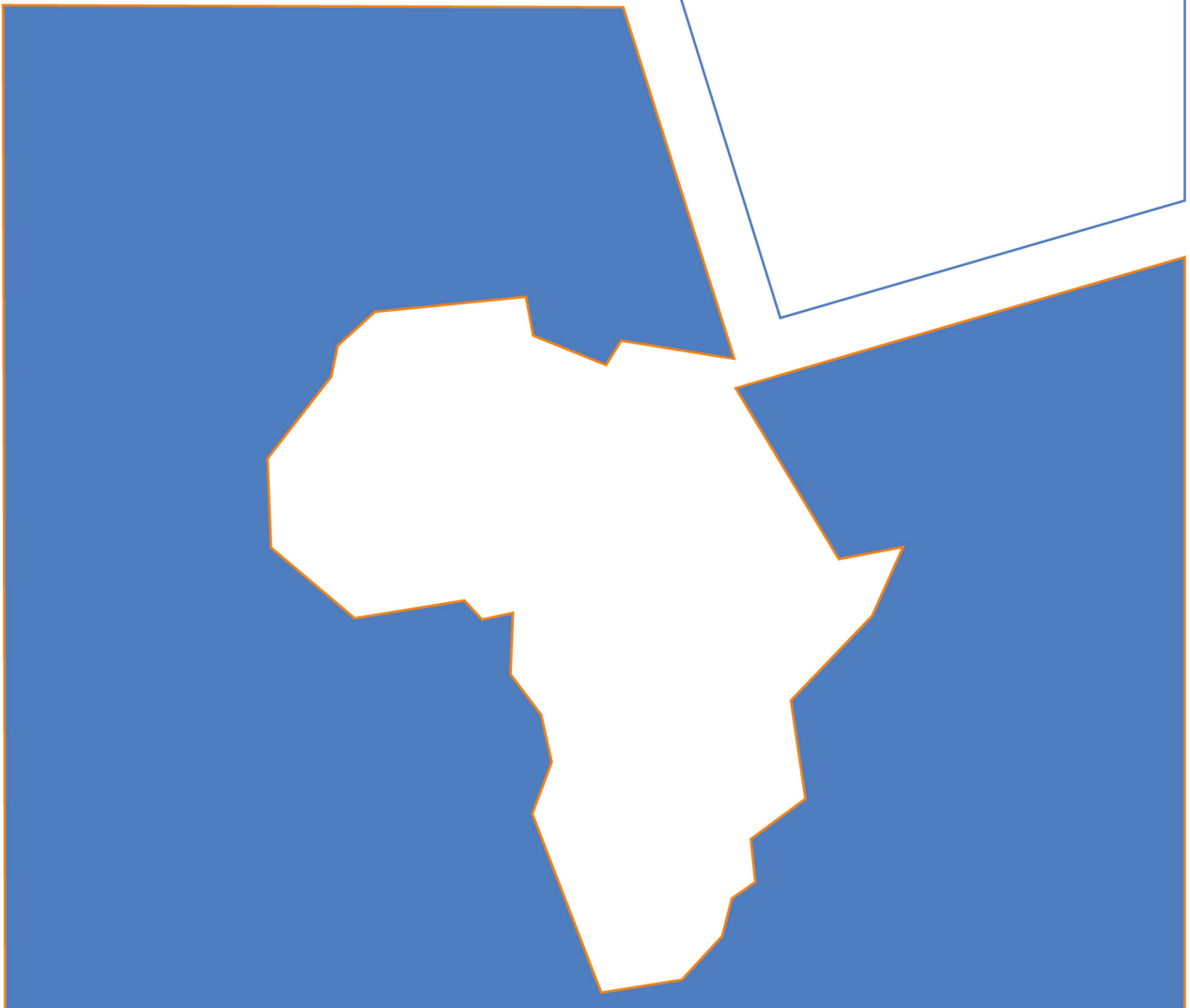


The University as a Geopolitical Actor: Francophone Africa Between Knowledge Dependencies and Regional Ambitions

Florian Rayssac



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I - Thinking with the Tools of the Other: The Challenges of Academic Sovereignty in a Postcolonial Context

While Africa is often analyzed through the lens of its economic or political dependence on Europe, the question of academic dependence remains largely underexplored. Long overlooked in public debate, this issue lies at the heart of the very production of elites and knowledge. Inherited from colonial history, it still shapes today the content, languages, institutions, and logic of knowledge production across the continent. Thus, if thinking with the tools of the other already means, in part, obeying him, then the question of defining educational and scientific priorities becomes essential in the desire for sovereignty among Francophone African nations. Indeed, the university is not merely a place of knowledge transmission: it molds the minds destined to govern and innovate, the agents of tomorrow. Can we therefore conceive of African sovereignty in an academic context still marked by colonial heritage and the reproduction of exogenous models?



A. Colonial Heritage: The Roots of Higher Education in Francophone Africa

The history of Francophone African universities cannot be separated from the colonial era. On the eve of independence, colonial authorities embarked on an ambitious program to establish institutions of higher learning. Aware that they could no longer suppress the advancing process of emancipation, they sought instead to retain control primarily by locking access to knowledge. This project did not envision a university free from imperial domination. This grip was soon challenged by independence movements, for whom knowledge was a lever for autonomy.

The establishment of the University of Dakar in 1959, just before independence, illustrates this desire to directly transpose the French academic model. Its organization testifies to this: Lucien Paye, a high-ranking French official, was appointed rector with the mission of structuring a university modeled after metropolitan institutions. This arrangement was part of a centralizing strategy, with universities conceived as vehicles for disseminating French culture and as training grounds for an elite shaped to fit metropolitan administrative norms. As Pierre Singaravélou explains, these structures were designed to serve the empire's objectives, not the needs of local societies.

From its inception, the University of Dakar functioned as a satellite of the French university system. Subordinated to the French Ministry of Cooperation until the 1970s, it issued diplomas in the name of the French Republic. Far from guaranteeing intellectual autonomy, the goal was to train an indigenous elite loyal to the colonial order. This vision had already been formalized in the early 20th century by thinkers such as Edmond Gain and Georges Hardy, who advocated for a higher education system geared toward colonial rather than emancipatory aims.

Thus, the university was structured around traditional faculties (arts, law, medicine, sciences) following the model of the Sorbonne or Bordeaux—then considered global references. The Ministry of Cooperation promoted institutional pairings with these French universities to ensure international recognition of degrees and maintain high academic standards. This transfer also included the import of entire disciplines, such as “colonial sciences”, tropical agronomy, colonial medicine, imperial geography, designed to

categorize and govern local populations through a Eurocentric lens (Singaravélou, 2009).

The teaching staff, largely composed of French expatriates, played a central role. These cooperants occupied key positions and led faculties, while African professors remained in the minority, often confined to subordinate roles. This structure ensured pedagogical uniformity aligned with French standards but blocked the emergence of endogenous critical thought. French, the sole language of instruction, reinforced this cultural domination. Courses, based on metropolitan textbooks, were frequently ill-suited to African realities. For example, history was taught from a European perspective, obscuring local figures and dynamics. Far from being “the memory of the world,” as Lacordaire put it, it was instead the memory of a world, a European one, experienced by proxy (Dulucq & Zytnicki, 2006).

The process of African universities gaining autonomy over the following decades was slow and incomplete. Cooperation agreements, such as the 1961 accord between France and Senegal, prolonged postcolonial dependency. Students continued to be sent to France, French teaching staff remained prevalent, and curricula continued to mirror French academic standards. This situation is what Singaravélou calls “academic neocolonialism,” where the legitimacy of knowledge produced on the continent still depends on the gaze and approval of the former colonizer.

B. The Post-Independence Era: Between Model Reproduction and Attempts at Africanization

At independence, Francophone African states inherited rigid university institutions, designed by and for foreign realities. Universities such as those in Dakar, Abidjan, Yaoundé, or Ouagadougou faithfully reproduced the architecture of the French model: division into faculties, linear annual curricula, issuance of national diplomas. This continuity ensured international recognition but also led to excessive centralization, overcrowding, and low adaptability. Lange (1998) observed that this inflexible system caused a saturation of institutions, unable to respond to the postcolonial demographic explosion.

The course content changed little. In law, for example, teaching still largely relies on the Napoleonic Civil Code, particularly in the field of obligations,

which remains in force in most former colonies (with the exception of Senegal and Madagascar), relegating African customary legal systems, though still widely practiced, to the margins (Agamben, 2004). In the humanities, canonical references: Durkheim, Weber, Kant still dominate, while African thinkers such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwasi Wiredu, or Amadou Hampâté Bâ are marginalized. The evaluation system remains inherited from French universities of the 1950s: single final exams and a dominance of lecture-based teaching.

The language of instruction itself constitutes a major issue of accessibility and independence. French, used at the university level, is a second or even third language for the majority of students. According to UNESCO (2023), in countries like Burkina Faso or Mali, more than 65% of students do not have French as their first language. This gap creates a cognitive barrier, reinforces social exclusion, and perpetuates linguistic elitism: only those from urban, French-speaking backgrounds truly access higher education.

International cooperation, especially with France, has helped maintain academic expertise but at the cost of weakened autonomy. Research priorities are often set by Northern donors (IRD, EU), steering projects toward global themes, climate change, migration, security at the expense of local needs such as smallholder agriculture, community health, or African languages. Due to a lack of funding, training, and institutional recognition, local research struggles to organize itself effectively.

C. Scientific Research: Chronic Weakness and Attempts at Recovery

A vital engine for any university, research remains the neglected child of Francophone African universities. In sub-Saharan Africa, research budgets rarely exceed 0.5% of GDP, far from the 2.19% recorded in Europe (OECD, 2022). This chronic underfunding translates into a lack of equipment, obsolete libraries, and a marginalized scientific output.

Certain journals, such as *Éthiopiques* (UCAD) or the *African Journal of Educational Research*, reflect a dynamic local scene but struggle to achieve international visibility, as they are rarely indexed in major databases such as Scopus or Web of Science platforms dominated by English-language

publications. This low recognition limits their reach, despite their often rich and locally anchored thematic content.

The brain drain is massive. According to UNESCO (2021), nearly 30% of researchers trained on the continent work abroad, mainly in France, Canada, or the United States. This hemorrhaging undermines local supervisory capacities and weakens the endogenous production of knowledge. Scientific infrastructure, when it exists, is outdated, and access to digital resources remains extremely limited in many institutions.

Despite this difficult context, some positive initiatives are emerging. CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), founded in 1973, supports critical research and encourages African academic publishing. Regional centers of excellence are also developing, such as the public health center in Ouagadougou or the mathematics center in Benin, with support from the World Bank. Nevertheless, these projects still depend heavily on external funding, which limits their sovereignty (Olivier de Sardan, 2015).

D. Toward a Decolonization of Higher Education

To decolonize the university does not mean rejecting science or universality, but rather enriching epistemologies through African experiences. This is not about identity withdrawal, but about an intellectual reconquest. It implies, in fact, a redefinition of curricula. Why begin a course in African philosophy with Plato and not with Théophile Obenga? Why teach economics without referencing African communal logics?

