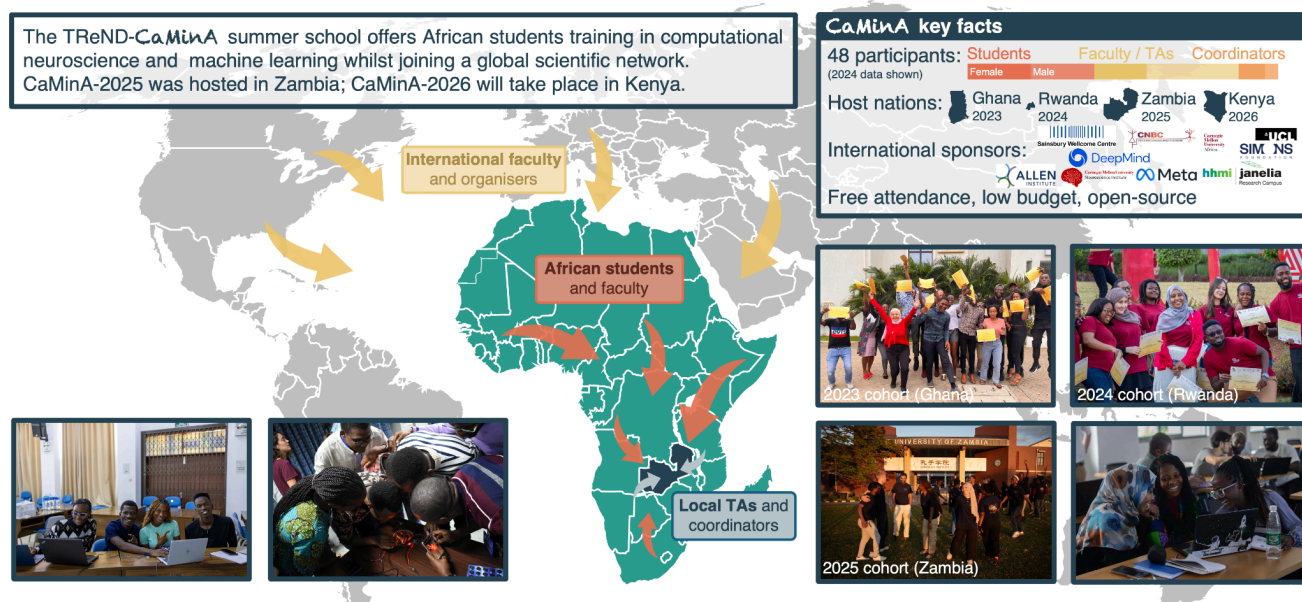


# TReND-CaMinA: A Low-Cost and Open-Source Teaching Initiative to Promote Computational Neuroscience and Machine Learning in Africa

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1. Sainsbury Wellcome Centre UCL, 2. Mila-Quebec AI Institute, 3. University of California Los Angeles, 4. Carnegie Mellon University, 5. HHMI Janelia Research Campus, 6. Utrecht University, 7. VIB-KU Leuven CBD, 8. TReND in Africa.



**Fig 1:** TReND-CaMinA visual abstract. Summary (top-left), key statistics and sponsors (top-right) and photos (bottom).

TReND-CaMinA is a residential summer school with the goal of accelerating Africa's emergence onto the global scientific stage by educating young African researchers in computational neuroscience and machine learning—two cost-effective and modern research fields. With successful past editions in Ghana (2023), Rwanda (2024) and Zambia (2025), the *CaMinA* is run in partnership with *TReND in Africa*, a globally-renowned NGO promoting African development through scientific education.

We are committed to accessibility by (i) making our course free to all attending students, (ii) rotating the host country in order to seed local research hubs and (iii) publishing all materials in order that our blueprint may be copied. TReND-CaMinA is exceptionally cost-effective, with a total budget of 60,000 USD—far cheaper than a confocal microscope—and has been funded entirely through donations from leading institutions in academia and industry.

