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Position Paper

Strengthening Africa-Europe academic mobility: visa policy for science partnerships

CIVIS Alliance

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CIVIS brings together a community of more than 470,000 students and 58,000 staff members, including 35,000 academics and researchers in Europe alone. Including Associate Members, the Alliance counts more than 720,000 students and 75,000 staff members.

We want to thank all respondents to the CIVIS surveys on visa issues.

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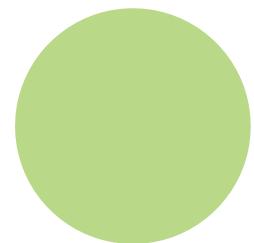
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Executive summary

Europe and Africa have significantly expanded cooperation in higher education, research, and innovation through initiatives such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, the AU–EU Innovation Agenda, and the Global Gateway strategy. These efforts reflect the growing importance of Africa-Europe academic exchange for addressing global challenges, advancing science diplomacy, fostering talent development, and deepening strategic relations between both continents.

Despite these ambitions, visa procedures remain a major impediment for African students as well as academic and professional staff seeking to travel to Europe. Evidence from existing research and CIVIS Alliance surveys shows that applicants frequently face obstacles such as long waiting times, difficulties obtaining appointments, high costs, long-travel distances to embassies and consulates, or extensive documentation requirements. These barriers cause major uncertainty and unfair deterrence often leading to delayed or cancelled exchanges, thus undermining the effectiveness of European investments in academic cooperation. For us at CIVIS, a European university alliance with African members, these obstacles present a constant challenge to our multilateral, intercontinental cooperation.

Key policy recommendations

Against this background, CIVIS welcomes recent efforts by the European Commission to modernize visa policy. This paper argues that the ‘EU Visa Strategy’ and ‘Recommendation on attracting talent’ offer significant improvements. But the underlying visa policy framework must be widened to recognise the specific needs and objectives of international academic collaboration, particularly with Africa. CIVIS therefore calls for complementing both policy initiatives in three ways:

Systematically include academic mobility as a priority category in facilitating measures, enabling easier visa access for scientific travel purposes, including longer-validity and multiple-entry visas where appropriate. Just as business people do, academics may count as low-risk and reliable travellers, while the EU would thereby strengthen its position as a global research and education hub.

Extend simplified visa procedures for long-term stays to short-term academic mobility, such as conferences, workshops, research visits, and training activities. Those are particularly affected by current administrative barriers, while playing an indispensable role for academic exchange as well as EU science support programmes.

Give strategic priority to Africa in visa facilitation efforts, including increased consular capacity, faster processing, and targeted measures that reflect Africa’s importance as a partner in education, research, and innovation.

Improving visa access for African academics and students is not merely an administrative reform. It is a strategic investment in stronger research partnerships, talent exchange, and Europe’s long-term scientific and geopolitical objectives.

1. Europe's quest for intensifying academic exchange with Africa

When European and African heads of state met at the 6th AU-EU Summit in 2022, they sought to lay the foundation for a “renewed Partnership to build a common future, as closest partners and neighbours”¹ and formulated the ‘Joint Vision 2030’ to this end. In this context, the state leaders identified academic exchange as a key commitment and opportunity. Support for “scientific cooperation between researchers to develop knowledge together as well as sharing technology and expertise” would be stepped up, the “exchange of young citizens, volunteers and students” encouraged, and “partnerships between universities” developed. State leaders confirmed their commitment at the last AU-EU Summit.²

Indeed, **Europe's efforts to enhance academic³ exchange with Africa have intensified** over the last several years. For instance, Erasmus+, the EU's educational flagship programme funding cooperation and mobility between institutions as well as of individual students and faculty, saw a fourfold increase in the budget for sub-Saharan Africa in the programme period 2021-27. It thus became the largest regional budget.⁴ In the realm of Research & Innovation (R&I), four successive ‘Africa Initiatives’ within the Horizon Europe programme have promoted participation of African researchers in R&I project consortia through dedicated calls since 2021. With more than 1.7 billion euro thus spent, new partnerships emerged and the involvement of African participants across the programme increased.⁵ The AU-EU Innovation Agenda, adopted in 2023, provides a groundbreaking new framework for strengthening Research and Innovation (R&I) cooperation and defines building ‘capacities for science’ as one of four action fields. The Agenda thus commits AU and EU members to strengthen intercontinental cooperation between higher education institutions and research organisations, while putting special emphasis on enhanced mobility of students and learners as well as young and senior researchers.⁶ Many of those initiatives, including the AU-EU Innovation Agenda, are supported by the

