

BARRIERS TO MENTORSHIP AND NETWORKING FOR EARLY CAREER PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND RESEARCHERS IN TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Despite the recognized importance of mentorship and networking, many early career researchers and professionals in public health face significant barriers that hinder their ability to access these opportunities. This research investigates the barriers to mentorship and networking for early-career public health professionals and researchers in Taraba State, Nigeria. Mention the objectives of the study. Identify the research methodology. Using data from structured surveys, the study identifies significant obstacles that hinder professional development, focusing on factors such as lack of access to experienced mentors, limited networking opportunities, cultural norms, language barriers, financial constraints, and inadequate institutional support. Key findings indicate that 85% of respondents reported limited access to mentors as a major barrier, worsened by the brain drain phenomenon, which has significantly reduced the availability of experienced professionals in the region. 88% of participants cited financial constraints as a primary reason for not attending conferences and workshops, limiting their ability to network with peers and professionals. Additionally, 53% noted cultural norms as affecting their comfort level in engaging with potential mentors outside their immediate circles, while 50% identified language barriers as a significant hindrance during networking events. The results also show that 87% of respondents were unaware of available mentorship programs and networking events, reflecting a broader issue of information dissemination. Furthermore, 86% felt limited by their institutions' lack of support for professional development activities, including mentorship programs and networking events. Finally, 38% of participants reported that time constraints due to work and personal commitments hindered their ability to participate in these opportunities. It is necessary that relevant authorities should develop and implement structured mentorship programs within institutions to connect early career professionals with experienced mentors.

Keywords: Barriers, Brain drain, Mentorship, Networking, Professional development.

Introduction

Mentorship and networking are widely recognized as vital elements in the professional development of individuals across various fields, including public health and related disciplines. Mentorship involves a more experienced individual providing guidance, support, and advice to a less experienced person, helping them navigate the complexities of their professional journey (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2021). Networking, on the other hand, involves building and maintaining professional relationships that can lead to opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and career advancement. For early career researchers and professionals, these two elements are crucial as they often determine the trajectory of their careers, providing them with the necessary tools, resources, and connections to thrive in their chosen fields (Hill *et al.*, 2022).

In the context of public health, mentorship and networking are particularly important due to the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Public health professionals often work in diverse

environments that require collaboration across different sectors, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, academia, and healthcare institutions (Odriguez *et al.*, 2021). Effective mentorship can help early career professionals navigate these complex environments, understand the nuances of public health policies, and develop the skills needed to address the unique health challenges faced by their communities (Kikuchi *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, networking can open doors to new opportunities, allowing professionals to engage with peers, share knowledge, and collaborate on projects that have a significant impact on public health outcomes (Bendowska *et al.*, 2023).

However, despite the recognized importance of mentorship and networking, many early career researchers and professionals in public health face significant barriers that hinder their ability to access these opportunities. In Taraba State of Nigeria, these barriers may be worsened by a variety of factors, including limited access to experienced mentors, geographical constraints, lack of formal mentorship programs, and socio-cultural factors that may discourage networking. Additionally, institutional limitations, such as inadequate funding for professional development, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of supportive policies, may further impede the ability of early career professionals to engage in mentorship and networking activities (Ughasoro *et al.*, 2022).

In the field of public health, mentorship and networking are indispensable for the professional growth and career advancement of early career researchers and professionals. However, in Taraba State of Nigeria these critical opportunities are often inaccessible or underutilized. Despite the recognized importance of these professional development tools, there is a noticeable gap in their availability and effectiveness within this region.

The absence of structured mentorship programs, coupled with limited networking opportunities, poses a significant challenge for early career professionals in public health and related disciplines in Taraba state. These barriers can hinder their ability to acquire essential skills, build professional relationships, and advance in their careers. Moreover, the socio-cultural and institutional constraints within the region may further exacerbate these challenges, leading to professional isolation, limited career progression, and potentially contributing to a broader issue of brain drain as talented individuals seek opportunities elsewhere. (No thesis statement)

Justification of the Study

This study is justified by the critical role that mentorship and networking play in the professional development of early career researchers and professionals, particularly in the field of public health. In regions like Taraba State, where resources and opportunities for professional growth may be limited, understanding the barriers to these essential components is vital. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by early career professionals in this context, which is currently under-researched.

