



Modern Curricula in African Library Schools: Setting the Agenda for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Education systems and institutions are established to produce graduates that are equipped with skills to provide solutions to societal challenges and advance human development. To achieve this, among other goals, these systems and institutions are expected to run based on curricula that reflect global realities and community needs. There has been advocacy for modern curricula adoption and integration into the programmes run in African library schools, to ensure librarians and information professionals are trained adequately and prepared to meet global standards in the provision of information services and actively involved in the promotion of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). However, the extent of the willingness and readiness to revise and implement modern curricula in African library schools is still characterised by uncertainty. What are the new areas to be incorporated? Are the areas in line with SDGs and prepare LIS graduates for sustainable development? Do the library schools have the manpower/skilled personnel for the implementation of the modern curricula? Building on this background, this study sought to highlight the phenomenon and investigate the state of adoption of modern curricula in African library schools to set an agenda for sustainable development. The study adopted a survey research design of quantitative methodology. Using an electronic questionnaire designed with Google Forms, data were collected from staff of library schools in the five regions in Africa. The data collected are presented in pie charts and discussed with descriptive analysis. The study discovered that information literacy is the topmost area identified to pursue sustainable development and lack of funds, and lack of computing tool and technological facilities as the major challenges hindering the adoption and incorporation of a modern curricula system in African library schools. It was recommended that practical steps be taken by AfLIA in towards the unification of LIS schools in the continent, through a reliable database system and periodic meetings to deliberate strategic mechanisms to have a working, modern curricula system that embraces and prepares LIS professionals that engender sustainable development.

Keywords: Africa; Agenda, Modern Curricula, Library Schools, Sustainable Development.

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century continues to witness exponential technological developments that affect the way information is generated, processed, stored, disseminated, consumed, and used. These developments have redefined the curricula of many educational institutions as well as their programmes and delivery techniques, including library schools. In developed countries like the United States, for instance, no fewer than 46 library schools have self-identified as iSchools, with a significant increase in the number of information technology related courses introduced in the curriculum (Boyd & Cramer, 2016). However, the curricula of most library schools in Africa are rarely updated; hence, while lagging in crucial phenomena that affect the information society, the graduates produced from these library schools at times become unemployable because they have not prepared for the reality of their era. Abubakar and Abbas (2014) and Mègnigbêto (2007) stated that while library and information science (LIS) schools in Western countries revise their curriculum regularly in tandem with extant global realities, the curricula of LIS schools in African countries have changed less.

Meanwhile, the emergence and promulgation of new phenomena like artificial intelligence, machine learning, human-computer interaction, data science, and digital marketing, to mention a few, highlights the dire need for reformation of the LIS curricula in African library schools. This reformation has become vital because the realization of sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Africa may never be possible without well-trained information professionals whose expertise will drive social change through adequate strategies for information diffusion. Lawal (2015) noted that the proliferation of Information Technology (IT) applications in libraries has provoked panic calls for curriculum renewal in LIS schools, and the reason for the renewal is to take account of IT requirements and skills expected of graduates. The call for curricula renewal is quite understandable, as Aina (2007) argued that the LIS curriculum must be in tandem with the needs of the immediate environment, mirror best global practices and prepare a workforce that is relevant to society. Ademilua and Akomolafe (2015) also stated that the multidisciplinary nature of the LIS profession in the 21st century has created challenges and opportunities for information professionals, especially in developing countries, that must be tackled with adequate preparedness and harnessed for collective development.

Despite the need for modern curricula in African library schools, there has also been concern about higher education structure. Chu et al. (2022) in the IFLA Guidelines for Professional Library and Information Science (LIS) Education Programmes noted that the higher education system has been developed based on particular ways of knowing that have centered on Western, scientific, and recorded practices. Although there is a gradual shift in academia that critically examines power structures, and recognises traditional and indigenous knowledge systems such as oral traditions, with a view to decolonising teaching, learning, and knowledge production. Therefore, LIS curricula, especially in African library schools need to integrate multiple knowing systems that prepare professionals to provide effective, equitable, inclusive, and accessible services appropriate to a diverse community and relevant to its local contexts in a globalised economy (Chu et al., 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Libraries and information institutions are vital for the sustainable development of individuals, organisations, communities, and nations, within the sociocultural, scientific, educational, and other sectors. However, due to institutional budgetary constraints and the shift to

