# EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF PUSH FACTORS AND OBSTACLES OF CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE AMONG ACADEMICS IN UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR

**OMOROBI, GARIETH OMOROBI, OGBECHE, MARY MARK AND ASU-OKANG, STELLA**
Email: omobi4christ@gmail.com, Marymarkogbeche1985@gmail.com, stellaasuokang@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

An essential aspect in the career life of academics is the need for continuous learning through seral avenues of professional development. Conferences remains one of the routine and constant mechanism employed by academics to learn, interact, socialize and collaborate with their counterparts within and outside the country. Despite, its relative importance and role in the career progression of academic some academics still find it difficult to participate in conferences. Those who do are sometimes motivated by reason other than core academic ones. This study assessed the push/pull factors and challenges of conference attendance among Nigerian academics in University of Calabar. To achieve the purpose of this study two research questions where formulated. Relevant literature was reviewed. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study and the population of the study comprised of all lecturers in university of Calabar. Eight hundred and fiftyone (851) were randomly selected as sample for the study. 'Academic Staff Conference Attendance Survey' (ASCAS) was used as instrument for data collection after being subject validity and reliability test, the instrument yielded Cronbach's Alpha reliability estimates ranging from .70-.84 across the variables. The data collected was analyzed using percentages, charts and percentage rank. The results emanating from the study showed that the push factors for conference attendance include learning new knowledge, learning from experts, as a criterion for academic staff assessment and promotion appraisals, networking and collaboration for research and grant. On the other hand, lack of funds and institutional support were identified as prominent factors hindering academics participation in conferences. It was recommended that; government institutions should increase financial support for conferences attendance.

**KEYWORDS**: Continuous, Teaching, Learning, Conference attendance, Push-factors, Obstacles.

## INTRODUCTION

The work of academic staff revolves on the tripartite job roles of research, teaching and community service (Author, 2019). These essential tasks of academic staff in universities are overlapping and inextricable (Kiziltepe, 2020).

Hence, none can exists independently of the other, because the performance of one enhances or partly depends on the others. Conference attendance is one of the crucial activities that is indispensable to the entire job roles of an academic staff (Smagil, 2018; Mbon, Omorobi,

**Omorobi, Garieth Omorobi,** Department of Educational Management University of Calabar, Calabar
**Ogbeche, Mary Mark,** Department of Educational Management University of Calabar, Calabar
**Asu-Okang, Stella,** Department of Educational Management University of Calabar, Calabar

Owan & Ekpenyong, 2019). It plays a critical role in the career progress and development of all academic staff in universities. This is because; periodic and regular participation at conferences as well as publication of articles in learned national and international journals constitute major assessment criteria for all academic staff in universities (Oester, sigliano, Hind-Ozan & Parsons, 2017; Omorobi, & Effa, 2018). Therefore, academic staff are expected to regularly attend conferences for personal development, career progress and socialization. Despite the premium placed on conferences by scholars and business executives, little efforts have been directed towards providing empirical evidence for motivation, nature, and benefits of conferences.

In the academic world, scholars attend conferences to display new research findings, collaborate, socialize and build solid relationships with experts in their field as well as for developing and expounding the knowledge base of academics (Harrison, 2010; Rowe, 2018; Owan, Bassey, Omorobi & Esuong, 2020). Conference attendance also plays a critical role in the development of a successful academic career. This is because, the career growth/advancement and or promotion of academic staff is directly tied to the number of papers presented at both local and foreign conferences and published articles in learned journals (Archibong, Effiom, Omoike & Edet, 2010; Omorobi, Eton & Chuktu, 2021). Therefore, many scholars actively participate in conferences to escape stagnation and the infamous 'publish or perish syndrome'. Beside, conference attendance provide academic staff opportunities to crossbreed or pollinate novel ideas, showcase new and original research findings, innovations, inventions, and discoveries. Conferences also serve a basic medium for academic staff development, mentorship, collaboration, and socialization. Thus, it is also is a potent instrument for enhancing teacher professionalism (Rimmer & Floyd, 2020; Omorobi, & Obona, 2018). However, conferences are actually so self-evident that very little research focuses on what takes place in conferences, why people attend them, challenges and essentially what the conference does to participants (Edelheim, Francois, Åberg & Phi, 2018; Omorobi, Harry, Kenn-Aklah, 2022).

