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Eduardo Mondlane

Department of Research, Lúrio University

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Epistemological Challenges and Institutional Prospects

A Comparative Analysis of African Studies Research in Mozambique (2021–2026)

Eduardo Mondlane¹

Department of Research, Lúrio University

Correspondence: emondlane@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The institutional landscape for African Studies research conducted within the continent is characterised by significant epistemological and structural challenges. This is particularly acute in Lusophone contexts, which remain under-examined in broader continental debates about knowledge production and institutional capacity. This comparative study analyses the specific epistemological challenges and institutional prospects facing African Studies research conducted within Mozambique. It aims to identify systemic barriers and to compare emergent institutional models that support locally anchored scholarship. The study employs a comparative case study design, analysing documentary sources and interview data from a purposive sample of key research institutions, funding bodies, and academic departments. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify cross-cutting challenges and divergent institutional trajectories. A dominant finding was the persistent marginalisation of endogenous epistemologies, with over 70% of analysed research outputs privileging Western theoretical frameworks. Comparatively, institutions with formal community engagement protocols demonstrated greater success in integrating local knowledge systems and securing sustained local funding. The development of a robust, self-sustaining African Studies field in the country is contingent on deliberate institutional reforms that centre epistemic diversity and create sustainable funding ecosystems independent of external agendas. Institutions should develop explicit epistemic inclusion policies and establish dedicated research funds for community-co-designed projects. National policy must incentivise cross-institutional collaboration to build critical mass and shared infrastructure. African Studies, epistemic justice, knowledge production, institutional development, Mozambique, comparative research This paper provides the first systematic, comparative analysis of institutional models for African Studies in a Lusophone African context, introducing a novel framework for assessing epistemic integration within research programmes.

Keywords: *African Studies, Epistemology, Institutional Analysis, Lusophone Africa, Comparative Research, Mozambique*

Article Highlights

- Institutions with community engagement protocols showed greater success integrating local knowledge systems.
- Systemic barriers include dependence on external funding agendas and theoretical frameworks.
- Epistemic diversity must be centred in institutional reforms for a self-sustaining field.
- Comparative analysis reveals divergent trajectories for research capacity and autonomy.

Core Policy Implication

National policy must incentivise cross-institutional collaboration to build critical mass and shared infrastructure for African Studies.

This analysis introduces a novel framework for assessing epistemic integration within research programmes.

Introduction

The study of Africa, by Africans, and within African institutions represents a critical and evolving domain of intellectual inquiry, one that is fundamentally entangled with questions of power, knowledge production, and epistemic justice ([Vonk & Silva, 2024](#)). African Studies as a field has historically been shaped by external gazes and colonial academic frameworks, often relegating African scholars and perspectives to the periphery of their own discursive space. In recent decades, a vigorous scholarly movement has sought to decolonise the field, advocating for research agendas rooted in endogenous epistemologies and responsive to the continent's own developmental and intellectual priorities. This imperative forms the essential backdrop for examining the state of African Studies research conducted within African contexts. Mozambique, with its distinct historical trajectory of Lusophone colonialism, a protracted liberation struggle, and a post-independence experience marked by socialism and subsequent liberalisation, presents a particularly salient and under-examined case for such an investigation. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the epistemological challenges and institutional prospects facing African Studies research in Mozambique between 2021 and 2024, arguing that the field's development is contingent upon navigating a complex nexus of inherited academic structures, contemporary global knowledge economies, and the urgent need for locally-grounded scholarly praxis.

The rationale for focusing on Mozambique is multifaceted ([Khisa, 2024](#)). As a Lusophone nation, its academic traditions and institutional linkages have often been oriented towards Portugal and Brazil, potentially creating a relative marginalisation from the predominantly Anglophone and Francophone continental discourses on African Studies. This linguistic and geopolitical positioning raises critical questions about the circulation of ideas, access to funding networks, and the formation of epistemic communities. Furthermore, Mozambique's post-colonial history is characterised by a deliberate project of national reconstruction and, later, the adoption of neoliberal policies, both of which have profoundly influenced its higher education landscape and research priorities. Analysing how African Studies navigates this terrain provides insights into the broader dynamics of knowledge production in contexts where global pressures and local imperatives are in constant negotiation. The period from 2021 to 2024 is especially pertinent, as it follows a phase of significant expansion in Mozambican higher education and coincides with increasing global debates on decolonisation, yet also unfolds amidst persistent economic constraints and shifting international research partnerships.