contingent staff arrangement, the future of jobs for LIS graduates in Africa appears threatened. Boyd and Cramer (2016) disclosed that Forbes magazine ranked the MLS as one of the worst graduate degrees for jobs and there is a trend of not hiring LIS-trained graduates but non-LIS employees with alternative expertise in areas such as technology, web design, sociology, public health and education. A deeper look into this trend shows a rising threat to the achievement of SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 8 (Good Work and Economic Growth), and 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) because it can lead to depression, underemployment and economic disparity, and dearth of adequate information infrastructures in Africa. Therefore, there is a concern whether African library schools can have modernized curricula that equip students with the professional skills that reflect the needs of their communities, changing technologies, and talent for leadership.

Likewise, the technological revolutions of the 21st century have led to the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), for example, allowing anyone to enrol for academic and professional programmes anywhere. However, what is the level of preparedness of African library schools to offer such education? Are the library schools equipped with the facilities and human resources to partner with their institutional authorities and instructors to provide seamless distance learning education? More so, the job roles required of LIS professionals have continued to change with some requesting that LIS professionals have expertise in web development, knowledge management, data science, social justice, equity and inclusion, climate change, etc. in furtherance of having a sustainable global community. Therefore, this study investigates how the modern curricula in African library schools to set the agenda for sustainable development.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- Do the curricula in African library schools generally reflect sustainable development?
- Do the curricula in African library schools prepare students for sustainable development?
- Are the African library schools equipped with requisite faculty members to deliver teaching and training that prepare student for sustainable development?
- What is the duration adopted by African library schools in reviewing their curricula?
- What are the key courses/modules/specializations students in African library schools need to pursue sustainable development?
- What are the challenges affecting African library schools in the adoption of a curricula system that embraces sustainable development?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of library and information science (LIS) has its roots in Africa even though the developed countries seem to be ahead of the continent. Aside from being the birthplace of the modern human species, Africa is also the birthplace of librarianship. Zulu (2012) stated that contrary to the long-established history taught in library schools, the library, as an institution, and librarianship, as a profession, have their roots in ancient African society. This revelation shows that the curricula of many library schools need to be reformed to reflect historical facts while also preparing students for the future of work, community service, national development and the attainment of sustainable development. However, Olike (2017) noted that the origin of

librarianship in Africa can be traced to pressure on UNESCO that illiteracy in sub-Saharan Africa could only be eradicated with support of libraries, which led to introduction of reading and writing the indigenous people.

Curriculum is the fulcrum upon which the substance of any academic programme is built. Lester (2011) noted that the curriculum is a fundamental driver for shaping the overall outcomes of any educational programme because it provides insights into its development, delivery techniques, lecturers to be involved and its impacts on the experience of students in the programme. Ocholla (2000) cited in Abubakar and Abbas (2014) stated that the curriculum provides not only a list of courses/modules offered in a programme, but it also gives information on content, purpose, method, time/duration, instructors, and location. According to Virkus (2012), the curriculum of any programme is the best barometer to reflect the changes and challenges being faced today. Despite the exponential growth in IT and the need for its invaluable incorporation into LIS curriculum, Abubakar and Hassan (2010) noted that LIS Schools still struggle to infuse ICT related courses in their curriculum, thereby making it a challenge to provide adequate training for their students in the 21st century. However, beyond the content of the curriculum, LIS educators are faced with the challenge to persistently learn and upgrade their competencies and skills to quickly step into new roles created by the service gaps in the growing knowledge intensive society (Singh & Malhan, 2012 cited by Jain & Jorosi, 2015).

