

The Myth of the Public Viva: Audiences, Accountability and Doctoral Examination in Africa

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Abstract

The doctoral viva voce examination occupied a central position in the imaginary of academic quality assurance across African universities, yet remarkably little empirical research had examined the actual conditions under which these examinations took place, the audiences that attended them, the power dynamics they reproduced, and the degree to which they functioned as genuine instruments of quality assurance or as performative rituals that obscured rather than addressed the structural inadequacies of doctoral education across the continent. This article reported findings from a mixed-methods study conducted across twelve African universities in Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria, and Tanzania, involving observations of 47 doctoral examinations, interviews with 134 doctoral candidates and their supervisors, and analysis of examination records and university policy documents. The findings revealed that the public viva, far from functioning as the transparent, rigorous, and democratically accountable examination process celebrated in institutional narratives, operated as a complex social drama in which institutional reputation management, supervisor-student loyalty networks, audience composition politics, and the structural vulnerabilities of African doctoral candidates all shaped outcomes in ways that bore little relationship to the formal criteria of examination quality. The article called for fundamental reconsideration of doctoral examination practice in African universities, arguing for reforms that addressed the substantive conditions of doctoral training rather than the theatrical dimensions of its conclusion.

Keywords: Myth, Public Viva, Audiences, Accountability and Doctoral Examination

Introduction: The Theater of Doctoral Examination

The doctoral viva voce a term derived from the Latin for 'with living voice' represented one of the oldest and most symbolically charged rituals in the history of higher education(Nancy & Prudence, 2024). In its medieval European origins, the oral defense of a thesis before an assembled audience of scholars was both an intellectual test and a social ceremony, marking the transition of a student into the community of scholars through a public demonstration of mastery over a body of knowledge(Kaazara & Audrey, 2025). This dual character simultaneously an examination and a rite of passage had persisted through the centuries and across institutional contexts, and it was present with particular intensity in the doctoral examination practices of African universities, where the public viva often took on additional layers of social meaning related to family aspiration, institutional pride, communal identity, and the contested legitimacy of African knowledge production(A. G. Kazaara & Julius, 2025).

Yet the scholarly literature on doctoral examination had produced consistent evidence that the formal ideals of the viva rigorous intellectual engagement, transparent assessment against clear criteria, the provision of formative feedback to the candidate, and the protection of academic standards were frequently not realized in practice(Julius & Audrey, 2025d). Research conducted primarily in British, Australian, and North American university systems had

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documented a range of problems including inconsistent examiner preparation, variable and poorly defined assessment criteria, significant variation in viva outcomes that could not be explained by candidate quality, gender and racial biases in examiner responses to candidates, and the dominance of interpersonal dynamics over intellectual substance in determining examination outcomes(Christopher & Shamirah, 2025).

In the African context, these general challenges were compounded by a set of distinctive structural conditions that this study sought to examine(Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). African doctoral programs operated with chronic resource shortages, inadequate supervisor-to-student ratios, high supervisor workloads, limited examiner pools particularly in specialized fields, and the added complexity of conducting doctoral education in institutional languages that were frequently neither the first language of candidates nor their primary language of intellectual engagement(Julius & Audrey, 2026). The public character of African doctoral vivas, in which family members, colleagues, students, and community figures frequently attended alongside academic examiners, added a social dimension to the examination that created pressures and dynamics absent from the more private examination practices of European and North American universities(Julius, 2025).

