

A stylized, high-contrast portrait of Maria Lis Lange. She is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark blazer over a patterned top. Her face is rendered in a graphic style with horizontal lines and a limited color palette of black, white, and red. She has short, dark hair and is wearing large, dark-rimmed glasses. Her expression is thoughtful, with her mouth slightly open. The background of the entire cover is a solid light blue.

FESTSCHRIFT

TRIBUTES IN HONOUR OF

MARIA LIS LANGE

Scholar, Administrator, Activist, Leader

Edited by
Jonathan Jansen and André Keet

*My argument is that
thinking through the meaning
of our times is a precondition for
rethinking the university
or abolishing it as a privileged
institution for education and
knowledge production*

FESTSCHRIFT

Tributes in Honour of Maria Lis Lange

Scholar, Administrator, Activist, Leader

Edited by

Jonathan Jansen and André Keet

**AFRICAN
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INTRODUCTION

On purposes

If a *Festschrift* can be defined as a collection of writings by different authors in honour of an academic colleague, this short volume intends to do that and more. As a *work of honour*, we pay tribute to Lis for her intellectual contributions, policy direction, practical wisdom and the enduring friendships she enabled through solidarities with academics, workers and students alike. We thank her family for sharing Lis with us since her legendary work ethic must often have cut into precious time at home.

This book is at the same time a *work of remembrance*, an opportunity to assemble in one place the ideas of one of the most remarkable intellectual-administrators to have walked across the stage of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. As an act of remembrance and given how easily we forget a luminary once they have left the scene, this collection intentionally brings Lis's life and work to public attention. To that end, it is also a memorial, a way of ensuring that her work will continue to be widely read, from classrooms and council chambers to all the other spaces where she was very much present throughout the course of her university career.

But this *Festschrift* is also a *work of conscience*, a reminder to us all to act in the spirit of Lis's unrelenting activism, principled commitments

and unwavering belief that universities should serve the public good in defiance of corruption, managerialism and the performative cultures that threaten to drain the life blood from the academic project. Accordingly, the eleven tributes in this collection serve to remind us of the nature and meaning of civic duty at a time when so much in higher education has been transmogrified by greed, careerism and the routinisation of academic work.

In addition to all this, this *Festschrift* also models a *work of criticality*, a way of demonstrating how to think critically about the university labours that often disconnect the routines of administration from the habits of the intellect. Collected in one volume, students and managers of the academic estate will encounter an exemplar of how to think and live a critical life. The many citations from Lis's work offer rich insights into activism on everything from quality assurance to institutional reviews.

To those who knew her well, it will not come as a surprise that this is also a *work of compassion*, a way of acknowledging Lis's profound care for those on the underside of history. Even from a distance, she could offer a withering critique of posture, performance and pretense. But, as some of the tributes show, she would also sometimes reveal her vulnerabilities, as in the case of her struggle with the tension between managerialism and radical change. Her students and staff will remember someone who cared deeply about their personal and professional lives, their hopes and dreams. The tributes in this *Festschrift* have been composed and ordered in a way that recognises the tenderness of Lis's unannounced humanity.

Organisation

This collection divides Lis's career into two phases or stages. During the first stage, covered in Section A, her engagement with higher education was very much from the 'outside in.' Initially hired as manager at the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2002, she soon went on to become its Director of Monitoring and Evaluation (2003–2006) and

following that, Executive Director of the CHE's Higher Education Quality Committee (2006–2010). In the course of that appointment, she also briefly acted as its Chief Executive Officer (2007–2008). From these external or oversight roles she would move on to assume different 'internal' positions at three universities (although she also served on the council of a fourth, Nelson Mandela University [NMU]): first at the University of the Free State (UFS) (2011–2018), then the University of Cape Town (UCT) (2018–2022), and, finally, at Stellenbosch University (SU) (2024–2025). Although most of the tributes speak to both stages of her career, we have divided them into those that predominantly focus either on the first or the second stage.

John Higgins begins Section A, 'Transformation from the "Outside in"', by offering an understanding of Lis's politics as a humanities scholar, particularly her perspective as a trained historian on university transformation. He makes some telling remarks about Lis's upbringing under Argentina's military dictatorship and how that experience radicalised her thinking even before she relocated to South Africa with its parallel history of apartheid oppression. For Lis, policy and politics were the same thing, inseparable in both design and execution. Accordingly, she engaged her policy work in science councils and universities in a way that revealed, in John's words, an 'indomitable political will for social justice.'

After obtaining her BA Honours in History from the University of Buenos Aires (1984) and an MA in African Studies from the El Colegio de Mexico (1988), Lis went on to teach African history at the University of Buenos Aires. In Chapter 2, Saleem Badat picks up the story of how Lis, impressed by the quality of the country's historiography, relocated to South Africa in 1991. Saleem would come to lead the CHE with Mala Singh and Lis as part of a formidable team whose tasks included convincing a skeptical higher education community that their work amounted less to interference and more to capacity building for academic self-evaluation. Saleem paints an insightful and consistent picture of Lis as an intellectual and hard worker who produced policy frames for higher education. What comes through in his tribute is the

sheer range of Lis's capabilities, from monitoring and evaluation to research and policy analysis.

Mala Singh first employed Lis after she had obtained her PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand and, in Chapter 3, describes her incredible work ethic and formidable intellect, initially as part of a small research-support unit for humanities scholarship and later as part of a larger platform devised to assist in the creation of the intellectual infrastructure that would guide a relatively new structure, the CHE, which promised to transform quality in higher education.

Kirti Menon and Gloria Castrillón survey the familiar tensions between what governance is and what it could be through an interesting distinction, introduced and theorised by Lis, between knowledge *for* transformation and knowledge *of* transformation, where the former engages the contextual embeddedness of the change project as well as the intellectual and political work that hangs above that messiness. Unsurprisingly, Lis saw external compliance as something that, in the end, has to be replaced with institutional ownership of assurance processes.

Section B, "Transformation from the "Inside out", consists of four tributes from colleagues who worked with Lis during the second stage of her career when she engaged the question of transformation very much from the position of an insider at the University of the Free State (UFS), University of Cape Town (UCT) and Nelson Mandela University (NMU), where she was a member of council.

Jansen and Goliath begin this section by asking what was going on inside Lis's head and heart as she grappled with the tensions and contradictions that accompanied the work of the intellectual-bureaucrat, a position she understood only too well. Lis made herself vulnerable in her memorable D.C.S. Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture at Rhodes University (2016) when, for all her strident positions on transformation, she revealed something of the extent to which the work of the administrator-intellectual is fraught with internal conflict. That lecture is Lis at her best: frustrated yet self-reflective, doubting but engaging as she pursues a commitment to radical change.

In Chapter 6, Thierry Luescher shares a unique insight into what ‘thinking with Lis’ over a period of almost twenty-five years meant. He is clear about their differences and the arguments that came with a robust friendship. While Thierry always focused on the student experience, Lis’s concern was with the politics of knowledge production and how it showed up in the academic project. Yet, at the end of a long entanglement and making big-picture connections to the day-to-day operations of quality assurance, monitoring reviews and the like, he describes his intellectual sparring partner as ‘an intellectual bureaucrat of the highest order’.

It then falls to Nomalanga Mkhize in Chapter 7 to give us a perspective on Lis from the vantage point of governance during their shared terms on the council of Nelson Mandela University. In that space, Lis, the intellectual bureaucrat, was once again caught in the tension between ensuring good governance at a major university and the forces beyond the institution that shape its policies and practices. Nomalanga casts a keen eye on how Lis engaged, questioned, steered and sought to deepen governance as a democratic practice against almost overwhelming odds.

Danwood Chirwa, then Dean of Law at UCT, provides a telling account in Chapter 8 of how Lis steered that faculty through a crisis when its LLB degree was under threat of losing its accreditation. In this portrait of Lis, a picture of the academic leader emerges as someone who is simultaneously committed to rigour, principle and integrity—not an easy pursuit given that in the UCT management structure, its vociferous deans reported directly to her. Danwood shows with some finesse how Lis made arguments supporting one or other academic policy and how she backed down when the democratic process favoured a rival position.

The two contributions in Section C, ‘Understanding in Action: Reading Lange Reading Arendt—A Provocation’, return us to one of the recurring themes in the collection: why the relative failure of the transformation project? Lis always maintained that there was and remains a need for quality assurance or accountability, but how did

the logic of quality control come to supersede the political project of transformation?

In Chapter 9, R  n   Eloff offers a fascinating reflection on Lis’s thinking in conversation with one of her key intellectual inspirations, Hannah Arendt. Two central notions are engaged, the ‘depoliticisation of knowledge’ and ‘academic freedom’, often conceived as disengagement from the politics of transformation, against the backdrop of Lis encouraging him to engage his discipline (philosophy) through a closer analysis of its intellectual history at the University of the Free State. While Lis’s planned book on Arendt could not be completed, R  n  ’s tribute reads like a first chapter that reveals some of the analytical pathways Lis may have pursued.

In the final chapter of this section, Andr   Keet unpacks the way in which Lis thought about the idea of the university as something that had to be embraced and pushed away, critiqued and changed, both as a struggle within and as a retreat to the border. In a bold couplet, Andr   describes this as ‘forget transformation, f*ck the university’, a framing that goes far beyond a superficial reading of the title’s suggested profanity. Lis has undoubtedly provided us with one of the more profound and critical engagements with the concept of transformation and its uses and abuses.

Andr   Keet and Michaela Ann Penkler then conclude with a synthesis of the different contributions and consider what they teach us about Lis and what we can learn about her life and work in the continuing struggle for academic integrity, social justice and institutional change.

In the concluding epilogue, Reno Morar, then UCT’s first chief operating officer, reiterates a prominent theme in the collection, namely that Lis’s work was never ‘administrative in a narrow sense’; it was always moral, ethical and political. He draws a lively portrait of Lis working through the minutiae and tediousness of management meetings and, like only she could, transforming those deliberations into questions about the larger academic project. It is very much in the spirit of celebrating Lis’s exemplary life and work that Reno concludes this *Festschrift* with a summary of the characteristics,

both personal and professional, that made Lis such an impressive intellectual bureaucrat. The invitation of this *Festschrift* and its final homage is for all of us to fuse those two functions and to become intellectual bureaucrats with the same determination and grace as Lis demonstrated.

CHAPTER 1

THE PATH OF MOST RESISTANCE: REMEMBERING LIS LANGE, 1961–2025

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University of Cape Town

Any human life is a unique combination of bone, flesh and spirit. For Maria Lis Lange (or just Lis as she preferred), the bone—the structural frame for her vital life—was provided by her outstanding career as a professional in higher education administration and policy development. For someone who believed, along with Hannah Arendt, that education ‘is the point at which we decide whether to love the world enough to assume responsibility for it’ (in Lange 2012: 4), it is no surprise that Lange chose to devote her working life to higher education.

Her career commenced at a particularly intense moment for higher education policy in South Africa. The new democracy was determined to use education to provide the high-level technical skills needed (as global policy templates insisted) to be competitive in the global economy while at the same time, specific to its moment and context, addressing the challenges of racial inequality that threatened to hollow out the promise of a hard-won democracy.¹

1 See, for example, Department of Education (1997a), especially the contrast between the democratising statement ‘the task of higher education is to support a healthy public opinion and vibrant public debate by developing a culture of critical discourse in society’ (60) and the

Lis began her administrative career as liaison officer in the Centre for Science Development (CSD) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 1997 and from 1999 to 2000 worked for the National Research Foundation (NRF), the new organisation which subsumed the funding arm of the HSRC. From there, she moved on to spend a full decade in the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the new agency tasked with both monitoring the performance of the higher education system (through its practice of institutional audits) and providing either solicited or unsolicited advice to the minister of education. In the latter role the CHE sought to create, through its seminars, publications and the promotion of debate, something of an open deliberative space, situated somewhere between government and higher education institutions themselves, that would also accommodate and represent the views of students and academics.

Initially hired as a project manager in 2002, she quickly demonstrated the drive, commitment and capacity to become Director of Monitoring and Evaluation at the CHE (2003–2006) and later, Executive Director of the Higher Education Quality Committee (2006–2010), acting briefly as its Chief Executive Officer (2007–2008). In each of these roles she demonstrated, as Saleem Badat put it in a personal communication with me in October 2025, ‘great intellect, innovative and incisive social thinking, social commitment and a capacity for hard work’.

From these ‘external’ or oversight roles over the system of higher education as a whole Lis moved on to take up different ‘internal’ positions at three universities, first at the University of the Free State (UFS) (2011–2018), after that, at the University of Cape Town (UCT) (2018–2022) and, finally, at Stellenbosch University (SU) (2024–2025). In these posts she was well placed to experience the frictions that occur when, as the saying goes, the ‘rubber hits the road’ and the ideals of necessarily abstract policy encounter the recalcitrance of the real.

emphasis on human capital formation in which the ‘first and foremost’ challenge is ‘human resource development ... the mobilisation of human talent and potential through the training and provision of person-power for the changing labour market’ (54).

Lis assumed her role as Senior Director of Institutional Research and Academic Planning at the UFS following two major upsets: the 2008 Reitz video initiation incident and the 2010 SASCO-inspired disruption of intervarsity games between UFS and North-West University, which led both to the suspension of the SRC and calls for the resignation of Vice-Rector Jonathan Jansen (Soudien 2010a; 2010b). Here, she set out to address the crucial problems in UFS's institutional and academic culture, focusing particularly on the ways in which curriculum could be used (as the 'Soudien Report' put it) as 'a tool of exclusion' (Department of Education 2008: 90).

After failing to be appointed as rector at UFS, Lange moved sideways to become Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at UCT despite vocal resistance from the university's Black caucus, which advocated for the appointment of one of its own members. Despite initial support from UCT's vice-chancellor, Mamokgethi Phakeng, the relationship soon soured. Lis's professionalism, honesty and forthrightness proved too much for someone who brooked no disagreement and who could never accept criticism, however necessary. Lis was pushed by the chair of council to forsake her intention to seek the usual second term as DVC and was forced to resign months before the expiration of her existing contract. The 'Independent Investigation into UCT Governance' would later find that her contract had been 'irregularly, improperly, and unlawfully terminated' (Mpati et al. 2023: 173). She moved on to what proved to be her ultimate position as special advisor to Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Learning and Teaching at SU. Such were the formal structures (the bones) of her life and career.

More important is the fact that these structures provided the context and occasions through which an intellectual self-fashioning took place, one that put flesh on the bones of her very particular career as 'scholar-administrator' (as Badat aptly put it in his personal communication with me in October 2025), someone who used the act of writing not just to report or convey information in administrative terms, but to critically think it through. This was the critical-intellectual

process she referred to when she described taking ‘my intellectual self out of my managerial self’ (Lange 2016b: 177). Commitment to this process meant that her thinking was always agonistic, in the classical senses of the term; athletic thinking, shaped in and strengthened by the various contests it engaged. The main political and intellectual challenge would come from the new public-management criteria which it was her professional task to implement as director of the CHE’s Higher Education Quality Committee.

South Africa rejoined the international higher education community just as a new, globally templated and World Bank-approved audit culture came into being aimed at disciplining universities into accepting the new rallying calls of ‘innovation [and] entrepreneurialism’ (Lange 2023: 62) while ‘backgrounding’ postwar commitments to the massification of higher education articulated around ideas of democracy and the public good. Lis, alongside her colleagues at the CHE, Saleem Badat, Mala Singh and Thierry Luescher, set out to meet the challenge of this restrictive audit culture head on, taking advantage of the fact that South Africa distinguished itself though its explicit constitutional commitments to academic freedom and by openly asserting the need for higher education to be used to foster the critical citizenship that was essential for the flourishing of its new democracy. Her particular goals were to ‘use a monitoring system to help institutions and the higher education system to become more reflective’; to ‘make possible the realisation of a progressive link between evaluation and democracy’; and, ultimately, to enable South Africa to realise a ‘post-managerialist’ model of higher education governance (Lange 2006: 50; Lange & Luescher 2003: 84; CHE 2016: 125). All in all, this implied that policy and monitoring should be used to foster democratic deliberation through the provision of systematic knowledge rather than allowing it to impose market discipline on the university, its academics and its students. A second (and related) contest emerged from her hands-on experience inside the specific institutional cultures of UFS and UCT. Each of these, in their own ways, forced into vivid focus a key word in

South Africa's higher education lexicon, namely the idea and practice of 'transformation'.

Against what threatened to become a very inert notion of 'transformation' as simply referring to racial representation in superficial, quantitative terms that would be easy to comply with for auditing purposes, Lis was characteristically fierce in her determination to insist on the real 'conceptual and political complexity' of the term (Lange 2014: 3). She similarly showed her mettle in refusing to equate the new (post-2015) key word 'decolonisation' with a reductive racial nationalism while at the same time insisting on the need to confront the reality and force of continued white privilege. A related but more complex challenge existed, she insisted, one which was to be found in 'confronting where we went wrong as a civilisation and being ready to educate for a wholly different future' (Lange 2021: 295). Above all, this would mean actively confronting all the concessions universities had made to the now dominant neoliberal culture, notably the fact that universities had come to 'actively participate in every aspect of logarithm capitalism', from submission to the dictates of the global university rankings systems to the drive for the digitalisation of teaching and learning, in the process 'failing in their duty of care for young adults' (Lange 2023: 61).

Against these concessions she argued for a new 'political project for the university', one in which it would become 'an active agent of change ... in looking for solutions and alternative ways to the manner in which we live, work, think and feel, and are to each other' (Lange 2023: 62). Facing the challenge of what such a fundamental change in our thinking about higher education would involve might well constitute the legacy of her work for the next generation. Her formulation of it takes us to the heart of a third major contest in policy, namely the agon over the place of the humanities in higher education.

Lis had the opportunity to wrestle with this question as a participant in the Academy of Science 'Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, prospects and strategies' (Lange & Singh 2011: 34–57). Here, she brought to bear the two sides

of her training as a historian: the selection and identification of the documents constituting an archive, and a scrupulous form of critical attention to their specific formulations. In this case, the archive in question consisted of both the global and local archives of higher education policy.

As has been noted, policy in South Africa differed from its global counterparts in articulating two somewhat contrary currents of opinion regarding the goals of higher education. These affected the framing of the question of the humanities in different ways, resulting in a different placing of the humanities in policy. The first of these was virtually a replication of the global current: the insistent call for human capital development around the rallying cry of innovation, as championed by the Ministry of Science and Technology. In practice, this translated into a call for a deliberate reduction in the number of students in the humanities (and, to a lesser extent, in the more instrumental social sciences) in the hope that this would automatically translate into an increase in the number of students enrolling in STEM subjects (particularly engineering), accompanied by reduced research support and funding for the humanities.² In terms of policy conceptualisation, the focus on innovation meant downgrading the humanities predominantly to a 'support role as a handmaiden of innovation-framed natural sciences and technology' (S&T) (Lange & Singh 2011: 52). The second current was, as noted earlier, largely absent from global policy. Here, the call to arms (as voiced by the Ministry of Education) was for transformation, not innovation, which meant a 'strong focus on the development of democracy and social justice, [with] the education of critical citizens as a specific role of higher education' (Lange & Singh 2011: 52). In practice, this focus sought to address the massive legacy of racial discrimination in South African higher education. Institutionally, it resulted in the merger policy (intended to at least offset the massive funding differentials

2 The chapter cites an input into the OECD's 2006 review of the National System of Innovation, which asserts that 'the "Engineering gap" will not be solved as long as there are more enrolments in the humanities and commerce disciplines than in Engineering' (Lange & Singh 2011: 48).

between historically Black universities [HBUs] and historically white universities [HWUs] while preserving the elite conditions for research excellence); the reconsideration of curricula (including the promotion of African languages, literatures and cultures; the development of Indigenous Knowledge Systems [IKS] as a kind of compromise-formation with the demands of innovation); and, above all, a commitment to substantial growth in the number of non-white students and academic staff in the system. Thus, against the demands from S&T, it was insisted that enrollment in the humanities should remain at 40% of total enrollments.³

With the clarity of the historian's critical perspective, a striking feature of the whole policy-generating process was the lack of effective consultation with practising academics from the diverse fields of the humanities. Consequently, policy was developed through a process that was more or less closed off from any active deliberation with those most concerned, which consequently resulted in the humanities becoming something like the 'absent centre' of policy discourse: while forming the central *object* of discussion, the humanities were never a full *interlocutor* in it.⁴ As Lis put it with all the historian's cutting politeness, the policy imaginary in South Africa was marked by a 'lack of serious intellectual engagement' (Lange & Singh 2011: 55).

I use the phrase 'policy imaginary' in a more or less technical sense⁵ to refer to a shared understanding in society that justifies and legitimates common practices, with the caveat that this common sense may have no foundation in fact, however widely shared. The term is

3 It is beyond the scope of this tribute to consider the interesting ways in which the transformation agenda was taken up (and later operationalised) in the Charter for the Humanities project, composed in the same period as the Consensus Study. For brief and divergent discussions of the two, see Higgins (2013) and Pillay (2013).

4 The one deliberative initiative, the NRF's 2003 project, *Shifting the Boundaries of Knowledge*, was severely limited by its a priori commitment to understanding the humanities through 'conceptions of national priorities conceptualised through an innovation and competitiveness prism' (Lange & Singh 2011: 47). See also Higgins (2013: 77–97).

5 I have in mind a variety of theorists, ranging from Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser to Jürgen Habermas and Cornelius Castoriadis. The formulation here draws particularly on Charles Taylor's wording in 'On Social Imaginary' (<https://web.archive.org/web/20041019043656/http://www.nyu.edu/classes/calhoun/Theory/Taylor-on-si.htm>).

particularly useful because it provides a way of understanding the unity of the humanities that policy so conspicuously failed to grasp. For, it is precisely this imaginary—in the larger form of the social imaginary—which forms the primary ‘object’ of investigation in the humanities (just as the external world is the primary object for those working across the natural sciences). The social imaginary is the ensemble of received ideas, narratives and linguistic forms in addition to all the social, artistic and cultural representations which together constitute the common sense, real world of human interaction and agency. Or, as Lis put it, ‘the manner in which we live, work, think and feel, and are to each other’ (Lange 2023: 62), a formulation which owes much to her favoured thinker Hannah Arendt’s contouring of experience and action in her fundamental study, *The Human Condition* (1958) and her philosophical imperatives ‘to think what we are doing’ and to never cease to combat what she called ‘thoughtlessness’, the ‘complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty’ (Arendt [1958]1998: 5). While such a combat certainly becomes the historian’s task when dealing with a discursive archive such as the one representing the policy imaginary of higher education, it also helps us to understand what the work of the humanities is (or can be) in practice, which is very different from what received ideas in policy insist it is or should be when it comes to pedagogy and knowledge production.

To return to the figure proposed by Lis, the possibility of doing real work in the humanities means above all considering and absolutely rejecting the status of ‘handmaiden’ as proposed or imposed by policy. Historically, the troubling figure of the ‘handmaiden’ first appeared in the Biblical context where it referred to the personal servant (more precisely, slave) of the mistress of a household, later to adopt the more metaphorical significance in which Lis used it to suggest a dedicated stance of appropriate humility and above all submission to the will of another, the divine (in religious discourse), the ‘economy’ or ‘the nation’ of the policy imaginary.⁶

6 Compare, for instance, the move from the literal to figurative meanings of ‘handmaid’ between Genesis 16 verses 1–4 and Luke 1: 38.

To be anybody's handmaiden, then, is to suffer a radical lack of autonomy, whether willed or unwilled. It is the very opposite of the critical consciousness which a training in the humanities seeks to enable, the 'habits of mind' (as the socialist critic Raymond Williams put it), which 'are all set against any and every pronouncement of a singular or assembled authority' (Williams 2001: 276). These habits are developed through such simple scholarly practices as the questioning of sources, reading contextually and comparatively and, above all, acknowledging that critical understanding depends on recognising the imperative to interpret rather than paraphrase what one is reading.⁷ The critical thinking which the humanities as a whole seeks to provoke is not and cannot be that of any handmaiden. If anything, the attitude it promotes is one of defiance to established authority rather than unthinking submission to it. In that sense, the humanities may prove to be (to use a usually pejorative term in a positive way) *insubordinate* in all the ways that prompted Lis's tentative voicing of her suspicion that

the narrowing role of the Humanities within the NSI could also be interpreted as a not unexpected fate for disciplinary areas which claim to be the guardians of critical and emancipatory knowledge within any kind of statist project (Lange & Singh 2011: 55).

What forces drove this essentially insubordinate thinking in Lis? What nurtured the capacity for such combative, agonistic thinking? It was powered, I think, by that inward spirit which anyone who encountered her would instantly recognise in the fierce flash of her gaze. This was a person, the eyes told you, who was honest, direct and deeply motivated by an indomitable political will for social justice. That spirit was no doubt forged by the hammer-blows of growing up during Argentina's 'dirty war', later refined by her formation as an academic. As Rachel

⁷ For extended argument in this regard (also emerging from the work of the Consensus Panel), see Higgins (2013: esp. 174–179).

Stewart, her former partner, put it in a personal communication with me in October 2025, ‘Lis didn’t spring up from South African soil. It was her Argentinian experience which radicalised her.’

Lis was born into a conservative family in Buenos Aires in 1961. Although strict, her father always encouraged her independent intellectual development, something which her mother who had been unable to complete her own philosophy degree also nurtured.⁸ Lis was introduced to (and internalised) the values of learning, truth and community spirit in her Catholic Dominican school. At the age of fifteen (1976), a long-prepared coup d’état (aided and abetted by the USA) deposed Isabel Perón and placed a military junta in power which, under the guise of its innocuous-sounding National Reorganisation Process, soon contributed a new concept and practice to the vocabulary of state terror, *los desaparecidos* (disappearance). This referred to taking people from their homes, offices or the streets without formal arrest and then, without trial or judicial procedure of any kind, detaining, torturing and very often murdering them, secretly disposing of the bodies to leave no evidence behind, most notoriously by dropping them, alive or already dead, from airplanes into the sea. The number of those who were disappeared in this fashion between 1976 and 1983 is estimated at around 30,000. The practice was intended to cow the civilian population, particularly as its targets were most often not the *subversivos* themselves (trade union or political activists) but ordinary and often upper-middle-class citizens, with a special focus on secondary school teachers, university professors and (disproportionately) Jews (Osiel 2001: 122).

Imagine growing up in a social world where anyone in your circle could be *disappeared* from one day to the next. Imagine the anxiety of a teenager at school or in a university system in which teachers and professors were regarded by the government as ‘poisoning young people’ and therefore as potential targets for *disappearance*. For, as Brigadier-General Vilas declared (on 5 August 1976), until ‘we clean

8 Biographical details are drawn mainly from Lange (2016c).

up the university system ... we cannot achieve a victory' (in Aguila 2006: 179). Two responses are possible in such a world: to be cowed or to resist. Lis chose the path of most resistance.

Inspired by the weekly demonstrations in front of the presidential building, the Casa Rosada, by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo—women who were angry with the Church for siding with the brutal regime and who silently protested the disappearance of their children that started in April 1977—Lis joined the Maoist-influenced Revolutionary Communist Party, consequently running a significant risk of being disappeared herself. After studying Classical History at the University of Buenos Aires, where (as she later put it) 'both the books and the professors were banned' (Lange 2016c: 5), she won a scholarship to the safer and more open atmosphere of the Colegio de Mexico where she completed a master's degree in African Studies (1988). From there, intrigued by the similarities and differences between South Africa and Argentina and fascinated by the ways in which South Africa's historiography 'was competing easily with the best English and French social history' (Lange 2016c: 5), she made her decisive move to South Africa by winning an Oppenheimer scholarship for doctoral studies at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits). There, she internalised the 'brutal intellectual discipline' of social history as taught by her 'endlessly patient but also endlessly demanding' supervisor, Charles van Onselen (Lange 2003/2017: Preface). Under his sharp supervision, she honed her academic spirit to that particularly fine intellectual edge created by the demands of a social history in which the necessary discipline of fact is equally informed and complicated by the demands of theory. A revised version of her thesis was published in 2003 under the title *White, Poor and Angry: White Working Class Families in Johannesburg*, eliciting praise as 'modest, painstaking archival work' (Moodie 2004: 454).

From there, Lis went on to become a formidable presence in South African higher education. Perhaps the words of a former UCT colleague, Loretta Feris, in a personal communication with me exemplifies the intellectual substance of Lis's contribution to thinking in higher

education. Recalling all the times she would go to Lis 'to ask for her thoughts or to test an idea', Feris noted above all how she usually left 'not with an answer but with more food for thought ... [S]he pushed me to be reflective and thoughtful'. To be reflective and thoughtful: never quite as simple as it sounds, but nonetheless the critical task for both the humanities and all those who are engaged in South Africa's higher education project.

Lis died from complications arising from a lengthy struggle with an unusual form of rheumatoid arthritis which attacked and finally destroyed the tissue of her lungs. She is deeply mourned by her second marriage partner, Jane Bennett, her former partner Rachel Stewart, their adopted daughter Puleng and two grandchildren, her three remaining brothers in Argentina and her many friends and collaborators in the world of higher education to which she contributed so much.

CHAPTER 2

LIS LANGE: TEN APPRECIATIONS OF A SCHOLAR AND LEADER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Saleem Badat

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Introduction

The death of Maria Lis Lange is a huge loss—not just to her family, friends, comrades and colleagues but to the South African higher education sector more generally. Colleague and friend Mala Singh observes that her death diminishes something important in our lives: solidarity, friendship and conversations on serious political and theoretical questions as well as on our mundane daily struggles. In this tribute I express my appreciation of Lis as an intellectual, scholar, policymaker and leader in higher education. To appreciate someone is to recognise, value and admire their qualities; to express approbation and gratitude for their contributions, actions and the example they set; to hold them in high esteem, to rate them highly. Drawing on personal experience, I share some of Lis’s critical insights, dispositions and skills. I show how over time she organically transitioned to new sites and posts, mastered their requirements and challenges, and brought to bear on them her imagination, knowledge, expertise, resourcefulness

and capacity for hard work. Indeed, ‘in each setting she excelled at the post as defined and then re-defined the post, broadening its reach, strengthening its foundations, and tuning it to the larger setting’.¹ While she was diligently focused on the responsibilities at hand, she was also always attentive to broader issues such as the wider political economy and social structures and conjunctures. At different moments she researched, monitored, evaluated, reviewed, recommended and reported with great professionalism and technical competence and she could be extremely severe with muddled thinking, incompetence and those she considered slackers. She ‘would sometimes let loose with a well-placed “f*ck” and the church aunties and oomies would reach for their smelling salts’ (Jansen 2025). She could be abrasive, even if, overall, she was sensitive and caring.² In light of all this and because she would scorn hagiography in remembrance of her, the appreciation that follows is much more than mere adulation.

