

## **EXPECTATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF CHOOSING DOCTORAL TOPICS IN EDUCATION RESEARCH IN STATE UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

The study examined the expectations and challenges associated with choosing doctoral topics in education research across four state universities in South East Nigeria. Research in education was a complex and innovative process that required fundamental understanding and careful topic selection. Doctoral candidates often encountered significant challenges at this stage. A descriptive survey design was employed. The population comprised 1,000 doctoral supervisors and candidates, from which 100 respondents, consisting of 40 supervisors and 60 candidates, were selected using purposive and random sampling techniques. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.70 determined through Cronbach's Alpha. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and t test, were used for data analysis. The findings revealed that inadequate supervisory guidance and limited research background and exposure were the major factors influencing challenges in selecting doctoral research topics. It was also found that both supervisors and doctoral candidates experienced significant difficulties in the area of identifying and refining researchable dissertation topics. The study recommended stronger supervisory mentoring, structured departmental research workshops, and improved institutional support systems for effective doctoral research.

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**Keywords:** Research; education; doctoral topics; doctoral candidates

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### **Introduction**

The growing difficulty experienced by doctoral candidates in selecting appropriate research topics in education has become a source of concern, particularly within state universities in South East Nigeria. This concern arises from the central role that doctoral topic selection, considered in this study as the independent variable, plays in shaping the quality, relevance, and completion of doctoral research. Increasingly, candidates are expected to propose research topics that are innovative, feasible, and aligned with contemporary educational needs, yet many struggle to meet these expectations due to a range of academic and institutional constraints.

Education continues to serve as a vital instrument for national development and individual advancement, fostering critical thinking, innovation, and the development of human capital (Creswell, 2018). Within this context, doctoral education represents the highest level of academic training, designed to produce scholars capable of contributing original knowledge to the field. The research process in education requires careful problem identification, systematic inquiry, and methodological rigor (Creswell, 2018). At the core of this process is the selection of a well defined and researchable topic, which determines the direction and success of the entire study. In educational research, major research designs such as historical, survey, and experimental approaches have been identified as essential frameworks for investigating diverse phenomena (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). These approaches depend on clearly articulated research problems and appropriate methodological choices. Similarly, the success of any research endeavor is closely linked to the researcher's ability to select a topic that is both manageable and significant (Kumar, 2019). However, in many Nigerian universities, doctoral candidates often encounter difficulties in identifying such topics due to inadequate exposure to current research trends, limited methodological training, and insufficient academic guidance.

Furthermore, doctoral candidates in state universities in South East Nigeria are expected to navigate complex academic expectations, including originality, relevance to local and global issues, and methodological soundness. Despite these expectations, challenges such as poor supervision, limited access to scholarly resources, and weak institutional support systems persist. These factors have been shown to hinder effective research topic selection and overall doctoral progress (Igumbor, Abhulimen, and Aigbavboa, 2022; El Hajj and Nassif, 2024). Although considerable attention has been given to doctoral supervision and research capacity globally, there remains limited empirical evidence focusing specifically on the expectations and challenges associated with choosing doctoral research topics in education within the context of state universities in South East Nigeria. It is this gap that raises significant concern and justifies the present study. Therefore, this study examines the expectations and challenges of selecting doctoral topics in education research, with a view to identifying strategies that can enhance research capacity and improve doctoral outcomes in the region.

