

Online Article

African Fellowships for Research in Indigenous and Alternative Knowledges (AFRIAK) 2026 Selection Report

Introduction

The African Fellowships for Research in Indigenous and Alternative Knowledges (AFRIAK) programme is implemented by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. The programme aims to strengthen research and training ecosystems in Africa by supporting young scholars invested in advancing Indigenous and alternative knowledge systems. AFRIAK is rooted in a commitment to re-centring African knowledge systems, promoting intergenerational learning and fostering socially relevant scholarship. The programme supports young researchers, especially young female researchers, to undertake innovative research grounded in Indigenous knowledge (IK) perspectives. It seeks to support the mobilisation of IK systems and locally grounded evidence to revitalise strategic sectors of the economy, contributing to sustainable livelihoods for the youth and broader community well-being. In the long term, AFRIAK aims to re-centre IK systems at the heart of Africa's transformation by encouraging a more collaborative, reciprocal and non-extractive approach to knowledge production.

As set out in its founding documents, the programme pays close attention to the historical and conceptual debates surrounding the notion of Indigenous knowledge, particularly its colonial and pejorative connotations. While acknowledging critiques such as those by Paulin Hountondji, regarding the externalisation of knowledge production in Africa, AFRIAK uses the term in a broader, more dynamic sense, referring to knowledge systems that emerge organically from Af-

Compiled by
CODESRIA Secretariat

rican societies and evolve through interaction with other forms of knowledge. Indigenous knowledge might be traditional in many ways but it is not restricted to the deep past. It can also be contemporary knowledge specific to the commu-

nity and the basis on which a people's thoughts, creativity and innovation grow.

AFRIAK is a ten-year programme, the first phase of which spans three years. It targets young Africans under the age of 35 who live on the continent. The programme recognises the close engagement of this cohort with local communities, as well as the specific social, economic and developmental challenges these communities face. The programme is also committed to ensuring that 70 per cent of fellows are young women, reflecting CODESRIA's determination to promote gender equity and challenge the assumption that the underrepresentation of women in such initiatives results from a lack of qualified female candidates.

In 2025, out of the 458 valid applications received, a total of 150 fellows (105 of whom were women) from thirty-two African countries were selected to form the inaugural AFRIAK cohort. Following the successful launch of the first cohort, the 2026 call for applications sought to consolidate the programme's intellectual foundations. The aim was to recruit 100 fellows in the second cohort, while expanding the programme's geographical reach, thematic diversity and institutional participation.

To achieve these goals, the Council issued [the 2026 AFRIAK call for proposals](#) in December 2025, inviting submissions by 15 February 2026. Applications from individuals and groups were invited under the

fourteen thematic areas identified in the programme framework. Based on lessons learned from the first cohort, the call was publicised, with strong efforts made towards promoting it in specific geographical areas (North Africa) and language zones (the Arabic- and Portuguese-speaking regions). This report details the process through which the 2026 cohort of fellows was selected, from the launch of the call to the final selection of successful candidates.

The selection process

The response to the call for the second cohort was remarkable, reflecting a growing interest among scholars in Indigenous and alternative knowledge systems, and an increasing recognition of AFRIAK as a unique platform for research, mentorship and intellectual exchange, both on the continent and beyond.

A total of 662 applications were received, comprising 552 individual applications and 110 group applications. When all members of group submissions are considered, the programme attracted 973 applicants. The applications were received from forty-two African countries (see Table 1), underscoring the programme's broad continental reach and appeal. Additionally, twenty applicants self-identified as persons with disabilities, including visual, hearing and physical impairments. Of the 973 applicants, 587 were women, and 386 were men (Figure 1). This reflects the programme's ability to attract participants from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and to advance the inclusion of groups who are often underrepresented in similar initiatives.

