Reflections on Defending a Dissertation Proposal from an Emic Perspective: The Confessions of a PhD Candidate

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Received: 21 December 2025; Accepted:1 October 2026

Abstract: *As a rare written account of a PhD proposal oral examination, this reflection interconnects how supervision and examination contribute to dissertation quality which starts from a quality proposal. Written from an emic perspective of a PhD candidate in Sustainable Development with proposal dubbed as* The Paradox of Economic Progress: Growth and Youth Unemployment in Ethiopia (2019-date)*, the ritual of oral examination generated feedback ranging from the problem statement, objectives, and theoretical perspectives. This reflection further shows how the intellectual trajectory of a PhD candidate is shaped by oral examination experiences, examiners' feedback, and their disciplinary background, and the nature of the thesis work itself.*

Key Words: Defense or Oral Examination, Interdisciplinary study, Dissertation Proposal, Sustainable Development

Introduction

In higher education, a high-quality dissertation is a key to quality doctoral programs which start from rigorous and sound proposal development that ensures originality and in-depth critical analysis of the thesis in a domain field of study (Adu & Miles, 2023). Often, academic units of universities elsewhere are known to set and ensure compliance with the conventional standards of research involving oral examination (AAU 2019; AAU 2021; AAU 2024). However, the practice of PhD Research oral defense varies across programs with some being reduced to in-house evaluation at times, due to conceded absence of the main supervisors or examiners. People who participated in program

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evaluation mentioned that most PhD curriculum remarks 'defense' for nominal consumption along with the proposal stage with neither indicating the formats nor explaining the ritual. Perhaps, the new program of Sustainable Development revived the ritual of serious consideration and convened it in the presence of all members of CGC (Center's Graduation Committee), other cohorts, and in the presence of several staff and students. Though the center's CGC is expected to review and approve as per the curriculum, this short communication aims to contribute to the understanding of the stage of proposal defense by doctoral students.

From a simple search of *examination of dissertations* on Google Scholar, without time limit, it counts 13,000. Entirely, it is either case studies or viva voce (Tsvetkova & Stoicheva, 2025) or the examination of discipline-specific viva voce (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011) Consistency and Inconsistency in PhD Thesis Examination (Holbrook et al., 2008).[1] Notwithstanding the conventional practice of commencing the dissertation project through the approval by the respective academic commission, there was a gap in which written accounts of proposal defenses in reputable journals and books were not available.

This short communication addresses a largely underexplored problem - how PhD candidates experience and interpret proposal defense as an intellectual and formative process, that is disguised as an evaluative exercise. The significance of this practice lies in highlighting how examiner feedback, supervision, disciplinary perspectives, and candidate reflexivity can shape the quality and direction of a doctoral research, offering practical insights for candidates, supervisors, and examiners. Furthermore, this short communication contributes an emic, reflexive account of the PhD proposal defense process that interacts

[1] At the time of writing this short communication, I knew Addis Ababa University was on the verge of ratifying a defense guideline for the actual viva voce.

with the candidate's own experiences in forming the doctoral research development.

The remaining section of the short communication outline includes: i) introduction, ii) methods and ethical statement, iii) the eve of PhD proposal defense, iv) the practice of oral examination v) conclusion, and vi) what it means for enhancing quality dissertations in an age beyond the 75th Jubilee anniversary of AAU.

Methodology

Against this backdrop, being an exploratory reflection, the analytical rigor employed in this short communication qualifies what Yuyao et al. (2025) dubbed as *emic perspective* of an author of a PhD dissertation. As for him, through an emic perspective an *Analysis offers new insights into how students experienced writing from their emic perspective, and the results can be applied to writing pedagogy*. (Yuyao et al., 2025, p. 172)

In its feature, at the center of the actor's mind, emic events underlie the experiences of the actor (Harris, 1976) whereas it focuses on the uniqueness of experiences (Chapman & Kinloch, 2011). This emic perspective is quintessential as Silence (2023) characterized PhD researchers evolving into figures who face a formidable crisis. From an emic perspective, I revisited the proposal's original intent as its author indicated and reflected on how my intuitive experiences evolved throughout the oral examination.

