

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.

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