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Original Article

France's Policy on Attracting African Students: Balancing Recipient Needs and Donor Interests in Development Cooperation*

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Abstract

This study examines the Official Development Assistance (ODA) policies of France and the United States toward African countries to assess the alignment between donor interests and recipient needs. This study employs a dual analytical framework, comparing settlement- versus return-oriented student mobility, and basic versus higher education priorities. It also explores how each country's

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strategic orientation shapes its educational ODA. France promotes long-term integration by offering elite scholarships, institutional partnerships, and labor market access through initiatives such as the Eiffel Scholarship and Talent Passports. In contrast, the United States emphasizes return-oriented leadership development through initiatives such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship, targeting individual empowerment rather than institutional transformation. Drawing on policy documents, the study finds that both countries demonstrate partial alignment with recipient needs but remain constrained by donor-driven objectives, such as talent retention or ideological influence. To address these limitations, this study recommends more equitable, capacity-oriented, and re-integration-supportive approaches to higher education ODA. These insights are more relevant for emerging donors, such as South Korea, whose education ODA currently focuses on basic and vocational education. This study suggests that Korea could enhance its development cooperation by expanding its support for higher education and its long-term institutional capacity.

Key words: Higher Education Official Development Assistance (ODA), Donor-Recipient Relations, France-Africa Cooperation, Brain Drain, Postcolonial Development

Ⅰ. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, France has experienced a significant increase in the enrollment of international students, particularly from African nations. As of the 2022–2023 academic year, France hosted approximately 412,000 international students, marking a 3% rise from the previous year and a 17% increase over five years (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Among them, students from Sub-Saharan and North Africa accounted for nearly half—95,285 and 91,865 respectively—showing notable growth of 34% and 10% between 2017 and 2022. Furthermore, African students represented 58% of international students enrolled in engineering schools and 45% of those in doctoral programs, illustrating the sectoral concentration of African mobility (Campus France, 2024).

This upward trend underscores France's strategic efforts to attract and retain talent from the African continent through its higher education Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs. Initiatives such as the "Choose France/Bienvenue en France" plan aim to welcome 500,000 international students by 2027, emphasizing scholarship expansion, streamlined visa processes, and the development of joint academic programs (Le Monde, 2024a). These policies not only enhance France's soft power but also address domestic labor market needs by integrating skilled graduates into the workforce.

To contextualize France's approach, this paper compares it with the United States' higher education ODA strategies. The U.S. stands as a significant comparator due to its substantial ODA contributions and its distinct philosophy on human capital development. Programs like the Mandela Washington Fellowship exemplify the U.S. emphasis on short-term training with expectations for participants to return to their home countries, contrasting with France's tendency to facilitate long-term settlement through mechanisms like the "Talent Passport" (Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2024; USAID, 2023).

While the primary comparison focuses on France and the United States, the analysis also holds relevance foremerging donors such as South Korea, which is beginning to expand its footprint in higher education ODA. The findings offer comparative insights that may inform the development of more balanced and capacity-oriented strategies among new actors in the aid landscape.

This comparative analysis employs a dual-framework: (1) the degree of return

expectation versus long-term settlement, and (2) the targeted stage of education support—whether basic or higher education. By examining these dimensions, the study aims to elucidate how donor countries' ODA policies influence student mobility patterns and contribute to capacity building in recipient nations.

Ⅱ. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: DONOR'S INTERESTS AND RECIPIENT'S NEEDS

To effectively compare the higher education ODA strategies of France and the United States in their engagement with African countries, this study adopts a two-dimensional analytical framework focusing on both the intended post-study trajectory of students and the level of educational investment. These dimensions reflect not only the donor country's development objectives but also its underlying strategic interests—ranging from soft power expansion to domestic labor needs.

The first dimension concerns whether students are encouraged or required to return to their home countries after completing their studies, termed a return-oriented approach, or are instead provided with pathways to remain in the donor country, often through employment-linked migration mechanisms—defined here as a settlement-oriented approach.

A clear example of a return-oriented model can be found in the education ODA programs implemented by the United States. Many U.S.-funded initiatives, such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship under the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), explicitly require that participants return to their countries of origin upon completion of the program. This policy is designed to ensure that the skills, training, and leadership experience acquired in the U.S. are reinvested in local communities and institutions across Africa. In doing so, the U.S. positions its education aid as a tool for strengthening domestic capacity in recipient nations, rather than facilitating long-term migration (Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2024; USAID, 2023).

