosophy, musicology, history and religion. There are also lots of ways in which we engage with and support emerging disciplines, interdisciplinary work, and ‘younger’ scholars.

The Academy doesn’t have the capacity for a full-time policy function (though the workload certainly warrants it), which is why I work across policy and research
domains. I like the in-between space of having to be across genres of knowledge as I think this overlap is conducive to both imaginative and useful work. If I had to concentrate solely on the policy work I would dry up because there is a shallow gene-pool of words to work with in the policy space at times and I feel as if the ‘academic’/research side of things injects new meaning into the policy discourse. Overused policy words like ‘innovation,’ for example, tend to work like brands, with all sorts of preconditions about how research should play out, given the right policy levers and mix of ingredients.

What humanities projects are you currently working on?

Right now there are lots of things on the books. I’m overseeing the final stages of two publications: an ARC-funded study to be launched as an ebook by the University of Western Australia Publishing (UWAP). It’s been terrific working with UWAP to bring this book to life – edited by Ian Donaldson and Mark Finnane, the volume collates papers from our 2009 Annual Symposium ‘Taking Stock’ which sought to think though some of the methodological and theoretical shifts in the humanities over the last forty years, including the way in which research collaboration has become more visible, more central to the academic scene. The other publication is the latest issue of the Academy’s journal Humanities Australia, which is edited by Elizabeth Webby, and features some terrific articles by Han Baltussen, Kate Burridge, Simon Musgrave, Robyn Holmes, and Moira Gatens, as well as an excerpt from Thomas Keneally’s new novel The Daughters of Mars, and new poetry by Vivian Smith.

Everything I do involves collaboration of some form or another at some stage or another. The project proposals I am contributing to at the moment are in support of a new arrangement which was announced by the Minister, the Hon Senator Chris Evans, in early April – a $10 million funding boost to Australia’s four Learned Academies (through the Australian Council for Learned Academies – ACOLA) for research advice to government. Over the next three years the Academy of the Humanities will play an important role in contributing to policy formulation by collaborating with the Chief Scientist, and working on multidisciplinary research projects with its counterpart Academies, to advise the Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) on long-term challenges facing Australia. It will be quite the study in multidisciplinary collaboration, likely to involve intensive interdisciplinary work over the next few years, and promises to bring together policy and research writ large, which is all very exciting.

I’m also working on our ARC-funded Humanities Connections project, which comes to an end this year. It’s been a great project to be involved with. The Academy has a number of things on this year where the theme of collaboration is very much in view: a series of policy workshops, discipline roundtables to coincide with this year’s Annual Symposium – the theme of which is Challenging (the) Humanities. Last year and into this we’ve done a lot of work in support of the digital humanities which culminated in our co-sponsoring the inaugural conference of the new Australasian Association for the Digital Humanities. And the Academy is working towards doing more in support of the professional development of early-career researchers across the humanities. The health of the humanities depends on all sorts of collaborative ventures, and I think one of the best ways of supporting early-career researchers is through network-based collaboration. Two very successful networks that come to mind are the Cultural Research Network, and the Network for Early European Research, both of which were funded under the ARC’s Research Networks programme from 2004-2010, and incorporated professional development programmes for postgraduates and early-career...
researchers, and lots of networking and collaborative opportunities. Many of the career support mechanisms currently on offer are tied to specific imperatives of individual universities and the Academy is looking into ways to provide more supra-institutional support.

The theme of our annual conference this year is ‘Humanising Collaboration’. How do you envisage the role of ‘collaboration’ in the future of Humanities research?

I think it’s a great theme for the conference. It’s terrific to be taking stock of the what, where and why of collaboration by the people who will be researching (and teaching) into the future.

In my policy work I have faced situations where, in all seriousness, I get told that humanities researchers can ‘get by with a pen and a piece of paper’. I concede that some humanities research is low tech or simply requires the brainpower of one (as would be the case for other disciplines, across the research spectrum) but it all depends on what’s ‘fit for purpose’, surely. At the moment, I’m helping to pull together policy advice about the strengths of international research collaboration in the humanities and it’s clear that there are vast networks of exchange between Australian and European humanities researchers, for example, even though a lot of what is happening is under the radar and is often un- or under-funded. What I’m seeing are all sorts of complex multi-scale projects involving multiple researchers, multiple disciplines, multiple geographies.

No doubt there are lots of factors engendering research collaboration in the humanities, and different ‘species’ of collaboration depending on the drivers – there are policy, institutional, and funding frameworks at play, as well as challenges to traditional methodologies emanating from within the disciplines themselves. From my point of view, into the future, I’d love to see more collaboration between academia and policy worlds. My own work at the Academy is at the juncture of academic and policy domains. As I’ve said, these roles require different sets of expertise — often incommensurate with each other— but I think that it is a healthy tension.

In your experience working at the Australian Academy of the Humanities, what have been the challenges of collaboration?

The Academy’s secretariat is small, so logistically you just can’t get everything done on your own. Our Executive Director, Christina Parolin, is very consultative in her management style and I get such a buzz out of working with incredibly bright and generous people. Most of the challenges of collaboration, as I’ve encountered them, seem mundane when I list them out: time constraints, financial pressures, miscommunication, hidden or not so hidden agendas, but these aren’t exactly specific to collaborative work. A few years ago I sat in a research seminar where a Professor, well-versed in research collaboration both in community-based contexts, as well as industry linkages, used the analogy of ‘marriage’ to characterise what he saw as the most effective forms of collaborative research venture. That’s certainly not my ideal. For sure collaboration is about building relationships, power dynamics, and forms of intimacy, but the heterosexual love plot is so not my reference point for good research collaboration.