Moreover, the health challenges in Taraba State and the broader region require a well-equipped public health workforce capable of addressing complex issues such as disease prevention, health education, and policy implementation. Enhancing the mentorship and networking

opportunities for early career professionals is essential to building this capacity. By identifying the barriers to these opportunities, this study can contribute to the development of targeted strategies that will not only support individual career advancement but also strengthen the overall public health system in the region.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the barriers to mentorship and networking among early career researchers and professionals in public health and related disciplines in Taraba State. A structured online questionnaire was used as the primary research instrument, designed to capture quantitative data on various aspects of mentorship and networking, including access to mentors, networking opportunities, and institutional support. The survey was distributed among a diverse group of participants to ensure broad representation of early career professionals in the region.

The study population comprised early career researchers and professionals working in the field of public health and related disciplines in Taraba State. This includes individuals employed in healthcare institutions, academic settings, non-governmental organizations, and public health agencies, as well as those currently pursuing advanced degrees in public health-related fields. The total population was estimated to include all professionals and researchers within the early stages of their careers in the aforementioned disciplines. A sample size of 397 respondents was selected for the study, based on the availability and accessibility of participants. This sample size was determined using appropriate statistical formulas to ensure that the results would be representative of the larger population of early career professionals in the region.

No Literature Review?

No Theoretical Framework?

Results and Discussion

Table 3.1.1: Demography data (n=397)

Variable	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	157	39.5
	Male	240	60.5
Educational Qualification	Diploma	97	24.4
	HND/BSc	262	66
	MSc	27	6.8
	PhD	11	2.8
Age	18-24	139	35
	25-30	152	38.3
	31-35	69	17.4
	36-40	18	4.5
	Above 40	19	4.8
Current Employment Status	Employed	73	18.4
	Student	219	55.2
	Unemployed	105	26.4

The demographic data of the 397 respondents reveals a predominantly male sample (60.5%), with most participants being young adults aged 25-30 years (38.3%) and 18-24 years (35%). Educationally, the majority hold an HND/BSc (66%), while smaller portions have a Diploma

(24.4%), MSc (6.8%), or PhD (2.8%). Employment status shows that over half of the respondents are students (55.2%), with 26.4% unemployed and 18.4% employed. This indicates a young, predominantly male population with a strong academic background, largely engaged in studies.