In contrast, France represents a settlement-oriented model, particularly in its policies targeting African students in graduate-level education. Through programs like the "Talent Passport," international graduates, especially in priority fields such as science, technology, and engineering, are offered facilitated access to long-term residence and employment in France (Welcome to France, 2024). These policies

suggest that France's education ODA strategy is designed not only to support international cooperation but also to attract and retain high-skilled talent for its own labor market. As such, education aid becomes closely intertwined with immigration policy and national workforce planning (Le Monde, 2024b).

The second analytical dimension distinguishes between donor support for basic education, such as primary literacy and teacher training, and higher education, including university-level scholarships, academic exchanges, and institutional partnerships. While both levels are essential to long-term development, higher education has become increasingly strategic for donor countries that seek to strengthen bilateral influence, build intellectual ties, and attract future global leaders (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2014).

France's education ODA is overwhelmingly concentrated in the higher education sector. Its policies prioritize elite scholarships, joint-degree programs, and the expansion of French academic institutions abroad, particularly in francophone Africa. These initiatives are aligned with France's broader foreign policy agenda, where education functions as an instrument of soft power and cultural diplomacy (Campus France, 2024). In contrast, the United States continues to devote significant resources to basic education initiatives, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where large-scale USAID programs have long focused on improving literacy rates, expanding access to primary education, and training teachers (USAID, 2023).

Taken together, this two-dimensional framework—focusing on (1) return versus settlement orientation and (2) basic versus higher education—provides a basis for evaluating how different donor strategies shape the flow of international students and their long-term developmental impact. By applying this framework, the following sections will compare the French and American approaches to higher education ODA and draw out relevant implications for development policy and donor alignment.

Ⅲ. FRANCE'S HIGHER EDUCATION OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE FOR AFRICA

1. Strategic Objectives and Policy Logic

France has consistently placed higher education at the heart of its Africa policy,

framing it as both a tool of development and a vehicle of diplomatic influence. Official strategies emphasize higher education as a "lever for transformation," combining normative claims with geopolitical interests and labor market concerns (Campus France, 2023a; MEAE, 2018). Especially in Francophone Africa, these policies serve to reinforce France's linguistic, institutional, and cultural influence across generations of African elites.

The operationalization of these strategies is evident through various programs and agencies. Campus France plays a central role in coordinating student mobility and promoting French universities abroad. One of its flagship tools is the Eiffel Excellence Scholarship, which funds master's and doctoral-level studies for top international students in priority fields such as engineering, economics, law, and political science. In the 2022–2023 academic year, the program awarded approximately 400 scholarships, with a notable share allocated to students from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb region (Campus France, 2023b). Complementing this is the AFD (2024), which supports regional and bilateral scholarship schemes as well as academic partnerships focused on institutional reform and technical training.

Beyond scholarships, France's visa and migration policies also reflect a settlement-oriented model. The Talent Passport scheme, introduced in 2016, allows foreign graduates who secure jobs in designated strategic sectors to apply for long-term residence. This pathway not only streamlines immigration processes for high-potential students but also reinforces France's domestic workforce through selective integration of foreign-trained professionals (Welcome to France, 2024). In 2022 alone, over 11,000 Talent Passports were granted—many to applicants from African countries (Le Monde, 2024a).

Another pillar of France's ODA strategy is its investment in joint academic institutions and transnational education programs. The Université Franco-Sénégalaise in Dakar and the Franco-Gabonese academic initiatives illustrate France's effort to internationalize its higher education model while expanding access to French degrees abroad. These initiatives form part of the broader "Choose France" strategy, which sets an ambitious target of attracting 500,000 international students by 2027 (Campus France, 2023a).

Taken together, these mechanisms—scholarships, labor integration policies, and institutional cooperation—demonstrate a deliberate strategy to attract and retain

talented individuals from Africa. In 2022 alone, France issued over 11,000 Talent Passports, many of which were granted to African nationals (Le Monde, 2024b). Additionally, about 24% of all French government scholarship recipients are from Sub-Saharan Africa, while North Africa and the Middle East together receive 29% (Campus France, 2024). While framed in developmental terms, France's education ODA increasingly serves national interests, blurring the boundary between aid and strategic recruitment. The long-term outcome is a system that encourages settlement and cultivates a transnational elite aligned with French cultural and economic norms.