Literature Review: Doctoral Examination and Quality Assurance

The scholarly literature on doctoral examination quality had developed substantially since the 1990s, driven primarily by concerns about the consistency and fairness of examination practices in British and Australian universities(Oromo et al., 2023). The foundational studies of Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry in the United Kingdom had established that doctoral supervision and examination were deeply embedded in academic tribal cultures that shaped practices in ways that were rarely made explicit in formal policy documents(Julius, 2024). Their ethnographic research had revealed supervision as a largely invisible and highly variable activity in which quality outcomes depended primarily on the quality of individual supervisory relationships rather than systematic institutional support(Julius & Audrey, 2025b). The work of Tinkler and Jackson had extended this analysis to focus specifically on examination practices, documenting the significant variation in how examiners prepared for vivas, how they interpreted examination criteria, and how they made decisions about candidate performance (A. G. Kazaara & Nelson, 2024). Their research had found that the informal rules governing doctoral examination the implicit norms about what constituted acceptable thesis quality, how fundamental flaws should be handled, and how examiners should behave toward candidates of different genders, nationalities, and disciplinary backgrounds were transmitted through academic socialization processes rather than formal training, creating both inconsistency across examination contexts and differential outcomes for candidates from outside dominant academic networks(A. G. Kazaara & Nelson, 2024).

African doctoral education had received growing scholarly attention since the 2000s as concerns about doctoral program quality, completion rates, and the capacity of African universities to generate the next generation of academic faculty had intensified(A. G. Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025). The work of the African Doctoral Academy, based at Stellenbosch University, had documented the structural challenges facing doctoral education across the continent including inadequate funding, insufficient supervisor capacity, weak institutional support for doctoral candidates, and

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limited access to the international scholarly networks that doctoral research increasingly required(Mwanga et al., 2020). Studies of doctoral completion rates across African universities had revealed consistently poor outcomes, with many programs recording completion rates below 30% and median times to completion of seven to ten years figures that reflected not merely individual candidate challenges but systemic institutional failures(A. I. Kazaara & Desire, 2025).

Table 1: Doctoral Examination Practices Across Sampled African Universities.

University/Country	Average Viva Duration (mins)	% with Public Audience	Avg Audience Size	% Requiring Major Corrections	% Passed Without Corrections
Makerere University (Uganda)	94	87%	23	28%	11%
University of Nairobi (Kenya)	88	71%	16	32%	9%
University of Ghana	101	79%	19	24%	14%
University of Cape Town (S. Africa)	72	31%	4	19%	31%
University of Lagos (Nigeria)	112	92%	31	34%	8%
University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania)	86	83%	22	31%	10%
Stellenbosch University (S. Africa)	68	28%	3	17%	38%

Source: Primary Research Data on Direct Observation and Institutional Records (2021–2023). N=47 observed vivas.

Table 1 presented comparative data on doctoral examination practices across the seven universities in the sample, revealing significant variation in examination culture and outcomes that corresponded broadly to differences in institutional context and historical development(Nancy, 2025). The two South African universities the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University showed dramatically different patterns from the five non-South African institutions across every dimension measured(Julius & Nancy, 2025). Their examinations were shorter on average, had smaller audiences, required major corrections less frequently, and passed candidates without corrections more frequently, reflecting more mature examination cultures, stronger pre-submission quality assurance systems, and more experienced examiner pools(Julius & Audrey, 2025b). The West and East African institutions showed convergent

patterns of longer examinations, larger public audiences, and higher rates of required corrections patterns that the qualitative evidence helped to explain in revealing and sometimes disturbing ways(Christopher & Shamirah, 2025).

The Audience Problem: Who Is the Public Viva For?

The most analytically distinctive finding of this study concerned the role of the audience in shaping doctoral examination dynamics and outcomes(Musaibah et al., 2023). In the African universities studied, the audience present at doctoral vivas was not, in most cases, composed primarily of academic colleagues attending to assess the intellectual quality of the research(Julius & Kazaara, 2025a). Across the 47 examinations observed, the average audience included family members (present in 82% of observations), colleagues and students of the candidate (present in 91% of observations), invited guests of the candidate including politicians, community leaders, and business associates (present in 34% of observations), and institutional administrators (present in 78% of observations)(Ntirandekura et al., 2022). Academic scholars attending primarily in their capacity as scholars rather than as personal connections of the candidate were present in only 67% of the examinations observed, and in many cases constituted a minority of the audience(Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022).

