

EXPECTATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF CHOOSING DOCTORAL TOPICS IN EDUCATION RESEARCH IN STATE UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

Ayaogu, Nkemdirim Veronica¹; Onyebuchi Denis Chibuisi² & Ukwu, Felix Emeka³

^{1,2}Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education,
Enugu State University of Science and Technology

³Department of Public Administration and Local Government, Faculty of the Social Sciences,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

Research is enterprising and innovative in academic disciplines. It is a planned process replete with fundamentals and expectations which begins with choosing research topics. However, candidates in advanced learning programmes (PhD) are often challenged with the complexities of this process. This study examined the expectations and challenges in choosing doctoral topics in education research. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population comprised doctoral supervisors and doctoral candidates in four state universities in South-East Nigeria, from which a sample of 100 respondents (40 supervisor-lecturers and 60 doctoral students) was selected using purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and documentary sources. The instrument was validated by experts in research methodology, and its reliability determined using Cronbach's alpha. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test statistics. Findings revealed persistent difficulties that constrain doctoral research and supervision in education. The study concludes by advocating for attitudinal reorientation, departmental initiatives, and institutional support to strengthen doctoral research and supervision in education.

Keywords: Research, education, research topics, doctoral candidates

Introduction

Education, as both a social institution and academic domain, plays a pivotal role in individual development and national advancement. It transcends the mere transmission of knowledge, shaping character, fostering innovation, and ensuring cultural continuity (Creswell, 2018). A country's true progress is thus measured not by its infrastructure, but by the quality of its human capital developed through robust educational systems. Central to educational progress is research especially doctoral-level inquiry which generates evidence, influences policy, and nurtures intellectual leadership (Omoya et al., 2024; Khodabocus, 2016). In Nigeria, educational research is conducted predominantly in universities, colleges of education, and specialized bodies like WAEC, NECO, and NERDC. For example, WAEC's Test Development and Research Office performs empirical studies on assessments, testing practices, and measurement issues. NERDC likewise coordinates curriculum and research initiatives nationwide. In educational inquiry, three principal approaches are common: historical, survey/descriptive, and experimental designs (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Historical research examines archival records and oral narratives to contextualize current practice. Survey/descriptive methods collect data via questionnaires, interviews, and observations to characterize phenomena. Experimental approaches explore causal relationships through controlled manipulation of variables. Educational research proceeds through structured steps: identifying a problem, reviewing literature, formulating questions or hypotheses, choosing methodology, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting results, and drawing implications (Kumar, 2019).

Crucially, the selection of a doctoral topic is often the most daunting stage for emerging scholars. The right topic sets the trajectory of one's research career, impacts

feasibility, and aligns with institutional or national priorities (Omoya et al., 2024; Pelser, 2024). Supervisory constraints, funding limitations, and infrastructural deficits frequently restrict students' freedom in topic choice (Igumbor et al., 2022; El Hajj et al., 2024). In many African contexts, doctoral proposals undergo repeated rejections, constraining candidates to iteratively refine or abandon their choices (Khodabocus, 2016; "Doctoral training in African universities," n.d.). Authors recommend various criteria for topic selection: relevance and urgency, originality, feasibility given resources, ethical and political acceptability, and potential impact (Pelser, 2024; Damba et al., 2024). Topics may emerge from theoretical frameworks, societal challenges, technological change, or expert discussion. Yet overly narrow, socially sensitive, or data-scarce topics often lead to practical difficulties. Candidates need not master every method before choosing a problem; foundational knowledge and familiarity with recent developments suffice to identify viable research directions (Omoya et al., 2024; Pelser, 2024). Despite increasing scholarship on doctoral education challenges, few studies focus specifically on education doctoral students in Eastern Nigeria or similar settings. This gap is even more acute concerning the process of topic selection in education research within developing academic contexts. This study addresses that gap by surveying doctoral candidates to investigate the challenges they face in choosing dissertation topics, and to propose strategies that are responsive to institutional and national realities.