2. Responding to Recipient Needs: African Higher Education in Transition

Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing one of the fastest growth rates in youth population globally, and this demographic surge has placed immense pressure on national education systems. According to UNESCO (2023), the number of students enrolled in tertiary education in Sub-Saharan Africa increased from 4.5 million in 2000 to over 10 million in 2020, reflecting a gross enrollment ratio that nearly doubled in two decades. Yet despite this growth, the region continues to face substantial challenges in access, equity, and quality of higher education.

Public universities in many African countries suffer from chronic underfunding, overcrowding, and infrastructural deficiencies, all of which hinder institutional capacity to meet growing domestic demand (World Bank, 2022). Moreover, the mismatch between academic curricula and labor market needs has created high rates of graduate unemployment, prompting growing numbers of African students to seek opportunities abroad.

This outward mobility is not only driven by personal aspirations, but also by systemic deficiencies within domestic education systems across the continent. As Woldegiorgis &Doevenspeck (2015) argue, African student mobility is shaped by structural inequalities, such as limited research capacity, outdated infrastructure, and lack of academic freedom, which constrain the ability of local institutions to meet growing demand.

This outward mobility is also driven by perceptions of higher educational qual-

ity, global recognition of degrees, and enhanced career prospects in host countries. As a result, France and the United States have become increasingly important destinations for African students. These choices are not made in a vacuum. As Altbach (2004) points out, global knowledge hierarchies, which are dominated by Western institutions, have positioned African universities at a structural disadvantage, encouraging students to seek academic legitimacy, quality, and opportunity abroad. While France draws upon historical, linguistic, and institutional ties—especially within Francophone Africa—the United States is perceived as a global hub for innovation, leadership training, and entrepreneurship (Campus France, 2023a; IIE, 2024).

For donors, supporting African higher education is no longer simply about expanding access, but about building knowledge systems, research capacities, and human capital pipelines that can drive local development. In this context, ODA programs that offer high-quality tertiary training, along with scholarships and academic mobility, are aligned with recipient needs in terms of both individual aspirations and systemic reform (OECD, 2021).

France and the U.S. have responded to these demands in markedly different ways, reflecting distinct policy logics. France has emphasized long-term cooperation and institutional partnerships, while simultaneously offering skilled African students opportunities for long-term settlement. In contrast, the U.S. has focused on short-term leadership training with reintegration incentives aimed at maximizing knowledge transfer to home countries. These contrasting approaches will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

3. Tensions and Alignments between France's Donor Interests and African Educational Needs

France's higher education ODA strategy exhibits both significant alignments and potential tensions with the evolving educational needs of African countries. On one hand, its long-standing commitment to expanding academic mobility, providing scholarships, and building institutional partnerships has directly responded to the increasing demand for high-quality tertiary education across the continent. On the other hand, France's settlement-oriented policy design raises questions about

the developmental impact of its aid—particularly with regard to brain drain and recipient-country capacity building.

Alignment is evident in several dimensions. First, African students benefit from access to prestigious institutions, specialized training, and international exposure. Programs such as the Eiffel Excellence Scholarship target key sectors like engineering, economics, and law, that are critical to the development agendas of many African countries (Campus France, 2023b). France has also promoted partnerships with African universities, such as the Université Franco-Sénégalaise, which foster South-North academic collaboration and curricular reform, thereby supporting capacity building at the institutional level.

Moreover, France's use of French as the medium of instruction and its support for Francophone institutions resonate strongly with the linguistic and educational ecosystems of many African countries. For students from Francophone Africa, the transition to French higher education is often smoother, reducing cultural barriers and promoting academic success (OECD, 2021).

However, tensions emerge when France's policy logic is viewed through the lens of long-term migration. While offering employment pathways and residency through the Talent Passportenhances opportunities for individual students, it also increases the likelihood of talent retention in France rather than return to home countries. This raises concerns about brain drain, particularly among highly skilled graduates in sectors already facing shortages in Africa (Le Monde, 2024b). In this sense, France's education aid may inadvertently contribute to the very inequalities it seeks to reduce.

Additionally, while France frames its policies as "mutually beneficial," the strong emphasis on attracting top-performing students aligns more with donor interests in labor market supplementation and soft power projection than with equitable educational development. There is limited evidence that France actively supports the return or reintegration of graduates into their countries of origin, nor are there structured alumni programs that link the skills acquired abroad with local employment opportunities (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

In summary, France's higher education ODA strategy reflects a complex interplay between development assistance and national interest. While it provides significant benefits to African students and institutions, it does so within a framework that favors donor-side priorities—particularly talent acquisition and geopolitical influence.

