

## How to Choose a Dissertation Topic

A dissertation is a long essay on a subject, written for a university degree or diploma.<sup>[1]</sup> It is derived from the Latin word “*dissertare*” (meaning continue to discuss).<sup>[1]</sup> It is a prerequisite for the final fellowship examination of the National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria (NPMCN), and the West African Postgraduate Medical Colleges.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Beginning a dissertation could be a daunting task to many candidates and this should start with the choice of an appropriate topic. The choice of a topic determines to a very large extent when the dissertation work will be completed.<sup>[3]</sup> This is why appropriate planning is required at this stage. Every other stage requires planning equally but the topic is pivotal to the direction every other stage will follow. This can take several months to years following a successful outing at the part 1/membership examination due to a variety of factors.

Different candidates face a variety of difficulties choosing a topic for different reasons. For many candidates, when this difficulty persists, prospective candidates may have extremes of emotions which range from anxiety to apathy and final dropout.

This editorial seeks to highlight certain vital tips that would help fellowship candidates currently facing this difficulty and prevent its occurrence for the upcoming generation.

The medical residency training program (otherwise called residency training) in Nigeria is a postgraduate medical training program that produces specialists in different specialties and subspecialties. Residency training as regulated by the NPMCN and West African College of Physicians/Surgeons is split into junior and senior residency with success in the Part 1 fellowship examination being a major milestone at the end of the junior postings. Recently, the West African colleges have modified the curriculum into membership and fellowship training with the membership examination (formerly part 1) as the milestone. At the commencement of senior residency or fellowship posting, the candidate (new senior registrar) should take out time to appraise the requirements of that stage of the training. The dissertation work is an integral part of this stage and it predicts the eventual duration of this stage. Anecdotal evidence suggests that challenges with dissertations account significantly for the numerous cases of prolonged senior residency. Two suggested steps in the above-mentioned appraisal are as follows (i) The candidate should read the current college dissertation guidelines (ii) The candidate should identify and approach a mentor (a senior colleague who has more experience in dissertation draftsmanship. This may be a young fellow. Most important here is the differential experience and availability of both parties toward the end goal). Such a mentor shall provide a basic but salient guide at every step of the planning. At different points, the examining college/faculty

may be interested in a particular area of research. The candidate should also go to the college website for previously published topics to avoid a duplication of past work or a proposal that would not be accepted on grounds of repetition. Such a piece of basic information can be time-saving as it can prevent the disappointment of rejection from the faculty/college. This kind of tip is easily obtained from purposeful interaction with the young mentor. Another important step is for candidates to acquaint him/herself with the training centres’ protocol. This may be unique to the centre in few aspects but will also be in line with the college guidelines. An importance of this is that some centres or departments automatically assign supervisors to candidates as soon as they come on board while some allow the candidate to approach prospective supervisors themselves. Whatever the case, it is the responsibility of the candidate to complete some baseline assignments such as suggested above. This will serve as a basis for a meaningful first meeting with the supervisor.

Points to note when choosing a topic:

1. The first is for the candidate to consider subjects in his/her discipline of interest.<sup>[4]</sup> It may be a passion for the subject or desire to solve a problem noticed in the course of the candidates’ training. The passion could also stem from the natural disposition of the candidate which may be a driver for self-motivation or an experience (or both) but the important thing at this point is for the effort to be geared towards the goal of a good topic.
2. While aligning to a subject or topic, it is noteworthy for the candidate to keep a few questions in mind such as potential benefit, workability, expected knowledge gap the study being considered will fill but to mention a few. Furthermore, reading a relevant conference book of abstracts would help the generation of an idea.
3. Review of available literature on the subject of interest. In this context, a literature review is a brief run-through of the existing body of knowledge on the subject/topic of interest.<sup>[5]</sup> It will ground the individual on the theoretical basis of some practices and guide the generation of ideas.<sup>[6]</sup> This should occur almost concurrently with the first two tips above. It provides a targeted guide to the candidate’s approach to the review and choice of key search words. A good review gives insight on the area of interest and points toward a knowledge gap which will serve as an objective rationale for the proposed study. It also helps candidates narrow down to a specific title in the chosen area. The insight garnered is what will serve as an objective predictor if the topic under consideration is worth investigating. A review is a guide toward developing specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) objectives. Another benefit of

a good literature review is the exposure to many methods deployed in previous similar studies. This will help the candidate adopt a sound method for his/her dissertation. Thankfully, with the advent of the internet, various online resources are available for a seamless review with the required guide.

4. Notwithstanding your institutional library is expected to be a good resource especially with Hinari and institutions with a subscription to academic databases.<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, note-taking at this stage (in fact all stages) is crucial.
5. Following the review, the candidate should be certain of the availability of literature resources upon which to build.
6. With the insight from the review, it will be easy to forecast if there is enough time to proceed with the study given the duration of the training.
7. Refine your draft topic.<sup>[4]</sup> This is not final and the candidate needs to keep an open mind at this point. With quality consultation with the faculty, mentors, and literature, there is a high chance for some change as ideas grow and insight deepens. This is a welcome development at this point so long as it will help the candidate come up with an appropriate topic.
8. Originality and uniqueness of topic.<sup>[7]</sup> This is not very straightforward but with good mentorship, the candidate can overcome any difficulty that may be encountered here. Much as originality may be desired, a long wait for a completely original title may lead to an avoidable delay in topic selection. Any work can be made unique so long as the candidate develops his justifiable approach, especially once there is a justifiable knowledge gap on the subject irrespective of the fact that a similar work has been conducted in the past. The candidate should also note that a dissertation is also an avenue for learning and should not spend valuable time seeking a novel topic and ignore the learning component of the exercise. Dissertations are not primarily designed for candidates to reinvent the wheel rather expose the candidate to standard research methods with appropriate guidance so that in future research engagements, the design and conduct will be seamless.
9. The topic should be simple but challenging.<sup>[8]</sup> Simplicity means the topic should be manageable within the available time frame. This is in line with the principle of SMART objectives mentioned earlier. The topic should also be tasking enough to warrant its submission for a postgraduate fellowship and should be seen to be targeted at solving a particular problem or filling a knowledge gap.
10. The chosen topic should be seen to be addressing a current and topical issue in the specialty as this will generate the desired interest from the assessors and central to avoiding topic rejection.<sup>[8]</sup>
11. Furthermore, it should be one the candidate is familiar with.<sup>[8]</sup> As much as a dissertation is designed for a specific approach to learning, it is also an avenue for the candidate to give a good account of the time spent in his training over the past years. Therefore, a display of mastery on the subject matter is of the essence to satisfy the assessors

at the final defense. An extensive literature review is a panacea for the desired familiarity in research undertaking.

In conclusion, this article has provided useful tips needed to mitigate the various challenges fellowship candidates encounter which hamper the timely selection of an appropriate dissertation topic. It is also pertinent to note that mentorship and literature review are central to this subject. The right choice of a dissertation topic is the “bedrock” for timely and successful completion of the resident doctor’s thesis.

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