In terms of language submission, the applications were submitted in three languages: English (482), French (178) and Portuguese (2). As with the applicant pool for 2025, most of the 2026 submissions were in English. However, the increase in Francophone participation suggests that the programme is gradually expanding its reach within the French-speaking academic and research communities. Despite targeted dissemination efforts and multilingual communication strategies, the number of applications received in Portuguese remained limited. This highlights the need for more sustained engagement with Lusophone scholarly networks in future calls, in line with AFRIAK's commitment to balanced continental representation and inclusivity.

Applications were assessed through a three-stage selection process designed to balance academic merit with the objective of building a diverse cohort reflective of the programme's continental scope and priorities.

Table 1: 2026 AFRIAK applicants: Gender and nationality representation

No	Nationality	Female	Male	Total
1	Nigeria	97	50	147
2	Benin	60	56	116
3	Kenya	68	22	90
4	Tanzania	50	30	80
5	Ghana	45	25	70
6	Cameroon	39	17	56
7	South Africa	32	14	46
8	Uganda	26	19	45
9	Zimbabwe	28	16	44
10	Togo	20	17	37
11	Senegal	21	12	33
12	Ethiopia	9	22	31
13	Malawi	16	8	24
14	Côte d'Ivoire	16	7	23
15	Rwanda	9	7	16
16	Democratic Republic of Congo	4	10	14
17	Botswana	8	2	10
18	Burkina Faso	5	5	10
19	Burundi	3	5	8
20	Congo	4	4	8
21	Somalia	2	5	7
22	Angola	1	4	5
23	Guinea	4	1	5
24	Niger	0	5	5
25	Algeria	2	2	4
26	Madagascar	4	0	4
27	Mali	0	4	4
28	Morocco	1	3	4
29	Namibia	1	3	4
30	Eswatini	2	1	3
31	Lesotho	3	0	3
32	Chad	2	0	2
33	Egypt	1	1	2
34	Gambia	0	2	2
35	Sudan	1	1	2
36	Zambia	1	1	2
37	Liberia	0	1	1
38	Libya	0	1	1
39	Mozambique	1	0	1
40	Sierra Leone	0	1	1
41	South Sudan	1	1	2
42	Tunisia	0	1	1
TOTAL		587	386	973

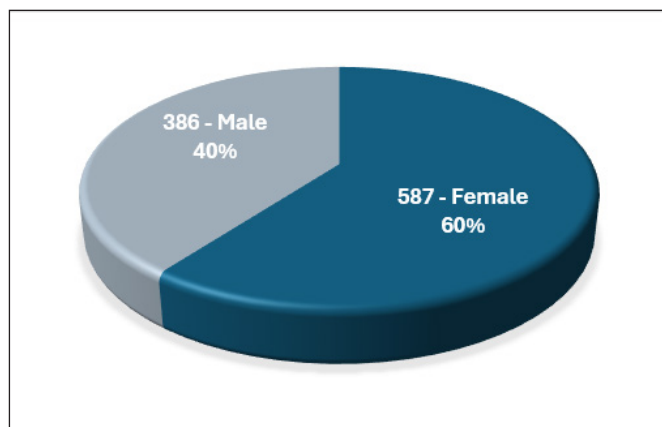


Figure 1: 2026 AFRIAK applicants: Gender distribution

Initial screening process

Following the deadline for the call of applications, all submissions underwent an initial screening to assess their compliance with the eligibility criteria outlined in the call for proposals. This process identified a number of recurring issues, including applicants based outside Africa, applicants above the stipulated age threshold (35 years), duplicate submissions, incomplete applications and concept notes outside the fellowship's thematic scope. Twenty (20) applications were removed at this stage. Following this, 642 applications were retained for external evaluation: 539 individual applications and 103 group applications. In total, this represented 925 applicants, comprising 556 female and 369 male applicants. This pool formed the basis for the scientific peer-review process. The country and gender distribution of the screened applications is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Country and gender distribution: 2026 AFRIAK reviewed applications