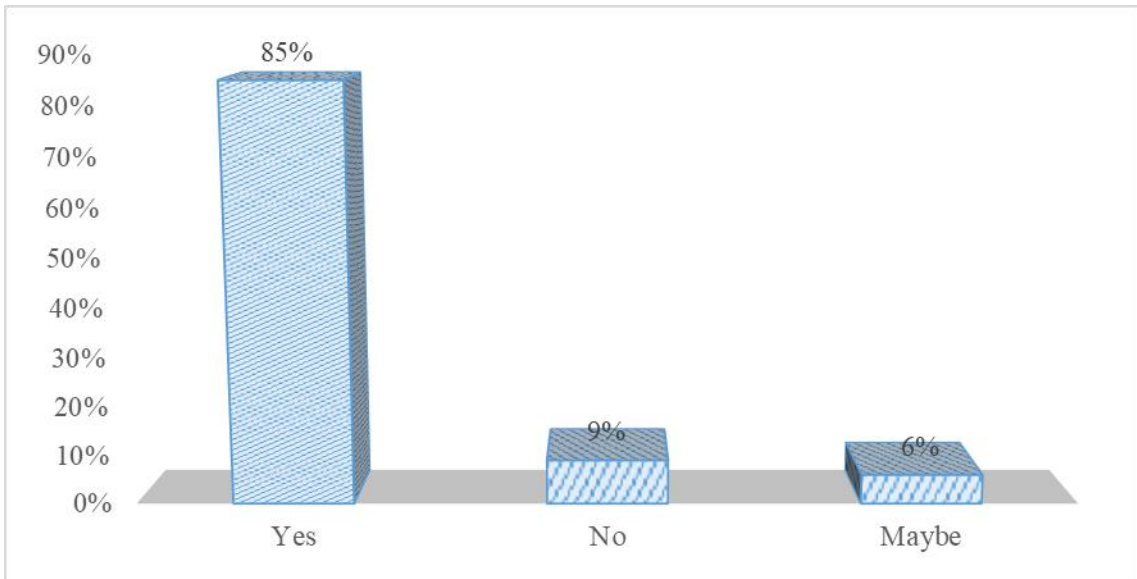


Figure 3.1.1 Chart showing Lack of access to experienced mentors as barrier to professional development.

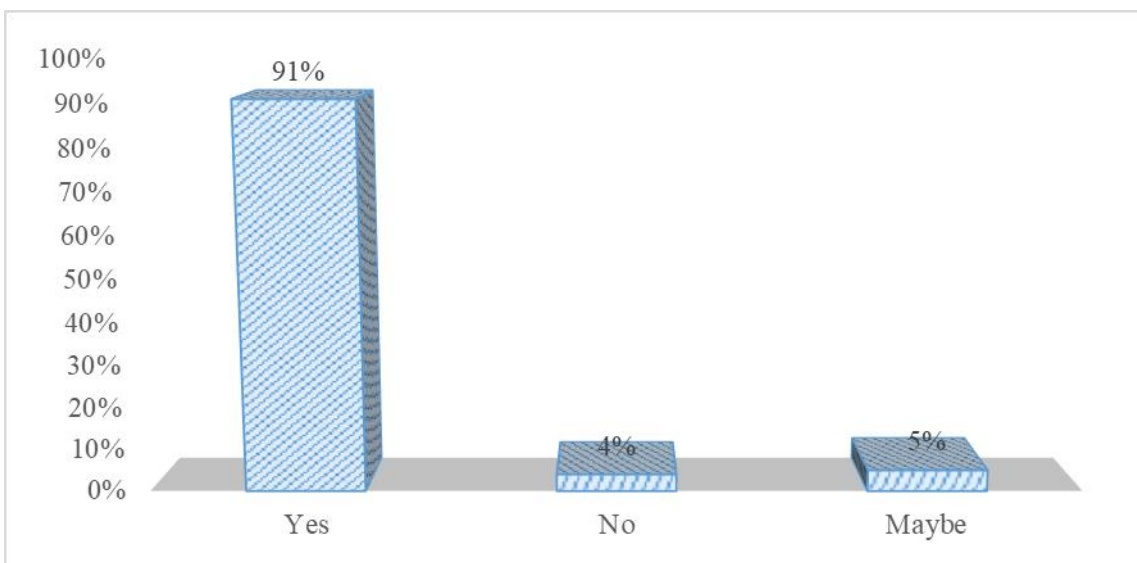


Figure 3.1.2 Chart showing Limited opportunities for networking events in Taraba as a hindrance to connect with peers and professionals.

