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Doctoral Research Topic Selection: A Reflective Evaluation of My First-Year DBA Journey



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INTRODUCTION

Choosing the right research topic is a critical decision in any doctoral journey, particularly for DBA candidates. The significance of this choice extends beyond academic requirements; it shapes the entire trajectory of one's research, influencing both the level of engagement and the outcome. Doctoral candidates often face the challenge of balancing academic rigor, personal interest, and practical feasibility when selecting their topics. Scholars like Petre and Rugg (2010) emphasize that a well-chosen topic is fundamental to maintaining motivation and contributing meaningful research within one's field. Throughout my first year in the DBA program, I encountered challenges and opportunities that guided me toward making a thoughtful choice. I totally understand that the modules I completed during this year were specifically designed to lay a strong foundation for my eventual thesis work, helping me build the necessary research skills and knowledge to develop and refine my doctoral focus. Therefore, maintaining thematic consistency will greatly facilitate the design of subsequent extensive papers. Initially, my focus was on AI-driven management solutions in healthcare, but due to practical limitations, I had to reconsider my approach. This reflection will explore how I navigated these decisions and ultimately found a topic that aligned with both my academic goals and personal interests—smart farming.

MY TOPIC CHOSEN JOURNEY

Table 1: Timeline of Research Topics Across DBA Stages

Phase 1	Module name	Topic/title
	Research Principle and Philosophy	<i>Examining the Influence of AI-Driven Operations Management Solutions on Healthcare Facilities in Heilongjiang Province, China</i>
	Visions for the Future	<i>An evaluation of ethical issues in the use of AI nudging for recruitment process</i>
Phase 2	Converting Research into Practice	<i>A pilot study examining the Influence of AI-Driven Operations Management Solutions on Healthcare Facilities in Heilongjiang Province, China.</i>
	Critical Literature for Doctoral Research	<i>Evaluating the Impact of Machine Learning on Talent Identification Process in Technology Sector: A Systematic</i>

Phase 3	Advancing to Doctoral Research Stage	<i>Doctoral Research Topic Selection: A Reflective Evaluation of My First-Year DBA Journey</i> <i>A 15–20-minute presentation: Evaluating the Adoption and Impact of Smart Farming Technologies on Family Farms in Wuchang.</i>
	Quantitative Research Methods	<i>Quantitative Analysis of the Gender Wage Gap: An Empirical Study</i>

According to Table 1, it is evident that my research topic has evolved multiple times over the course of more than a year. In Phase One, my research centered around the healthcare sector, specifically on AI-driven operations management. During this phase, I completed two separate projects on this topic, as the research did not yet involve significant data collection or analysis. However, in the second stage, as I embarked on qualitative research, I encountered substantial challenges in gathering healthcare-related data, particularly in China. The sensitivity of patient information and the restrictive regulatory environment in China made data acquisition exceedingly difficult. This realization compelled me to reconsider the trajectory of my dissertation.

Selecting a doctoral research topic is often more intricate than anticipated, and it is common for candidates to refine or change their focus during the early stages of their journey. As Pugh (2014) point out, the practicality of a research topic often only becomes apparent when transitioning from theory to actual research practice. I encountered both of these challenges in my initial research on AI-driven management systems in healthcare. At the outset, investigating the role of artificial intelligence in transforming healthcare management seemed promising. With AI rapidly advancing across industries, healthcare was no exception in adopting such technologies to improve efficiency and patient outcomes. My research sought to explore how AI-driven systems could enhance healthcare delivery, which I believed to be both academically rigorous and impactful.

As I delved deeper into the logistics of data collection, significant obstacles began to surface. Securing access to patient data was especially challenging due to the strict regulations governing patient privacy, along with China's stringent data protection laws. These barriers made it nearly impossible to acquire the necessary data for my study. The task of recruiting interview participants in the medical industry proved to be highly challenging for me. I encountered a significant number of individuals who opted to withdraw their participation due to my status as a foreign student. It is possible that concerns regarding information leakage played a role, despite my repeated assurances of complete anonymity for all personal data collected.