No	Country	Individual Applications		Group Applications		Total
		F*	M**	F*	M**	
1	Angola	0	2	1	2	5
2	Benin	20	40	37	15	112
3	Botswana	7	2	1	0	10
4	Burkina Faso	3	5	2	0	10
5	Burundi	2	1	1	3	7
6	Cameroon	26	12	13	4	55
7	Chad	1	0	1	0	2
8	Republic of Congo	0	3	4	2	9
9	Democratic Republic of Congo	2	9	2	0	13
10	Côte d'Ivoire	2	2	14	5	23
11	Egypt	1	1	0	0	2

12	Eswatini	2	1	0	0	3
13	Ethiopia	5	22	4	0	31
14	Gambia	0	2	0	0	2
15	Ghana	9	10	34	13	66
16	Guinea	1	1	1	0	3
17	Kenya	47	17	16	4	84
18	Liberia	0	1	0	0	1
19	Libya	0	1	0	0	1
20	Lesotho	1	0	2	0	3
21	Madagascar	4	0	0	0	4
22	Malawi	5	4	13	4	26
23	Mali	0	4	0	0	4
24	Morocco	1	3	0	0	4
25	Mozambique	1	0	0	0	1
26	Namibia	1	3	0	0	4
27	Niger	0	5	0	0	5
28	Nigeria	61	37	32	8	138
29	Rwanda	5	6	5	1	17
30	Senegal	5	6	16	6	33
31	Sierra Leone	0	1	0	0	1
32	Somalia	2	5	0	0	7
33	South Africa	21	11	11	3	46
34	South Sudan	1	1	0	0	2
35	Sudan	1	1	0	0	2
36	Tanzania	10	13	40	16	79
37	Togo	3	6	17	11	37
38	Tunisia	0	1	0	0	1
39	Uganda	16	15	5	4	40
40	Zambia	1	1	0	0	2
41	Zimbabwe	12	7	5	6	30
TOTAL		279	262	277	107	925

