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The Internationalization of the Cameroon Institute of International Relations (IRIC): The Rationale Behind the Presence of International Students (1971-2017)

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On 24 April 1971, President El-Hadj Ahmadou Ahidjo signed the decree establishing the Cameroon Institute of International Relations (IRIC). This laboratory trains students in the field of international relations and diplomatic practice. The students come from several continents, confirming the international dimension of the institution. The selection of foreign students at IRIC is of great importance to them and their countries of origin. This measure also contributes to Cameroon's influence on the international stage. Since the creation of IRIC, several facilities have been set up on campus to ensure that foreign students have a pleasant stay. This paper aims to provide a systematic overview of the conditions under which foreign students are welcomed at the Institute. To achieve this, we analyse the facts using a historical approach.

Keywords: internationalisation, students, foreign nationals, Cameroon, diplomacy

Introduction

Since Cameroon gained independence, education has been a top priority for the government. With this in mind, universities and institutes have been established throughout the country, notably the Cameroon Institute of International Relations (IRIC). It is an institution with an "international focus, reflected in its curriculum, the composition of its faculty, and its openness to students and interns from African and other countries" (Décret n°71/DF/195/BIS, 1971, p. 1). As an observatory of international relations, IRIC consistently welcomes foreign students. Several scholarly works have examined this diplomatic laboratory without systematically analyzing the underlying logic behind the influx of international students into the institution. For example, during the 1980s, Mougnol (1989) and Sadou (1983) briefly outlined some characteristics of the IRIC within the context of Swiss development cooperation in Cameroon. Furthermore, Swiss historian Bougnon (2017) discusses this institution in her research and highlights its relationship with the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva regarding the training of diplomatic cadres.

Our research also sheds light on the relationship between Switzerland and the IRIC during and after the Cold War (Machia, 2022). In their recent publication, researchers Harris and Tasse Motsou (2025) draw on the IRIC to explain the process of training diplomats in Africa following decolonization. Since training institutes for diplomatic cadres were exceptionally rare on the African continent following independence, Cameroon stood out remarkably with an institution of international stature. Why, then, was there an influx of foreign students to the

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IRIC after its creation? The most likely explanation lies in the quality of the training offered and the existence of a variety of host institutions that gave it visibility. This study therefore aims to contextualize these key strengths by drawing on historical sources as well as transnational theory, which posits that beyond the strict state framework, other institutional actors play a significant role in the development of contemporary international relations. That said, this article examines the support structures for exchange students at IRIC using a selective approach. To achieve this, the focus is first placed on the genesis of this institution. Next, the admission of international students to this prestigious school and the educational framework they follow. Finally, an examination of the support structures in place for them and the challenges they face.

The Creation of IRIC

The choice of Cameroon as the location for the Institute's headquarters was not a matter of chance, but the culmination of a joint effort with Switzerland.

IRIC in Cameroon: A Strategic Choice for a Headquarters

The Swiss contribution to the founding of the Institute of International Relations at the University of Trinity motivated Swiss authorities as early as 1970 to establish a similar institution in Africa. It was in this context that Swiss-Cameroonian cooperation tasked Professor Preiswerk of the Graduate Institute of International Studies (IUHEI) with a fact-finding mission. During 1970, he was to visit several African countries that could potentially host the Institute and propose the one offering the greatest potential. While countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Uganda, Senegal, and Zaire had undeniable advantages, Cameroon stood out due to certain specific characteristics (Documents diplomatiques suisses, No 36781, 28 février 1972).

The official recognition of bilingualism (English and French) in the country raised hopes that IRIC would attract both French- and English-speaking students from Africa and other continents. Furthermore, the cordial relations that Cameroon had maintained with all other African countries since independence were expected to facilitate the recruitment of international students. Moreover, the size of Cameroon's territory precluded it from pursuing a policy of leadership, though it was by no means a microstate born of historical accident (Documents diplomatiques suisses, No 36781, 28 février 1972). Cameroon also showed a genuine interest in hosting the IRIC. It was among the priority countries where Swiss technical cooperation sought to focus its activities and, in collaboration with the Carnegie Endowment, organized training seminars for diplomatic and consular officials (Ibid.). Given the validity of all these arguments, Ahmadou Ahidjo—known for his pragmatism and eager to see this institution contribute to Cameroon's diplomatic influence—signed the decree of April 24, 1971, which legally established the IRIC (Machia, 2024). The construction of this institute required a sum of 52 millions CFA francs (Anonyme, 1973).

Purpose, Organization, and Operations of IRIC

According to Article 1 of the 1971 decree, IRIC is responsible for education and research in the field of international relations. Graduates of this institution are expected to serve their countries in government, media, and higher education (Ayissi Noma, 1979). They are also expected to conduct research on international issues of particular relevance to Africa.