In Dakar, the Cheikh Anta Diop University has launched several programs focusing on African epistemologies, the continent's intellectual history, and critiques of colonial knowledge systems. Some of these courses are taught in Wolof, marking a shift toward linguistic Africanization. Escaping a peripheral position relative to Europe implies redefining oneself as a new center. CODESRIA and the ELAN program support this direction, promoting the teaching of African languages starting at the primary level. However, their integration into higher education remains limited and requires considerable effort. Standardizing lexicons and developing scientific terminology in local languages, in turn, necessitates the training of multilingual professors, which assumes strong and sustained political will.

University governance is equally critical. Institutions must be able to freely define their priorities, recruit their staff, and choose their languages of instruction. Pan-African structures such as AESA (Alliance for Accelerating Excellence in Science in Africa) and CAMES (African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education) play a key role: they work on program accreditation, resource sharing, and researcher mobility. Building an African university space beyond linguistic, epistemological, and institutional divisions inherited from colonization remains a strategic challenge for the continent. It is necessary to develop pilot universities, strengthen South-South consortia, and expand partnerships beyond former colonial powers.

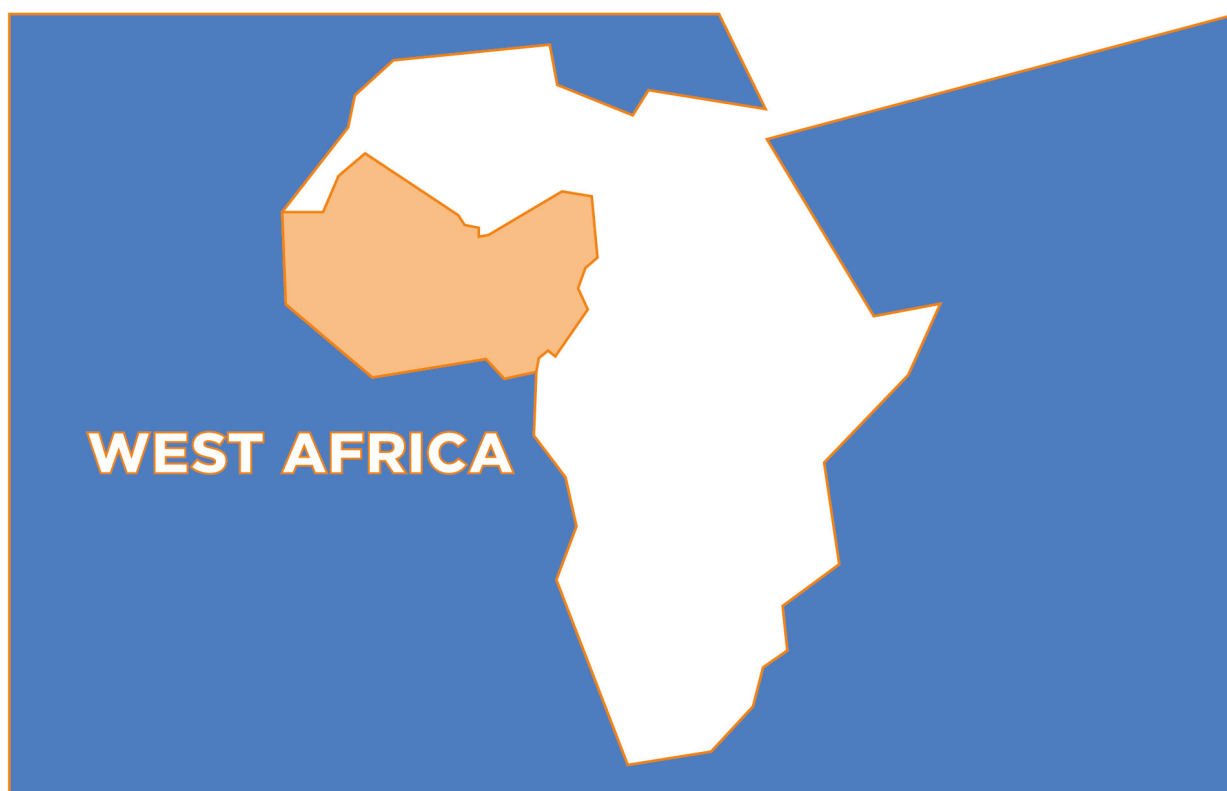
While Africa is often discussed in terms of economic and political dependence on Europe, its academic dependence remains underexplored. Yet academic sovereignty inasmuch as it shapes the citizens who will one day work for their nation remains a fundamental prerequisite for true autonomy.

II - Regional University Convergence: Pooling, Exchanging, Thriving

Introduction regional distinction:

A. West Africa: Challenges of Autonomy and Dynamics of Cooperation

If there is one space where the tensions between a postcolonial legacy and a desire for university autonomy are most strongly felt, it is in Francophone West Africa. Once the center of French influence on the continent, it consists of ten principal countries—Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, to which one can add Mauritania and Guinea-Bissau in a broader sense. This subregion now hosts over 2.5 million students spread across a dense network of more than 70 public universities and some fifteen private institutions. Such a figure is no accident: it makes West Africa a veritable academic laboratory on the continental scale, but also a minefield marked by the contradictions of a persistent dependence on external funding and imported curricular models, reflecting a structure still too often modeled on exogenous references rather than local needs.



1. Flagship institutions and areas of excellence

West African universities have grown up in an ambivalent relationship to history. On the one hand, a deep anchor in structures inherited from France; on the other, a growing desire to redefine centers of excellence based on local issues. Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar (UCAD), founded in 1957, is the emblematic illustration. While it remains one of the main centers of scientific production in medicine, law, and social sciences with more than 1,000 indexed publications per year, largely thanks to its long-standing ties with France's CNRS and IRD, it has also embarked on a regional outreach strategy that today extends beyond the Francophone sphere.

Another flagship is Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, founded in 1990, which has made its mark by federating programs in development economics, agroecology, and applied computer science. Currently coordinating over 30 projects under the Partenariats Académiques Afrique–France (PeA) program, a scheme funded by the French Development Agency aimed at supporting the creation of joint training programs and applied research between African and French institutions, it has developed shared curricula with the University of Geneva, symbolizing a shift toward more equitable partnerships on a broader scale. Likewise, the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) in Benin consolidates its position among the regional top three according to UniRank, notably thanks to its joint projects with Limoges under the “One Health” program, crossing biotechnology and agronomic research. Combining biotechnology and on-the-ground agronomic research, this program marshals expertise in human health, animal health, and environmental science to better prevent zoonoses and improve food security.

Finally, the 2iE Institute in Ouagadougou, the foremost center for water and environmental engineering recognized by the World Bank as a regional Centre of Excellence, embodies the strategic shift some institutions have made toward international rankings, since it tops the Times Higher Education 2024 list for sub-Saharan Africa. In Lomé, the eponymous university invests in fields such as international law and sustainable logistics while, since 2020, actively participating in the Erasmus+ program, counting over 200 annual mobilities.

2. Collaborative research and co-publications

To understand what structures research today in West Africa, one must mention the gradual but still unfinished shift toward a logic of scientific co-production. In other words, a model in which research ceases to be a one-way output dictated from the North, becoming instead the fruit of triangular interactions between universities, governments, and the private sector. A bibliometric study covering 2005–2009 confirms this: 15 % of regional publications result from partnerships between university institutions and national administrations, while collaborations with the corporate world still marginal (< 2 %), are beginning to emerge in high-potential sectors such as energy or biotechnology. However, private funding, more the exception than the rule, remains scarce due to the low investment of local firms in R&D and the predominance of the informal sector, which hinders the development of a genuine applied research ecosystem.

3. Academic mobility: flows and challenges

Added to these internal dynamics is increasingly pronounced academic mobility. Over twenty years, the number of West African students registered abroad grew by 170 %, from 163 000 in 1998 to over 441 000 in 2021. Behind these figures lies a dual phenomenon: on one hand, a very strong orientation toward Europe, with France alone accounting for 14 % of departures; on the other hand, rising intracontinental mobility (20 %), yet not enough to stem exodus dynamics. With an external mobility rate of 4.6 %, well above the global average (1.9 %), West Africa shows how the circulation of knowledge is also one of geopolitical asymmetries between North and South: funding and diploma recognition remain heavily concentrated in Northern universities, driving many graduates to seek opportunities outside the continent.

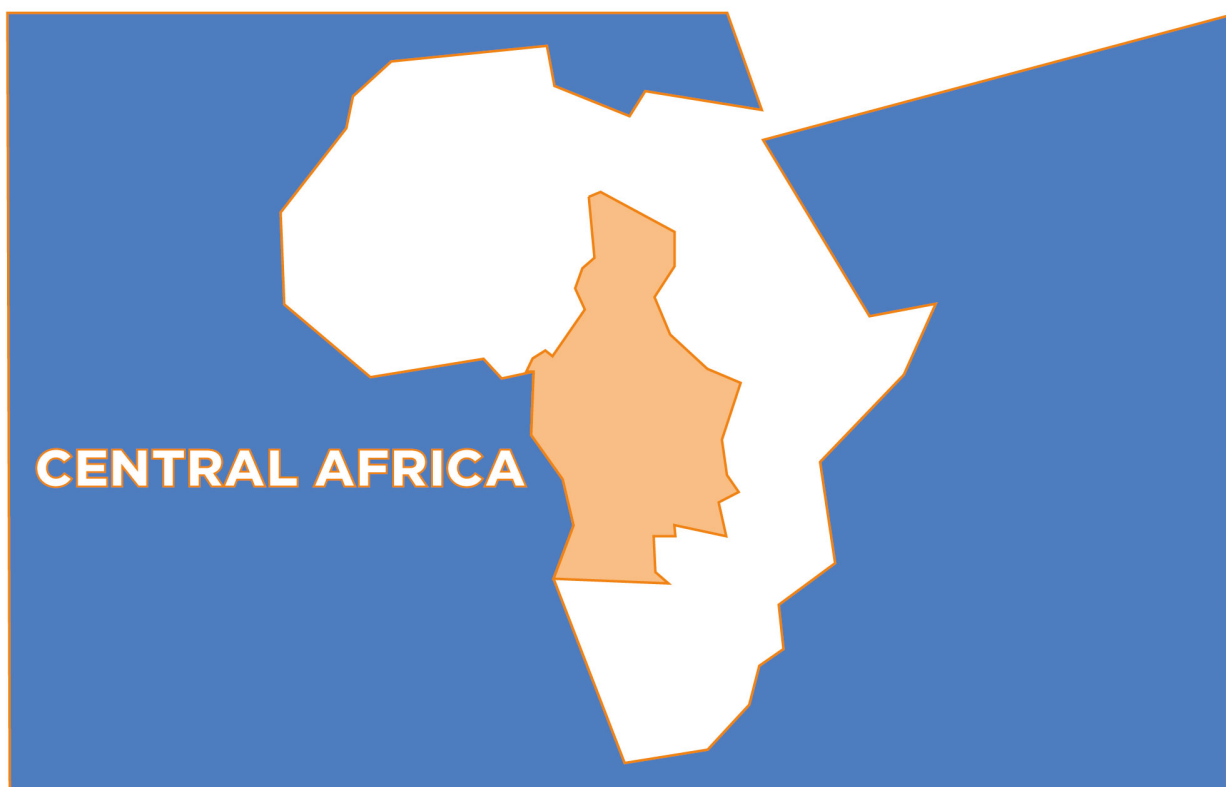
4. Intra- and extra-continental partnerships

In response, cooperation instruments have emerged both to strengthen regional integration and to reconfigure international dependencies. The Réseau pour l'Excellence de l'Enseignement Supérieur en Afrique de l'Ouest (REESAO), active since 2005, brings together over forty universities across eight countries to harmonize the Licence-Master-Doctorate (LMD) system, promoting mutual recognition of diplomas and curriculum modularity while facilitating academic mobility. RUSTA, for its part, encourages the pooling of laboratories and the

development of joint curricula by providing shared platforms, organizing joint training, and negotiating equipment access collectively, as shown by its 2024 agreement with the University of Bondoukou. At the extra-continental level, the PeA program, coordinated by Campus France and supported by AFD, has enabled more than 50 joint projects in agroecology, bioenergy, and renewable energy. Finally, Erasmus+ completes this framework, ensuring a steady flow of exchanges among the universities of Dakar, Lomé, and their European counterparts.