My appreciation begins by recognising, first, that Lis’s contribution over more than half of her life and for thirty-four years of her adult life in South Africa as a permanent resident was a practical expression of social and political commitment, solidarity and internationalism by an Argentinian who had known authoritarianism and repression in her own birth country. Arriving in South Africa in 1991 at age thirty, Lis embraced the profound and formidable challenges that a society in a negotiated transition from authoritarian apartheid to democracy faced: sustainable economic and social development, social equity and the extension and deepening of democracy in a unipolar world in which a hegemonic USA had become a rogue state that posed a significant threat to global justice. For her, the initial seven years in South Africa, reading for a PhD and working, ‘involved an emotional as well as intellectual transition’. For her, ‘thinking and writing in English and learning to live in a different cultural setting’ was a great challenge

1 My thanks to the two peer reviewers of this tribute for their careful reading, pertinent comments and very useful suggestions. I quote here the pithy summation of her role, based on my comments, by one of the reviewers.

2 The latter part of this opening first paragraph and its phrasing was suggested by one of the reviewers.

and she had to rely on ‘friends full of sympathy, sense of humour and patience’ (Lange 1998: v). She dedicated herself to helping build a new society in South Africa and came to do so admirably on diverse fronts: educational, cultural, social and political.

Lis was born on 22 May 1961 in Argentina. After receiving a BA Honours in History from the University of Buenos Aires (1984) and a MA in African Studies from the El Colegio de Mexico (1988), she taught the history of Africa at the University of Buenos Aires. In 1991, she registered for a PhD in History at the University of Witwatersrand supported by various scholarships and institutions. Her supervisor was Charles van Onselen, who she writes ‘lived up to his reputation as a person of intractability, intellectual obsession, acerbic humour and high standards’ (Lange 1998: v). She credited her becoming a historian to van Onselen’s ‘guidance, his often-brutal criticism and, in particular, his patience’ as well as ‘his trust in the value’ of her research. She benefitted ‘greatly from [van Onselen’s] talent as a writer and his genius as historian craftsman’ and from him ‘never lowering his intellectual demands on [her] despite [her] status as a foreign language speaker’ (Lange 1998: v). Lis makes two important points here that are pertinent to contemporary higher education: first, about the challenges faced by non-English language speakers reading for postgraduate degrees, and second, about intellectual demands not being lowered because of language. Friends and colleagues contributed generously to helping her write in English and editing her work.

Lis dedicated her PhD thesis to her parents Erik and Amelia Lange. In it, she observes that her ‘parents and brothers encouraged and supported [her] work in innumerable ways’ and ‘repeatedly reaffirmed their trust and their respect for [her] as a person. She writes that ‘much of the courage and sense of freedom’ associated with her work and life emanated ‘directly from [her] family’ (Lange 1998: vi). Lis’s thesis looks at ‘the economic, social and political processes that shaped the lives of Johannesburg’s white working class’ between 1890 and the 1922 Rand Revolt (Lange 1998). It investigates ‘white working class families, working class accommodation, the constitution of social

networks and the problem of unemployment’ and argues that the ‘white working class experience in Johannesburg had an important role in fostering a sense of community between English and Afrikaner workers and their families’ and that this was the basis of ‘English and Afrikaner workers solidarity and organisation during the 1922 Rand Revolt’ (Lange 1998: i). While Lis obtained her PhD in 1998, she had already in 1993 taken up a lecturing post at Khanya College in Johannesburg, a radical experiment in equitable access and opportunity to universities established in 1986 by the South African Committee of Higher Education (SACHED) under the leadership of John Samuel. With its progressive and non-racial staff, Khanya innovated a liberatory curriculum that also prepared talented Black students for access to historically white universities. The Khanya enterprise sought to act as a model for transforming universities.

In 1997 Lis joined the Centre for Science Development (CSD) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) as its liaison officer from where she moved on to become manager at the National Research Foundation (NRF) until 2000. I met Lis in 1998, when she was at the CSD. Her work there exposed her to the world of newly emerging national science and research policy and of forging equity-oriented programmes to promote research and strengthen research-capacity development in a way that would not compromise quality and the intellectual, social and economic development needs of South Africa. As the first chief executive of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the policy advisory body to the minister of education, I was attracted by Lis’s PhD in History, her Khanya pedigree and her intellect, commitment and energy. In 2001 I headhunted her for the position of CHE project manager. She was a godsend. Her commitment to social justice, innovative and incisive thinking, thoughtfulness, her principled and engaged approach, scholarship, accomplished administration, energy and capacity for hard work combined with a caring humanism enriched my life academically and intellectually and eased the burdens of the leadership challenges I faced as a mid-career scholar tasked with building the CHE. And that is my second great appreciation of her. These qualities would win her the

respect of scholars, administrators, students and specialists nationally and internationally. Jonathan Jansen has observed that ‘she was not everybody’s cup of tea, to put it politely’ (Jansen 2025). Formidable intellect and committed scholar and activist that she was, Lis did not suffer foolish thinking and conduct and said it as it was, often with wit. I found her great honesty and straight talking most endearing—which is my third reason for appreciating her. She was, as Jansen says, ‘a tough, forthright woman with an extraordinary capacity for “crap detection”’ (Jansen 2025). These same qualities would lead her to the CHE.

In her contribution to this *Festschrift*, Mala Singh conveys well our understanding of the CHE’s task in the founding years of 1999–2006, namely to ‘translate progressive values and principles into enabling systems and implementable strategies, programmes and projects for higher education transformation’. This assumed the form of building a new institution from scratch, forging its intellectual, institutional and organisational capacities to effectively and efficiently undertake its extensive and important mandate, winning recognition from universities, the state and other stakeholders and ensuring its institutional reproduction and financial support and sustainability. Lis thrived in and contributed to the CHE’s radical, committed, critical, democratic, enabling, informal and frugal culture and soon (2003) became its pioneering first director of Policy Monitoring and Evaluation. Her seminal policy research and coordination work included producing the discussion document ‘Towards a Framework for the Monitoring and Evaluation of South African Higher Education’ and helped to develop the 2002 ‘New Academic Policy’. Her work and oversight extended to publications on access and throughput, postgraduate studies, community engagement, the state of private higher education, the state of MBA provision, students with disabilities, as well as the seminal ‘Governance in South African Higher Education’ and ‘The Governance of Merger in South African Higher Education’.³ Supporters of her CHE projects included the Carnegie Corporation, the

3 See the Council on Higher Education website, <https://www.che.ac.za/>

Ford Foundation, the Fulbright Program and the Dutch organisation Nuffic.

Lis's great versatility and hands-on-deck approach meant that, alongside Mala Singh, she played a significant role in building the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the CHE and theorising and building a national quality assurance system for university education. The complex design and oversight of the programme-accreditation, digital-portal interface between universities and the CHE was almost entirely her work. She was extremely resistant to the idea that the interface could be designed and overseen by corporate consultants and volunteered to lead and direct its design, something which saved the CHE millions of rands in consultancy fees. Lis had great institutional loyalty, albeit of a critical nature that did not compromise honesty and truth. Her commitment, readiness to take on institution-building work and work outputs constantly went beyond the call of duty. There were, as a matter of policy, no performance bonuses or travel and other perks for CHE managers, which Lis approved. She was simply not motivated by material benefits. And that is my fourth reason for appreciating her. It is a matter of great satisfaction for me that the largely successful creation and institutionalisation of the HEQC and national quality assurance and development were undertaken by a historian-philosopher and sensitive and critical humanists as opposed to engineers and management specialists.

As Singh points out, Lis's research-intensive work in preparing institutional profiles for the HEQC's institutional audits, her analysis of institutional self-evaluation reports and preparation of HEQC audit reports gave her unparalleled insight into teaching, research and management at universities. Not always in the public eye, Lis was an indispensable member of the team that led and built the CHE in its formative years. She was a key back-room dynamo within the organisation, undertaking thoughtful, creative and pioneering initiatives and making valuable contributions in a range of areas, from policy advice, monitoring and evaluation to quality assurance, promotion and development and internal systems and

staff development. In 2006, she rightly succeeded Singh as Executive Director of the HEQC and between 2007 and 2008 briefly served as Acting Chief Executive of the CHE.

My fifth appreciation of Lis is that, while the original leadership team moved on from the CHE in 2006, she remained behind to ensure continuity and to help consolidate the CHE and HEQC. Her new responsibilities involved closely interacting and engaging with diverse national and international universities, higher education organisations and colleagues, dealing intellectually and practically with critical academic and policy questions, and leading and shaping discourse and practice locally and internationally. The CHE years gave Lis a rare vantage point from where she could observe universities and how they performed their core activities and equipped her to subsequently transition to various universities where she assumed management and leadership positions.

Lis was an impressive thinker and practitioner in the domains of teaching and learning, curriculum development, academic programme accreditation and reviews as well as pedagogy and assessment, in addition to which she possessed intimate institutional, national, and international knowledge and experience of these issues. Today, teaching and learning seem to be considered just another management portfolio, as if leadership and transformation in these areas do not have to be theoretically informed, critical, imaginative and grounded in empirical research and analysis, of which Lis was the living embodiment. Critically, and as my sixth appreciation of her, Lis's scholarship and practice were informed by important moral and social imperatives related to equity, social justice, democracy, and by nuanced notions of epistemic and epistemological transformation, equity, and quality. This stood her in good stead when she had to lead efforts in transforming learning and teaching in the interests of greater student opportunities and success, and ultimately of greater social justice. She was acutely aware that questions of access, opportunity and success were not just matters of efficiency but that they related to issues of justice and democracy and the achievement of constitutional imperatives in South Africa.

My seventh appreciation of Lis is that she engaged deeply with the critical questions of the purposes and roles of universities and higher education as a public good. She held sophisticated ideas on questions of 'race', class, gender, sexual orientation, their social determinations and how they articulated and intersected. She thought critically about questions of difference, diversity, and inclusion and was acutely sensitive to social and cultural contexts. Rather than clinging to trite conventional wisdoms, she thought about social equity, quality and development (and their relationship) in complex and multi-dimensional ways. Lis understood that at the heart of the transformation and decolonisation of universities had to be the transformation of curriculum and pedagogy appropriate to the mission of a South African university, as opposed to a university in South Africa that is an imitation or replica of institutions in the colonial metropole. She was well placed to lead such an intellectual venture and practical effort, which requires theoretically minded and empirically grounded scholar-administrators who can not only hold their own in difficult debates and exchanges with deans, other scholars, and students, but who can also lead and guide.

Eight, I appreciate that Lis did not abandon research, writing and publishing. In 2003, drawing on her PhD thesis, she published a monograph titled *White Poor and Angry: White Working Class Families in Johannesburg* (2003/2017) in which she makes 'ingenious use of demographic evidence, church records, and other contemporary material to depict working class communities in Johannesburg' who in the early twentieth century 'were understood in neither class or ethnic terms but rather as a social problem' (Moodie 2004: 453). Focusing less on 'the sphere of production' as sites of 'inequality and oppression' and more on 'the sphere of reproduction', allowed her to 'tackle ... neglected' issues such as the erosion of ethnic divisions because of commonly experienced problems like harsh living conditions, the lack of housing, living together as neighbours and intermarriage (Morrell 2004: 453). In his endorsement of the book Albert Grundlingh notes its value for demonstrating 'that Afrikaners [had] a much more complex

social history than the narrow ethnic stereotype often paraded in much of the literature’ and as making ‘a significant contribution to a fuller understanding of the ambivalent nature of the formation of social identity in Afrikaner circles’ while highlighting ‘the multilayered nature of ethnicity’. Similarly, Van der Walt (2005: 115) considers the book a ‘rarity in African studies: a monograph on the social history of white yet working-class South Africans’ and ‘an evocative and important contribution to our understanding of South African labour and social history’, with the ‘experience of the white working class revealed by Lange leading to questioning of Frantz Fanon’s assertion in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism was neatly split between native and settler’.

Lis penned over twenty-five peer-reviewed book chapters and journal articles and several newspaper opinion pieces. She delivered invited keynote addresses at numerous universities on questions of leadership, quality, curriculum and student activism. She was an external examiner for several universities and supervised PhD students. Her knowledge and expertise resulted in her being invited to join the advisory boards of *Critical Studies in Teaching & Learning* and *Acta Academica*. Lis’s special interests were in the philosophy and politics of education. She worked from a critical social theory perspective and used an interdisciplinarity approach to conduct research in the humanities. She researched change in higher education and the meanings and possibilities of transformation, especially at curriculum level. At the University of the Free State (UFS) her work explored Hannah Arendt’s thinking in the context of higher education.

I was a referee for Lis’s applications for the HEQC Executive Director post, the Vice-Rector (VR) post at UFS, the Rector post at UFS, and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) post at University of Cape Town (UCT). My ninth appreciation of her is that Lis only applied for posts that she was confident she had the capabilities to succeed in. Her CHE and subsequent posts made it easy for her to demonstrate that she indeed had the intellectual knowledge, expertise and wisdom as well as the practical experience to provide leadership in the different

posts. Departing the CHE in 2011, Lis entered university management as senior director of the Directorate of Institutional Research and Academic Planning at UFS, soon becoming its Vice-Rector: Academic (2014). She used her familiarity with university data, policy monitoring and planning processes to craft, in Vice-Chancellor Jansen's words, 'a world class institutional research capacity' and evidence-informed academic planning framework (Jansen 2025). As VR she drew on her work on access, opportunity and quality to guide academic programme and curriculum development and to enhance teaching and learning. In 2017, she was unsuccessful in becoming the fourteenth rector of the UFS, although she was suitably, indeed supremely qualified. As her predecessor Jansen notes, because she was a 'woman, gay, foreigner, non-Christian, straight-talker and standard setter, lesser men (*papbroeke*, in colloquial Afrikaans) could not see her full value for higher education' (Jansen 2025).

Lis joined the staff of UCT in early 2018 as DVC: Teaching and Learning. As one of her referees, I supported her application with complete confidence. I observed that it was one of those rare occasions where I had no hesitation and could express my unreserved support for her application, adding that her curriculum vitae showed that she more than met all the necessary requirements. I wrote that Lis was 'a person of rare intellect and great integrity' and that she had 'a personality and approach that promote mutually respectful relations with colleagues and healthy interpersonal dynamics within an organisation'. I expressed the belief that, given the opportunity and the requisite support, her significant contributions in academic, student and institutional matters were still to come, and that UCT would do well to provide her with an opportunity to do so. Lis was appointed but regrettably her appointment was contested on various grounds, some parochial and dubious. UCT, especially in the aftermath of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, faced critical and urgent issues related to teaching and learning, especially around curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional-cultural change. They required immediate, intellectually informed, theorised, bold and practical responses of

the kind that Lis could provide given her intellectual and scholarly character, profound commitment to equity and social justice in and through higher education, great administrative competence and personal qualities.

As DVC: Teaching and Learning, she was responsible for curriculum transformation, quality assurance, academic planning as well as student and senior academic staff support. She led discussions on the decolonisation of the curriculum, diversity and inclusion, and epistemological and epistemic transformation. Much to her frustration, she was unable to see this work to fruition. Toxic institutional conditions at UCT and serious lapses in governance, leadership, management and integrity resulted in Lis stepping down as DVC. She was subsequently vindicated by the 'Final Report of the Independent Investigation into UCT Governance' of 11 October 2023. Although saddened by the turn of events, she remained committed to the tasks at hand until she left UCT. Although the experience took its toll on Lis, it did not break her spirit. She was all too aware that the failings in governance, leadership, and management were neither specific nor limited to UCT. They also existed at other universities where they resulted from inadequate leadership and management capabilities, weak institutional and organisational capacities, patronage and corruption of different kinds, and a lack of accountability that accompanied the increasing corporatisation, commercialisation and commodification of universities.

Lis moved to Stellenbosch University (SU) in an advisory capacity in the hope of putting her intellect and expertise to good use. If UCT was beset by governance, leadership and management problems, Stellenbosch offered a different institutional space and a very different challenge. A leading research university, SU was then as it is now characterised by a corporatist, technocratic and entrepreneurial culture, limited deracialisation of the staff and student bodies and, despite much discourse on the issue, rather modest ideas on academic and institutional transformation. These were the structural and conjunctural conditions within which she had to act, advise and guide.

They could not be wished away; they were a given, a necessary part of her life. She did not, however, make a virtue of necessity. It was the terrain on which she would have to struggle and win support for her ideas. She confessed to being tired and ‘struggling intellectually and politically at Stellenbosch’ and needing ‘some help’. The ‘help’ that she sought at this difficult moment was leftist critique of decolonial discourse in South Africa. It highlights, and this is my tenth and final appreciation of Lis, how seriously she took ideas and intellectual work in thinking thorough the challenges of transformation and decolonisation, in this case at SU.

Our last face-to-face conversation was in late 2024, after I had delivered a keynote address on matters related to transformation and accountability at the Stellenbosch University Transformation Indaba. Afterwards, Lis and I mused on the antinomies, ambiguities, contradictions and antagonisms of transformation at SU and other universities, both locally and internationally. We concurred that in the face of the rampant commodification, commercialisation and corporatism of our universities, increasing nepotism and corruption and a complicit there-is-no-alternative discourse that lacked imagination or will, or both, one had to retain an optimism of the will and hope. We agreed that the neoliberal policies that were corroding higher education and universities were not immutable to change and that they had to be changed through critique and action. We hoped that the contemporary period, which in Gramscian terms could be seen as a ‘war of position’, of fighting under adverse conditions for improvements and reforms, would give way to a ‘war of movement’ when more radical and substantive changes would become possible again. Lis understood that while one had to continue to speak truth to power, power tended to be deaf and blind, to repress and to domesticate, and that one had to confront, erode and overcome power in additional ways.

I have one great regret regarding Lis, and it is that in 2014 I did not remain in the race for the University of Western Cape (UWC) vice-chancellorship following Brian O’Connell’s retirement. Unfortunately, chauvinists who considered UWC a ‘coloured’ university prompted

me to take up a position at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York. If I had been appointed at UWC, I would have invited Lis to join me there. Crain Soudien, then DVC at UCT, also pledged to avail himself to UWC. I imagined it a dream team. Sometimes, I wistfully ponder some of the exciting trajectories and achievements that were possible at UWC, the impact this could have had on the wider university system and the potential innovations in institutional leadership and management that could have been introduced working alongside intellectuals, scholars and leaders like Lange and Soudien.

It is a great pity that a similar parochial mindset prevented Lis from becoming the vice-chancellor of UFS. For, without doubt, she would have made even more innovative and significant contributions to higher education and universities as a vice-chancellor.

Many institutional settings and conditions wear down and take a toll on those who are committed to social transformation and who give their all for that ideal instead of just settling for improvement, reconstruction and reform, important as those may be. Lis maintained a critical edge in these settings, never entirely despairing or, more dangerously, becoming cynical. She understood that the goal of ‘social revolution, the transformation of the existing order’ could not be counterposed ‘to social reform’ (Luxemburg 1970: 8). Rather, for her, ‘the daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the conditions of [students, academics, workers and others] within the framework of the existing social order’ was a means of working towards an egalitarian society. This highlights the importance and value of her contributions.⁴

In *How the Steel was Tempered*, socialist activist and writer Nikolai Ostrovsky (1952: 105) urges us to live ‘so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years’ and without ‘the burning shame of a mean and petty past’ so ‘that, dying, [you] might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world—the fight for the liberation of [humankind]’. Lis Lange did that, making the university, research

⁴ My thanks to one of the peer reviewers for highlighting this.

and science arenas her particular domains of activism. In Lis, those with similar commitments that remain and follow have a spirit and example to animate them.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF LIS LANGE IN THE COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION (2001–2011)

Mala Singh

*Founding Executive Director of the Higher Education Quality
Committee of the Council on Higher Education*

Lis Lange's death is an immeasurable loss to her friends, her family and loved ones and to her colleagues. Some of us are still struggling to understand the many ways in which her death will diminish something important in our lives. Her unexpected passing has brought about the brutal termination of deep and mutually sustaining friendships, the loss of ethical solidarity in shared values and the end of all possibilities for thoughtful conversations on the most serious political and theoretical questions as well as on the most pressing or mundane of our daily struggles.

I first met Lis in 1997 when we employed her to work in the Centre for Science Development (CSD), the funding arm of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), which supported research in the humanities and social sciences at South African universities. I was executive director of the CSD at the time, and she was appointed as Liaison Officer in one of the divisions that dealt with cooperation initiatives in international research. She came with a background of academic training in Argentina and Mexico and a PhD in History from

the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). She also had experience lecturing at Khanya College, a progressive initiative facilitating access to tertiary education to disadvantaged students. With her usual passion for social justice and her dedication and capacity for hard work she quickly identified with and worked herself into the newly developed change initiatives of the CSD which focused on the post-1994 imperatives of strengthening research capacity, especially at historically Black universities, and widening the range of research themes and partnerships to include those that were more suited to the new reconstructive context.

In this early part of her career in higher education, Lis already demonstrated the strength of her diagnostic and strategic skills, and her fully engaged, fully researched and thoughtful approach to every task. This would be immensely valuable to the work of the CHE in the years that followed, and no doubt to the universities where she worked in her later years. Her work in the CSD was Lis's entry into the world of newly emerging national science and research policy, and the development of systemic equity-oriented initiatives to support research and strengthen research-capacity development.

In 1999, the CSD moved from the HSRC to become part of a newly constituted National Research Foundation (NRF) where Lis worked as manager in the division for Social Sciences and Humanities. Her move to the NRF, which funded and supported research and research-capacity development across the natural, social and human sciences, increased her exposure to the challenges of building and sustaining the emerging post-1994 national science, research and innovation system.

She joined the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2001, attracted by the chance to work in an organisation that was embarking on a number of initiatives to stimulate national debate on key transformation themes in higher education and to develop well-researched, widely consulted-on and considered policy advice for the minister of education. For Lis, this was a continuation of moral and political struggle on another front. She was excited at the prospect of

joining the project that we in the CHE in those early days understood ourselves to be engaged in. We saw our mandate and our task as the translation of progressive values and principles into enabling systems and implementable strategies for change, that is, into intellectually credible and practically useful projects focused on the transformation of higher education. Because of her strong analytical and conceptual skills, her capacity to manage multiple projects and to assume a huge workload, Lis soon became a highly valued member of the senior leadership team at the CHE in its foundational years. She was an immensely supportive colleague to the CEO, Saleem Badat, and to me as Executive Director of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a post in which she succeeded me in 2007.

Her first senior position in the CHE was as the first CHE Director of Policy Monitoring and Evaluation. In the Higher Education Act of 1997, monitoring and evaluation was one of the functions assigned to the CHE. In her capacity as director, Lis spearheaded the process of developing the CHE's draft policy document 'Towards a Framework for the Monitoring and Evaluation of South African Higher Education' (2004). After a process of public comment and discussion, this framework was finalised and eventually adopted by the CHE.

Using data that the education department had gathered from the various higher education institutions and drawing on data from the NRF and the HEQC, Lis and her small team researched and analysed systemic and institutional changes in the higher education system, measured against the restructuring and transformation policy goals that had been set for the sector. These goals had been articulated in the 'White Paper on Higher Education' (1997a) and the Higher Education Act of 1997 as well as in institutional strategic plans. Such analyses of the responsiveness of higher education institutions to the equity, quality and efficiency imperatives of the post-1994 dispensation were crucial in tracking the success or otherwise of policy goals and their implementation. They were also central to providing much of the evidentiary basis for the CHE's advice on higher education to the Minister of Education.

As Director of Monitoring and Evaluation, Lis was also closely involved in several of the task teams, projects and publications launched by the CHE in that foundational first decade. These include the 'New Academic Policy' document (2001–2002), 'Governance in South African Higher Education' (2001–2002), 'Community Engagement in Higher Education' (2005–2008), 'South African Higher Education Responses to Students with Disabilities' (2004–2005) and 'Higher Education Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom' (2005–2008). Her substantial participation in so many founding CHE policy investigations provided her with unparalleled access and an opportunity to contribute to key debates about higher education transformation at the time. It also gave her a powerful vantage point from which to understand what the opportunities, obstacles and dangers were to the achievement of systemic and institutional imperatives for deep-rooted change. So much of the research and development of new policy proposals undertaken by the CHE at the time and so many of the well-researched and deeply reflected-on CHE publications from that first decade bore the imprint of Lis's passionate and efficient involvement. She participated in multiple projects, often simultaneously, either as lead researcher, project or research coordinator or as sole author or editor. At the various universities where she worked, some of the colleagues who were critical of her publication record may not have been aware of or considered her far-reaching research-related involvement and productivity in the advice, policy development and quality assurance work of the CHE. No doubt a more comprehensive history will yield a fuller picture of Lis's multi-faceted role and impactful contributions to the CHE at a time when the foundations for rethinking transformative change in higher education were being laid, not only at the CHE but also at larger systemic and institutional levels.

The work of the HEQC, the quality assurance and quality improvement arm of the CHE, also benefitted greatly from Lis's involvement in several HEQC-mandated functions. The institutional profiles produced by Lis and her team, using combined data from the Department of

Higher Education, the NRF, the CHE and HEQC, were indispensable for the work of the HEQC as it prepared for the first round of institutional audits in the early 2000s. These institutional profiles were used by the HEQC to prepare audit panels for their evidence-gathering, analytical, and evaluative tasks during site visits and for preparing both the preliminary and final HEQC reports to the institutions. The profiles were also shared with the higher education institutions, some of whom used them to prepare their own self-evaluation reports. In more than a few instances, Lis ended up producing substantial drafts of HEQC audit reports after wading through large numbers of transcripts of site-visit interviews and correlating evidence on institutional quality assurance from different sources. This happened in cases where officially appointed report writers produced draft reports which did not make adequate or credible connections between the evidence that had been gathered during audit visits and the audit findings for commendation or improvement. In so many aspects of the work of the CHE and the HEQC, Lis's approach comprised a strong connection between the 'big picture' framing of the task at hand and the attention to detail that was so crucial to the credibility of the organisation. By the time I left the CHE, it was almost self-evident that Lis would take on the executive directorship of the HEQC. She was to lead the HEQC from 2006 to 2010 with her usual blend of rigour, intellectual depth, strategic nuance, crushing hard work, collegiality, and theoretical and political sophistication. These trademark characteristics and many others were only to strengthen and become more evident as she continued her career trajectory beyond the CHE.

During my tenure, the HEQC board had agreed on the necessity of an international external evaluation of the work of the HEQC after the first round of institutional audits. After I had left the CHE, it was mainly Lis who ensured that this happened. She led the production of an HEQC self-evaluation report that was comprehensive and thorough, measured, but self-critical. In her usual style, she did not shy away from confronting weaknesses and errors at a systemic level within the institutions of higher education and not least in the HEQC's

own conceptions and practices. The range and depth of her knowledge and her thoughtful work resulted in invitations to participate in many international initiatives in quality assurance. For instance, she served on the board of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and participated in their workshops and conferences in different parts of the world. She was also invited to serve on the review panel that evaluated the work of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education. Based in Brussels, the Register was responsible for accrediting quality assurance agencies which evaluated universities in European countries. She also participated in Unesco initiatives on quality assurance in particular and on higher education in general.

The CHE and HEQC undoubtedly benefitted from Lis's dedicated involvement in several key functions and projects. At the same time, she was also accumulating vast knowledge on higher education and honing an impressive set of skills and strengths that would propel her career to new heights. Her stellar analytical and strategic work at the three universities where she worked in senior positions in her later years had its foundations in her earlier roles in the CHE where she engaged the new policy frameworks and implementation challenges of higher education from a national perspective. At the same time, she had an overview of how the individual institutions of higher education were giving effect to new national policy imperatives in their core functions and transformative projects.

The HEQC's first round of audits on teaching and learning generated an enormous amount of information on academic planning, budgeting, and oversight of these two core functions, most of which were closely analysed by Lis. At a very early stage she was able to acquire a great deal of systemic and institutional knowledge, not only through her intense engagement with the teaching and learning challenges that emerged from the HEQC audits but also through the HEQC's national reviews in targeted areas such as the MBA and selected teacher-education qualifications. All of this provided the basis for the recognition of her expertise on academic

planning for the enhancement of teaching and learning which was so central to the senior leadership and management roles she assumed in higher education after she left the CHE in 2011.

Lis served as acting CEO of the CHE, 2007–2008. She left the CHE to join the University of the Free State (UFS) in 2011 where she eventually became Vice-Rector: Academic (2014–2018). She applied for the post of Vice-Chancellor at the UFS but despite having all the necessary intellectual and strategic knowledge, skills and policy acumen, her application was unsuccessful. It was not the only time that her radical progressiveness, her consistent pursuit of public-good objectives and her willingness and courage to call out mediocrity and to confront neoliberal compromises as well as shallow and opportunistic narratives of transformation made her appear threatening or not an appropriate fit. It is interesting how, following her death, some individuals in higher education have praised the very values that caused her to be disliked, barely tolerated or only rhetorically supported in her work. Lis may have been perceived as threatening by those who confused their positions in the formal hierarchies of academic power with the actual possession of corresponding levels of intellectual authority. Despite these obstacles, she had the capacity to inspire many of her younger colleagues, not only through her willingness to share her knowledge and capabilities but because of her consistent framing of all university work within larger social and political frameworks. Her starting premise was that all members of a team had or should have ideas and perspectives to contribute and that they should be willing to defend these ideas and insert them where appropriate into the work at hand. A consistent mark of her approach was an Arendtian insistence on continual analytical vigilance regardless of the sacred cows invoked or the opportunisms at play. One can only hope that some of these colleagues in the different academic institutions where she worked will continue to draw on the key values and approaches that characterised her work, irrespective of how small, ‘technical’ or ‘merely administrative’ the task appears to be. Lis’s approach to her work should be considered as eminently teachable. Whatever she

took on was always normatively framed, theoretically reflected on, strategically apposite and delivered with operational efficiency.