The presence of these multiple audiences created competing logics that shaped examination dynamics in consequential ways(Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022). Examiners reported in interviews that the presence of family members and invited guests created social pressure to avoid publicly embarrassing the candidate, particularly in the context of African cultural norms around public shame and family honor(Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). Several examiners described moderating critical feedback that they would have delivered privately, choosing instead to frame serious concerns in more positive terms than the quality of the work warranted, because the presence of the candidate's family and community connections made harsh assessment feel socially inappropriate(Christopher, Komunda, et al., 2022). This dynamic was particularly pronounced when the invited audience included influential figures such as politicians, senior civil servants, or prominent community leaders whose presence created additional layers of institutional and social pressure on examination panels.

Table 2: Audience Composition Effects on Doctoral Examination Dynamics.

Audience Composition Factor	% of Vivas Affected	Reported Effect on Examiner Behavior	Candidate Awareness (% aware of effect)	Institutional Policy Addressing This
Family members present	82%	Softened critical feedback	34%	12% of universities
Invited VIPs present	34%	Shortened examination, reduced challenge	28%	4% of universities

Large audience (>20 people)	51%	Performative rather than analytical engagement	41%	8% of universities
Media/cameras present	18%	Exhibition behaviour by both parties	67%	19% of universities
Junior colleagues of candidate	78%	Reduced willingness to expose weaknesses	22%	3% of universities
Supervisor advocacy from audience	29%	Examination bias toward passing	16%	2% of universities

Source: Primary Research Data -Examiner Interviews and Observation Notes (2021–2023). N=47 vivas observed, 134 interviews conducted.

Table 2 documented the specific effects of different audience composition factors on doctoral examination dynamics as reported by examiners and observed in the study(Julius & Audrey, 2025d). The finding that supervisor advocacy from the audience the practice of supervisors or their allies in the audience signaling support for the candidate during the examination had affected 29% of the examinations observed and had been associated with examination bias toward passing was particularly troubling(Julius & Audrey, 2025d). The low rate of institutional policies addressing this and other audience composition effects across the sampled universities ranging from only 2% of universities having a policy on supervisor advocacy to 19% having a policy on media presence indicated that the field had not yet developed systematic institutional responses to well-documented problems(Julius & Audrey, 2025d). The finding that only 34% of candidates were aware that family presence softened examiner critical feedback suggested that candidates were not equipped to make informed decisions about the composition of their examination audience, and were therefore unable to choose environments more likely to generate the honest feedback that would be most valuable for their scholarly development(Nancy, 2025).

Accountability and Quality: The Structural Disconnects

The examination findings raised fundamental questions about the relationship between the public viva as currently practiced and the quality assurance functions that doctoral examination was designed to serve(Julius & Audrey, 2025c). A genuinely effective doctoral examination system served at least three distinct quality assurance functions: it certified that the candidate had demonstrated the intellectual competence required for the award of a doctorate; it provided formative feedback that advanced the candidate's scholarly development beyond the dissertation; and it protected the academic standards of the awarding institution and discipline(Julius, 2025). The evidence gathered in this study suggested that in many of the African universities examined, the public viva was failing across all three of these functions(David et al., 2023).

The certification function was compromised by the systematic pressures toward leniency that the audience dynamics and social accountability structures of the African public viva generated. When examiners moderated their critical engagement in response to the presence of family members, senior officials, or other audience stakeholders, the examination ceased to function as a reliable certifier of quality and became instead a social ceremony in which the award of the doctorate was determined more by the social standing of the candidate's support network than by the quality of the research itself (Julius & Audrey, 2025a). The high rates of required major corrections across the non-South African universities in the sample ranging from 24% to 34% suggested that significant proportions of doctoral theses were being allowed to proceed to examination without meeting the quality threshold that the examination itself subsequently identified (Julius & Audrey, 2025a).

Gender, Power, and the Examination Encounter

The gendered dimensions of doctoral examination had received considerable attention in the British and Australian literature but had been examined far less systematically in African contexts. The data gathered in this study pointed to significant gender dynamics in African doctoral examinations that demanded analytical attention (Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). Female candidates represented 38% of the doctoral candidates whose examinations were observed in the study, broadly consistent with the female share of doctoral enrollment at the sampled institutions (Mark et al., 2023). However, the examination experiences and outcomes of female candidates differed from those of their male counterparts in several consistent ways that suggested the operation of gendered dynamics in the examination encounter.