These tensions call for a more balanced model that enhances reciprocal benefits and supports the long-term educational and economic goals of recipient countries.

Ⅳ. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THE CASE OF THE UNITED STATES

1. Policy Orientation and Institutional Architecture

The United States was selected as the primary comparator to France not only because of its scale and influence in global education ODA, but also due to the contrast it offers in terms of strategic orientation. Whereas France combines educational aid with labor integration and long-term settlement, the U.S. emphasizes short-term leadership development and return migration. This binary contrast helps highlight the broader spectrum of donor motivations and aid logics in the higher education ODA landscape.

France and the United States adopt fundamentally different approaches to higher education ODA in terms of both policy orientation and institutional architecture. These distinctions reflect broader national philosophies on development assistance, the degree of centralization in governance, and the extent to which education aid is aligned with foreign policy, immigration, and labor agendas.

France operates under a centralized, state-led model in which higher education ODA is strategically embedded in its diplomatic and soft power agenda. The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE), in collaboration with Campus France, plays a crucial role in administering scholarship programs, promoting French universities abroad, and negotiating bilateral partnerships. This model ensures policy coherence and allows educational aid to serve broader objectives such as geopolitical influence, labor market supplementation, and the maintenance of Francophone networks (Campus France, 2024; MEAE, 2018).

Importantly, France integrates its education aid with immigration and employment policies. The Talent Passport program, introduced in 2016, facilitates residence for foreign graduates employed in strategic sectors such as science, technology, and innovation. In 2022 alone, over 11,000 Talent Passports were issued, with a considerable share going to applicants from African countries (Le Monde, 2024a).

These efforts are closely tied to the Bienvenue en France strategy, launched in 2018, which aims to attract 500,000 international students by 2027 by improving student services and easing visa procedures—thereby strengthening France's global competitiveness and cultural outreach (CampusFrance, 2023a).

In contrast, the United States follows a decentralized and pluralistic model, where multiple agencies play a role in shaping education ODA. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) remains the primary body for managing education assistance, historically focusing on basic education. However, in recent years, it has expanded its engagement with higher education through partnerships with universities, NGOs, and private-sector organizations (USAID, 2023).

Highereducation programs like the Mandela Washington Fellowship, managed by the U.S. Department of State, embody a development-centered orientation. These programs are executed through collaborations with American universities and civil society actors, and emphasize leadership development with a strict expectation of return and reintegration. Unlike France, U.S. education aid is largely disconnected from immigration or labor policy; there are few structured pathways for international students to remain in the United States after their studies unless they independently secure employment under limited visa categories (IIE, 2024; USAID, 2023).

In summary, while both countries provide higher education aid to Africa, their institutional frameworks and strategic objectives diverge sharply. France employs a state-driven, labor-integrated model that links education with long-term settlement and national interest. The U.S., by contrast, relies on a development-oriented, institutionally fragmented model that privileges local capacity building and short-term mobility. These distinctions shape not only the operational logic of education ODA but also its long-term developmental outcomes.

2. Donor-Centered Orientation and Geostrategic Alignment in U.S. Higher Education Official Development Assistance (ODA)

While the United States frequently presents its higher education ODA as a tool for empowering individuals and building local capacity, the structure and logic of many U.S.-funded programs reveal a donor-centered orientation closely aligned with broader geostrategic interests. Rather than addressing structural inequalities in

African higher education systems or expanding large-scale access, U.S. initiatives tend to focus on selective leadership development and the dissemination of democratic values to a limited cohort of high-performing individuals (USAID, 2023).

A prominent example is the Mandela Washington Fellowship, part of the YALI, which annually selects around 700 emerging leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa to participate in six weeks of intensive training at U.S. universities (Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2024). Although framed as a development program, the Fellowship explicitly seeks to cultivate ideological alignment with U.S. values, including liberal democracy, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement (U.S. Department of State, 2024). As stated on the YALI website, the goal is to develop a generation of African leaders "connected to the United States and committed to democratic principles" (YALI, 2024).

