

iSchools and Africa: Trends and Developments

by Ruth Nalumaga

iSchools Around the World

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

The movement from traditional library schools to iSchools reflects a revised approach toward librarianship and information technologies. For some institutions, embracing a more modern identity and disciplinary approach may be a matter of survival. An examination of library and information schools across Africa indicates that only one has formally adopted the iSchool perspective. Closer scrutiny of 10 other schools shows some shifts in curricular focus and positioning within institutions. Programs tend to be placed under departments of education, social sciences or computer science. The terms *library* and *librarianship* are giving way to *knowledge* and *information management*, especially at the graduate level. The variety of terminology and placement reflects ongoing philosophical and pedagogical shifts, though the iSchool emphasis on interdisciplinarity remains scarce.

KEYWORDS

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Ruth Nalumaga is on the faculty of the Makerere University Library and the East African School of Library and Information Science. She can be reached at relnalumaga@mulib.mak.ac.ug or r.nalumaga@yahoo.com.

According to the iSchools website (<http://ischools.org>), discussions on how to explain information science to people outside the field go way back – to 1988. The conversations started with a few deans of library schools in the United States. In due course, the dialog focused on building an identity in information schools and later moved to collaborative research. A movement had thus begun, which gained official status in 2005 but still included only a small group of library schools in the United States. Interest in this direction could have been propelled mostly by three major factors: the dissatisfaction with existing library schools; the exponential growth of digital information; and the desire to draw a line between traditional library education and the new perspectives. These factors could have contributed to the formation of the new domain, the “iField” [1] and consequent different centers of investigation.

This new thinking tends to combine information, human beings and technology across organizational and social contexts; more specifically, it focuses on the in-depth (ontological) questions regarding information, information systems design and human behavior with regards to seeking and use of information [2]. On the other hand, one would say that the movement seems to have been fueled by a need for LIS disciplines to survive amidst the current technological advances by taking on new identities and disciplinary approaches.

However, there is on-going contention about the philosophical and social (epistemological) foundations of the movement. King [3] argues that iSchools have risen in three main ways: 1) repurposing pre-existing schools; 2) merging



pre-existing but divergent programs; and, 3) creating new programs. The identity of iSchools, however, is still a matter of speculation. In some instances, it simply means renaming the schools. It can also, for instance, be about discarding the word *library* or the concept of librarianship, or, put differently, replacing it with *information* and discarding the professional practice. Or, in others, is it moving towards a more interdisciplinary approach? What about the future position of libraries as institutions and librarianship? A study by Wiggins and Sawyer [4] on the intellectual domains and identity of 21 iSchools that subscribe to the “iSchool movement” reveals a variety of intellectual roots with computation predominant. The names of degrees were found to be changing with the substitution of the term *information* rather than *library*. Library-focused research, however, is not being phased out. Although the caucus of iSchools was formed about 10 years ago, the need for library education to take into consideration the changing ICT environment has been ongoing in many library schools. There has been evidence of new programs and research areas that have continuously reflected this reality. Examples include subjects such as social informatics, data management,


information architecture and digital libraries. The repositioning, according to Raju [5], is also a survival strategy for LIS training institutions, which is in one way or another dependent on the ability to recruit and maintain student numbers; the relevance and quality of programs and the competitiveness of the graduates on the wider employment market.

However, it is important to note that the changing ICT environment and the need for professional inclusiveness into the information society and ensuing knowledge economy have not only affected library and information science curricula but has had an impact on the general education processes as well.

The iSchool Movement in Africa?

In Africa, technological advancements have also affected LIS schools with the need to change curriculum and embrace new research areas. While most library schools in Africa are changing, they do not seem to have formally embraced membership to the iSchools organization. A general view of the regional LIS education environment is presented but excludes the Arab world in Northern Africa. The schools discussed are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. African Library and Information Science Schools mentioned in the article