Female candidates were significantly more likely to be asked questions about methodological choices and research limitations than male candidates, whose examiners more frequently engaged with theoretical contributions and broader disciplinary implications (Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). Female candidates' qualitative feedback from examiners more frequently included references to writing style, presentation quality, and organizational clarity dimensions that were less frequently foregrounded in feedback to male candidates (Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). Female candidates reported higher levels of anxiety about the public character of the viva and more frequently described the examination as an emotionally as well as intellectually challenging experience (Julius et al., 2024). And female candidates were slightly more likely to receive outcomes requiring major or minor corrections than male candidates, a differential that could not be fully explained by differences in thesis quality as assessed by supervisors prior to examination (Christopher & Felex, 2022).

Reform Proposals: Toward a More Honest Examination Culture

The findings of this study generated a set of reform proposals for doctoral examination in African universities that addressed both the specific pathologies documented in the research and the deeper structural conditions that had generated them. These proposals were organized around three principles: that doctoral examination should genuinely serve quality assurance rather than institutional reputation management; that examination environments should be structured to enable honest, rigorous intellectual engagement rather than social performance; and that the experiences

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and developmental needs of doctoral candidates should be placed at the centre of examination design rather than the needs of institutional audiences.

The first set of proposals addressed examination preparation and examiner selection. The research had documented highly variable examiner preparation across the sampled universities, with many examiners reporting that they had received no formal orientation to examination criteria, processes, or expected behaviors before conducting doctoral examinations. Reform required the development of formal examiner training programs that addressed not merely procedural requirements but the intellectual and ethical dimensions of examination what it meant to evaluate doctoral work fairly, how to provide feedback that was simultaneously honest and constructive, and how to resist the social pressures that the African examination environment generated.

The second proposal addressed audience composition through the development of clear and consistently enforced policies on who should attend doctoral examinations and in what capacity. The research had demonstrated that the unrestricted public character of many African doctoral vivas created social dynamics that systematically undermined examination integrity. A reformed examination culture would permit invited observers who had a genuine academic interest in the work students, scholars, and colleagues who attended to learn from the examination process — while excluding or strictly managing the presence of family members, VIP guests, and others whose presence created the social accountability pressures documented in this study.

Conclusion

This study had sought to penetrate the ceremonial surface of the African doctoral viva to examine the social dynamics, power structures, and accountability mechanisms that shaped what actually happened in these examinations and what consequences they had for the quality of doctoral education across the continent. The findings had been troubling in their consistency: across multiple countries, institutional types, and disciplinary contexts, the public viva had been found to serve social and reputational functions that frequently undermined its quality assurance purpose.

The myth of the public viva the belief that the presence of an audience added rigor, accountability, and transparency to doctoral examination had been systematically contradicted by the evidence gathered in this study. The presence of non-academic audiences had been associated with softened examiner engagement, shortened examination processes, and outcomes shaped more by social dynamics than by intellectual quality. The accountability that the public viva supposedly provided was accountability to social audiences rather than to academic standards a form of accountability that protected institutional reputation in the short term while systematically undermining the quality of doctoral education over time.

Reforming doctoral examination in African universities required both the technical improvements in examiner training, criteria clarity, and process design that this study had recommended and a deeper cultural shift in how universities understood their obligations to doctoral candidates. The obligation was not to provide a ceremony that celebrated candidates before their families and communities though celebration had its proper place. The obligation

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was to provide rigorous, honest, developmentally oriented intellectual engagement that equipped candidates with the feedback and the scholarly identity they needed to become genuine contributors to knowledge. Meeting this obligation required the courage to prioritize substance over ceremony, intellectual integrity over social performance, and the long-term development of African scholarship over the short-term management of institutional reputation.

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