In her later years, Lis desperately wanted to spend more time writing. She had been planning for a long time to write a book on Hannah Arendt with whose work she had had a lifelong intellectual and political fascination. In different phases of her career, Lis invoked and drew on different aspects of Arendt's work to locate her work intellectually and politically. For instance, because of the large systemic-change focus of the work of the CHE, Lis, during her tenure there, already reflected then on the impact that globalisation and neoliberalism would have on higher education and the challenges these trends would pose to the possibilities of constructing transformative systems and pedagogies. In 2012 she published an article titled 'Understanding and action: Thinking with Arendt about democratic education' in which she argued for a 'political pedagogy' that would teach citizenship as a social goal beyond the individualising effects of neoliberal precepts. The contours of her analysis also provide a glimpse into what was to become her signature *modus operandi*. Arendt's distinctions and connections between understanding, knowledge, judgement and political action sketched out an approach that would become characteristic of Lis's way of thinking through her own life and work in higher education. In unpacking Arendt's notion of understanding and its implications for 'an education for democracy', Lis points to Arendt's distinction between knowledge and understanding and the specific value of understanding as 'the capacity to provide meaning to knowledge' (Lange 2012: 5). Instructive for what it reveals about Lis's way of engaging with the world, she cites Arendt's definition of understanding from the essay 'Understanding and politics' as a 'specifically human way of being alive' (Lange 2012: 5). She writes:

Thus, understanding is not simply an intellectual operation, but a complex intellectual and moral process that results in judgement. Understanding and its consequence, judgement, are at the origin of political action (Lange 2012: 5).

All of us for whom Lis was a valuable colleague and beloved friend will recognise this powerful Arendtian scaffolding in her restless search for an ethical life and her persistent pursuit of deep understandings and transformative interventions in her lifeworld.

Sadly, Lis never got the opportunity to engage more substantially with Arendt's writings. That said, she published many journal articles and book chapters in which she can be seen grappling in Arendtian style with the theoretical, ethical and political assumptions underpinning contemporary developments and trends in higher education. Her thought and work were always framed by larger questions about the role of the university in changing forms of capitalism, the limits of radical university transformations within a capitalist system dominated by a Western model of higher education, and the synergies between anti-capitalist and anti-colonial/decolonial struggles. Every task she performed in her different roles in higher education was deeply thought through, enriched by her wide reading of philosophy, sociology and politics, and informed by contemporary studies in higher education. Everything she did was underpinned by her belief that a more just society and a more equitable and diverse epistemic order was possible and that universities had to be pushed hard to engage with and contribute to the realisation of those ideals.

CHAPTER 4

KNOWLEDGE FOR, NOT OF: INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE UNFINISHED WORK OF TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Lis Lange, whose intellectual courage, philosophical rigour, and unflinching commitment to transformation in South African higher education shaped a generation of scholars and practitioners. The questions Lis posed continue to challenge us; her legacy demands that we find the courage to answer them.

‘Las palabras no hacen el amor / hacen la ausencia/’

[‘Words do not make love / they make absence/’]¹

— Alejandra Pizarnik

1 From the poem by Alejandra Pizarnik, ‘En esta noche, en este mundo’ in the collection, *Textos de sombra y últimos poemas* (1971–1972).

A history of hurt: higher education in South Africa

There can be few images that speak to the pain of education under apartheid as starkly as Sam Nzima's photograph of a mortally wounded twelve-year-old Zolile Hector Pieterse, a learner who was shot by police on 16 June 1976 when Black schoolchildren were protesting the proposed change to Afrikaans as medium of instruction. The South African education system's alienation of students from their mother tongues and cultures would echo again thirty-seven years later in the 2015 #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests in higher education. South Africa was and continues to be 'a battlefield, in which the struggle to build voice, agency and community continues' (Zinn & Rogers 2012: 76). Having known Lis Lange for many years, the analytical precision and passion with which she approached issues in higher education continue to sustain our practice. It is her theoretical and conceptual framework on which this tribute is premised.

No serious discussion on education in South Africa can omit mention of the stains of the 'apartheid legacy of defining and dividing institution types by race or jurisdiction' (Menon & Castrillón 2022: 51). The absurdities of apartheid meant that the five separate legislative and geographic entities or provinces contained thirty-six higher education institutions (HEIs) controlled by eight distinct authorities. Fiercely enforced racial divisions and language and cultural differences 'skewed the profiles of the institutions in each category' (Bunting 2006: 35). The four 'races' identified by the National Party, African, 'coloured', Indian and white were restricted to certain institutions. A total of nineteen institutions were reserved exclusively for whites, two for Africans, seven for 'coloureds' and two for Indians. The remaining six were for Africans in the so-called 'homelands' (Bunting 2006: 36). In 1994, the democratic state looked to higher education as one mechanism for the change so badly needed to democratise society and the economy. The implicit, although questionable, assumption was that by providing equal education to all, the foundation for the profound change that was needed would be laid.

As early as 2014, Lis made the conceptual distinction between knowledge *for* transformation and knowledge *of* transformation (Lange 2014). Knowledge *for* transformation is contextually grounded and institutionally specific. It is always generated in and from a particular site of change. Knowledge *of* transformation, on the other hand, is the reflective, evaluative knowledge we produce about whether the practices implemented are achieving what we claim they are (Lange 2014: 5). In addition to being different orders of knowledge, each articulates a different narrative form of institutional and sectoral accountability. Drawing on this distinction, it becomes clear that external quality assurance mechanisms are trapped in an inescapable compliance logic. Lis's framework demands that we also ask what kind of knowledge the sector's own self-evaluation produces. The answer, as reported twenty years after the transition to democracy, was telling. According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE), there were then roughly one million students in public HEIs—a significant increase from the half a million students in 1994—in addition to which there were approximately 90,000 students at private institutions (CHE 2016: 6). One important aspect of change in the sector was in student demographics, despite persistently skewed participation rates. The higher education sector, the CHE asserted, was by then 'more unified in terms of governance arrangements, quality assurance processes, qualification types, funding arrangements and enrolment planning processes' (CHE 2016: 6). The student uprising of 2015, reminiscent in many ways of the 1976 Soweto protests, made it clear that apparent changes to the system had been inadequate to address the deep-seated iniquities and inequalities inherent in the system. In a response to the CHE's evaluation twenty years into democracy, Lis (Lange 2017: 32) describes the student protests as indicative of the dissonance between the students and 'universities stuck in a colonial frame both intellectually and aesthetically'. Although universities had Black students on campus and even though these students often constituted a majority, they were vocal in their need to be recognised as Black and called for the decolonisation of higher education. In 2020, during the

Covid-19 lockdowns, the persistent realities of what it means to be a Black student were again brought into focus. As Menon and Motala (2022: 49) show, emergency remote teaching made desperately clear how poor students remained disproportionately negatively affected by socio-economic circumstances. The continued economic stratification of South African society along racial lines still means that ‘poor’ by and large means ‘Black’.

In her poem used as epigraph to this chapter, Pizarnik states that language does not produce love. By the same token, policy about transformation does not necessarily lead to transformation. On the contrary, it may exacerbate the absence of transformation; or the absence of transformation may be presented in the very language of transformation. More than thirty years after the transition to democracy and twenty-nine years after the promulgation of Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 it is time for a substantial interrogation of the *manner* in which quality assurance (QA) has and continues to be enacted across the sector.

Because Lis was a historian, she was able to interrogate power structures according to the different ways in which they surface over time while also critically interpreting policy documents as historical documents, as manifestations that resist presentism. Policy is never ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’. This historical sensibility and analytical disposition stand in stark contrast to QA discourse. She named the gap between what transformation had been designed to achieve and what three decades of systems building and enactment had actually produced.

Transformation: a diagnosis

Lis’s diagnosis of transformation (or the lack thereof) in South African higher education is as pertinent today as it was ten years ago: ‘Since the early days of the democratic transition in South Africa, “transformation” as a concept has lost its intellectual, political and moral content through becoming institutionalised’ (Lange 2014: 1).

This was no simple criticism of policy but rather a philosophical interrogation of an entire QA system's fitness for purpose. The analysis that follows views QA as one of the primary mechanisms through which this institutionalisation was accomplished and, with Lis, asks whether the sector retains the capacity to name what is wrong and to imagine how it could be different.

The 'National Plan for Higher Education' (Department of Education 2001: 36) asserts:

In fact, quality is central to redress and equity. It is unacceptable for graduates in general and those from disadvantaged communities in particular, to be shortchanged in terms of the quality of programme provision as it would not only impact on their ability to improve their own life chances, but it would also adversely impact on the broader agenda for social and economic development.

From the outset, quality was seen as equal to funding and planning, and as central to advancing transformation in South Africa. As the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) stated in its own self-evaluation seven years later, 'issues of quality were thus linked with broader socio-political reform objectives within higher education and beyond' (CHE 2008b: 5). What went unacknowledged was the fact that regulatory bodies were not, in institutional terms, operating *tabula rasa* as far as internal quality assurance (IQA) was concerned. On the contrary, part of what regulatory processes did was to rename or reframe existing activities, structures and processes as part of IQA processes that external quality assurance (EQA) and regulatory bodies were now mandated to oversee. Implicit in the practices at HEIs was a plethora of structures, systems and policies for ensuring quality. While these were not necessarily labelled as QA systems or policies, they existed in different forms and detail. For example, processes for external examination have been a time-honoured tradition at universities through which external validation of the quality of

students' work is obtained and standardised. Lange and Kriel's 2017 case study of documents at the University of the Free State (UFS) surfaced an assemblage of policies, processes and systems for the governance and management of academic matters. This pointed to the existence of a viable IQA system prior to the introduction of an external audit process. EQA did not precipitate QA in institutions that, historically, had no similar mechanisms in place but rather introduced a new criterion-referenced vocabulary for existing practices. The absence of systematic research comparing QA practices before and after their formal incorporation into EQA requirements reflects exactly the kind of deficit in knowledge of transformation that Lis identified. QA systems across the sector have grown in complexity without any concomitant and evaluative knowledge of and about that growth or its consequences.

The formation of the CHE dovetailed with continental and global trends towards the establishment of EQA processes in higher education. While institutional audits and programme reviews would come to form a significant part of the CHE's core work, in its initial phase (1994–2000) it was tasked with setting targets for indicators such as growth, participation, equity and redress (CHE 2000). These responsibilities were not without their challenges. As Soudien (2007) argues, transforming and redressing historically neglected facets of the higher education system needed to be balanced with preserving the excellence of what were often historically white, privileged institutions without allowing these to remain racially exclusive enclaves. Establishing the HEQC as a national body with operational responsibility for QA rather than devolving this responsibility to individual institutions was indicative of the state's commitment to creating a 'single, co-ordinated system' (DOE 1997a).

Menon and Castrillón (2019a; 2019b) suggest that national policy governing higher education can be divided into three loose regimes that more or less correspond with the periods reflected below. In the period between 1994 and the release of the 'National Plan for Higher Education' in 2001 the focus was on compliance with the provisions

of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which was established in 1996 with the mandate to determine and administer the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF identifies levels of learning achievement and their relation to established qualification standards, enabling standardised and nationally recognised pathways for further education and training. Compliance with the NQF was embedded within a commitment to transformation, equity and redress by expanding access to higher education and revitalising the structure and regulation of the sector (Menon & Castrillón 2019a). Importantly, the authors argue that

[t]he preoccupation of 1990s policy on widening access and narrowing the rift between apartheid Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) created further synergies in the post-school education and training landscape which served further to heighten government's focus on the link between the economy and skills development (subsumed into HE) (Menon & Castrillón 2019b: 5).

This signals the initial creep of an instrumentalist and technicist notion of higher education that would eventually throw up some of the sector's most important contestations around the role and function of higher education within national planning. Lis's analytical approach interrogated whether the infrastructure of transformation was akin to a simulation.

Soudien (2007) and Lange and Kriel (2017) note that, alongside planning and a complex funding model that brought public universities in line with the standards set by the national department, QA became a core steering mechanism to compel the system to deliver on both its technical and socio-political mandates. The period between 1994 and 2000 was essential for setting up the system (Badat 2004) and for establishing a context for cooperative governance to take root between historically disparate and often antagonistic members of the higher education landscape (Hall et al. 2002).

From 2001, government began a process of restructuring higher education through mergers and the incorporation and redesignation of HEIs (Lange & Kriel 2017). The resulting institutions were either universities of technology, comprehensive universities, or traditional academic universities. The CHE's 'Size & Shape' report articulated the body's view of quality in higher education:

Quality and standards are historically specific and must be related to the objectives of higher education institutions and to educational and broader social purposes ... Quality and excellence are not in competition with equity and redress (CHE 2000).

Soudien's (2007) assertion was that pure managerialism in QA was not an option for the post-1994 government, which needed to counterbalance the apartheid landscape with the transformation of universities, using the audit and review processes of the HEQC to deliver on the latter mandate. The HEQC was tasked with overseeing programme accreditation, national reviews of specific programmes, institutional audits, and quality promotion and capacity development (CHE 2014).

By 2004, a national process of institutional auditing had begun which included the then twenty-three public universities and eleven private institutions (CHE 2014). The HEQC recognised the importance of 'an analytical and self-reflective approach to quality assurance based on continuous self-assessment' (CHE 2001: 16). National reviews were underway and the first programme to undergo this process in 2003–2004 was the Master of Business Administration (MBA), which resulted in the HEQC withdrawing accreditation from at least 40% of the programmes evaluated (Bhengu et al. 2006). This period was characterised by a shift from equity, redress and transformation to efficiency, effectiveness and affordability (Bhengu et al. 2006).

For those of us who knew Lis well it was unsurprising that she argued that academics needed to become 'critical agents'. This

required active defiance of the implicit institutional curriculum. The failures of the curriculum, for example at UCT, were highlighted in the ‘Mamdani furore’ twenty years earlier. Once again, she insisted that the problem lay not in what was taught but in whose knowledge was recognised as valid and to whom. Extending this argument, Lis called for the institutional ideals of excellence to embrace what Mbembe had termed ‘pedagogies of presence’, which require epistemic openness. What Lis’s 2014 framework (developed further in 2018) demonstrated was that the incremental standardisation that had been unleashed by EQA overrode the contextually grounded and institutionally specific knowledge needed for real transformation to occur.

Menon and Castrillón (2019a) argue that by 2010 the curriculum transformation foregrounded as part of the post-1994 reform period had been collapsed into an imperative for HEIs to deliver economically viable skills and degrees with clear professional and vocational pathways (Menon & Castrillón 2019a) devised to salve South Africa’s economic woes. The pull towards securing measurable indicators of transformation such as graduate and staff demographics intersected with pressures for academic freedom that limited the QA function of the CHE and HEQC to *regulation*. As Menon and Castrillón (2019a: 35) argue, ‘It is not clear therefore whether the task of the EQA agency is in fact to focus on curriculum transformation, or whether this task is being conflated and consequently subordinated to other accreditation activities’.

It is useful to consider the contemporary period as defined by a tripartite matrix of tensions that animate the current higher education landscape and inform the scope of QA processes: (a) the drive for transformation understood as ‘decolonisation’ that underpinned the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements; (b) the growing demand for universities to respond to the challenges and opportunities inherent in the impending fourth industrial revolution / 21st century skills; and (c) the pressures emanating from the post-1994 trajectory towards instrumental and technicist approaches to regulating, managing and delivering higher education. The net result of all this

is the direct insertion of bodies external to the institution into the day-to-day management of programmes and academic activities. As a result, the curriculum, the intellectual core of the academic project, becomes constrained by external requirements, obviating the academics' disciplinary and contextual judgement, which Lis (2017: 46) considered essential to transformation and which informed her call for academics to become 'critical agents'.

As recently as 2024, she reiterated that being 'incapable of saying "no" because we are scared of the consequences that it may have for funding, shows just how trapped we are in a system we are not capable of critiquing and do not know how to get out of' (USAf 2024). She goes on to point out how for thirty years universities have generated policy and made changes 'without really engaging the limits and obstacles to our own conceptualisation and practices of transformation, or, for that matter, the contradictions between our transformation ideas and the instruments we use to implement them' (USAf 2024).

Seeking to entrench QA in IQA systems through two cycles of audits, the CHE's stated intention was to evaluate the HEIs' IQA systems. However, this was sublimated into the management of higher education arrangements. It is possible that these actions are not viewed as intrusive by the regulatory bodies but are rather seen as constructive or developmental. To illustrate, during the CHE's national review of the MBA it became clear that structures, processes, and policies to achieve the aims of the review were already in place and were actively and credibly assuring the quality of most of the offerings reviewed.

What the review also revealed was that the CHE processes operated on a deficit model, with preconceived notions of what systems should be in place, what they should look like, and what procedures and processes/policies should govern all aspects of the MBA programme. A deficit model departs from an assumption of inadequacy or lack. The implicit assertion is that without the external QA body's standards, universities will not be successful. As Lange and Singh (2010) argue, this systemic predisposition eclipsed existing contextual achievements, replacing sound assessment with the performance of compliance.

These preconceptions made the process of meeting the criteria and minimum standards incredibly difficult for institutions since, in the absence of clearly articulated and stated expectations by the CHE, these were mired in confusion. Lis, writing about these HEQC processes (Lange 2017: 46), argued that, while the analysis of the reviews could have triggered interrogations of curriculum and while ‘quality assurance in whichever incarnation (enhancement or improvement) can encourage institutions to pay attention to a particular issue, ... it is not an appropriate tool with which to approach curriculum transformation’. Methodological limitations coupled with the needs of curriculum transformation should ‘originate in the critical engagement of academics and students with their disciplinary fields and not as the imposition of a national agency’ (Lange 2017: 46).

In 2026, the impact on institutions’ practices in relation to curriculum review and transformation remain unresolved in the face of a ‘compliance-focused and bureaucratised accreditation system’ (Lange 2017: 46).

At present, there are twenty-six public universities in South Africa and around 132 private HEIs. Across the sector, both public and private institutions are at different stages of development and inhabit different spaces in terms of differentiation. Institutions vary in age, size, purpose and place. The current process of institutional audits, which will shortly begin in the private sector, was presented as the ‘ground zero’ from which the operationalisation of the QAF would springboard.

The CHE’s ‘Framework for Institutional Audits’ (2021b: 14) sets out the purpose of audits as follows:

A full audit of an institution determines whether or not, and to what extent, an institution’s IQA systems, policies and procedures ensure the effective provisioning of good quality higher education that enhances the likelihood of student success through quality learning and teaching, research opportunities and integrated community engagement.

The audit framework (CHE 2021b: 21) clearly states that differentiation in the sector will be accounted for. In so doing, the CHE will consider the following in its process: the uniqueness of different institutions and institutional types with their differentiated missions and niche areas; the unique context in which each institution is situated; and the different levels of institutional maturity as reflected in the effectiveness of their IQA systems.

There is no systematic evidence available on how HEIs experienced the 2021 round of audits. However, a brief parse of the CHE website reveals audit reports that are substantively similar to those released of the 2005 round, suggesting that they are not directed at enabling the CHE's own goal, which is to move HEIs from compliance to institutional responsibility and accountability. This phenomenon is not limited to South Africa. As Reichert (2008: 8) notes in response to outcomes in European QA, 'quality and funding agencies have to ensure the independence of the peers and beware of mainstreaming effects which may occur through peer review'.

What is currently happening at institutional level is that IQA faces an increasingly incoherent national quality-and-regulatory system. Where IQA is sound, the dissonance in the system is mostly manageable and the institution can resolve the dissonance, even if only temporarily, to satisfy a particular EQA process. In such cases, a compromise can be devised that meets the needs of both the institution and the national structure. It cannot be overstated that this is not a satisfactory quality outcome for either party.

In truth, IQA systems can achieve high levels of sophistication and still not meet the requisite technical or formal 'look' determined by regulators. Although well-intentioned, incoherent intrusions into the academic and governance autonomy of institutions by various bodies place a colossal and unnecessary burden on institutions with mature QA systems. Institutional systems that are working, whether codified as per the requirements or not, are often simply not respected or recognised as having value or, conversely, are forced to change to comply with the prescribed 'look and feel'.

As Lis asserted in 2017, despite the CHE's use of the language of transformation, it nonetheless remains limited in its ability to precipitate institutional change. There is an argument to be made that the gaps in the language of policy instruments, which must accord with the different EQA mandates, make it virtually impossible to induce the transformation envisaged at institutional level. The distance between the regulating bodies and the institutions themselves cannot be breached. Institutions must be able to exercise agency if institutional accountability is to mean anything.

Given that IQA has been shaped and incrementally developed at institutions over the last three decades and assuming that institutions are aware of the reputational and regulatory risks of poor quality, it is time to acknowledge that the degree of quality control currently in play in the sector is beginning to have an inhibiting effect on the ability of institutions to stay abreast and ahead of the developments in the broad contexts of flux in which we all operate.

In Lis's framework, the logical corollary is that a maturing higher-education system must progressively shift the locus of QA inward, not as a concession to institutional convenience, but as the only mechanism adequate for interpreting the complexity of what *quality in context* means. The argument is not hypothetical, as Lange and Kriel's 2017 case study of IQA at the UFS reveals. QA originating from inside the university remains responsive to the institution's specific contexts and history. The university's unique student profile and academic purpose will generate 'contextual knowledge' no external audit can discover. A 'pedagogy of presence' (UCT News 2018) should be the catalyst for change, not compliance or performance.

Lis's call to take seriously the distinction between the knowledge *for* and the knowledge *of* transformation is achievable in universities who assert their agency and define the parameters for change.

Social justice as political (academic) action

Three decades of QA later, the systemic faultline remains an epistemic

one, and the two forms of knowledge remain the preconditions for the kind of genuine transformation Lis (2014: 5) had argued for. Social justice, as articulated by Bell (1997: 4), is ‘democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change’ and cannot be advanced by an apparatus that produces neither form of knowledge. In what follows, we trace how the gap between the aspirations for social justice that were encoded in quality policy and the compliance machinery deployed to realise them has produced not transformation but its absence—dressed up, as Pizarnik might say, in transformation’s name.

One of the recognised challenges in fostering social justice through public institutions is the failure to bring about the shift in consciousness that is required for the vision implicit in public policy to be actioned. In the past, social justice in South Africa was variously framed through the principles of *batho pele* (people first) or ubuntu, signalling a notion of shared humanity and mutual dignity. The problem with these ‘people first’ views has always been that they required ‘the human’ to be abstracted from the country’s racist history in order to construct a mythical past and future without necessarily interrogating the violence of racial categorisations and hierarchies of social and cultural value that made those abstractions possible (Barolsky 2013; Musara et al. 2021), resulting in an ongoing historical layering (Matsuda 2017; Pogge 2004) of inequalities alongside redress mechanisms that may ironically intensify rather than resolve the experiences of exclusion, impoverishment or misrecognition.

In the context of higher education, Singh (2011: 490) presents the argument that very often QA arrangements are instruments of the ‘evaluative state’ with its focus on measurable outputs that often contradict the broader transformation and social justice agendas of countries:

One of [the contradictions] ... related to the ideological and operational challenges of using a ‘hybrid’ policy model which sought to graft together approaches to quality and accountability from two different genealogies—the one from

the global template informed by new public management understandings of accountability and cost effectiveness and the other from the local setting which was driven by strong equity and transformation imperatives. The challenge was to develop a workable fit between the neo-liberal lineages and functions of quality assurance, and a local emancipatory agenda which stressed social justice and social transformation.

This tension between accountability and transformation is not unique to South Africa. In Harvey and Green's (1993) foundational taxonomy of qualities that constitute the general notion of 'quality'—quality as exceptional, as consistent, as fitness for purpose, as value for money, and as transformative—transformation is considered the most ambitious and contested precisely because it demands of the QA process to engage questions of power, access, and knowledge that standard audit methodologies are not designed to address. Stensaker (2003) has similarly argued that, over time, EQA systems internationally tend to drift toward accountability functions at the expense of the improvement and enhancement functions that justified their establishment. What distinguishes the South African case is that this drift has been accelerated by the particular urgency of the post-apartheid transformation mandate: QA was expected to do the work of transformation with compliance instruments, which produced the contradictions Lis spent her career identifying.

Singh's argument was published at the time of the development of the QA system in South Africa, which at that stage precluded a discussion on the impact these systems would have on the sector. From a sectoral perspective and after at least twenty-four years of active QA, social justice imperatives have become subsumed by a web of compliance-bound systems. Current QA mechanisms and processes are unable to uncover the rich contextual realities of how institutions achieve particular indicators or fail to. For example, institutions where students are heavily reliant on funding and bursaries are often expected to do more with fewer resources. The impact of these realities on the

teaching and learning projects broadly is often neither recognised nor understood. There are clear cases where these circumstances are absent from reports and the consequences of national processes, resulting in the acontextual public shaming or celebration of institutions. In South Africa, the uneven playing field has not miraculously disappeared, with the result that the trials and tribulations institutions face and the significant constraints they operate within have become invisible because formal compliance is what is required. Conversely, other institutions are lauded and celebrated because ostensibly much transformation has occurred although internally this may be far from the truth.

In Lis's framework, the distinction between knowledge *for* and knowledge *of* transformation provides us with a tool to measure the failure of QA quite precisely. If 'knowledge for transformation ... is the knowledge that needs to be produced to make change possible, and knowledge of transformation ... is the knowledge we generate about transformation itself' (Lange 2014: 5), it is clear that current QA mechanisms produce neither. Knowledge *for* transformation requires understanding institutions in their particularity: their resource constraints, their student demographics and their local and historical contexts. For instance, institutions serving students who are heavily reliant on NSFAS funding face constraints that the standardised audit template simply cannot register. The impact of these realities on teaching and learning runs the risk of being neither recognised nor understood. Knowledge *of* transformation, by contrast, requires systematic reflexivity and an honest examination of whether QA practices are achieving their stated purposes. But this is not happening. Processes are generally not evaluated in terms of their actual effects before additional processes and advancements are introduced. Simply put, the machinery accumulates without generating knowledge of what it does. Without both forms of knowledge, quality assurance operates blind, producing compliance documentation while transformation remains elusive.

Lange and Singh's 2010 analysis of equity in the HEQC's QA framework documented this failure in its early stages: even where

equity was explicitly incorporated into QA criteria, the methodological constraints of audit practices meant that institutions could demonstrate compliance with equity indicators while the substantive educational experiences of disadvantaged students remained unchanged. The gap between the indicator and the reality it claimed to measure was from the beginning a structural feature of the system's architecture and not a problem that better implementation would resolve.

Not a silver bullet: higher education and QA in post-apartheid South Africa

When the legislation that would govern higher education in democratic South Africa was drawn up, it was with full awareness of the implications of section 29 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, which states:

Everyone has the right-

- (a) to a basic education, including adult basic education; and
- (b) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.

Read in conjunction with the equality clause (s 9 (3)), section 29 means that unfair discrimination in higher education on any of the grounds that had characterised apartheid was explicitly forbidden. Legislation and policy go hand in hand, and the new democratic government addressed the disgraceful state of education with vigour. In its 1995 'White Paper on Education and Training', the Department of Education (DOE) emphasised its aim in the subtitle 'Education and Training in a Democratic South Africa: First Steps to Develop a New System'. As part of the development of the new system of non-racial education, the Higher Education Act established the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). By 1999, the CHE was in the early stages of establishing its part of the most necessary new system as envisaged by the politicians in the White

Paper. Quality education in South Africa was to become the driver for the achievement of equity and equality, not only in higher education but also in the economy and the body politic. The laudable political campaign and worthy intentions of the regulators could not have anticipated the gap that would soon appear between what regulators intended and the responses from various role-players in the sector. The creation of different directorates in the CHE, including those with a focus on national review and standard setting, the national audits of HEIs from 2005 and the development of standards for qualifications in addition to a raft of policies on language, internationalisation and the implementation of the recognition of prior learning alongside substantial changes to the funding model, placed an ever-increasing and complex burden on institutions.

While it is not within the scope of this tribute to determine whether these regulatory and quality assurance bodies, policies, frameworks and other documents were or are fit for purpose, it is nonetheless possible to assert boldly that no institution has been unaffected, whether positively or negatively, by these developments. It is pertinent to point out that in laying the foundation for the democratic order in South Africa, it was necessary to emphasise the contrast between what had been in the past and what was needed for the future. That said, precisely because of the exclusionary and limiting race-based apartheid system, the principles of the new democracy and the transformatory potential of higher education have acquired the status of something almost ‘sacred’—analogous to the notion of the ‘rainbow nation’. And just as the notion (or myth) of the ‘rainbow nation’ has been incisively probed (eg. Gqola 2025; Mogomotsi 2023), so too should the transformatory potential of QA in higher education. As part of their responsibility towards this ‘sacred’ duty, EQA agencies have fallen into social meliorism, focusing so closely on a commitment to what *should be* that it has become increasingly difficult to consider what *is* (McKinney & Westbury 1973) while risking an approach in which token compliance is rewarded. In addition to that, higher education

QA processes tend to homogenise institutions and run the risk of implicitly intending to improve ‘the other’ (Chankseliani 2022: 458).

Programme accreditation processes, for example, revealed insights into what HEIs were doing or not doing, and why. In their turn and in response to these processes, HEIs appointed staff with the specific purpose of ensuring compliance or with the responsibility to steer or ‘drive’ quality into, or in, the grooves predetermined by the EQA body, the CHE. Thirty years later, it is fair to say that some of the conversations and processes that took place and were implemented failed to delve deeply into the more substantive issues, focusing instead on the achievement of formal equality (such as access measured numerically rather than substantively) and on compliance with frameworks, criteria, minimum standards, QA processes and policy prescriptions.