B. Central Africa: Bureaucratic Inertia and a Crossroads in Flux

Although Francophone Central Africa often seems lagging in the continent's major academic integration dynamics due to a low density of economic activity, linguistic fragmentation, and meager public investment in higher education, it nonetheless constitutes a strategic space where deep mutations take place. Comprising six countries, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Chad, and the Central African Republic, the region enrolls nearly one million students each year across some forty public universities and ten private institutions. At the intersection of structural constraints—with national budget allocations often below 0.2 % of GDP and political will for transformation, Central Africa's university system embodies a constant tension between the inertia of heavy bureaucracy and a renewal illustrated by recent reforms aimed at increasing institutional autonomy.



1. Flagship institutions and areas of excellence

The structuring of university hubs in Central Africa centers on institutions with contrasting profiles, both rooted in their national contexts and engaged in transnational networks. The University of Dschang in Cameroon has established itself as an indispensable resource center in agroecology and veterinary sciences, with labs covering six of the country's ten regions and a reach extending beyond national borders. The Catholic University of Central Africa (UCAC), also in Cameroon, managed in two decades to build a multidisciplinary offering around social sciences, management, and theology, developing bilingual English-French programs and forging more than twenty international academic partnerships, notably with the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Italy.

In the DRC, the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) embodies both a numerical and symbolic centrality: with 30 000 students and nearly 2 000 faculty across twelve divisions, it accounts for a large share of the country's scientific output—particularly in civil engineering, political science, and communications. In N'Djamena, the national university increasingly focuses on internationalizing its research: through collaborations with around twenty institutions across twelve countries, it generates about fifteen annual research projects, benefiting from support by the European Union and specialized NGOs in strategic areas such as engineering, health, and governance.

2. Collaborative research and co-publications

While university research in Central Africa remains often subject to budgetary and administrative uncertainties, it is experiencing a slow consolidation process. Between 2010 and 2020, UCAC and UNIKIN co-founded over thirty Africa–Europe mixed labs, producing some 250 articles primarily in the humanities, public health, and environmental engineering. These numbers, though still modest on the global stage, reflect the emergence of a cross-border academic network in the region. At the same time, university–government partnerships account for roughly 12 % of regional scientific output, while ties with industry, though still weak (< 2 %) are advancing in agroecology and solar energy. Yet again, the lack of sustainable funding and administrative burdens significantly hamper the development of an autonomous research ecosystem.

3. Academic mobility: flows and challenges

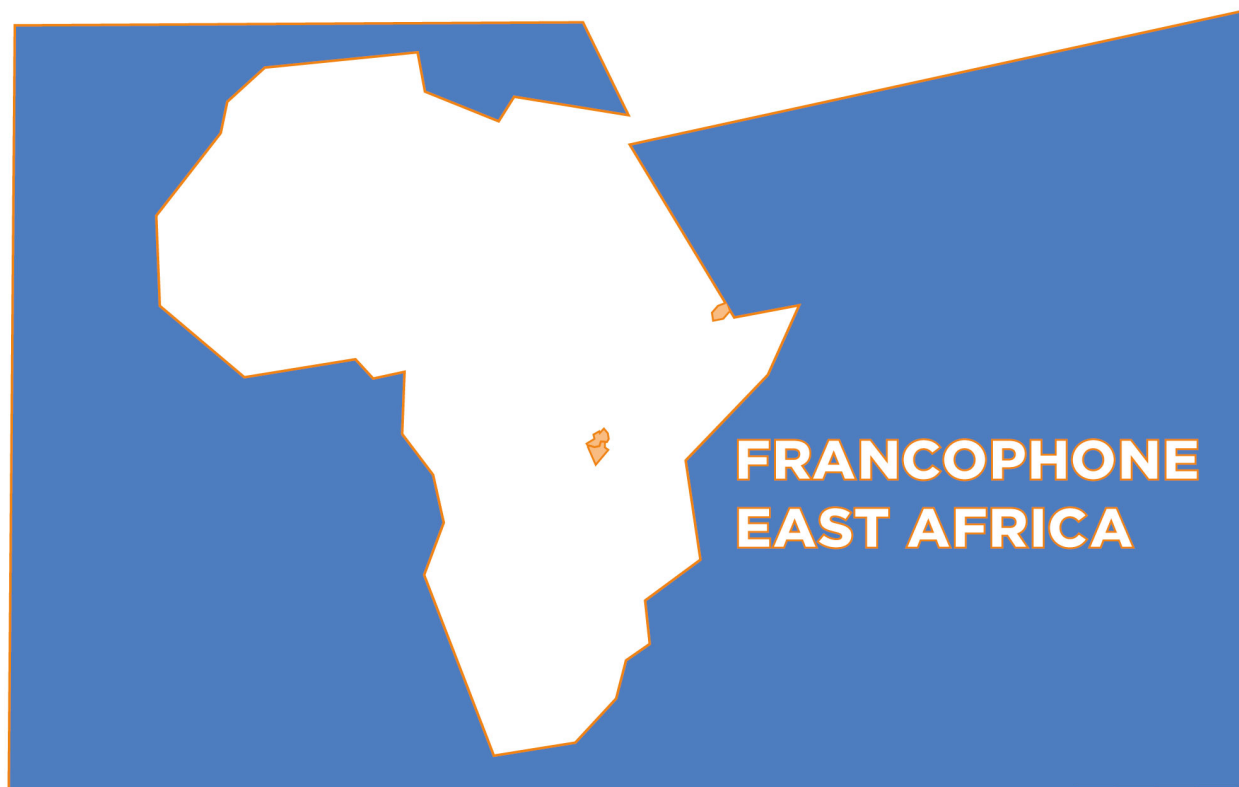
Inter-university mobility remains one of Central Africa's distinguishing markers. In 2021, only 2.8 % of the region's students were enrolled abroad, versus 4.6 % in West Africa. This low mobility reflects both financial and logistical obstacles and the fragmentation of the regional system. Flows concentrate around three hubs: Cameroon, the DRC, and Europe, which alone accounts for 50 % of outgoing mobility. Erasmus+ programs and scholarships from the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) have nonetheless enabled nearly 1 200 exchanges in 2023, facilitating doctoral training. Yet many graduates emerge into a professional impasse, lacking a sufficiently structured local ecosystem to absorb their skills.

4. Intra- and extra-continental partnerships

In face of this fragility, several networks are striving to construct a coordinated response. RUSTA—which includes UCAC and the University of Dschang—pools laboratories and educational resources around fields like civil engineering and environmental management, organizing joint training sessions and negotiating consortium purchases of expensive equipment. The CAMES works to harmonize diplomas and certify programs regionally through semiannual evaluation commissions. Internationally, the PeA program financed more than 30 joint projects between 2018 and 2022 with a total of €7 million, covering public health, water management, and agrifood. Finally, Erasmus+ reinforces this momentum with around one hundred funded mobilities per year among UCAC, UNIKIN, and their European partners.

C. Francophone East Africa: Access, Professionalization, and E-Learning under Renewed Governance

Long marginalized from the continent's major university hubs, Francophone East Africa comprising only three countries, Rwanda, Burundi, and Djibouti has undergone over the past decade a discreet yet structurally significant reconfiguration of its academic landscape. Although student numbers there remain lower than in West or Central Africa (around 300 000 across thirty public institutions and ten private structures), ongoing legislative reforms and the adoption of digital course-management platforms reflect a genuine effort to modernize university governance. This emerging dynamic is founded on a twofold logic: broadening access to higher education while aligning national university systems with professional and innovation-based imperatives.



1. Flagship institutions and areas of excellence

In just ten years, Rwanda has focused its efforts around a central institution: the University of Rwanda (UR). Created in 2013 through the merger of seven public entities, it now stands as the country's largest academic body with nearly 25 000 students across five campuses. This centralization has pooled resources and directed the national strategy toward three key domains: infrastructure engineering, environmental sciences, and information technology. This specialization has been supported by strategic partnerships with North American and European universities and targeted funding from the World Bank and European Commission.

In Burundi, the university landscape remains more fragmented yet similarly strategic: Hope Africa University (HAU) has emerged as a center of excellence in health sciences and rural economics. From 2018 to 2023, it trained over 5 000 nurses and project managers through partnerships with the University of Michigan and various NGOs. The University of Burundi remains the cornerstone of law, social sciences, and governance, hosting annual human-rights colloquia that attract up to 300 scholars and practitioners, thus asserting its role as a regional intellectual forum.

In Djibouti, the national university, modernized in 2006, has deliberately specialized in port logistics and marine sciences. Supported by the national port authority, it recently joined an international "blue economy" laboratory developed with Morocco's National Institute of Marine Sciences and Technologies (INSTM) and the University of Malta. This focus underscores Djibouti's strategic intent to link higher education with its geostrategic position at the mouth of the Red Sea.

2. Collaborative research and co-publications

University research in Francophone East Africa remains dominated by North–South cooperation dynamics. A 2022 study by the Centre for African Studies (University of Cape Town) found that co-publications involving at least two East African institutions rose by 60 % between 2010 and 2020. While significant, this growth relies heavily on European funding and infrastructure. Priority areas include public health, water resource management, climate, and environmental resilience. This apparent dynamism masks a lingering

dependency on bilateral partnerships and a lack of robust intra-regional collaboration, hampered by scarce political support and technical resources.

3. Academic mobility

Perhaps the most notable evolution in the region is in mobility. Since ratifying the Addis Convention in 2014, intra-African student flows have nearly doubled. Today, 45 % of regional academic mobility is directed toward neighboring African countries, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda versus 40 % to Europe and 10 % to North America. This shift reflects a strengthening of cultural and scientific exchanges at the regional level but also raises issues of harmonization: in a still-developing academic space, diploma recognition, credit equivalence, and standardized pathways remain insufficiently guaranteed, limiting these mobilities' transformative potential.