This alignment is further evident in the targeting of specific countries and individuals. The program consistently prioritizes participants from geo-strategically important nations such as Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa—countries where the U.S. has broader security and economic interests (Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2024). While these programs can yield meaningful micro-level impact, they are not designed to catalyze system-wide educational transformation. Moreover, the limited availability of full scholarships for degree-seeking students from Africa suggests that the U.S. strategy emphasizes influence cultivation over equity-driven access expansion (IIE, 2024).

Beyond individual training, the U.S. supports university-to-university partnerships in fields like STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), agriculture, and public health. However, these collaborations often maintain a hierarchical structure in which U.S. institutions lead research design, funding allocation, and project management—reinforcing asymmetrical power dynamics typical of North-South academic cooperation (Ahlstrom, 2022). These partnerships promote American higher education models as global standards, thereby expanding soft power and normative influence in Africa.

Taken together, U.S. higher education ODA reflects a geopolitically informed, donor-centered model that emphasizes strategic return over systemic development. While it undoubtedly builds capacity in selected individuals, it falls short of addressing broader issues such as institutional reform, mass access, or long-term

reintegration. The effectiveness of this model depends less on development outcomes and more on how closely recipients align with U.S. strategic and ideological objectives.

3. Addressing Recipient Needs through Capacity-Oriented Approaches

The extent to which donor countries address the actual needs of recipient countries, particularly in strengthening institutional and human capacity, has become a central benchmark in evaluating the developmental effectiveness of ODA. In the African context, where higher education systems face challenges such as underfunding, limited research output, and brain drain, capacity-oriented approaches require more than just individual scholarships. They demand system-level investment in faculty development, institutional reform, and long-term knowledge production (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

France's strategy demonstrates a partial alignment with these needs, particularly through its investments in joint campuses and Franco-African academic partnerships. For example, the Université Franco-Sénégalaise in Dakar offers dual degrees and joint faculty appointments, promoting South-North academic mobility and localized access to high-quality education (Campus France, 2024). Such partnerships aim to improve institutional capacity by embedding French standards and resources inAfrican contexts. However, the emphasis remains on Francophone Africa, raising concerns about inclusivity and linguistic hegemony (Knight, 2014).

In terms of human capital development, France supports elite scholarships through the Eiffel Program but lacks robust follow-up mechanisms to reintegrate graduates into their home-country systems. The Talent Passport facilitates their transition into the French labor market, often at the expense of recipient-country knowledge ecosystems (Welcome to France, 2024). As a result, while France contributes to individual capacity, its systemic impact in Africa is uneven and skewed toward retaining high-skill labor within its own borders (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

By contrast, the U.S. emphasizes individual leadership capacity through return-oriented programs like the Mandela Washington Fellowship. Participants are not only expected to return home but also receive post-program support in the

form of small grants, local alumni networks, and mentorship for launching social initiatives (Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2024). This model attempts to link skills development with local impact, although its scalability remains limited due to the small number of beneficiaries and the absence of comprehensive institutional partnerships (USAID, 2023).

Nevertheless, the U.S. has invested in long-term university partnerships, such as the U.S.-Africa Higher Education Partnership Initiative, which supports collaborative research in public health, agriculture, and climate resilience. These efforts, while often U.S.-led, aim to enhance local research capacity and institutional autonomy over time (World Bank, 2022). Still, critics argue that the asymmetric nature of these partnerships often reproduces donor–recipient hierarchies and undermines reciprocal knowledge exchange (Ahlstrom, 2022).

In summary, both countries offer partial responses to recipient needs. France focuses more on bilateral academic integration and student retention, while the U.S. centers on short-term leadership training with home-country reintegration. Neither model offers a fully capacity-oriented approach at scale. Addressing systemic educational needs in Africa will require more inclusive, sustainable, and co-owned initiatives that empower local institutions—not just elite individuals.

V. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of France and the United States reveals two distinct paradigms in higher education ODA to Africa. Both donors have significantly contributed to expanding academic opportunities for African students, yet they do so through sharply contrasting strategic logics, policy instruments, and institutional frameworks.

France adopts a settlement-oriented, institutionally integrated approach that embeds higher education aid within its broader foreign policy and labor market strategy. Through elite scholarships, academic partnerships, and long-term residency pathways such as the Talent Passport, France positions education as a channel for skilled migration and soft power expansion. While this model offers African students high-quality education and professional mobility, it often does so at the cost of brain circulation, resulting in the retention of talent in France rather

than its reintegration into African systems. The benefits to individual recipients are clear, but the broader development impact in Africa remains uneven and donor-centric (Campus France, 2024; Welcome to France, 2024).