¹ European Council, 2022

² European Council, 2025

³ In this paper, we use ‘academic’ and ‘academia’, referring to the entire disciplinary spectrum at higher education and research institutions – natural, social sciences, and humanities – as well as all the core missions of these institutions - teaching, research, outreach, interchangeably with ‘scientific’ and ‘science’. Likewise, we use ‘academics’ interchangeably with ‘scientists’, referring therewith to teaching and research staff at higher education or research institutions. We are aware that ‘science’ in English and the Anglo-American tradition refers to the natural sciences only but deliberately promote an inclusive notion of teaching and research practices, as it is common in other European languages and reflects the self-perception of large parts of the European higher education and research sector.

⁴ Africa-Europe Innovation Partnership, 2021

⁵ European External Action Service, 2026. For the combined funding volume of the Africa initiatives I-IV, see numbers provided at the factsheet for each initiative, available at European Commission (n.d.-a).

⁶ European Commission 2023a. For the short- and mid-term, the Agenda calls for reinforcing existing scientific and academic mobility opportunities and developing joint degree programmes as well as more inclusive mobility “to increase the number of future researchers and innovators freely moving among and between both areas” (p. 9). Fostering the emergence of new - and strengthening existing - joint excellence centres through joint calls for proposals constitutes a long-term task of the Agenda.

Global Gateway, the EU's strategy for infrastructure partnerships with Africa, Asia, and Latin America, implemented through combining EU and EU member state funds. Africa counts for the largest regional budget therein.⁷ Also, with its flagship initiative 'Youth Mobility for Africa', the Global Gateway directly promotes higher education collaboration and learning mobility within Africa as well as between Africa and the EU.⁸

Such **collective efforts are widely matched at the member state level**. In France, already the number one European destination for incoming students from Africa, President Macron set the goal of doubling the number of academic partnerships with Africa when coming into office.⁹ Italy's reformulated foreign policy agenda for Africa, the 'Mattei Plan' of 2024, lists collaboration in education and training as the first of five major priorities for action.¹⁰ Also, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), having long considered Africa as its strategic focus region, plans to strengthen its support for academic cooperation with the region.¹¹

Notwithstanding regional and national variation, Europe's quest for intensifying academic exchange with Africa is rooted in four main rationales: first, in the words of President von der Leyen, **Africa is Europe's "natural partner and neighbour"**.¹² Both continents are already prime trade, investment, and development partners. Their deep, complex historical entanglement and geographical proximity tie them together in a myriad of social, cultural, and political ways. The higher education and research sectors of both continents mirror this with their long history of institutional collaboration and exchange relationships.

Second, **global challenges** like climate change, security threats, or pandemics cannot be adequately addressed by Europe's academic and research community alone. If the latter is supposed to contribute to finding solutions, it needs international partners. Africa is of key importance in this regard. Many societal issues in Africa are closely intertwined with those in Europe (e.g. the management of migration flows), and more effective solutions are possible through intercontinental collaboration (e.g. the evolving green energy partnership).

Third, scientific exchange with Africa has gained **increasing geopolitical significance** for Europe. In a period of overall geopolitical instability, the U.S. is retreating from its long-standing development cooperation with Africa, while China and, to a lesser extent,

⁷ Out of the 307 billion euro mobilised in the period 2021-24, about 80 billion targeted sub-Saharan Africa. With northern Africa and the Middle East only slightly smaller, both regions counted for more than half of the Global Gateway funds mobilised (European Commission, n.d.-b).

⁸ See, e.g., European Commission (n.d.-d).