* Female ** Male

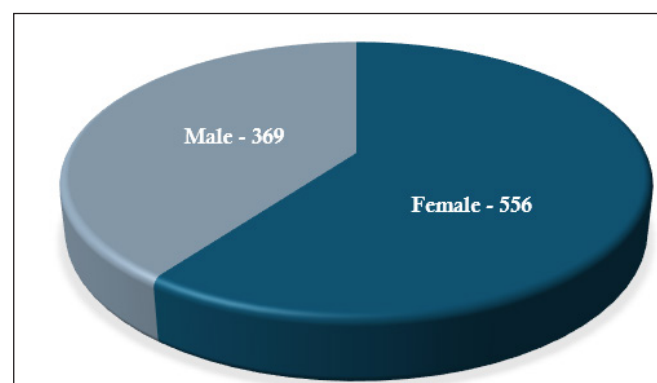


Figure 2: Gender distribution: 2026 AFRIAK reviewed applications

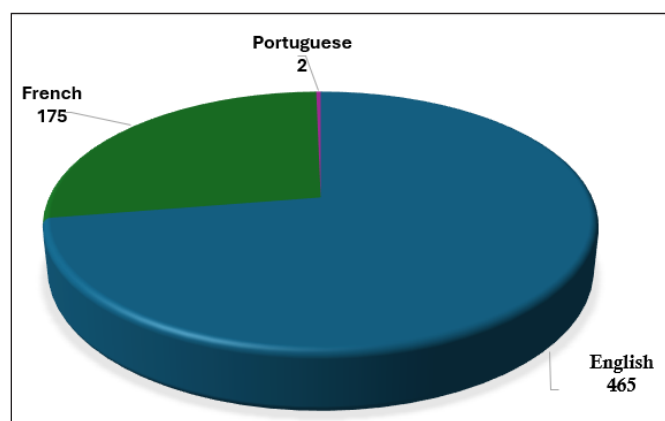


Figure 3: Language distribution: 2026 AFRIAK reviewed applications

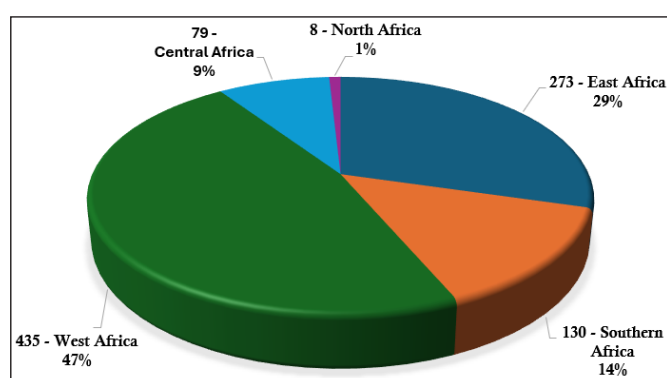


Figure 4: Regional distribution: 2026 AFRIAK reviewed applications

External review and evaluation process

The evaluation of applications was undertaken by an independent panel of seven (7) reviewers drawn from different disciplinary, linguistic and regional backgrounds. The review process was designed to ensure scientific rigour and consistency in the assessment of applications, while also aligning selection decisions with the broader intellectual and diversity commitments of the AFRIAK programme.

Prior to the review exercise, reviewers were inducted into the objectives of AFRIAK, the philosophy underpinning the programme, and the evaluation framework guiding the assessment process. The purpose of this orientation was to ensure a shared understanding of the programme's commitment to Indigenous and alternative knowledge systems, the co-production of knowledge, methodological innovation and gender and regional diversity. During the orientation, Dr Amanda Coffie, the Mastercard Foundation's Head of Program Evidence, was invited to provide an online presentation on the programme from the Foundation's perspective.

Applications were assessed using a standardised evaluation framework based on a set of criteria. Reviewers agreed that the primary criteria would be based on sci-

entific merit : the quality, originality and intellectual significance of the concept note; the methodological rigour and appropriateness of the proposed research design; the relevance of the proposed project to Indigenous and alternative knowledge systems; the academic and research background of the applicant(s); the quality and relevance of reference letters; and the potential contribution of the proposed research to the broader goals of AFRIAK. Each application was scored on a scale of 0 to 100, with reviewers assigning consolidated scores based on their assessment of the submitted application materials.

In addition to the above scientific merit, the review process considered broader factors arising from the programme's objectives, such as gender equity, linguistic diversity, regional representation, thematic variety and the balance between individual and collaborative group applications. Although scientific quality was the main assessment criterion, these diversity considerations were taken into account in the final selection stage. Table 3 shows the final results of the reviewed applications.

Table 3: Consolidated results of the reviewed applications

Scores (%)	Number of applications
90-100	32
80-89	66
70-79	104
60-69	143
50-59	110
40-49	47
30-39	43
20-29	46
10-19	28
0-9	23

Based on these results, the reviewers agreed that applications scoring 70 per cent and above would be prioritised in the first instance, and that applications scoring 60 per cent and above could be considered, where necessary, to support diversity, thematic spread and regional balance.

In total, 202 applications met the benchmark of 70 per cent and above. These included 161 individual submissions and forty-one group submissions, representing 316 applicants spread across thirty-two African countries. Table 4 illustrates the summary in terms of gender and nationality.

Table 4: Summary representation of applicants with a score of 70% and above

Nationality	Female	Male	Total
Benin	26	21	47
Ghana	24	10	34
Kenya	29	5	34
Tanzania	20	14	34
Nigeria	18	12	30
Senegal	12	7	19
Zimbabwe	12	5	17
Cameroon	13	1	14
Côte d'Ivoire	11	3	14
South Africa	12	0	12
Uganda	8	3	11
Ethiopia	2	8	10
Botswana	4	1	5
Democratic Republic of Congo	1	3	4
Burkina Faso	1	2	3
Burundi	2	1	3
Lesotho	2	1	3
Madagascar	3	0	3
Togo	2	1	3
Republic of Congo	0	2	2
Malawi	2	0	2
Rwanda	1	1	2
Angola	0	1	1
Central African Republic	0	1	1
Chad		1	1
Egypt	1	0	1
Eswatini	1	0	1
Mozambique	1	0	1
Niger	0	1	1
Sierra Leone	0	1	1
South Sudan	1	0	1
Sudan	0	1	1
Total	209	107	316

General reviewer feedback and emerging considerations

Beyond the scoring process, the reviewers raised a number of observations that may help strengthen future AFRIAK calls and the broader programme design.