LIS professionals work within a dynamic sociopolitical, technological, and global landscape, which makes any formal education to prepare them interdisciplinary, changing, and expansive (IFLA BSLISE Working Group, 2018). Considering the swift changes globally and specifically within in the LIS professions, academic policies and curricula need to practically reflect these changes and ensure that the set of LIS professionals being trained have adequate knowledge and competencies for them to work successfully with these changing conditions (Rehman, 2012; Tanloet & Tuamsuk, 2011). Chu et al. (2022) argued that a robust curriculum for LIS professionals should be developed based on disciplinary and cross- sector knowledge, through adequate recognition of the intersection of LIS as a discipline with related sectors such as archives, museums, records management and data management, and cognate fields such as computer science, data science, communications, and education.

Jain and Jorosi (2015) stated that the complete paradigm shift caused by rapid advancement in IT, ever-changing user needs and diversity of users, and the development of information technologies continue to drive changes within the LIS curriculum system globally. Hu (2013) in a study in United States found that 50 of the of 14 LIS schools surveyed offer IT related degrees as part of their curriculum, or have merged with Information Technology or Computer Science programs. Citing examples, Hu noted that while the School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University has merged with its Computer Science and Informatics programs, the School of Information Sciences at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has offered multiple IT programs such as Data Curation, Socio-technical Data Analytics, Certificate of Advanced Study in Digital Libraries and so on. These researchers also confirmed that the iSchool at Urbana- Champaign offers courses and research areas that focus on Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, Data Analytics and Human Centered Data, Computer Supported Cooperative Work, to mention a few. These developments in courses, research and nomenclature of programmes highlight the reality of information work globally and the need for LIS curriculum to align and prepare students adequately.

Chikonzo et al. (2014) maintained that LIS schools should regularly incorporate new

realms into their curricula to produce information professionals that understand and can pursue sustainable development. Therefore, LIS schools in Africa have to revamp their facilities and course curricula to transform into institutions that educate and train professionals who are competent enough to create a stir in the market, a demand for their skills, societal hunt for their talents, and who can substantially contribute to management of knowledge resources, dissemination of information and create a sought after brand name for their service and niche for themselves (Malhan, 2009: 57 cited in Jain & Jorosi, 2015). These researchers posit that the dearth of modern curricula that cater for the overall needs of students threaten the quality of education in African library schools. This can in turn lead to frustration as some graduates lose bearing in their quest for sustenance and decent work, hence, there could be growing inequality in economic development and scarcity of innovative approach to solving societal challenges such as misinformation and mental health.

The curricula of many LIS programmes do not address the current job market requirements due to inadequate teaching resources at LIS training; lack of adequate ICT content in the courses; inadequate length of courses; courses that are outright irrelevant to the job market and inadequate industrial attachment for LIS students, and despite the call for reformation, there has been significant change (Kavulya, 2007; Amunga & Khayesi, 2012 cited in Rukwaro & Bii, 2016). Chikonzo et al (2014) maintained that LIS schools should regularly incorporate new realms into their curricula to produce information professionals that understand and can pursue sustainable development.

However, while there has been clamour for a modern curriculum that reflects technological advancement, cultural peculiarities and immediate social needs have to be considered in the development or review of the curriculum. Chu et al. (2022) noted that libraries and information services are essential for not just for scientific explorations but also for cultural development, to catalyse the collective contribution to the sustainable development of individuals, organisations, communities and nations.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a survey research design of quantitative methodology. The researchers adopted a survey research design to facilitate the data collection process across the five regions in Africa; that is, Central/Middle Africa, East Africa, North Africa, South Africa and West Africa. Ponto (2015) noted that surveys historically include large population-based data collection and are useful to quickly obtain information from a large number of individuals with similar interests. Using an electronic questionnaire designed with Google Forms, the researchers reflect the key phenomena being investigated through the research questions in six sections of the questionnaire. While section one introduced the respondents to the details of the questionnaire, section two was to elicit data on respondents' biodata; section three on African Library Schools Curricula & Sustainable Development; section four on Teaching and Training that Prepare Student for Sustainable Development; section five on Curricula Review by African Library Schools; section six on Courses/Modules Required in African Library Schools for Sustainable Development; and section seven on the Challenges Affecting the Adoption of a Curricula System that Embraces Sustainable Development in African Library Schools. The questionnaire was administered for 10 days through social media networks specifically meant for LIS professionals, such as WhatsApp, Facebook groups and sent directly via emails and direct messaging. The data from the study is presented in pie charts and discussed with descriptive analysis.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Demographics of the respondents

The respondents to the study were mostly below the rank of senior lecturer (26 responses) as shown in Figure 1 and most respondents' institutions are in the West African region as shown in Figure 2. The least response (1) came from the North African region whose major dominant language is Arabic and at times identifies with the Middle East.