4. Partnership networks

To meet these challenges, several cooperation frameworks have emerged. The Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) deploys continuous training programs in Kigali, Bujumbura, and Djibouti, leveraging structured research networks. In 2023, Erasmus+ funded over 150 short mobilities among the three countries and a dozen European University's partners as Sorbonne, the University of Liège, and the University of Geneva under cotutelle and skill-transfer arrangements. The pan-African East Africa Network, coordinated by the University of Minnesota, brings together about fifteen institutions focused on public health and tropical diseases—regional priorities. In 2022, the Partenariats Académiques Afrique–France program launched a call dedicated to East Africa, supporting the creation of new master's programs in bioeconomy and port logistics.

Together, these dynamics suggest an ongoing but clearly underway movement to reconfigure African university systems, where the question of intellectual sovereignty emerges with fresh urgency. Although Francophone West, Central, and East Africa follow distinct trajectories, they all converge toward the same horizon: transforming the university from a mere extension of former colonial metropolises into a rooted, critical forge of knowledge, resolutely focused on local, regional, and continental challenges.

III- Campus Geopolitics: A Closer Look at the Intellectual Capitals of the Continent

A. Senegal and Its University Network: A Driving Force of Excellence Poised to Become the Intellectual Hub of West Africa

Anchored in the heart of Francophone West Africa, Senegal has, since independence, built a genuine network of public universities. It was in 1957 that Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar was established, laying the foundations of a center of excellence aimed at training the national elite and promoting scientific research in Francophone Africa. Thirty-three years later, the opening of Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis in December 1990 reflected a desire to expand access to higher education and alleviate congestion in the capital. Today, nearly one hundred thousand students are spread across about ten public institutions, underscoring the central role of universities in the country's socio-economic development.



1. Structuring the University Network

The Senegalese university landscape draws its roots from the post-colonial momentum following independence. While in 1957 the Senegalese state inaugurated Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) on the remains of the AOF Medical School, it asserted its will to build an institution capable of training a national elite and promoting scientific research in Francophone Africa. Although its beginnings were under colonial tutelage, UCAD quickly took on the role of an instrument of intellectual sovereignty by emancipating itself to become a genuine voice for Africa in the academic world. The emblematic figure of Cheikh Anta Diop himself exemplifies this emancipation. As a former researcher and pan-African intellectual, his work on the African origins of Egyptian civilization was promoted, disseminated, and institutionalized within the university that now bears his name. His research, initially marginalized in Western scientific circles, helped to refocus debates on African history and identity. Moreover, since the 1960s, the Fundamental Institute of Black Africa (IFAN), affiliated with UCAD, has played a key role in this emancipation by fostering intellectual production centered on cultural, linguistic, and historical issues specific to the continent. Thus, this first major university quickly became the cradle of intellectuals and decision-makers by forging partnerships with the CNRS, IRD, and European universities, laying the foundations of a model recognized across the continent in the humanities, law, and medicine.

Faced with growing pressure on Dakar's infrastructure and the need to decentralize higher education, Gaston Berger University (UGB) opened its doors in Saint-Louis in December 1990. This creation responded to the dual objective of offering an academic alternative outside the capital and anchoring the university in a region with strong agricultural and historical vocation. From its inception, UGB stood out for its openness to applied disciplines and a firm regional positioning, thus contributing to territorial balance and the development of a local pool of expertise.

Several reports highlight that the multiplication of public universities outside Dakar, in Saint-Louis, Thiès, Ziguinchor, and Bambey has enabled a better geographic distribution of educational offerings. According to the national report on higher education presented at the 2022 UNESCO World Conference, this policy of peripheral expansion aims to correct regional disparities by

facilitating local access to university programs and limiting the exodus of youth toward the capital. The diplomas awarded feed both central administrations and local authorities, while also contributing to social mobility and the emergence of an informed and engaged civil society.

2. Academic Excellence and Pedagogical Innovation

UCAD asserts itself as the locomotive of the Senegalese system: ranked first in the country, 27th in Africa, and 1,632nd worldwide according to EduRank (March 2025), it leverages a student body nearing 90,000 and the expertise of 1,422 permanent faculty members. It offers a multidisciplinary curriculum covering law, political science, medicine, social sciences, engineering, economics, languages and literature, as well as natural sciences. Its scientific output, comprising over 12,440 publications and 138,453 citations, attests to the intensity of its international collaborations through mechanisms fostering researcher mobility, joint thesis supervision, and shared teaching modules. The Euro-African alliance CIVIS is one such mechanism, bringing together seven European and six African universities around a common virtual campus, double degree programs, and transcontinental research projects, thereby enhancing the global dimension of student pathways, supported further by the Erasmus+ “Partnerships for Cooperation” actions.

UGB positions itself as the second national university, ranked 137th in Africa and 4,349th worldwide by EduRank (March 2025), with a student body of 10,145 and applied research focused on statistics, development economics, and agroecology, disciplines key to addressing rural planning challenges, food resource management, and policy analysis in agriculturally dominant areas. With 2,643 publications and 14,679 citations, it promotes education grounded in addressing local and regional issues, actively participating in Erasmus+ information days organized by the European Union Delegation, the National Erasmus Focal Point, and UGB’s rectorate. This helps raise local actors’ awareness of international cooperation opportunities, strengthens institutional capacities, and guides pedagogical projects toward identified needs on the ground.

But it is in the context of massification of higher education that pedagogical innovation has truly accelerated. Indeed, UCAD deployed in 2023 “Pass UCAD,” a hybrid platform developed with SONATEL providing free access to digital resources for over 12,000 students, while UGB experiments with online modules

(MOOCs) specializing in agroecology and circular economy to diversify learning methods and optimize infrastructure by reducing pressure on lecture halls, limiting logistical costs, and offering simultaneous access to thousands of learners without physical expansion. These adaptations demonstrate Senegalese universities' capacity to innovate in the face of digital challenges and quality demands.

3.Collaborative Research and International Mobility

Research funding in Senegal follows a model dominated by public action: in 2015, R&D expenditure accounted for only 0.6% of GDP, with the private sector's contribution remaining marginal (<2%) according to the BTI 2024. To address this imbalance, UCAD and UGB position themselves as proactive players in international programs: Horizon Europe, NEPAD-AAS, and calls launched by UNESCO or the World Bank provide substantial funding for projects on governance, security, and sustainable development, prioritizing these themes to tackle regional geopolitical issues, fight insecurity, and implement growth policies.

At the same time, academic mobility is a major lever for enhancing skills in Senegalese higher education. According to figures published by Campus France, international mobility of students from Sub-Saharan Africa increased by 79% between 2009 and 2018, reflecting a regional dynamic fully involving Senegal. France remains the primary destination for Senegalese students, followed by the United States, Morocco, and South Africa, confirming the enduring historical, linguistic, and institutional ties between Dakar and the Francophone European space (Campus France, 2019). To promote these exchanges, Erasmus+ and the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) programs annually grant scholarships to several hundred students, doctoral candidates, and researchers. For example, according to data from the Erasmus+ Focal Point Senegal, over 200 inbound and outbound mobilities were recorded under KA107 and KA171 actions during 2022–2024. These mobilities go beyond simple academic stays to contribute to expertise transfer, joint curriculum development, joint thesis supervision, and dissemination of best pedagogical practices within Senegalese laboratories and teaching teams.

These exchanges nourish the local ecosystem and foster the creation of transnational networks: researchers trained in Europe or North America join regional think tanks, support joint thesis supervision, and contribute to public

policy development by collaborating with ministries and West African institutions. It is this circulation of knowledge that makes Senegal a knowledge hub for the sub-region and a privileged interlocutor in international forums.

4. Focus on Political Science & International Relations

As mentioned earlier, in 2023, UCAD's Faculty of Legal and Political Sciences (FSJP) undertook a thorough overhaul of its curricula, resolutely focusing on digital integration and flexible pathways. This adaptation is notably reflected in leveraging technological tools already deployed at the university, such as the hybrid platform "Pass UCAD," now fully mobilized to structure political science and international relations education.

This hybrid pedagogy integrates political theory, comparative systems, and quantitative methods from the undergraduate level, complemented by "Data & Policy" workshops where students develop skills in electoral mapping and crisis scenario modeling. At the graduate level, master's programs are divided into three strong tracks: African Governance, International Security, and Economic Diplomacy, each including supervised projects and multilateral negotiation simulations.

In applied research, the Human Rights and Peace Institute (IDHP) and CREDILA drive the faculty's intellectual activity. IDHP organizes conferences and workshops on fundamental rights protection and conflict mediation, applying peaceful resolution methods and training mediators capable of intervening in post-conflict or sociopolitical tension contexts, while CREDILA annually coordinates over fifteen thematic colloquia covering decentralization, electoral processes, and OHADA legislation, and publishes the CREDILA Review, which gathers contributions from West African and European researchers.

International partnerships also structure the discipline's relational dimension: UCAD has established an annual exchange with Sciences Po's Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA), allowing twenty Senegalese students and ten faculty members to participate in a workshop on Sahel security, including visits to the OECD's Sahel West Africa Club and lectures at the European Union Institute for Security Studies in Paris. Membership in the CIVIS alliance, an academic coalition aiming to create a European-African space for interdisciplinary cooperation, mobility, and joint degree certification with a focus on sustainability, inclusion, and social innovation, also offers doctoral candidates joint supervision opportunities and collaborative modules with

seven European and six African universities.

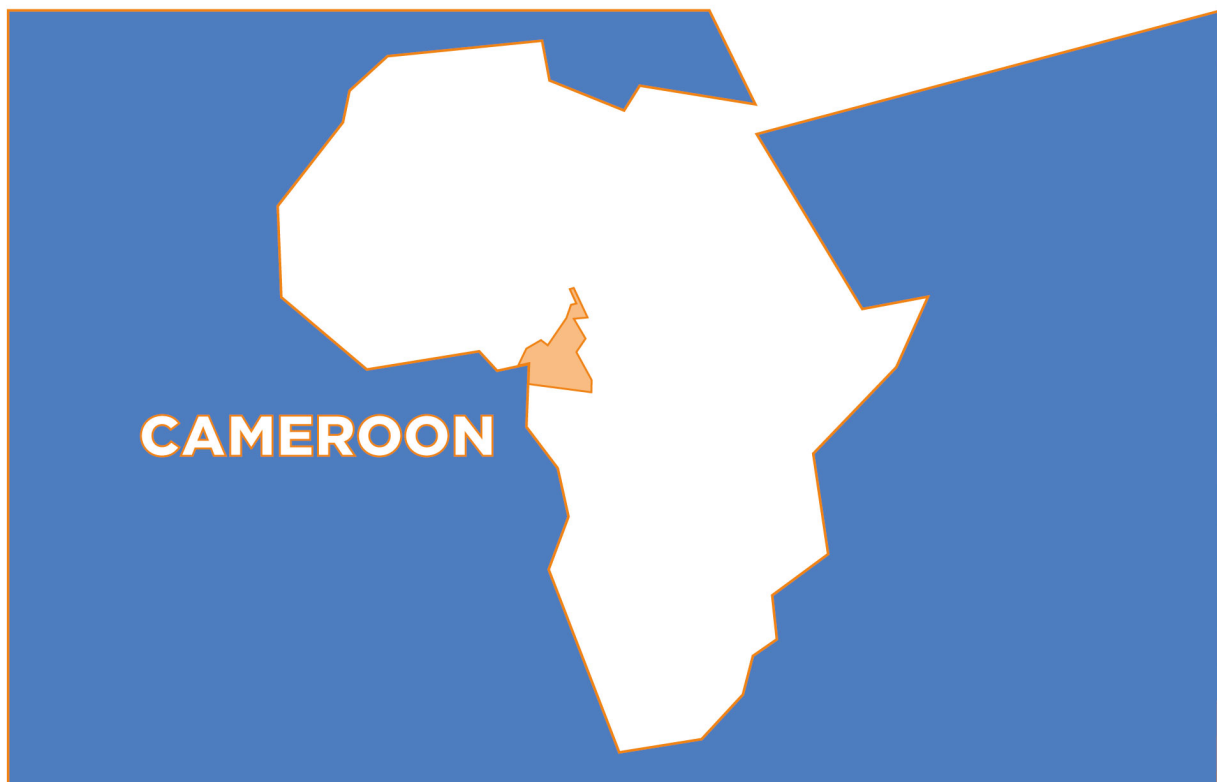
Finally, UCAD's FSJP stands as a breeding ground for decision-makers, having trained numerous leaders now holding key positions nationally and internationally. Among them, Ousmane Tanor Dieng, a graduate in law and international relations from UCAD, served as secretary-general of Senegal's Socialist Party from 1996 to 2019. Cheick Sidi Diarra, holding a master's in public international law and international relations from the University of Dakar, was appointed deputy secretary-general of the United Nations. Awa Marie Coll-Seck, a physician trained at UCAD, held ministerial positions in Senegal and served as director of the "Policy, Strategy, and Research" department at UNAIDS. Today, many graduates occupy key roles in ministries, international organizations (UN, AU), and regional think tanks, directly contributing to policy making and African diplomacy. Finally, the Dakar International Forum on Peace and Security, organized since 2014 under the auspices of CHEDS, gathered over 1,000 decision-makers in 2016, reaffirming FSJP's central role as a catalyst for strategic dialogue across the continent.