Additionally, when addressing topics such as patient mortality or AI-related practice management issues, many respondents chose not to provide answers, even though these matters had already been approved by the ethics committee. As Johl and Renganathan (2009) suggest, data access challenges are common at the doctoral level, and researchers often have to adapt their plans when confronted with these limitations.

In addition to data access issues, ethical considerations became another significant challenge. The integration of AI in healthcare raises complex ethical questions related to data security, patient consent, and the transparency of AI-driven decisions(Li, Ruijs and Lu, 2022). In the second phase, I once contemplated the significance of employing deep machine learning techniques to investigate patient mortality, which elicited a strong reaction from one of the supervisors who advised me to select an alternative topic due to potential ethical review concerns. For a doctoral candidate with limited resources, navigating these ethical concerns became a daunting task. I realized that continuing this line of research would require extensive ethical approvals and a process constrained by factors beyond my control.

Acknowledging these difficulties, I recognized the need to pivot. It is not uncommon for doctoral students to realign their research focus when confronted with ethical or practical barriers(Furtak, 2022). While it was difficult to shift away from a topic into which I had invested considerable time and effort, it became increasingly clear that a

change in direction was necessary. Reflecting on my personal background and interests, I turned my attention to smart farming, a topic that offered both academic relevance and practical feasibility. Given that my father is a farmer, I had access to valuable real-world experience and data from the agricultural sector. Smart farming, which leverages technology to improve agricultural productivity, provided an opportunity to contribute meaningfully without encountering the ethical and data access obstacles that had previously hindered my research.

This transition from AI in healthcare to smart farming not only addressed the practical and ethical challenges I faced but also reignited my passion for the research. As Boud and Lee (2009) argue, successful doctoral research requires both academic rigor and personal engagement, which are essential for sustaining long-term motivation. In my case, smart farming provided both—a topic that was academically relevant and personally meaningful due to my family’s farming background.

REALINING WITH PRACTICALITY AND PASSION

As I navigated through the initial stages of my doctoral journey, it became increasingly clear that my original focus on AI-driven healthcare management, despite its academic allure, was not feasible. The challenges of obtaining patient data and navigating the complex ethical landscape of healthcare research began to feel like insurmountable barriers. This realization forced me to step back and reflect on my

broader interests and the practical realities of conducting research that would not only be achievable but also personally meaningful.

It was during this period of reflection that I began to consider the importance of aligning my research with both my academic goals and my personal passions.

Growing up in a farming family, I had always been connected to agriculture in a way that felt deeply rooted in my identity. My father, a farmer, has long been my source of inspiration when it comes to understanding the value of hard work and the evolving role of technology in agriculture. As I thought more about this, I realized that the agricultural sector, particularly smart farming, could provide a unique opportunity for me to conduct research that is both practically relevant and personally engaging. I distinctly remember the conversation I had with my parents regarding the potential transition of my research focus from an AI-driven medical management system to smart agriculture. To my astonishment, their response was exceedingly positive and enthusiastic. They were genuinely thrilled by my decision to pursue this new research direction as it directly pertains to their daily lives and professional backgrounds. And my parents firmly believe that this research is meaningful for other agricultural practitioners.

Smart farming, which leverages advanced technologies like AI and data analytics to improve agricultural efficiency, quickly became a field that I could connect with on multiple levels. From a practical standpoint, it provided easier access to data through

my family's farming connections, and the ethical concerns that had plagued my healthcare research were no longer an issue. More importantly, it offered me a way to blend academic rigor with personal passion. Being able to consult my father, who has firsthand experience with the challenges and opportunities in farming, gave me an advantage I hadn't anticipated. His insights into the practical needs of farmers allowed me to shape my research in a way that felt grounded and directly impactful.