Academic conferences bring researchers together for purpose of presenting their work to each other within one or more days. It could be in form of a symposium, seminar, workshop, or any other organized and formal meeting, that is either face-to-face or via internet connections, where individuals gather physically (or meet virtually) to exchange information and views or explore or clarify a defined subject, problem, or area of knowledge (US Department of Health and Humanitarian Services, 2020; Omorobi, Eton & Egbai, 2021). Similarly, the US Department of Justice (2018) sees conference as a pre-arranged formal event with designated participants and/or registration, with a published substantive agenda, and scheduled speakers or discussion panels on a particular topic. Conferences provide participants with a confluence of thoughts, links between different related themes, which are all evoked through the concentration of related topics that lead to new ideas and thought patterns (Edelheim et al, 2018; Eton & Omorobi, 2020). Therefore, conference attendance are employed by researchers to connect with their counterparts in their field to update themselves with innovations, methods and changes in their fields. It provides opportunity to meet many people, learn more and build relationships for future collaborations.

The New World Encyclopedia (2021) identified three basic types of academic conferences namely:
a.     Theme-based conferences organized around a particular topic
b.     General conferences that feature sessions on a wide variety of topics. These conferences are often organized by regional, national, or international societies, and are held on a regular basis
c.     Professional conferences or any large conference not limited to academics, but with academically-related issues.

The components of formal conferences more often than not will include a keynote address, lead paper(s), workshops and plenary sessions (American Psychology Association, 2016; Etim & Omorobi, 2020). At conferences keynote/lead paper address is typically given to set the theme for the event as well as establish the framework, tone, for the following programme of events or conference agenda.

It summarizes the core message or most important revelation of the event with an attempt to arouse the interest of participants in the conference. These sessions are assign to leaders or accomplished academics in their field (Hourigan, 2014; Eton, Kajang, & Omorobi, 2020). More often than not, a highly experience professors, that possess wide knowledge of the main theme/issues of the conference, use these sessions to provide superior direction to conferees on the main subject. Workshops are also integrated into conferences and handled by experience and senior academics. They provide practical skills and technical knowledge by combining theoretical instruction with hands-on training to conferees (Grip & Pleijers, 2019: Osim, Omorobi, Ogar & Adie, 2023). On the other hand, plenary/technical sessions are often smaller units which conferees are divided into small groups in line with their interest or focus of their papers to be presented base on the sub-themes of the conference. It comprise a leader which is a senior and experience academic, a secretary and members of the group. Here, participants are given opportunities to present their works and respond to constructive criticisms by members of the group.

Many scholars attend academic conferences for different reasons described in this study as push factors. A push factor is a motivator or factor that induces a behavior. Therefore, academic staff have different motivating variables for participating in academic conferences. Some of the factors that could motivate Nigerian scholars to participate in both local and foreign conferences include keeping updated with innovations in their career, listening and tapping knowledge from renown and highly respected experts in the field, and developing fresh professional networks, as well as learning new skills. Other motivating factors for academic staff attendance of conferences include satisfaction derived from traveling to wonderful cities, partly or wholly financed by employers, as an avenue of furthering career by presenting thoughts and work to influential people in the field who might have powers to open doors for us. The fun of good party, dance, music, good food and drinks, socialization etc. (Hobson, 1993; Oppermann, 1997; Parker & Weik, 2014; Bell & King, 2010; Murray,2007; Lindley, 2009; Nicolson, 2017; Edelheim, 2015; Rowley, 2012).