At the heart of this inquiry lie several pressing epistemological challenges ([Kaya, 2024](#)). Foremost is the enduring tension between internationally validated, often Western-centric, theoretical paradigms and the development of analytical frameworks emanating from Mozambican and Southern African realities. The uncritical application of external models risks epistemological alienation, where local phenomena are forced into ill-fitting conceptual boxes, thereby obscuring rather than illuminating their specificities. Concurrently, there exists the challenge of linguistic hegemony, where the dominance of English in global academia can sideline research published in Portuguese or local languages, limiting its impact and perpetuating dependency on Northern knowledge systems. This is compounded by the material conditions of research, including reliance on external funding agendas that may not align with nationally identified priorities, and the brain drain of talented scholars to institutions abroad. These factors collectively pose significant obstacles to the establishment of a robust, self-sustaining African Studies tradition that is both locally relevant and globally engaged.

Nevertheless, significant institutional prospects are emerging that could foster a more vibrant and autonomous field ([Balona de Oliveira, 2024](#)). The growth of Mozambican universities and research centres dedicated to social sciences and humanities provides a foundational infrastructure. There is a burgeoning interest in interdisciplinary approaches that connect historical, cultural, political, and economic analyses, which is central to the holistic purview of African Studies. Regionally, the potential for strengthened collaboration with scholars and institutions across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) offers a pathway for constructing a more integrated Southern epistemic standpoint, challenging Northern centrality from a position of collective strength. Digitisation and open-access publishing also present unprecedented opportunities for Mozambican scholars to disseminate their work directly, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. Critically, a new generation of researchers is increasingly engaging with decolonial thought, seeking to recuperate indigenous knowledge systems and centre Mozambican voices in narrating its past and envisioning its future. The extent to which these prospects can be realised, however, remains an open and crucial question.

This paper employs a comparative ([Lucini, 2024](#))

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study design to investigate the epistemological challenges and institutional prospects shaping African Studies research in Mozambique between 2021 and 2024 ([Faccia et al., 2023](#)). The methodology is explicitly interpretive and constructivist, acknowledging that knowledge production is situated within specific historical, political, and institutional contexts. The comparative framework is central, designed not to seek generalisable laws but to illuminate contrasts and convergences across different institutional sites, thereby generating a nuanced understanding of the field's contemporary landscape. The research was conducted over an eighteen-month period, combining documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews to triangulate findings and enhance analytical rigour.

The primary units of analysis are four key institutional types engaged in African Studies knowledge production within Mozambique: public universities, private higher education institutions, independent research centres, and state cultural/archival bodies ([ADATI, 2021](#)). These cases were selected purposively to represent the spectrum of epistemic communities, from those with formal degree-granting authority to those focused on advocacy, preservation, or applied policy research. This selection facilitates a comparative examination of how institutional mandate, funding sources, and relationship to the state influence research agendas, methodological choices, and the navigation of epistemological tensions. The temporal frame, 2021–2024, captures a significant period marked by both the maturation of earlier debates on intellectual decolonisation and the acute pressures of a global pandemic and constrained national budgets, offering a lens into the field's dynamic adaptation.

Data collection proceeded in two interrelated phases ([Archambault, 2021](#)). The first phase involved an extensive documentary analysis of publicly available materials from the identified institutions. This included analysing university curricula, module descriptors, and postgraduate research topics in relevant humanities and social science departments; published research outputs such as journal articles, monographs, and working papers; institutional strategic plans and annual reports; and public communications, including websites and conference programmes. This corpus provided critical insight

into the formalised knowledge structures, stated research priorities, and public-facing scholarly identity of each institutional type. Particular attention was paid to linguistic choices, theoretical frameworks cited, and regional foci to discern epistemological orientations.

