
Right to reply

Of ethics and incompetence

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I have read with interest the article by Mareli Stolp “Report to the Academy”, the response from Dr Lyn Horn and senior colleagues at Stellenbosch University, and Stolp’s reply to them in turn (*Acta Academica* 48, 1 & 2). Since I am referred to in these texts (though unnamed), I wish to offer a brief report of my own.

To sum up: I was the internal examiner for Stolp’s doctoral thesis in 2012. Several months after the thesis had been passed and the degree awarded, a complaint about ethically questionable research was filed against Stolp by her own head of department, and an investigating committee thereupon appointed by Dr Horn. This was despite the complainant’s open admission that his charges were based only on a partial reading of the thesis (p. 1, para. 3 of the complaint), and despite the investigating committee’s admission of “deviations from university policy” in its own procedures (Report of 28 August 2013, p. 2). The dispute was finally resolved in Stolp’s favour by the Ombudsman of Stellenbosch University in early 2016.

Dr Horn and her colleagues are quite correct that Dr Stolp’s thesis raised complex issues of ethics and agency. While details of examiners’ deliberations may not enter the public record, I can nevertheless state that we had already engaged in a robust, highly critical exploration of all these issues during the examination process, and had resolved them to our unanimous satisfaction. Yet at no point during the complaint or investigation were we asked for our opinion, or even informed that an investigation was ongoing. Since the complaint and its investigations called into question our own competence and ethics, it was surely unethical in itself to leave us uninformed and unconsulted.

There is a more fundamental issue at stake here. How can a music department be allowed to file a complaint against a doctoral student of its own, whose topic it has accepted, whose research it has supported, whose examiners it has appointed, and to whom it has already agreed to award the degree? At what point does departmental incompetence descend into unethical conduct? There is indeed scope here for a large-scale investigation of academic ethics. But its focus should be on the department, not its student.