⁹ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs [France], 2025

¹⁰ Italian Government 2024a, 2024b

¹¹ Lüder, 2025

¹² European Commission, 2020

Russia are heightening their efforts to forge partnerships in the region.¹³ Not least, African policy-makers are pushing for intra-African collaboration and developing the continent into a self-confident global player in its own right, as manifested in the Agenda 2063.¹⁴ This puts Europe in the position of a usually very welcome but not exclusive or taken-for-granted partner. In this context, academic collaboration is an important realm of people-to-people exchange and civic dialogue. As part of an emerging framework of ‘science diplomacy’ in the EU, it becomes an element of soft power and a deliberate way to foster relations with key countries and regions.¹⁵

Fourth, Africa-Europe science collaboration offers **great socio-economic potential**. Already home to more than one billion people, Africa will have the largest population of young people in the world by 2030, while Europe’s population, like that of China or the U.S., is ageing and shrinking without immigration. Academic exchange, therefore, has an important role to play in facilitating talent circulation and knowledge exchange in a ‘global race for talent’ and in ensuring the attractiveness of Europe’s higher education sector.¹⁶ Moreover, in a general context of economic expansion, demographic dividend, low-cost renewable energy, digital transformation, and tertiarization, many countries on the African continent push their R&I sectors as drivers of sustainable and inclusive development, economic growth and job generation. R&I partnerships with Africa both support this ambition and, in return, benefit Europe’s R&I sector development as well as its strategic positioning at the global level.¹⁷

2. Issues in visa issuance for African academics and students

Tremendous political and financial efforts at an EU and national levels foster Europe’s academic collaboration with Africa. Its strategic significance for Europe is widely acknowledged. Against this background, **persistent complaints from African academics and students**, experiencing European visa processes as long, wearing, opaque, and sometimes even humiliating, are surprising and worrying.

During the last AU-EU Summit in December 2025, the president of the Association of African Universities (AAU), Professor Olusola Oyewole, explained: “While European partners can often travel to Africa with relative ease, our academics frequently face significant visa hurdles to visit their European counterparts.”¹⁸ In a recent survey among

¹³ This has direct implications for academic cooperation, which has benefitted a lot from U.S. development cooperation, and is an explicit objective of Chinese and Russian foreign policy (see, e.g., Marklein, 2025; Manyukwe, 2026).

¹⁴ African Union Commission, 2015

¹⁵ European Council, 2026; European Commission, n.d.-c. Africa is a primary target region in this framework, demonstrated by the ‘AU-EU Dialogue on Science Diplomacy’, 22 October 2025 (ibid.).

¹⁶ See, e.g., European Commission, 2023.

¹⁷ See, e.g., European Commission, n.d.-a.

¹⁸ cit. in Mitchell, 2025

member institutions of the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), respondents acknowledged Europe's attractive programmes for cooperation and exchange with Africa, but consistently raised "tedious and unpredictable" visa processes as a barrier to mobility.¹⁹ At an Erasmus+ stakeholder conference in Tunis in April 2026, Marcello Scalisi, Director of the Mediterranean university alliance UNIMED, appreciated the EU's increase of cooperation budgets with Africa, but stated that financial resources alone would not suffice to address cooperation challenges between Africa and Europe. Highly complicated visa procedures remain one of the biggest obstacles and should be addressed at the EU level.²⁰

Such voices from sector representatives echo **frequent reports on individual incidents**. For instance, the *Nature* article of Sandra Owusu-Gyamfi, a Ghanaian PhD candidate, received wide attention. She was meant to speak at the Conference of Tropical Ecology in Lisbon 2024 but instead felt "exhausted and insulted" by what she describes as her "EU visa ordeal".²¹ More recently, the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported about Divine, a Ugandan student, who decided against an offered scholarship position in Canada, accepting a study place in Munich instead. She later regretted her decision because she lost both offers due to a waiting time of three months for an embassy appointment and of another eight months until she finally received her German visa.²²