Regrettably, despite the eagerness among academic staff in Nigeria to participate in conferences, several challenges hinder them from attending many conferences both locally and internationally. These challenges partly arise because conference attendance requires time, effort and money. Generally, academic staff in developing nations like Nigeria often have difficulty participating in academic conferences due to cost of transportation, lodging, and registration fees among others. Many academics depend on self-sponsorship because universities do not provide adequate funding for conference sponsorship to academic staff (Niyi, Jegede & Musa, 2022). This makes it very difficult because the salaries of academic staff in Nigeria is acutely poor. Hence, the quality of academic staff research and productivity continues to cascade behind other developing nations. Although, some academics have been accused of collecting and diverting monies meant conference sponsorship for personal aggrandizement (Yakubu, Bello, Yahaya & Adamu, 2022). This corrupt practice has resulted to stoppage of conference sponsorship for academic staff in Nigerian universities by TETFund (Odunsi, 2020). This might largely affect academic staff capacity to participate in conference as well as reduce the volume of research activities carried out by academics across board. Hence, this study is designed to evaluate push factors and setbacks of conference attendance among academic staff in Nigerian Universities.

**Statement of the problem**

The academic career essentially concerns knowledge creation through research, teaching and community service. Academic conference remains one of the most reliable activities through which academic staff gather useful data, knowledge, ideas, techniques, and inspiration for effective and efficient performance of their job. This is because, academic conference attract a wide range of researchers with diverse academic experiences from different environments for purpose of sharing new ideas and collaboration. Regrettably, many academic staff in Nigeria find it difficult to participate in conferences within and outside Nigeria due to several constraints. This has largely resulted in poor research productivity among academics, academic inbreeding, ignorance of trends, innovations and best practices in their chosen disciplines.

This is dangerous because, the career growth of academic staff largely depends on the number of conferences and published articles in reputable journals. Additionally, this also could be the reason for the low ranking of many universities in Nigeria because research productivity accounts as a critical metric for ranking institutions world over. Many scholars have lamented that a critical setback to frequent attendance of conferences is lack of sponsorship or funding. This is because participating in local or foreign conference require huge funds for registration, transport fare and accommodation. Some who manage to attend do so from their meagre salaries. If this is allowed to continue, Nigerian universities might not be able to compete favourably with other universities around the world. Hence, the need to investigate conference attendance, push factors and challenges among academic staff in Nigerian Universities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW
### Push factors for academic staff conference attendance

Push factor otherwise motivation refers to anything that drives individual action or behaviour. It also implies what causes people to act in a certain direction. In the words of Tohidi (2012) motivation is a force that cause people to behave in certain ways that brings high achievement. The source noted that that motivation could be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature. It is intrinsic when, it stems from within the pleasure derived by the individual performing an action, while it is extrinsic when it is a product of external rewards derived by the individual. Similarly, academics have several intrinsic and extrinsic factors that drives their desire to attend conferences. For instance, Rowe (2018) found that conference attendees were motivated by the possibility of building long lasting academic networks for future collaboration, the desire for knowledge exchange or sharing and formal and informal interactions leading to further scientific or social endeavours. In the same vein, Mair and Frew (2016) discovered in their study that social networks built in conferences are very strategic to the successful career of respondents. They also linked conference attendance to national and international collaborations on grant submissions, projects and joint publications as well as building academic reputation.

On the other hand, Kordts-Freudinger, Al-Kabbani, and Schaper (2017) showed in their study that conferences create opportunities for lecturers to be exposed to experiential learning and communities of practice that further boost their knowledge and expertise of their discipline. The researchers identified some benefits of conference attendance to include: opportunities to generate scientific knowledge, dissemination of knowledge, shaping public opinion and public policy through research. Others benefits are promoting peer review to enhance quality of research, academic community networking, scientific gatekeeping, academic careers and the preparation of scholars, and disciplinary knowledge communities, all link conference activities strongly to the fields of science and education.

Scholars are of the view that, an essential factor conference organizers must consider as a major trigger of conference attendance is conference destination. It is observed that the town or city a conference is organized could influence the desire to attend or not. In a study, Wang (2020) found that conference destination among other things was very critical to participants' motivation to attend. The source therefore observe that more often than not, conferences are organized in interesting' or 'exotic locations with access to zoos and historic buildings or tourist sites. This enhances fun and friendship for participants, networking; opportunities for personal and professional development at the conference location.