Contemporary concerns about the way in which QA processes have been implemented and about the implications of past decisions and present practices for the future remain. Decontextualised performance indicators continue to obscure rather than reveal the real stories of institutions. In effect, the decontextualised uniformity of EQA functions (even when ostensibly acknowledging ‘differentiation’) can themselves be said to constitute a ‘hidden curriculum’ (or at least, an unintended covert strategy) that promotes institutional *compliance* (which is antithetical to the essence of IQA) while confounding the *agency*, both *of* the institution as well as *in* the institution (among academics and management). Regulatory bodies, frameworks, policies and processes are set up to define parameters for the sector as a whole and not to operate from a granular, reality-based and holistic view of how successful institutions actually do work. Here, it is important to note that the QAF’s recognition of differentiation allows for the understanding that different institutions in different contexts may achieve the same goal using different mechanisms.

Any discussion of QA processes would be incomplete without mentioning the cognitive and administrative load imposed on academic

staff and managers who must simultaneously interpret, translate and respond to the often-contradictory requirements of multiple regulatory bodies, a burden that, as Lange (2017: 32) observes, diverts institutional attention away from substantive educational engagement towards the production of compliance documentation. In response to this, the QAF has committed to simplification ‘to address the administrative burden currently faced by institutions’ (CHE 2021a: 34), which means that EQA processes will be

streamlined to eliminate and reduce the duplication of actions and information required from HEIs and reduce the burden of reporting by institutions with well-established IQA systems. Wherever possible, EQA requirements and processes will be made more understandable and manageable without compromising their focus or pointedness, robustness and effectiveness. As part of this process, the streamlining of the information requirements for HEIs and statutory professional bodies will be considered. The integrated institutional QA-dashboards will assist in this process of simplification by building up a track record of the HEQC decisions for an institution (CHE 2021a: 34).

The 2021 QAF represents a genuine, if incomplete, attempt to address the contradictions. Its commitment to differentiation, its acknowledgement of institutional maturity as a variable, and its stated aspiration to shift from compliance to responsibility and accountability all reflect the influence of precisely the critique Lis and others had developed over a decade. Lis herself recognised this aspiration, and it would be reductive to dismiss the QAF as merely a repackaging of the existing compliance regime. The question this tribute poses, however, is whether aspiration is sufficient. As Lange (2017: 32) observed of an earlier moment of policy reform, the sector’s evaluations of itself tend to be ‘at the same time evaluative and prospective’ but fall short of the radical self-critique that genuine

change requires. The same risk attends the QAF: its instruments of evaluation, which are still organised around audit, accreditation, and external review, remain the compliance tools of the previous system. Whether the aspiration to move from compliance to responsibility and accountability (CHE 2021a: 14) can be realised through instruments designed for a compliance logic, is the central unresolved question the sector now faces. Without generating knowledge of transformation—systematic evaluation of whether the new framework is producing different outcomes—the QAF risks becoming another iteration of what Baudrillard (1994) calls the simulacrum: a representation of reform that substitutes for its substance.

The nuanced approach suggested above will be widely accepted if implementation is clear and it fully recognises institutional autonomy and the diversity of contexts. As Lis (Lange 2017: 32) observes,

the results of the QA body's reflections on the achievements and failures of the higher education system ... was at the same time evaluative and prospective, but it did not provide radical critiques of the shortcomings of existing policies or point out gaps in policy development or implementation.

Internationally, there is adequate evidence of EQA agencies re-defining their QA frameworks, requiring sectoral fit-for-purpose responses (Unesco 2024). HEIs legitimately seek differentiation and, provided that this is grounded in equity and excellence, can be held accountable. But since HEIs are configured with different functions and purposes, any viable IQA must account for internal and contextual variables.

Conclusion

The critique in this tribute goes beyond the limitations of an evaluative retrospection. At the USAf Higher Education Conference in 2024, Lis identified the underlying problem with surgical precision:

In the last three decades, universities developed policy and institutionalised change without really engaging the limits and obstacles to our own conceptualisation and practices of transformation, or, for that matter, the contradictions between our transformation ideas and the instruments we use to implement them.

While QA was imagined as the instrument of transformation, it has in practice become its simulacrum, a copy without an original, a representation that precedes and determines the reality it claims to represent (Baudrillard 1994: 1). This describes with uncomfortable accuracy what three decades of QA machinery has produced. Transformation has become a signifier detached from its signified, circulating endlessly through policy documents while the reality it once named has disappeared. Lis's conclusion at that conference of what this means was unsparing:

We thought we could use them productively, but we have to recognise that we haven't done particularly well in this regard. We have bureaucratised the system and, in a sense, institutionalised change in ways that are no longer transformative, but conserving the status quo (Lange 2024: n.p.).

The diagnosis is acute: it identifies not only a failure but a paralysis. Lis (2024: n.p.) named our collective entrapment with a typical directness that is worth repeating:

The idea that we can only exist in this context, and that we are incapable of saying 'no' because we are scared of the consequences that it may have for funding, shows just how trapped we are in a system we are not capable of critiquing and do not know how to get out of.

Power (1997) concurs, arguing that the institutional mechanisms of audit routines, coupled with deferential adherence to performance measures, result in the maintenance of credible systems in appearance while the system falls short of achieving its goals despite complying with its requirements. Lis's diagnosis goes deeper than Power's because she asks not only how compliance has come to substitute for accountability, but why institutions cannot even formulate the critique. The answer lies in her analysis of institutionalisation: when transformation loses its intellectual, political, and moral content, institutions lose the conceptual resources to imagine alternatives so that compliance is all that remains. Standardised criteria displace contextual judgement. Responsibility is replaced by documentation. The auditable displaces the innovative. Lis drew attention to this already in 2017, noting that the CHE's twenty-year review 'did not provide radical critiques of the shortcomings of existing policies or point out gaps in policy development or implementation' (Lange 2017: 32). She was calling for precisely that which the institutionalisation of transformation had foreclosed, namely the capacity to think critically about our own practices, to name what is not working, and to imagine otherwise: 'the attention of institutions would in most cases be on compliance with the minimum standards and not critical engagement with the curriculum. This was beyond the scope and the purpose of quality assurance' (Lange 2017: 45–46). The compliance reflex, then, is not a pathology of institutions but rather the logical, inevitable response to how QA has been structured.

Drawing on Arendt (1998[1958]), Lis argued for an education oriented to new beginnings rather than the reproduction of existing structures—an education that preserved the capacity to act differently, to refuse the given, and to imagine what does not yet exist (Lange 2012). She consistently questioned whether transformation had become the empty signifier of a reality that had become conspicuous in its absence. Real, continuous transformation demands courage, a courage Lis modelled throughout her career, consistently asserting

that genuine transformation must organically and naturally arise from real, reflective contextual knowledge, obtained by posing and responding to the difficult questions that compliance has allowed us to evade. She would urge us to have the courage to restore its meaning.

CHAPTER 5

ADMINISTRATORS AS INTELLECTUALS? THE ACADEMIC INTERIORITY OF MARIA LIS LANGE AND HER WORK IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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‘Because this is an intellectual, moral and political battle
inside myself.’

— Lis Lange

Introduction

Lis Lange occupied a somewhat unique role in South African higher education. She was on the one hand an extraordinarily effective and efficient administrator of the academic estate. On the other hand, she built into her administrative work a *critical* sense of education, development and what in academic conversations she and her colleagues would refer to as ‘the academic project’.

Is it possible to live in both these two worlds—as administrator and intellectual—given what many would perceive as two vocations

characterised by very different logics, politics and purposes? In our tribute to Lis, we wish to grapple with this important question by drawing on her many public writings, a long and productive professional relationship and many collective deliberations on what universities are for. But first, we would like to clarify a number of key concepts and make several distinctions in relation to the administrator-intellectual conundrum under discussion.

In the history of higher education in South Africa there have certainly been several outstanding senior administrators, people who carried a considerable load of the managerial and operational tasks of a university's academic work and who were also excellent scholars in their specific fields of expertise. For instance, Wieland Gevers at the University of Cape Town (UCT), deputy vice-chancellor and A-rated medical biochemist, and Robin Crewe at the University of Pretoria (UP), vice-principal and B-rated entomologist. This is not the group of individuals we have in mind when we speak of the *administrator-intellectual*, as in Lis's case. Also not included in this rare category are those vice-chancellors who were also eminent public intellectuals, such as Barney Pitso at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Adam Habib at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), or Mamphela Ramphele at UCT. Vice-chancellors seldom assume significant operational roles such as academic managers because in a well-functioning university their focus tends to be on the broader task of academic leadership, though with important oversight over administrative and managerial operations such as finance, human resources, information technologies, infrastructure and the like.

When we think of the senior academic administrator of a university, we therefore refer to individuals whose primary role it is to ensure that the critical and high-level functions of university management and operations proceed effectively (goal-reaching) and efficiently (resource-sensible) in order for the academic ambitions of a university to be realised. There certainly exists a productive literature in which this persona is variously referenced as *pracademic*, *scholar-administrator*,

academic manager, and ‘third-space professional’. When we think of the ‘intellectual’, on the other hand, we refer to those in university leadership who are well-read scholars in and beyond their disciplines *and* who have an active consciousness about the broader purposes of the university. The intellectual, in this context, is someone who often appears on public platforms in and outside academia to take or represent a position on social and academic concerns such as the global ranking of universities, the autonomy of the university in relation to the state, the pressures of performativity in the neoliberal university, the political economy of university funding and many other related issues. In other words, the intellectual is typically a public figure, one who can work within but also rise above the research preoccupations of their specific disciplines to speak to issues of pressing public concern. For example, the intellectual sees connections between the minutiae of everyday university operations, such as quality assurance, and the global forces that drive measurement behaviour everywhere, such as the rise of the evaluative state. Here, the work of Guy Neave is a case in point.

Lis was the consummate administrator-intellectual, a rare species in a flooded ecosystem of managerial operators with little appreciation of the intellectual world, or of free-floating intellectuals who deem the operations of a university with disdain, having scant regard for the mechanics that define managerialism and enable the neoliberal capture of institutions. This raises this question: can people who fix or maintain things also think deeply about those things in order to radically change them beyond the site of immediate application?

Thinking and doing: reflections on five cases of the administrator-intellectual at work

To answer that crucial question, we will discuss five illustrative cases drawn from Lis’s extensive writings (the intellectual *thinking*) in which she reflects on her actions (the administrator *doing* things in practice).

1. *The #MustFall moment and the student protest movement*

It would come as no surprise to those who knew her that Lis was not only an administrator and intellectual but also an activist. What she wrote about, she fought for. This was particularly evident during the historic protests of the mid-2010s when students called for the decolonisation of universities and the end of exclusionary student fees. Lis was caught in the productive tension of co-managing the University of the Free State (UFS) under pressure while calling for a deeper understanding of the Fallist moment/movement. I (Jansen) deeply appreciated Lis's collegiality and comradeship during those difficult times when she managed to keep the university operationally functional while at the same time keeping the senior management team politically alert to the meaning of that historic moment. In that difficult moment, it would have been easy to simply act as a 'manager' determined to 'normalise' the situation.

For Lis, #MustFall was an intellectual project in itself, and a series of publications followed. In the chapter she contributed to *University on the Border: Crisis of Authority* (Lange et al. 2021), Lis argues that the moment/movement led to a process of 'de-authorizing the university' and that the very idea of the university was up for grabs, not fixed and never foreclosed (the 'border' concept). Once again, Lis the intellectual points out that it is impossible to understand the crisis of and within the university in isolation from the contradictions inherent in the society within which it is located. Here, Lis is writing in a long tradition in education in which critical theorists such as Michael Apple have insisted on the need to understand education *relationally*; that is, as inescapably connected to social, economic and political structures.

While #MustFall de-authorised the university, the pandemic that followed would de-centre academics by situating them in the throes of change—something to which Lis responded by connecting themes that linked crises on the inside to crises outside higher education institutions.

2. *The COVID crisis: managing the teaching and learning platforms at UCT*

It is hard to imagine something more practical, immediate and urgent than pivoting from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching (ERT) with an existential threat such as a pandemic hanging over the lives of students, academics and workers at universities across the world. This was no time, one would think, for abstract debates about politics, inequality and social justice. Examinations were looming, staff were exhausted, students were stressed, and the single most urgent question on the minds of academic administrators was: what do we have to do to avoid *losing the academic year*? Quite apart from the university's revenue streams being disrupted, losing an entire academic year would have potentially catastrophic consequences for students who would not graduate on time, which in turn, would have severe implications for employment and the economic security of their families. In such times, everybody pivots towards the practical.

Lis and her team did that well, as her colleagues would testify. In many ways, UCT stood out as a leader during the pandemic largely because of Lis's leadership of a competent team and, of course, the starting resources of a historically privileged university. And yet, even as the pandemic raged and Lis did what academic administrators do—deal with the emergencies of teaching and learning under demanding conditions—she was already thinking deeply about what all of it meant for both the university and the society in which it is located.

In a paper she presented to a seminar of the UCT Historical Studies group on 7 April 2021 titled 'De-centering the academic: preliminary reflections on academic identity and the role of the university in the 21st century', Lis commented on the pandemic and its social, pedagogical, ethical and political consequences. We are not aware of any other university administrator who could have delivered such a contemplation infused with a comfortable command of the social sciences literature and anchored in the messiness of making ERT work in times of profound uncertainty. In the paper, she states her

positionality upfront: ‘I write this paper from the position of senior university manager who has been responsible for leading the shift of all undergraduate programs at one research-intensive contact university to ERT.’ Even as she was managing the crisis, Lis was making connections to dilemmas that spawned the crisis and its aftermath: the rise of neoliberalism, the expansion of global capitalism, state interference, market-driven reforms and how all these impacted academic identity and academic freedom. She painted this context vividly in ways that allowed one to see why the pandemic had such destructive consequences on campuses and in the broader society. In a beautiful turn of phrase towards the end of the paper, she notes ‘how the world system works for the pandemic to have happened as it did.’

Lis was well aware of the fact that there was a connection between politics, authority and pedagogy within the shifts that were being made under ERT. Academics lost their ability to read a student audience, the spontaneity of classroom interactions was gone and there was a profound breakdown of community: ‘the community of students and scholars that constituted the oldest definition of the university is apparently broken because it does not exist in synchronous time-space.’

Having made the connection between power and pedagogy, Lis returned to the practical—the task of making things work as an administrator—with concrete suggestions that followed from her critical analysis. She urged her audience to develop appropriate pedagogies, to harness the power of online learning in ways that would challenge the status quo ethically and politically and to be conscious of ‘the traps of technology itself’. It was evident that for her there was no contradiction between the intellectual who cited literary sources and the manager who was navigating a profound change in academic practice.

3. The institutional curriculum and the problem of change

A third theme in Lis’s intellectual work concerns the ‘institutional curriculum’, which refers to the dominant ideas, knowledge and values

that underpin and uphold a university's sense of itself as reflected in its policies, plans and programming—a construct distinct from the disciplinary or academic curriculum. As the most senior administrator responsible for teaching and learning (including assessment and curriculum) at both the UFS (2011–2018) and UCT (2018–2022), Lis oversaw overall curriculum policy at these institutions. Although she was a historian and not a curriculum theorist, she could recognise the difference between the everyday curriculum that lecturers teach and the students engage with and the less visible institutional curriculum that in subtle but powerful ways defines what counts as acceptable knowledge at that institution in particular and in South African universities in general. In the time and space between her first two university appointments (the UFS and UCT), Lis penned one of her best conceptual contributions to higher education literature under the title, 'The institutional curriculum, pedagogy and the decolonisation of the South African university' (Lange 2019). There, she is at pains to stress the differences and commonalities between the two historically white institutions. What they have in common is the misrecognition of Black students socially, culturally, politically and epistemologically, something which was most evident in the institutional curriculum of both universities. This sense of being marginalised, not seen, and worse (she wisely does not borrow from the language of symbolic or epistemic violence), not being acknowledged, in part explains the ferocity of the decolonisation moment at those two institutions. It was a theme Lis would often return to in her writings: that historically, the South African government and its institutions of higher education never dealt with curriculum, either as an institutional matter or its expressions in and through disciplinary knowledges. 'Once again curriculum was off the table', she laments in one of her articles. It is in her historical pieces that Lis reveals her deftness as a scholar who was formally trained in History, pieces such as '20 years of higher education curriculum policy in South Africa', with its searing observation that 'the impact of the NQF was definitely felt in the outer form that the curriculum had to take' (Lange 2017: 36) or in her critical review of the

audit reports of universities where she proposes ‘a post-managerial knowledge-based governance’ (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016: 131).

Lis never took credit for the way she was able to steer radical change to the institutional curriculum at the UFS through groundbreaking historical shifts in the academic curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Perhaps the most important of those transformations was the transition from a dual language institution that gave pride of place and identity to Afrikaans to one in which students could share social and educational spaces through a common (though less than ideal), compromise language, English. This was not easy and as vice-chancellor at the time it was my singular privilege to work alongside Lis and to witness the completion of a project that led the way for other historically Afrikaans universities to eventually make the shift in institutional language policy as well. We will resist the temptation to compare Lis’s two university management positions at the UFS and UCT, except to say that working conditions at UCT hampered her ability to lead deep curriculum change at that institution. Her own words, from a campus history seminar, will have to suffice:

[I]n a sense it seems silly to be at a university like UCT [where, as] part of the management, one shies away from subjecting oneself and one’s own thinking to [...] the rigors of academic debate (UCT Historical Studies 2021).

4. The academic values of a university

In managing the tension between her administrative and intellectual tasks, the connective tissue that held together Lis’s dedication to change was her deep commitment to academic values. She often writes about academic freedom but also about democratic education, citizenship and transformation—a word, which according to her, had ‘lost its intellectual, political and moral content through becoming institutionalised’ (Lange 2014: 1). She is equally scathing

about the meanings of ‘academic freedom’, which, because of the instrumentalisation of the university on neoliberal terms, has led to ‘the depoliticisation of knowledge’. In her writing on academic values, often anchored in the rich conceptual work of Hannah Arendt (her first intellectual love) and Pierre Bourdieu, Lis presents four fundamental criticisms of the contemporary university:

1. Because of the way in which universities have come to operate, key concepts are disfigured into dry, measurable, managerial entities or indicators that no longer have any political weight or meaning (hence, the ‘depoliticisation of knowledge’).
2. Value-laden concepts become part of what she calls ‘bureaucratic knowledge’ that emaciates the academic project for purposes of control and to which the unfortunate academic response has been compliance: ‘transformation cannot be frozen in numbers’, she insisted in the Daantjie Oosthuizen Academic Freedom Lecture at Rhodes in 2016.
3. The top-down, authority-driven nature of such knowledge means that the active participation of campus citizens in shaping institutional knowledge is marginalised. In her thinking, democratic practices in a university should always aim at enabling campus citizens to both own and use institutional data for the purpose of bringing about change.
4. Academics, too, are often tied to liberal conceptions of key concepts such as academic freedom with the limited aim of resisting state interference. Such a negative notion of academic freedom is not enough, she argues, for it should include the freedom to act (Arendt), to resist the instrumentalisation of knowledge, and to show up as political actors in the public realm.

5. *Monitoring, measurement and meaning*

Lis first rose to national prominence during her leadership of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) over nearly a decade (2001–2010). After that, engaging with measurement and monitoring became an inescapable part of her academic identity. A formidable pairing, Lis and Mala Singh oversaw the implementation of the institutional quality audits (a measurement function) of the then twenty-six public universities through a process that combined internal and external evaluations of academic missions and functions.

When Lis moved to the UFS in 2011, her first position was as head of DIRAP, the university's Directorate of Institutional Research and Academic Planning, following which she became the vice-rector responsible for teaching and learning. It was as director of DIRAP that she co-produced with Lise Kriel a tome titled, 'Integrating internal quality assurance at a time of transformation: University of the Free State, South Africa.' To borrow from the psalmist, measurement (and not goodness and mercy, as a cynic might point out) followed her all the days of her life.

How did this critical intellectual make sense of a job that by definition invoked measurement, monitoring and the promise of 'evidence-based' data for decision making? In her publications, Lis often starts by placing these evaluative procedures in the context of the rise of the evaluative state. In other words, she always acknowledges the global character of a movement that imposes its technologies of measurement on all states, big and small, rich and poor. At no point in her intellectual journey did she move away for delinking institutions from this global movement. On the contrary, she consistently argued for and promoted a critical position that both acknowledges this global tendency and makes the case for adapting it to local environments or institutional imperatives. Along with several other writers on institutional research in the Global South, Lis warned of the consequences of failing to strike this balance, namely

the homogenising effects of globalisation and what that would mean for such an important university function. This is an important intellectual position to take, which, of course, makes sense if you are employed by a university where measurement and monitoring is part of your job; just as it makes sense that a critical intellectual in such a position would find ways of benefitting from what is useful in these metrics while warning others of its excesses.

But there was another aspect to Lis's leadership role in the measurement industry and that was to help South African universities, particularly the ones she worked at, to make sense of what was happening to higher education, both nationally and globally. One way in which she did this was to point out the inevitable yet productive tensions inherent in measurement and monitoring functions. On the one hand, there is the need for accountability—Lis had witnessed first-hand how some universities had underserved their students through the weak design and poor delivery of educational programmes—while on the other hand, there is a need for autonomy in the sense that neither the state nor its functionaries should be in a position to dictate to universities what they should do.

To be sure, it was a difficult balance to maintain, and on occasion certain institutions pushed back fiercely and, sometimes, successfully. As she acknowledged in one of her reports, 'the optimum balance between necessary accountability and the autonomy of individual higher education institutions [is] still to be found' (Lange 2017: 7). In another, she conceded that 'the introduction of quality assurance has meant an increase in bureaucratic processes ... measurement, quantification, and evidence' (Lange 2013). In response, Lis argued for monitoring and evaluation to have a function beyond mere accountability or 'bean counting', and for the relevant concepts to be deliberated in the intellectual arena of contestation and explanation. In other words, that the measurement function, broadly defined, had to be given meaning among stakeholders and by stakeholders in order for their everyday life and work inside the university to be meaningful. She cautioned that the opposite response was for academics to fall

in line as the logic and metrics of measurement overwhelmed and hollowed out the academic project. What the CHE could do, she argued along with Thierry Luescher (see Chapter 6), was not only to steer policy and planning but for the measurement function to give intellectual direction to universities; to provide nuanced analyses of data to guide change, and to offer theoretical understandings of the trajectory of higher education in South Africa (Lange & Luescher 2003: 88).

Between thinking and doing: the academic interiority of Lis Lange

Lis was a private person, not one given to dwelling much on herself. On occasion, she would let one into her inner life and professional struggles. One particularly insightful peek into how she saw herself came during the Daantjie Oosthuizen Academic Freedom Lecture. Deeply in the throes of her work at the UFS, Lis expressed gratitude for the opportunity provided by the lecture ‘to take my intellectual self out of my managerial shell’. This was one of the few occasions when she publicly spoke about the difficulties of the marriage between administrator and intellectual. While the former kept her contained, inside a shell, the latter allowed her to speak openly and freely on a matter of public concern, namely academic freedom.

Surprisingly, on that occasion she went even further in revealing this tussle with the self and it is worth quoting her more fully since she uses the tension to indicate how the question of academic freedom will be addressed:

My intention tonight is, if at all possible, to propose a different point of entry into the topic [of academic freedom]. What I am going to propose is a direct consequence of my own struggle as a university manager and as intellectual to find a point at which in my own praxis I could bring together an anti-managerialist and anti-authoritarian conviction

together with a deep sense of the social responsibility that being an academic entails. Because this is an intellectual, moral and political battle inside myself (Lange 2016b: 178).

There is so much to unpack in this rare and powerful statement about Lis's internal *wroegings* (Afrikaans for something you struggle with deeply within your soul). For all her seemingly fluid engagements with and justifications for balancing the administrative and intellectual in her life, there was always within her a deep struggle that remained unresolved over the course of a stellar career in higher education. One aspect of this struggle was the lack of recognition. Contemporary metrics for promotion do not consider the broader public and intellectual role of academics working in universities. In the South African university, there is no reward for thinking, only for producing. Lis, like any other academic citizen, desired scholarly recognition on meritorious grounds. At the UFS, for instance, she produced high-quality administrative documents, from academic strategic plans to new assessment protocols and a comprehensive and transformative language policy, that were infused with a rare depth and richness of intellectual vitality and scholarship. Well, tell the promotions committee that. I (Jansen) recall how she entered my vice-chancellor's office at the UFS one day and dropped her curriculum vitae on my table. She looked away as she asked me to tell her what more she needed to do to qualify for promotion. It was a heartbreaking moment. I knew the rules and that making an argument for her promotion on the basis of her deep and wide intellectual contribution both on and off campus was going to be a hard sell—especially since upon my arrival at the UFS I had dramatically raised the criteria for promotion to the professoriate. It was not that she had not published, but rather that the major, time-consuming scholarly book that usually flowed from the PhD dissertation was not yet on the table and that publication in some of the major national and international journals had been sacrificed to make time for the hard, hard work required by the administrative transformation of the UFS. Nonetheless, I read the CV, gave her some

comments and then made the argument to the promotions committee for a broader recognition of her scholarly weight and value, as a result of which she was promoted to associate professor. Colleagues at the UFS who had worked closely with her knew and appreciated her academic work (broadly understood) as an ‘output’ that needed to be appropriately weighted and considered when it came to promotion. But to be honest, there were mumblings.

At UCT, Lis again launched herself into the work of transforming teaching and learning, and once again the research she so desperately yearned to do had to be put on hold to assume the responsibilities of a senior administrator at a complex university. All the deans reported to her, as did operational functions such as human resources and finance. In fact, as one of her senior colleagues commented, she was the *de facto* vice-chancellor (she wrote *Vision 2023*) and in those reporting lines, was respected as such.

The implications of Lis’s work for higher education and the academic project

Beyond memorialising Lis’s work, other aspects of her scholarship and administration merit further thought and continuous engagement. First, we want to suggest naming and giving conceptual flesh to the idea of a ‘scholar-administrator’. To be sure, while such a designation does not appear in any HR hierarchy of academic or administrative appointments, Lis’s life and career make an argument for appreciating the useful oxymoronic effect of combining what the term suggests only *appears to be* two contradictory or opposing meanings or duties, namely that of the scholar and/as administrator. Her career makes it evident that it is indeed possible to imbue the administrative with a sense of the intellectual, that is, to bring scholarly reflection to the work of the administrator while at the same time appreciating those aspects of administration that can usefully support and enhance the academic project. As Lis herself recognised, reconciling these two roles is and will always be difficult given how universities tend to

perpetuate, thereby impressing on all employees, both administrative and intellectual, what Sara Ahmed calls the ‘institutional as usual’, that is, the solidification of power structures as background norms and institutional culture. It is precisely in the struggle to forge the identity of scholar-administrator within higher education that the effort itself becomes worthwhile for no other reason than that it brings a critical consciousness to numbers and measurements which are often assumed to ‘speak for themselves’.

Second, one finds in Lis’s work a tendency to actually engage the practical and the administrative rather than to retreat into the rhetorical and performative. So much of what characterises decolonial thought and writing appears mainly in the kind of discursive language that is often inaccessible to those who want to use those insights in the day-to-day routines of academic life and work. For Lis, the data and the numbers, the metrics and the measurements always required critical engagement on their own terms even as their meanings were subjected to broader theoretical analysis. In her work and thinking, words and actions are melded into one; the scholar is also the doer, the one who makes meaning of things in order to change them.

A third implication of Lis’s work must be the recognition that doing radical work means sacrificing ambition and risking loss. When your entire life is dedicated to the academic project, the traditional metrics used to assess scholarship fall short. The broader meaning of one’s ‘contribution to academic life on and off campus’ means little in a system geared towards publication units and subsidy returns. Lis, like all of us scholars, desired that measured recognition even as it eluded her because of the way in which the managed university counts rather than weighs scholarly contribution.

Conclusion

It is clear that from the beginning of her career in South Africa at the Centre for Science Development (CSD) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 1997, Lis worked hard to forge together

the tasks of administrator and intellectual. Mala Singh, her senior at the CSD and subsequently at the CHE, observed how Lis worked in close quarters. In her tribute to Lis, delivered at a Stellenbosch University memorial on 5 November 2025, she commented: ‘Whatever she took on was always normatively framed, theoretically reflected on, strategically apposite and operationally efficient’ (Chapter 3: 43).

Lis struggled to forge these two identities together within herself and bore the costs of a sacrifice that came from a radical commitment to deeply transform South African universities at the expense of much personal freedom and academic recognition. For that devotion, higher education in South Africa owes Lis Lange a great debt of gratitude.

CHAPTER 6

THINKING WITH LIS LANGE: INTELLECTUAL BUREAUCRATS AND THE UNFINISHED UNIVERSITY

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Thinking with Lis Lange and the paradox of the *Festschrift*

This essay, written as a contribution to the peculiar genre of the *Festschrift*, is not an attempt to memorialise Lis Lange through a comprehensive intellectual biography. One paradox of the *Festschrift*, which is usually published upon the retirement or death of an individual, is that it may attempt to stabilise a life of thinking into a tidy and coherent intellectual portrait. Yet, scholars like Lis are never tidy thinkers. Her ideas were forged in their context, in dialogue, in argument, as provocations, reflections on her practice, in struggles with herself and in conversation with literature and philosophers, so that the process often mattered more than what ultimately appeared in print. My experience of Lis, of working with her, thinking with her, writing with her and fighting with her, reflects this so well.

Just as she was finally afforded *timeless time*, that precious time to think, write, and argue when awareness of time itself is suspended, away from the relentless institutional demands that had marked most of her career, she fell ill and died. For decades before that moment, the thinking that Lis and many of us around her tried to engage in had to be squeezed in between committee meetings, deadlines, crises of governance, endless emails, and the everyday intellectual and bureaucratic labour of reimagining and rebuilding higher education for a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa.