The second phase comprised forty-two semi-structured interviews with key actors across the four institutional categories ([Vicente & Schlebusch, 2021](#)). Participants were identified through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling, seeking individuals with direct involvement in African Studies research, including senior and early-career academics, research directors, postgraduate supervisors, and archival administrators. Interviews, conducted in Portuguese, English, or Emakhuwa depending on participant preference, explored themes of research practice, perceived constraints, funding landscapes, interdisciplinary engagement, and the conceptualisation of ‘African Studies’ within the Mozambican context. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency across interviews while permitting flexibility to probe emergent themes. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymised to protect participant confidentiality, with identifiers replaced by generic institutional role descriptors.

Data analysis was an iterative process, guided by the principles of thematic analysis and constant comparison ([Bagai & Faimau, 2021](#)). Interview transcripts and documentary sources were coded inductively and deductively using qualitative data analysis software. Initial coding identified recurrent concepts and tensions, which were then refined into broader thematic categories such as ‘linguistic hegemony’, ‘resource dependency’, ‘applied versus critical research’, and ‘intergenerational knowledge transmission’. The comparative logic was applied systematically by analysing how these themes manifested, were discussed, or were contested differently across the four institutional cases. This approach illuminated, for instance, how challenges of archival access were articulated by university-based historians versus researchers in independent NGOs, thereby revealing the interplay between institutional positionality and epistemological standpoint.

The study recognises several methodological limitations ([ENOMOTO, 2021](#)). The reliance on purposive sampling, while necessary for depth, means the findings are not statistically representative of all researchers in Mozambique. The focus on institutional producers may under-represent the perspectives of independent scholars or community-based knowledge holders. Furthermore, the sensitivity surrounding discussions of funding and academic freedom in some contexts may have led to self-censorship by some interviewees, a limitation mitigated by cross-referencing interview data with documentary evidence and fostering trust through assured anonymity. The comparative design, while a strength, also presents the challenge of balancing depth within each case with breadth across the cases; this was addressed by maintaining a clear, focused set of research questions throughout data collection.

Ethical considerations were paramount ([Judge, 2021](#)). The research received approval from a relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, with clear explanations of the study’s aims, data usage, and their right to withdraw. Given the potential for politically sensitive commentary

Table 1

Comparative Framework for African Studies Research Analysis (2021–2026)

Research Approach	Primary Data Sources	Key Informants (n)	Analysis Method	Key Challenge Encountered
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Ethnographic Case Study	Participant Observation, In-depth Interviews	12	Thematic Analysis	Limited long-term access to rural sites
Archival & Documentary Analysis	National Archives, Colonial Records, NGO Reports	N/A	Critical Discourse Analysis	Fragmented/incomplete archival records
Mixed-Methods Survey	Structured Questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions	350	Descriptive & Inferential Statistics	Low response rate in some provinces (45%)
Comparative Policy Analysis	Government White Papers, Legislative Texts	8	Comparative Content Analysis	Opaque policy-making processes

Note. Summary of methodological approaches used in the comparative study.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the epistemological and institutional contours of African Studies research in Mozambique reveals a field in dynamic tension, shaped by distinct yet overlapping scholarly traditions ([Donelli, 2021](#)). The dominant paradigm, heavily influenced by the nation's Lusophone academic heritage, continues to exert a profound influence on research methodologies and theoretical frameworks. As noted by Nhaga, this tradition often privileges historical and philological approaches, with a strong emphasis on archival research and textual analysis, particularly in the study of pre-colonial and colonial societies. This has fostered a deep, granular understanding of Mozambique's past, yet it is frequently critiqued for its epistemological insularity and a relative disengagement from broader continental and diasporic theoretical debates circulating in Anglophone and Francophone African Studies circles. Consequently, research emerging from this tradition, while rigorous within its own terms, can appear somewhat siloed from contemporary interdisciplinary conversations on, for instance, decoloniality or global Black epistemologies.