Thus, as a PhD candidate, I reflect on manifest and latent intuition after the experience of oral defense of a research proposal that aims to convey what it means for a quality doctoral program. In this essay, I treated oral examination and defense as interchangeable; whereas unless the proposal clearly stated, the PhD defense is meant to say the actual viva-voce, that is, the dissertation defense.

Ethical declaration

In this short communication, the names of examiners, supervisors, and other important actors during the discussion are labelled as anonymous. Producing such a short communication was permissible for those actors if its central objective was to illuminate the actual proceedings of the oral examination, how the intuitive response of the learner – the PhD candidate -- flows, and what it means for the entire process of defense.

What goes on the Eve of the Actual PhD Proposal Defense?

The study of the PhD Defense would properly begin by reflecting on the proposal development process that culminated in the study titled *The Paradox of Economic Progress: Growth and Youth Unemployment in Ethiopia (2019-date)*. Despite eight months of proposal development involving several supervision meetings, systematic review, and on-site visits to multiple government offices to preliminarily assess data availability, the defense schedule marked an inevitable step rather than a decisive turn.

In the preparatory phase of the PhD proposal oral examination on one of the days, authorities at the Center shared with the examiners the schedule of the examination whereby each one of the candidates' examiners (internal and external) was indicated. Meanwhile, on one of the days, the Center Head, along with the Program Coordinator, conducted a brief online orientation meeting. Students attended the orientation meeting although they did not ask any questions or give any comments. I was the only one who asked questions and differed with the coordinator's advice: ‘‘Don’t say ‘*it is a good question*!’ when responding to an examiner’’. The reason for my reservation was by no means intuitive; I felt that saying “it is a good question’’ often simply affirmed the relevance or coincidence of the question asked.

Fast forward to the eve of my scheduled defense, the Center Head, with whom I worked closely informed me that my schedule was postponed because one of the external examiners had been replaced. Initially, I felt disappointed for the rescheduling, as I had hoped to gain mental relief from the matter and could switch to another professional assignment. This newly assigned examiner aligned with my interest; indeed, he was the person I hoped would serve as an examiner, as I believed his Economics background would situate him for better rigorous criticism strengthening the proposal upgrading.

Be that as it may, at last I was told to prepare on the day after the original schedule. Fortunately, the rescheduled date also worked well for me. At that moment, I was determined to prepare for two things: first, to rehearse my presentation and contemplate all the potential examination questions; second, to engage with the examiners during the Q&A session and respond thoughtfully.

The Practice of Oral Examination of a PhD Dissertation

When the specific time and date arrived- 11:00 am, on 18 December 2025- I entered the defense room. The examiners, chairperson, members of CGC, an Ethiopian co-supervisor, and nearly twenty-five PhD students had gathered. The chair welcomed the examiners and invited me to deliver 20 minutes long presentation. I began by noting that my PhD research is supervised by a transnational supervisory committee drawn from Ethiopia, Malawi, and Oslo, highlighting the differences epistemic traditions observed during individual and joint supervision. I also emphasized that: ‘whatever wrong found on the proposal I am solely accountable for that, yet I share the credit for the strength with the rest of the supervisors as well’.

One must note that, being an interdisciplinary study, the Sustainable Development program frames a range of relatable theories from other disciplines. However, one of the key pieces of feedback from the

economics-trained examiner was that the economics theories were misunderstood and to some extent, distorted. On the other hand, the other examiner with a Sociology background reacted, *Eyob, you flee away from your Sociological roots. Return to Sociology for a more fitting theory*. This was one of the points raised on the proposal defense for a candidate to prevent a relapse to disciplinary identity crisis. Though for a thesis leading to a terminal degree, I felt that reviewing and engaging with literature and associated theories beyond one's own disciplinary roots is not permissible but it is a necessary intellectual exercise.