What is your academic cadre?
39 responses

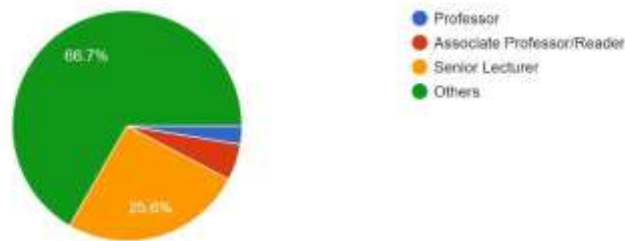


Figure 1: Respondents' academic cadre

Please select the region where your institution is located in Africa.
39 responses

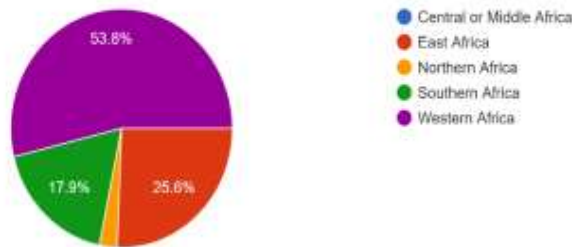


Figure 2: Respondents' regional location

Meanwhile, the number of institutions that identified as information schools (iSchool) was the lowest when compared to those that did not or were uncertain as shown in Fig. 3. This finding also revealed that many library schools in Africa still grapple with truly reflecting the incorporation of ICTs and SDGs in their nomenclature. Additionally, while 11 institutions (28.2%) claimed to identify as members of iSchools, the researchers found on the iSchools organization website and through feedback from the Program Manager that only two institutions in Africa are registered members of the iSchools; Makerere University, Uganda, and the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Does your institution identify as a member of iSchools?
39 responses

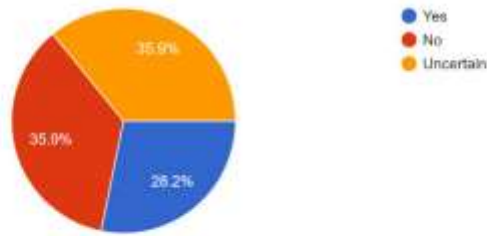


Figure 3: Identification as a member of iSchools

The study also found that majority of the respondents as shown in Figure 4 have spent over a decade at their institution and more than a quarter of them are Heads of Department in their respective programmes as shown in Fig. 5. This finding provides basis that they should have been involved and/or aware of any curriculum review that has happened in their department.

How long have you worked at your library school?
39 responses

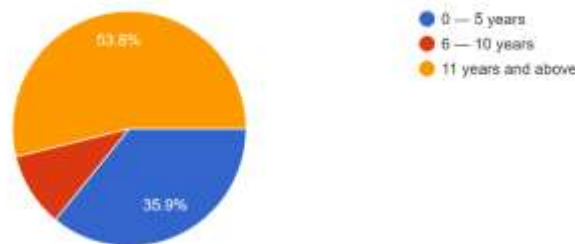


Figure 4: Years of professional experience at the library school

Do you hold or have held any administrative position at your library school?
39 responses

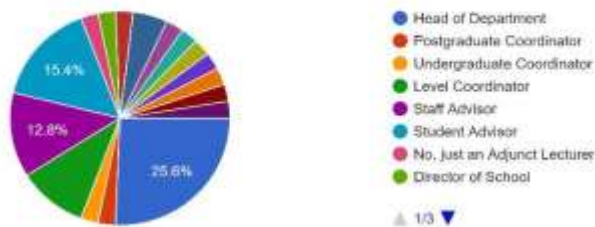


Figure 5: Administrative experience at the library school

African Library Schools Curricula & Sustainable Development

The study found that while majority of the respondents claimed their curricula reflect SDGs (61.5%) and offer courses/modules/topics that are related to SDGs (71.8%), the data showed raises concern because only 8 (20.5%) agreed to the curricula reflecting SDG 3 – Good Health

