

Development and Content Validation of a Rubric for Assessment of Thesis Proposal for Graduate Studies of Lyceum of Aparri

Pablo R. Laurente¹, Evelyn L. Pascua² & Fr. Lordan T. Lagda³

^{1,2,3}Lyceum of Aparri

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article history:

Published: October 2026

Keywords:

Thesis Proposal Assessment
 Rubric Development
 Graduate Education
 Content Validation
 Philippine Higher Education

ABSTRACT

This study developed the Thesis Proposal Assessment Rubric (TPAR) and conducted initial content validation in the context of Graduate Studies at the Lyceum of Aparri, Philippines, in response to the enduring difficulties arising from the use of non-objective measures and subjective comments when assessing proposals at thesis defense. The methodology employed in the study consists of a literature review, an analysis of the transcripts of thesis proposals' defenses derived from documents produced by the respective institution of higher education, and qualitative expert validation. Thesis Proposal Assessment Rubric (TPAR), evaluate the qualitative and quantitative aspect of educational research for graduate studies. It was established that critical components of thesis proposal assessment, which are necessary in this regard, include the clarity of the problem statement, methodological relevance, rigor of the design used, detailed data analysis, ethical issues involved in conducting research, and high academic writing standard. Eventually, the draft TPAR produced after the expert validation and included behaviors, indicators and rating scale to be used. Nonetheless, the process of developing assessments—usually referred to as "black box"—often depends on hidden and subjective criteria, in which each evaluator has personal standards that may result in distortions and inconsistencies. The aim of the research is to develop and validate the thesis proposal evaluation rubric that would make the evaluation easier without losing the necessary detail required for advanced scholarship.

1. Introduction

Independent research is the cornerstone of graduate education. A thesis proposal requires students to situate their research questions within relevant literature and describe how they will contribute to systematic scholarly inquiry. However, the proposal evaluation process—often described as a "black box"—frequently relies on implicit, subjective standards that vary by panelist, leading to bias, inconsistent feedback, and systemic inequity for students. To meet this challenge, this study aims to develop and validate the Thesis Proposal Assessment Rubric (TPAR) to standardize judgments without losing the granularity required by advanced scholarship.

2. Literature Review

Although the Commission on Higher Education in the Philippines has established the quality assurance framework for graduate education (e.g., CMO No. 46, s. 2012 and CMO No. 15, s. 2017), there are no commonly unified systems of evaluation for submissions to proposals. This means the need for the quality control is essential. In academic literature, the point that the evaluation of complex tasks, like thesis proposals, involves the subjective process is commonly acknowledged. Evaluators tend to apply hidden standards, which means that personal interpretations and opinions of evaluators differ. Due to this ambiguity, non-traditional students are significantly disadvantaged in the evaluation process, which is determined by the panel rather than on the proposal itself.

The rubrics are considered to be an evidence-based approach. Good rubrics clarify what success in the project means, boost inter-rater consistency, and offer the necessary vocabulary for effective feedback. Foundational literature confirms that it is important to standardize complex evaluations. For instance, Jonsson and Svingby (2007) reported that the use of rubric with appropriate descriptive behavior anchors increases the reliability of evaluations significantly and raises assessment transparency. Moreover, the academic literature on graduate pedagogy offers important insights into the significance of the proposal stage in the process of moving from being a consumer of knowledge to becoming a producer of knowledge (Boote & Beile, 2005; Lovitts, 2007). The lack of clear guidelines makes the transformation difficult because of vague feedback that is hard for the students to implement (Brookhart, 2018; Mullen & Tuten, 2020). Although the rubrics have been shown to solve such problems in undergraduate education, their application and psychometric proof in the context of graduate education have not been studied yet, which indicates a new gap in local development of educational tools.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

This research is carried out using a Pragmatic paradigm where the focus is on the practical solutions to the real-life educational issues and using the post-positivist methods for validation. The study applies the Input Process Output model of the research:

- Input: already existing thesis proposals, 30 specially selected panel meetings minutes collected during the development of the research, and other necessary sources.