This shift in focus brought a renewed sense of excitement and relevance to my DBA journey. I found that smart farming not only aligned with contemporary global concerns, such as food security and sustainability, but it also resonated with my desire to make a tangible difference. The intersection of technology and agriculture allowed me to pursue a field that is both innovative and close to my heart. As the literature suggests, aligning personal interests with academic pursuits can significantly enhance a researcher's motivation and resilience in the face of challenges (Verner-Filion *et al.*, 2020). I've found this to be true in my own experience, as the shift to smart farming has reinvigorated my passion for research.

Ultimately, this realignment of my research focus reflects the importance of both practicality and passion in choosing a doctoral topic. Smart farming not only fits within the academic framework of my DBA program but also gives me a sense of purpose, knowing that my work could contribute to an area that is personally meaningful to me and my family. This personal connection has not only sustained my

motivation but also deepened my commitment to the research process, something I'm confident will carry me through the more challenging phases of my doctoral work.

IDENTIFYING THE TOPIC HELP CLARIFY RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

In the early stages of my research journey, I found that research objectives and the chosen topic are deeply interconnected. Without clear objectives and research questions, even a topic that seems promising can quickly become vague and unmanageable. A significant turning point for me occurred when I started thinking critically about what I wanted to achieve through my research. Initially, my approach was driven by aligning with academic trends and personal interest. However, I soon realized that without clear, defined goals, my research could easily lose focus.

The process of clarifying my objectives was crucial in transforming my broad interest in smart farming into a structured and focused research project. After engaging in conversations with my parents, I began reflecting on what outcomes I wanted from my dissertation and which specific areas of smart farming I wanted to explore. This led me to narrow my focus to Wuchang and family farms, where smart farming technologies are being adopted. My research then became centered around “Evaluating the Adoption and Impact of Smart Farming Technologies on Family Farms in Wuchang.”

Once I focused on smart farming, it became clear that I needed to outline specific research objectives to give my work direction. My primary goal was to examine how smart farming technologies were being utilized and the effects of these technologies on the rice farming community in Wuchang. This topic not only aligned with my personal background, given my family's involvement in farming, but it also offered the potential for both academic contributions and practical applications.

This reflection led to the following research objectives:

1. To catalog the specific smart farming technologies currently being utilized by family farms in Wuchang.
2. To measure the adoption rates and patterns of smart farming technologies among rice farmers in Wuchang.
3. To identify and analyze the economic, social, and technological factors influencing the adoption of smart farming technologies.
4. To assess the economic and social impacts of adopting smart farming technologies on family farms in Wuchang.
5. To develop practical recommendations for enhancing the adoption and impact of smart farming technologies for farmers, technology providers, and policymakers in Wuchang.

These objectives provided me with a clear direction, and more importantly, they helped me develop a foundation for designing a research methodology that would allow me to gather meaningful and impactful data. With these objectives in place, the

next logical step was to formulate research questions that would guide my investigation.

The research questions I developed were aimed at addressing the key aspects of smart farming adoption in Wuchang:

1. *What specific types of smart farming technologies are currently being used by family farms in Wuchang?*
2. *How widely are smart farming technologies adopted among rice farmers in Wuchang?*
3. *What are the patterns of adoption across different demographic and socioeconomic groups?*
4. *What are the primary barriers and motivators for family farms in Wuchang to adopt smart farming technologies?*
5. *How do economic factors (e.g., costs, perceived benefits) influence the adoption of smart farming technologies among family farms in Wuchang?*
6. *How do social factors (e.g., peer influence, community support) impact the adoption of smart farming technologies?*
7. *How do technological factors (e.g., ease of use, compatibility with existing systems) affect the adoption of smart farming technologies?*
8. *What are the economic impacts (e.g., productivity, profitability) of adopting smart farming technologies on family farms in Wuchang?*
9. *How do smart farming technologies affect the social aspects (e.g., quality of life,*

labor dynamics) of farming communities in Wuchang?

10. What are the most effective strategies and support systems (e.g., training programs, financial incentives) for promoting the adoption of smart farming technologies among family farms in Wuchang?

11. How can policymakers support the integration of smart farming technologies in the agricultural sector to enhance sustainability and productivity?