The Senegalese university network, rooted in a strong historical legacy, plays a crucial role in training elites and fostering the country's socio-economic development. Through its academic excellence, commitment to research, and international partnerships, it helps position Senegal as a key player in Francophone Africa. Thus, the country's public universities embody a strategic lever for the political and diplomatic future of the continent.

B. Cameroon

B. Cameroon and Its University System: An Academic Lever at the Crossroads of Regional and International Dynamics

Rooted in the heart of Francophone Central Africa, Cameroon is a country marked by striking linguistic diversity—between French and English, but also among a multitude of local languages. With a population of 28 million, it hosts a university landscape in full recomposition. Heir to a postcolonial centralized model, Cameroon has, since the 1990s, pursued a denser and more specialized deployment of its public university institutions. From Yaoundé to Buea, from Dschang to Maroua, the system mirrors both bureaucratic tensions and aspirations for academic self-determination. Today, Cameroonian universities, while grappling with enduring structural challenges, seek to integrate into the global currents of research and to shape an elite capable of addressing the geopolitical stakes of the subregion.



Structuring the University Network

Cameroon counts 11 public universities spread across its ten regions, including institutions in Bamenda, Ngaoundéré, Bertoua, Ebolowa, and Garoua, all contributing to a diversified academic offer. The University of Yaoundé I, established in 1962 on the legacy of the colonial-era *École Normale Supérieure*, stands as the foundational pillar of the national system. Ranked first in the country, 83rd in Africa, and 3,437th globally (EduRank, 2025), it anchors itself in core disciplines—medicine, law, natural sciences, mathematics—and concentrates much of the country's scientific output, hosting over 40,000 students.

This initial model gradually gave way to a decentralization logic. The University of Douala (founded in 1977) has become a hub in the Littoral region, offering programs in economics, maritime affairs, and industrial sciences. Dschang University (1993) is noted for its agro-economics and veterinary science programs, operating secondary campuses in six of the ten regions. Meanwhile, the University of Buea (1992)—Cameroon's first public Anglophone university—symbolizes the country's bilingual higher education ambitions, offering advanced training in IT, engineering, and social sciences. The University of Maroua (2008), located in the country's north, addresses growing regional demand and tailors its programs to transborder challenges—security, decentralization, climate change.

Academic Excellence and Pedagogical Innovation

Cameroonian scientific output remains largely concentrated in three institutions: Yaoundé I (2,806 publications and 47,601 citations), Douala (1,234 publications), and Dschang (1,687 publications). While still modest by African standards, this reflects a sustained effort toward research internationalization.

The University of Dschang has emerged as a center of excellence in agricultural sciences, with training that blends local knowledge, public policy analysis, and experimentation in agroecology. It partners with European universities like Cologne via the Erasmus+ program. The Catholic University of Central Africa (UCAC), though private, is an important part of the academic ecosystem. Known for its bilingual programs and strengths in social sciences, management, and theology, UCAC maintains over 20 active partnerships with international institutions such as the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Italy, the

University of Fribourg in Switzerland, and the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium.

Pedagogical innovation, however, is hampered by a lack of digital infrastructure and an incomplete shift to hybrid learning. Electricity shortages, low internet penetration, the high cost of digital tools, and insufficient teacher training all weigh heavily. Nonetheless, gradual progress is visible: e-learning platforms have been introduced in Yaoundé II (IRIC) and Dschang, where MOOCs in environmental management and rural development policy have been piloted.

Collaborative Research and International Mobility

Cameroonian research is embedded in an internationalized framework. As Wagner et al. (2018) observe, African countries exhibit collaboration rates above the global average—a trend Cameroon shares. This dynamic is fueled by limited domestic research funding and by the emergence of transnational networks often anchored by European or North American projects. The PeA (Programme de Partenariats Académiques), funded by the AFD and coordinated by Campus France, has launched over 30 collaborative projects in health, agrifood, and water management. Notable partnerships include joint research with the University of Montpellier on food security, the University of Bordeaux on public health, and the University of Liège on water governance.

UCAC and Dschang University play active roles in the RUSTA network, which pools teaching resources in civil engineering, environmental management, and business studies. Meanwhile, the CAMES harmonizes regional diplomas (LMD system) and certifies training programs, fostering mobility and mutual recognition of credentials across Central Africa's Francophone academic space.

In 2021, around 30,000 Cameroonian students studied abroad, making up 7% of internationally mobile Sub-Saharan students—lower than Nigeria's 18% but a notable 18% increase since 2016. Europe—particularly Germany, France, and Belgium—remains the main destination, driven by historical, linguistic, and institutional ties. Erasmus+ and AUF-supported programs enabled nearly 1,200 student mobilities in 2023, primarily at the doctoral level. These exchanges build student skills, broaden academic pathways, and strengthen transnational research networks, helping elevate Cameroonian institutions' global academic visibility. Yet, outbound mobility remains below the West African average (4.6%), suggesting untapped potential.

Focus on Political Science and International Relations

Cameroon's flagship institution in this field is the Institute of International Relations of Cameroon (IRIC), founded in 1971 and affiliated with the University of Yaoundé II. IRIC offers training in diplomacy, security, development, and strategic intelligence through theoretical courses, practical workshops, and multilateral negotiation simulations. It has produced many of Central Africa's top diplomats, such as Odette Melono, Deputy Director-General of the OPCW and former ambassador to the Netherlands; René Emmanuel Sadi, Minister of Communication; and Simon-Pierre Omgba Mbida, minister plenipotentiary.

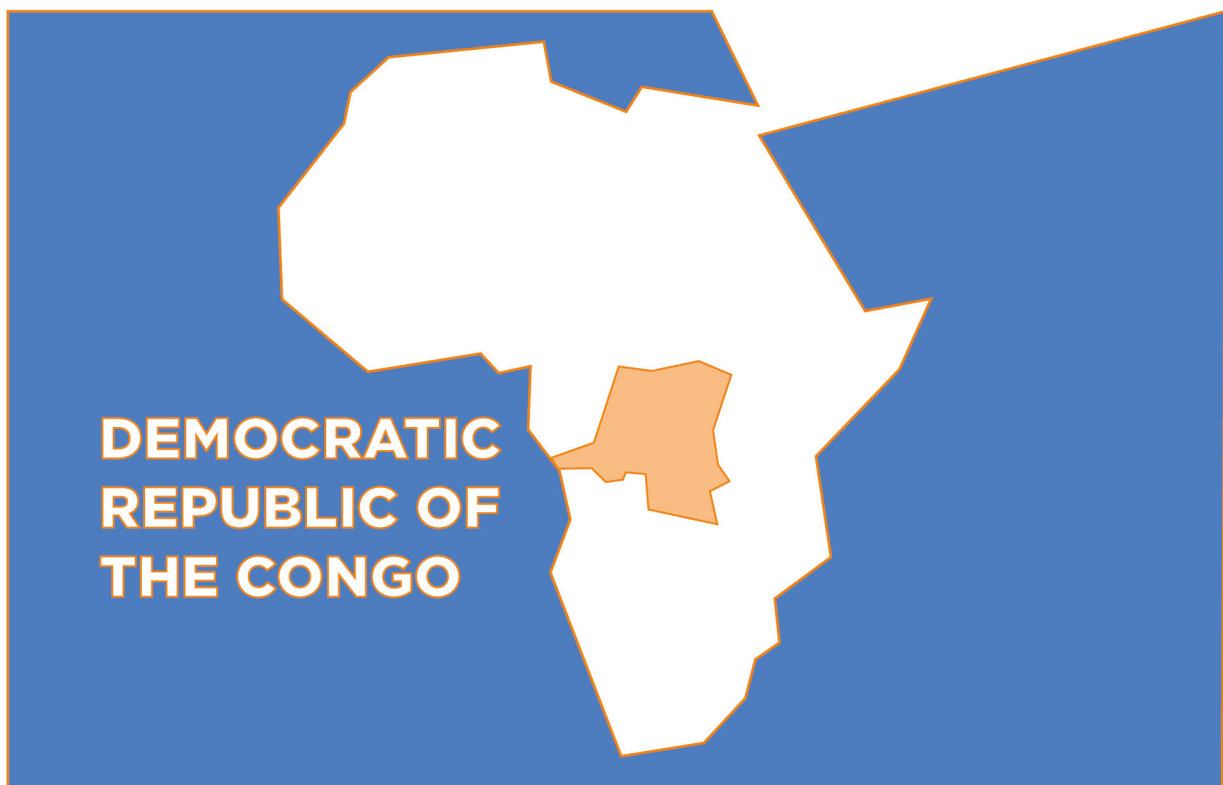
IRIC actively participates in exchanges with Sciences Po Paris, the École nationale d'administration publique in Quebec, and Chinese institutions like the China Foreign Affairs University and Peking University, within a framework of South–South cooperation. These partnerships aim to emancipate African executives from traditional training circuits, promoting horizontal collaboration and shared expertise among emerging nations. They include reciprocal student hosting, co-organized seminars on global governance, and the formation of South–South research networks. Modules are co-developed with the European University Pole of Toulouse and the G5 Sahel Defense College, reflecting a strong regional focus. This academic openness, grounded in African geopolitical realities, positions IRIC as a strategic hub for diplomatic and policy leadership in Cameroon and the broader subregion.