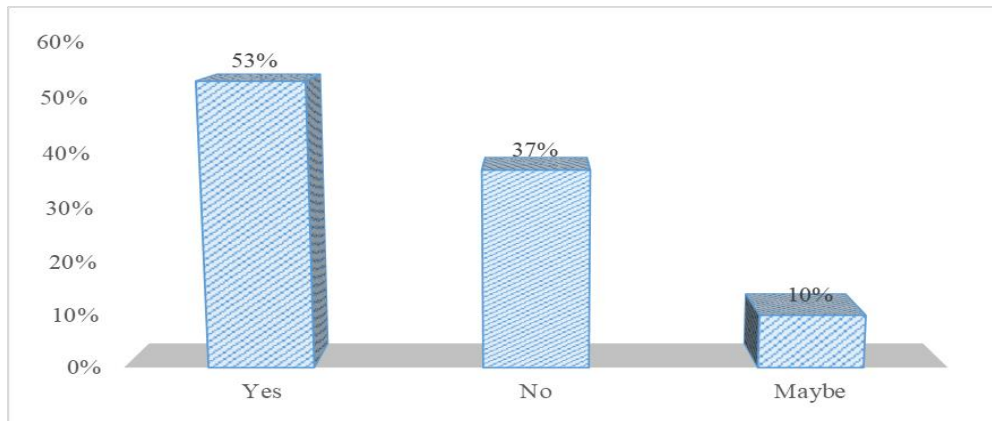


Figure 3.1.3 Chart showing Cultural norms and practices affecting comfort level in engaging with potential mentors outside immediate circle.

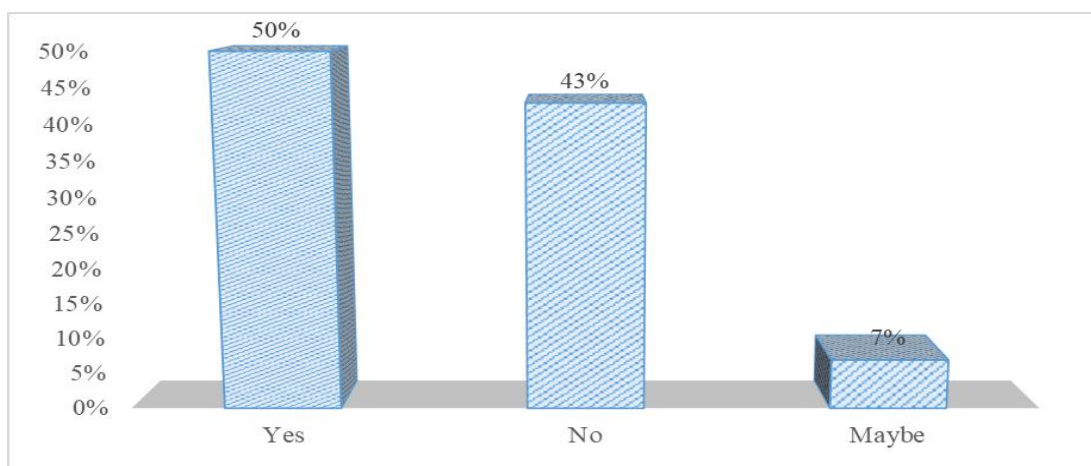


Figure 3.1.4 Chart showing Language barriers making it difficult to communicate effectively in networking events or conferences.

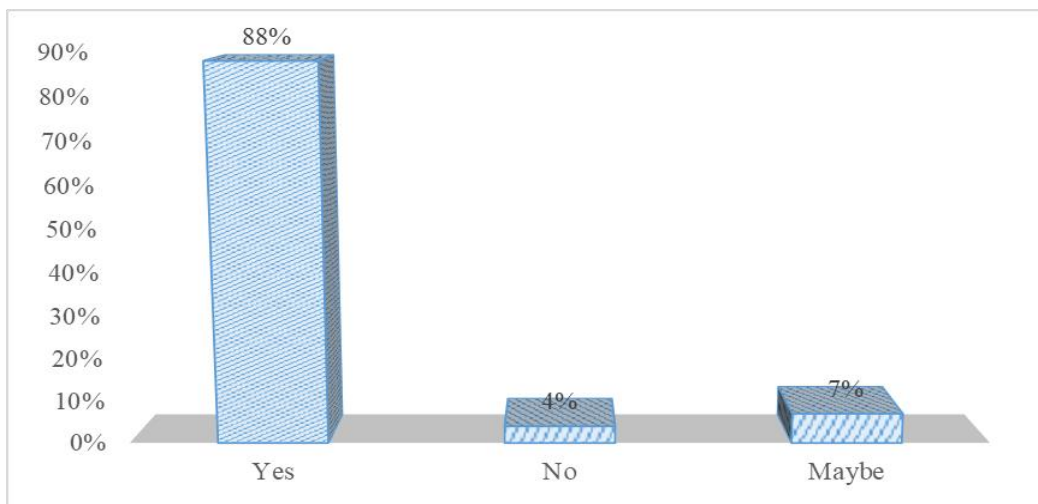


Figure 3.1.5 Chart showing financial constraints preventing attendance of conferences and workshops that offer networking opportunities