Across three courses we received 2000 applications, demonstrating a remarkable demand for training initiatives of this kind. Data suggests students benefit greatly from our course; many go on to secure prestigious entry to advanced international schools, win competitive travel grants, and/or progress to higher education programmes, indicating that the course is beginning to meet its goals of training and network-building in Africa. Through our training, we aim to foster a more skilled and competitive African society that brings development to the continent and more diverse perspectives to the global scientific landscape.

## Introduction

Neuroscience, despite its origins in Africa, is a field dominated by non-African researchers<sup>[1,2]</sup>. There are many reasons for this, including a lack of funding, a lack of training programmes, and sub-critical network size at the single-country and continental level, collectively leading to a self-perpetuating “brain-drain”<sup>[3,4]</sup>. Furthermore, *experimental* neuroscience is a particularly expensive pursuit with new microscopes costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, and new institutes costing hundreds of millions, creating an often insurmountable barrier to entry.

This global imbalance is not only a problem for Africa, which has one of the world's largest and youngest populations of aspiring scientists, but also for the global neuroscientific community that misses out on contributions and perspectives that could enrich and diversify the scientific domain. Unlike experimental neuroscience, *computational* neuroscience and the related field of machine learning are often not as expensive. Given the right training, little more than a laptop and access to open-source datasets can be enough to start making progress in the field<sup>[5,6]</sup>. Furthermore, these fields are multidisciplinary with the potential to spur progress in related areas, from medicine to robotics, and are of growing importance to the global economy.

As such, we propose that **introductory-level training programmes in computational neuroscience and machine learning are a cost-effective means to accelerate Africa's emergence onto the global scientific stage**. Here we present one such effort.

## Our Strategy: TReND-CaMinA

We are a group of six junior research trainees from across the world. By partnering with TReND<sup>[7]</sup>—a globally-renowned NGO committed to promoting sustainable African development through higher education and science—we founded the course Computational Neuroscience and Machine Learning in Africa (TReND-CaMinA), an annual, residential, two-and-a-half-week summer school.

Our primary goals are:

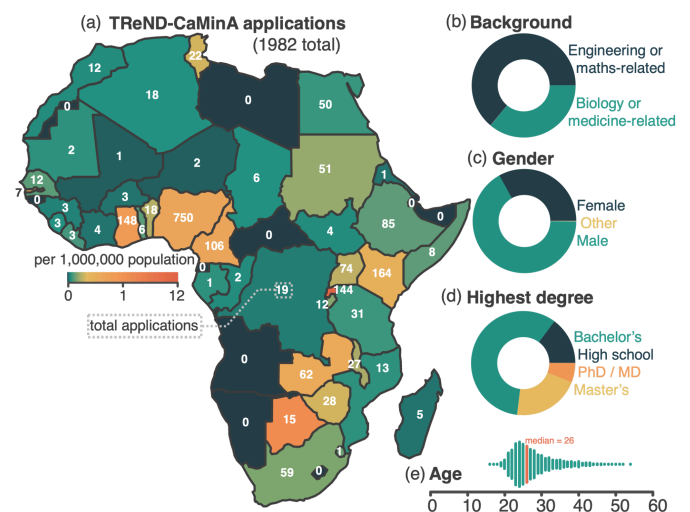
1. **Training:** To train a new cohort of African researchers in computational techniques.
2. **African Network:** To establish a lasting pan-African network of junior researchers.

3. **International connections:** To forge global partnerships which support the flow of researchers to and from Africa.

The course brings together 20 African students from diverse backgrounds and 20 teachers (African and non-African neuroscience and machine learning experts at various career stages) for a program structured around three key pillars:

1. **Teaching:** Theoretical and hands-on teaching sessions
2. **Projects:** Supervised group research projects using open-datasets.
3. **Lectures:** Inspirational guest lectures from academic and industry leaders.