### Obstacles of Academic Staff Conference Attendance

There is a clear evidence that conference organizers worry about low attendance at conferences. This is because so much money, time and effort is put to organize conferences (Omorobi, Mbon, Owan & Ekpenyong, 2020). Therefore, organizers always seek for means to encourage large turn out to get value for money. However, many factors tend to hinder academics from attending conferences despite the desire so to do. This stems from the fact that so much time, energy and resources is required to successfully and fully attend or participate in conferences (Jago & Deery, 2005). This is essential because, more often than not, conferences are organized in faraway cities or countries and could span from three days to one week.

Therefore, academics have to plan adequately by adjusting their schedules, making provision for money for transportation and hotel bills, conference registration among other things. These factors could largely influence the inability of many desirous target population from attending conferences also poor institutional sponsorship. Other reasons for non-attendance at conferences is then phobia for long distance travel (Urry, 2002); physical discomfort (Edward Foley, & Hergesell, 2016); cost of transportation hotel bills and conference registrations (Yoo & Zhao, 2010). Additionally, Mair and Thompson (2009) found the prominent reasons that prevent interested academics from attending conferences in their study were cost, time and health and safety. In the same vein, Rittichainuwat, Beck and Lalopa (2001) identified some other inhibiting factors to conference attendance as security threats at time of hosting, inclement weather and economic instability. Handerson, Coa and Masuy (2018) identified irrelevant conference themes, poor reputation of organizers and lack of institutional sponsorship as key variable for non-attendance of conferences. In a particular study, McCurry (2017) observed that some delegates skipped conference sessions because organizers do not offer free meals, while some conference delegates dashed out for sight-seeing. Finally, Gordon and Gledhill (2018) reported in their study that some delegates also leave conferences for perceived threat to physical and mental health.

## Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate push and pull factors to conference attendance among academics in Nigerian universities. Specifically, the study will investigate:

1. The push factors of conference attendance among academics in Nigerian universities,
2. Obstacles of conference attendance among academics in Nigerian universities.

## Research questions

The following hypotheses were used for the study:
1. What are the push factors of conference attendance among academics in Nigeria?
2. What are the obstacles of conference attendance among academics in Nigeria?

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study adopted the survey research design. The survey design is usually adopted to enable flexible colection and analysis of data from respondents (Zimba & Gaparyan, 2023). It also easier popular in social science and education (Jones, Murphy, Edwards, & James, 2008; Phillips, Friedman, Utrankar, Ta, Reddy, Durning, 2017). The area of the study is University of Calabar. The choice of this location was informed by the fact that the institutions houses many academics that attend different conferences as part of their professional activities. The population of the study was 2,842 academic staff of the University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. The simple random sampling technique was adopted by the study. This technique was employed due to the homogeneity of the selected population and to provide equal opportunity to every member of the population to be selected as a member of the sample (Noor, Tajik, & Golza, 2022). However, 30% (851 academic staff) of the entire population was selected as sample for the study. This was achieved through the hat and draw method. This procedure allows the researcher and trained research assistant(s) to randomly pick participants from a pool of others neatly folded and put bawl. This process is repeated until the desired sample size is selected (Hibberts, Johnson & Hudson, 2012). The instrument for data collection for the study was titled 'Academic Staff Conference Attendance Survey" (ASCAS). Three experts vetted the instrument and reasonable inputs were made before attesting to its validity and usability of the instrument. The Cronbach's alpha method of reliability was employed to establish the reliability of the instrument (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). It yielded alpha coefficient estimates between .70-.84. The instrument was administered by the researcher with assistance from two trained research assistants. Relevant documents for ethical consideration was obtained form University of Calabar, Directorate of Research and Development. Data collected was analyzed through percentages, ranking and charts.