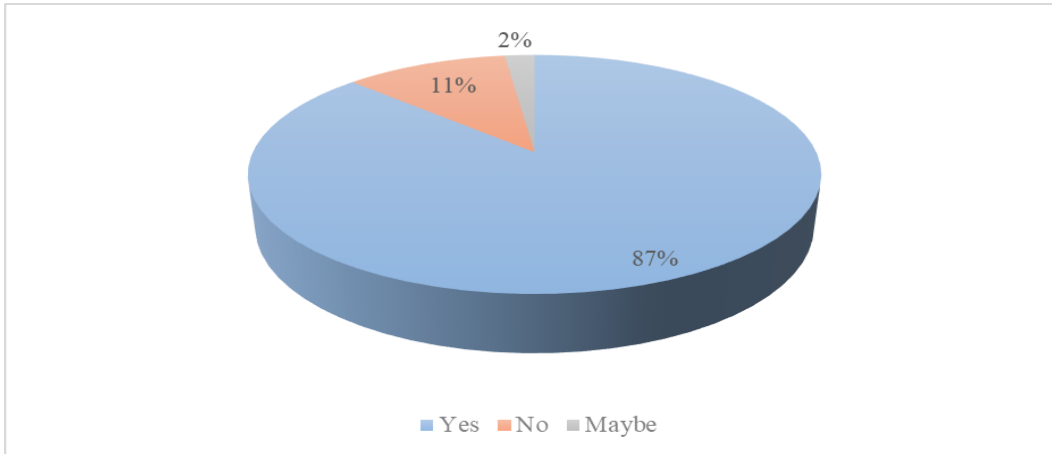


Figure 3.1.6

Chart showing Lack of information about available networking events and mentorship programs as a barrier

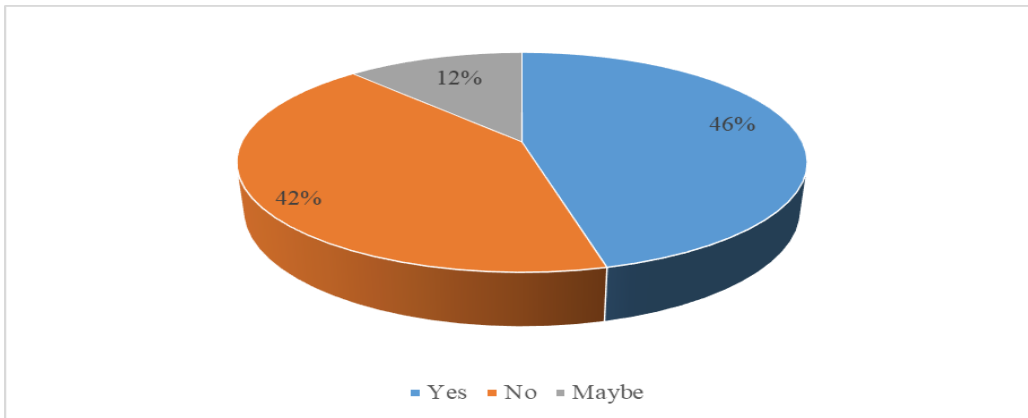


Figure 3.1.7 Chart showing the brain drain phenomenon has impacted the availability of experienced mentors in Taraba