Current research on visa policy

In scientific research on European visa policy, academic mobility is usually not a topic in its own right. But at a more general level, the **literature confirms the frequent and widespread single-case or anecdotal evidence for an 'issue in visa issuance'**. For instance, scholars dealing with visa regimes and their transformations analyse the rise and manifestation of a 'global mobility divide'. Citizens of high-income countries as in Europe have, on average, significantly benefitted from visa waivers and relaxed requirements over the last decades, while mobility rights for citizens from low-income countries, and particularly those from Africa, have stagnated or even diminished.²³

Other contributions deal with European visa regimes in relation to migration policy.²⁴ In this context, Finotelli and Sciortino²⁵ have shown that sweeping notions of a 'fortress Europe' erected by visa policy are generally misleading. Significant variation in visa issuance practices exists across Schengen member states on the one hand and towards different types of non-European countries on the other. However, African countries are

¹⁹ The Guild, 2025, p. 7

²⁰ cit. in Abd Elgalil, 2026

²¹ Owusu-Gyamfi, 2024

²² Gundlach and Lopinski, 2025

²³ Mau *et al.*, 2015; Czaika *et al.*, 2018

²⁴ See for an overview Aygül and Mertek, 2025

²⁵ Finotelli and Sciortino, 2013

an exception, characterised by a significantly lower visa application volume, an extremely higher visa rejection rate as well as an insignificant share in the overall expansion of Schengen short-term visas compared to other world regions. Hence, “[i]f the image of the fortress has some empirical plausibility, it is only along the Southern Mediterranean shores”.²⁶ Recently, Deutschmann *et al.*²⁷ analysed global variation in waiting times for a visa appointment, frequently reported as a major obstacle in the visa application process. Based on the German case and notwithstanding considerable differences across embassies on the continent, they again found that Africa stands out. Here, citizens have by far the longest waiting times and the least chance to secure an available appointment to apply for a visa.

In their report for the Together Science Can campaign, McInroy *et al.*²⁸ provide the only, and therefore much discussed, account of visa issues in relation to scientific mobility so far, albeit with a global focus preventing conclusions for Europe as a mobility destination. Their non-representative survey of about 2500 researchers from 109 countries found that scientists from Africa are three times more likely than Europeans or North Americans to encounter visa-related challenges, especially when applying for a short-term visa. More than one third reported that visa issues constituted an obstacle to going abroad for research purposes.

Findings from the CIVIS Alliance

CIVIS is a European university alliance of 11 European universities and six associate member institutions in Africa. Since the beginning of our intercontinental collaboration in 2022, we have received frequent complaints from our scientific community about the difficulties African colleagues face in obtaining a visa for European partner countries. In our own scientific exchange and events with participants from African member institutions, we regularly encounter failed visa applications resulting in missed collaboration opportunities at best and wasted expenditures at worst. In conversations with African scientists and university representatives, the ‘visa problem’ is usually mentioned as one of the most urgent in Africa-Europe science collaboration.

Due to the lack of more systematic inquiries on European visa processes in this specific realm, we launched two surveys within the CIVIS alliance for exploring the nature and scope of the issue – one survey among African students and scientists with European academic mobility and related visa process experience,²⁹ another among university

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 92

²⁷ Deutschmann *et al.*, 2026

²⁸ McInroy *et al.*, 2018; see p. 26 for results on Africa. See Waruru (2018) for a discussion of those results.

²⁹ Academics (lecturer/researcher/professor) and students (including PhD candidates) from African countries, who applied for a visa to go to a European country for an academic purpose (e.g., study exchange, participation in an academic conference/workshop, teaching, training).

managers in charge of organising or supporting such mobility.³⁰ We recognise our investigations are neither representative nor a sufficient basis for final statements on existing visa issues and policies.³¹ Further data and research on the subject are required. Nevertheless, the survey outcomes suggest four main findings that fit within and inform the more general picture drawn by existing inquiries and anecdotal evidence:

- **Visa issues are a structural phenomenon in academic mobility from Africa to Europe, going beyond single cases or individual challenges.** About 36% of our respondents with relevant visa application experiences reported problems, for which they deem neither themselves nor their sending/receiving institution responsible. Such problems occurred in most of their visa application processes and were in most cases considered to be of major scope, i.e. hardly or not manageable.³²
- **Concrete visa challenges largely revolve around known issues, but also less prominent problems come to the fore.** The three most significant problems – both in terms of severity and frequency – are the much-discussed challenge to get an embassy appointment, the overall length of application processes, and the costs related to visa applications. Further reported problems are the number and type of required documents, problems with mandatory intermediary agencies, communication with the embassies/consulates, long travel distances to embassies/consulates (often in another country), and obtaining appropriate information on the visa application process.³³ Moreover, numerous respondents

³⁰ Persons from Africa or Europe responsible for managing or implementing mobilities of students, academics, or university (Higher Education Institutions) staff from African countries to Europe on a regular basis, e.g., as an International Office representative, an Erasmus+ officer, someone in charge of African-European academic mobility at a faculty, research center, or in an academic network.

³¹ The survey was circulated in six African CIVIS member universities in Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, Uganda, Mozambique, and South Africa in 2025 and 2026. Responses from outside were possible, too, although not explicitly invited. Questionnaire 1 (academics/students) received 264 responses from persons with relevant visa application experiences; the great majority of them with citizenship from Senegal (96), Mozambique (84), Tunisia (81), and Morocco (48). The remaining 27 responses were distributed among 15 African nationalities. Among the 25 European destination countries (including non-EU countries UK, Switzerland, Norway) mentioned by respondents, France stands out with 143 reported visa application experiences, probably due to its close academic and language connections to three top home countries of our respondents (Senegal, Tunisia, Morocco). It is followed by Italy (44), Spain (38), Poland (35), Germany (34). Questionnaire 2 (mobility staff) received 36 responses.

³² The survey initially checked for relevant visa experiences by asking if respondents already faced visa problems when going to Europe for academic purposes and if so, whether they would deem neither themselves nor their sending/hosting institution responsible for their difficulties. We continued with those 36% for whom this was the case and asked for their concrete experiences in eight given issue categories (multiple answers possible). Respondents mentioned the occurrence of problems in such categories in all their applications 154 times, in more than 75% 126 times, in more than 50% 107 times, in more than 25% 78 times, in less than 25% 122 times, never 181 times. The problems were mentioned in 325 cases as being of a major scope (hardly or not manageable), in 168 cases of a medium scope (still manageable), in 75 cases of a small dimension (rather easy to manage). No problem in a specific category was reported in 172 cases.

³³ ‘Getting an appointment’ was mentioned by 88% of the respondents who reported problems as major or medium difficulty, occurring for 66% of them in more than half of their past applications; for 20% even in

report the less discussed challenge of extremely short visa durations limiting, for instance, the necessary flexibility for travel arrangements. Others highlight what they see as a burdensome, inefficient repetition of visa applications due to the denial or absence of a multiple entry visa. Several survey participants also highlight the non-transparent rejection of visa applications or the insufficient consideration of the scientific purpose and partnership underpinning their application. Finally, some respondents report cases in which they felt degraded and humiliated in the process, e.g. by embassy staff treating them with a lack of respect or empathy.

- **Visa issues often result in higher costs, higher efforts, delayed or cancelled stays.** Almost 40% of those facing visa issues already had expended significant extra effort to obtain a visa on-time or to re-arrange a planned stay. 36% did not get a visa on time and, therefore, had to postpone or even cancel their stay. 30% report cases where they did not get a visa at all and, thus, could not go to Europe as planned. 28% faced direct additional costs for re-arranging or cancelling their planned stay.
- **Visa applications for Europe are mostly perceived as more challenging than those for other destinations.** About 63% of our survey participants with relevant visa application experiences find European countries on average more or much more difficult to cope with if compared to other world regions, e.g. North America or Asia. Only 17% regard them as easier or much easier to manage, while 20% see them as about equal.