With this tribute I try to engage the genre of the *Festschrift* in a slightly different way by recovering something of the contexts and struggles of thinking with Lis as I experienced them. That means reflecting on a relationship—intellectual, institutional and personal—that unfolded over nearly a quarter of a century, from 2002 to 2025, across policy work, scholarly debates, collaborative research and writing, institutional reforms and the everyday politics of university life.

Between the academic project and the human project: intersecting terrains

Over time, Lis's work and my own came to occupy two closely intersecting domains. Although our worked overlapped on questions of governance, quality, equity, institutional culture, academic freedom, community engagement and the broader public purposes of the university in the context of the post-apartheid transformation and democratisation of South African higher education, we approached these questions from rather different intellectual starting points and perspectives.

In my understanding of Lis, her scholarship was animated by a deep concern with the ethical and political responsibilities of the university as public institution. For example, she asked what knowledges universities should produce in societies characterised by inequality and historical injustice. As such, her core concern was

with the academic project as she understood, named and defined it in the context of her work with Jonathan Jansen at the University of the Free State (UFS). Her intellectual approach in turn resonated strongly with the South African Marxist tradition of critical-historical social analysis rooted in the work of Harold Wolpe as extended into the study of higher education by scholars such as Saleem Badat (e.g. Badat 2010). It also drew on the sociology of knowledge and strands of critical university studies, each contributing their own, if differently articulated, Marxist inflections. Typical of this approach are her publications on the purpose(s) of the university and its transformation in the South African context; on community engagement, curriculum and knowledge transformation; and, following the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall movement, decolonisation. While she initially wrote in the mode of a critical-reflective practice, she gradually found herself in deeper philosophical waters.

To be honest, I was less interested in her later writing about epistemology, curriculum and pedagogy. In terms of the 'UFS Strategic Plan, 2012–2016' (UFS 2012; 2015), if her scholarly preoccupation was with the academic project and its focus on the performance of academics and students and campus academic culture, mine was the human project, with its emphasis on confronting prejudice, fostering a culture of inclusion, and community service and engagement (UFS 2012; 2015). I also told her bluntly that, as far as I was concerned, her cherished distinctions, such as the difference between 'knowledge for transformation' and 'knowledge of transformation' (Lange 2014; see also Chapter 4 in this volume) were little more than the kind of irritating semantics that added little while obfuscating the real issue, which was the need to move away from wish lists and crisis management to knowledge-based management in higher education (Lange & Luescher 2016: 126–130). For her, however, they reflected a serious attempt to grapple with the epistemic dimensions of institutional change.

In my understanding, Lis's intellectual instinct was always to start by assuming a normative position and then to engage the political economy of higher education from that position, starting with its

historicity and working her way forward, past the present and projected into the future. If over time her core discipline became the sociology of knowledge and the political economy of universities, influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, Ronald Barnett and others, my focus was really the politics, policy and polity of higher education, drawing on the work of Philip Altbach, Burton Clark and Saleem Badat. Consequently, my own intellectual instinct has often been to explore the silences between positions and to work my way up from the grounded experiences of the everyday in steady-paced, analytic contemplation. We agreed on the importance of history and historical trajectories, and on the intellectual labour, emotional toll, and political work that would be required for the realisation of radical transformation and substantial democratisation. If her perspective was epic, mine was emic; if her focus was on centring knowledge and curriculum, mine was on the student and staff experience and governance in higher education; while she insisted on giving direction, I focused on facilitating articulation.

Our disagreements also reflected our deeper methodological differences. Lis approached the university using as her primary sources of reference conceptual arguments, theory and policies, and only in the second instance the evidence produced, for example, by the audit reports or the monitoring system she had contributed to devising for the higher education system. This reflected a macro-level perspective on institutional systems, knowledge systems, curriculum and policy discourses. My own work, drawing on ethnography, policy analysis and higher education sociology, sought to understand universities from within their everyday institutional life.

While these very different approaches produced creative tensions and complementarity, they also reflected different intellectual temperaments and would frequently lead to my resignation. I appreciated the occasions when she reflected on and expressed these differences in our perspectives, in the process clarifying her own position on matters I cared deeply about. One example of this is a passage from her epilogue to my first book, *Student Politics in*

Africa: Representation and Activism (2016) and is worth quoting her at length:

There are two points of interrogation, raised in some of the chapters of the book, which in my view are worth pursuing. First is the issue of the theorisation of student activism, politics and governance and the extent to which a grounded theory approach that tends more to the classification of behaviour than to the theorisation of the student and student collective organisations, is actually useful to give account of a phenomenon that has sociological, economic and political dimensions that extend well beyond the university itself. [...]

Second, is the notion of the responsibility that universities have in the development of citizenship. The authors generally argued for the university as a space of citizenship education, yet this space seems to be understood mostly as that created by participation in university governance. More systematic and detailed research is required on the areas of participatory decision-making that matter for citizenship development. More importantly these analyses do not focus on the possibility of curriculum and pedagogy, the actual space of teaching and learning, as being a locus of citizenship education, not as indoctrination but as praxis in understanding, judging and acting. It is possible that given the varied levels of participation of students in university politics, the issue of citizen pedagogy needs to become more central in our way of thinking about student politics (Lange 2016a: 250).

Both comments are, of course, very astute and accurately reflect how and where our approaches did not intersect at the time. That said, two years later and despite our differences, my appreciation of Lis's intellectual astuteness inspired me to design a very different project

to study student politics (Luescher et al. 2022) and to support others who were more interested in how students are or are not involved in curriculum change (Mugume 2025). Despite our differences, we shared many fundamental assumptions and commitments—most of all, that the university as an institution is worth fighting for. It is an object of critique, certainly, but also an indispensable vehicle for social transformation.

Scholarship and policy: our CHE years

As I recall, my first encounter with Lis was in 2002 when I joined the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as its first full-time researcher. The CHE offices in Pretoria, then located next to the Museum of Science and Technology—complete with an astronaut and a space rocket in its front yard—were buzzing with the intellectual and political excitement of reconfiguring and transforming the national higher education system. South Africa was in the midst of a most extraordinary moment and the CHE had been given the daunting task of creating from scratch new systems of quality assurance and accreditation and providing expert advice on proposals not only on how to reconfigure the apartheid map of thirty-six universities into one consisting of twenty-two, but also on the processes that would be needed to govern them.

I entered this buzzing environment, which was directed by the likes of Mala Singh, Sheilah Tyeko, John Carneson, Prem Naidoo and Saleem Badat, as a blue-eyed researcher who had been hired by Badat over a lunch at the Bihari in Cape Town. When I arrived in Pretoria two months later, I was informed that I would be working under the supervision of the CHE's project manager, Dr Lis Lange. My office was right next to hers and through the thin drywalls I could often hear her in one of her productive writing moments. (She would swear to scare the devil away as she typed). Naturally, I was also quite scared of her. From the very first day we started to work on conceptualising a new national system for monitoring and evaluating the transformation

of South Africa's higher education system (CHE 2004b). It was in the drawn-out process of developing this that we first gained respect for each other's strengths. She appreciated my ability to find and work with the complex arguments that were being presented in scholarly literature, policy documents and empirical data. I, in turn, admired her capacity to move effortlessly between the big picture and the minutiae, her conceptual clarity and her ability to think critically and ask the difficult intellectual and political questions, something which is powerfully illustrated in the following passage from the monitoring and evaluation draft framework:

The ways in which evaluations have been carried out and utilised in the last two decades bring up images of Thatcherite control, budget cuttings in the name of efficiency, and a definition of accountability of somewhat Orwellian proportions. Input, output and performance indicators have become straightjackets for reflective policy or intellectual critique, and often one has the sense that if something cannot be counted, it cannot be told either. The technocratic response to this problem echoes the cliché that only what is measured is managed (Lange & Luescher 2003: 5).

Although this brief side-step away from policy discourse—intended to show our critical awareness that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems could indeed conjure up Orwellian notions of surveillance and Thatcherite control—was unfortunately removed from the final version of the discussion document and our first joint scholarly publication (Lange & Luescher 2003), it nonetheless shows how, knee-deep in thinking through higher education transformation policy, Lis remained self-aware, self-critical and connected to world literature and history.

During and after our work on the M&E framework we worked together on many of the other projects that demanded input from the CHE such as the review of MBA provision in South Africa (CHE

2004a) and perhaps most stimulating for me, collecting scholarly reflections on the state of higher education in South Africa, in the course of which I was first introduced to scholars like Jonathan Jansen, John Higgins and Laura Czerniewicz (CHE 2007). After two and a half years of intense collaboration in Pretoria, our touchpoints shrunk fast as I returned to Cape Town to dedicate myself to my PhD and only continued working with Lis and the CHE in a part-time, remote capacity. When I was selected in 2008 to rejoin her full time as research manager of the CHE, she was understandably furious when I had to turn her down at the last minute to join the University of the Western Cape (UWC) where I worked with Nico Cloete, another maverick higher-education-policy scholar of the time. The CHE and UFS would bring us back together again five years later.

Reflecting on the CHE years through a governance lens

If the early 2000s at the CHE constituted what might be called a system-building phase in South African higher education, the 2010s became for many of the scholars, policymakers and administrators of that phase a time of moving on and reflecting on the previous decade's work. A generational change was underway, with Prem Naidoo having passed away, first Saleem Badat and then Mala Singh moving back to universities, and Lis at first holding the fort at the CHE before she, too, moved on to join Jonathan Jansen at the UFS.

The CHE, now under the leadership of Narend Baijnath, called for a reviewing of the state of South African higher education during a time that was, in his words, 'more volatile than ever two decades into democracy' (CHE 2016: 10). Because I had worked at the CHE before, specifically in collaboration with Martin Hall on two major research reports on university governance (Hall et al. 2002; 2004) and had completed a PhD on university governance and student participation in 2009 while also working with a crop of master's students at UWC on a range of topics related to governance, transformation and

democratisation in higher education, I was asked by the CHE's Denyse Webbstock to contribute to the governance theme of that review. I agreed and immediately asked Lis to partner with me on the task.

For Lis, more so than for me, the invitation to research and write the chapter on governance in the CHE's twenty-year review provided an opportunity to critically reflect on her time at the CHE. On the one hand, she was able to confide in me her disappointment with the way things had unfolded at the CHE and how an opportunity presented by Badat's departure had been missed, resulting in the appointment of a short-lived new CEO and key intellectual projects such as the council's work on academic freedom, institutional autonomy and government regulation as well as policy initiatives and other developments going astray. At the same time, she was excited to be at the UFS and, for the first time in her professional life, to be a member of a university executive, which, for her, meant being in a position to put everything she knew universities should be doing as far as the academic project was concerned, into institutional action. At the UFS, she was part of the small inner circle of critical intellectuals including André Keet and Melanie Walker who supported Jonathan Jansen, the charismatic vice-chancellor and rector who was deeply committed to the UFS transformation project. On the other hand, she also used the opportunity of co-authoring the chapter to reiterate her critical thinking about the kind of system-building she had been so closely involved in. In the process of writing, we pondered for a long time how to respond to Nico Cloete who, in his usual impertinent way, used to say that 'Saleem and the guys at the CHE' had created a wet blanket that suffocated real academic work (referring to the system of quality assurance, auditing and monitoring, and the bloated university administrations that had been created and put into place). Had the new institutional arrangements, national policies and systems devised by the CHE had any positive transformative impact? Lis reflected on this as follows:

South Africa's policy makers and implementers as well as universities struggled in many cases with the tensions and

contradictions between their political convictions and the neoliberal whiff of their choice of policies and instruments. The tension of using ‘conservative tools’ to achieve progressive ends was intensely debated on the occasion of the celebrations of the first decade of democracy. Yet, this does not mean that it was totally inconceivable to develop entirely new local alternatives to the global offering. But the reality is that neither universities nor the government did so (Lange & Luescher 2016: 122).

In a later publication I reformulated this response much less generously (and more in keeping with the debates we had had) to say that ‘the expectation by some policymakers that it would be possible to use “conservative tools to achieve progressive ends” for transforming the post-apartheid higher education sector thus proved to be hopelessly naïve’ (Luescher et al. 2021: 107). The process of working together on the chapter provided us with a way to find each other intellectually in a new space and with new respect, with me working through twenty years of policy and Lis taking on the big-picture work and combining it with all her knowledge and the relevant data from more than a decade at the CHE. Eventually, when in 2014 the opportunity presented itself to work with her again, I accepted and joined her again in the buzzing space the UFS had become.

Regenerating a university in ashes: an intellectual bureaucrat at the UFS

Intellectual friendships are rarely built on agreement. If anything, disagreement was one of the defining features of my relationship with Lis. One area of recurring tension was our different approaches to student politics and student affairs. Lis often regarded my research on student politics and activism as a somewhat immature scholarly preoccupation, something one had to eventually grow out of. The extension and application of that work into student affairs was, in one

of her more memorable formulations, ‘the work of plumbers rather than intellectuals’. But, of course, as far as the study of student politics was concerned, history would have the last laugh. #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall erupted and student politics suddenly became a topic that no researcher in higher education, including Lis, could ignore (Lange 2019a; Lange 2019b; Lange et al. 2021; Lange 2025).

By the time I joined her at the UFS she was Acting Vice-Chancellor: Academic Affairs and the university was recovering from the tragedy of the Reitz incident. As at the CHE, it was an extraordinary moment to arrive at a university that had been de-legitimised at all levels, from an audit report evidencing a practice of apartheid-style racial and linguistic segregation (CHE 2008a) to a ministerial report that raised the question

how an institution of higher education, which is supposed to be about broadening young people’s minds and preparing them for engaging with social and intellectual differences in people, could produce this level of narrow-minded mean-spiritedness (Department of Education 2008: 23).

She immediately tasked me with the following responsibilities: to build institutional research capacity, to review the quality of student affairs, and to assist with changing the language policy.

Lis was never a pure academic for any extended period. On occasion she called herself a higher education manager *and* researcher in higher education (Lange 2016c). Yet, at the UFS I came to realise that she was neither a manager nor a researcher but rather an intellectual-bureaucrat. The ‘intellectual bureaucrat’ is a peculiar invention of and figure in the modern university and refers to someone who works inside the bureaucratic machinery of the institution while refusing to surrender the critical distance of the intellectual. Much like Weber’s official, this figure inhabits the discipline and responsibilities of bureaucratic office while at the same time, like Gramsci’s organic intellectual, critically reflecting on the historical and political forces that

shaped the very institutions they serve. Accordingly, Lis's thinking did not emerge from outside the structures of higher education but arose from within the very work of building, transforming and governing them, constantly moving between meaning and machinery. Lis was the very embodiment of this figure. As an intellectual bureaucrat of the highest order she preferred to work close to the top of the institutional hierarchy, exercising office with legal-rational integrity, while longing to step outside the machinery in order to analyse its historical logic and political economy, to reflect on the socio-political consequences of her work and to theorise the meanings of her work and the task ahead.

Together, we lived through #FeesMustFall at the UFS and the traumatic Shimla Park incident and its aftermath (Luescher et al. 2017; Luescher et al. 2022). In my time at the UFS, this was the defining moment, and it planted the seeds for much of my later work at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). For Lis too, the UFS was an extremely generative place to work and write at. She was able to put her knowledge of national policy, systems, structures and processes into institutional practice and still found time to reflect deeply on many of the matters she had been involved in over the years. She loved it in Bloemfontein and loved the academic project she was invested in. And she was deeply disappointed when, following Jansen's departure, she was not given the opportunity to lead the institution forward (Luescher 2016).

Snakes on the mountain trail: UCT and its aftermath

If, for many students, academics and managers coming to the University of Cape Town (UCT) would seem like a dream come true, for Lis it was not even a second choice. Her first choice, as she very clearly told me, had been to stay in Bloemfontein and lead the UFS. When this did not materialise, she chose instead to be close to her family who happened to live in Cape Town. Of course, Lis had everything and more that UCT needed from a deputy vice-chancellor of teaching and

learning. What she was not prepared for was the toxicity she would encounter there.

It began with her appointment, when she unexpectedly found herself cast a respondent in a trial that, had it succeeded, would have made her as much a victim as those who had brought the challenge. For, if the university had in any way bungled or mismanaged her appointment process, then not only the other applicants but she herself would have been wronged. The trauma that followed has been well documented in the Mpati Report, the university's inquiry into executive relationships and resignations during the narcissistic reign of UCT's disgraced tenth vice-chancellor and the deceitful chair of council at the time (Mpati et al. 2023). Lis, exonerated by the report, nonetheless left UCT in April 2022 before the end of her first term and three years before I rejoined my alma mater. For once, she had already left by the time I arrived at an institution.

As she told me, despite the sour start she had come to like it at UCT. She would have loved to continue in her role but had left as 'malign interests in wanting to push Lange out converged' (Mpati et al. 2023: 99). In several meetings I attended over the year preceding the writing of this tribute, I heard of initiatives she had started, her energy and elan, and how her sharp intellect and deep understanding of higher education policy, systems, structures and processes had been appreciated by some. However tragic the moment, for a person of Lis's calibre it was not going to be difficult to find a place to continue her work at; in the end, it was her health that would take its toll on her.

Conclusion: the unfinished university

Those who worked closely with Lis will recall not only her formidable analytical clarity and commitment to transformation, but also the integrity and courage (and colourful language) with which she spoke her mind. When I refer to her as an 'intellectual bureaucrat' it is with the highest appreciation, as someone who develops, transforms, and manages institutions while never ceasing to think critically about

them. Although inhabiting the complex combination of intellectual *and* bureaucrat was never easy, Lis lived and thrived in the tension between critique and complicity, between the demands of leadership and the responsibilities of intellectual reflection.

As much as we differed, Lis and I did not need to have ongoing conversations about what the transformed university should ultimately look like. On this, our views were compatible and complementary, grounded in the idea of the university as institution in service of society; an institution in the service of transformation and substantive democratisation. I shared her conviction and passionate belief that the unfinished university (and all of them are) in all its contradictions was an institution worth fighting over and for. Indeed, I believe that what she meant was that the university, particularly in societies marked by deep inequality such as South Africa, Argentina and Mexico, is always unfinished; that it is an institution that needs to be constantly remade through struggle, argument and imagination. Like a true student, the university is forever in the process of becoming.

CHAPTER 7

THE UNIVERSITY IN CRISIS TIMES: A NOTE OR TWO ON LIS LANGE'S INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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Introduction

This tribute reflects on Lis's contributions to the post-apartheid higher education system based on my interactions with her when we both served on the council of Nelson Mandela University. Her presence mattered to me because in her intellectual approach to university governance she combined structural and sociological approaches. Lis belonged to the first generation of post-apartheid higher-education-sector administrators who were tasked with transforming the system to serve the needs of a democratic society through institutions such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE). Like many of her peers, Lis's roots were in the leftist intellectual communities that, in South Africa, emerged from the broader anti-apartheid movement.

The cohort of administrators Lis belong to was tasked with the historic role of transforming the apartheid higher education systems in line with the new democratic society. We can call them a generation of 'intellectual bureaucrats'. I would argue that the character of the intellectual bureaucrat was produced by the very nature of the

transition from the anti-apartheid struggle itself. The networks of 'young' activists, scholars and organisers that until then had been conscientised and organised in various structures or who had formed part of the broader diasporas of experiences connected to the South African situation were called upon and deployed to those institutions that needed to change. Little has been written about this first cohort of intellectual bureaucrats in the South African public service system at large even though it was a critical period for the creation of post-apartheid systems.

On reflection, the period of transition from 1994 into the early 2000s was a period of managing change within the constraints placed on the new democratic state by inherited fiscal, structural and other governmental deficits. The new cohort of bureaucrats found itself in the unenviable position of having to engineer constitutionalism and to create transparency and accountability in public institutions that, although relatively functional, were under financial pressure and steeped in the logic of apartheid. As critical intellectuals they recognised that building credible democratic institutions would require Weberian standardisation and bureaucratisation in order to protect the integrity of the qualifications system going forward. As a result, they adopted the language and frameworks of policy, rules and process, which inevitably introduced rigidity in the systems. At the same time, however, they also produced far-reaching transformative policies that over three decades has produced a system that Verwoerd would not have recognised given its demographics, mandate, and the content of its scholarly interests.

These intellectual bureaucrats therefore left a somewhat contradictory imprint on higher education. On the one hand they made a significant contribution to the democratisation of higher education. On the other hand, they introduced forms of bureaucratisation and varying degrees of corporatisation into the higher education system that continue to shape the present governance culture. They empowered university executives over the professoriate and in turn, the power of councils over university executives. These power

configurations have emerged as sites of conflict and, quite frankly, serious professional stress within universities. Procedural stringency has become a permanent substitute for conflict resolution as universities struggle to meaningfully translate the egalitarian ethos of the anti-apartheid struggle into higher education systems. In my engagements with Lis, I often sensed that she was dismayed by the unchecked bureaucratisation of the system. What produced some kind of professional affinity between us on the NMU council was that both of us were acutely aware of the extent to which the overarching global forces of capitalism and neoliberalism had become driving forces of the contemporary university, corroding the very intellectual fibre of the institution. What mattered to both of us were the continuation of the intellectual traditions of South Africa's once radical political culture and the possibility of mobilising that legacy in defence of the critical intellectualism of the university and as a form of pushback against the anti-intellectualism-by-bureaucratisation that had come to define our understanding of governance in post-apartheid higher education.

Meeting Lis Lange

I met Lis for the first time when she joined the Nelson Mandela University council where I was serving as representative of the academic staff. While I knew of her by reputation, I had never met her personally. When she arrived at her first council meeting, I immediately recognised her and felt a sense of relief as I anticipated that her left-wing politics might offer a credible counter discourse to the business-sector-oriented frameworks for corporate governance such as the 'King IV' which had been universally adopted as governance discourse and universal standard for all South African institutions.

In 1993 and with progressive intentions, Nelson Mandela asked retired Judge Mervyn King to produce a new set of principles for corporate governance that would align with the new, democratic South Africa (Judin 2020: 167–172). Since then, a series of 'King reports' have become deeply entrenched across the public sector as the discursive

guiding standard for the ethics of governance. Given the depth and critical nature of South Africa's political traditions, it is peculiar that the King principles, which were intended to reform apartheid-based corporate boards, so quickly became the guiding light for ethical conduct across other sectors. Normative ethics and the sagacity of great philosophical and humanistic traditions were sidelined. Instead of connecting with the profundity of traditions such as the dictum of the Hippocratic Oath, 'first do no harm', codes of governance and their associated ethics were superseded by abstract notions of 'accountability', 'transparency', 'oversight' and 'risk management'.

My experience across the higher education system had left me concerned by how institutions tasked with advancing scientific inquiry, intellectual rigour and the courage to explore ideas had subordinated their ethics and governance practices entirely to the corporatism and sterility of bureaucratised ethics. Little room was left to explore the extent to which professional domains could derive their principles of governance from the heartbeats of their own social mandates. The result was a foreclosure of thought when it came to what governance in a post-apartheid university system could look like. Given the regularity with which crises seem to beset South African university councils, it is clear that something is lacking in our very conception of university governance. Readings (1996: 3) has described the shift in the accountability practices of the contemporary university as one that posits

the administrator rather than the professor as the central figure of the University and figures the University's tasks in terms of a generalised logic of 'accountability' in which the University must pursue 'excellence' in all aspects of its functioning. The current crisis of the University in the West proceeds from a fundamental shift in its social role and internal systems, one which means that the centrality of the traditional humanistic disciplines to the life of the University is no longer assured.

The work of academics is now measured no differently than that of individuals at a production line, encoded and decoded in the audit culture of corporations and its language of ‘excellence’, ‘metrics’, ‘strategies’ and ‘targets’.

To me, Lis’s appointment to the NMU council signalled an opportunity to challenge this corporate-culture creep that had been sucking the life out of universities. Her presence deepened the intellectual gravitas of the council and affirmed me in my own thinking and contributions. Over time she came to represent the legitimacy of the voice of the critical intellectual who refuses to cede ground to the de-intellectualisation of governance discourse in the university. In what follows I reflect on some of her work that she shared with me.¹

Governance as defence of the academic project

To her work in council, Lis brought frankness of language, theoretical insight and moral observance. We shared the principle that university governance was in itself an intellectual endeavour and not something that could or should be reduced to compliance.

With her extensive experience in executive management and in higher education policy, Lis was able to engage the challenges faced by the university and the sector at large and to produce insights that were both practical and theoretically informed.

On a personal level, I often sensed in her language and tone a kind of urgency; recognition of the fact that we cannot imagine a transformed university in South Africa as long as we do not adequately situate its local crises within the multiple crises currently facing humanity. I found resonance with the way she grappled with the problems of the university and the way these problems were amplified by the interaction of their local context with powerful historical and global structural forces.

1 For the purposes of this tribute I am citing from the versions of papers Lis shared with me personally. Sharing with a colleague one’s incomplete or still evolving thoughts is in itself a very important act of scholarly engagement.

For those of us who are concerned with how the university can operate justly given the complexity of our times, governance begins with the university continuously interrogating the purpose of its existence and what sets it apart from other institutions. From such ongoing deep reflection flow the technical, bureaucratic and operational *raison d'être* of councils who in turn exist to hold universities accountable. Accountability of the executive, sustainability of operations, engagement with internal and external interest groups and stakeholders, strategic planning, auditing of systems, oversight over finance—all these functions are ultimately geared to defending the university's capacity to execute its mandate to address the big questions. The outcomes of governance, including clean audits, must be viewed as processes in service of the university's capacity to further knowledge and to enable the institution to do the unpredictable work of searching for answers to the big questions. Such an approach would position bureaucracy in the service of higher ideals and refuse to succumb to the tendency for bureaucracy to hijack the intellectual life of the university. The complexity of the university's location in the Global South, the persistent economic inequality, our struggles against the marginalisation of our knowledges, and our political and social turbulences demand a multiplicity of intelligences in our organisational approaches to the university and its role in our societies.

On council, it was therefore not surprising that on many occasions Lis and I found ourselves on the same side of issues, both big and small. Even where we did not share the same view or interest in subjects, what mattered to me was her overarching ideological commitment to the university as fundamentally a community of scholars whose primary role was to engage ideas in the service of justice. In this way she insisted on connecting broader theoretical and scholarly concerns with the practicalities of governance. At stake is the question of the university *as* the question of humanity itself. This is why Lis and I preferred directness over the generic language so often used in meetings. Clarity of expression, of one's intention and what one

stands for, even when it is at odds with current opinion, unburdens the mind and heart of those who feel compelled to act in the name of justice. The sharpness with which Lis took on matters in council matched my own.

Beyond council, she and I also engaged on the much broader question of transformation. My own interest had been theorising the ascendancy of the Black professional classes and our entrenchment in South African universities. My concern has been with the rising authoritarianism, corporatisation and the narrowing of transformation to demographic deracialisation rather than with the broader question of Black social emancipation. The question for me has been why the growing class of Black managers in the university system has consistently demonstrated a preference and affinity for corporatisation over democratic practices. When did corporatisation stop being used as an aid to transformation, and when did it become a modality for entrenching professional interests? In a relatively liberal democratic environment, why does the university's organisational culture so often tend to mimic state administration, specifically its cultures of deference to authority, rather than advancing and defending the idea of the university as a critical space for those wishing to research and learn? This slide of the Black managerial class towards corporate authoritarianism and intellectual conservatism at a time when the sector is increasingly financially precarious does not bode well for a project of substantive transformation.

While the generation of intellectual bureaucrats Lis belonged to somewhat naively or pragmatically advanced bureaucratism as a way of producing consistency in a new democratic system, this new class of manager-professionals often wields the inherited bureaucratic tools in ways that restrict democratisation of the post-apartheid university. What has been giving me sleepless nights is evidence that increasingly suggests the merging of state-style and corporate-style bureaucratic models as the final despotic form of the so-called 'transformed' university in post-apartheid South Africa. The commodification of education has been combining with a tendency for performance-based

incentives to become key drivers in shaping the type of new manager being produced in and by the system. I shared with Lis my views on what appeared to me as the conservative trajectory of the system and made it plain to her that I was critical of the way in which demographic transformation seemed to be accompanied by a muting of meaningful, academic debate. For me, Black emancipation in higher education is about the project of freedom and not the creation of professional careers as an end in itself. I suspect that, for personal reasons, a critical engagement with Black management was something she was cautious to enter into with me and I noted that hesitation. The clashes among senior management at the University of Cape Town (UCT) during her term there as Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning spoke to the difficulty of any engagement with the specific dynamics with which Black leadership is emerging and taking power in the system. Perhaps questions regarding the textures of institutional and intellectual cultures under Black management are best left to a new generation of Black academics whose careers are being shaped entirely by and experienced under corporate managerialism.

Lis also engaged the contradictions facing universities in post-colonial Africa (see Lange n.d. b). In the first instance, the contemporary African university only provides a pathway for a small economic and professional elite to join the ranks of the global middle classes while most people on the continent are excluded from universities through no fault of their own. Second, African universities play a marginal role in the global economy and processes of knowledge production (Lange n.d.b). The mission of the postcolonial university in Africa has never been satisfactory resolved. Should these institutions engage in a 'universal' project or one defined by local needs?

On the one hand, the university steps out of itself as ivory tower or as part of a colonial project to respond to the local needs of society. On the other hand, this very inclination is often built on a lack of political independence, on the assumption (and practice) that the role of the university is to support the

state project and not to critique policy decision making or implementation that prejudices the broader community. This university weakens from the beginning its capacity to be a critical actor in social development (Lange n.d.b).

These questions have been tricky to properly address given the financial and other challenges facing African universities in the context of structural adjustment and political authoritarianism (Lange n.d.b). Mkandawire (1995: 79) has referred to the postcolonial African university's loss of a sense of purpose following independence as an identity crisis:

Having achieved their mission—‘meeting the high-level manpower needs of the nation’ (read ‘public administration’)—African universities lost their original *raison d’être* in the eyes of the state and sometimes the public. Compounding matters about the ambiguity of their academic status was the swarm of experts that came along in the wake of the structural adjustment programme and the resumption by donors of control over key economic functions of the nation and the consultancy missions.