Gender

The reviewers were impressed with the quality of applications received from female applicants, and there was no need for affirmative action because they scored highly enough to make up the targeted 70 per cent.

Group applications and fellowship allocation

Reviewers noted the need to further reflect on the size of group applications in relation to the overall fellowship quota. In particular, concern was raised that groups with up to five members may place pressure on the total number of fellowships available and may require reconsideration in future calls to ensure a balance between collaborative applications and opportunities for individual applicants.

Use of artificial intelligence

Reviewers raised questions about the growing use of artificial intelligence in proposal writing, including concerns regarding overreliance on AI-generated text, similarities across applications and implications for originality. This prompted discussions on how future calls might better address the ethical and appropriate use of AI in proposal development.

Disciplinary composition of applications

A notable observation was the significant number of applications received from the natural and applied sciences, reflecting a growing interest in Indigenous knowledge from beyond the traditional social science and humanities disciplines. The reviewers welcomed this interdisciplinarity while also noting the importance of maintaining conceptual clarity regarding the programme's intellectual orientation.

Institutional affiliation and similarity across applications

The reviewers observed a considerable number of applications without clear institutional affiliation, raising questions about how affiliation should be defined and assessed in future calls.

They also noted instances where applications appeared to 'speak to each other', with overlapping topics or highly similar framing. Some proposals were also seen to overlap thematically with projects already being pursued by fellows in the inaugural cohort, raising questions about novelty, complementarity and thematic clustering that may need closer consideration in future selection rounds.

Outputs beyond scholarly production

An important concern raised by reviewers related to the nature of the outputs proposed by the applicants. Most applications emphasised conventional scholarly outputs, such as journal articles, theses and policy papers, with limited attention to community-oriented, creative or public-facing outputs. The reviewers suggested that future calls could more explicitly encourage applicants to think about outputs that speak not only to academic audiences but also to communities and Indigenous knowledge-holders themselves.

Authenticity and quality of recommendation letters

The reviewers also raised concerns regarding the authenticity and quality of some recommendation letters, including unsigned letters, letters appearing to have been signed by applicants themselves, and overly generic letters that did not meaningfully support the application. It was suggested that future calls may consider mechanisms whereby referees submit letters directly to strengthen the integrity of this aspect of the application process.

In accordance with the above stipulations, the Secretariat was entrusted with constituting the final cohort of fellows from the pool of candidates who obtained scores exceeding 60 per cent, while ensuring alignment with the programme's broader objectives and diversity considerations.

Final selection

A total of eighty-two applications, representing 100 fellows, were selected to form the second AFRIAK cohort. In line with the programme's commitment to gender equity, 73 per cent of the selected fellows are young women, which exceeds the minimum target set for the fellowship and reflects the strong and sustained participation of women in the programme. In terms of application categories, seventy-three fellows were selected from individual applications, and nine group applications were retained. This balance reflects AFRIAK's dual commitment to supporting both individual scholarship and collaborative, group-based approaches to knowledge production.

The figures and tables that follow break down the selected fellows by nationality, gender, language of submission and thematic focus, illustrating the diversity and continental representation achieved in the 2026 cohort.

Table 5: Country and gender representation of the AFRIAK 2026 cohort

Nationality	Female	Male	Total
Benin	6	4	10
Nigeria	7	3	10
Cameroon	5	1	6
Kenya	7	1	8
Ghana	5	2	7
Togo	3	3	6
Uganda	6	-	6
South Africa	5	-	5
Zimbabwe	5	-	5
Tanzania	2	2	4
Senegal	3	1	4
Côte d'Ivoire	2	1	3
Ethiopia	2	1	3
Lesotho	2	1	3
Democratic Republic of Congo	1	1	2
Eswatini	2	-	2
Madagascar	2	-	2
Malawi	1	1	2
Angola	-	1	1
Botswana	1	-	1
Burkina Faso	1	-	1
Burundi	1	-	1
Chad	-	1	1
Republic of Congo	-	1	1
Egypt	1	-	1
Mali	-	1	1
Mozambique	1	-	1
Namibia	1	-	1
Sudan	-	1	1
South Sudan	1	-	1
TOTAL	73	27	100

REFLECTION

Why has AFRIAK resonated so strongly in Benin?

