



European
Research
Council

CALL FOR PAPERS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE
(Projet AFRUNI – ERC)

Universities and students in Africa: dynamics, discourses and representations

11-13 January, 2024, University of Abomey-Calavi - Benin

Please note that the AFRUNI project will cover registration fees for the symposium.

The University of Al Quaraouiyine (in present-day Morocco) is one of the earliest ancestors of the world's universities, with its first buildings dating back to the ninth century. In Africa south of the Sahara, the history of Sankoré, an important centre for religious education in the city of Timbuktu, dates back to the 14th century. Africa has been host to many modes of formalised higher learning, and experiences of what modernity now refers to as a university. Colonial and neo-colonial universities notably appeared under the Western model much later, in the 19th and (in francophone regions) 20th century.

Even if the majority of these institutions are not yet a century old, African universities are very much present in knowledge production and the dissemination of scientific discourse. And if they are the subject of scholarly discourse, African higher education institutions are also its object. Research on African universities has sought to highlight, for example the influence of university actors, particularly academics and students, on: the construction of national identity in independent states such as Dahomey-Benin (Hounzandji, 2021), Côte d'Ivoire (Zinsou, 2009) and Nigeria (Livsey, 2017); notions of radical emancipation in the Cold War era (Monaville, 2022); and the Africanization and/or decolonization of these spaces and their curricula (Mbembe, 2016; Nziem, 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2019; Aidi, 2020). Other studies have examined the gendered inequalities reproduced within these institutions – and thus the visions of Africa they perpetuate (Mama 2003; Diaw 2007; Assié-Lumumba 2013). Recent institutional and pedagogical reforms linked to the adoption of the Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) system in the continent's historically francophone region have also precipitated studies that examine the concrete problems it has induced (Charlier, Croché & Ndoye, 2009). From a more theoretical point of view, and in the wake of V.Y. Mudimbe (1982), Felwine Sarr points to the alienation experienced by African (public) universities, and their role in "reproducing and perpetuating a vision of Africa manufactured elsewhere" (2016: 119). The different dynamics of these studies point to the idea African universities can be understood as an organization (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977) and a field (Bourdieu, 1984), where human agency is vital but also restricted. **Hence the urgency, in this call, to reflect**

on specific examples of resourceful, multilingual everyday life in these spaces, and the manifest contradictions of efforts to "decolonize the mind" there (Thiong'o, 2011).

Alongside academics, administrative staff, service providers, etc., students are a key focus of this conference, due to their huge and increasing numbers in many African universities. Their status as learners is coupled, paradoxically, with an enormous potential for initiative and action that is feared and/or recognized and respected by other actors in the university. Activity involving students becomes an eminent place for the expression of their creativity, given the confines and hierarchies of the pedagogical set-up. For young people in training, the campus provides a vital space in which to express their creative potential. These forms of creativity touch on educational activity as much as on recreation and daily survival, in an environment where, as a general rule, getting through a day is often an endurance test. From this point of view, every university campus becomes a field of creative life, with many different spaces of expression for students who interact with each other, and with other protagonists of university life and socio-political life beyond the campus. Thus, creative life on campus brings together activities in which students, in (in)formal contact with instructors, academic leaders, administrative and technical staff, commercial service providers, political parties, non-profit or for-profit associations and entrepreneurial circles, may find unusual or even original answers and solutions to concrete structural problems, sometimes breaking down the boundaries between the educational, social, cultural and artistic to create a permeability of these sectors. Creative life appears as a microcosm of temporalities, of creative forms supported and framed at times by student organizations or by structures integrated into pedagogical systems; at times stemming from the spontaneity of everyday life.

In all cases, students become strategic players, interacting with the other components of the university through forms of cooperation in which both collaboration and conflict have their place. They are organized into powerful federations and trade union associations of varying degrees of rivalry (FECCI in Côte d'Ivoire; FNEB, UNSEEB and UNEB in Benin; ADDEC in Cameroon, Amicales des étudiants in Senegal), artistic and cultural associations, local or communal development associations, ethnic-linguistic entities.... This abundance and dynamism of associations generates and sustains creative life in trade unionism and political activism (creation and running of political party committees), in security and caretaking (student security corps), in crafts (sewing, hairdressing, photography workshops...), literature (poems or short stories, novels, plays, slam performances), communications (creating and running campus newspapers, radio stations, social media...), sports (handball, soccer, basketball...), mutual aid micro-services (tontine microcredit schemes, food distribution like the *Association des Délateurs Nocturnes* on the University of Abomey-Calavi campus), the arts (theatre, dance and choreography, music, cinema, etc.), etc. At Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal, for example, the "Ciné-UCAD" student film-making club made a number of films, including "La Fac de lettres" and "La cité Claudel". Looking further afield, some of the artistic forms that emerge from creative life have been exported from the micro-space of the campus to acquire transnational notoriety. We might think of the explosion of zougloù in the late 1980s, a philosophical movement expressing itself through poetry, music and dance, which highlighted creative life in Abidjan's university halls of residence but ended up with a now-continental audience (Adom, 2018). Conversely, the vitality of student creative lives feeds the inspiration of writers and creators, as seen in Cameroon with the novel *Le cimetière des bacheliers* (1999) by François Nkeme, and the short film series *Cité U Ngoa* directed between 2019 and 2021 by Vladimir Ken, as well as an abundant corpus of novels and films emanating from anglophone African countries (Gulick 2023). **These and**

other examples are pretexts for the colloquium's reflection on how such initiatives contribute to (re)thinking the university.