By clarifying these research objectives and questions, I was able to create a focused framework for my research. This process not only helped me sharpen my thinking but also guided the design of my research methods. It became clear that a mixed-methods approach—combining quantitative data on adoption rates and patterns with qualitative insights from farmer interviews—would provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the adoption of smart farming technologies in Wuchang. The refinement of my objectives and questions ultimately gave me a clearer vision of how my research could contribute to the larger discussion on agricultural technology and rural development.

INSIGHTS GAINED FROM TOPIC SELECTION

The process of selecting a research topic has provided me with several valuable lessons, particularly around balancing academic rigor, ethical concerns, and personal interest. Early in my journey, I was driven primarily by academic curiosity, choosing a topic that aligned with cutting-edge technological advancements in AI for healthcare management. However, as I delved deeper into the ethical implications and data

access challenges, I realized that academic intrigue alone was not enough to sustain a viable research project. It became clear that a successful doctoral topic must strike a balance between intellectual ambition and practical feasibility, including the ethical considerations that often dictate the course of research.

One of the most important lessons I learned was the need for flexibility. I initially struggled with the realization that my first research idea—while academically stimulating—was not practical due to the restrictions around patient data and the complex ethical landscape of healthcare AI. Rather than seeing this as a setback, I began to view it as an opportunity to reflect on what really mattered to me and how I could align my academic goals with practical realities. The shift to smart farming was a turning point. It allowed me to explore a field that was not only academically relevant but also more manageable from a data and ethical standpoint.

In addition to the academic and practical considerations, personal interest played a significant role in my topic selection. My father, being a farmer, added a layer of personal meaning to my research that I had not anticipated. The connection to my family's agricultural background made smart farming feel like more than just an academic pursuit—it became something I was personally invested in. This personal connection reminded me that a research topic is not just an intellectual exercise; it can also be a reflection of who we are and where we come from. Having my father's support and insight helped ground my research in reality, making the process more

engaging and fulfilling.

Resilience and adaptability emerged as key qualities throughout this process. It's easy to become attached to an initial research idea, but I quickly learned that the ability to pivot is crucial in the face of practical or ethical challenges. Doctoral research, as Maxwell (2016) points out, often requires candidates to adapt their topics to align with new realities. Whether it's shifting focus due to data limitations or reconsidering ethical concerns, the journey is rarely straightforward. By embracing change and staying open to new possibilities, I found a topic that not only fulfilled academic criteria but also resonated with me on a personal level.

Looking back, I understand now that topic selection is a dynamic process that requires a careful balance of multiple factors. The journey has taught me that while academic rigor is important, it is equally essential to ensure that the topic is practically achievable and personally meaningful. This balance is what sustains motivation throughout the long, sometimes difficult, process of doctoral research. With my shift to smart farming, I have found a topic that embodies this balance, setting the stage for a rewarding and impactful research journey.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE STAGES OF THE DBA

Reflecting on my first year in the DBA program, I can see how the various components—reports, reflection portfolio, and presentation—have laid a solid

foundation for the journey ahead. Each task not only deepened my understanding of academic research but also helped clarify the direction I want to pursue in my doctoral work. The process of writing multiple reports and engaging in reflective analysis pushed me to refine my research skills, critically assess the relevance of my chosen topics, and navigate the challenges of structuring a long-term research project.

The reflection portfolio, in particular, was instrumental in helping me understand the importance of careful topic selection. As I revisited my early topic ideas and the pivot I made from AI in healthcare to smart farming, I gained clarity on how crucial it is to choose a topic that aligns with both academic goals and personal passion. This reflection allowed me to identify gaps in my initial planning, while also affirming the value of adaptability in research. It gives you the confidence to move forward, knowing that the path you've chosen is not only feasible but also exciting.

The presentation I delivered on my smart farming research further boosted my confidence. It was a significant moment, as I had the opportunity to articulate my ideas, receive feedback, and refine my approach based on both my own reflections and the input from peers and supervisors. This experience strengthened my belief that smart farming is the right topic for me, as it bridges my personal background with the academic requirements of the DBA. In doing so, it made me more confident in the long-term relevance and impact of my research.