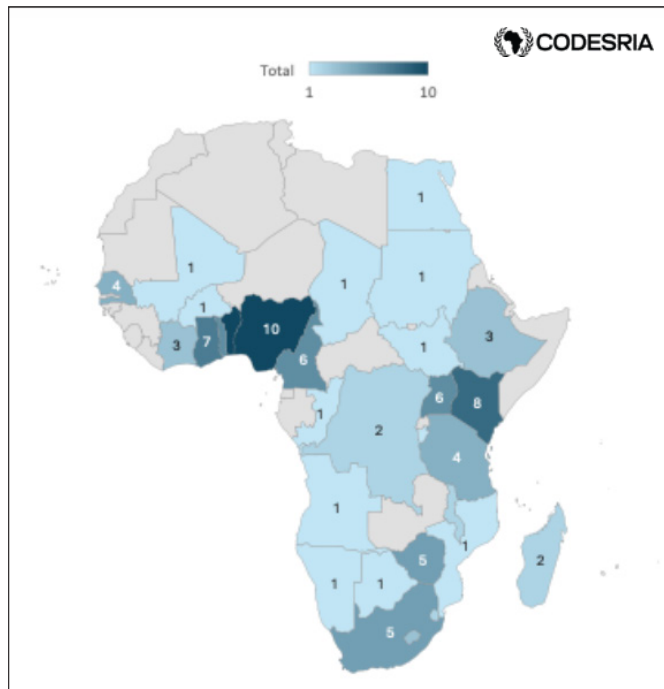
One of the most striking observations to emerge from the AFRIAK programme is the exceptionally high level of participation from applicants in Benin. This trend was already evident during the first cohort, in which Benin ranked eighth with thirty-eight eligible applications out of approximately 700. Participation increased dramatically in the second cohort. Out of 973 applicants, 116 were from Benin (112 after eligibility screening), making it the second-largest source of applicants after Nigeria. This is particularly impressive given its relatively small population and research community. Benin also produced ten successful fellows, placing it alongside Nigeria as one of the countries with the highest number of selected fellows.

This trend is particularly noteworthy because it cannot be explained solely by CODESRIA's communication strategy. Although AFRIAK has deliberately strengthened its outreach in Francophone, Lusophone and Arabophone countries, similar efforts have accompanied other recent CODESRIA programmes without generating such a disproportionate response from a single country. Similarly, although AFRIAK is intentionally interdisciplinary and welcomes applications from all fields, including the natural sciences, engineering, health sciences and technology, this openness alone does not explain why Beninese researchers responded so enthusiastically.

One explanation lies in Benin's long-standing intellectual and cultural engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems. The country has played a leading part in discussions about recognising, preserving and promoting Indigenous knowledge, traditional medicine, religious practices and cultural heritage. This intellectual tradition has been greatly influenced by the work of the late Paulin Hountondji, whose thinking on knowledge production in Africa helped shape the conceptual framework of AFRIAK. Therefore, the programme's invitation to rethink Indigenous knowledge as a living, evolving source of knowledge rather than a relic of the past may resonate particularly strongly with a generation of scholars working within this intellectual environment.

Another explanation may lie outside academia. Across Africa and within the African diaspora, there is a growing public interest among young people in reconnecting with their African heritage, including histories, identities, languages, spiritual traditions and locally grounded ways of knowing. Benin's annual Vodun Day is now one of the world's largest celebrations of African spirituality and cultural heritage. It attracts thousands of participants from across the continent and the diaspora, reflecting a broader movement to reclaim and celebrate African epistemologies and traditions. Beyond this flagship event, Benin has invested in promoting its cultural heritage, establishing itself as a place where Indigenous knowledge is preserved, debated and reimagined. AFRIAK's focus on Indigenous and alternative knowledge systems may therefore resonate with a wider social and intellectual movement that is particularly evident in Benin.