## Results

The results of the analysis of the descriptive statistics of the demographic variables of the participants of the study revealed that, a total of 851 (eight hundred and fifty one) academic staff were the participants for the study. Out of this number, 582/68% were male and 269/32% were female. The table also revealed that 245/29% participants of the study were within 20-40 years bracket, 410/48% were within ages 46-55, and 196/23% participants were within the age-range of 60+. Similarly, the table also showed that participant with 1-10 years of experience were 416/49%, those within 11-20 years of experience were 284/33% and those of 21+ were 151/18%. Additionally, academic staff of junior cadre were 394/46%, those on junior cadre were 346/41% and those of the Professorial cadre where 111/13. The result of the analysis is presented in table 1.

**Descriptive statistics of participants**

| Gender Discipline | No | % No | Age | No. | % | Years of Experience No. % | No | | Rank | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 582 | 68% | 20-45 | 245 | 29% | 1-10 | 416 | 49% | Junior Cadre | 394 | 46% |
| Female | 269 | 32% | 46-60 | 410 | 48% | 11-20 | 284 | 33% | Senior Cadre | 346 | 41% |
| | | | 61+ | 196 | 23% | 21+ | 151 | 18% | Professoriate | 111 | 13% |
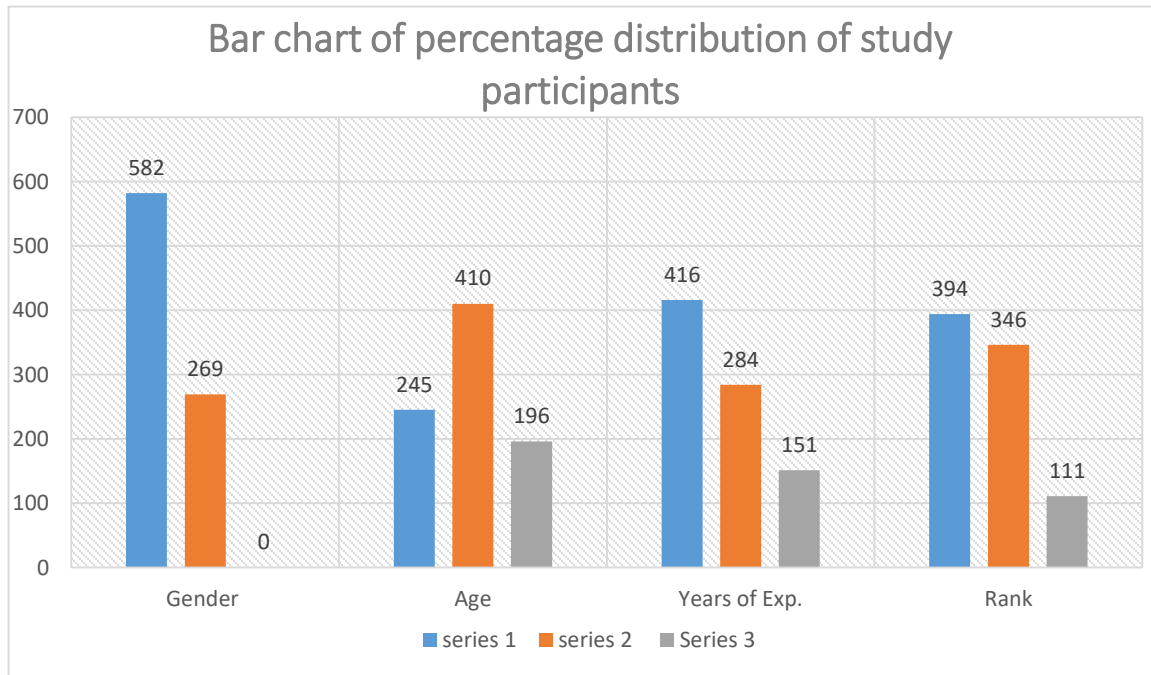


**Research question one:** What are the push factors of conference attendance among academics in Nigeria?

Research question one bothers on the push or motivating factors of conference attendance among Nigerian academics. Frequency and ranking method were adopted to answer this research question.

Thus, the push factors of conference attendance on the questionnaire were ranked in order of responses of respondents. The results from the analysis showed that the total respondents to the questionnaire were 851.