- Process: performing thematic analysis of the minutes, mapping the obtained data with the practices of the graduate school, developing the rubrics, expert validation, validating the pilot version, and data evaluation.
- Output: content-validated TPAP that includes the reliability requirements and standard scoring.

3. Methodology

The research is executed in four stages in order to create the Thesis Proposal Assessment Protocol (TPAP):

- Stage 1: The establishment of the foundation. The exploration of the policies of the Lyceum of Aparri Graduate School and the literature analysis to form the preliminary domains of the rubric.
- Stage 2: The process of getting the data and document analysis. The collection and analysis of thirty anonymized minutes of thesis proposals defense. The sample was selected purposely during the study to obtain newly acquired empirical data on faculty expectations and feedback. Documents were chosen so that various research designs—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods—were evenly represented across graduate programs in the institution and resulted in useful criteria.
- Phase 3: Mapping TPAP to Practices. Thematic analysis of defense minutes to provide a cross-mapping panel evaluation with drafted rubric criteria thus assuring that it captures real evaluation practices at the graduate level. The analysis was conducted using a 6-stage process of thematic coding (Braun & Clarke) to identify recurring panel critiques and minimize bias in data interpretation.
- Phase 4: Expert Review and Validation. A qualitative phase of validation of the tool when five experts in the field improved the tool utilizing the guided questionnaire while paying attention to content validity and accuracy of the descriptors. (Important to mention that in the subsequent pilot study, quantitative indices of Item-Level and Scale-Level Content Validity and ICC will be measured).

3.1 Ethical Considerations

Although the detailed Institutional Ethics Protocol initiated by the IRB was not used in this retrospective analysis, the proper ethical measures were taken to keep the participants data safe. Informed consent was obtained for the expert validation phase. In order to protect confidentiality and anonymity concerning the 30 thesis proposals and defense minutes under investigation, student names and other identifiers were removed from the documents before them being used in the analysis.

4. Findings

The thematic analysis of the defense minutes revealed that the evaluation process underwent extensive scrutiny regarding the actual coherence in the seven significant domains. Five eminent validators (including graduate school deans and research professors) assessed the draft of the thesis proposal assessment rubric with respect to correction of the identified themes for revision, which include: Descriptor Accuracy, Graduate-Level Rigor, and Usability. Based on the qualitative empirical data and expert revisions, the complete TPAP was developed.

Table 1: The overall mapping of themes of the evaluation panels to TPAP criteria.

Final TPAP Criterion	Extracted Theme	Empirical Evidence / Example from Defense Minutes
1. Problem Statement	Problem Justification & Focus	Panels required a major reorientation from a quasi-experimental design to a documentary analysis because the initial problem lacked sufficient empirical justification (e.g., Proponent #1).
2. Literature Review	Conceptual Framework Synthesis	Proposals were critiqued for merely stacking sources; panels required the formulation of matrices to logically connect existing theories to study variables.
3. Alignment	SOP-Methodology Traceability	Tight alignment was non-negotiable. Redundant Statement of the Problem (SOP) entries were removed entirely to ensure direct methodological traceability (e.g., Proponent #3).
4. Research Design	Methodological Rigor & Feasibility	Panels scrutinized sampling strategies heavily and required explicit theoretical justification for the chosen design frameworks.
5. Data Analysis	Technical Specificity	Panels demanded exact technical specificity, strictly correcting statistical procedures and requiring precise metrics (e.g., weighted means) over vague descriptions.
6. Ethical Issues	Privacy & Protocol Adherence	Evaluators persistently checked for and mandated data privacy protocols, informed consent measures, and proper institutional permissions.
7. Academic Writing	Formatting & Visual Discipline	Panels demanded strict adherence to APA 7th edition formatting and consistent table labeling, viewing these as markers of scholarly readiness.