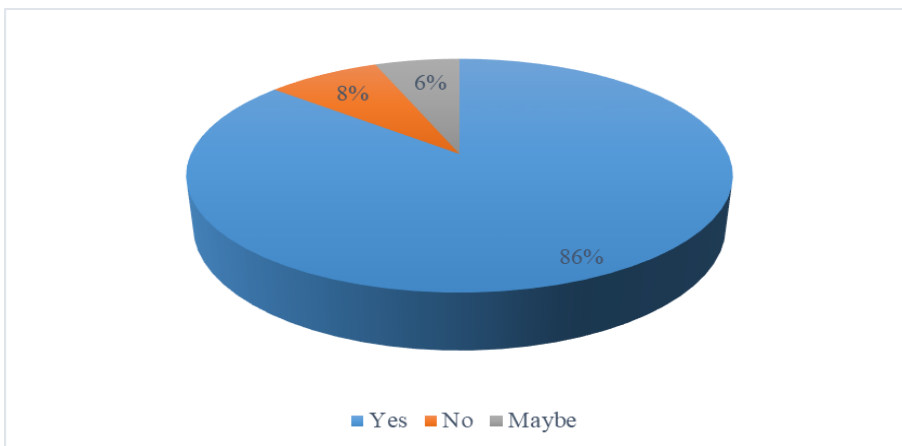


Figure 3.1.8 Chart showing Limited institutional support from educational institutions and organizations hampers access to mentorship and networking opportunities

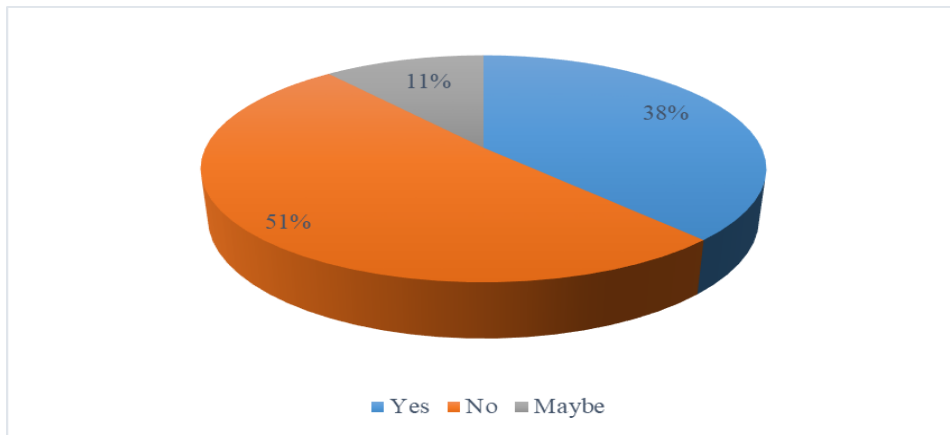


Figure 3.1.9 Chart showing Lack of time due to work or other commitments hampers participation in networking events

Discussion of findings

The results presented in Figures 3.1.1 to 3.1.9 reveal significant barriers to mentorship and networking for early-career public health professionals and researchers in Taraba State, Nigeria. These barriers highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals seeking professional development and growth in the region. The result in Figure 3.1.1 revealed a critical challenge: the limited availability of experienced mentors in Taraba State. Professional development is largely contingent on guidance from seasoned professionals. The absence of such mentors deprives early-career individuals of crucial support, feedback, and career advice as reported by Limeri *et al.* (2019). This lack may be due to the migration of professionals (brain drain) from Taraba to other regions, as further illustrated in Figure 3.1.7. The lack of experienced mentors hinders the transfer of knowledge and skills, leading to slower career progression and limited personal development (Limeri *et al.*, 2019).

Networking events are instrumental in fostering connections between peers and professionals, yet, as Figure 3.1.2 shows, limited opportunities exist for such events in Taraba State. Without these platforms, early-career public health professionals struggle to create meaningful relationships that could facilitate collaboration, peer support, and potential mentorship (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2021). The scarcity of organized networking forums or professional conferences diminishes their chances of building a strong professional network. The impact of cultural norms on mentorship and networking cannot be overstated. Figure 3.1.3 highlights that cultural practices affect the comfort level of professionals engaging with potential mentors outside their immediate social or professional circles (Girotti, 2016). In regions like Taraba, hierarchical relationships and respect for seniority can create barriers in approaching experienced professionals for mentorship. Furthermore, traditional values might discourage open communication between different genders or age groups, further limiting mentorship access.