Cameroon's university system, marked by institutional density, decentralization efforts, and international cooperation, is carving a place for itself as a center of academic production and elite training. Despite persistent challenges—chronic underfunding, administrative hurdles, weak digitalization—institutions like Yaoundé I, Dschang, and IRIC exemplify a trajectory toward positioning Cameroon as a durable academic crossroads in Central Africa.

C. RDC - Democratic Republic of the Congo

C. Democratic Republic of the Congo: A Nation of Contrasts, A University System in Motion

To write about the Democratic Republic of the Congo is to enter a space where everything is vast—land, suffering, potential. A land that stretches endlessly at the heart of the African continent, sheltering more than 109 million lives, blessed with incalculable natural wealth and yet burdened with the scars of history. From Mobutu's long shadow to the brutal civil wars of the late twentieth century, from hopes of peace to the stubborn reality of instability, the DRC is a country that keeps trying. And in that trying, education—especially higher education—stands as one of the rare bets on a different future. A fragile, ambitious, essential bet. Because forming minds means preparing a new way to inhabit this wounded land. Because in a country where human capital makes up nearly half the national wealth, that which is not mined but imagined could well become the key to transformation.



A Network That Expands, Unevenly

The university system in the DRC is not new, but it is constantly being reshaped. Its earliest foundations date back to the colonial era: Lovanium University in Kinshasa in 1954, the Official University of the Belgian Congo in Lubumbashi in 1955. After independence, these two poles continued to dominate. Then came 1971, when the regime merged scattered campuses into the National University of Zaire, an ambitious but short-lived project. By 1981, decentralization was back on the agenda, and UNIKIN, UNILU, and UNIKIS re-emerged as distinct entities.

Since the 2000s, the Congolese government has been multiplying new public universities in the provinces—Kananga, Goma, Kalemie, Kamina, Likasi, Kindu. Today, the main state institutions include the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) with about 30,000 students, the University of Lubumbashi (UNILU) with 25,000 to 29,000, the University of Kisangani (UNIKIS) with around 9,000, and the University of Kolwezi (UNIKOL), one of the newest, with approximately 2,400 students.

Around these poles, other public universities have emerged: UNIGOM in Goma, UNIKIV in North Kivu, UOB in Bukavu, UNIKAN in Kasai, UOM in Mbuji-Mayi. But geography remains a barrier. Some provinces still lack any university infrastructure, forcing students to migrate toward large cities. In 2020, gross enrollment in higher education stood at just 8%—only 5% for women, 11% for men. Urban and connected youth have the advantage. Scholarships exist, provided by the state or international donors, but they only reach a fraction of those in need.

Alongside the public sector, religious and private institutions play a crucial role. The Protestant University of Congo (UPC), created in 1959, is a reference point. The Free University of Kinshasa (ULK), established in 2006, was the first private institution and now trains nearly 9,000 students in law and economics. The Catholic University of Congo (UCC) offers six faculties, including political science and law. The Marist University of Congo (UMC), founded in 2012, counts about 1,500 students. Others—Simon Kimbangu University in Kinshasa, the Evangelical University in Africa (UEA) in Bukavu, Notre-Dame University of Kasai—round out a network where law and economics remain dominant, reflecting both demand and feasibility.

Academic Renewal and Pedagogical Challenges

The adoption of the LMD reform in 2021–2022 marks a turning point. It shortens the undergraduate cycle to three years and aims to shift toward a more practical, employability-oriented model. At UNIKIN, for example, a new master's in Infectious Disease Ecology, developed with the University of Franche-Comté, targets local health priorities through collaborative research.

In select fields—health, engineering, public administration—the quality of education is rising, provided that material conditions follow. The three doctoral hubs (UNIKIN, UNILU, UNIKIS), authorized to deliver PhDs since 2014, remain national leaders. Still, teaching methods are evolving slowly. In Kinshasa, the AUF has set up a Francophone Digital Campus offering access to online resources. In Lubumbashi, a FabLab launched in 2022 in partnership with Orange RDC introduces students to 3D printing and digital prototyping.

Other earlier initiatives, such as the SESAM multimedia centers developed between 2009 and 2014, continue to provide infrastructure. Some programs are now testing blended formats: theoretical lessons coupled with case studies, group work, and internships. These shifts are promising, but fragile. They are slowed by logistical and human limitations—too few instructors, outdated labs, weak internet infrastructure. Improving the quality of teaching remains a national priority, and symbolic gestures reflect this ambition. In 2022, the University of Lubumbashi awarded a Doctor Honoris Causa to the rector of the AUF for his agency's role in uplifting higher education and research in the DRC.

Research: Fragile Roots, Transnational Branches

Research in the DRC, while vital, is still under-resourced. Domestic R&D spending hovers at 0.43% of GDP, and the country counts barely 11 researchers per million inhabitants. The scientific ecosystem is fragile but not inert. Health (particularly virology and infectious diseases), natural resource governance (mines, renewable energy), and social sciences (citizenship, governance, peace) dominate the landscape.

In 2023, a major initiative was launched: PRISME RDC, an international health research platform coordinated by the Ministry of Health and the INRB in Kinshasa, in partnership with IRD, Inserm, and the University of Montpellier. It was inaugurated in the presence of French President Emmanuel Macron—proof that science now intersects with diplomacy.

The AUF plays a structuring role, with offices in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi supporting over fifteen projects: digital libraries, employability labs, research training. Around 35 Congolese institutions are part of its network. French cooperation remains vital: Campus France processes roughly 600 scholarship applications per year, and many Congolese universities maintain academic ties with Montpellier, Aix-Marseille, Franche-Comté.

The European contribution also runs through Erasmus+, which has enabled growing student and researcher mobility. On the multilateral front, UNESCO supports sectoral reforms via the Education Partnership Pact, and the World Bank contributes through targeted projects. At the regional level, the DRC returned to CAMES in 2022 and hosted its 39th ministerial session in Kinshasa under the patronage of President Félix Tshisekedi—a symbolic step toward deeper academic integration with its Francophone neighbors.

Mobility remains modest but growing. More Congolese students are studying abroad, and international students—especially from the Great Lakes region and Central Africa—are coming to study in the DRC, drawn by its regional relevance and multilingual offerings. International master's and PhD programs are still rare but expanding, opening new horizons for Congolese academia.

Political Science: An Emerging Strategic Field

One of the newest and most revealing developments in Congolese higher education is the rise of political science and international relations. Long peripheral, these fields are beginning to find their place. At UPN, programs in social, administrative, and political sciences have become permanent fixtures. UCC offers a full faculty dedicated to the discipline. The ESMK (École Supérieure de Management de Kinshasa), founded in 2011, provides an LMD curriculum in governance and public management in collaboration with Sciences Po Aix—a bold attempt to connect theory with the administrative needs of a modern state.

Though few institutions formally offer degrees in international relations, many—especially UNIKIN and UNILU—integrate modules on diplomacy, comparative politics, and political communication within law and humanities programs. The outcomes are pragmatic: graduates aim for roles in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provincial governments, international organizations such as the UN, the AU, the Francophonie, the World Bank.

These programs emphasize languages (French, English, and national languages), international law, and negotiation skills. The demand for formal political training is rising. Even Joseph Kabila, former president of the Republic, returned to the classroom after his mandate to earn a master's in political science and international relations from the University of Johannesburg in 2021. That gesture—highly symbolic—shows a growing recognition that political legitimacy increasingly goes hand-in-hand with intellectual preparation.

This academic field is still emerging, but its strategic role is undeniable. In a nation seeking to reclaim its voice—regionally, continentally, globally—training the next generation of diplomats, analysts, and public decision-makers is not optional. It is foundational. In the DRC, where every institution still bears the tension between past and possible, political science may well be the place where the future gets its vocabulary.

D. Burkina Faso



D. Burkina Faso: A Nation's Knowledge on the Move

For a long time, Burkina Faso's academic landscape revolved around a single name: the University of Ouagadougou. Officially established in 1974 from a Higher Education Centre created in 1969, this university was the country's lone beacon of advanced learning. But over the decades, the landscape evolved. The government undertook a wide-reaching effort to decentralize the system, giving rise to academic hubs across the nation: Thomas Sankara and Norbert Zongo universities in Ouagadougou, Nazi Boni in Bobo-Dioulasso, and centers in Dédougou, Banfora, Gaoua, Dori, Kaya, Tenkodogo, and since 2017, the University of Ouahigouya—upgraded from a polytechnic center founded in 2010. This geographic redistribution aimed to spread opportunity, yet student numbers remain unevenly distributed. In 2022–2023, Joseph Ki-Zerbo University (formerly Ouaga I) alone accounted for nearly 48,000 of the 220,128 students enrolled nationally. In contrast, newer campuses such as Ouahigouya

hosted fewer than 800 students and around 50 instructors—40 of them holding doctorates. The central region, anchored by Ouagadougou, still absorbs over a third of all public university enrollments (67,626 out of 176,851). Meanwhile, student numbers continue to soar: from 132,569 in 2018–2019 to 220,128 in 2022–2023—a 66% rise in just five years, driven largely by population growth. And in this expanding world of knowledge, women now make up nearly 40% of the student population.

The private sector, too, has grown vibrantly. In 2023, the Ministry of Higher Education recorded 95 private institutions—15 universities and 80 specialized schools—offering a range of programs, from general education to niche disciplines. Many are religious in origin: Catholic institutions like USTA and UCAO, Protestant universities, and secular models. These schools frequently offer degrees in law, business, science, and more. Their quality is under close scrutiny. The latest national audit ranked USTA and UCAO at the top, each earning a “very good” score of 17.46/20. These evaluations reflect a clear state policy: to monitor and elevate the private sector as a structured and credible pillar of the educational system.

Burkina Faso now possesses a diversified and expanding academic network. Public universities house multidisciplinary teaching and research units (UFRs), alongside institutes in engineering, health, arts, and communication. Joseph Ki-Zerbo University alone hosts six UFRs and five specialized institutes—including a distance learning center and a start-up incubator. A system of regional Polytechnic University Centers (CUPs) further complements this network. The goal is clear: to make higher education a tool for territorial development. Yet the project remains vulnerable to political shocks. When a military coup struck in January 2022, universities were shut down across the country for several days, stalling this educational momentum.

Academic Excellence and Pedagogical Innovation

The drive for quality is palpable. Joseph Ki-Zerbo University, the largest and oldest, boldly asserts itself as the “best Francophone university in Africa.” Its track record in research and engagement underpins that claim. In 2018, its budget reached 26.2 billion CFA francs—nearly a quarter of the ministry’s entire budget and nearly half of the total higher education expenditure. The university hosts several cutting-edge institutes—in computing, population studies, sports science, and environmental research—and a UNESCO Chair on Gender, Science,

and Development. Across its departments—health, hard sciences, humanities—new advanced programs have emerged. The geography department, for instance, offers a development-focused master's in GIS, tied to an international consortium.

Innovation runs deep in teaching methods as well. Student entrepreneurship is encouraged: in 2020, the university's digital incubator designed a contactless hand-sanitizer dispenser in response to the COVID-19 crisis. UJKZ regularly promotes graduate-led start-up initiatives. Other universities are following suit, launching research labs in biotechnology and energy, and expanding digital access to academic resources—UJKZ's library alone offers more than 25,000 online documents.