In my own experience, research collaboration is hard work and often involves all sorts of inequalities and vulnerabilities: trying to ensure equality of participation – of people and ideas – is one of the real challenges. Before joining the Academy I worked at a research centre at the University of Western Sydney, which was a great training ground for all forms of research collaboration. I ended up doing quite a lot of co-authoring, mainly
journal articles, which was tricky at times because I was writing with my supervisor and I was the junior contributor, and I was also from a more strictly humanities background and my supervisor had a sociology background. The main thing is to ensure that structures and mechanisms are in place to allow the more junior members of research teams to air their ideas. Far too often these things are left to chance when there are some very practical measures to take to build up collegiality and trust.

In designing its grant programmes, the Academy recognises that early-career researchers are well placed to undertake creative collaborative work but need support to develop networks via mentoring, support for travel, and access to disciplinary and institutional leaders. One of my first jobs at the Academy was to help design a new grant programme. The government had opened up the International Science Linkages programme to humanities and creative arts researchers for the first time (at the tail end of the programme, which had been running for 7 years at that point for the physical, natural and engineering sciences). The Academy administered a specific scheme for the humanities aimed at connecting up researchers and seeding new collaborations, and ensured that the involvement of early-career researchers was built into the programme.

**What are your thoughts on web-based collaboration?**

It’s great to use web-based mechanisms for collaboration, such as video-conferencing, and Google docs, especially when researchers are geographically dispersed. Though sometimes you need to get together in person – you can’t really read the ‘mood of the room’ or observe people and ideas when you are interacting online. So it is good to have both options: online and face-to-face interaction.

**Do you believe, both in your professional and academic career, that the culture of collaboration has changed in recent decades? How? Where do you think things are headed?**

That’s a big question. I think it’s the culture of academia, more broadly, that has changed, or is changing, so the shifts and turns in terms of collaboration are playing out as part of a bigger process, which is also variable depending on where you are ‘doing’ your humanities both geographically and institutionally. Collaboration in the humanities continues to happen in myriad ways: co-authoring, co-teaching, working in research teams, collaborating on joint projects or research programmes, conference co-convening, as well as a whole host of collegial, often ‘extra-curricular’, activities such as peer review. Much bigger minds than mine have grappled with all this, but I would say that in 2012 the humanities and humanities scholarship are diffuse. Academic work is happening in and out of the humanities, and in and out of the academy. Research practices are changing with the ascendance of collaborative methodologies and centrality of grants to the new landscape.

Another thing I’m particularly attuned to is the changes in working conditions over the last few decades – increased casualisation, contract labour, sessional teaching – all of which has a material influence on the quality of the academic culture, not to mention the appeal of an academic career for those just starting out. In the humanities, job security and remuneration are motivating factors for early-career researchers, but the extent to which collegiality and mentoring are part of the experience also has a defining influence.

**How do you think post-graduate students can work together to promote collaboration within their institutions? Do you have any advice to give post-graduate students, particularly regarding some of the challenges faced by collaboration in academia?**
My own past experience is that gritty individualism and self-reliance gets rewarded, but I think that industrial collaboration and solidarity are more vital. Post PhD I worked on a series of short term and casual contracts as a research assistant/officer and sessional tutor. In both the research and teaching contexts there was little in the way of professional development available to me. The onus was very much on early-career researchers to seek out and/or craft collaborative opportunities on their own. At one research centre I worked at, a big-name Professor initiated a series of mentoring workshops, which all staff who identified as early-career researchers were able to attend (and that was quite an elastic identification as became plain at the sessions, with postgrads, research assistants and Senior Research Fellows in the mix). At the same time as these sessions were taking place, the research assistants lobbied to get a research seminar up and running, designed to be more discussion-based and ‘work in progress’ than the banner monthly research seminar that the centre ran. We used our seminar series in part as a way of showcasing our work. While we were employed on ARC dollars to work on specific projects, many of us had our own academic aspirations – most of the cohort were PhD students or recently graduated PhDs, and we wanted to get the most out of working at the centre.

My own PhD is probably a study in how not to go about business because I took a long time to complete. What kept me on the path, though, wasn’t the end of year viva or other forms of institutional disciplining but in essence everything that was superfluous to the thesis itself: I held a fractional teaching appointment, co-convened a conference, co-edited a book, co-enrolled in a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (having to first obtain special dispensation from the Dean). All of this happened by working with other postgrads. When I started my PhD at the University of Sydney, the Faculty of Arts set up a postgraduate research centre to house postgrads from across the faculty. Enrolment numbers had outstripped office space, so we were all working in a large, hot-desk, lab-type environment, which was a very effective form of ‘natural surveillance’ actually. PGARC, as it was known, had a visionary director – at the time Professor Moira Gatens – and some money behind it to stage conferences, or cater for fortnightly seminars. Collaborative opportunities are often unforeseen. In my experience some of the best forms of collaboration come about by happenstance, originating out of a particular project or process. Fantastic connections can arise simply by attending a conference. You want to look beyond your institution too, and this is where I think collaborative research networks have a real role to play.

Dr. Brass thank you kindly for taking the time to answer our questions and for enriching what has been a ‘Collaboration’ themed conference and volume this year. We wish you the best of luck in what evidently appears to be a challenging and insightful career.