Alongside these para-academic activities, the degree programmes offered are also a source of initiatives, albeit less diversified, but sometimes similar (theatrical creations) or often specific (exhibitions of artistic, writing workshops...), forms of scientific reflection (production of dissertations and theses) and original inventions (in Benin these include devices to clean dirty water; solar-powered hand-washing devices; recycling of plastic bottles, to cite some examples...). These activities extend from the micro level to the meso (participation in sub-regional student festivals such as those of the UNESCO Clubs) or macro level (participation in international festivals or public speaking competitions). They give a glimpse of the bridges between African universities and global societies, where broader issues such as the adaptation of training to the job market, possible responses to environmental issues, etc., are raised.

In choosing to focus on "Universities and students in Africa: dynamics, discourses and representations", the colloquium raises a number of questions: what are the significant contributions of students' "creative lives" to the original and successive configurations of African universities? How do they influence the design and content of knowledge-building and dissemination policies and strategies in African universities? In what artistic or discursive forms are the various aspects of life on African campuses expressed, and the inter-relational dynamics from which they emerge or unfold?

With the aim of organizing interdisciplinary exchanges around these questions, the colloquium invites all proposals for papers (in French or English) that contribute to one of the following thematic areas:

Theme 1: Knowledge construction: policies and strategies

Content of academic programmes and policies for the elaboration of knowledge, and their perception by learners; epistemic diversity and the integration of endogenous knowledge (Boology in Benin, for example); visible/possible repercussions in the LMD era (e.g. pedagogy, university operations); study modalities (including access to learning materials; book, reading and digital cultures among students); the cognitive influence of teaching and the normative influence of campus life. The relationship to politics could be considered from the angle of coloniality/decoloniality and its expressions, and students' experiences of the university-politics dynamic (at national/regional/global scales).

Theme 2: Student activities and sustainable development

On a voluntary basis, through associations, or as a result of practical work carried out in vocational courses, some students, lacking the resources but not the ingenuity and determination, are initiating activities designed to improve their relationship with nature and the environment (plastic bag recycling, ecological market gardening, etc.). This thematic strand of the symposium will examine how, in terms of their concept, modus operandi and results, certain student activities offer the prospect of appropriate responses to the urgent issue of ecology and climate change.

Theme 3: Discourses of reality and fiction

At this level, the theme of creative lives will be expressed in a variety of possible forms, including: identity quests/questions, memory (of key events and people in university life, as well as historical events including the slave trade, colonialism, etc.); artistic expressions

(literature, music, poetry, dance, theatre, visual arts, cinema, digital spaces, Internet memes, etc.) and their reception on campus, memoirs/life-writing, student press (newspapers, radio, television), games. We will consider the form and social role of these works, their production and reception, and their aesthetic dimensions. This strand also connects to the question of the university's relationship with the political world and the economy; links with trade unions; the issue of censorship and attempts to instrumentalize or manipulate the leaders of student organizations.

Theme 4: Multilingualism and translation on university campuses

We invite examples and studies of plurilingualism on campus and in literary/cinematographic/artistic representations of this space. There is a specific interest in the presence of translation (formalized or informal) in these university spaces; material cultures of printed/written text and orality. Potential links between plurilingualism and epistemic diversity could be explored, while taking into account the methodological diversity that all these thematic strands require.

This event is part of the 'AFRIUNI: Creative Lives of African Universities' project (2021-2026), funded by the European Research Council (ERC). This team project focuses on cultural representations and lived experience of African universities. The four case studies are: Université Cheikh-Anta-Diop (Senegal), Université Félix-Houphouët-Boigny (Côte d'Ivoire), Université Abomey-Calavi (Benin) and Université Yaoundé I (Cameroon).

Timetable and submission details

Proposals for papers in French or English should be sent by July 10, 2023, to the following address: afriunicolloque2024@gmail.com. Abstracts should not exceed 1500 characters, excluding spaces. They should include a title, author's name and institution. Each abstract must be followed by a biographical note of no more than 1000 characters, excluding spaces. Contributions will be subject to anonymous evaluation by the scientific committee. Please note that proposals from students are especially encouraged, and that there will also be the possibility of round-table discussions. Responses to proposals will be announced on August 10, 2023.

Registration fees

Registration is free of charge. Participants are responsible for their own travel and accommodation. We have a few grants available to help cover travel and accommodation costs: please let us know when you send in your paper proposal if you are interested in this financial support.

Scientific committee:

Professor Marie-Clémence Adom (Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire)

Dr Blandine Agbaka (University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin)

Dr Alain Serge Agnessan (University of Bristol, UK)

Dr Ruth Bush (University of Bristol, UK)

Dr Finagnon André Gaga (University of Bristol, UK)

Dr Romain Dédjinnaki Hounzandji (University Abomey-Calavi, Benin)

Dr Roger Fopa Kuete (University of Maroua, Cameroon)

Dr Albert Jiatsa Jokeng (University of Maroua, Cameroon)

Dr Monique Kwachou (University of Bristol, UK)

Dr Fernand Nouwligbèto (University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin)

Dr Bacary Sarr (Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal)

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Organizing committee:

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Professor Mensah Wekenon-Tokponto (University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin)

Dr Vincent Atabavikpo (University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin)

Timeline:

April 27, 2023: launch of the call for papers

July 17, 2023: deadline for submission of paper proposals

August 10, 2023: notification of acceptance and distribution of grants

September 31, 2023: distribution of the conference programme

January 11, 12 and 13, 2024: conference

Late January: follow up regarding certificates of participation and possible publications