The digital transition is gaining speed. The Virtual University of Burkina Faso (UV-BF) was created to expand access to online learning. Government programs are equipping students with laptops: the second phase of the presidential initiative "One Student, One Laptop," launched in 2023, now includes master's students and sets quotas for private university attendees. These domestic efforts are bolstered by international funding. In 2021, the World Bank invested 11 billion CFA francs into Burkina's higher education sector, disbursing funds between 0.5 and 2.8 billion per university based on size. The aim: improve teaching conditions, governance, infrastructure, and curricular variety.

Yet challenges remain. Student-to-faculty ratios are often unmanageable, especially where top-tier professors are scarce. Equipment shortages and the need for continuous staff training also persist. Still, reforms are in motion: the LMD system, quality controls, and accreditation mechanisms are being gradually implemented. International partnerships support this movement. USTA and UCAO routinely rank highest in national assessments. Meanwhile, public universities organize conferences, scientific forums, and continuing education seminars—often covered by the media—to raise visibility and build bridges with society and the private sector.

Research Collaboration and International Mobility

Burkina Faso's research output is modest but growing, with strong integration into regional and international networks. The Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) plays a major role. In Koudougou, the OPERA program—co-financed by AFD and PME with a €1 million budget—brings

together Burkinabe and Senegalese researchers to co-develop educational tools for teacher training. Similarly, a West African academic consortium, funded by Erasmus+, has launched a Professional English Program to help students and scholars improve their scientific communication skills.

Academic mobility draws from bilateral and multilateral funding. Every year, scholarships from the People's Republic of China support UJKZ students. Departments across Burkina form joint-degree partnerships and host international faculty. Erasmus+ has enabled mobility clusters with European universities, helping students and professors travel abroad or welcome foreign peers. The Francophone Digital Campus (CNEUF) and Campus France also provide vital infrastructure for student exchanges with France. And the "One Student, One Laptop" program's expansion to private and master's students demonstrates an intentional policy to bridge the digital divide with help from European Union partners.

On the research front, Burkina's institutions are increasingly linked to African networks. University laboratories participate in major regional conferences like CAMES and lead projects in health, agriculture, and engineering. The Muraz Center in Bobo-Dioulasso, formerly part of CNRST, is a leader in tropical medicine and biology, working hand-in-hand with academic institutions. Local researchers co-publish with peers from France, North America, and other African nations. At the doctoral level, interdisciplinary PhD programs are growing, often co-accredited with other countries. UJKZ's doctoral schools, such as ED-ICC and ED-LESHCO, are shaping the next generation of regional scholars.

Focus on Political Science and International Relations

Political science and international relations occupy a unique space in Burkina Faso's academic terrain. In public universities, these fields are often paired with law. At the University of Nazi Boni in Bobo-Dioulasso, for instance, the UFR for Political and Legal Sciences prepares students for careers in public service, the judiciary, and international organizations. At Joseph Ki-Zerbo University, the former political science department now falls under the humanities UFR, but continues to train future civil servants and NGO professionals.

Private institutions are also stepping up. The Université Libre du Burkina (ULB) offers a professional bachelor's in Diplomacy and International Relations. These programs are intentionally outward-looking, incorporating diplomatic

simulations and engagement with foreign missions to give students a hands-on understanding of international work.

At the pinnacle of this academic path stands the National Institute of Advanced International Studies (INHEI), founded in 2008 and overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. INHEI is Burkina Faso's diplomatic training school. Its "Cycle A" is a 24-month advanced track that leads to a postgraduate diploma in Diplomacy and International Relations (DESDRI). The "Cycle B," at 21 months, results in an intermediate certificate. According to its Director General, DESDRI graduates are immediately recruited as foreign affairs advisors. Entry to Cycle A is selective and requires a master's degree recognized by CAMES, emphasizing professional specialization over academic repetition.

INHEI also runs shorter courses—from five days to three months—targeting in-service diplomats, public officials, and even interested private citizens. The goal is both strategic and cultural: to build a national space for global awareness, where Burkinabe can sharpen their geopolitical knowledge through lectures, workshops, and expert panels.

This network of academic and professional structures forms the bedrock of Burkina Faso's political and diplomatic class. Most senior officials follow a familiar trajectory: undergraduate and graduate training in political science, law, or international relations, followed by entry into ENA or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs via INHEI. As one Burkinabe commentator aptly put it, "political and legal sciences are taught to help students understand how a state lives, how the affairs of the country are managed." In essence, these disciplines do more than educate—they shape the nation's stewards. They offer not only the knowledge of statecraft but the legitimacy to practice it, connecting academic rigor with national sovereignty.

E. Djibouti and Burundi

Djibouti and Burundi: Diverging Paths, Shared Ambitions in Higher Education

A. Organization and Structure of the University Landscape



Djibouti's higher education system is still in its infancy—centralized, modest in scale, and concentrated entirely in the capital. The University of Djibouti (UD), created in 2006 from a small nucleus of higher education, has grown swiftly to accommodate nearly 10,000 students (up from just 460 in its first cohort). This rapid expansion reflects both the demographic pressure on the system and the political will to build an academic infrastructure. Alongside UD's two technological departments—the tertiary and industrial IUTs, which offer professional DUT and bachelor's degrees—the country hosts a Higher Institute of Health Sciences (ISSS), training healthcare professionals, and a national Center for Studies and Research (CERD), operating under ministerial oversight.

In 2011, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MENSUR) was established to manage UD, CERD, and ISSS—all now officially designated as public institutions of a scientific and technological nature. The system remains highly centralized, with tight governmental control over institutional budgets and decision-making. A few private institutions, such as the African Institute of Djibouti, have gained official accreditation, but their impact remains limited.

Burundi, by contrast, has a deeper and more diversified university network. The University of Burundi (UB) was formed in 1964 through the merger of post-independence Jesuit faculties in agronomy, humanities, philosophy, and economics, later joined by a teacher training college and a national school of administration—consolidated into UB in 1977. Today, the university operates under the Ministry of Education and Research and is governed by a rector and an administrative board. It comprises eight faculties (letters, sciences, law, economics, medicine, agronomy, engineering, and psychological sciences), along with several specialized institutes.

In addition, legacy institutions from the 1970s and 1980s—business schools, journalism programs, police academies—have been integrated into or collaborate closely with UB. Since the 1990s, a thriving private sector has emerged, with institutions like Lumière University of Bujumbura, Ngozi University, Université des Grands Lacs, Espoir d’Afrique, and Tanganyika University leading the way. Enrollment soared from 19,000 students in 2004 to nearly 45,000 by 2013, with over 70% in private institutions by 2017. The geography of higher education has also shifted: beyond the historic Kiriri campus in Bujumbura, new academic centers now operate in Gitega (the political capital), Ngozi, Rumonge, Kayanza, Cibitoke, Makamba, and other provinces—signaling a deliberate move toward decentralizing education.

Despite this growth, the state remains the main funder of UB and the few public institutions, while the private sector largely absorbs unmet demand, especially after the erosion of previously free higher education. New challenges have emerged: disparities in quality and access, urban–rural gaps, and the urgent need to establish a coherent regulatory framework for the increasingly complex system.

B. Academic Innovation and Curriculum Models

In Djibouti, curricular reform has come swiftly. Since its founding, UD has aligned itself with the French LMD (Licence–Master–Doctorate) model. It now

offers 17 general bachelor's programs and is developing several master's degrees in management, humanities, and related fields. Its two IUTs together provide 8 DUT programs (including one taught entirely in Arabic) and 10 applied bachelor's degrees, showcasing Djibouti's bilingual nature (Arabic and French). Language plays a critical role: not merely symbolic, the incorporation of Arabic into curricula speaks to the country's hybrid identity—rooted in both the Francophone and Arab worlds—and reflects a desire to position graduates for a diverse regional labor market.

The university has also launched online education tracks aimed at working professionals and offers continuing education programs in the evenings and on weekends. These initiatives aim to expand access for historically excluded groups—working adults, women with family responsibilities, and students unable to follow conventional academic schedules. However, infrastructure lags behind: campuses are strained, student housing is insufficient, and transportation and digital resources remain underdeveloped. Graduate employability is another concern, driven in part by limited private-sector involvement in shaping curricula and a faculty still undergoing professionalization.

International excellence programs are virtually absent, with the exception of a new World Bank-funded Center of Excellence in Logistics and Engineering. Targeted at the region's top students, this initiative aspires to attract elite instructors and create a regional hub for academic innovation—positioning Djibouti as a niche intellectual crossroads aligned with its geopolitical stature.

In Burundi, traditional teaching methods dominate but are under growing strain. UB has gradually adopted the LMD framework to harmonize its degrees. French remains the primary language of instruction, though Kirundi is used in early years and English was introduced post-2014. The booming private sector brings pedagogical diversity: some institutions focus on professional training in business, engineering, and healthcare, while others preserve a more classical, generalist orientation.

The wave of privatization that began in 1999 absorbed soaring demand but came at a cost—literally. Prior to 2000, higher education was publicly funded and free. The rise of private institutions transferred much of the financial burden to families. Today's challenge lies in maintaining quality across a fragmented landscape. A handful of selective “excellence” tracks in

engineering and management have been launched, but their impact remains limited.

In sum, Djibouti has opted for a centralized, bilingual, state-driven model, while Burundi's system is split between a legacy public sector and a burgeoning, often unequal, private landscape.

C. Research Capacity and International Mobility

Research in both countries remains underdeveloped but is slowly taking shape. In Djibouti, the CERD is the principal R&D institution. Created to support the country's technological ambitions, it hosts multidisciplinary labs focused on information technology, industrial development, energy, environmental science, and georesources—aligned with national priorities. While growing, the volume and international visibility of CERD's scientific output remain low.

The University of Djibouti, meanwhile, lacks formally structured research units. It has recently launched a doctoral school, a nascent national framework for advanced study. The first doctoral candidates—trained primarily in France, Morocco, or Tunisia—are now emerging. A UNESCO report counts about 60 active PhD students and 95 doctorate holders nationwide, underscoring the scale of the challenge in building a domestic research ecosystem.

Funding comes almost entirely from the state, with supplementary support from partners like France, the EU, the World Bank, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Yet Djibouti's scientific footprint is still faint: few indexed publications, limited participation in African research networks, and near-invisibility on international academic platforms. This lack of recognition discourages aspiring researchers.

Student mobility is similarly limited. Outbound students—mostly at the master's or doctoral level—head to France, Morocco, Tunisia, or Turkey, usually on targeted scholarships from Campus France, the AUF, or the Islamic Development Bank. Inbound flows are rare, hampered by the small scale of Djibouti's academic offering and its limited international profile. Still, regional cooperation and planned centers of excellence may gradually boost the country's appeal.

Burundi faces similar constraints but has built more academic infrastructure. UB hosts several research labs and specialized centers in agronomy, public

health, education, and applied hydrology, aiming to root scientific inquiry in local needs. Public funding, however, is critically low—under 0.3% of GDP, well below UNESCO’s 1% benchmark and regional neighbors like Kenya (0.8%).