The frequency ranks of the respondents' push factors of conference attendance are in the following order: quest for new knowledge (n=752), which was the highest motivating factor. This was followed by the need to learn from experts in the field (n=684); use of conference attendance as criterion for academic staff assessment and promotion appraisals (n=652); for professional development (n=592); and to share new findings of research (n=571). Others include for personal development (n=543); academic networking and collaboration for research and grant (n=501); for socialization (n=486); and tourist attraction at conference destination (n=365) in that order.

**Table 2**: Frequency ranks of push factors of conference attendance among Nigerian academics (N=851)

|     | Push factors | Frequencies | Rank |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. | To learn new knowledge | 752 | 1st |
| 2. | As criterion for assessment and promotion | 652 | 3rd |
| 3. | Share new findings of research | 571 | 5th |
| 4. | To establish academic networks for research and grants | 501 | 7th |
| 5. | To learn from experts in the field | 684 | 2nd |
| 6. | For professional development | 592 | 4th |
| 7. | For personal development | 543 | 6th |
| 8. | For socialization | 486 | 8th |
| 9. | Tourist attractions in conference destination | 365 | 9th |



Push factors for conference attendance
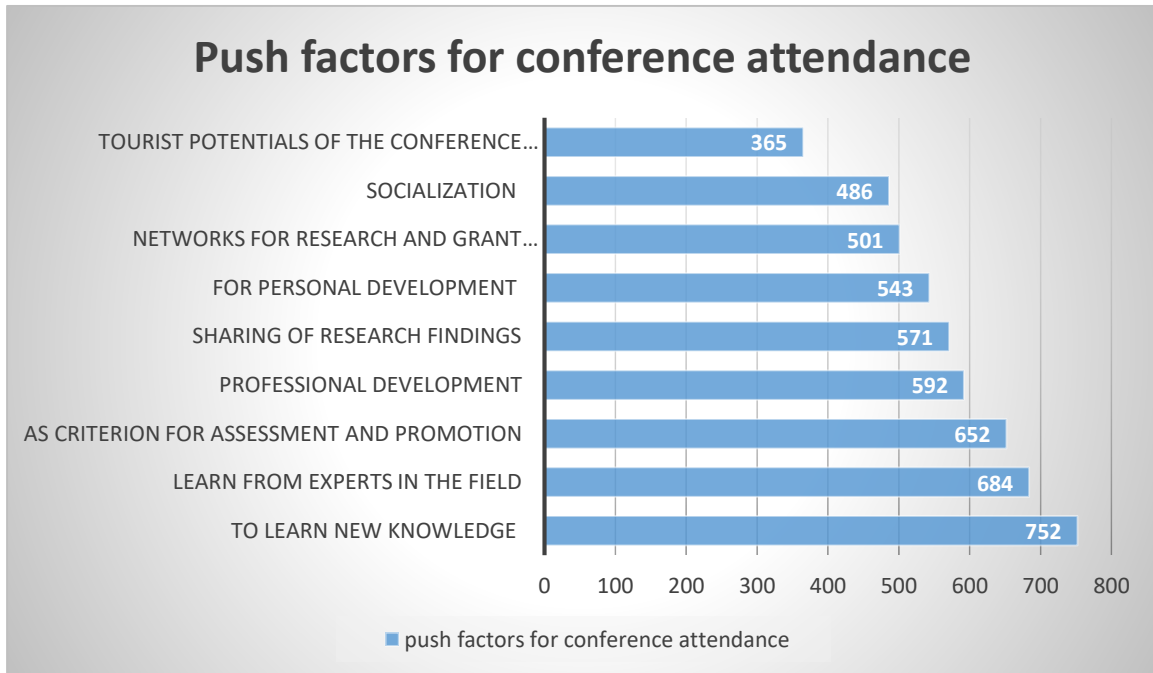
**Research question 2**: What are the obstacles of conference attendance among academics in Nigeria?