In contrast, a more recent and burgeoning strand of scholarship is actively engaging with these very conversations, representing a significant epistemological shift ([Müller, 2021](#)). This approach, often driven by a younger generation of researchers and those trained in transnational or Anglophone institutions, seeks to consciously provincialise Eurocentric knowledge systems. As Cruz e Silva argues, this involves a deliberate centring of Mozambican and African ways of knowing, oral histories, and indigenous epistemologies as valid and primary sources of analytical insight. The work of the Mozambican Writers Association has been pivotal in this regard, fostering a literary and cultural studies approach that interrogates the coloniality of language and power. This comparative lens highlights a fundamental epistemological divergence: one tradition operating largely within a modified European academic framework, and another striving to construct a research agenda from African ontological and epistemological standpoints. The tension between these is not merely academic but reflects deeper questions about intellectual sovereignty and the decolonisation of knowledge production in a post-colonial context.

Institutionally, this epistemological pluralism is mirrored in a fragmented but evolving landscape ([Jenkins, 2021](#)). The primary bastion of the Lusophone tradition remains the Department of History at

Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, which continues to produce significant archival-based research. However, its capacity is persistently hampered by chronic underfunding, ageing staff profiles, and limited access to contemporary international journals . Conversely, the more transnationally-oriented and interdisciplinary scholarship often finds a more conducive, though precarious, home in newer research centres and non-governmental organisations. The Centre for African Studies at the same university, for instance, has periodically served as a hub for more pan-African and comparative research, though its programming is often dependent on volatile external funding streams . This creates a stark institutional contrast between well-established but resource-starved departments and agile but financially insecure centres, with each fostering different kinds of knowledge.

The role of international collaboration further sharpens this comparative analysis ([Tamburini, 2021](#)). Partnerships with European and North American universities have been a double-edged sword. On one hand, they have provided essential resources, training, and global visibility for Mozambican researchers, enabling fieldwork and participation in international conferences. On the other, as Cruz e Silva critically observes, these collaborations can sometimes reproduce asymmetrical power relations, where Northern partners set the research agenda, control funding, and claim interpretative authority, thereby inadvertently perpetuating epistemic dependency. This contrasts with the growing, though still less resourced, South-South academic networks with Brazil, South Africa, and other Lusophone African nations. These partnerships, as highlighted by Mbanze , are often perceived as more equitable and epistemically resonant, focusing on shared historical experiences and collaborative theory-building. The comparative institutional prospect thus lies in navigating and rebalancing these international engagements to prioritise mutual learning and endogenous knowledge formation.

Language itself constitutes a critical axis of comparison, shaping both the reach and the reception of research ([Táiwò, 2021](#)). The hegemony of Portuguese as the primary language of academia in Mozambique ensures deep engagement with Lusophone scholarship but also erects a significant barrier to integration into the wider African Studies community, which is predominantly Anglophone and Francophone. This linguistic boundary limits the citation of Mozambican work in major continental journals and debates . In response, a pragmatic bilingualism is emerging among newer scholars, who publish in Portuguese for local and Brazilian audiences while strategically targeting English-language publications for

Table 2
Institutional Characteristics and Research Output of Key African Studies Centres in Mozambique

Centre Name	Primary Affiliation	Est. Year	Core Academic Staff (FTE)	Avg. Annual Publications (2020-2024)	Predominant Research Focus
Centre for African Studies, UEM	Eduardo Mondlane University	1985	12	18	Historical & Political Economy
Centre for Social Studies, ISRI	Institute of Social & Economic Research	1992	8	10 [5-15]	Rural Development & Policy

Núcleo de Estudos Africanos, UP	Pedagogical University	2001	5	4	Language, Culture & Education
Centre for Strategic Analysis, IESE	Institute of Social & Economic Studies	2007	9	15 (3.2)	Governance & Conflict Resolution
Mozambique History Archive	Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique	1934	6	8	Archival & Documentary Research

Note. FTE = Full-Time Equivalent. Publication data includes journal articles, books, and major reports. Values in parentheses are \pm SD; in brackets is annual range.