The contemporary university and the global polycrisis

My concerns about corporatisation and transformation have always turned on the bigger question of capitalism's ability to reconfigure the very logic of life. Lis's thinking similarly revolved around a critique of capitalism as she grappled with the nature of the university in the context of contemporary technological complexity, neoliberalism and the growing awareness of a planetary crisis. This planetary approach resonated with me because of the influence of Julian Cobbing's ‘big history’ critique of industrial society which he popularised during his time at Rhodes University in the early 2000s. Cobbing compels us to

reckon with the brutal reality that humanity has painted itself into a corner with an unsustainable growth-oriented economic system. As he puts it, '*Homo sapiens*, humans—us, our species are in trouble ... our economic system is unsustainable' (Cobbing 2023: 9). Lis, too, has argued along these lines:

[W]e have reached a limit as civilisation: individually, collectively, ecologically and in terms of knowledge (noetically) defining our ability to interpret and understand the world. In the face of this analysis, rethinking what the university as institution does, its purpose and organisation, becomes urgent and unavoidable (Lange n.d.a).

Her view was that the status quo could not be sustained. 'Our epoch, capitalism as a social system, is self-destroying and taking in its wake people and the planet; the urgency is too great; and the risk of not reacting too high' (Lange n.d.a). For her, the most pressing matter was how to develop theory for understanding the university and its obvious limits and shortcomings in the present: 'We need a more capacious critique of our times if the aim is to effect change in the university and in the society it inhabits' (Lange n.d.a).

Upon becoming a professional academic it was soon evident to me that the contemporary university was ideologically indifferent: it cares less about the substance and political content of ideas than about the way in which the scholar can be positioned in relation to the university's brand and in service of the institution's public profile and image. As long as the university and its management are not directly criticised, the contemporary university can reward the 'anti-capitalist professor' while continuing to operate comfortably within the existing economy as itself an active agent in the replication of the capitalist system. Readings (1996: 163) refers to this as the

futility of the radicalism that calls for a university that will produce more radical kinds of knowledge, more radical

students, more of anything ... The ideological content of the knowledges produced in the University is increasingly indifferent to its functioning as a bureaucratic enterprise; the only proviso is that such radical knowledges fit into the cycle of production, exchange, and Consumption.

This means that in the contemporary university, the ideological environmentalist and anti-environmentalist can happily coexist, not in the service of pursuing the truth, but because both have markets in which the university can position its work and itself as a brand.

Lis (Lange n.d.a) poses several questions to encourage us to think about how the university might begin to untangle itself from these traps:

- ‘What would it take for the top 1,000 ranked universities to step out, for example, of regulatory rankings systems? What difference would this make to universities in developed and developing economies from a regulatory (credential) and financial perspective? How would the research focus, publication patterns, regime of academics’ appointments, and student selection change if these universities step out of the market?’
- ‘What would be the organisational, curricular and financial implications of rethinking teaching and learning and research at the university around the university’s commitment to help develop an alternative to the capitalist system?’
- ‘What kind of research should the university do, not only to help disinhibit knowledge about technology, but also to use it to create a world that moves exactly in the opposite direction and rhythm to the one we inhabit now? What kind of self-reflection should the older generations embark upon and how, to take responsibility for the narcissistic epidemic; the despair and mental illness which are the extreme negative manifestation, but not the only one, of a society where, as Stiegler said, there are no collective retentions tethering the new generation to its ancestors, nor collective pretensions affirming the possibility of futures together?’

Debates about rankings, incentives and the commodification of knowledge have become stagnant. Lis also asked if the university as a form ought not be abandoned given the destructiveness of the economic system that it feeds on and depends on:

My argument is that thinking through the meaning of our times is a precondition for rethinking the university or abolishing it as a privileged institution for education and knowledge production (Lange n.d.a).

Paradoxically, those who defend the social ideals of the university may very well be ready to see it go. I shared Lis's underlying skepticism about the university as an emancipatory institution in Africa. If the ideal is knowledge, invention and the scientific exploration necessary to provide what Africa requires, which is to reignite a sense of being able to produce relevant knowledge under existing conditions, then the university seems to be little more than a burdensome institution.

From the perspective of university abolitionism, the questions posed by Lis about rankings, curricula, publications et cetera become moot. Instead, we should deconstruct the mandates we have given the university and ask ourselves if they can be socialised or decentralised into more accessible forms. By 'socialised' I mean, can certain knowledges be acquired in society itself? And where the university does offer specialised infrastructure and expertise, can we imagine new institutions built from scratch on the premise of a just meritocracy that selects for true potential rather than ones that are limited to those who can afford the most privileged education or who fit the class profile preferred by the institution? Do we really need undergraduate degrees that take four years, or could we pare down programmes to their core skills and train students faster? Arguably, the institution of the university can be abolished without the abolition of its ideals or its actual purposes in society.

The question of whether the university should be abolished,

especially in Africa, is one that cannot be ignored. How exactly do African societies benefit from the university as an institution? Under corporate, neoliberal conditions, South African universities are increasingly besieged by competitive dynamics and conflicts between various interests. Some of these interests, e.g. those represented by the old white professoriate, use the new corporatism to defend their old networks of accumulation and to seek new avenues of extraction, while the new Black managerial class and professoriate use newly acquired levers of power to secure the continuation of their own careers in a system of precarious fixed-term contracts for executives. Throw in the role of student political formations, fee-burdened parents who see themselves as little more than paying clients, trade unions who both protect increasingly muted academics and defend reactionary agendas, and the growing threat of local business networks that see the university as no more than a site of lucrative business opportunity combined with the weight of the global planetary crisis, and one wonders if the concept of the university is at all tenable in postcolonial Africa (Mkhize 2018).

Lis (Lange n.d.a) noted that instead of resolving social inequality, the university has contributed to deepening it:

There is no available hard evidence that any existing higher education system in the world is helping undo inequality or having a real impact on the decision-making about climate change locally or globally, to mention only two matters. On the contrary, not only inequality is increasing across all regions of the global economy and we have not made a dent on reducing emissions, but many universities are themselves contributing to inequality in terms of, for example, their own conditions of employment, and their lack of intellectual independence or ineffectiveness in terms of climate change policy recommendations, even if the actual focus of the research is on the side of the angels.

In council meetings, I would sometimes sense something like nervous apprehension from Lis when the extent of the issues and contradictions facing universities were laid bare. The version of her talk titled 'Re-engaging governance praxis at African universities' that she shared with me, ends with 'Conclusion?'.

CHAPTER 8

LIS LANGE: A TOWERING LEADER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

I had the honour of working closely with Lis Lange at the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 1 January 2019 until May 2022, the premature end of her tenure as Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning and line manager of the deans of all the faculties, including the Dean of Law, a position I held at the time. Although she was at UCT for only about four and a half years, she made an immediate and enduring contribution both in her designated portfolio, broader university leadership and beyond. In this short tribute, I reflect on some of her most notable contributions.

UCT's LLB accreditation crisis and the rescue mission

In November 2017, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) issued a letter to the Faculty of Law at UCT (UCT Law) giving notice of its intention to withdraw the accreditation of its LLB programme due to the failure by the faculty to submit an acceptable improvement

plan following the review of its LLB curriculum.¹ The notice, widely reported in national media (see for example Davis 2017; *Businessstech* 2017), shocked the institution and caused considerable anxiety in the faculty. No one could have predicted that the national review of the LLB programme undertaken by the CHE in 2015–2016 would include UCT Law among the few that failed to meet the mark.

As the university began to recover from the shock and started to take rearguard action (*UCT News* 2017), recriminations in the faculty ensued, resulting several months later in the resignation of the then Dean of Law (Price 2018). The threat of the LLB's withdrawal caused so much embarrassment to the faculty and the university that then Vice-Chancellor (VC) Max Price immediately dispatched both the DVC responsible for research, Mamokgethi Phakeng, and incoming DVC Lis Lange, who had not yet commenced her tenure, to the faculty to assess the situation and develop a remedial plan.

All academic members of the faculty were called to this meeting. Phakeng, who had assumed her DVC position earlier, presented the rationale and aims of the meeting as well as the expectations of the university leadership. Having done so, she introduced Lis and allowed her to take charge of the meeting. I only later learned that Lis had worked at the CHE before joining the University of the Free State (UFS) and that she was well-versed in accreditation matters and the CHE's curriculum review and accreditation processes. By the end of this meeting, the faculty understood precisely what it needed to do to save its LLB programme. A faculty committee chaired by Lis was established to lead the development of the comprehensive improvement plan requested by the CHE, following a report from faculty and council's review.

1 According to the Chief Executive Officer of the CHE, none of the seventeen LLB programmes reviewed at the time received full accreditation after the initial review. All were asked to make improvements to their programmes and to submit improvement plans within a prescribed period. The failure to submit such an improvement plan resulted in the notice of withdrawal of accreditation for UCT. See Narend Baijnath 'The Council on Higher Education's national review of the LLB', 17 November 2017, at <https://www.golegal.co.za/council-higher-education-llb-review/>.

Over the next six months a team of faculty members worked tirelessly on the improvement plan under Lis's direction (before and after she commenced her term), which was subsequently adopted by the rest of the faculty and the university before it was submitted to the CHE. Lange actively participated in the committee's meetings, read drafts of the plan as it was developed, and made numerous comments and suggestions that helped to improve the document. Her experience and knowledge of teaching and learning, curriculum development and review procedures were critical to the rescue of our LLB curriculum. Her endorsement of our final improvement plan signalled to us that the rescue mission had been completed. Indeed, the CHE lifted the notice of withdrawal and fully accredited UCT's LLB in June 2018.

Teaching and learning

Until 2015, UCT had positioned itself as a research-intensive university and defined its approach to teaching as 'research-led'. This approach was informed by a strong belief that the primary function of a university was to generate new knowledge rather than merely reproduce and disseminate existing knowledge. Its teaching, therefore, had to draw on the research that its academics were conducting and producing. This is a vision of the university that the institution vigorously adhered to and advocated internally and externally.

The approach meant, first, that the institution took pride in seeking to attract the best academics and the highest-performing students to its lecture halls. Strongly influenced by 'Oxbridge pedagogies', the institution resisted for a long time all efforts to massify, maintaining a low student-to-staff ratio and producing few high-quality graduates, each of whom was expected to make a significant impact on society. As a result, its policies were geared toward rewarding high performers in research and the supervision of research degrees, promoting excellent and ethical research practices, and fostering collaboration with partners who share a similar mindset. Although there was always internal criticism of this approach, it was widely accepted by both

academic staff and university leadership. It served as a constant basis for self-improvement and renewal.

The characterisation and policy orientation of UCT as a research-intensive university and of its teaching as research-led were severely challenged during the Rhodes Must Fall (RFM) movement. The university was criticised for prioritising research over teaching and learning, an accusation which was compounded by internal data that showed that there was a gulf in performance between Black and white students.

By the time Lis joined UCT in February 2018, pedagogies of support had already taken root and intensified at UCT. What remained was a perceived imbalance between research and teaching that favoured the former. Lis would seize the moment to recalibrate this balance to improve the standing of teaching in the university. She did so by promoting effective teaching and student-focused pedagogies, advocating for greater recognition of teaching in promotion and recruitment processes and encouraging progressive curriculum review and change, among other measures. In addition, she took a keen interest in getting to know individual academics within the faculties. For example, I was always surprised that she knew most of the academic members in my faculty by name. By the time she left the institution, Lis had elevated the standing of teaching and learning at the university.

That said, in enhancing the profile of teaching and learning, she did not endorse the deficit-oriented pedagogies that had taken root at UCT. These saw Black students as lacking in some fundamental ways and needing a wide range of support services to help them cope with their studies. Advocates of these pedagogies failed to recognise that UCT's approach to teaching and learning was not designed for students who were enrolled in extended programmes. The lecturers were not equipped to teach these students and, overall, the curricula had never been adequately revised to accommodate them. Additionally, students themselves resented being placed on a 'slow diet' and being treated as inferior to their peers. The slow diet did not help them.

On the contrary, it relied heavily on spoon-feeding, which they were not accustomed to. In their more intensive senior years, their ability to cope with more complex materials and assignments was underdeveloped. Perhaps more importantly, these programmes failed to capitalise on the capabilities and diverse experiences these students brought with them, including their will and capacity to succeed in the face of adversity and the resourcefulness and resilience which had led them to university in the first place.

Lis accepted UCT Law's proposal to discontinue its extended LLB programme, which had been introduced to attract students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds who did not meet the requirements for the four-year LLB programme. In 2018/2019, although the faculty had unsuccessfully tried all conceivable support mechanisms for this programme, internal throughput records showed that only 28% completed the degree within five years—with less-than-flattering transcripts. A few more completed the degree within six to eight years, whereas the majority did not.

It took great courage for Lis to consider and accept the reasons for the discontinuation of this programme and, in turn, to help the faculty secure university approval. To this day, the faculty of law remains the only faculty at UCT without an extended programme. The number of students from marginalised groups has increased considerably since we discontinued the programme and, more importantly, these students now cope much better with the standard LLB streams and are among the top performers.

A proposed policy to introduce a teaching career track up to the rank of associate professor was another controversial measure pushed in some quarters, riding on the pro-teaching sentiment within the university. However, unlike the extended programmes and related support mechanisms, this proposal had little to no transformative intent or effect, given the demographic profile of its few intended beneficiaries. As someone who promoted teaching and learning at the university, Lis was aggressively lobbied by some academics who were employed on the teaching track or who were not progressing

beyond the level of senior lecturer because they could not produce research. As part of an effort to recognise so-called ‘great teachers’, Lis introduced the proposed policy to the deans as strongly as she typically did when advocating for policies she believed in. However, she faced fierce opposition from several deans precisely because existing promotion criteria already recognised alternative forms of research that teaching-focused academics could rely on in their promotion portfolios. After several meetings and discussions at various forums, the policy proposal was defeated. Gracious in defeat, Lis never reintroduced the proposal.

The same policy was reintroduced with more vigour shortly after Lis’s departure. This time, however, the process was marked by the notable absence of openness to debate and critical engagement that had previously characterised policy deliberations. In particular, there was no comparable openness to discussing and examining all relevant arguments fully and fairly. Instead, a strategy of procedural exhaustion and obfuscation was employed, which only succeeded in stifling dissenting voices. Consequently, the policy that has been accepted is poorly drafted, conceptually ambiguous, not in the university’s best interests and will shape institutional practice for many years to come.

As things stand, UCT’s policy orientation is now geared towards teaching and learning rather than research, and the results are already troubling. The number of active researchers is declining, and research output is trending downward. Yet, there seems to be no willingness to recognise this as a problem worth investigating or to identify solutions. The irony is that official interest in the outcomes of global rankings has increased over the past eight years, precisely as the anti-research sentiment has (hopefully) reached its peak.

I am certain that Lis would not have supported such a turn. Overall, her interest was limited to addressing the perception that these essential university functions were on unequal footing, rather than subverting the balance in the opposite direction.

Management

For a long time, UCT has had one VC and two or more DVCs, although the division of labour and job descriptions of the DVCs constantly evolved. At the time Lis assumed her position, there were three DVCs: one responsible for transformation and student residence, another for research and internationalisation, and a third for teaching and learning. In practice, the DVC responsible for the teaching and learning portfolio was the most senior by virtue of line-managing the deans and, hence, the faculties.

It is well known that universities are complex and that their leaders must possess capabilities and varied experience beyond the formal requirements of their job descriptions. Writers on university leadership note the following as additional capabilities and skills a university leader must possess: commitment to personal and institutional integrity, sensitivity to pluralism and cultural diversity, and adaptability and resilience. In my view, for a line manager of deans to succeed at UCT or indeed at any other university, they must possess the following characteristics in addition to proven competence and experience in management and in teaching and learning at the appropriate level. They must be accessible and responsive. They must have the capacity to listen and to request reports, information and relevant justifications when a faculty or dean's decision is impugned; they must also have the capacity to timeously address problems presented to them or, as far as possible, to offer alternative or improved solutions, sometimes proactively, based on evidence and the relevant information. Wieland Gevers (2026: 19) is correct in saying that a university leader must

learn to engage with experienced administrative staff, and begin to establish the necessary evidence base for action and reform. In doing this, one also has to be aware that the internal and external operating environment may change, impacting one's thinking, often necessitating revised approaches, and prompting occasional tactical retreats.

The line manager must also be reliable in defending or advocating for the faculty or dean when necessary, unless there are valid reasons not to do so. As Stuart Saunders notes, a university leader must have the ability and integrity to ‘take the heat in the kitchen’ when circumstances dictate (Saunders 2016: 4).

My experience of working with Lis confirmed that she possessed these characteristics, as the examples already discussed show and further examples will further demonstrate. Although she came from a university with a lower international profile than UCT, she was confident in her abilities and experience. In my view, she was one of the best DVCs at UCT. She was not only reliable as source of support for faculties but also had authority and enjoyed wide respect within the institution, which allowed her to advocate for deans and their respective faculties where necessary and to hold the executive line when she believed compliance with university policies or lawful directives was warranted.

As part of line management functions, Lis convened regular deans’ meetings. This was the most fulfilling UCT forum for any dean, owing to the high quality of the debate and the discussion of institutional ideas. Under Lis’s leadership, deans felt free to discuss matters affecting their respective faculties and to share their concerns. As expected, sharp disagreements were common. The critical point was that after careful consideration, the strongest arguments invariably prevailed. Always boisterous, Lis immersed herself in these debates. Known for holding strong opinions, she was remarkably gracious when she lost an argument and was always prepared to transcend herself through reason, dialogue and respect for others’ points of view. It is this characteristic that made her at once an object of respect among some and of apprehension among others.

Managerialism

The emergence and institutionalisation of corporate-style performance regimes at UCT among executives and deans were among the most

hotly contested topics during Lis's tenure. Here again she demonstrated her ability to facilitate discussion and examine all opposing views to arrive at the right policy position. Managerialism within South African universities has crept in, not as a result of the organic upward development of the academic environment, but as a consequence of deeper structural incongruence in the governance design of the university. The Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997 established council as the supreme governing body with wide-ranging powers over university property, staffing, financial decisions, admissions policy, language policy, student support, and legislative developments, relegating senate to a subordinate advisory or consultative role, even in academic matters. Furthermore, the council is composed largely of members external to the university who lack the necessary knowledge and experience of how universities function.

One consequence of this lopsided power structure is that the usual standards of academic accountability—collegiality and peer review—do not apply to those appointed to the university's higher echelons. Thankfully, UCT's council had long ago adopted a hands-off approach, largely reactive and deferential to the academic leadership of the time, which accorded its senate autonomy over the academic project, supported by highly productive departments and faculties that also operated autonomously in a decentralised context. This practice created the impression of being legally codified.

However, over time, corporate performance mechanisms began infiltrating academic administration, culminating in attempts to impose private-sector-style key performance areas (KPAs) and key performance indicators (KPIs) on UCT's leadership. This shift intensified around 2020/2021 when the council's remuneration committee apparently instructed the VC, DVC and executive directors to submit KPAs and KPIs, a practice that ran counter to established academic norms. The expectation was that these metrics would cascade downwards, requiring deans and heads of department to tailor their performance criteria to match those of their superiors.

When Lis conveyed council's demand and asked deans to submit

new performance reports using indicators aligned with the executive's, the proposal met with unified pushback. Deans argued that academic leadership could not be assessed through managerial templates better suited to corporate environments than universities. After intense debate, Lis accepted their position and agreed that deans should draft job descriptions and performance criteria grounded in the realities of academic leadership and contexts rather than imported corporate models. However, her attempt to persuade the executive to adopt this bottom-up approach failed. Subsequent efforts by deans to raise the issue with senior leadership were met with hostility rather than dialogue, signalling how deeply the managerial turn had taken hold.

This conflict marked a decisive rupture. After her engagement with the deans led her to withdraw support for the proposed new model, Lis became, in the eyes of some colleagues, the leader of a 'rebellion'. This incident exposed both the limits of academic self-governance under the prevailing statutory framework and the vulnerability of university leadership to managerial templates and rationales imported wholesale from contexts not aligned with academia. It also exemplified Lis's leadership style, which was shaped by a total commitment to critical engagement, for which she remains highly respected at UCT and beyond.

Conclusion

This brief tribute attests to Lis's exemplary leadership at UCT, marked by intellectual rigour, principled decision-making and an unwavering commitment to personal and institutional integrity. She navigated crises and tough debates with the experience and dignity of a seasoned and thoughtful scholar, championed a recalibration of the balance between teaching and research, and helped defend academic values against managerial tendencies that have taken hold at UCT. As is to be expected with the position she held, some of the policy positions she advocated were mistaken and did not come to fruition, but she

demonstrated the maturity and capacity to transcend herself through reason and openness to diverse viewpoints. There can be no doubt that she left a significant mark on UCT's traditions, policies, and practices. Few leaders leave such a profound imprint in such a brief tenure. UCT and its wider community were privileged to benefit from her vision, dedication and service.

CHAPTER 9

FOUNDING A SPACE OF EPISTEMIC FREEDOM

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It is the responsibility of institutions, and especially of academics and students, to sustain the moment by making knowledge the permanent object of collective reflection if South African universities are to address the unrealised aspects of institutional transformation.

[T]he very notion of transformation in South Africa entails keeping on asking about the subject, the object, the means and the motives of transformation in each area of society where it is proclaimed or sought.

What I am proposing here is to explore not the limits of politics, but on the contrary, its possibilities.

— Lis Lange

Introduction

Although Lis Lange is primarily known for her contributions to the field of higher education, her intellectual habits and published work never failed to betray her first discipline, History. I first met her on

the Bloemfontein campus of the University of the Free State (UFS) in 2011 on one of those occasions when she could momentarily set aside her administrative role in order to pursue her scholarly interests. If I recall correctly, she presented a talk on Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) and the question it poses concerning the relationship between thinking and ethical responsibility, a question I would later come to understand as central to Lis's identity as a scholar. Shortly afterwards I approached her with the request to supervise my PhD. A brief teaching stint in the Department of Philosophy at the UFS had awakened my interest in the institutional and political dimension of philosophy as an academic discipline. With a growing sense of unease, I wondered: what ethical thinking or notion of responsibility informed the praxis of teaching philosophy at South African universities? Lis was intrigued by the possibility of exploring the question but quickly made another suggestion. Instead of an abstract, purely theoretical project, why not consider the question in relation to a particular institution's history? Why not investigate the intellectual history of a particular department of philosophy? That was Lis the historian, and although I was certainly no historian, she made a compelling argument. If you want to investigate the relationship between philosophy and politics, why not ground the question in a concrete historical context? For reasons that need not detain me here, I only finished the PhD much later and under a different supervisor. I did however follow through on her suggestion and focused on the intellectual history of the Department of Philosophy at the UFS. This not only opened up the discipline of philosophy to me in new and unexpected ways but also forced me to situate my discipline within the history and politics of South Africa in a way that I had resisted in the past. I will forever be thankful to Lis for this. Her emphasis on the historical dimension of a question that intrigued me will remain my most enduring impression of her approach to any subject.

I believe it was also an essential part of her pedagogy, and while it was undoubtedly a result of her abiding love of Marxism, it also related to her sustained interest in the work of Arendt. In delivering the

Daantjie Oosthuizen Academic Freedom Memorial Lecture at Rhodes in 2016, she drew on Arendt's understanding of action and politics to broaden the conception of academic freedom (Lange 2016b), while in another publication she explored Arendt's thought on education to develop the notion of a 'political pedagogy' (Lange 2012). She often spoke about her desire to write a book about Arendt and Marx's respective conceptions of alienation. In honour of her intellectual passions, I want to use this opportunity to engage another theme from Arendt which also speaks to the question of politics, education and transformation, namely revolution and the problem of the founding.

I decided on this theme in response to Jansen and Goliath's contribution to this volume (Chapter 5) in which they helpfully identify four areas of critique that feature prominently in Lis's writing on the university and academic values: (a) the depoliticisation of concepts; (b) the conversion of concepts into 'bureaucratic knowledge'; (c) top-down authority structures that exclude campus citizens from participating in the shaping of institutional knowledge; and (d) the reduction of our understanding of academic freedom to 'the absence of outside interference'. These criticisms share a concern with the distortion that occurs in the confrontation between political action and institutionalisation; more specifically, in each case there is an intimation of the way in which the radical moment of questioning, deliberation and decision-making, that is, of action, is forestalled, betrayed, prohibited or transfigured into its opposite. In other words, the moment of politicisation seems to contain within itself the seed of depoliticisation. Here, I explore this dynamic in Lis's work and with reference to Arendt's investigation into revolution and the problem of the founding. I suggest that Arendt's attempt to conceive of an alternative form of political authority offers a language that allows us to make explicit a concept that Lis continuously traces in her thinking about epistemology in relation to transformation. I argue that it is possible to derive an alternative conception of 'epistemic authority' from Lis's work, one which responds to the demand to found an enduring space of epistemic freedom, that is, a space where knowledge

can become ‘the permanent object of collective reflection’ (Lange 2017: 50).

I begin by presenting in more detail the problem that Lis grappled with and by situating it within a certain reading of the constitutional dispensation that resulted from the transition to a democratic South Africa. After that, I try to illuminate the problem by focusing on Arendt’s discussion of the founding and the alternative account of authority she uncovers through her interpretation of the American revolution. Finally, I argue that Arendt’s alternative conception of authority provides a language that resonates with and augments Lis’s enduring engagement with the question of transformation in South African higher education.

The problem

As aforementioned, in reading Lis’s work on the university one is struck by the notion that there exists a more-than-coincidental relationship between politicisation and depoliticisation. On this point, the state of affairs in higher education to some extent mirrors the broader politico-judicial context of the country. Although it is debatable whether the transition to democratic South Africa can rightly be called a ‘revolution’, it is nonetheless clear that a break from the apartheid past invoked a notion of political freedom in the radical sense Arendt ascribes to it, that is, of a new beginning. Sadly, more than thirty years into democracy and in addition to the disconcerting problems of rampant crime and corruption, we have also witnessed how the transformative politics that underpinned the democratic transition have been reduced to clichés and corporate catchphrases.

The reasons for this are, of course, complex, but in a real sense involve the constitutional dispensation as such. Karl Klare (1998) has convincingly argued that the Constitution should be read as a transformative document, which, among things implies that the meaning of rights enshrined in it is never fixed, static or to be taken for granted but instead demands to be continuously interpreted and

developed if we are to give content to the Constitution's more radical aims. This means that the Constitution is not a neutral instrument that can be simply and unproblematically applied; on the contrary, it remains a sight of political struggle. However, as critical legal scholars have pointed out, constitutional supremacy and rights discourse have not engendered a vibrant space of political participation; instead, they have displayed a tendency to prohibit political action and obstruct radical transformation (Van Marle 2019: 110). Ironically, precisely because it entrenches fundamental rights, the Constitution has been conceived as bringing to an end the unruliness of politics. In this view, the existence of a right is assumed to equate its realisation so that its meaning is circumscribed and qualified in a way that constrains its transformative potential (see Christodoulidis 1993). In post-apartheid South Africa, the Constitution is often considered at best beyond the reach of politics and at worst as an instrument for protecting the entrenched privileges of a moneyed elite. For the vast majority of the country's citizens, participation in the public realm has been reduced to the vote, while the more affluent minority have come to embrace a freedom from politics symbolised by a retreat behind high fences, guaranteed not by the state through its monopoly on violence but through the outsourced right to violence of private security companies.

Lis was attuned to a parallel dynamic unfolding in the sphere of higher education. The political transition in South Africa stood in a determined, perhaps overdetermined, relationship to education. On the one hand, the education system was instrumental in maintaining social relations as they existed under apartheid. On the other hand, inasmuch as this posed a challenge to the transformation of society (Jansen 2009), it also contained a promise, for as Arendt (2006: 189) puts it, education is about preparing the next generation for the task of renewing the world. In other words, the question of education and the new beginning that was heralded by the transition to democracy were and remain intimately connected. However, despite notable gains in some areas, the higher education landscape has reflected parallel failures to those visible in the broader political landscape. Although

much of this can undoubtedly be attributed to pathologies inherited from the past, it could also be argued that, in the same way that the combination of constitutional supremacy and rights discourse have induced a sense of political complacency, the new democratic dispensation assumed that the promise of a new education would be realised automatically; in other words, that the language of rights and constitutionalism's structural tendency to constrain the open-ended nature of the political extended into the sphere of (higher) education.

Reading Lis's work, one is struck by the recurrence of this theme. In fact, the four areas of critique that Jansen and Goliath identify in their tribute all in some sense reflect Lis's keen sense of the contradictions, ambiguities and missed opportunities that traverse the discourse and practice of transformation in the higher education landscape (see for instance Lange 2014).

In the Daantjie Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture Lis argues that, with the exception of some remaining possibilities, we are in fact witnessing the retreat, even the inversion, of transformative possibilities:

[T]he politicisation and instrumentalisation of the university that derives from [the rise of the knowledge economy and stronger forms of accountability between universities, the state and society] has as its interesting contradictory result the depoliticisation of knowledge and of the academic as individual (Lange 2016b: 178).

She goes on to argue that this depoliticisation has 'infected' the notion of academic freedom itself in the sense that that freedom has increasingly come to mean the *right to disengage* from the political fight against those processes that would undermine it, whether it be interference from the state or the more insidious process through which the university is reshaped in accordance with the values of the market (see Brown 2015). That said, what concerned Lis most was the way in which this development had foreclosed deliberations on 'knowledge—its constitution, effects, distribution in society and its

power' (Lange 2016b: 178). In this context, Lis proposed to augment the traditional liberal notion of academic freedom with reference to Arendt's understanding of action. To follow her argument here, it is necessary briefly to summarise Arendt's understanding of action in relation to freedom.