and Well-being and SDG 8 – Good Work and Economic Growth (30.8%), respectively. It is quite understandable that SDG 4 – Quality Education received the 31 (79.5%) responses because the institutions are expected to provide quality education. However, the quality education that does not reflect preparation for good work after graduation, economic growth and prosperity, and well-being of the people should be a source of worry for LIS schools and educators on the continent. And this finding reveals the lacuna that should be filled as argued by Aina (2007) that LIS curriculum must prepare a workforce that is relevant to the society.

Teaching and Training that Prepare Students for Sustainable Development

The data collected also showed that majority of the respondents have the teaching expertise (92.3%) and transferable skills (97.4%) to prepare students for SDGs; although their professional background/training mostly aligned with SDG 4 – Quality Education (Figure 6). This finding can be connected to the fact that most library schools in Africa are domiciled within the Faculty of Education; whereas LIS has evolved to a stage that it should be a stand-alone discipline with its own faculty running a variety of academic programmes. These programmes may include but not limited to Knowledge Management, Digital Humanities, Digital Archives and Records Management, Management Information Systems, Information Systems and Design, Human-Centered Data Science, User Experience, Cybersecurity, etc.

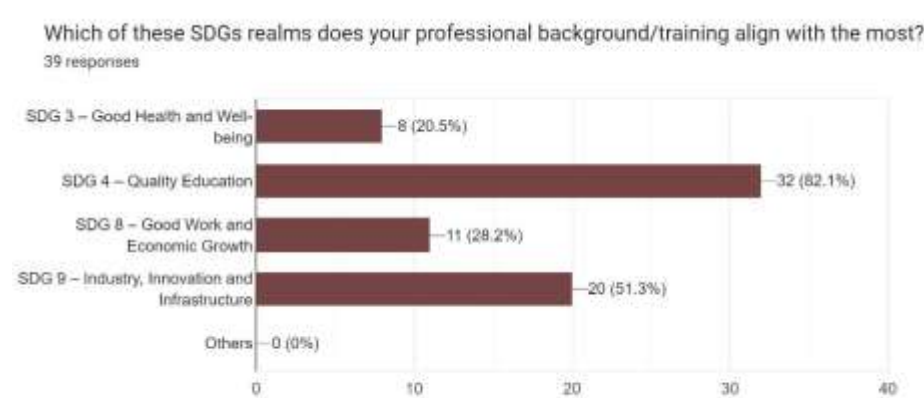


Figure 6: Respondents’ professional background alignment with SDGs

Curricula Review by African Library Schools

The study found that more than quarter of the library schools surveyed (Figure 8) have no curriculum review policy. This finding portrays a fundamental problem of disconnection between library schools and current global reality because a library school without curriculum review policy jeopardizes the quality of education and preparation of students for SDGs. This also indicates that when the curriculum review process is subject to politicization of appointment by government agencies, the content and value expected may be far-fetched.

Does your library school have a curriculum review policy?

39 responses

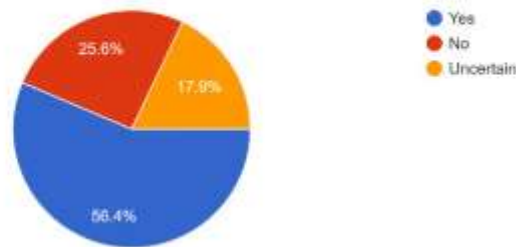


Figure 7: Availability of curriculum review policy

Courses/Modules Required in African Library Schools for Sustainable Development

Findings from the data collected revealed that the topmost ranked course/module required in African library schools for sustainable development is Information Literacy as shown in Figure 8. This finding also showed that 89.7% of the respondents chose information literacy, and this was followed eBook Design and Publishing (82.1%), and Digital Libraries & Administration. The continuous development of ICTs has led to a surge in misinformation across various sectors, even among the scholarly and scientific communities. While this makes the need for information literacy skills a must-have for students being trained in library schools, it also revealed the consciousness of library schools and practitioners in Africa about the need to stem the tide of information disorder. This finding aligns with the view of Onifade (2022) who argued that information schools have to continuously make efforts to localize information literacy in their institutions by developing formal and voluntary instructional programmes that equip students and staff with up-to-date mechanisms in tackling misinformation. Other areas identified from the data gathered are library comedy which is needed especially in preparing school librarians providing children's literature and information services, and data literacy. Additionally, majority of the respondents stated that they have the expertise to offer these courses/modules and believe the courses/modules can prepare students for sustainable development.

