

Spring 2024 Professional Fellow

Name: Denis Ouma
Country: Uganda
Job Title and Employer: Chief Executive Officer, Embellish Consults Limited
Project Title: Empowering Disability Self-Advocacy in Higher Education: A Pilot Mentorship and Training Program for Ugandan Universities

Issue: Uganda has adopted policies guaranteeing inclusive education at all levels. For example, the 2001 Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act states that institutions of higher education (IHEs) risk losing their provisional license if they fail to meet infrastructure standards. Unfortunately, the Act does not explicitly address universal design and accessible facilities.

IHEs have admitted to lacking both policies and procedures to support students with disabilities. They have rejected students from specific programs or from the university entirely due to perceived challenges in accommodating their needs (Emong & Eron, 2016). Additionally, students report encountering negative attitudes, stigma, violence, and harassment from staff (Emong & Zeyen, 2023). This has perpetuated the negative learning experience and exclusion of students with disabilities from IHEs in Uganda.

Denis faced many challenges in his own journey in academia, including inaccessible classrooms and rejection due to his accommodation needs, which nearly prevented him from graduating. He intends to leverage his experience to help more students graduate from college.

Project Objective: Denis' project aims to enhance disability support in higher education by recruiting students and mentors, providing customized training, and improving policies. The goal is to empower students with disabilities for educational and career success.

Project Activities: Partnering with a university's disability student support center, Denis will recruit incoming students with disabilities for a mentorship and training program. Leveraging his extensive network, Denis will enlist mentors who are successful graduates with disabilities with expertise relevant to the students' interests. Denis will provide an orientation to these mentors, guiding them in their roles and responsibilities. Mentors will engage with students over time, offering both formal and informal support, with a focus on advocating for reasonable accommodations in education and providing career guidance for post-graduation success.

Denis and his inclusion experts at Embellish Consults Limited will complement this mentorship with their training modules. These training modules cover leadership ethics, communication, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, employability, soft skills, and self-advocacy. Denis will customize the training content and materials based on student feedback to meet the information and support needs of students with disabilities within higher education.

Additionally, Denis aims to collaborate with the university's administrators and staff responsible for support of students with disabilities to review current policies and propose necessary modifications to ensure they are disability inclusive.

References:

- Emong, P. & Eron, L. (2016). Disability inclusion in higher education in Uganda: Status and strategies. *African Journal of Disability*, 5(1), 1-11.
- Emong, P. & Zeyen, A. (2023). Exploring equality and non-discrimination of disabled students in policy and practice in public universities in Uganda. in: Sally Robinson & Karen R. Fisher (ed.), *Research Handbook on Disability Policy*, chapter 36, pages 421-436, Edward Elgar Publishing.
- The Uganda Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001: <https://www.ugandalaws.com/statutes/principle-legislation/universities-and-other-tertiary-institutions-act-2001>