3. Why Europe must act

Empirical evidence shows a tension between the policy objective for European science collaboration to intensify academic exchange with Africa and the constraints put on this effort by current visa processes. European and EU member states must address this inconsistency by alleviating visa applications for academic mobility – out of self-interest and for upholding European values and commitments. We see three underlying purposes for policy action:

To support the European higher education and research sector in fulfilling its policy objectives: such objectives include attracting global talent, promoting Europe as a destination for globally mobile students and researchers, and strengthening its global significance by producing excellent, internationally recognised teaching offers and R&I

all their past applications. The analogous numbers for the other issues are as follows: length of the application process - 82%/53%/20%, visa related costs - 69%/61%/23%, number and type of documents to be provided - 61%/48%/21%, dealing with a mandatory intermediary - 58%/55%/25%, communication with the embassy/consulate staff - 56%/43%/19%, distance to the embassy/consulate - 52%/36%/19%, obtaining appropriate information on the process - 46%/39%/14%.

results.³⁴ Implementing those objectives relies not least on predictable cross-border academic mobility as a practical necessity in international science collaboration and a proven condition for high quality collaboration outcomes.³⁵

To increase the effectiveness and efficiency of European programmes for academic exchange: apart from strains and challenges experienced by applicants themselves, costly or even unsuccessful visa applications harm national as well as EU science support programmes, among them Erasmus+ and the world’s largest multilateral R&I programme Horizon Europe. Many of those programmes fund academic exchange, including the coverage of travel and visa costs. Cancelled or postponed stays of projects partners or students due to visa problems usually require ad-hoc adjustments by European hosts or curtailments in joint research or educational activities and, thereby, affect programme outputs negatively. They also imply direct financial burdens on programme budgets and, therefore, the European taxpayer, if travel, visa, or accommodation costs for ‘no-show’ participants must be covered.

To ensure the integrity of European science partnerships in a changing geopolitical context: President von der Leyen’s call for an African-European collaboration in a spirit of a “true partnership of equals”³⁶ echoes in the AU and EU member states’ declaration, as in the Joint Vision for 2030, to build a partnership between the continents founded, among other things, on “human ties, respect for sovereignty, mutual respect and accountability, shared values, equality between partners and reciprocal commitments”.³⁷ This commitment strongly resonates in the higher education and research sector. Reports show that European institutions and science support programmes are moving from a ‘donor-recipient’ model towards a strategic vision of ‘equal’ collaboration.³⁸ Manifold initiatives pushing for more equitable partnerships have emerged within Africa’s scientific community and beyond.³⁹ Relationships at eye-level,

³⁴ For instance, the ‘Choose Europe’ initiative not only promotes the leading role of Europe’s R&I sector but directly relates this objective to increasing its attractiveness for globally mobile, talented, and especially young scientists (European Commission, 2025a). In the context of The Union of Skills, the European Commission (2025b, p. 15) proposes the annual target, to be achieved by 2030, of 350,000 non-EU students seeking a tertiary degree in the EU.

Elsewhere, the European Commission (2023b, p. 16) highlights the contribution of shorter-term student academic exchanges, as supported by Erasmus+, for enabling longer-term talent and skills mobility: “Higher education students who have benefited from learning mobility through Erasmus+ are more likely to work abroad or in a job with an international dimension. When people gather positive experiences during temporary learning mobility within the EU, they will be more inclined to return at some stage to take up a job.”

³⁵ Scellato *et al.*, 2017; McInroy *et al.*, 2018

³⁶ von der Leyen, 2019

³⁷ European Council, 2022, p. 1

³⁸ See, e.g. Mitchel, 2025; Abd Elgalil, 2026.

³⁹ The Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations, for instance, sets out principles and aspirations for a global re-configuration of African science partnerships. It is backed by the African Union and all significant sectoral bodies, among them the African Academy of Sciences (AAS), the African Association of Universities (AAU), or the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) (Perivoli African Research Center, n.d.).

especially in cooperations with the ‘Global South’, are not least an explicit foundation of Europe’s new science diplomacy framework.⁴⁰ On behalf of Cyprus’ European Council Presidency, Nicodemus Damianou⁴¹ highlighted its great significance for Europe in the current conjuncture:

In an era defined by geopolitical fragmentation and rapid technological change, science diplomacy is no longer a peripheral endeavour – it is a core strategic imperative. It is through the universal language of science, and a commitment to open yet secured collaboration, that the European Union can not only advance its own interests and values, but also forge a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world; an autonomous Union, open to the world.