Nevertheless, UB is active in regional and international research networks (AUF, CAMES, RUFORUM, IUCEA), enabling collaborative projects and increasing Burundian researchers’ visibility. These partnerships also support academic exchanges, summer schools, and doctoral training programs. Bilateral ties with France, Belgium, Québec, and China help sustain co-supervised research and short-term faculty mobility.

UB’s doctoral school, launched in the 2010s, plays a central role. It supports theses developed through regional partnerships with universities across the Great Lakes and with European labs. Funding comes from government sources, the EU, Belgian cooperation, and the Great Lakes Economic Community. Most dissertations focus on applied social sciences, sustainable agriculture, and community health—topics aligned with the country’s pressing development needs.

Student mobility is bolstered by scholarships from UEMOA, the EU, the UN, and China, though logistical barriers and periodic border closures limit opportunities. Academic emigration is increasing: graduates often move to better-funded universities in Kenya, Tanzania, or Rwanda, as well as to France, Belgium, or Canada. Inbound student numbers remain modest, except for small cohorts from Congo or Rwanda attracted to programs in agriculture, paramedicine, and law.

Overall, both countries are taking early steps toward scientific sovereignty. Djibouti is investing in tech-oriented infrastructure, though not yet fully connected to its university. Burundi leverages its Francophone and regional networks to offset scarce resources and anchor research in local realities.

D. Focus on Political Science and Public Affairs

Political science as a distinct academic discipline is virtually absent in Djibouti. UD does not offer an explicitly labeled political science track. Instead, public affairs are taught through law, economics, and general social science courses. CERD’s Department of Political and Strategic Studies hints at interest in governance topics, but local political education often serves existing elites rather than fostering independent critical inquiry. Students seeking deeper

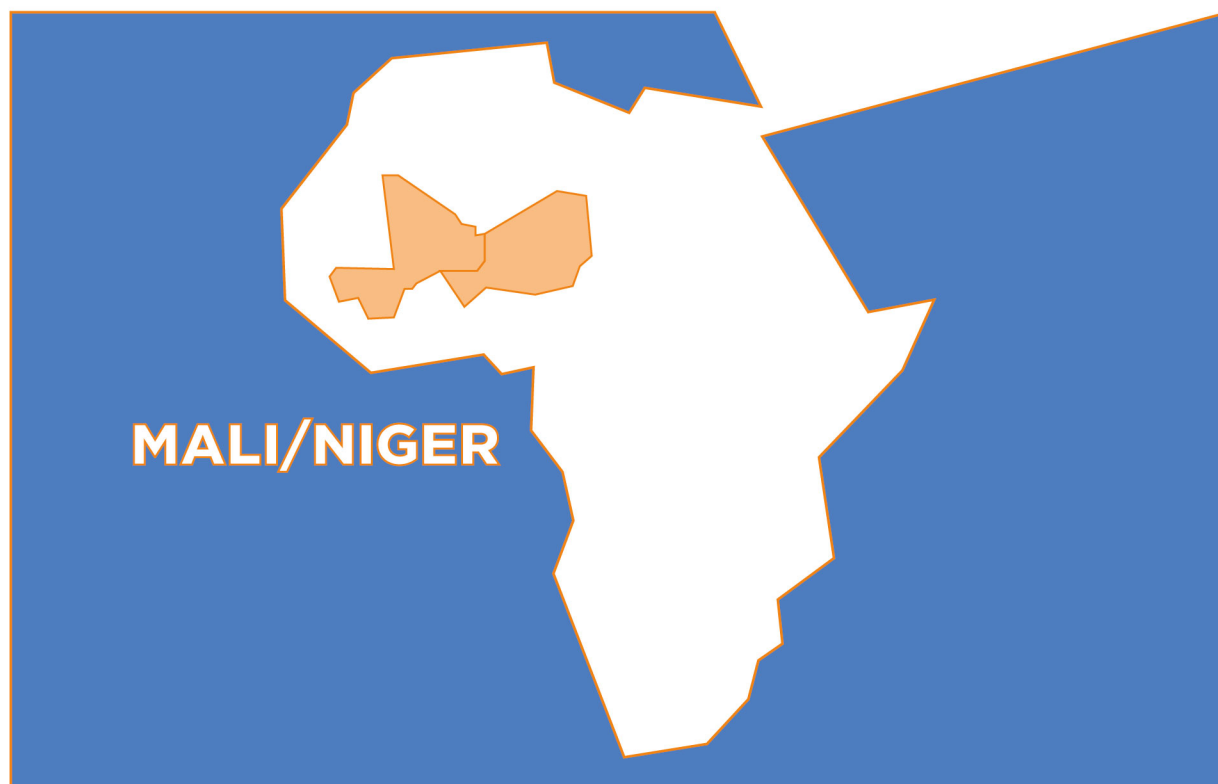
specialization must typically study abroad—in Tunisia, France, or other countries—with a preference for administrative rather than political training.

Burundi, by contrast, has a long-established academic tradition in political science. UB's Faculty of Political and Legal Sciences has trained jurists and political scientists for decades. Many public officials—former presidents Pierre Nkurunziza and Évariste Ndayishimiye among them—are UB alumni, reflecting the institution's deep entwinement with the state. Graduates frequently go on to civil service or opposition roles.

Moreover, local NGOs and think tanks working on peacebuilding and rural development often collaborate informally with UB's academic departments, with faculty sometimes serving as board members or advisors. Political science research, however, remains largely externally funded and tied to fieldwork or international cooperation.

In sum, Burundi boasts a strong, nationally rooted political science tradition linked to state-building and civil society engagement. Djibouti, meanwhile, lacks a dedicated academic infrastructure in this field, and its political education remains narrowly tethered to state agendas.

F. Mali/Niger



1. Structure of the University Network

Higher education in Mali, long centered around the former University of Bamako (originally the University of Mali in the 1990s), has undergone a dramatic transformation. By 2010–2011, this single institution hosted approximately 80,000 students—an unsustainable concentration that prompted its division into four specialized institutions covering sciences, humanities, social sciences and management, and law and political science. Today, Mali has six main public universities: four are located in Bamako—including the University of Science, Technology and Techniques of Bamako (USTTB) and the University of Social Sciences and Management of Bamako (USSGB)—while two others serve the regions of Ségou and Sikasso. For instance, the University of Ségou, created by decree in 2009, became operational in 2012, and a new university in Sikasso (decreed in 2022) is currently under construction to

enhance national coverage. In addition to public institutions, a wide array of private establishments exists, including major faith-based programs. Notably, the Catholic University affiliated with UCAO in Bamako (University Unit of Bamako) has offered an excellence-driven curriculum since 2008.

Niger's network has expanded more recently but follows a similar trajectory. The Abdou Moumouni University in Niamey, established in 1974, remains the country's flagship institution, with around 25,000 students. Until the early 2000s, it held a near-monopoly over higher education. However, the 2014 law established four new multidisciplinary universities (in Tillabéri, Diffa, Dosso, and Agadez), raising the total number of public universities to eight. These institutions joined older ones such as Zinder—now the André Salifou University—Tahoua, and Maradi, forming a more complete territorial network. The public system is complemented by a limited number of private universities and specialized institutes, though the private sector remains less developed than in Mali. Together, these two countries now feature expanded but still youthful university systems anchored in major regional capitals.

2. Academic Excellence and Pedagogical Innovation

Each country's higher education landscape offers foundational disciplines—sciences, health, humanities, law, management—tailored to national priorities. In Mali, USTTB (focused on sciences and technology) and USSGB (specialized in management and economics) stand out, along with the former ULSHB in the humanities. However, resources remain modest and scientific output limited. According to SCImago, Mali has produced approximately 6,130 Scopus-indexed publications with an H-index of 145 (153,348 citations). EduRank 2025 places USSGB as the country's top institution (180th in Africa, 5,164th worldwide), with USTTB ranking second nationally (535th in Africa). No Malian university appears in the Times Higher Education or other major global rankings. Nonetheless, Mali has taken steps toward innovation: for example, the Faculty of Science and Technology at USTTB has long hosted the "Campus Numérique Francophone de Bamako" (supported by the AUF), expanding access to online courses and resources. Additional e-learning initiatives emerged during the 2020 health crisis, although digital infrastructure remains patchy beyond the capital.

Niger shows a comparable profile. Abdou Moumouni University leads nationally—ranked 174th in Africa and 5,080th globally by EduRank—while

institutions in Maradi, Tahoua, and Zinder are gradually growing in stature. SCImago attributes 3,852 Scopus publications to the country (H-index 113, 85,877 citations). Like Mali, no Nigerien university is featured in THE global rankings. Pedagogical modernization is gaining ground: in 2022, AUF, the Nigerien government, and the EU launched an online learning platform covering all departments at the University of Niamey (the Wehubit project, funded at €1.6 million) to ensure academic continuity amid health and security crises. These hybrid teaching approaches and interactive module-based training signal a future expansion of digital tools in Nigerien higher education.

3. Collaborative Research and International Mobility

Both countries participate in regional and international networks designed to bolster research and academic exchange. Malian and Nigerien universities are members of West African frameworks such as ECOWAS, CAMES, UEMOA, and the African Union—bodies that standardize curricula and foster inter-university collaboration. They also belong to the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), which provides joint training and institutional support. Bilateral partnerships with European universities (through Erasmus+, thesis co-supervision, research chairs) and development institutions (AFD, World Bank) further enrich the academic environment. For example, the EU funds joint training and mobility programs (Erasmus Mundus masters, Erasmus+ workshops), while the AUF offers doctoral grants and collaborative pedagogical projects.

In Mali, the security crisis has triggered specific resilience programs to maintain local research capacity despite instability. Some research labs have joined cross-border networks, such as Sahel observatories and CEDEAO agropastoral partnerships, allowing scholars to collaborate with international counterparts through bilateral programs. In Niger, Abdou Moumouni University hosted Erasmus Days sessions (2019) to promote student exchange and pedagogical cooperation with Europe. Although formal exchange programs remain rare (with only a few dozen scholarships awarded annually), increasing system openness has encouraged a broader flow of students to France, Canada, and neighboring African countries.

4. Focus on Political Science and International Relations

Political science education holds particular significance in these two Sahelian nations, given their regional governance challenges. In Mali, an Institute for

Political Science, International Relations, and Communication was created in Bamako to professionalize these fields. In Niger, the Faculty of Legal and Political Sciences (FSJP), founded in 2016, hosted over 2,800 students in 2023. These institutions primarily train jurists, political scientists, and public administrators. Their formal mandate is to develop skilled professionals in legal and political affairs and to promote research in social sciences. National Schools of Administration (ENA) in both countries further prepare state elites. Many graduates from these programs now hold key positions in government, diplomacy, or security—former prime ministers, ministers, and think tank directors often emerge from these university backgrounds.

Although research in political science remains limited (few specialized journals), it plays a strategic role. Universities provide a foundation for debates on Sahelian governance, and faculty members are frequently consulted on security and diplomacy issues. In short, both Mali and Niger continue to invest in academic programs for political science and international relations, recognizing these institutions as critical training grounds for the future stewards of the state amid a turbulent regional landscape.

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