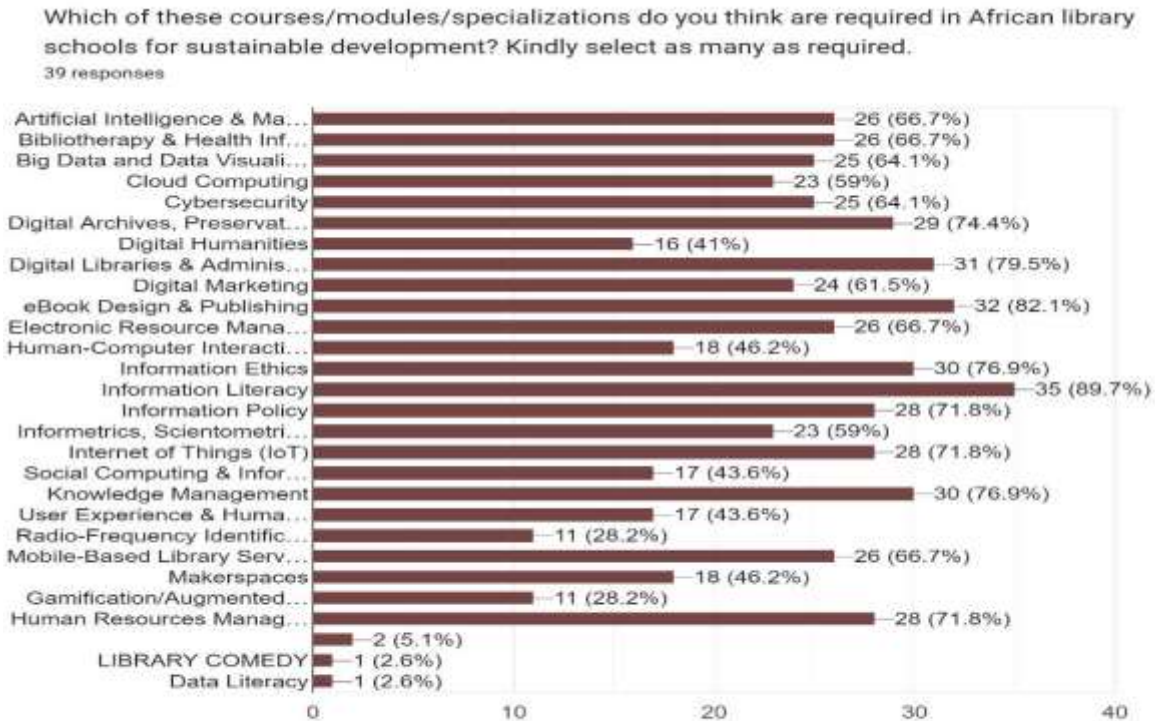


Figure 8: Courses/Modules in African library schools for SDGs

Challenges Affecting the Adoption of a Curricula System that Embraces Sustainable Development in African Library Schools

Despite the complaint about lack of skilled personnel in African library schools to provide education that champions SDGs, findings from the study showed that the major challenges hindering the adoption of a curricula system for sustainable development include lack of fund and lack of computing tools and technological facilities, both having the topmost responses at 82.1%. These factors are followed by lack of awareness of the relevance of sustainable development in the library schools, lack of skilled personnel, and institutional restrictions and bureaucracies (Fig. 8). Meanwhile, the challenge of funding is not peculiar to LIS programmes alone in Africa because the education system is still generally underfunded. However, the dearth of technological infrastructures that will practically facilitate skills diffusion among staff and students, considering the pace of information proliferation and computing tools development, remains a roadblock to the implementation of a curricula system that drives SDGs in Africa.