To encourage replication, all our materials are made publicly available on [Github](#) and, upon completion, students join an alumni network where opportunities are shared and career support is provided. Our project is inspired by related training schemes like the *Imbizo*<sup>[8]</sup> and *Neuromatch*<sup>[9]</sup>, but is tailored exclusively for African students, teaches at a more introductory level and rotates location on a yearly basis in the hope of seeding multiple hubs in computational neuroscience and machine learning.



**Fig 2:** Application statistics to TReND-CaMinA across all years. Biases in the student's applicant country, background and gender are corrected for in our selection process.

## Financial Model and its Cost-Effectiveness

Each course operates on a constrained budget of ~60,000USD—a small amount compared to related courses such as the *Imbizo* (~150,000USD<sup>[10]</sup>). This covers all costs for the selected students including tuition, international travel, accommodation and meals. **Importantly, this means the course is offered at no cost to the students.** This is made possible through a hybrid funding model. Direct costs are covered by grants and donations from leading academic and industry institutions. This is

supplemented by the significant in-kind contribution of teaching, voluntarily provided by both local and international lecturers, and teaching space, provided by the local university. Furthermore, international instructors typically fund their own travel to the course through their home institutions, a crucial and non-trivial source of funding from the Global North.

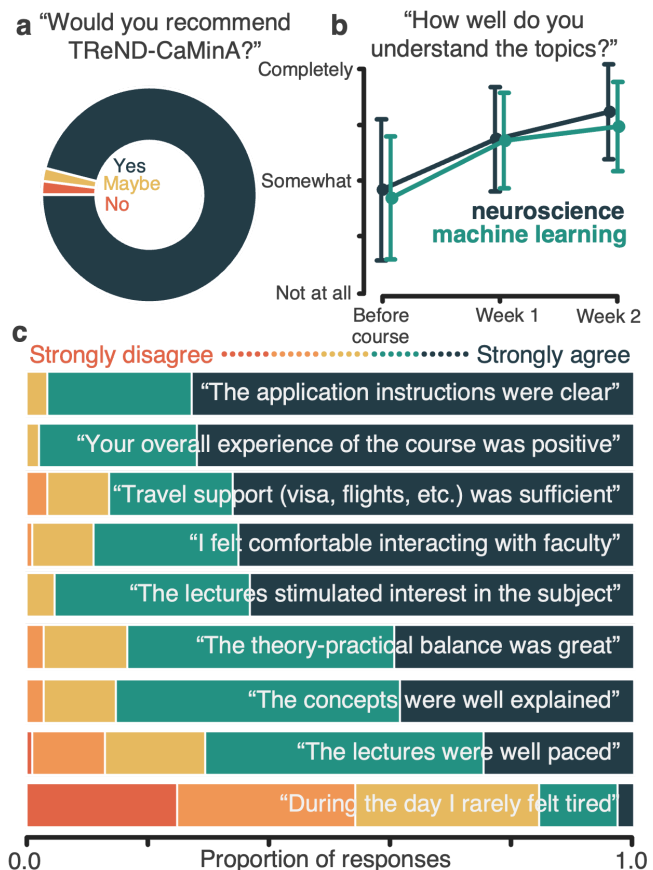
In order to continue this project into 2026 and 2027 we are projecting a required budget of \$132,000 (Table 1). Starting this year we will hold \$5,000 in reserve for a “Support fund” used to enable alumni attendance to international courses and conferences. We believe this will act as a significant multiplier on our impact by allowing the most motivated students to progress faster.

Expense	2024/2025 average	2026 (Kenya)	2027 (TBD)
Student flights	\$15,500	\$18,000	\$18,000
Accommodation	\$24,000	\$25,000	\$25,000
Food	\$9,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
Misc. and social	\$6,500	\$8,000	\$8,000
Support fund	\$0	\$5,000	\$5,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$55,000</b>	<b>\$66,000</b>	<b>\$66,000</b>
Total / student	20 students \$2,750	22 students \$3,000	22 students \$3,000

**Table 1:** TReND-CaMinA budget breakdown.

### Applicant Selection

We invite applications through broad posting across our social media platforms and the extensive TReND mailing list. The selection process begins with automatic filtering to remove applications with incomplete documentation or insufficient responses. A rapid, blind review is then conducted, with each application receiving three independent scores based on predefined metrics. High-scoring applications proceed to an in-depth review (where recommendation letters will be studied), and the top candidates are selected for an offer. In the final selection stage, we actively correct for potential biases to ensure our pool of selectees is balanced across the following criteria: gender, technical backgrounds (engineering, mathematics, physics) versus biological/medical backgrounds, and broad geographic distribution across Africa.