Real or perceived hurdles set up by visa application processes risk undermining the integrity of Europe’s commitments and efforts for academic partnerships with Africa. Sector representatives already point to the mismatch between a very welcome and necessary change toward more equitable partnerships on the one hand and the laggard of visa provision on the other.⁴² Even more damaging for Europe’s reputation may be the aggregated effect of negative personal experiences of unequal treatment. As an international team of medical scientists described it:

These inequities are profoundly disorienting when in your country you are considered an academic leader [...]. But in higher-resource countries—if we use the visa process as a proxy—you are considered dishonest at best and a potential criminal at worst. The fear that we would overstay in a foreign country is unfounded and based on racial stereotyping that hampers the development of equitable global relationships.⁴³

4. Our policy positions and recommendations

We call on governments in Europe, particularly those of EU member states, as well as EU institutions to **tackle the ‘issue of visa issuance’** in Africa-Europe academic collaboration.

We **acknowledge the complexities and challenges of visa policy** both in terms of its multi-level political coordination for the Schengen area as well as the need to strategically bridge openness and protection. But easing visa applications for stays of African citizens with a clear scientific purpose must not hamper diligence in visa procedures, the safety of cross-border movements, or the objectives of migration policy. Rather, meaningful measures could be implemented without additional risks and with relatively little effort compared to their potentially significant practical benefits and high symbolic value.

⁴⁰ European Council, 2026a, p. 8, 16

⁴¹ cit. in European Council, 2026b

⁴² See, e.g., Mitchel, 2025.

⁴³ Wondimagegn *et al.*, 2022, p. 38

In regard of the Schengen area, we **recognise past achievements** in facilitating academic mobility through the 2016 and 2019 visa policy reforms. In particular, the waiving of costs for student visas, the extension of application periods, and the introduction of multiple-entry visas for academics have delivered tangible, albeit still insufficient, improvements.

We greatly **appreciate embassy or consulate staff** in African host countries engaging with academic stakeholders and institutions and promoting collaborations with European countries. This sometimes includes direct help in managing problematic visa applications. However, this necessarily single-case, selective, and laborious support – with unpredictable outcomes – cannot replace more consistent, effective, and predictable visa application procedures.

Steps in the right direction: The European Commission's 'EU Visa Strategy' and 'Recommendation on attracting talent for innovation'

We thus **welcome the European Commission's recent 'EU Visa Strategy'** in relation to relevant sections III and IV as well as the parallel '**Recommendation on attracting talent for innovation**'.⁴⁴ In particular, we support the Commission's explicit inclusion of international students and researchers as target groups for easier, faster, and more predictable visa access. We also share the Commission's analysis that policy action in this field may contribute to Europe's attractiveness as a study and research destination and, thereby, to the EU's talent and competitiveness agenda. Most importantly, these documents contain measures and proposals in which we see potential to make real progress on recurrent visa issues:

- We expect students and academics from Africa and beyond to experience easier, faster, more transparent, less costly and burdensome applications in the future through the implementation of **digital visa procedures** and the full roll-out of the **Visa Information System (VIS)**.
- Given frequent complaints on **external service providers (ESP)**, we look forward to the results of the announced study on quality control and effective monitoring in the outsourcing of visa procedures.