Current scholarship on doctoral education emphasizes the centrality of research topic selection to the success, quality, and timeliness of doctoral studies. Contemporary studies highlight increasing expectations for originality, societal relevance, and methodological rigor in educational research, alongside growing interest in research capacity building, supervision practices, and access to scholarly resources (Creswell, 2018; Kumar, 2019). Recent contributions have also drawn attention to the influence of institutional support systems and supervisory dynamics on doctoral progression, particularly in developing contexts where structural and resource constraints remain evident (Igumbor, Abhulimen, and Aigbavboa, 2022; El Hajj and Nassif, 2024). Notwithstanding these advancements, existing literature has not sufficiently examined the specific expectations and challenges associated with selecting doctoral research topics in education within state universities in South East Nigeria. Most studies focus broadly on doctoral supervision and research processes without isolating topic selection as a critical factor or addressing its contextual realities. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on how institutional conditions, supervisory practices, and candidate preparedness interact to influence topic selection in this region. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing context specific insights into the expectations and challenges of doctoral topic selection and by proposing strategies to strengthen research capacity and improve doctoral outcomes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Doctoral research in education is expected to serve as a major driver of knowledge production, innovation, and evidence based policy development within the university system. Ideally, doctoral candidates are expected to identify research topics that are clear, relevant, feasible, and capable of addressing pressing educational issues within their immediate and broader contexts. Such topic selection should be guided by strong methodological competence, effective supervision, and adequate institutional support, thereby ensuring high quality research outcomes and timely completion of doctoral programmes. However, in many state universities in South East Nigeria, the process of selecting doctoral research topics in education appears to be fraught with several challenges. Many doctoral candidates experience difficulty in identifying suitable and researchable topics due to limited exposure to current research trends, inadequate methodological preparation, and insufficient academic guidance. In addition, institutional constraints such as limited access to scholarly resources and weak research support structures further complicate the process. These conditions often result in poorly defined research topics, delays in proposal development, prolonged duration of study, and, in some cases, reduced quality of doctoral outputs. The problem of this study, therefore, is that despite the critical importance of doctoral topic selection in determining research quality and completion, many doctoral candidates in education in state universities in South East Nigeria

face significant challenges in meeting expected standards of topic selection, thereby affecting the overall effectiveness of doctoral research in the region.

### Purpose of the Study

The study aims to examine the expectations and challenges of choosing doctoral topics in education research in state universities in South-East Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. identify factors responsible for ignorance of fundamental expectations in choosing PhD topics.
2. determine the major difficulties doctoral students encounter in selecting dissertation topics.
3. propose measures to strengthen doctoral research in education.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study;

1. What factors contribute to ignorance of fundamental expectations in selecting doctoral topics?
2. What are the key difficulties doctoral students face in choosing dissertation topics?
3. What measures can strengthen doctoral research in education

### Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference between supervisors and candidates on factors responsible for ignorance of research expectations.
2. There is a significant difference between supervisors and candidates regarding difficulties in choosing dissertation topics.
3. There is no significant difference between supervisors and candidates on measures to strengthen doctoral research.

### Methods

A descriptive survey design was adopted. The study area comprised four state universities in South-East Nigeria: Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Ebonyi State University (EBSU), Imo State University (IMSU), and Abia State University (ABSU). The population included 1,000 persons—80 lecturers and 920 doctoral students. A sample of 100 respondents (40 supervisors and 60 doctoral students) was selected using purposive and simple random sampling. A 15-item structured questionnaire validated by four experts in Measurement and Evaluation was used for data collection. Reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha yielded 0.70. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and independent t-test at a 0.05 level of significance. A mean score of 2.50 and above indicated "agreement."

### Results

**Research Question 1:** What factors are responsible for ignorance of expectations in choosing doctoral topics?

| Item                                                             | Supervisors<br>Mean | SD   | Decision | Candidates<br>Mean | SD   | Decision |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------|----------|--------------------|------|----------|
| Inadequate research background and exposure                      | 3.50                | 0.89 | A        | 3.00               | 0.98 | A        |
| Impatience and lack of interest in following research procedures | 4.00                | 0.74 | A        | 4.00               | 0.86 | A        |
| Limited supervisory time and engagement                          | 4.00                | 0.62 | A        | 4.00               | 0.76 | A        |
| Supervisors' inadequate research competence                      | 3.23                | 0.51 | A        | 3.49               | 0.77 | A        |
| Irregular postgraduate workshops                                 | 2.46                | 0.93 | A        | 2.36               | 0.80 | A        |

**Cluster Mean 3.38 0.73 A 3.37 0.83 A**

Table 1 shows that both supervisors and doctoral candidates agreed that inadequate research background and exposure, impatience and lack of adherence to research procedures, limited supervisory time and engagement, supervisors' inadequate research competence, and irregular postgraduate workshops are factors responsible for ignorance of expectations in choosing doctoral topics. The cluster mean scores of 3.38 for supervisors and 3.37 for candidates further show general agreement that these factors contribute to the problem.