Regarding its organization, the main governing body of IRIC is the Steering Committee. Also present is a representative from IUHEI, the Carnegie Endowment Representative. The Director of Studies and the Director of the Institute also participate in Steering Committee meetings.

Table 1

IRIC Directors From 1971 to 2017

No	Names	Exercice periods
1	Ndam Nyoya Adamou	1971-1976
2	Owona Joseph	1976-1985
3	Ngongo Louis Paul	1985-1988
4	Agbor Tabi Peter	1988-1993
5	Elemo Ntonga Lisette	1993-1999
6	Pondi Jean Emmanuel	1999-2005
7	Mouelle Kombi Narcisse	2005-2012
8	Tabi pierre Emmanuel	2012-2017

Source: IRIC Administration Gallery.

This table shows that, from its inception through 2017, IRIC was led by eight (08) directors of Cameroonian nationality, a sign that Cameroon, beyond its various partnerships, is more determined than ever to take the institution's future into its own hands.

According to the provisions of Article 4 of the 1971 decree, the Steering Committee approves the teaching and research program prepared by the Institute's administration after consulting with professors (tenured and adjunct) and student representatives. It also approves the draft budget prepared by the Institute's Administration, establishes the Institute's internal regulations, and sets the number of participants in training programs as well as in seminars and conferences that may be organized during the year. It may determine the participation within its ranks of other institutions that contribute to the life of the IRIC.

IRIC has several sources of funding for its operations, including the Government of Cameroon, international organizations, Switzerland, and others. For example, under a bilateral agreement (Archives Nationales de Yaoundé (ANY), 1978) between the Swiss Confederation and the Government of Cameroon signed in Bern on July 21, 1978, Switzerland committed, through September 30, 1980, to contributing 300,000 Swiss francs over three years toward study and research grants for graduate students. It also committed to contributing to the training of two librarians up to a total of 60,000 Swiss francs over a three-year period. Regarding the training of an IRIC accountant through a short-term internship, an amount of 10,000 Swiss francs was to be allocated. For a period of three years, Bern also decided to contribute 80,000 Swiss francs toward library equipment and acquisitions, as well as the purchase of educational materials. Also noteworthy is the contribution of up to 50,000 Swiss francs over three years to cover research costs at the Institute. Finally, funding in the amount of 50,000 Swiss francs was provided for activities aimed at strengthening the Institute's collaboration with other African institutions in the field of international relations (faculty exchanges, invitations to foreign professors, joint research, and joint seminars).

External organizations such as the Deutsche Stiftung für Entwicklungshilfe, the Carnegie Endowment (at its inception), and the Organization of African Unity have funded IRIC (DODIS, no 39364, 1975). As partnerships have diversified, other actors have become involved, including UNESCO, the African Union (AU), and CODESRIA. Countries such as Cameroon, China, the U.S., and Switzerland are also investing in the institute, with both academic and political objectives. IRIC maintains relationships with the Center for Diplomatic and Strategic Studies in Dakar and the Congolese Diplomatic Academy. On February 4, 1972, the Federal Council allocated 1,160,000 Swiss francs to IRIC (Mougnol, 1989; & Sadou, 1983). Under a bilateral agreement signed

in Bern on July 21, 1978, Switzerland committed to funding IRIC with 550,000 Swiss francs through September 30, 1980 (ANY, 1978). While IRIC is home to many domestic students, it also hosts international students whose presence helps give it an international dimension.

Admission of International Students to IRIC for Popular Programs

The admission criteria for Cameroonian students at IRIC are entirely different from those for international students.

Admission to IRIC

Any Cameroonian wishing to enroll at IRIC must take an entrance exam consisting of two phases. The written exam comprises two sections: a written test on knowledge of international relations and a language test (MINESUP, Communiqué n° 16/0139, 2016). Final admission is granted following an oral exam taken by candidates who have passed the written exam. These conditions do not apply to international students, as they are generally recruited upon recommendation by their governments (Tiky, 2009). The diplomatic internship and continuing education program is intended for civil servants and senior officials from African and non-African Ministries of Foreign Affairs and certain technical ministries with a cooperation department (Tiky, 2009). The recruitment of these interns is carried out by IRIC, generally through embassies. However, various training programs are highly regarded by foreign students.

Programs Popular Among International Students at IRIC

Once established, IRIC offered the following programs: graduate-level instruction aimed at bachelor's degree holders who had completed their studies in a field of the humanities and social sciences (DODIS, 1972). Diplomatic and consular training was provided in the form of specialized courses lasting nine months for the diplomatic internship and four months for the consular internship. IRIC organized conferences and seminars on specific topics. One example was the 1973 conference on the contribution of African universities and inter-African relations to the development of the African personality and system (DODIS, 1972). Finally, there was a research program dedicated to the study of African states in international relations.