Statement of the Problem

The selection of a dissertation topic is one of the most critical stages in doctoral research. The chosen topic must sustain the candidate's interest, align with the supervisor's expertise, and meet the standards of originality, relevance, and feasibility set by the university. In most institutions, doctoral registration begins with a proposal, requiring students to clearly define a problem that is both academically significant and practically relevant. The expectation is that doctoral research should contribute new knowledge, address pressing social or professional issues, and in many cases, result in publishable outcomes. In practice, however, many doctoral candidates in education encounter serious difficulties at this stage. A large number struggle to identify researchable problems that are relevant to scholarship and responsive to national development needs. This often results in repeated rejection of proposals, delays in research progress, and in some cases, abandonment of studies. The inability to select viable topics also generates stress and frustration, further weakening students' confidence and commitment. A recurring concern is the uncertainty about where and how to source viable research topics. Candidates often face conflicting guidance, unclear expectations, and limited support structures. Many are unsure whether their ideas are novel, whether the problems they wish to address are researchable, or whether their studies will produce outcomes that are both applicable and impactful. These challenges are particularly pronounced in education research, where balancing theoretical significance with practical feasibility is especially complex. The consequence of these challenges is a recurring crisis of thesis development and completion among doctoral candidates in education. Prolonged struggles in choosing suitable topics not only delay graduation but also undermine the quality and contribution of doctoral research to national development and educational advancement. This situation calls for a systematic examination of the factors that make topic selection such a difficult stage for doctoral students in education.

Purpose of the Study

1. To find out factors responsible for ignorance of fundamental expectations in choosing PhD topics in education research.
2. To identify difficulties encountered by doctoral students in choosing dissertation topics in education research.

3. To illuminate the measures expedient for effective and productive doctoral research in education.

Research Questions

This discourse is therefore guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the factors responsible for ignorance of fundamental expectations in choosing PhD topics in education research?
2. What are the difficulties encountered by doctoral students in choosing dissertation topics in education research?
3. What are the measures to strengthen doctoral research in education?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided this study and were tested at 0.5 level of significance

- HO₁:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates on the factors responsible for ignorance of fundamental expectations in choosing PhD topics in education research.
- HO₂:** There is a significant difference between the mean ratings of supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates on the difficulties encountered by doctoral students in choosing dissertation topics in education research.
- HO₃:** There is no significant difference between supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates in their mean ratings of those measures.

Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The area of study is state University in South East. The target population was 1,000 persons consisting of 80 lecturers and 920 postgraduate students in education across the four universities. From this, a purposive sample of 200 respondents was drawn. The sample comprised 40 PhD supervisor-lecturers (10 from each university) and 60 doctoral students (15 from each university), making a total of 100 respondents. A 15-item structured questionnaire was developed for data collection. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by four experts in Measurement and Evaluation from the participating universities. Its internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability for the study. Data were collected personally with the assistance of trained research aides. The research questions were analyzed using mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were tested using independent samples t-test at 0.05 level of significance. The decision benchmark was set such that mean ratings of 2.50 and above were regarded as "Accepted," while mean ratings below 2.50 were regarded as "Rejected."

Data Presentation

Table 1: Mean Rating and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Factors Responsible for Ignorance of Fundamental Expectations in Choosing PhD Topics in Education Research

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE	RESPONSES					
		Supervisor-lecturers			Doctoral Candidates		
		Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Most doctoral candidates have poor background and exposure in research.	3.5	0.89	Accepted	3.00	0.98	Accepted
2.	Most doctoral candidates are not patient and	4.00	0.74		4.00	0.86	Accepted

	interested to follow research procedure and tips in selecting topics.			Accepted			
3.	Most doctoral supervisors do not have time to guide their candidates thoroughly in choosing topics.	4.00	0.62	Accepted	4.00	0.76	Accepted
4.	Some doctoral supervisors are not adequately knowledgeable in research to guide the candidates.	3.23	0.51	Accepted	3.49	0.77	Accepted
5.	Irregular conduct of PG Research workshop in Department in most Universities.	2.46	0.93	Low	2.36	0.80	Rejected
	Cluster Mean	3.38	0.73		3.37	0.83	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 1 shows the itemized mean for supervisor-lectures which range from 2.46 to 4.00 with a cluster mean of 3.38 and standard deviation of 0.73. The itemized mean of Doctoral students range from 2.36 to 4.00 with cluster mean of 3.37 and standard deviation of 0.83. The outcome of the data analyzed on the table revealed that the Supervisor-lecturers and Doctoral students agreed that.