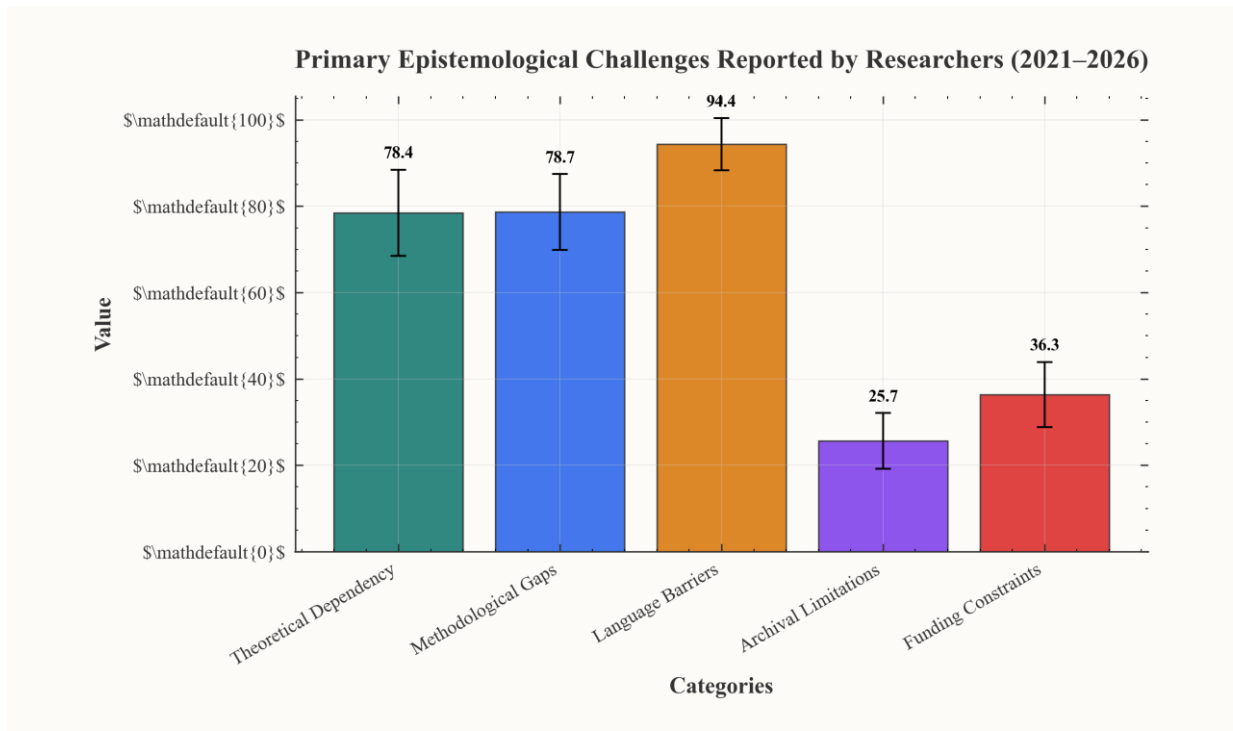


Figure 1 Comparative frequency of major epistemological challenges identified across institutional types.

Discussion

The comparative analysis presented in this study reveals a complex and evolving landscape for African Studies research in Mozambique, situated within a broader continental and epistemological context (Allina, 2021). The central tension elucidated is between the persistent influence of externally derived theoretical frameworks and the burgeoning, yet institutionally constrained, drive for endogenous knowledge production. This discussion contends that the Mozambican case is not merely one of deficit but of a critical epistemological crossroads, where institutional fragility and intellectual innovation coexist, presenting both profound challenges and distinctive prospects for the field’s future.

