

CHAPTER 3

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

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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.

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