

EPILOGUE¹

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‘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.