Taken together, these observations suggest that AFRIAK may have connected with an existing intellectual ecosystem in Benin, in which Indigenous knowledge is increasingly recognised as a legitimate foundation for contemporary research, innovation and social transformation, rather than simply an object of study. Although these reflections remain exploratory and would require substantiation through a more systematic study, they nevertheless provide an interesting lens through which to understand the remarkable response from Beninese scholars. They also informed the decision to hold the 2026 AFRIAK induction workshop in Benin. This choice reflects the country's exceptional level of participation in the programme, as well as the opportunity it offers Fellows from across the continent to engage directly with an intellectual and cultural environment in which debates on Indigenous knowledge, heritage and African epistemologies have gained renewed visibility and significance.



Map 1: Geographical representation of the AFRIAK

The thematic distribution of the 2026 AFRIAK cohort

The thematic distribution of the 2026 AFRIAK cohort (Table 6) reflects both continuity with the inaugural cohort and emerging shifts in the areas of interest among applicants. While all core themes of the programme are represented to varying degrees, the distribution reveals a clear concentration of proposals in a few key areas.

Similar to the 2025 cohort, themes related to ‘Indigenous Medical Science and Practices’ and ‘Climate Change and Ecological Sustainability’ continue to attract strong interest, underscoring the centrality of health systems and environmental challenges in shaping research priorities across the continent. These areas remain critical entry points through which Indigenous knowledge is being mobilised to respond to pressing societal needs.

However, the 2026 cohort shows a more pronounced emphasis on ‘Indigenous Knowledge and Methods of Knowing’, which emerges as the most represented theme. This suggests a growing shift towards deeper epistemological engagement, with applicants increasingly concerned not only with the application of Indigenous knowledge but also with its conceptual foundations, modes of transmission and validation. This trend aligns closely with AFRIAK’s broader objective of re-centring African epistemologies and advancing alternative frameworks of knowledge production.