After the actual examination, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I found that several questions were unexpected. I had not realized that the proposal's body somewhat decoupled from the title. To my relief, I was not extensively interrogated on the methods, which particularly concerned me because of the two alternative models proposed for one objective. Yet I worried that I had introduced these models without sufficient consideration. I also recognized my limited familiarity with them, as both required matrix-based analysis and may be difficult to implement given the limited availability of secondary data. The examiners, however, could not have known that the proposal had evolved through several stages of revision. The final revision followed my supervisor's insistence that the core question - 'the paradox of economic growth and unemployment'- be reflected in the title to make it more appealing to the scientific community. However, later I realized that I submitted the final proposal for defense without adequately aligning the proposal's content with the new title.

The chair characterized the contrasting responses of the two examiners: one appeared to dismantle my proposal just like what Doloriert & Sambrook (2011) argued that examiners have a role to reinterpret expectations, while the other appeared comparatively therapeutic despite offering strong criticism. Intuitively, I regarded the feedback as constructive, viewing challenges to the proposed framing and methods as opportunities to reconstruct the knowledge

underpinning the study. Although the chair summarized the outcome saying, 'your proposal seems demolished; reflect on that; I interpreted the criticism differently, consistent with Amare's (2019) view that criticism at any stage of the research is part of the scientific discovery and a recipe for accumulating knowledge. I reacted cautiously to some points while acknowledging major issues that required consideration.

At the end of the examination, we were asked to leave the hall for a moment until the team of examiners completed their decision with three outcomes: *pass as it is*, *pass with comments*, or *fail*. The audience didn't evacuate the room immediately; instead, members informally exchanged reflections, reminiscent of discussions following conferences and workshops. The corridor outside the examination hall was swarmed by the defense audience, creating a palpable sense of anticipation. A few moments later, the chair called me and notified the decision: *passed with comments* in the presence of examiners. In this endeavor, I concur with the outcome as a *proposal shall pass with a comment* rather than be *passed as it is*. In short, the comments and feedback at this stage would help to upgrade the dissertation project and reduce potential difficulties in publishing articles arising from the study.

Whichever way, my scholarly journey neither started with the examination nor reached a juncture at this event. Rather, I viewed the defense as reinforcing the status quo, not unlike attending a regular class involving presentation, questions, and answers. I was not naïve to expect a proposal that went *passed as it is*. At least I expected examiners' comments for improving the research project *per se*; since my repeated look at my proposal, falls at last on my blind spot, I cannot detect the flaws of the proposal.

Conclusion

Both on the eve and aftermath of the defense, I felt like I wish I had done the PhD and as much as possible. Rather, I would be grateful if

people avoided asking: *how is PhD going on*? I felt I needed to be groomed for what after PhD completion. Commencing the PhD research work after the successful defense of the proposal was a critical milestone. i.e., what matters, therefore, is what we transact in between the journey, other than what we are after the completion of the PhD. This short communication is an attempt to uncover the process and untold stories about proposal defense - details that the eventual dissertation manuscript cannot fully reveal. In sum, from an emic perspective, I confess that the intellectual course of a PhD candidate reveals how oral examination examiners' feedback, shaped by their disciplinary background, examination rituals, and the nature of the thesis, collectively shaped my intellectual journey as a PhD candidate.

What it means for Enhancing Quality Dissertations in an age Beyond the 75th Jubilee Anniversary of AAU

As Addis Ababa University is now reorganized as an autonomous university and intensifies its efforts towards quality education and research, the PhD dissertation proposal as an archetype of research demands greater attention. PhD curriculum developers and implementers recognize the challenges they may encounter and design support mechanisms accordingly. The actual ritual surrounding the proposal's oral examination should be more consistently standardized and formalized. Commendably, the defense guidelines of the university that guide viva voce at AAU could usefully be extended to include proposal for oral examination as well.

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