**Fig 3:** Student feedback on the TReND-CaMinA course.

### Progress & Impact

TReND-CaMinA is designed to provide an academically accessible entry point for students who feel unprepared to apply for more advanced international schools (*Imbizo*, *Neuromatch* etc.) or PhD programmes. A very enthusiastic response has confirmed the demand for this approach: so far, across three cycles, **we have received 1,982 applications for a total of 60 places offered**. Our applications are broadly distributed across Africa (Fig. 2), but, nonetheless, skew around past course locations (Ghana [3.2x continental average], Rwanda [11.4x] and Zambia [2.3x]) as well as countries listing English as an official language [1.8x].

Student perceptions, collected via an in-course survey, were overwhelmingly positive (Fig. 3). Almost all the **participants praised the clarity of the application process and the standard of travel support**. Similarly, nearly all students reported that the course **topics taught were interesting, relevant, and well-balanced** between theoretical and practical components. **Students felt comfortable interacting with faculty** and valued the instructors' efforts to make challenging material accessible. The key area identified for improvement related to pacing and fatigue; some **students noted feeling tired during the day and**



reported that the lecture delivery was too fast-paced (a tension inherent in providing good quality teaching which covers significant ground).

The most significant measure of our impact lies in the subsequent success of our alumni. In a one-year follow-up survey **88% of students stated that the course had helped their careers**, and that they felt highly empowered to continue research in computational neuroscience and machine learning. In line with this, **64% of students went on to participate in at least one other related course, workshop or conference**.

Following the 2023 course, **six of our alumni were accepted into the prestigious Imbizo summer school** (out of nine who applied), a 67% success rate that represents nearly a third of that year's entire African cohort. **In 2024 five alumni were awarded the competitive COSYNE student travel award** however, even these successes are fragile as three could not secure visas to attend. This highlights why **in-continent training is a non-negotiable step toward equity in global science**. Some students have gone on to set up their own meetings or workshops<sup>[11-14]</sup>, citing TReND-CaMinA as inspiration.

### Summary of 2025 and plans for 2026

The 2025 TReND-CaMinA course was successfully hosted at the University of Zambia in Lusaka, bringing together 20 highly motivated students and an exceptional faculty, including Kimberly Stachenfeld (Columbia Google-Deepmind), Ronald Dale (HHMI-Janelia), Byron Yu (CMU), Dean Buonomano (UCLA), Albert Njoroge Kahira (AstraZeneca) and many more. Despite minor logistical challenges, such as an initially unreliable internet connection—a common hurdle for scientific teaching in Africa—the course proceeded successfully. Our teaching force is expanding; we have widespread interest in teaching at our school

and many teaching assistants are actively seeking to take on larger coordination roles for future editions. **The 2026 course will be hosted at the Dedan Kimathi University of Technology**, near Mt. Kenya. This location, a three-hour drive from Nairobi, marks our first course in a rural African setting, an exciting new development.

### Conclusion

Addressing the systemic barriers that limit African participation in global science is a task that no single initiative can solve alone. However, our experience with TReND-CaMinA demonstrates that targeted, community-driven efforts can yield impact with relatively modest resources, serving as a proof-of-concept for a scalable, shareable and cost-effective model. Looking to future editions we aim to expand support by establishing internship opportunities for our alumni within our global network and to provide an internal budget for conference and travel expenses. We invite partners to join us in scaling up this successful model.

### References

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### Past sponsors