Research question two bothers on the obstacles of conferences attendance among Nigerian academics. Frequencies and ranking methods were used to analysis the data collected. Based on the results from the analysis, the frequencies of the responses of respondents on their challenges of conference attendance were ranked. The responses were in the following order: lack of funds (n=816, 1st); lack institutional sponsorship (n=789, 2nd); safety and security concerns of conference destination (n=704, 3rd); distance of conference destination (n=643, 4th); and lack of alternative online participation platforms (n=532, 5th). Others include reputation of organizers (n=532, 6th); discomfort (n=486, 7th); lack of time due to other academic engagements (n=486, 8) and poor conference themes (n=317, 9th ).

**Table 3.** Frequency rank analysis of obstacles of conference attendance among Nigerian academics.

| Challenges | Frequencies | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| 1.     Lack of funds | 816 | 1st |
| 2.     Distance of conference destination | 643 | 4th |
| 3.     Safety and security concerns of conference destination | 704 | 3rd |
| 4.     Lack of alternative online participation platforms | 611 | 5th |
| 5.     Lack of institutional sponsorship | 789 | 2nd |
| 6.     Reputation of organizers | 532 | 6th |
| 7.     Poor conference themes | 317 | 9th |
| 8.     Lack of time due to other academic engagements | 453 | 8th |
| 9.     Discomfort | 486 | 7th |



Frequencies of respondents on obstacles to conference attendance
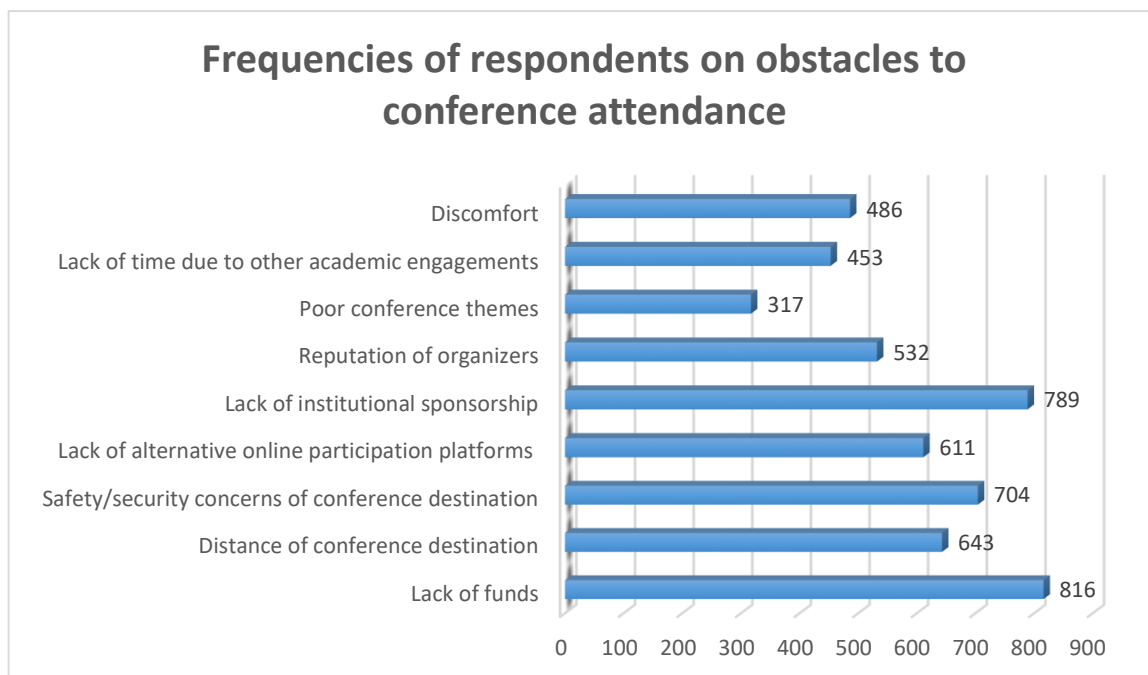
## DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis revealed some specific motivating variables for attendance of conferences among Nigerian academics in order of importance. This include quest for new knowledge, followed by the need to learn from experts in the field, use of conference attendance as criterion for academic staff assessment and promotion appraisals, for professional development and to share new findings of research. Others include personal development, building a sound academic networking and collaboration for research and grant, socialization, and tourist attraction at conference destination in that order. This implies that among the motivating variables that propels Nigerian academics to attend conferences the quest for new knowledge, learning from experts, as a criterion for assessment and promotion appraisal, professional development as well as building sound networks for research and grant collaborations topped the chat. This is so because academics in universities are knowledge workers with high penchant for new knowledge especially on the current practices and innovations in their field. Therefore, the quest for keeping abreast with the trends in their discipline. Hence, belief of acquiring new knowledge remains a very critical reason for constant, routine and regular attendance of conferences. Similarly, the results of the study also indicated that the desire to learn from key experts of the field is the second influential reasons for attendance at conferences. This is because, the best brains of any field cannot be found commonly by early career researchers for fruitful academic interactions. Thus, organizers of academic conferences attract attendance through inviting sound scholars that are active drivers of research, policies and innovations to serve as keynote speakers, and workshop facilitators to share their wealth of knowledge with young professionals. This findings are in tandem with the findings of Kordts-Freudinger, Al-Kabbani, and Schaper (2017) which revealed that conferences create opportunities for lecturers to be exposed to experiential learning and communities of practice that further boost their knowledge and expertise of their discipline.

