

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.