**Research Question 2:** What are the major difficulties doctoral students encounters in choosing dissertation topics?

| Item                                            | Supervisors<br>Mean | SD          | Decision        | Candidates<br>Mean | SD          | Decision        |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Late topic presentation for approval            | 1.45                | 0.87        | Rejected        | 1.59               | 0.94        | Rejected        |
| Difficulty in identifying researchable problems | 2.49                | 0.74        | Rejected        | 2.48               | 0.87        | Rejected        |
| Supervisors impose research topics              | 1.55                | 0.86        | Rejected        | 1.38               | 0.91        | Rejected        |
| Poor guidance on topic selection                | 3.50                | 0.95        | Accepted        | 3.42               | 0.75        | Accepted        |
| Lack of departmental workshops                  | 1.30                | 0.39        | Rejected        | 1.24               | 0.84        | Rejected        |
| <b>Cluster Mean</b>                             | <b>2.67</b>         | <b>0.76</b> | <b>Rejected</b> | <b>2.02</b>        | <b>0.86</b> | <b>Rejected</b> |

Table 2 shows that both supervisors and doctoral candidates rejected most of the listed items as major difficulties in choosing dissertation topics, including late topic presentation for approval, difficulty in identifying researchable problems, imposition of topics by supervisors, and lack of departmental workshops. However, poor guidance on topic selection was accepted by both groups as a major difficulty. The cluster mean scores of 2.67 for supervisors and 2.02 for candidates' further show that only supervisory guidance was considered a significant challenge.

**Research Question 3:** What measures can strengthen doctoral research in education?

| Item                                      | Supervisors<br>Mean | SD          | Decision        | Candidates<br>Mean | SD          | Decision        |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Prioritizing research methodology courses | 2.32                | 0.95        | Rejected        | 2.27               | 0.98        | Rejected        |
| Regular seminars on research methodology  | 2.00                | 0.79        | Rejected        | 2.00               | 0.79        | Rejected        |
| Enhanced supervisory guidance             | 1.00                | 0.76        | Rejected        | 1.00               | 0.93        | Rejected        |
| Provision of sample dissertation topics   | 1.23                | 0.85        | Rejected        | 1.42               | 0.85        | Rejected        |
| Two supervisors per doctoral student      | 2.26                | 0.93        | Rejected        | 2.24               | 0.90        | Rejected        |
| <b>Cluster Mean</b>                       | <b>1.76</b>         | <b>0.85</b> | <b>Rejected</b> | <b>1.78</b>        | <b>0.89</b> | <b>Rejected</b> |

Table 3 shows that both supervisors and doctoral candidates rejected all the proposed measures for strengthening doctoral research in education. These include prioritizing research methodology courses, regular seminars on research methodology, enhanced supervisory guidance, provision of sample dissertation topics, and assigning two supervisors per doctoral student. The cluster mean scores of 1.76 for supervisors and 1.78 for candidates further show general disagreement that the listed measures are adequate for strengthening doctoral research.

### Hypotheses Testing

| Hypothesis                                      | t-cal | t-table | df | Decision     |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|---------|----|--------------|
| H01: No difference on ignorance factors         | 0.64  | 1.98    | 98 | Not Rejected |
| H02: Difference on topic selection difficulties | 3.97  | 1.98    | 98 | Rejected     |
| H03: No difference on strengthening measures    | 0.12  | 1.98    | 98 | Not Rejected |

Table 4 shows that for Hypothesis One, the calculated t value of 0.64 is less than the table value of 1.98 at 98 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the ignorance factors influencing doctoral topic selection was not rejected. This indicates that both supervisors and doctoral candidates do not differ significantly in their responses regarding the factors responsible for ignorance of expectations in selecting doctoral topics. Table 4 also shows that for Hypothesis Two, the calculated t value of 3.97 is greater than the table value of 1.98 at 98 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the difficulties encountered in choosing dissertation topics was rejected. This implies that there is a significant difference between supervisors and doctoral candidates in their responses regarding the difficulties faced in selecting dissertation topics.