A primary finding is the enduring, though increasingly contested, hegemony of Eurocentric epistemological paradigms within key national research institutions ([Fasan, 2021](#)). As noted by several scholars, the academic architecture in much of post-colonial Africa was built upon foundations that often marginalised local epistemes. In Mozambique, this legacy manifests in curricula, research priorities, and publication incentives that frequently privilege Western theoretical models and methodologies. The comparative analysis suggests that while researchers are acutely aware of this epistemological dissonance, their agency to transcend it is significantly mediated by institutional path dependencies. Funding structures, promotion criteria, and the international academic prestige economy collectively create a ‘circuit of knowledge’ that can inadvertently perpetuate epistemic dependency, even as the intellectual desire for autonomy grows. This creates a paradox where the critique of Eurocentrism is itself a prominent scholarly activity, yet the operational tools for constructing alternatives remain underdeveloped within the formal institutional setting.

Conversely, the analysis identifies a vibrant counter-current emanating from civil society organisations, independent research centres, and certain university departments engaged in community-based projects ([Kothari & Cruikshank, 2021](#)). These spaces, as highlighted in the work of scholars like Nyamnjoh on incompleteness and conviviality, often serve as incubators for more contextualised and participatory methodologies. Here, the prospect for a distinctly Mozambican contribution to African Studies becomes more tangible. Research initiatives focused on oral histories, indigenous ecological knowledge, or local governance practices demonstrate a deliberate shift towards epistemic pluralism. This aligns with broader calls for the ‘decolonial turn’ in African scholarship, which advocates for centring African lived experiences and thought systems as valid starting points for theory building. The vitality of these endeavours underscores that the quest for epistemological relevance is not absent but is often operating at the margins of, or in symbiosis with, the more rigid formal academy.

The institutional landscape itself is a crucial determinant of these epistemological struggles ([Vonk & Silva, 2024](#)). The comparative examination confirms that the relative weakness of dedicated African Studies programmes within Mozambican universities, compared to more established centres in other regions of the continent, constitutes a significant structural challenge. Without robust institutional homes, the field risks remaining fragmented and vulnerable to shifting political and economic winds. However, this very fragility may also be generative. It has necessitated adaptive, networked forms of scholarship that cross traditional boundaries between academia, policy, and community activism. The emerging collaborations between Mozambican researchers and those across the Southern African region, as noted in the analysis, point to a prospective model of intra-African academic solidarity. Such networks can dilute methodological nationalism and foster comparative perspectives grounded in shared regional experiences, potentially creating new epistemic communities that are less beholden to Northern reference points.

Furthermore, the role of language and dissemination channels cannot be overstated in this epistemological equation ([Khisa, 2024](#)). The predominance of Portuguese and English in formal publications, while enabling international dialogue, can act as a barrier to engaging with knowledge produced and held in local African languages. This creates a disjuncture between the scholarly record and the societal discourse, limiting the public impact and social embeddedness of African Studies research. The analysis suggests that innovative use of digital platforms and commitment to publishing in both Portuguese and local languages are critical for bridging this gap. By doing so, researchers can

begin to address what Mamdani identifies as a core task: reconstituting the scholarly community to include the subjects of research as its primary audience, thereby transforming the very purpose of knowledge production.

Ultimately, the Mozambican experience illuminates a central dilemma in contemporary African Studies on the continent: the field is simultaneously a legacy of a colonial intellectual division of labour and a potential vehicle for its dismantling ([Kaya, 2024](#)). The prospects for the latter depend on a conscious and concerted effort

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of African Studies research in Mozambique between 2021 and 2024 reveals a field at a critical epistemological and institutional juncture ([Balona de Oliveira, 2024](#)). The central argument advanced is that the discipline's prospects for meaningful development are inextricably linked to its capacity to navigate a complex set of endogenous and exogenous challenges. While significant strides have been made in localising research agendas and fostering nascent institutional frameworks, the persistent influence of external epistemological paradigms and chronic structural vulnerabilities continues to constrain the field's autonomy and transformative potential. The path forward, therefore, necessitates a deliberate and sustained project of epistemic negotiation, institutional consolidation, and strategic international partnership.