The United States, by contrast, follows a return-oriented and leadership-focused model that aligns more closely with traditional development principles. Programs like the Mandela Washington Fellowship are explicitly designed to build local capacity by supporting emerging leaders who are expected to return and implement community-based change. However, the scale of such interventions is limited, and U.S. education ODA provides few institutional linkages or scholarships for full degree programs. As a result, while the U.S. model may be more aligned with the rhetoric of recipient needs, its impact is constrained by its narrow targeting and limited systemic engagement (Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2024; USAID, 2023).

Both models reflect a form of partial alignment between donor interests and recipient needs. France's approach offers structural support through institutional collaboration but is often guided by domestic labor priorities. The U.S. promotes values-based leadership and return migration but does not invest in broad-based capacity building. In neither case do we see a fully recipient-centered, system-strengthening strategy that empowers local ownership of the development process.

This comparative tension illustrates a broader dilemma in international education aid: balancing the strategic interests of donors with the long-term developmental goals of recipients. While both France and the United States frame their ODA in terms of mutual benefit, the implementation often favors donor-side objectives—whether in the form of talent acquisition, ideological alignment, or soft power projection. Addressing this misalignment requires a shift toward capacity-oriented partnerships that include co-design, co-ownership, and long-term reintegration mechanisms.

Given these contrasting models and their limitations, emerging donors—particularly South Korea—have the opportunity to design alternative frameworks from the outset. Korea's current emphasis on basic education can be gradually expanded to include higher education partnerships that avoid the donor-centric pitfalls observed in traditional models.

Future donor strategies would benefit from moving beyond elite-focused mobility

and short-term leadership programs toward inclusive and systemic investments—such as faculty development, institutional infrastructure, and policy reform. Only through such efforts can higher education ODA contribute meaningfully to Africa's long-term development and ensure that aid effectiveness is measured not by donor influence, but by recipient transformation.

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FRANCE'S HIGHER EDUCATION OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (ODA)

To ensure that higher education ODA contributes meaningfully to both national development strategies in African countries and global development effectiveness principles, donor countries must recalibrate their policies to better reflect the long-term needs of recipients. The following recommendations are offered to guide more equitable, responsive, and sustainable donor engagement in African higher education.

Donor governments should prioritize system-level capacity building over individual-level mobility. While scholarships for elite students remain important, they must be complemented by support for institutional development. This includes investment in research infrastructure, faculty development, curriculum modernization, and quality assurance systems that strengthen the long-term capabilities of African universities (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

In addition, both sending and receiving countries should establish structured reintegration mechanisms to ensure that students whostudy abroad are able to contribute effectively upon their return. These mechanisms might include national reintegration schemes, targeted job placement, incentives for public sector service, or partnerships between universities and government agencies to absorb returning graduates into relevant sectors (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; USAID, 2023).

Donors should also work to make academic partnerships more mutually accountable and co-designed. Current models often perpetuate North–South asymmetries where African institutions act as junior partners. Shifting toward joint agenda-setting, shared governance, and co-publication models would enable more balanced knowledge production and institutional reciprocity (Ahlstrom, 2022; Knight, 2014).

Equity in access must become a core goal of education ODA. Programs should expand support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and non-elite institutions through regional scholarships, digital learning platforms, and localized academic hubs. This would help reduce the concentration of ODA benefits among urban, well-connected elites and support inclusive educational development (UNESCO, 2023).

Furthermore, the evaluation of ODA effectiveness should be tied to recipient-defined outcomes—such as institutional performance, national graduate employment rates, or contributions to innovation systems—rather than to donor-side metrics such as the number of inbound students or program visibility. Transparent and collaborative monitoring mechanisms will ensure that development outcomes are jointly owned and mutually accountable.

These lessons are not only relevant to traditional donors such as France and the United States but also hold meaningful implications for emerging donors like South Korea. Korea's education ODA has so far focused primarily on basic education and vocational training in developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, with notable initiatives in Ghana and Ethiopia (KEDI, 2023; SEO, 2024). While these interventions address important foundational needs, Korea has yet to develop a comprehensive strategy for supporting higher education or leadership development abroad. Drawing on the strengths and limitations of both the French and American models, Korea could consider gradually expanding its education ODA to include targeted scholarships, academic partnerships, and reintegration pathways that foster long-term capacity building in partner countries. France, for instance, directs 36% of its bilateral ODA—equivalent to €2.9 billion—to Africa and maintains 26 out of 51 AFD offices across the continent (AFD, 2024; France Diplomatie, 2024).