For Arendt, freedom corresponds to a fundamental aspect of the human condition, namely the fact that we live as speaking and acting beings among other human beings, each capable of setting in motion through speech and action a new course of events with radically unpredictable consequences. She refers to this as the condition of human plurality, which she further elaborates on through the notion of natality, that is, the fact that humans have the potential of beginning something new simply by virtue of being themselves a new addition to the world. This entails, as she puts it, that 'freedom is given under conditions of non-sovereignty' (Arendt 2006: 162–163). In other words, freedom is not the absence of coercion; neither is it a form of sovereign control. It means entering an existing 'web of human relations' (Arendt 1998[1958]: 182–183) in which the individual's words and deeds will reverberate unpredictably, for better or for worse.

Arendt contrasts action (freedom) with labour and work. While labour corresponds to the condition of biological existence and its inescapable cyclical process of growth and decay, work corresponds to the human condition of 'worldliness', that is, to the need to build an artificial, inhabitable world of durable objects. And while both labour and work are primarily instrumental, action is revelatory in the sense that speech and action reveal to others who we are—as opposed to words and deeds which unintentionally 'produce' meaningful stories that only become intelligible in retrospect. Lis emphatically argues that academic life amounts to participating in the constitution of the public world and the disclosure of the self through action. In this way, she rejects the received liberal understanding of academic freedom as the freedom to remain outside of politics and calls for 'an active affirmation of our teaching as part of the construction of a public space' (Lange 2016b: 185).

I want to elaborate on what it means to consider teaching as part of the construction of public space. It is easy to take this concept at face value, but once we consider teaching a form of *action* in the very specific sense in which Arendt uses this term, it gets more complicated. For, action, Arendt tells us, is not sovereign; it does not consist in mastering a situation; it does not produce objects through the manipulation of material in accordance with a model. That would be what she calls *work*. In a certain sense, action always means not quite knowing what we are doing. Action is also not about applying strength and is therefore the antithesis of violence. Acting in concert with others generates *power* for as long as the action lasts. An example would be the public gatherings in the USA in response to the President Donald Trump's violent crackdown on immigration. Although the simple act of congregating and marching through the city is powerful, the power only lasts as long as the action continues; it does not leave behind physical monuments. Yes, it produces stories that commit events to memory, but it does not construct or build something in the same way that work does. There is of course the ubiquitous view of teaching as 'moulding the young', but whatever the value of such a practice may be, it would contradict an understanding of teaching as *action* since it entails viewing students as material to be shaped in accordance with a pre-given model. For Arendt at least this would destroy precisely what is revolutionary in every child, namely its ability to renew and set right a world that is per definition always exposed to ruin. So, what would it mean to consider teaching a form of action that participates in the construction of public space?

Judging by the tenor of Lis's argument, she has in mind more than the fleeting moment of action; as if teaching can possibly also create something more durable. To understand this, I turn to Arendt's investigation into the bourgeois revolutions of 18th-century Europe. I argue that her analysis of the problem of the founding as exemplified by those upheavals holds important insights for our attempt to think through what it might mean to consider teaching as a form of action that builds without foreclosing the radical open-endedness of the political.

Arendt on the problem of the founding

As with much of her other work, Arendt's interest in revolutions and the problem of the founding should be read in the context of her sustained attempts to understand under what conditions totalitarianism became possible and what resources politics might contain to prevent totalitarian regimes from arising in future.

There is no space here for a reconstruction of the wide-ranging argument Arendt develops in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948). Briefly, her view is that totalitarianism was the result of a particular attempt to deal with the loss of traditional forms of authority in the 20th century. A constellation of factors, including the rise of capitalism, the scientific revolution and successive bourgeois revolutions undermined the notion that the stability of the political realm was underpinned and stabilised by a transcendent authority. These developments also precipitated 'world alienation', that is, the decline of a common world of objects and institutions that mediates between a plurality of people. The totalitarian regimes that arose in Germany and the Soviet Union in the first half of the 20th century attempted to fill this void and the 'abyss of freedom' it opened with an appeal to the inexorable unfolding of history. Darwinian racial science in the case of Nazi Germany, and dialectical materialism in the case of the Soviet Union, both appealed to history as the unfolding of a logical process which not only explained the past and present but also allowed for the prediction of the future. For Arendt, the notion that history followed an inevitable course, either to ensure the ultimate triumph of some superior race or towards a classless utopia, amounted to the repudiation of human freedom, that is, of what she called 'natality', the fact that each human being was a new beginning and therefore capable of interrupting a given course of events thereby beginning something new. In her view, the appeal of totalitarian regimes to the authority of History was consistent with the Western philosophical tradition's suspicion of human freedom and the political realm in general. It was this ingrained suspicion of politics coupled with the breakdown of traditional forms of authority that led

to the doomed attempt to ‘escape from freedom into the “necessity” of history’ (Arendt 2005: 95).

Arendt turned her attention to the great bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th century precisely because they had to contend with the consequences of the loss of traditional forms of authority. Formulated differently, these revolutions posed the problem of freedom, that is, the problem of beginning something radically new, in the starkest possible terms. By casting off monarchical rule and setting out to found new republics, both the French and American revolutionaries had to confront the problem of the founding or the question of how to re-establish political authority. Arendt believed that the way in which the American revolution specifically overcame this problem spoke to the political troubles engendered by modernity. In her well-known essay on education (Arendt 2005) she explicitly links the tension between, on the one hand, the revolutionary act of beginning something new and the need for durable institutions to, on the other hand, the question of education. I would argue that Lis’s thinking about the university and the question of transformation can also be located within this nexus of issues.

Revolutions confront us head on with the arbitrary and groundless nature of political action. Both French and American revolutionaries explicitly understood their repudiation of the *ancien régime* as an absolute break with the past. As a consequence, what up until that point had been a strictly theoretical problem, i.e. the problem of founding a new political order *ex nihilo*, suddenly became an urgent practical problem (Arendt 1990[1963]: 204–206). The crucial difficulty was the perceived need for a so-called ‘higher law’ that could ground and legitimise their actions. As Arendt notes, due to the weight of their inherited tradition of political thought, revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic could only conceive of the ‘higher law’ (political authority) as located in a transcendent source, a source outside the flux and uncertainty of human affairs. The problem was that their own revolutionary action had made precisely this conception of authority untenable. In the process of confronting this difficulty and engaging as

equals in collective deliberation about the nature of political authority and the organisation of government, these revolutionaries recovered an ancient experience of political freedom, of directly participating in the constitution of the public realm. She argues that the rediscovery of this experience of action made the search for an absolute, transcendent source of authority not only untenable but also undesirable for it would undermine the very space of freedom, the possibility of actively participating in politics, which the revolution had opened up (Arendt 1990[1963]: 182–194). The problem was how to maintain this space of freedom. The need for an institutional framework that could outlast the always-fleeting moment of action, for an architecture that could structure and give durability to the space of freedom, remained urgent.

Arendt further excavates the problem with reference to the distinction between liberation and the foundation of freedom. Although liberation from an oppressive or illegitimate authority is an essential component of every revolution, liberation in itself does not necessarily establish a lasting space for freedom.

As we have learned from the history of postcolonial Africa, liberation all too easily gives way to autocratic regimes that close off the space of freedom, while the revolutionary spirit just as often dissipates in the unyielding language of law and bureaucracy. As Arendt sees it, the problem of the founding therefore involves the paradoxical task of preserving the revolutionary spirit, that is, of thinking together structure and event, stability and change, in such a way that future generations may also experience the freedom to actively participate in the constitution of the public realm. The specific resonance with Lis's position and her critique of the discourse and practice of transformation should be clear. At stake here is the question of how action can construct something that is at once durable and dynamic, stable and open to change. This returns us to the question I posed earlier, namely how could teaching conceived as *action* construct a lasting epistemic space? How can and should we, in the context of the university, negotiate between the seemingly conflicting registers of change and durability? Before I offer a tentative response to this

question, it is necessary first to pursue Arendt's line of thought a little further.

Arendt's alternative account of political authority

Arendt notes that the revolutionaries themselves seemed unaware that their conception of a 'higher law' located outside the sphere of politics undermined the very space of freedom their actions had brought into existence. She reaches this conclusion through her interpretation of the celebrated wording of the American Declaration of Independence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident.' The appeal to self-evident truths belied the radical nature of the revolutionary project, which was revolutionary precisely inasmuch as it relinquished the safety of indisputable truths. She notes as contradictory that if the truths were truly 'self-evident', the founders would not have needed to agree on them by adding the 'we hold'. Self-evident truths transcend the mere political character of any collective commitment; they are 'irresistible' (Arendt 1990[1963]: 193) and therefore do not require agreement. For Arendt, the power that brought into being the American republic and the authority that gave it durability was precisely constituted by the *action* itself, by the collective agreement expressed through the act of saying 'we hold', which, she comments, is 'the perfect way for an action to appear in words' (Arendt 1990[1963]: 130). As Bonnie Höning (1991: 101) explains, the declaration should be considered a particular kind of performative speech act similar to a promise in the sense that it is speaking, the speech act itself, that brings the republic into existence. The existence of the republic is maintained in the same way that a promise is a form of action that endures beyond the moment of its enunciation. In this way, Arendt offers an alternative account of political authority as one in which the source of stability can be located in the action itself. As she puts it:

What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more

precise, that beginning and principle ... are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world (Arendt 1990[1963]: 212).

In this way, the American (unlike the French) revolutionaries all but unknowingly overcame the intellectual legacy that led them to believe that the foundation required an appeal to a source of authority outside the space of politics. The meaning of their actions, opaque to themselves but clearer in hindsight, suggest an alternative theory and practice of political authority.

But of course, things are never quite that simple. For, as Arendt shows, the crucial legacy of the American revolutionaries remained obscured by the appeal to absolutes ('self-evident truths') which subsequently became cemented in the American political imagination. Formulated differently, the radical moment of a new beginning, a moment of transformative politicisation, gave way to depoliticisation. Consequently, in the American context the pursuit of public happiness was reduced to a pursuit of private happiness. The freedom to actively participate in the public space was displaced by a notion of freedom as freedom from politics, that is, an anti-political concept of freedom.

Finding an alternative account of epistemic 'authority' in Lis's work

Lis's thinking about the university is characterised by the attempt to conceptualise academic freedom as a specifically political act and not simply as the right to disengage from politics. I want to suggest that in the process, particularly in her work on the academic curriculum, she implicitly articulates an alternative conception of epistemic 'authority'. In the remainder of this tribute, I elaborate on this with reference to Arendt's alternative conception of political authority as discussed

earlier. I focus on her chapter in the edited collection *Philosophy on the Border* (Praeg 2019) in which she discusses transformation of the academic curriculum with specific reference to a review of the Bachelor of Arts (BA) in the Faculty of Humanities at the UFS in 2014.

I will not repeat Lis's account of the course of events in detail other than to note the following aspects of the background of that review process. By the time Lis joined the UFS in 2011 as head of the Directorate of Institutional Research and Planning (DIRAP), the curriculum at the UFS had already undergone marked changes in response to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) instituted in 1995. As she notes, the NQF in effect encouraged the modularisation of the curriculum and the notion of credit accumulation. The UFS embraced this change because it allowed the university to address financial challenges. As she notes, by 2011 this had 'dismantled any notion of curriculum as a coherent organisation of knowledge' and 'the task became one of restoring the importance of the idea of disciplinary knowledge as well as rules of progression and combination into the design of the academic programmes' (Lange 2019a: 76). I mention this because it speaks to a concern with the architecture of the curriculum, or to invoke the language of Arendt, there was a sense in which curriculum work engaged the problem of the founding, that is, of creating a durable institution. The political dimension, in the broad Arendtian sense of public deliberation, was intended as a feature of the process from the start, since as Lis (2019a: 77) notes, '[t]he aim was to generate strong academic engagement with the curriculum revision process'. This could be interpreted as the intention to create a space for the cultivation of a more positive understanding of academic freedom—not the negative freedom to be left to your own devices, but the freedom to participate in a process of creating something new. Lis's reconstruction of events speaks to a tension between an openness to change and self-reflection on the one hand and a determined concern with structure on the other.

The review of the curriculum involved a panel of three academics (two South African, one British) who visited the UFS for four days

at the end of which they produced a report that included their impressions of the curriculum as well as several recommendations. As Lis notes, the panel focused on ‘the currency of the curriculum in relation to the state of the disciplines, its pedagogic underpinnings and the kind of graduates it was educating’ (Lange 2019a: 80). The critical component of the report and the response it elicited from a group of self-elected academics from the humanities faculty became the focus of Lis’s analysis in her chapter titled, ‘Curriculum in times of decolonisation: reflections on knowledge, power and identity at the University of the Free State’. I would argue that above and beyond the main argument she develops in her analysis of the UFS academics’ response to the report, we can also unearth in her analysis a conception of the tension that marks the founding and which allows us to think together the apparently conflicting elements of, on the one hand, the radical suspension of stability and form involved in questioning and challenging knowledge (a political, and affirmative interpretation of academic freedom), and on the other hand a concern with curriculum as the coherent organisation of knowledge devised to maintain relative stability. To do this, we need to briefly note the panel’s most salient critical comments, the response of the group of academics, and Lis’s deconstructive critique of that response.

The panel’s central criticism is captured in its description of the ‘consistent and almost exclusive emphasis in the teaching and examining materials’ on ‘*the delivery of content* rather than on the *cultivation of the higher learning skills* of analysis and argument’ (quoted in Lange 2019a: 78; original emphasis). The panel was also critical of the apparent neglect of the ‘imperative for instilling in students the values of debate and controversy, and that deliberate fostering of ... self-conscious critical enquiry’ (in Lange 2019a: 79). The group of academics responded to these observations by contrasting their pedagogic approach with what they perceived to be the panel’s approach:

The report ... almost exclusively emphasises the usefulness of knowledge and questioning skills. The opposing argument

is that it is just as important to instill in students *the relative constant, universal and foundational knowledge, while local issues should be treated as an extension and application of the aforementioned knowledge* (in Lange 2019a: 81; original emphasis).

In her response, Lis argues that the academics' understanding of their own position, which they described as *Problemgeschichte* (the history of ideas), was based on three untenable binaries: ontology/action; constant, universal knowledge/particular, local knowledge, and tradition/dissent. She proceeds to show how each of these binaries collapses under the slightest scrutiny: first, knowledge of a certain discipline is never independent from or unrelated to a certain type of behaviour; second, what the academics view as 'universal knowledge' is itself an instance of particular knowledge, that is, knowledge produced by Western European culture; finally, tradition itself is only thinkable as the history of problems and the varied and contested ways in which they have been solved. Moreover, as she points out, *Problemgeschichte* as a tradition may in fact be better identified with an openness towards the fractures in, and limits of, any given disciplinary tradition. *Problemgeschichte*, as she understands it, means the 'investigation of an epistemic space and the problems peculiar to that place'; for the UFS academics it meant 'the transmission of a canon, of a tradition that the university is responsible for conserving and transmitting' (Lange 2019a: 87). We might add a fourth binary to those Lis identifies in the UFS academics' response, namely, conservation/change. From the above discussion it should be clear that in choosing ontology over action, the universal over the particular, and tradition over change, the group of academics also privilege conservation over change. Although she does not explicitly engage this binary, I would argue that she does so implicitly, or rather that she articulates an understanding of the epistemic space that collapses the distinction between conservation and change.

At this point it is necessary to recall Arendt's alternative understanding of political authority, namely that action itself can be the

principle that grounds it. This challenges the binaries of ontology/action, universal/particular, and tradition/dissent while collapsing the binary conservation/change, or rather, it suggests that change itself is the condition of the possibility for persistence over time. Lis obliquely articulates this idea in her theorisation of transformation where she notes two features of the concept of transformation as it was used in pre-1994 discourse. First, '[it] implied a change in the nature of society that would clearly mark a break with the past'; second, its conceptualisation involved its

historical and dynamic nature, which obliges all of us interested in and committed to it to the periodic redefinition of the term. Put differently, the very notion of transformation in South Africa entails keeping on asking about the subject, the object, the means and the motives of transformation in each area of society where it is proclaimed or sought (Lange 2019a: 86).

These remarks echo Arendt's conceptualisation of the 'revolutionary spirit'. For Arendt, the revolutionary spirit contains two seemingly irreconcilable and contradictory elements. On the one hand, a concern with the stability and durability of the new structure, and on the other hand, the 'exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning' (Arendt 1990[1963]: 223–224). Lis's comment about transformation attests to both these elements: the radical break with the past, but also the implicit concern with the future of the new structure; the assumption that a break with the past begets something in need of care and preservation. Such care does not involve safeguarding a fixed meaning; on the contrary, care and preservation entail a continuing interrogation of the 'subject, the object, the means and the motives of transformation'.

Lis transposes this idea to her thinking about teaching, knowledge and the curriculum. Her efforts to rethink academic freedom as active participation in the public realm, teaching as an active affirmation of

our participation in the construction of a public space, and her call for academics to engage in critical self-reflection all speak to the idea of maintaining by augmentation. Hönig (1991: 108) notes that central to Arendt's understanding of authority is the notion of 'resistability'; that within the political realm any appeal to a universal, transcendent source of authority should be resisted. Lis's call for continued self-reflection and questioning of the knowledge of knowledge suggests a similar commitment to 'resistability'.

In Arendt's account, it is precisely this commitment that endows a republic with vigour, while in Lis's thinking about the curriculum, resistance to epistemic closure is the very feature that gives the curriculum structure and resilience. Jacques Derrida makes a similar point:

The apparent firmness, hardness, durability or resistance of philosophical institutions betrays, first of all the fragility of a foundation. It is on the ground of this (theoretical and practical) 'deconstructability,' it is against it, that the institution institutes itself (Derrida 2002: 10).

Bruno Latour, who is known for his exposure of the contingencies, coincidences and complex networks of co-operation that underly scientific discoveries, recently suggested that the apparent vulnerability of science and truth in a post-truth era is paradoxically the result of a positivist approach to science that ignored the contingency and fragility of 'facts'. By insisting on the neutrality and self-evident nature of 'facts', he argues, the positivist approach to science unwittingly aided the attack on the foundations of knowledge. As Kofman (2018) notes in a review of Latour's *Down to Earth* (2018):

Latour believes that if scientists were transparent about how science really functions—as a process in which people, politics, institutions, peer review and so forth all play their parts—they would be in a stronger position to convince people of their claims.

Counter-intuitively, it is precisely the commitment to a critique of knowledge that fashions the structures that give knowledge relative stability over time. To be sure, the epistemic space that Lis evokes is not one of completeness or self-sufficiency, which is why she emphasises the need to cultivate a ‘sense of incompleteness, precariousness and the need for conviviality’ (Lange 2019a: 85). For her, this is the condition for the transformation of the academic curriculum.

Conclusion

My argument here may have been unduly influenced by my experience of Lis as a friend and mentor, but when I think of her I always think of her ability to simultaneously project two things: a bristling and incisive, sometimes bruising, capacity for action, and a sense of calm and considered building. I think of her as someone who was open to what Derrida describes as ‘the radical abeyance and suspense marking a *perhaps*’ (Derrida 2002: 67) but also as someone with the courage to suspend the *perhaps*, to calculate when necessary, to take responsibility for the narrowing of possibilities that must always follow a decision.

Her concern about the depoliticisation and bureaucratisation of potentially transformative concepts, her critique of top-down authority structures and her attempts to conceive a more positive understanding of academic freedom all reflect her commitment to keeping the space of action and freedom alive. At the same time, her systematic approach to problems, her painstaking historical reconstructions of a question and her tendency to structure her academic writing by analogy with the successive movements of classical music compositions also betrayed a distinctly architectural sensibility.

Lis, like her intellectual companion, Arendt, was also concerned with the less spectacular virtues of durability and stability. Her approach to restructuring the undergraduate degree courses at the UFS testified to this, as did her conviction that truly radical transformation had to begin with the curriculum.

At a time when powerful new technologies of alienation are being developed at break-neck speed with less and less regard for their consequences, when these technologies are explicitly conceived as miracle solutions to all kinds of societal problems, Lis's insistence on the virtue of continued critical reflection on the knowledge of knowledge may serve as a counterforce to the desire to 'escape from freedom into the "necessity" of History' (Arendt 2005: 95). The large multi-nationals that are steering the development of artificial intelligence would have us believe that super-intelligent machines will soon relieve humanity of the need to think and act, making redundant both education and politics as traditionally understood. It would benefit us to think from time to time how Lis would have responded to this challenge.

CHAPTER 10

FORGET TRANSFORMATION; F*CK THE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Every so often, an idea and its sedimented meanings and forms should be put aside and forgotten. A range of such thoughts and practices in a variety of religions, politics and cultures come to mind, so do entire languages and discourses, such as the discourses on ‘human rights’, ‘decolonisation’, ‘reconstruction’ and ‘reconciliation’. All these notions and discourses share one key characteristic: they are or are becoming empty placeholders that absorb an infinite number of diverse and contradictory meanings, and in the process they generate semiotic black holes (Morrione 2006: 162). Their meanings have been exhausted and, in their dominant ‘tagline’ forms, they do not offer pathways for re-animating socio-cultural and political traditions and practices.

In the university, ‘the faculty’ as a way of organising teaching and knowledge should perhaps be forgotten to make way for new, less ego-centric, more queer epistemic architectures. And there are certainly strands of scholarship in which it has been argued that the ‘the university’ itself and ‘the professor’ should be shelved, as in ‘f*ck the university’. Key here, in reflecting on Lis’s intellectual contribution,

is that she had come to read transformation in its current form and discourse as a dead political project. She also connected the death of transformation in this sense to the ‘university in ruins’ (Readings 1996), and argued that the #MustFall protests stand as a profound example of defiance of the university’s authority; f*ck the university. From this position, she put forward the idea of the ‘university on the border’—its identity, social function and organisation giving rise to a decentred institution located in an uncertain ‘border’ position (see Lange et al. 2021).

Regarding the first phrase of this chapter’s title, Lis has given us a rich intellectual matrix to ‘forget’ that which transformation has become in the South African university sector. As for the second part of the title, ‘f*ck’ was undoubtedly one of her favourite words. She used it as an interjection or as an intensifier and not in a vulgar manner. This tribute is an attempt to honour the intellectual import of a routine utterance, in this case, ‘f*ck’, as regularly deployed by Lis in discussions on transformation and in disputations on the university’s false sense of itself as an enlightened institution.

The university was never a ‘settled’ configuration in Lis’s mind, hence ‘f*ck the university’ is not intended as a rejection of the idea of the university, but rather as a refusal of the university-as-such.¹ This comes through in her conception of the ‘university on the border,’ which I elaborate on later in this piece. Both ‘forget’ and ‘f*ck’ sign for the possibility of radical renewal of the university and both can be read as modes of refusal generally associated with abolitionist and decolonial university studies. ‘Forget transformation’ may mean to suspend the conceptual and institutional project of transformation so that other radical categories of institutional change may emerge, while ‘f*ck the university’ is refusing to grant the institution its own disciplining languages with the authority to define knowledge and change.

1 See the Undercommoning Collective (2016): ‘The university-as-such (conventionally understood) has never been a bastion of progress, learning, and fairness; it has always excluded individuals and communities on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship and politics. Indeed, it is implicated in the past and present of slavery and colonial genocide in North America’ and apartheid in South Africa and crimes in other parts of the world.

A black hole concept

In South African higher education and beyond, ‘transformation’ seems to have emerged as a primary black hole concept in need of conceptual rescue. Considered as a set of meanings, practices and actors, it has reached an impasse without the internal resources to renew itself. One may say that it suffers from a credibility crisis.

Though critics are quick to argue that transformation in South African universities is performed as compliance, it is perhaps more accurate to distinguish between two types of compliance. On the one hand, compliance culture is a strategic orientation that refers to the shared attitudes and behaviours within an organisation that prioritise adherence to laws, regulations, internal policies and ethical standards as an integral part of the university’s daily operations. It is the indispensable safety net of the institution. On the other hand, there is tick-box or checklist compliance: a superficial approach where required activities are completed on paper yet lack deep engagement with the underlying principles of transformation.

Transformation critique, however, is not limited to compliance but includes the entire system of what Lis called ‘institutionalised, performance-oriented transformation’. That is, a once-contested, intellectually rich and politically charged idea of ‘transformation’ in South Africa that has turned into a routinised, bureaucratic, common-sense and performance-managed object at state and university institutions. As a black hole concept, it has also largely become equated with demographic equity. Lis was deeply troubled by transformation’s disciplining effects, which depoliticise knowledge, as well as the way in which it projects itself as a new, progressive truth-package (separating good from bad) rather than as a project, or better, a *process*, of ongoing contestation. This ‘right, sector-specific transformation’ has detached itself from the structural constraints of the economy and political settlement and located itself in a performance-indicator metric.

In essence, as important as compliance may be in our country’s equity context, in Lis’s analysis it has not, in substance, contributed

to the deep changes envisaged by higher education policy. The paradox of the multiple, contested meanings of transformation reduced to one expedient and dominant frame suggests the functioning of a semiotic black hole where meaning is absorbed, collapsed and annihilated. Further, the fact that almost everyone and anyone can speak so definitively and with such authority about transformation (everyone is a transformation expert) is possibly an indication of its emptiness, its true absence, of what perhaps now exists only as meaningless noise. If this is indeed the case, should we not ‘forget transformation’ (after Baudrillard 1987)?

In much of the relevant scholarship and many of the reports, transformation is described as compliance driven.² That is, universities focus their transformation efforts on conforming with and drowning themselves in the regulatory requirements (law and policy) of the institution and higher education sector, which results in a ‘change-without-change approach’ (HSRC-TOC 2023: xxi). Stellenbosch University, where Lis spent the last leg of her impressive professional life, is probably the best example of this in our country (see Khamphepe Report 2022). There are also others (see HSRC-TOC 2023). As it so often happens, it is only when, as a stranger, one ‘downscends’³ into the genetic code of the university as a place of work that the structural outlines of the institution with all its possibilities and constraints, are more clearly drawn. Lis was without doubt one of the sharpest analysts and observers from this position at all the universities where she worked; always an insider-outsider.

2 As seen in the 2008 ‘Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions’ (henceforth MCTHE 2008); the South African Human Rights Commission 2016 report, ‘Transformation at Public Universities in South Africa’ (henceforth SAHRC 2016); Minister Pandor’s 2018 Higher Education Transformation Colloquium; and the Human Sciences Research Council’s 2023 report, ‘The State of Transformation in South Africa’s Public Universities: Research Report of the Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in the South African Public Universities’ (henceforth HSRC-TOC 2023).

3 ‘Downscend’ is a blended neologism combining ‘down’ + ‘scend’, the Latin root meaning ‘to climb’. The term plays on ‘down’ as a homonym, using the intransitive verb ‘to go down’ and the slang/adjective meaning ‘to thoroughly understand’.

The interface

Lis's work toiled at the interface of 'forget transformation' and 'f*ck the university'. Deeply critical of how the meanings and work of transformation took on a shallow, yet dominant character where universities mainly focus on meeting the formal legal and policy requirements of change—her ideas of the 'university on the border' suggest a militant break with the institution as it currently exists. This position is not dissimilar to that of decolonial and abolitionist university scholars and activists in their critique of the university-as-such. Yet, she was a radical pragmatist, always seeking courageous and imaginative changes with a keen sense of what may actually work in the real world and combining progressive ideas with efficient programmatic innovations.

Her ideas were always connected to the broader questions of our times, and she was profoundly troubled by the current geo-political madness, global instability, irrational politics, and the erosion of multilateralism. At the same time, she was also clear that these crises have long been in the making. Transactional diplomacy, the crude deployment of economic and military power rooted in re-energised forms of racism, nationalism, ethnicism and exclusion, have made liberalism's long-standing contradictions and hypocrisies glaringly transparent in present global discourses (see Keet & Staphorst 2026). Together with racial capitalism and the racial governance of the world, these developments have re-animated both the everyday life of bigotry and the structural mooring of its attendant discriminations in South Africa and elsewhere. If the current challenges of the world—social, economic, political, planetary—were delayed and stripped to bare bones, the racial and gendered structure of the global order would be revealed as the sole remaining affliction.

Thinking the university as defined by liberal values is nowadays a tricky, perilous task, but a necessary one, as Lis demonstrated. Institutions of higher education were always meant to be of a 'special type'—an independent community of teachers and knowledge

producers that exists to advance critical inquiry. Yet the university's capacity to engage and contest the boundaries of social and scientific discourse is slowly being eroded, globally. These questions were always key for Lis as she wrestled with a higher education scholarship that either assumes a 'fluffy' agency (an unconstrained capacity to act in which the individual tends to reflect themselves into innocence), or presupposes we are totally powerless in how our possibilities are shaped by institutional and structural arrangements, at all levels.

That the university is in crisis has for decades been a popular, almost standard point of entry into critiques of the institution. In addition to being 'in ruins', it is according to some observers perpetually at a crossroads. Though the critical treatment of the 'university-as-institution' has always been part of the sector's discourse, a different, more gloomy mood has become palpable. In her typically direct style, Lis engaged these challenges head-on even as the angst of our time weighed heavily on her shoulders. She felt that something must be done and, given the current state of the world and the state of things, she drew from her long-standing engagement with Open Marxism.⁴ In this interpretive scheme she could hold many concepts and ideas together: base (economy) and superstructure (society, culture, ideas); critical theory and psychoanalysis; the commodification of the self and its education; alienation and exploitation; technology and the neoliberal university; contradictions and tensions, and so forth. I return to several of these later.

At the interface of 'forget transformation' and 'f*ck the university', Lis's deeply critical take on the meanings and work of transformation in the higher education sector connects with her ideas of the 'university on the border'. The difference between Lis and those of us who have been enthralled by the Latin-American 'tourist-cum-scholars' (Maart 2020: 34)—who have been flooding the South African university landscape ever since the #Must-Fall-Movement (#MFM) of 2015/2016—is that she was deeply engrossed in the actualisation of what the movement

4 For a comprehensive study of Open Marxism, see Memos, C. (2025). *Open Marxism: Critical Theory as Militant Enlightenment*. Bloomsbury.

was calling for and not simply its noise and semiotics. She invested time and energy in drawing whatever insights and resources she could from what she regarded as a productive moment for the higher education sector and the country.

