

# Africa's research ecosystem needs a culture of mentoring

August 5 2020, by Oluwaseyi Dolapo Somefun and Kudus Adebayo

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Sub-Saharan Africa faces a range of development challenges, including [high population growth](#), [poverty](#), [food insecurity](#), and [poor health](#). There is [a clear need](#) for qualified and skilled researchers to tackle these issues. But there is also a scarcity. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa [contributes less than 1%](#) to global research output despite accounting for [13.5% of the global population](#).

This asymmetry calls for a [response](#) that builds research capacity and trains skilled researchers for the continent. Mentoring is a key ingredient of this approach.

Mentoring can help build the confidence of young scholars by improving research outputs, thereby [reducing](#) the likelihood of brain drain from the region. But higher education programmes don't always provide regular mentoring opportunities. And where there are opportunities, there may be other [barriers](#) to building research capacity. These include scarcity of [mentors](#), ambiguity in mentor-mentee relationships, limited mentoring knowledge and skills, [lack of formal structure](#) and the nonsupporting cultural atmosphere of African institutions of learning.

Mentoring can confer many [benefits](#) to the careers of junior faculty. But there are challenges in finding mentors or sustaining relationships with them. This has already been highlighted by other [researchers](#) in the region. It could have serious implications for the development of research in the region. For instance, researchers who do not have mentors may not be motivated to continue their academic programmes

or may try to [leave the region](#).

Understanding this need, we conducted [research](#) among doctoral fellows in the [Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa](#) (CARTA) programme. The aim was to examine the mentoring experiences of fellows within the programme and highlight how mentoring can be further improved.

Our study established that there is a need to improve institutional capacity for the development of mentoring systems in higher education and research systems in Africa. This matters because mentoring in the region can sustain the gains being made to retain African researchers for development.

## **Building local research capacity**

The CARTA programme aims to build local research capacity in population and public health by creating a network of locally trained but globally recognised scholars through a [Ph.D. training fellowship](#) . Fellows are usually staff of nine academic and four research institutions representative of Africa. We contacted fellows in the CARTA network through the [RedCap](#) platform and asked them questions about their perceptions of mentoring and what could be done to improve this aspect of the programme.

At the time of data collection, CARTA had only seven cohorts and each cohort had between 24 and 27 members from diverse academic disciplines and backgrounds. More than half of the respondents worked in health sciences while 35% were in social sciences. Our results showed that only 47% of the fellows had mentors and 20% had mentees. One of the reasons stated for this was the difficulty in finding a mentor.

We also found that fellows perceived mentorship to be a responsibility.

They saw it as an opportunity to live up to their duty to scholarship, their mentors and to society.

Several fellows had not received any request for them to act as mentors. We deduced that young scholars within the network may be reluctant to seek guidance useful for their professional development. Poor understanding of the need for and importance of mentoring to academic career growth may also be responsible. It is important that mentees learn the art of networking and gain skills that will help them to confidently seek out mentors within and outside their network.

Peer mentoring, in which CARTA fellows mentor each other, was a striking feature of our findings. Young researchers from different parts of the continent and involved in diverse research topics across varied disciplines help and learn from one another. Peer mentoring should be encouraged as these relationships are likely to increase collaboration among scholars on the continent.

Some fellows who are mentees complained about the delay in getting feedback from mentors. Some of the reasons they identified were time, internet connectivity and geographical time difference.

In the view of the young researchers in our study, a successful mentor-mentee relationship can improve the level of progress in mentees' research publications and career options.

## **Transforming mentoring programmes**

Our results are important as they are quite representative of a broad group of researchers from different countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Mentoring does not seem to be part of the institutional culture or framework in several African institutions.

A well-designed research capacity building programme like CARTA can provide young researchers with mentoring opportunities. Ultimately, combining formal and informal mentoring approaches appears to be the way forward.

The culture of training and capacity building in Africa's institutions of higher learning must transform to widen the access of young researchers to mentoring opportunities.

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