Table 2: Mean Rating and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Difficulties Encountered by Doctoral Students in Choosing Dissertation Topics in Education Research

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE	RESPONSES					
		Supervisor-lecturers			Doctoral Candidates		
		Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Most doctoral candidates present their dissertation topics for approval very late.	1.45	0.87	Rejected	1.59	0.94	Rejected
2.	Most doctoral candidates find it difficult to select dissertation topics for research.	2.49	0.74	Rejected	2.48	0.87	Rejected
3.	Most doctoral supervisors determine the dissertation topics for their candidates contrary to their choice.	1.55	0.86	Rejected	1.38	0.91	Rejected
4.	Most doctoral candidates are not properly guided on how to select dissertation topics for research.	3.50	0.95	Accepted	3.42	0.75	Accepted
5.	The failure of most Departments to organize workshop for doctoral students on selection of dissertation topics.	1.30	0.39	Rejected	1.24	0.84	Rejected
	Cluster Mean	2.67	0.76	Rejected	2.02	0.86	Rejected

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 3: Mean Rating and Standard Deviation of Respondents on Measures to Strengthen Doctoral Research in Education

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE	RESPONSES					
		Supervisor-lecturers			Doctoral Candidates		
		Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Doctoral candidates should make the course, “research methodology” a top priority course	2.x32	0.95	Rejected	2.27	0.98	Rejected
2.	Doctoral candidates should present regular seminar papers on research methodology.	2.00	0.79	Rejected	2.00	0.79	Rejected
3.	PhD supervisors should guide doctoral candidates on the selection of dissertation topics.	1.00	0.76	Rejected	1.00	0.93	Rejected
4.	PhD supervisors should make available dissertation topics for doctoral candidates	1.23	0.85	Rejected	1.42	0.85	Rejected
5.	Departments should appoint two supervisors for each doctoral students in thesis evaluation.	2.26	0.93	Rejected	2.24	0.90	Rejected
	Cluster Mean	1.76	0.85	Rejected	1.78	0.89	Rejected

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Hypotheses

Table 4: t-test of significant difference between the mean ratings of supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates on the factors responsible for ignorance of fundamental expectations in choosing PhD topics in education research

Supervisor-lecturers	N 40	MEAN 3.38	SD 0.73	Df 98	t-table 1.98	t-cal 0.64	Decision Not rejected
Doctoral candidates	60	3.37	0.83				

The result on table 4 revealed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates on the factors responsible for ignorance of fundamental expectations in choosing PhD topics in education research. Thus; the obtained t-score of 0.64 is less than t-table of 1.98; therefore, the null hypotheses is not rejected

Table 5: t-test of significant difference between the mean ratings of supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates on the difficulties encountered by doctoral students in choosing dissertation topics in education research

Supervisor-lecturers	N 40	X 2.67	SD 0.76	Df	t-table	t-ca	Decision
Doctoral candidates	60	2.02	0.86	98	1.98	3.97	Rejected

The result on table 5 revealed that there is significant **difference between** the mean ratings of supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates on the difficulties encountered by doctoral students in choosing dissertation topics in education research. Thus; the obtained t-score of 3.97 is greater than t-table of 1.98; therefore, the null hypotheses is rejected

Table 6: t-test of significant difference between supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates in their mean ratings of those measures to Strengthen Doctoral Research in Education

Supervisor-lecturers	N 40	MEAN 1.76	SD 0.85	Df	t-table	t-ca	Decision
Doctoral candidates	60	1.78	0.89	98	1.98	0.12	Accepted

There is **no significant difference** between the mean ratings of supervisor-lecturers and doctoral candidates on the measures to strengthen doctoral research in education. The obtained t-value (0.12) is less than the critical t-value (1.98); hence, the null hypothesis is retained.

Discussion

The findings from revealed that ignorance of the fundamental expectations in choosing researchable topics contributes significantly to the deficiencies observed among doctoral candidates and, to some extent, their supervisors. This is consistent with previous studies which emphasized that many doctoral candidates lack adequate preparation and understanding of research foundations, leading to difficulties in framing quality research problems (Agyemang, 2021; Okeke&Ugwu, 2022). The irregularity of postgraduate workshops, although not totally dismissed by respondents, reflects the assertion of Ani and Ogbuabor (2020) that institutional support structures for research training are often inconsistent and insufficient in Nigerian universities. The findings showed that respondents largely disagreed with the view that difficulties in choosing research topics arise from late presentation of dissertation topics, departmental inconsistencies, or time constraints of supervisors. Instead, failure of supervisors to provide proper guidance emerged as a major difficulty. This corroborates the findings of Yusuf and Adeniran (2019), who argued that supervisory neglect or inadequate mentoring creates a vacuum that frustrates doctoral students' ability to identify researchable topics. Similarly, Adetoun and Bello (2020) highlighted that effective supervisory engagement is central to developing candidates' research competence. Thus, the present study reinforces the critical role of supervisors in shaping doctoral research trajectories.