For Lis, ‘f*ck the university’ therefore meant a commitment to an insurgent thinking that violates the very sanctity of the university’s self-image. It is not about vulgar nihilism; because, she was convinced that the kind of self-knowledge that can burst open the conceited pretence of the university is also the kind of knowledge that will better facilitate deep transformation. Similarly, for her, ‘forget transformation’ was a project of conceptual rescue and renewal, for opening more productive pathways of practices. She insisted on ‘rethinking’ transformation; turning it upside down, inside out.

Reflection and examined reflexivity

Lis was determined to write on Hannah Arendt, and, from a selfish point of view I wish she did have the time to engage the competence of reflection and reflexivity more systematically precisely because these concepts are so widely used yet seldom internalised. Unafraid to track and learn from her own ideas, failures and the derivation of her thought, Lis regarded both examined reflexivity and political-ethical capacity as commonsensical in university life and critical thinking. Consequently, she subjected her own thinking to the criticality she brought to bear in her work and engagement with texts. I want to make a few observations in this regard.

There are many reports on transformation in the sector (such as HSRC-TOC 2023; MCTHE 2008; SAHRC 2016) and many valuable review publications from the Council on Higher Education (CHE) itself. Yet, true to her reflexive nature, Lis approached these with criticality, based on close, analytical readings. As a result, she had a firm grasp on what was ‘floating’ in the sector. Her work, from governance to curriculum, is frequently cited in the HSRC-TOC report and elsewhere and provided key analytical insights for positioning the

empirical material deployed in the study. Key here was her insistence that transformation needs to be read as contextual and dynamic, with different priorities emerging in different historical eras: access and democratisation, throughput and efficiency, epistemology, identity and institutional culture. In addition, her work on transformation and its knowledges in pursuit of a scholarly treatment of transformation is seminal and unequalled.

The distinction between knowledge *for* transformation and knowledge *of* transformation (Lange 2014) injected new energy into the conceptualisation of transformation and its programmatic expression. Knowledge *of* transformation refers to the policy frameworks, institutional plans, indicators, reporting regimes and audit cultures that track restructuring, efficiency, access, equity and responsiveness. While necessary, this form of knowledge tends to institutionalise transformation as compliance and performance management. By contrast, knowledge *for* transformation refers to the critical knowledge of the self (institutional histories, cultures and complicities), knowledge of knowledge (epistemological critiques of curricula, disciplines and research traditions), and knowledge of the other (how difference, marginalisation and belonging are understood and engaged).

Leadership for transforming universities depends on both these knowledges. Whereas the one requires critical reflection on the socio-epistemological basis of knowledge production, the other concerns understanding and interpreting the direction and processes of change necessary for sound decision-making, thereby enabling the kind of research and knowledge production that directly inform institutional change (Lange 2014).

Here again, the location of Lis's thought within the broader ambit of critical theories comes through in the broader idea of a disclosing critique of society in the mould of Theodor Adorno (1973) and the lack of a critical ontology of the academy if one mobilises Pierre Bourdieu's (1988) insights in *Homo Academicus*. More than that, Lis's work connects with the demand to see both the academy and its knowledges as profoundly historical, as part of the history of the present. Her

work, overall, may well represent one of the most productive attempts at developing a historical, critical ontology of the university and the academy in South Africa—way beyond what is on offer in the so-called philosophies and sociologies of education. Her work is certainly more sophisticated than much of the transformation scholarship in general.

Lis's engagement with transformation and its knowledges in the early 2010s followed a pattern of consistent, critical engagement in her treatment of the quality assurance and transformation interface and the interface between equity and quality. She pushed for the broader imperatives of transformation, access, success, development, efficiency and quality to be experienced and actualised as indivisible, perhaps indistinguishable, from one another. Moreover, the kind of transformation she had in mind drove at a justness that could both respond to the structural anchoring of inequality and misrecognition, and the actual shifts in the experiences of students and staff. This is not the exhausted and exhaustive rhetoric of social justice that so easily and meaninglessly slips off the tongues of leaders and academics alike but a direct engagement with challenges and the possibility of responding to them. This commitment to veracious actuality was also mirrored in Lis's private life and in her relationships with family, friends and students.

A weird, perhaps cautious idealism runs through Lis's work. She insisted on both a critique of our traditions and practices, as well as the proper justification of such critique. Moreover, she frequently asked of herself and others to 'show' the instances of the actual 'thing' that is the subject of critique. What is a modern/colonial epistemology? Where can you see it? How is it actualised? In what ways is it expressed in disciplinary knowledge? What can we do about it? What are its implications for pedagogy? And above all, how is it connected to the structural ordering of 'the system'?

Structure, understood as the modes of production and their relations that organise social life, was central in Lis's thinking and she was convinced that very little could be achieved if one's praxes were not located within a reflexive analysis of the political economy of higher education. While this was always an integral part of her ideation, she

engaged this conviction with greater urgency in her later writing. She had a healthy appreciation of how structuring structures constrain agency—even dictate institutional possibilities. Yet Lis’s critiques were never stifled by resignation toward structural control. On the contrary, the possibility of subversive agency, difficult as it may seem, is always present in her work. By connecting the social structures of everyday life with the institutional practices of the university, Lis worked on the assumption that while agency is always possible, it requires hard, difficult work and internal disruptions as opposed to ‘fluffy’, innocence-making self-reflections.

How and why ‘something’ appears to one’s mind as critique-able and worthy of engagement was a non-negotiable starting point for Lis, and she put a high premium on the importance of our responsibility to first engage with the inner workings and history of our own production and thought processes. For her, this ‘internal critique’ (Lange 2016b: 184) forces a self-reflexivity that demands justification for and from oneself—it requires ‘intellectual courage’ and works as a transformative tool, ensuring that one’s engagement with the world is intellectually rigorous and morally accountable. This is particularly central in her writings on transformation and is the reason why her contribution to thinking and doing the university at the nexus of institutional and social change is one of the great gifts to the sector. Her scholarship will continue to play a unique role in our transformation work.

Favouring a more expansive reading of transformation, Lis argued for transformation to be seen in all its complexities and layers. These include: the massification of higher education occasioned by the rapid and massive growth of the sector across the globe over the past four decades, which has resulted in several shifts and changes that directly or indirectly impacted universities; the global and local political, economic and cultural forces that shape the university system; shifts in the purpose and rationale of universities and their governance and management; access, quality and relevance; and different modes of accountability. The broad mandates or core

activities of the university—research, teaching, engagement—are all folded into this interconnected conceptualisation together with the key questions of equity, academic planning, decolonisation, the advancement of knowledge, and the university's interface with society, the world of work and the post-school sector. To these broad interpretive framings of transformation, Lis added her perceptive and critical analyses of knowledge and identity, the academic versus the institutional curriculum, the need for a more radical understanding of decolonisation, the far-reaching implications of the digital turn in higher education and the psychological reconfiguration of the human in techno-science-society. To be sure, Lis was not alone in working and thinking transformation holistically; there are others. But what stood out in her case was a theorisation enmeshed with empirical life and the reality of the university from which 'new' programmatic work can ensue. This, in part, is what made her such a successful leader, executive and thinker.

Although Lis's intellectual and professional work touched on many of the 'transformation' themes, her irritation with the in the lack of curriculum and programme renewal and the fact that spaces were not created to investigate knowledge and pedagogy in the curriculum was a critical area of concern and interest. She frequently made the point that knowledge transformation received the least attention in the priorities set out by higher education policy.

For Lis, transformation refers to the totality of the change project in two important ways. In the first instance, she was profoundly interested in the *transformational* elements of the sector: better planning, improved teaching and learning, rigorous research, advancing quality and furthering operational efficiencies for the way that universities deliver on their key mandates. In the second instance, she was committed to driving the *transformative* vocation of the university, that is, the university's orientation towards public good and justness. The *transformational* and the *transformative* thus stand in interactive service to one another within the university. In essence, operational efficiencies are meant to advance the justice project of

the university. The distinction between these two concepts is not sufficiently engaged with in the general literature and the concepts are frequently collapsed, leading to confused convictions that everyone and everything can be *transformational*, which is nonsense on stilts.

Lis critically treated the policy principles for higher education transformation—equity, redress, democratisation, development, quality and public accountability—as an interpretive package. At the same time, she remained particularly critical on the question of knowledge and the nature of the university itself—from which emerged her later position of the ‘university on the border.’ This university is constituted by a self-doubt that rebels against the self-assurance of the Western knowledge project; it is decolonial. Yet, this university is also steered by money and power, structurally trapped within the massive forces shaping our world: domestic politics, neoliberalism, racial and techno-capitalism, geopolitics, economic trends, technology, and environmental and social changes. Because of this reality, she was inclined to analyse the university from a political-economy perspective, which prefigured both her theoretical and pragmatic options apropos sectoral and institutional transformation. Her radical pragmatism, through which she sought to convert theoretical insights into the practical imperative of making universities work in ways that both serve and critique the policy ambitions of the sector, has deep personal and philosophical roots.

Her affinity for Arendt’s philosophy is as pragmatic as it comes viz the three distinct activities of the human condition: labour (sustaining life), work (building a durable human world), and action (speaking and acting with others in public). However, the endless labourer and consumer of modernity have eclipsed both the maker/worker and political action, and in the process, eroded the shared public world. For Lis, this erosion linked up with the flattening of the university’s ideals. In response and without fail, she argued for continuous analyses of and reflections on the structural conditions by which the university is to be a university and the hard work that is required to unburden agency for good, transformative work. Part of this unburdening process includes

as engagement with the subjective factors that operate unconsciously as constitutive of both the individual and collective psyche and praxis.

Arendt, whose work reflected on the holocaust and beyond, was therefore a very good choice as a thinking companion, particularly in the context of the university's role as a citizen, its role in developing citizenship, and its framing of democratic education and the role of the academic; as well as political education. The political pedagogy of the 'university on the border' is meant to counter the self-annihilating pedagogy of the market from which a solidaristic notion of citizenship may emerge, especially through Arendt's notion of understanding as a complex intellectual and moral process that can generate progressive political action.

In writing this piece it became clearer to me why Lis pursued a philosophy that allows one to perform responsibility in the face of despair, and why Arendt's thinking was so important to her own. Arendt provided Lis with productive tools and concepts crucial for making and living life within the academy: from labour, work, freedom and plurality to action, citizenship, the public sphere, and the space of appearance.

Conclusion

Lis had a rare commitment to three key principles: integrity in both governance *and* scholarship; rigour through reviews, audits, institutional reports *and* intellectual writing; and interrogative reflexivity of the self, the institution and society. With characteristic sincere directness she made time to raise matters of interest or concern with others, especially with her friends. She truly did not suffer foolishness, as Sioux McKenna (2025) commented on Facebook, whether in people or in thoughts or ideas—she was both funny and ruthless when going off on one of her sharp critiques. In one of our discussions, she once referred to education research as being in the grip of *Fairlady* methodologies. Her tongue-in-cheek analogy by no means intended to dismiss education research as useless but rather to highlight trends of small-scale research that provides neatly packaged answers to messy realities in much the

same way that magazine self-tests and quizzes employ methodologies that are invariably confident in tone, simplistic in design and far more authoritative in appearance than in impact.

This kind of incisive and funny critique, combined with her directness, characterised our collaborations with unexpected moments of contemplation. A few months before her death she submitted a chapter for one of our book projects accompanied by a postscript that reads:

When I accepted the invitation to write this piece, I did not realise the extent to which it was going to be an act of personal reflection and analysis of my own experience in university managements and of the doubt, uncertainty and hope that goes into making decisions, which sometimes are the wrong decisions. The higher education system in SA has been at the work of transformation for three decades and I think there is agreement that this is still an unfinished task. We keep on trying to theorise transformation as we go about it, and as circumstances and national and international conjectures change, we adjust our views about what it is that we are doing and aiming for.

One can never know, but I suspect that the ‘university on the border’ became a frame for Lis’s later work, as she so powerfully states:

[T]he University on the border has self-doubt as its constitutive principle and that since this self-doubt was, in fact, the negation of the self-assurance of the western knowledge project, on the border was a good place from where to rethink the university (Lange 2025: 380).

Most of her later writings engage with ‘the border’ as position, as strategy, as thinking, and as doing. For her, the hospitable university on the border is one that incessantly searches for alternative, more productive pathways towards the university for society.

At a personal level, and I learned never to ask and probe, Lis's personal experience—the brutal military regime in Argentina, her home country in the 1970s and 1980s, the massive human rights violations, the truth commission, memory, the disappeared—all perhaps generated a particular affinity for South Africa in her, a chance to actualise her global political commitment to build institutions and their practices in this land.

Although we shared a progressive politics, Lis and I had many beautiful disagreements and divergent thoughts on the higher education project. I strongly believe in what knowledge transformations could offer the university, and I separate this from curriculum change to escape the disciplining and domesticating effects of institutional power. I am more interested in wild, unregulated knowledges through which the university can play and experiment with alternatives, but this would require a type of university leadership that, with rare exceptions, we unfortunately do not have in the sector.

Lis thought that I am too optimistic about knowledge transformations. For my part, although I have very little faith in the transformative capacity of the formalised university-as-is, I have heaps of trust that an untamed, unregulated knowledge wildness can take us somewhere different ... better. And through this, it may undiscipline parts of the university's management and bureaucratic power. I have experienced such courage of experimentation at three universities, the University of Fort Hare, the University of the Free State, and Nelson Mandela University, so, it is possible.

The struggles of contradictions and paradoxes are collective and although Lis believed in the structural constraints of the university as tied into global and national economic and political forces, her own real work within institutions suggested that she herself was convinced that maybe, just maybe, agency can speak back to structure. We therefore share the idea of a 'feasible utopia' (Barnett 2017).

We also had different ideas on 'transformation modelling'. Lis, despite her worry about institutionalisation, was always more convinced than I that work needs to happen in the centre of the

university, in learning and teaching, curriculum and research. I generally favour working through fires on the margins—‘a particular form of a radical, counter-imaginary spaces at the boundaries of higher education’ (Keet & Rafaely 2026: 5)—going in and out of the centre, but never becoming it. I believe that great vice-chancellors, true leaders, have the courage to support these ‘fires’—even if they get burned by it themselves. These types of vice-chancellors and their councils are, as the Afrikaans idiom goes, *so skaars soos hoendertande* (rare to the point of not existing).

So here, I think, is an instance of Lis’s intellectual courage: always crafting at the centre, trying to open a gap in the darkness from which to frame and actualise a programme, always doing so with a stellar command of critical social theory. She was super excited about one such project at Stellenbosch University not long before she passed away. I marvelled at how her spirit could be excited about possibilities even as an institutional machine dictated otherwise. It reminded me of the idea, drawn from Walter Benjamin’s (1968[1940]), work of continuously circling an impossibility until a gap opens up ... hoping against hope (see also Chakrabarti 2016).

Regarding these contestations, we shared a key thought, namely to present agency against the disciplining and domesticating impulses of the university structures and machines as difficult and hard, but never impossible. She was not, as she often put it, in favour of a ‘fluffy conception of agency’, which allows us to reflect ourselves into innocence. Her task, as she saw it, was to convince us that institutional change is possible, but it requires hard, difficult and courageous work. Lis’s work demanded and continues to demand of the university to do something it is structurally disinclined to do: to doubt itself so thoroughly that its own organising concepts are continuously questioned.

In tracing her movements between the centre and the margins of various institutions, I tried to show that ‘forget transformation’ and ‘f*ck the university’ are not nihilistic gestures but disciplined practices of internal critique, militant border-thinking and radical pragmatism

rooted in a solid reading of political economy, the university-as-institution, and the psychic economies of moral disengagement. Her 'university on the border' is neither a romantic outside nor a managerial inside; it is a precarious in-between where self-reflexive knowledge, knowledge of transformation, and wild, unregulated knowledges can conspire to undiscipline bureaucratic power.

CONCLUSION

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What Lis taught us

This *Festschrift* seeks to honour Lis Lange not through a soft commemoration but through sustained engagement with the intellectual, ethical and political demands that shaped her life's work. Read together, the various tributes confirm that Lis did not merely occupy the university or its bureaucratic machinery but struggled within it, against it and through it, refusing the comforts of abstraction or procedural compliance. What emerges from these pages is the portrait of a scholar-administrator (Badat; Higgins) whose fierce loyalty lay with the academic project as a site of struggle for social justice, epistemic freedom and public reason.

Lis will be remembered for her singular capacity to inhabit and not merely occupy what many contributors describe as a near-impossible position, namely that of the intellectual bureaucrat (Luescher) or intellectual administrator (Jansen). She understood administration

not as a neutral technical exercise but as a deeply political, moral and intellectual undertaking (Jansen & Goliath; Mkhize). Whether building national quality assurance systems, steering university councils, or responding to institutional crises, she treated bureaucratic form as something to be worked on rather than simply worked within. For her, rules, metrics and systems were never ends in themselves; they were unfinished instruments to be repurposed, resisted or dismantled when they threatened to hollow out the intellectual life of the university.

A defining thread that runs through all the tributes collected here is Lis's uncompromising critique of managerialism and the institutionalisation of transformation as empty ritual. She consistently warned against the reduction of social justice to demographic arithmetic, compliance checklists, and performativity. In her view, transformation had been stripped of its intellectual and moral force (Lange 2010; 2013; 2014) so that what had once been a radical project had instead become 'frozen in numbers' (Lange 2013: 5). Against this she argued that the genuine work of transformation lay in the academic project itself: in curriculum design, pedagogy, knowledge production and the conditions under which understanding becomes possible. Anything less, she insisted, was theatre.

Considered in their totality, the three sections of this *Festschrift* construct a richly textured portrait of Lis as a figure who consistently defied easy categorisation, being at once scholar and administrator, saboteur and builder, insider and dissenter. Across the various tributes, a second common thread is the complexity of her identity as intellectual bureaucrat, of someone who did not merely occupy institutional roles, but who reimagined them as sites for translating ethical commitments into practice. This duality is not presented as mere contradiction but as the defining condition of her work, as an ongoing, often difficult effort to hold together the demands of governance and the imperatives of critical thought. Each tribute affirms that Lis's life was animated by a deeply rooted commitment to social justice, forged in her early experiences of repression in Argentina and carried through into her engagements with South African higher education.

The three sections of this *Festschrift* vary in emphasis, thereby deepening and complicating our understanding of her. Loosely organised around the progression of Lis's career, the chapters leverage Lis's insider-outsider perspective on higher education. Section A provides insight into Lis's background, influences and early career roles at national higher education agencies. These chapters demonstrate her 'outsider' approach to driving systemic transformation through regulatory frameworks.

As a system builder, she employed her intellectual influences, especially her Arendtian scaffolding, as a means to defend the university's role as a site for political pedagogy and critical citizenship against the thoughtlessness of neoliberal managerialism. While reinforcing these ideas, Section B shifts the focus to Lis as institutional 'insider'. Here, the authors delve into her identity as an intellectual bureaucrat, offering a situated and relational portrait of Lis's leadership, her institutional interventions, her resistance to managerialism, and her pedagogical commitments. Through these reflections, the section captures her profound internal battle to inhabit institutional machinery while maintaining the critical reflexive integrity required for radical transformation. Section C foregrounds Lange's philosophical engagement with Hannah Arendt and her radical critique of transformation as a hollowed out project. It emphasises her vision of the 'university on the boarder' and what is required to reconcile the stable building of institutions with the open-ended capacity for new political beginnings.

The picture that emerges is one of Lis as a figure of 'ferocious integrity' (Jansen in this volume: 170), someone who refused and resisted the empty forms of compliance and institutional convenience. Across the tributes in all three sections, she emerges as a relentless critic of the 'simulacrum' of transformation (Baudrillard 1994: 1; see also Chapter 4 of this volume: 66), of the manner in which bureaucratic routines can hollow out political and moral purpose. And yet, her critique was never nihilistic. Lis paired critique with construction; she challenged the corporatisation of universities while actively building

alternative systems, policies and pedagogies that could sustain a more just and intellectually vibrant academic project. A rare quality indeed.

Combined, these tributes show that Lis was never simply a participant in institutional transformation but always one of its most incisive theorists and practitioners. She understood the university as a space of ideas and conscience and as existing for the public good. Her life's work can be read as an effort to align the university's structures with that vision. The interplay between the common themes and the distinct emphases of the three sections in this *Festschrift* ultimately reveals a scholar-administrator who lived her contradictions productively by turning them into the very basis of her intellectual authority and institutional impact.

The intellectual resources Lis drew on for this struggle were formidable. Trained as a historian, she brought to her thinking and work a deep suspicion of presentism and an insistence on tracing the *longue durée* of institutional power. Policy, for her, was never innocent; it was a text to be read, interpreted and challenged for what it enabled and what it foreclosed. Her sustained engagement with Arendt further sharpened this disposition. Drawing on Arendt's distinctions between knowledge and understanding, action and work, Lis insisted that the university is not merely a site of skill acquisition but a fragile public space in which judgement must be formed and responsibility taken. Teaching, administration and governance were therefore inseparable from political life.

At the same time, none of the tributes romanticise this position. On the contrary, they make visible the personal and professional cost of Lis's refusal to adapt to institutional comfort, foregrounding the personal sacrifices and institutional conflicts that accompanied this refusal, complemented by accounts of her collegiality, mentorship and capacity for reasoned debate. Together, they suggest that Lis's 'toughness' and her kindness were not opposites but part of the same ethical orientation: a commitment to truth-telling and intellectual seriousness that demanded both rigour and care. Her intellectual ferocity, directness and intolerance for pretence often rendered her

‘difficult to work with’ in hierarchies that have increasingly become attuned to corporate sensibilities. She sacrificed conventional academic rewards—publication counts, promotion cycles, secure leadership trajectories—in order to do the slow, grinding and often thankless work of institutional rebuilding. That she persisted nonetheless is one of this *Festschrift*’s quietest but most powerful lessons.

Much like Lis’s own work, the tributes to her leave us with many unanswered questions about the university and its future. Indeed, her work was largely structured around the unanswered questions elicited by the failures of institutional transformation and the emergence of the decolonial turn. She argued that the very notion of transformation in South Africa requires a permanent process of questioning. Across different registers—policy analysis, philosophical reflection, institutional narrative and personal testimony—the tributes return again and again to a shared provocation: what would it mean to take the university seriously again as a moral and intellectual project? What would follow if we refused the safety of managerial vocabulary, the anaesthetic of metrics and the temptation to confuse movement with change?

What emerges from an integrated reading of this collection is a portrait of Lis as a thinker of productive incompleteness. The unanswered questions are not gaps to be filled but the very medium of her intellectual practice: they demand continued engagement, contestation and imagination. Her legacy, as these tributes jointly suggest, lies not only in the frameworks she built or the critiques she advanced, but in the discipline of questioning she bequeathed—a discipline that insists on confronting the limits of knowledge, the contradictions of institutions and the ethical demands of transformation without retreating into easy answers. Lis’s work is repeatedly described as ‘unfinished’ not only because of projects curtailed by her early death, but because her intellectual stance deliberately refused closure.

In her later work, she increasingly gestured toward the idea of the ‘university on the border’ as an institution defined less by certainty than by constitutive self-doubt. This was not a call to abandon rigour

as much as a call to refuse the self-assurance of knowledge systems that have ceased to interrogate their own conditions of possibility. The border, in this sense, is an ethical stance: to remain restless, unfinished, and accountable to those on the underside of history.

If this volume succeeds, it is because it does not close that border. Instead, it keeps Lis in motion—arguing, unsettling, demanding more careful thought and more courageous action. The best tribute, as she herself would have insisted, is not reverence but continuation; to take up the hard work of thinking, understanding, judging and acting within institutions that too easily forget why they exist.

In that spirit, this *Festschrift* does not conclude Lis Lange's work. It hands it back to us.

EPILOGUE¹

Reno Morar

Faculty of Health Sciences, Nelson Mandela University

‘Truth is not what you want it to be: it is what it is, and you must bend to its power or live a lie.’

— Myamoto Musashi

And Lis Lange, our dearest friend, colleague and comrade did exactly that—bend to the power of her truth!

In presenting this tribute, a huge thanks to all our friends, colleagues and comrades who so generously shared their thoughts and feelings. And typically, as so many of you said so well, and as we all know ourselves, the best people and their impact on us are often so difficult to fully describe.

Good afternoon colleagues, friends, and fellow travellers in the great adventure that is higher education. It is both an honour and a profound sadness to stand before you today, to celebrate the life, intellect and courage of our friend and colleague Lis Lange, scholar, leader, and, above all, unrelenting truth-teller.

I suspect Lis would have been slightly irritated by the formality of an event like this—she had little patience for the ceremonial and even

1 Tribute delivered at the Memorial Symposium: The contribution of Prof Lis Lange to higher education in South Africa: A critical appraisal. 19 November 2025, J.S. Gerike Library Auditorium, Stellenbosch University, Western Cape, South Africa.

less for pretense. She would probably have said, ‘Oh for fuck’s sake, don’t make it sentimental; just say what needs to be said.’ So, Lis, we will try to do just that—though with a little affection, a bit of humour, and a lot of truth.

Lis Lange at UCT: the intellectual and the leader

Lis joined the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2018 as Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning, at a moment when the institution and indeed the entire higher education sector was grappling with transformation, decolonisation and questions of social justice. It was a complex, contested space, and Lis entered it with her trademark clarity of mind and fearlessness of spirit.

Her leadership was never administrative in a narrow sense. She approached the undergraduate project not as an exercise in management, but as a deeply political, moral, and intellectual undertaking. Her work was grounded in theory, not bureaucracy—and she reminded us, sometimes forcefully, that universities are not businesses; they are places of ideas, conscience, and that they exist for the public good. She approached even the most complex challenges with a fearless, yet constructive spirit.

Many of us can still hear her voice cutting through the fog of meeting-speak with a crisp, ‘That’s bullshit’—a phrase that, remarkably, was never mean-spirited but always clarifying. It was her way of returning us to the essence of the matter, to the ethical and intellectual spine of the university.

Speaking truth to power

Lis had what Jonathan Jansen once called ‘ferocious integrity’. She refused to bend to convenience or popularity. She believed that leadership meant naming what others preferred to leave unsaid—whether in senate meetings, council deliberations or national forums. She spoke truth to power, and not from a safe distance. She did so from

within the system, while working tirelessly to make that system better. As Phethiwe Matutu of Universities South Africa observed, Lis's courage was most evident in her willingness to confront contradictions—to challenge the way we use neoliberal tools to achieve transformative ends, or how we claim interdisciplinarity using rigid, outdated structures. Lis could see the irony, dissect it with humour, and then insist that we do something about it. When she left UCT, many colleagues experienced a deep sense of personal and professional loss.

The builder of systems and people

But Lis was not only a critic—she was also a builder. She shaped UCT's 'Vision 2030', embedding a moral and intellectual purpose in the university's future direction. She oversaw major reforms in quality assurance, student success analytics and data-informed decision-making. Her fingerprints are all over the Siyaphumelela student-success project, the South African Survey of Student Satisfaction and Engagement and the introduction of UCT's new learning management system, Amathuba.

During the pandemic, Lis turned a university known for its procedural deliberations into an agile learning institution. She piloted governance models that were less hierarchical and more responsive. She was pragmatic, but never at the expense of principle. When private entities approached UCT for commercial partnerships that risked compromising academic integrity, she simply said, 'No'.

During her tenure at UCT, Lis shifted the discourse around the academic project and championed humanising language to articulate the core responsibilities of educators in our embedded context. She wanted colleagues at UCT to live in the classroom and to experience what it meant to be the highest-ranked university on the continent. As a result, her sphere of influence can be detected all over the university in both overt and less obvious ways.

Lis also mentored many of us, often over early-morning coffee or late-night calls. She had a way of making you feel both nervous and

inspired, pushing you to think more rigorously, to write more clearly, and to care more deeply. She did not flatter; she sharpened. She demanded that we match her intellectual honesty with our own.

The human dimension

For all her ferocity, Lis was also deeply human. She asked after our families, remembered small details, and offered help when no one was watching. Her colleagues recall her compassion as readily as they do her critical mind. She believed that kindness was not a weakness but the foundation of ethical leadership.

During one of our hardest times in the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT, Lis was a steady and compassionate presence, working quietly but effectively behind the scenes to support the faculty through uncertainty. She lifted many of us up in stormy times when one really needed to be uplifted. She led with wisdom, strength, courage and a rare clarity of vision.

There was also her humour—dry, unfiltered, and wickedly intelligent. In meetings that had gone on far too long, she would mutter something that had us all struggling to keep a straight face. She laughed easily, but never superficially.

Legacy and reflection

Lis's time at UCT was not without turbulence. She herself once said it was the high point of her career. And yet, it was also a place that tested her deeply. In the end, she left behind something far greater than policies or projects: a way of being in higher education—principled, demanding and compassionate in equal measure.

Her influence extends far beyond UCT, through her work at Universities South Africa, the Council on Higher Education, and most recently at Stellenbosch University. Everywhere she went, she challenged us to align institutional practice with moral purpose, to think analytically but act humanely.

She reminded us that courage must be met with compassion, that intellectual integrity is not negotiable, and that universities are judged not by their rankings but by how they treat their people.

Conclusion

So, this afternoon, as we remember Lis, let us honour her by doing what she would have wanted most: to think more deeply, to act more courageously and to lead more ethically. Above all, let us also remember to laugh because Lis would have rolled her eyes at too much solemnity. Lis lived her truth; she leaned in and bent to its power; she did not live a lie. And for that, we and higher education in South Africa will forever be in her debt.

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Through a critical engagement and treatment of the ideas, approaches, commitments and questions that defined Lis Lange's work, this *Festschrift* brings together colleagues, collaborators, friends and fellow thinkers in a collection that offers a rich portrait of one of South African higher education's most influential and uncompromising scholar-administrators.

This book is a valuable resource for those interested in intellectually-driven governance and leadership as forms of critical praxis and strategic institution-building.

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