Furthermore, an essential finding from the analysis is that the use of conference attendance as an indispensable criterion for academic staff assessment and appraisals. Thus, majority of academic staff intentionally attend conferences annually as a major requirement for promotion to the next level. Similar finding reported in the literature showed that, periodic and regular participation at conferences and publication of articles in learned national and international journals constitute major assessment criteria for all academic staff in Nigerian universities (Oester, sigliano, Hind-Ozan & Parsons, 2017). Additionally, it was also shown that, the need to develop productive academic collaborations for research and grants is also another key motivator for conference attendance among many academics. This view aligns with the claims of Rowe (2018) that conferences are fertile avenues for developing long lasting networks for future collaboration. Similary, Mair and Frew (2016) reported related finding which showed that social networks built in conferences are very strategic to successful career.

On the other hand, the second findings of the study indicated the numerous challenges that hider attendance of conferences among Nigerian academics. This include the following challenges lack of funds and lack institutional sponsorship. The poor payment academic staff in Nigeiran universities coupled with lack of institutional conference sponsorship are very critical variables that prevent many lecturers from attending both local and international conferences. This finding is supported by the assertion that poor institutional sponsorship is a key element that quenches the desire of many Nigerian academic from attending conferences (Urry, 2002). Similarly, it was found that the cost of transportation hotel bills and conference registrations are major setbacks to conference attendance (Yoo & Zhao, 2010). Furthermore, the safety and security concerns of conference destination another major factor that determines the decision to attend conference. Similar findings were reported by Rittichainuwat (2001) identified some other inhibiting factors to conference attendance as security threats. In the same vein Thompson (2009), found prominent reasons that prevent interested academics from attending conferences to include cost, time and health and safety. The study also revealed that distance of conference destination and lack of alternative online participation platforms also strongly inhibited conference attendance. However, this challenges can be attributed to failure by organizers to use alternative web-based platforms for participation from different locations globally.

Another index that diminishes conference participation is reputation of organizers. When organizers are insincere, dishonest and of low academic standing. Lecturers find it difficult to spend their hard earned money, time and energy to attend their conferences. This view was also shared in the findings of Handerson, Coa and Masuy (2018) pointed out that irrelevant conference themes and poor reputation of organizers are major kills the interest of researchers to participate in some conferences.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that certain factors are very essential to attract high attendance of conferences among academics. This is because the motive to attend could stem from the researchers desire to acquire new knowledge, share knowledge, peer review and collaboration for research and grants. On the other hand, institutional policies and organizer's failure to put in place some essential element to motivate academics to attend conferences annually. Thus, if these challenges are not adequately address many academics may not find conference interesting to attend as they reach the highest levels of their career.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations are made for the study:
1.      Institutions should provide adequate funds for all academics willing to attend conferences within and outside Nigeria.
2.      Organizers of conference must carefully plan programme of events in conference as well as select highly influential scholars in the field to motivate earlier career researchers to participate.

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