By incorporating these recommendations, donor countries can evolve from models centered on national interest or ideological projection to ones that genuinely support recipient-led transformation. A shift toward capacity-oriented, inclusive, and reintegration-focused education ODA is essential for building sustainable higher education systems across Africa. This presents an opportunity for Korea to innovate, not replicate, in shaping a more equitable model of higher education ODA.

Ⅶ. LIMITATIONS

While this study provides a comparative analysis of France's and the United States' higher education ODA strategies toward African countries, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary sources, including government reports, institutional data, and academic literature. Although these materials offer valuable insights, the absence of primary data—such as interviews with policymakers, program administrators, or student beneficiaries—limits the depth of interpretation, particularly regarding the lived experiences and perspectives of African recipients.

Second, the scope of this study is restricted to two major donors. While France and the U.S. represent influential and contrasting models, other significant education donors—such as Germany, China, and the United Kingdom—have adopted alternative strategies that may offer additional insights into the diversity of donor approaches. Including a broader range of donor cases would enhance the generalizability and comparative strength of the findings.

Third, the study focuses on higher education ODA, without extensive discussion of how it interacts with other dimensions of education aid, such as support for basic education or vocational training. As education systems are interdependent, future research could benefit from a more integrated, sector-wide analysis.

Finally, the study does not fully capture the heterogeneity within recipient countries. African nations differ significantly in terms of education infrastructure, political priorities, and absorptive capacity. Treating "Africa" as a generalized category risks overlooking important contextual variations that shape the effectiveness and reception of donor strategies.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a useful analytical framework for understanding how donor interests and recipient needs align—or diverge—in the realm of international higher education aid. It also lays the groundwork for more empirically grounded and recipient-centered studies in the future. This concern aligns with earlier critiques by Samoff & Carrol (2003), who warned that donor-driven educational aid models often fail to account for local realities, resulting in interventions that are externally designed, poorly contextualized, and difficult to

sustain over time.

Ⅷ. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the higher education ODA strategies of France and the United States toward African countries, using a dual analytical framework based on student mobility orientation (return vs. settlement) and the level of educational engagement (basic vs. higher education). Through this lens, the analysis reveals that both donors, despite their differing approaches, reflect a partial alignment with recipient needs—often shaped by domestic priorities and strategic interests (Campus France, 2023a; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; USAID, 2023).

France offers a state-led, settlement-oriented model that integrates education aid with immigration and labor policy. Programs such as the Talent Passport and the Eiffel Excellence Scholarship illustrate France's dual goal of promoting international cooperation while also attracting high-skilled foreign talent to its domestic labor market (Campus France, 2023b; Welcome to France, 2024). While this model builds transnational academic networks and facilitates African student mobility, it often lacks structured reintegration mechanisms, increasing the risk of brain drain from the recipient countries (Le Monde, 2024b).

The United States, by contrast, emphasizes return-oriented leadership development through selective initiatives such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship. These programs aim to empower young African professionals who are expected to return and implement community-level change in their home countries (Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2024; USAID, 2023). However, the small scale of these efforts and the absence of system-level support for African institutions limit their broader developmental impact (Ahlstrom, 2022; IIE, 2024).

These findings suggest that both countries approach higher education ODA not merely as a development tool, but also as an extension of foreign policy and geopolitical strategy. As such, their programs tend to prioritize elite individuals, institutional branding, and influence projection over inclusive, capacity-building outcomes (Knight, 2014; OECD, 2021).

To realign ODA with recipient-defined goals, this paper has proposed a shift toward capacity-oriented, equity-sensitive, and co-designed strategies. Such approaches would move beyond the donor-centric logic of visibility and retention

and instead invest in sustainable partnerships, institutional resilience, and the re-integration of talent in African higher education systems (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Ultimately, if higher education ODA is to serve as a genuine engine for development, it must prioritize transformation in the regions it intends to support—not just the strategic aspirations of the countries that fund it. France and the United States, as long-standing leaders in this field, have the opportunity and responsibility to reimagine their roles not only as donors, but as partners in global educational justice. These insights are also relevant to emerging donors, such as South Korea, seeking to define their role in the evolving landscape of education aid.

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