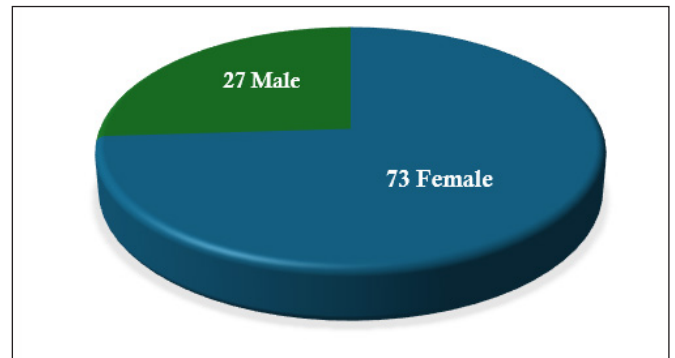


Figure 5: Gender representation of the AFRIAK 2026 cohort

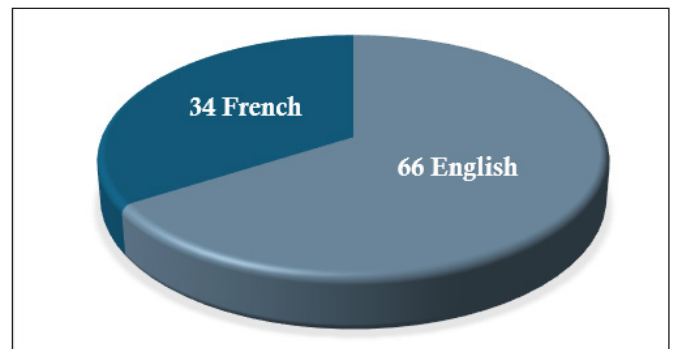


Figure 6: Language distribution of the AFRIAK 2026 cohort

A second tier of themes, including ‘Indigenous Pedagogies and Curriculum Development’, the ‘Creative Sector’, ‘Social Capital Development’ and ‘IK Heritage in Nutrition’, demonstrates moderate but meaningful engagement. These areas reflect the expanding interdisciplinarity of the programme and the diverse ways in which Indigenous knowledge intersects with education, culture, livelihoods and community well-being. At the same time, some thematic areas remain underrepresented. Themes such as ‘Mobilising Digital Systems for Indigenous Knowledge in Africa’ and ‘Governance Systems and State-Building’ attracted relatively few applications, and ‘Indigenous Languages and Science’ did not feature in the final selection. This pattern, which is consistent with observations from the inaugural cohort, points to persistent gaps in engagement with certain domains and suggests the need for more targeted encouragement and capacity-building in future calls.

Overall, the thematic spread of the 2026 cohort demonstrates the vibrancy and unevenness of engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems across disciplines. It reflects a consolidation of interest in applied areas such as health and climate, alongside an emerging deepening of epistemological inquiry. These trends provide important insights for the continued development of the AFRIAK programme, particularly in strengthening underrepresented thematic areas while supporting the growing intellectual maturity of the field.

Table 6: Thematic focus of the 2026 AFRIAK cohort

No	Theme	Individual	Group	Total
1	IK and methods of knowing	17	1	18
2	Indigenous medical science and practices	12	1	13
3	IK and the creative sector	8	0	8
4	IK and systems of entrepreneurship	3	0	3
5	Agriculture and agri-foods systems	3	1	4
6	Mobilising digital systems for IK in Africa	1	0	1
7	Indigenous pedagogies and curriculum development	5	0	5
8	IK in social capital development	3	1	4
9	Indigenous technologies and sustainable development	3	0	3
10	IK, climate change and ecological sustainability	9	3	12
11	IK heritage in nutrition	3	1	4
12	Indigenous languages and science	0	0	0
13	IK, religion and spirituality science	4	1	5
14	IK, governance systems and state-building	2	0	2
Total		73	9	82

Throughout the fellowship period, participants will benefit from structured mentorship engagements with senior scholars and community-based knowledge-holders. This intergenerational mentorship model is central to AFRIAK's approach and seeks to bridge academic and non-academic knowledge systems while supporting fellows in refining their research. With this second cohort, AFRIAK continues to strengthen its contribution to African knowledge systems, foster collaborative research cultures and support a new generation of scholars grounded in Indigenous and alternative ways of knowing.

The 2026 AFRIAK selection process reflects both the growing demand for the fellowship and the increasing intellectual momentum around Indigenous and alternative knowledge systems across Africa. The quality and diversity of

Way forward

Following the selection process, the successful fellows will be inducted into the AFRIAK programme through a structured sequence of academic, mentorship and institutional engagements designed to support individual and collaborative research development.

The fellowship will begin with an induction workshop, during which the intellectual, methodological and ethical foundations of the programme will be introduced to the fellows. This will involve engaging with key debates on Indigenous and alternative knowledge systems, the co-production of knowledge and the role of research in addressing societal challenges. Subsequently, fellows will undertake a one-month residency in intellectual hubs across Africa. These hubs will provide an enabling environment for fellows to interact with academic mentors, Indigenous knowledge-bearers and peer researchers. The residency is intended to foster immersive learning, interdisciplinary exchange and the co-production of knowledge grounded in local contexts.

applications received, as well as the composition of the final cohort, affirm AFRIAK's relevance as a platform for supporting young scholars and advancing African-centred research. The process also highlights important areas for further strengthening, including methodological development, diversification of outputs and deeper engagement in underrepresented thematic areas. This second cohort, characterised by female representation, broad geographic reach and a balance between individual and group applications, marks an important step in consolidating the programme. It reinforces AFRIAK's role as a key initiative in fostering research, mentorship and knowledge co-production, as well as contributing to broader processes of an intellectual and socio-economic transformation that benefit African youth.