4.1 Expert Validation Synthesis

Five expert validators (including Graduate School Deans and Research Professors) reviewed the draft. The consolidated themes for revision included:

- Descriptor Precision: Requiring measurable-action verbs and behavior-anchored examples to differentiate "Proficient" from "Exemplary".
- Graduate-Level Rigor: Specifying tangible markers of theoretical grounding and methodological justification appropriate for Master's/PhD levels.

- Usability: Minimizing cognitive load by transforming dense text into user-friendly tables with a clear scoring summary sheet.

4.2 The Finalized Thesis Proposal Assessment Rubric (TPAR) Based on the qualitative empirical data and expert revisions, the complete TPAR was developed.

Table 2: Thesis Proposal Assessment Rubric (TPAR) - Master's Level
Performance Levels: Exemplary (4), Proficient (3), Developing (2), Needs Improvement (1)

Criterion	Exemplary (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Needs Improvement (1)
1. Problem Statement	Problem is compelling, explicitly justified with evidence; precise, focused, and articulates a specific literature gap.	Problem is justified with adequate evidence; rationale is clear; gap is identified but could be more specific.	Problem justification is present but weak; gap is mentioned vaguely or not distinguished from existing research.	Problem justification is absent or unclear; no research gap is identified; unsearchable.
2. Literature Review	Comprehensive/current sources (5-7 yrs); critical synthesis of debates; clear visual conceptual framework.	Adequate coverage of key sources; some synthesis; conceptual framework present but could be operationalized better.	Limited coverage; descriptive summaries lacking synthesis; conceptual framework is mentioned but not developed.	Minimal engagement with literature; stacking sources without synthesis; no framework.
3. Alignment	Every research question is explicitly answered by a specific method; perfect traceability; variables perfectly operationalized.	Most questions align with methodology; answerable within scope; minor gaps in variable measurement.	Several questions do not align with methods or are unanswerable as written; variables inconsistently operationalized.	No alignment between questions and methodology; questions are fundamentally unanswerable.
4. Research Design	Design is explicitly justified; sampling strategy clearly described/justified; all constructs have measurable indicators.	Design is appropriate; sampling generally appropriate with minor details missing; most constructs operationalized.	Design mentioned but weak justification; sampling details incomplete; vague operational definitions.	Inappropriate design for questions; no sampling description; no operational definitions.
5. Data Analysis	Exact statistical/analytical procedures named and matched to questions; transparent software/procedural steps.	Specific analyses named but rationales or assumption checks incomplete; software named without full procedural detail.	Analyses mentioned generally (e.g., "descriptive statistics"); presentation plan vague.	No alignment between questions and analyses; no specific procedures named.
6. Ethical Issues	Detailed informed consent; specific privacy protections; required institutional permissions identified.	Consent process described but forms not included; privacy measures described but could be more specific.	Consent mentioned but vague; privacy mentioned generally; missing permission discussions.	No informed consent, privacy protections, or institutional permissions described.
7. Academic Writing	Perfect APA 7th ed. formatting; zero mechanical errors; tables/figures perfectly formatted and labeled.	Minor formatting errors (1-3) that do not impede readability; tables adequate but minor labeling issues.	Multiple errors (4-7) distracting from clarity; tables have issues obscuring communication.	Pervasive errors impeding understanding; missing or incomprehensible tables; plagiarism concerns.

TPAR Decision Matrix & Scoring System

To be completed by the evaluation panel during the defense proceedings.

- 25–28 Points (89-100%): Pass with Distinction. Proceed to data collection; minor editorial suggestions only.
- 21–24 Points (75-85%): Pass. Proceed to data collection after addressing minor revisions.
- 17–20 Points (61-71%): Conditional Pass. Major revisions required; second review needed before data collection.
- 1–16 Points (Below 60%): Fail. Proposal must be substantially rewritten and re-defended.