Touched upon in the Visa Policy Strategy, elaborated in the Recommendation for Attracting Talent for Innovation, we **endorse several of the Commission's proposals on long-term visa and resident permit provision**, because they directly pertain to needs of Europe's higher education and research sector as well as international students and researchers. With this focus, we especially call on Member States to implement the recommendations to:

⁴⁴ European Commission, 2026a, 2026b

- **Facilitate the submission of applications** by installing user-friendly online application systems. In-person appointments for applications, interviews, or visa collection should be restricted to strictly necessary cases only and sufficient, easily accessible appointments for such cases provided. If sufficient in-person access to consular services is not given in a certain country or region, consular resources in third countries should be pooled, coordinated, or jointly delivered in cooperation with other (EU member) states or EU delegations.
- **Simplify admission** by recognising research organisations and higher education institutions as hosts for international students and researchers. Applicants hosted by such institutions should be exempt from certain documentary requirements. The need to provide a resident address when applying for a visa well in advance of departure should be abandoned.
- **Shorten visa processing times** by providing special recognition for international students and researchers funded by Union programmes (e.g. Erasmus+, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions in Horizon Europe, European Research Council grants). Their visas should be issued as soon as possible within 30 days from the submission date of the application.

Recommendations

The Visa Policy Strategy discusses the significance of its measures for the Higher Education and R&I sector primarily in terms of its role in attracting skills and talent. The Recommendations on attracting talent further expand on this topic, while their proposals mostly target changes in long-term visa and resident permit provision. The underlying, explicit policy focus on unilateral economic benefit and competitiveness, however, must be widened to **include the flourishing of Europe’s international science collaboration and partnerships as a visa policy objective in its own right**. This implies a stronger emphasis on reciprocity, equity, ‘brain circulation’ and academic exchange with international partners as a key feature of an open, dynamic, and excellent higher education and R&I sector in Europe capable of creating international ‘attractiveness’ in the first place. Visa policy has become both an important practical condition as well as a signifier for quality in our partnerships. We thus fully converge with the Commission’s assessment that “Europe’s visa policy is also a projection of partnership and influence. How we open or restrict access sends a clear signal to the world about Europe’s values and strategic interests.”⁴⁵

Taking such a wider policy framework as well as the practical issue in Africa-Europe science collaboration into account, we propose complementing European visa policy in three areas:

⁴⁵ European Commission, 2026a, p.1

- 1) **Systematically include academics and academic purposes in facilitating measures:** The Commission's EU Visa Strategy, section III.1, refers to tourism and business as categories justifying easier visa access. We suggest that EU institutions as well as member states consider 'academia' as a further category requiring preferential treatment. Similarly to the other purposes, academic stays for research or teaching constitute legitimate travel purposes. The EU would strengthen its position as a "global hub" in this realm, and - just as business people - academics may count as "low risk" and "reliable" travellers. Although international researchers and academic staff already often benefit from multiple-entry visas, we suggest extending access to this option to reliable persons, granting such visas earlier and for longer durations.

- 2) **Systematically apply the 'Recommendation on attracting talent for innovation' to short-term visa:** In line with the Commission's reminder (p. 5) on the feasibility of this option, we call on EU member states to systematically adapt and implement the above-mentioned measures, designed for long-term visas, for academic stays of up to 90 days, too. This would imply a direct, significant boost for Europe's international science partnerships, especially with Africa. The proposals for facilitating the submission of applications, simplifying admission, and shortening visa processing times target typical visa issues frequently arising in applications for short-term stays, e.g. for academic conferences, short-term educational offers, or the conduct of research projects. Also, this would benefit EU funded programmes such as Erasmus+ or Horizon Europe, which are frequently used for short-term stays.

- 3) **Give strategic priority to Africa:** We are fully aware that special attention for African countries must be in line with a comprehensive and consistent approach to visa policy in general and towards comparable countries in other world regions in particular. However, Africa stands out as the most disadvantaged region on average in this context while at the same time enjoying great strategic significance for Europe. It thus requires exceptional political consideration. Therefore, we call on EU member states to prioritise policy action on visa applications from African academics and students. In line with the Commission's recommendation (p. 13), member states should also consider the strategic use of EU funding for visa policy implementation, staffing, and equipment in African countries, since they are often locations with long waiting times for visa appointments. Furthermore, we suggest to the European Commission to include priority measures for both Africa and visa for scientific purposes in the task plan for an EU Visa Support Office, charged with training for consular officers, supporting consulates in document verification, or conducting risk assessments and country analyses.

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