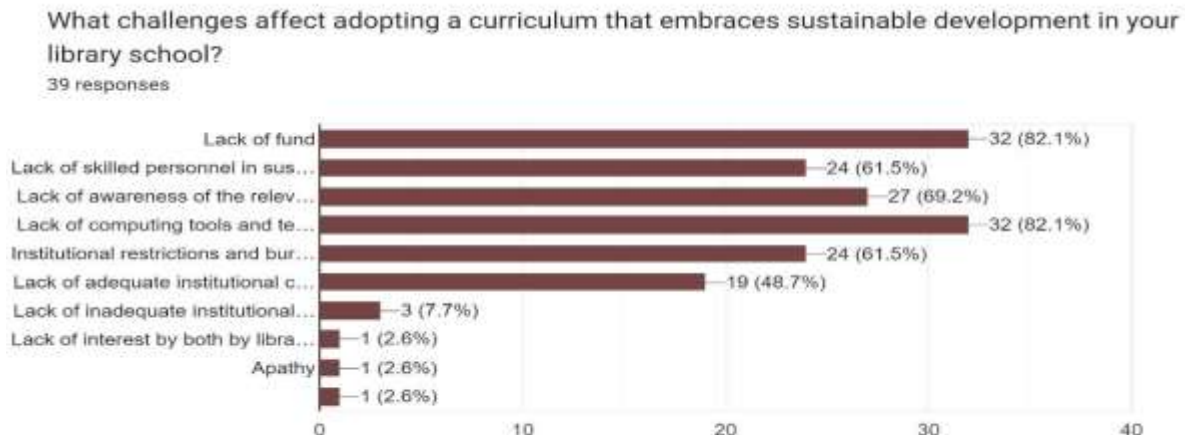


Figure 9: Challenges affecting SDGs incorporation into the curricula of African library schools

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has established that LIS professionals in African library schools have the expertise and willingness to embrace a curricula system that promotes sustainable development. It has also highlighted that quality education remains the topmost area where LIS professionals and academics are mostly active, while lacking in other areas this study focused on; specifically, SDGs 3, 8 and 9. There is a need for reconsideration of the content of the curricula of library schools to ensure they reflect other SDGs because the generation, organisation, dissemination and application of adequate information in all spheres of human life continues to be the vehicle that drives the attainment of the SDGs. Likewise, the study noted that the most important course/module identified for a curriculum to align with sustainable development is information literacy. As a core skill that drives critical and analytical thinking, information literacy should be broken down in topics that address issues like misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, plagiarism, etc., at all levels in African library schools.

Based on the findings from the study, the researchers recommend that practical efforts should be taken to harmonize the names of the library schools in Africa to reflect as *Information Schools* (iSchools). While each institution is allowed to choose its own name, being identified as iSchools will give uniformity to the programme's nomenclature. Likewise, there is more than enough recommendations on the review of the curricula in African library schools, implementation remains the biggest challenge. In order to make this a reality, the African Library and Information Institutions and Associations (AfLIA) has to partner with library associations in each country, collate the library schools in the country and have periodic meetings to facilitate the implementation process. While AfLIA has meritoriously championed programmes to equip LIS professionals with skills to be abreast of trends in the field, it is worrisome to note that it has no database of members and how their operational activities. For instance, clicks on the website segments that deal with membership, libraries and library associations lead to error or the homepage. This should be fixed by having conscious deliberations that bring the whole African regions together about issues affecting the curricula system, having a uniform review process and implementation strategies.

Likewise, the expansion in the scope of information as a discipline depicts that the time is ripe to detach LIS as a discipline in faculties of education to stand alone or merged with other information related disciplines like Computer Science, Information Technology, Mass Communication, to mention a few. Specifically, LIS should run in either School of Information or Faculty of Information with different specialization programmes like Data Science, Information Science, Creative and Assistive Technologies Knowledge Management, Infopreneurship and Digital Marketing, Research Data Management, Bibliotherapy, etc.

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