Effective communication is fundamental in professional development and networking, but Figure 3.1.4 reveals that language barriers present significant challenges during networking

events or conferences. The language diversity of Nigeria, including Taraba, can create communication challenges for those who are not fluent in the dominant languages used in professional spaces. Consequently, public health professionals from non-dominant language backgrounds might feel excluded or unable to engage fully, thus reducing the effectiveness of their participation in these events. Financial barriers, as depicted in Figure 3.1.5, prevent many early-career public health professionals from attending conferences, workshops, and other events that offer valuable networking and mentorship opportunities. In a region with limited resources and lower economic opportunities, professionals may prioritize essential expenses over professional development activities. The inability to afford participation in events not only limits access to knowledge but also curtails the building of vital professional networks.

A lack of awareness or information about available networking events and mentorship programs (Figure 3.1.6) creates an additional barrier. Even when opportunities exist, insufficient publicity or inadequate communication channels prevent early-career professionals from accessing them. This barrier reflects broader issues with institutional communication, outreach, and the availability of centralized platforms to disseminate information on professional development resources. The brain drain phenomenon, as captured in Figure 3.1.7, highlights a significant issue contributing to the scarcity of mentors in Taraba State. Skilled professionals often migrate to areas with better opportunities (Essien *et al.*, 2024), leaving behind a vacuum in local mentorship and expertise. This migration trend exacerbates the problem of access to mentors, further isolating early-career professionals who remain in Taraba. The departure of mentors stunts the growth of new professionals, who miss out on the wisdom and support that experienced professionals would have provided.

Institutions, including educational bodies and organizations, play a critical role in fostering mentorship and networking opportunities (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021). Figure 3.1.8 shows that a lack of institutional support in Taraba hampers access to these opportunities. Educational institutions may not prioritize or invest in professional development initiatives such as mentorship programs or networking events. Similarly, organizations might not provide the structural support needed to facilitate participation in professional development activities. This lack of support leaves early-career professionals to navigate these challenges on their own, often with limited success. Finally, Figure 3.1.9 demonstrates how work commitments and time constraints act as barriers to participation in networking events. Public health professionals, particularly those working in resource-limited settings, often face heavy workloads, leaving little time to engage in networking or mentorship activities. These constraints limit their ability to attend events, even when they are accessible, further curtailing their professional development.

Conclusion

The study highlights critical barriers to mentorship and networking faced by early career researchers and professionals in Taraba State. These barriers include a shortage of experienced mentors, limited networking opportunities, and significant cultural and institutional challenges. Socio-cultural norms, language barriers, and financial constraints further compound these

issues, while a lack of institutional support and time constraints also play a role. The findings indicate a complex interplay of factors that hinder professional development and career progression for individuals in the region. The study concludes that addressing the barriers to mentorship and networking Taraba state requires a multifaceted approach. The shortage of mentors, coupled with limited networking opportunities significantly impacts the professional growth of early career researchers and professionals. There is an urgent need for targeted interventions that address these challenges and create an enabling environment for mentorship and networking.

Recommendations (should be based on objectives & findings)

- i. Relevant authorities should develop and implement structured mentorship programs within institutions to connect early career professionals with experienced mentors.
- ii. Relevant authorities should organize regular professional events, workshops, and conferences to provide networking opportunities. Consider virtual platforms to overcome geographical constraints.
- iii. Relevant authorities should promote inclusive practices and cultural sensitivity training to mitigate the impact of traditional norms on professional interactions.
- iv. Relevant authorities should advocate for increased funding and resources for professional development programs within educational institutions and organizations.
- v. Relevant authorities should offer scholarships or funding support to enable early career professionals to attend relevant conferences and workshops. Too many and no link to findings?

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