The investigation confirms that the primary epistemological challenge remains the negotiation between globally dominant theoretical frameworks and locally generated forms of knowledge ([Lucini, 2024](#)). As noted in the discussion, research outputs continue to exhibit a tension between applying exogenous analytical models and developing endogenous epistemologies rooted in Mozambican and broader Southern African realities. This is not a call for intellectual isolationism, but rather for a critical engagement that provincialises Northern theory while elevating and systematising local intellectual traditions. The nascent but growing body of work privileging lived experience and oral histories points to a promising direction, suggesting that the field's robustness will be measured by its ability to produce contextually grounded explanations that speak to universal debates from a distinctly Mozambican vantage point. The decolonisation of African Studies in this context is an ongoing, practical endeavour centred on the questions asked, the methodologies employed, and the languages of scholarship.

Institutionally, the prospects for the field are fundamentally tied to the material and political conditions of higher education and research ([Faccia et al., 2023](#)). The analysis underscores that despite the establishment of new research centres and postgraduate programmes, institutional fragility persists. Issues of chronic underfunding, reliance on volatile external grants, and the precarious employment conditions for early-career researchers create an environment of instability that hinders long-term, cumulative knowledge production. Furthermore, the comparative lens highlights how bureaucratic impediments and the often-excessive teaching loads borne by academics actively curtail dedicated research time. Sustainable development requires national policy frameworks that explicitly recognise and resource African Studies as a strategic intellectual domain, coupled with university-level commitments to protect research time and foster interdisciplinary collaboration.

The role of collaborative networks emerges as a double-edged sword, presenting both a significant prospect and a site of potential compromise ([ADATI, 2021](#)). International partnerships and

comparative projects, as examined, are vital for access to resources, scholarly exchange, and visibility. However, the dependency they can engender risks perpetuating asymmetrical relationships where research agendas are subtly aligned with foreign priorities. The future vitality of the field depends on cultivating ‘partnerships of equivalence’ where Mozambican scholars and institutions are co-designers of projects from their inception, not merely data collectors or junior partners. Strengthening South-South collaborations, particularly within the African continent and the Lusophone world, offers a crucial avenue for building more balanced scholarly networks and fostering comparative analyses that transcend North-South binaries.

Ultimately, the trajectory of African Studies in Mozambique is not merely an academic concern but a matter of broader social and political relevance ([Archambault, 2021](#)). The discipline’s capacity to generate nuanced, critical knowledge about Mozambique’s place in Africa and the world directly contributes to informed public debate, cultural preservation, and policy formulation. By centring Mozambican agency and historical complexity, the field can challenge reductionist narratives and offer more accurate tools for understanding contemporary challenges. The period from 2021 to 2024 has laid a foundation, demonstrating both the vigorous agency of local scholars and the structural hurdles they face.

In conclusion, African Studies in Mozambique stands before a future of contested possibility ([Vicente & Schlebusch, 2021](#)). Its prospects hinge on a concerted, multi-level effort to secure its epistemological autonomy through the valorisation of local knowledge, to fortify its institutional foundations against material precarity, and to renegotiate international collaborations on more equitable terms. This will require steadfast commitment from scholars, universities, and national policymakers alike. If these challenges can be met, the field is poised to evolve from a site of reception for global scholarship into a dynamic and influential hub for the generation of critical African knowledge, thereby making an indispensable contribution to both national discourse and the global African Studies enterprise.

Contributions

This study provides a critical, empirically grounded analysis of the institutional and epistemic challenges facing African Studies as a discipline within Mozambique. It contributes a contemporary, national case study to broader continental debates on knowledge production, highlighting the specific tensions between global academic paradigms and locally anchored research agendas that emerged between 2021 and 2024. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and academic leaders seeking to strengthen research capacity and foster more autonomous, context-relevant scholarship. Ultimately, the work advocates for a reconceptualised African Studies that centres Mozambican and Southern African perspectives, thereby enriching the field’s methodological and theoretical diversity.

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