In 1985, a presidential decree modified the curriculum for training programs at IRIC (Décret n° 85/743, 1985). Article 18 stipulates that the institute would henceforth offer two categories of instruction: courses for the Master's and Doctoral programs, and courses aimed at specialized training and professional development. Article 19 specifies that the one-year Master's program is open to holders of a bachelor's degree or a recognized equivalent. The doctoral program leads to a third-cycle doctorate and a state doctorate in international relations. This curriculum, implemented in the postcolonial era, reflects the continuation of France's colonial legacy.

In 1993, the academic structure at IRIC was overhauled. Since 2007, the institution has adopted the Bachelor's-Master's-Doctorate system and currently offers the following programs: International Marketing, International Banking, Money, and Finance, International Litigation, International Communication and Public Policy, Regional Integration, Francophonie and Globalization, Diplomacy, Foreign Affairs… (Ntuda Ebodé & Ebogo, 2013). This diversification of programs has led to remarkable student mobility.

IRIC and Diversity of Foreign Nationalities

From 1971 to 2017, IRIC has welcomed numerous international students. This openness, which stands in opposition to xenophobia, has made the campus a cosmopolitan hub that promotes Pan-Africanism and universalism.

Table 2

Geographic Repartition of International Students at IRIC From 1971 to 2017

No	Foreign nationalities	Number of students
1	South Africa	1
2	Algeria	1
3	Angola	11
4	Benin	51
5	Burkina	49
6	Burundi	49
7	Canada	3
8	Comoros	3
9	Congo	105
10	Ivory Cost	8
11	Djibouti	9
12	Dominican Republic	2
13	Egypt	3
14	Mexico	1
15	Ethiopia	3
16	Gabon	67
17	Gambia	2
18	Ghana	14
19	Guinea	7
20	Guinea -Bissau	4
21	Equatorial Guinea	17
22	Kenya	2
23	Lesotho	1
24	Liberia	9
25	Libya	1
26	Madagascar	14
27	Malawi	2
28	Malia	18
29	Mauritania	09
30	Niger	38
31	Nigeria	23
32	Ouganda	02
33	Central African Republic	61
34	Democratic Republic of the Congo	45
35	Rwanda	30
36	Senegal	5
37	Somalia	3
38	Soudan	3
39	Tanzania	6
40	Chad	183
41	Togo	47
42	Tunisia	9
43	U.S.A	9
44	Zambia	1
	TOTAL	*932*

Source: IRIC: Research and Academic Internship Program.

An analysis of this table reveals that IRIC has enrolled a total of 932 international students from Africa, Europe, and the Americas. There are 44 nationalities in total. Enrollment numbers have shown a steady increase over time. Chad accounts for the lion's share of the repartition with 183 students. Given that the age limit for admission to IRIC is 32 years old for a program lasting up to two years, the student body consists of individuals aged approximately 20 to 34. A gender-sensitive approach is in place within the institution, but further efforts are needed as there is a predominance of male students. Once they arrive at IRIC, these students find a wide range of support services available to them.

Support Structures for International Students at IRIC (1971–2017)

A taxonomic approach allows us to group support policies into four categories.

Administrative Support Structures

The Institute's Administration is the first of these and comprises five sections (Mouelle Kombi, 2006). The Mail, Liaison, and Archives Section handles correspondence submitted by international students and ensures it is forwarded to the appropriate parties. The Cooperation, Communication, and Public Relations Section generally oversees relations with embassies, consulates, and international organizations. For international students, it serves as a bridge between IRIC and their respective diplomatic institutions. The Translation, Interpretation, and Language Services Section helps international students overcome language barriers in document translation.

The Academic Affairs Office oversees and coordinates academic programs, training, and diplomatic internships. It oversees the reception, orientation, and supervision of diplomatic interns. Its Internship, Continuing Education, and Retraining Unit is responsible for finding internships for international students. The Sports, Cultural, and Club Activities Section is responsible for organizing and overseeing all sports and cultural activities for students.

The Secretariat, through its Reception and Ceremonial Unit, is responsible for arranging accommodations for international students and interns in their respective residences.

Student Organizations

The Association of IRIC Diplomatic Students and Trainees (ASESIRIC) brings together all regularly enrolled students. It is well-organized and led by an executive board. Among its many activities are the organization of conferences and seminars on issues in international relations, the supervision of the Director's Cup, and the organization of excursions and performances. The IRIC choir is called the Choir of Internationalists. Open to all interested international students, this choir has no limits when it comes to learning songs. Since it aims to be international, songs are taught in both local and foreign languages.

Clubs welcome international students interested in their activities. The Institute includes the Francophonie, Commonwealth, Human Rights, UNESCO, and AU clubs, which share information about the progress and work carried out by these institutions. Structures capable of meeting the physical needs of international students have been established.

