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 Pityana at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Adam Habib at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), or Mamphela Ramphela 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').
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> 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.
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> 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.
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> 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.

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