AFRICAN REGION	SCHOOL	WEBSITE
Eastern	Addis Ababa University. <i>School of Information Sciences</i>	http://aaau.edu.et/sis/about.php
	Makerere University. <i>East African School of Library and Information Science</i> . 	http://easlis.mak.ac.ug/index.php/programmes/blis
	Kenyatta University. <i>School of Education. Library & Information Science</i>	http://ku.ac.ke/schools/education/index.php/departments/lib-studies
	Moi University. <i>School of Information Science</i>	
	Tumaini University (Dar es Saalam). <i>Bachelor of Arts in library and information studies – an overview of the program</i>	www.tudarco.ac.tz/main_department.php?pu=3&d=1
	University of Dar es salaam. Directorate of postgraduate studies.(2013). <i>Postgraduate prospectus, 2013/2014-2014/2015 academic year</i> , Dar es Salaam. Dar es Salaam university press.	
Western	University of Ibadan. Faculty of Education. <i>Department of Library, Archival and Information Studies</i>	http://educ.ui.edu.ng/courseslib
	University of Ghana. <i>School of Information studies</i>	www.ug.edu.gh/infostudies/
Southern	University of Botswana. Faculty of Humanities. <i>Library and Information studies</i>	http://educ.ui.edu.ng/courseslib
	University of Cape Town. <i>Library and information studies center</i>	www.lisc.uct.ac.za/lisc/masters-programmes
	University of Pretoria. <i>Department of Information science</i>	www.up.ac.za/information-science/

Eastern Africa

Out of 65 iSchool members listed in the iSchool directory (<http://ischools.org/members/directory/>), only one institution from East Africa, Makerere University, Uganda, is listed as of November 15, 2015. It appears that it is only Makerere University that has formally been assimilated into the movement. There have been organizational reforms at Makerere University that could have had a bearing on this direction. In 2010, for instance, the university moved from a faculty-based to a collegiate system. Amongst the presumptions in this institutional change were improving efficiency and decentralizing administrative and academic functions. Faculties, institutes and schools merged. A new tiered administrative structure, starting from departments, schools and the college was created. The assumptions behind the mergers were that schools with some similarity in epistemological and philosophical foundations fitted together. The humanities, for example, were combined with social sciences to form the College of Humanities and Social Sciences; the library school formerly known as the East African School of Librarianship (EASL) was merged with computer science to form the College of Computing and Information Sciences (CoCIS).

The library school is currently referred to as the East African School of Library and Information Science (EASLIS). Whether the study of the practice of librarianship draws theoretical grounding from computer science or the social sciences could be debated. However, the advances in technology as well as technology use and uptake could in some ways situate the LIS discipline closer to computer science. The word *library* does not feature in the combination, but rather appears to be subsumed by *information science*, probably to reflect this philosophy. However, at school level, the term *librarianship* is maintained in one of the two bachelor's programs, the bachelor's degree in library and information science (BLIS). This inclusion is also reflected in the membership of iSchools with 15 of 65 institutions maintaining the word *library* or *librarianship* in their names. However, the course units for this degree are more reflective of the changing technological environments and include courses in designing and managing databases and web documents and in information technology.

The (EASLIS) master's program on the other hand appears to be more ICT-driven, where the term *library* has been predominantly replaced with *information* or *knowledge*.

The philosophical ideals of the iSchool movement of bringing together information, human beings as users and suppliers, and technology point to interdisciplinarity in identifying and addressing new research problems, mentioned as an identifying factor in iSchools. However, it is yet to be discovered how many of faculty in Africa have embraced, succumbed or shunned this direction. Literature on the development of the iSchool movement is scanty in Africa, but there has been documentation on the information revolution in Africa and adjustments within the LIS curricula across the board.

In Kenya, for instance, there are nine library training schools, including those at public universities like Moi and Kenyatta. At Moi University, the training unit is called the School of Information Sciences. However, the word *library* is maintained in the Department of Library, Records Management and Information Studies as well as in one of the master's programs. Although the unit is not formerly associated with the iSchool movement, there are indications towards that direction. For example all bachelor's programs do not have the word *library* in their names, which range from informatics to media science. The school has close links with media studies.

In Kenyatta University, LIS programs are under the School of Education, but have maintained traditional library and information science nomenclature in both the undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The link with education is a little difficult to explain, but there is consideration for teacher/librarians, who ideally represent graduates who can be both teachers as well as librarians.

In two other Kenyan universities, Kisi and Kabianga, there has been rebranding from librarianship to knowledge and information management, especially at graduate level. The professional term *librarian* appears not to sell to the youth as it tends to resonate with the basic, and maybe mundane, practices of shelving and issuing books. In a bid to tap into the constantly changing market forces affecting scholarship and to attract new students,

rebranding has been found to be of necessity [6]. Among undergraduate students at EASLIS, Makerere University, the professional title of “information manager” is often seen as a favorable and acceptable form of professional reference.