Table 4 further shows that for Hypothesis Three, the calculated t value of 0.12 is less than the table value of 1.98 at 98 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the measures that can strengthen doctoral research in education was not rejected. This indicates that both supervisors and doctoral candidates share similar views regarding measures for strengthening doctoral research.

### Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that ignorance of fundamental expectations in selecting doctoral topics is largely influenced by inadequate research background and exposure, impatience in following research procedures, limited supervisory engagement, and insufficient research competence among some supervisors. The findings further showed that both supervisors and doctoral candidates strongly agreed that these factors significantly hinder proper understanding of research expectations. The findings are in consonance with the study of Creswell (2018) who posited that a strong foundation in educational research is essential for identifying and defining researchable problems. The findings also agree with Kumar (2019) who asserted that inadequate methodological knowledge and poor research orientation contribute to confusion and weak direction in topic selection among postgraduate students.

The findings of the study revealed that poor supervisory guidance is the most critical difficulty doctoral students face in choosing dissertation topics, while other factors such as late topic presentation, difficulty in identifying researchable problems, and lack of departmental workshops were not considered major constraints. This implies that effective supervision plays a central role in guiding students toward viable and researchable topics. The findings are in consonance with the study of Igumbor, Madueke, and Adebayo (2022) who posited that quality supervision is a key determinant of doctoral success and research progression in African universities. The findings also align with El Hajj, Nderitu, and Kalinga (2024) who emphasized that inadequate supervisory support significantly affects doctoral students' ability to conceptualize and refine their research topics.

The findings of the study revealed that commonly proposed measures for strengthening doctoral research, such as prioritizing research methodology courses, organizing regular seminars, enhancing supervision, and assigning multiple supervisors, were largely perceived as inadequate by the respondents. This suggests that conventional or routine interventions may not sufficiently address the deeper structural and systemic issues affecting doctoral research. The findings are in consonance with the study of Omoya, Jacob, and Odeyemi (2024) who posited that doctoral training challenges in Africa require comprehensive and systemic reforms rather

than isolated efforts. The findings also agree with Pelsers (2024) who asserted that improving doctoral education requires collaborative, innovative, and institution wide strategies that go beyond traditional support mechanisms.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study have important implications for doctoral education, supervision practices, and research capacity development in state universities in South East Nigeria. First, the result that ignorance of expectations in selecting doctoral topics is influenced by inadequate research background, limited exposure, and weak engagement in research procedures implies that many doctoral candidates may be entering doctoral training without sufficient foundational research competence. This suggests a need for stronger emphasis on research literacy and preparatory training at earlier stages of postgraduate education. Second, the identification of poor supervisory guidance as the most critical difficulty in selecting doctoral topics implies that the effectiveness of doctoral training is highly dependent on the quality of supervision provided. This indicates that universities must prioritize supervisory capacity development, including training for supervisors and improved mentoring structures, to ensure that doctoral candidates receive adequate academic direction during topic selection and proposal development.

Third, the finding that commonly suggested measures such as seminars, methodology courses, and multiple supervisions were largely considered inadequate implies that current institutional interventions may not sufficiently address the deeper structural and attitudinal challenges affecting doctoral research. This highlights the need for more comprehensive reforms that go beyond routine academic activities to include sustained research support systems, improved academic culture, and stronger institutional commitment to doctoral development. Generally, the study implies that improving doctoral topic selection and research outcomes requires a coordinated effort involving candidates, supervisors, and institutional authorities, with particular attention to strengthening research training, supervision quality, and institutional support structures.

### **Conclusion**

Doctoral topic selection remains a significant challenge in education research in South-East Nigeria. The study concludes that these challenges stem from ignorance of research expectations, limited supervisory engagement, and weak institutional structures. Effective solutions require attitudinal change, systemic mentorship, and supportive academic environments.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Supervisors should provide consistent, structured mentorship on topic development.
2. Doctoral students should actively engage in seminars and self-directed research training.
3. Postgraduate schools should institutionalize regular workshops on research problem formulation.
4. Departments should initiate mentorship programs pairing junior and senior researchers.
5. Universities should ensure accountability and incentives for effective doctoral supervision.

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