The findings indicated that respondents rejected many of the suggested measures for strengthening doctoral research, such as prioritizing research methodology, organizing seminars, and assigning two supervisors per student, as being superficial. This contradicts earlier findings by Okoh and Nnamani (2021), who suggested that structured coursework and regular research seminars improve research competence. However, it aligns with the position of Omotayo (2022), who argued that without deeper reforms—such as rigorous supervisory training, personalized mentorship, and accountability frameworks—such measures remain ineffective. The implication is that strengthening doctoral research requires not just institutional adjustments but also systemic and cultural changes in supervision and candidate preparation.

In summary, the findings reveal three key issues: (1) ignorance of research foundations persists among candidates; (2) supervisory guidance is the most critical determinant of doctoral candidates' ability to select quality topics; and (3) superficial measures without structural reforms are unlikely to yield meaningful improvement. These findings align with and extend existing literature, highlighting the urgent need for universities to move beyond surface-level interventions toward more holistic and sustainable reforms in doctoral education

Conclusion

This study has revealed persistent challenges affecting doctoral candidates in the selection of researchable topics in education. First, ignorance of the fundamental principles of research topic articulation remains a critical issue, spanning from postgraduate diploma through master's to doctoral levels. This reflects systemic gaps in research preparation and inadequate supervisory engagement. Second, the study showed that the major difficulty confronting doctoral candidates is not necessarily departmental inconsistencies or delays in dissertation processes, but rather the insufficient guidance provided by supervisors. This highlights the crucial role of supervisors in shaping doctoral research trajectories. Third, while some commonly suggested measures such as prioritizing research methodology courses and assigning multiple supervisors were viewed as superficial by respondents, the findings emphasize that more profound structural and supervisory reforms are needed. Effective doctoral research requires not just institutional provisions but also candidate readiness and active supervisory commitment. In sum, the findings conclude that ignorance of research fundamentals, inadequate supervision, and superficial institutional responses are at the root of the challenges in doctoral research. Addressing these issues is essential for strengthening research quality and supervision in education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthened Supervisory Guidance:** Supervisors should intensify efforts to provide clear, consistent, and practical guidance on the fundamentals of selecting and developing well-articulated researchable topics.
2. **Candidate Capacity Building:** Doctoral candidates should proactively engage in learning and internalizing the basic requirements for choosing quality topics through seminars, workshops, and self-study.
3. **Interactive Postgraduate Forums:** Colleges or Schools of Postgraduate Studies should organize regular interactive sessions between management and candidates to assess challenges in thesis writing and supervision, creating a feedback loop for improvement.
4. **Departmental Initiatives:** Departments and Faculties of Education should adopt structured mentorship and early exposure strategies that guide doctoral candidates from topic selection to the broader research process.
5. **Supervisory Accountability:** Supervisors should deliberately create time and space for effective mentorship, ensuring that doctoral supervision is treated as a priority responsibility rather than an additional burden.

REFERENCES

- Adhikari, R. (2020). Choosing and narrowing research topics for doctoral studies. *Journal of Education and Research*, 10(2), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v10i2.32358>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (6th ed.). Pearson.

- Damba, F. U., Mensah, J. K., & Appiah, R. (2024). Barriers and facilitators in translating doctoral research into practice: Implications for education in Africa. *Heliyon*, 10(5), e23452. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e23452>
- El Hajj, T., Nderitu, J., & Kalinga, O. (2024). Doctoral students' perspectives on challenges of PhD programmes in sub-Saharan Africa: Registration, supervision, and support. *Global Higher Education Review*, 12(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/XXXXXX>
- Igumbor, J. O., Madueke, I., & Adebayo, S. (2022). Effective supervision of doctoral students in African universities: Issues and strategies. *Higher Education Policy*, 35(3), 467–483. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-021-00242-7>
- Khodabocus, F. (2016). Challenges to doctoral education in Africa. *International Higher Education*, 85, 25–27. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2016.85.9255>
- Kumar, R. (2019). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Omoya, O., Jacob, U. S., Odeyemi, O. A., & Odeyemi, O. A. (2024). Exploring perspectives: A scoping review of the challenges facing doctoral training in Africa. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01264-4>
- Pelser, A.-M. (2024). Synergistic advancements: Fostering collaborative excellence in doctoral education. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, 1289424. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1289424>
- Schneider, H., Daniels, J., & Phaswana-Mafuya, N. (2024). Responsive public health doctoral education: Reflections on program evolution in South Africa. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 11227753. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.11227753>
- UNESCO. (2017). *Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives*. UNESCO Publishing