As I prepare for the remaining stages of the DBA, I am aware that the skills I've gained from these early experiences will be essential. The ability to critically assess topics, adjust my research direction when necessary, and present my ideas with clarity has set the stage for the more advanced work that lies ahead. I now feel more prepared to tackle the challenges of the upcoming stages, particularly as I move towards conducting more in-depth research and analysis.

ADVICE FOR FUTURE DBA CANDIDATES

My advice for future DBA candidates is simple: find a topic that balances academic rigor with practical feasibility, stay flexible in the face of challenges, and choose something that truly excites you. By doing so, you'll set yourself up for success in your doctoral journey and beyond.

Choosing the right research topic is both an art and a science. It requires careful consideration of various factors, such as academic rigor, practicality, and personal interest. Reflecting on my own experience, I learned that a balanced approach is essential. I encourage future DBA candidates to not only think about how their topic aligns with the current body of knowledge but also consider how feasible it will be to carry out their research within the given timeframe and with available resources. A topic may look academically impressive, but if it's not practical—whether due to data limitations, ethical concerns, or other obstacles—you will likely struggle to complete it. It's crucial to find that balance from the start.

One important lesson I learned is the value of flexibility. Initially, I was determined to explore AI-driven management systems in healthcare. However, the more I engaged with the topic, the more evident it became that there were significant ethical concerns and challenges in accessing the required data. These barriers were frustrating, but they also provided an opportunity to reassess my direction. As Johnson and Kerrigan (2022) suggests, the ability to pivot is a critical skill for doctoral candidates, as the research landscape often shifts in unexpected ways. In my case, moving toward smart farming not only resolved many of these issues but also reinvigorated my passion for the project. This shift allowed me to focus on something more personally meaningful while maintaining the academic rigor expected of doctoral research.

I would also encourage future candidates to remain open to new ideas and opportunities, even if it means stepping out of their comfort zone. Topic changes during doctoral studies are not uncommon and can often lead to stronger, more refined research (Zhuchkova and Bekova, 2023). In fact, the ability to adapt to these changes can be a mark of intellectual maturity and resilience. In my own journey, the decision to shift from AI in healthcare to smart farming was not initially part of my plan, but it ultimately strengthened my research. By embracing the unexpected, I found a topic that was both engaging and achievable.

Another piece of advice is to trust in the process. The challenges you face—whether

they are related to ethical concerns, data access, or even personal motivation—can be frustrating, but they are also valuable learning experiences. These difficulties force you to critically evaluate your research approach and refine your focus. Boud and Lee (2009) argue that the doctoral journey is as much about developing as a researcher as it is about producing original work. By remaining adaptable and persistent, you will likely discover that these obstacles are not setbacks but rather opportunities to refine your research and grow as a scholar.

Lastly, I cannot stress enough the importance of passion. Doctoral research is a long-term commitment, and without genuine interest in your topic, the process can become overwhelming. Candidates who choose topics they are passionate about are more likely to maintain motivation and produce meaningful work. My own experience with smart farming reinforced this idea (Pugh, 2014). The topic not only connected with my personal background but also provided a sense of purpose that sustained me through the inevitable challenges.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my first year in the DBA program, the shift from AI-driven healthcare to smart farming has been a pivotal moment in shaping my research journey. This change taught me the importance of choosing a topic that is not only academically relevant but also personally meaningful and feasible. By aligning my research with both my interests and practical resources, I've found renewed motivation and a stronger sense of direction.

As I move forward in my DBA journey, this experience has prepared me well for the next stages of research. By aligning my topic with both personal passion and practical feasibility, I feel more confident about the direction of my studies. This balance between academic rigor and personal relevance is something I will carry with me as I continue to develop my research. Ultimately, this process of selecting and refining my research topic has not only set a solid foundation for the rest of my doctoral work but has also taught me the value of adaptability, which I believe will serve me well in the future stages of my academic career.

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