Tanzania has a limited number of library schools. Only one university, Tumaini University, which is private, offers an undergraduate program called bachelor of library and information studies. One of the justifications listed for the program reveals foresight of an LIS graduate with more employment possibilities, in areas such as information brokerage, database administration, system design or analysis, information research consultancy and electronic publishing, among others. This conceptual analysis suggests that the university is looking beyond preparing a traditional librarian to training an information worker at par with the digital environment. The University of Dar es Salaam, on the other hand, offers postgraduate training at master’s and Ph.D. levels. The program is under the College of Social Sciences. The master’s program is a master of arts in information studies. Course units offered reflect a blend of traditional librarianship and aspects of the digital era, for example, information theory, organization of knowledge, collection development, records management and information user studies. Information technology-related course units include basic IT, digital libraries and information systems. Judging from the units, they appear to be more geared towards traditional information organization.

In the horn of Africa, Ethiopia, the first School of Information Studies was established jointly by the International Development Research Center (Canada) and UNESCO in the 1990s as a school of information studies for Africa (SISA). Later on, there was a merger with the Faculty of Computer Science, which was then under the Faculty of Science to form the Faculty of Informatics in 2002. In 2009, the faculty again transformed into the School of Information Sciences, under the College of Management, Information and Economic Sciences. The Ethiopian experience shows a shift from the hard sciences to social sciences. The school has three programs: 1) the bachelor’s in information systems; 2) a master’s in information science; and 3) a master’s in health informatics. No programs have components of

traditional librarianship course units, but rather units aligned to information and database systems, their design and management, including knowledge management. The courses are more or less geared towards digital environments. At the same time, there does not seem to be evidence of interdisciplinarity, but rather shifts towards computer science.

Western Africa

Earlier library training in West African was dominated by Ghana and, later, by Nigeria at Ibadan University.

The Ibadan library school prides itself as the oldest in West Africa, established in 1959. It is housed under the Faculty of Education. It still maintains itself as the Department of Library, Archival and Information Studies, which appears to preserve a more traditional perspective to librarianship. This approach is also reflected in the course units, which include studies in bibliography, the book trade and serials librarianship. The only reference to the technological age appears to be with courses on information science and computers in libraries. There is thus very minimal reference to the digital environment. One would conclude that despite the longevity of the school, it is one of those that have not embraced the iSchool movement.

In the University of Ghana, the Department of Information Studies is under the School of Information and Communication Studies. Formally established in 1961, the department has experienced several name changes, from being called the Ghana Library School to becoming the Department of Library And Archival Studies in 1976 after its merger with the Center for Archival Education. It became the Department of Information Studies in 2001. The school offers three programs in library and archival studies. Courses offered at undergraduate level include a mix of traditional courses in librarianship, cataloguing, classification, indexing and abstracting as well as those reflecting information provision in the ICT-driven era, for example, database design and analysis. At the graduate level, similar trends can be observed. It is difficult to position this school in terms of the iSchool movement.

Southern Africa

In the Southern part of Africa, at Botswana, LIS studies, are housed under the Faculty of Humanities as Library and Information Studies. The department offers three programs in information systems or information management, library and information studies and archives and records management. For library and information studies the course content leans towards ICT and includes data base management, data communication and digital libraries, while the program in information systems includes elements of information systems design, applications, and maintenance and of understanding users.

In South Africa, LIS schools have had to reposition themselves with the information revolution as well as with changes in higher education. Institutions as well as library services have had to relocate and in some instances to close down, leaving the country with 10 library schools. There has been a refocus from librarianship courses to courses related to information management, computing, communication and business studies. In instances where there have been considerations for merging schools or colleges, there has been a common choice for LIS schools to affiliate with education or communication schools. Although some LIS schools have retained the word *library* in their names, there has been a shift towards the 'I' concept by at least five institutions. The course contents have also varied. For example, at the University of Capetown, there is an emphasis on curation in digital settings and metadata architecture, and this area appears to be the

major focus of postgraduate training. The University of Pretoria, which prides itself as the largest information science training institution in South Africa, could be described as one that has embraced the information revolution. Although courses include the option of library science, the department is cognizant of the new technologies demonstrated in multimedia and information technology. There is a distinction between library science and information science, with the latter being associated with the information society, information systems and information entrepreneurial opportunities.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, most library training institutions in Africa have adapted to the changing information environment precipitated by ICTs and the reforms in higher education that appear to be a global phenomenon. Curricula have been reviewed, and in some instances there are direct connections with market forces. Nomenclatures in courses, as well as in professional attribution and inclination, appear to be directed at building status, esteem and competitiveness in the information world. Although most library training schools in Africa have not directly embraced the terminology of iSchools, they appear to be silently tilting towards its philosophy in response to information provision and knowledge management in digital environments. There is, however, not much evidence of shifting towards interdisciplinary strategies. ■

Resources Mentioned in the Article

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