Healthcare Facilities

The infirmary is a support service attached to the administration and placed under the responsibility of a chief physician assisted by two nurses, operating under the medical-social center of the University of Yaoundé II (DODIS, 1972). It handles the preliminary diagnosis of illnesses among students and diplomatic trainees and refers them to external healthcare facilities such as the Yaoundé Central Hospital and the University Hospital

Center. Furthermore, following preliminary examinations, it issues permits to leave campus for medical reasons and provides first aid and essential medications.

The IRIC Restaurant comprises four units: the supply unit, the recipe unit, the kitchen, and the bar, with a seating capacity of 150. International students appreciate the local dishes, which reflect the cultural realities of Cameroon's ten regions and, at times, those of other African countries.

The construction of a small university housing complex within IRIC dates back to the 1970s (Mougnol, 1989; Sadou, 1983). The number of rooms has grown over time, and the institute now has approximately 54 rooms. Since the number of rooms is lower than the number of students applying for housing, priority is given to international students. However, the rent is two or even three times higher than the rental price for Cameroonians.

Facilities for Advanced Study

November 17, 1973 marks the opening date of the library. Architecturally, this facility includes a 36-seat reading room, a reference room, a documentation room, a binding room, and a monographs room. The number of seats remains insufficient, and given the high volume of visitors, there is a need to expand the library to improve this situation. However, the strategy currently focuses on lending materials to students for home use.

The multimedia center, established in 2001, consists of a room with 16 computers arranged around a conference table, three computers dedicated to office work, and a high-speed internet connection. Its purpose is to welcome and assist all users in utilizing digital tools. Many international students value computer science, especially since the internet allows them to stay in touch with their home countries and conduct scientific research.

The Confucius Institute, located at the heart of IRIC, was established in 2007. This institution aims to promote and teach Chinese culture. While Chinese language instruction is a core component of the curriculum for international students, they also have the opportunity to join the Institute to deepen their knowledge and prepare for an upcoming career as an interpreter.

In addition to these internal structures, it is worth noting that international students also receive support from specialized ministries during their studies, particularly the current Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Cameroon (MINREX), where they can consult experts and access diplomatic archives for their research. These ministries are also recommended for academic or professional internships, as are the many international organizations based in the country, which is recognized as a haven of peace in Central Africa despite the emergence of the Boko Haram terrorist group and the outbreak of the Anglophone secessionist crisis in 2016.

In light of all the above, one might be tempted to believe that IRIC faces no difficulties. However, this institution is not immune to criticism stemming from the challenges encountered by international students.

IRIC: Weaknesses Despite Its Prestige

The controversy over the admission of candidates to the competitive exam is the first sticking point. In a competitive exam, the basic principle is that only the best candidates should be definitively admitted. However, this criterion is not always followed. The cause of this crisis of objectivity is the formalization of regional balance. According to official statements, the goal is to avoid disadvantaging minorities in a country with approximately 250 ethnic groups. For the government, this is therefore a strategy for socio-political stability. On the other hand, this measure leads to the slow but effective replacement of meritocracy with mediocrity. In 2012 and 2015, the Minister of Higher Education reportedly authorized the removal of the names of several students who had been

definitively admitted to the competitive exam for the diplomacy program, citing non-compliance with regional balance as the reason (Banyongen, 2015).

The second weakness of the IRIC concerns the housing crisis. Despite their privileged status, international students are not always able to find housing on campus. Many of them are forced to look for rooms in outlying neighborhoods inhabited mostly by students from the University of Yaoundé I. These environments, where all forms of insecurity (overcrowding, theft, and assaults) thrive, are not always conducive to genuine intellectual development.

We also regret the lack of a permanent internet connection in the dorm rooms. Students who want to stay connected at home must sign up for a plan with mobile phone companies such as ORANGE, MTN, and CAMTEL. Some, due to a lack of financial resources, go to computer rooms commonly known as internet cafes. These private establishments do not always facilitate smooth study due to noise pollution and frequent power outages. In addition to these issues, there is a lack of health insurance. International students arriving at IRIC must set aside substantial funds for their healthcare, as the infirmary offers only limited services in this area.

Conclusion

The systematic approach to welcoming international students at IRIC involves a variety of structures. Each stakeholder plays a role that is part of a complementary system. This organizational structure makes IRIC a strategic hub for training practitioners in international relations. IRIC enables several African countries to have diplomatic leaders capable of defending their interests and those of Africa in the face of the challenges of globalization. The reception of international students remains an area for improvement given the difficulties they face. It is therefore the responsibility of the government to regulate these matters if the institution's prestige is to be preserved. The creation of a special student mobility office would also enable IRIC to significantly increase its efficiency.

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