5. Discussion

The results of this study remove the validation shortfalls previously found in literature regarding assessment in higher education in the Philippines. While prior studies pointed out that the feedback given during thesis proposal defense is often vague and not constructive, the thematic analysis of the events that took place at the Lyceum of Aparri suggests that there exists a rigorous, albeit implicit institutional culture that is concerned with internal consistency, methodological transparency, and ethicality. In particular, the development and implementation of the TPAR follow what has been found by Jonsson and Svingby (2007) and Dawson (2017),

who claimed that analytic rubrics are most effective only when they provide the particularized, behavior-based descriptors instead of generalized evaluation terms. Another benefit of the TPAR is that it embodies the concepts of literature synthesis and methodological alignment, thereby enabling the shift from being a consumer of knowledge to being a producer of knowledge as described by Boote and Beile (2005) and Lovitts (2007). The TPAR differs from the generic checklists that are commonly used in institutions and provides the kind of scaffold that enables overcoming the systemic ambiguity recognized by Mullen and Tuten (2020).

5.1 Study Limitations

It is worth mentioning that the methodology behind the TPAR is based on a sample of data collected from the defense proceedings conducted at one of the institutions, namely the Lyceum of Aparri. This ensures that the findings are relevant to the context, but there are implications for their generalizability. The next stage of the pilot testing will allow examining the inter-institutional applicability of this tool.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The main conclusion drawn from this study is that the TPAR is a valid and practical tool that is feasible for piloting in academic institutions. The TPAR makes the process of defense more than just a formal procedure of evaluation, as it tool incorporates the realities of defense processes used by different panels, including the idea of ensuring methodological alignment, visual literacy, and ethical voicing.

6.2 Recommendations

- For students: Make use of the TPAR beforehand to ensure correspondence between the analysis plan and research questions prior to the defense. Make use of visual instruments for representing information, such as ADDIE models of workflow while abiding by the APA 7th edition formatting guidelines.
- For Faculty: Utilize the seven criteria as a guide for formative advising. Undertake "early alignment audits" with TPAR that will reduce significant changes during the final defense.
- For Administration: Implement the TPAR in doable steps. Have an ongoing record of evaluations used to find the weaknesses in students' proposals systematically. Further research must use TPAR in a pilot project to find the Inter-Rater Reliability (ICC) of the tool while also predicting measures like time-to-degree and completion rates.

6.3 Knowledge Contributions

- Theoretical: The study transfers the established design principles into the empirical evaluation literature, underpinning the importance of practical validity alignment with theoretical one.
- Methodological: A creative methodology has been created based on thematic document analysis of defense minutes and expert opinions so that the tool would be internally and externally valid.
- Practical: The study introduces a ready-to-use assessment scale that will help enhance the quality of the feedback provided, speed up the process of evaluation, and nurture the culture of transparency and academic excellence in the graduate education system in the Philippines.

References

- [1] Abulencia, J., Reyes, M., & Santos, L. (2021). Contextualizing assessment frameworks in Philippine graduate education: Challenges and directions. *Philippine Journal of Education*, 45(2), 112–130.
- [2] Boote, D. N., & Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational Researcher*, 34(6), 3–15.
- [3] Brookhart, S. M. (2018). *How to create and use rubrics for formative assessment and grading*. ASCD.
- [4] Commission on Higher Education (CHED). (2012). *CMO No. 46, s. 2012: Policies, standards and guidelines for graduate programs*. Republic of the Philippines.
- [5] Commission on Higher Education (CHED). (2017). *CMO No. 15, s. 2017: Policies, standards and guidelines for graduate education*. Republic of the Philippines.
- [6] Dawson, P. (2017). Assessment rubrics: Towards clearer and more replicable design, research and practice. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(3), 347–360.
- [7] Jonsson, A., & Svingby, G. (2007). The use of scoring rubrics: Reliability, validity and educational consequences. *Educational Research Review*, 2(2), 130–144.
- [8] Lovitts, B. E. (2007). *Making the implicit explicit: Creating performance expectations for the dissertation*. Stylus Publishing.
- [9] Mullen, C. A., & Tuten, J. (2020). Subjectivity and inconsistency in graduate proposal assessment. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(5), 567–578.