

## Expanding Horizons: Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships

# Studying From Afar: Applying Learning to Practice to Improve Community Health and Livelihoods

The University of Manchester offers a Master's Degree in Public Health and Primary Care as a distance learning course.

Since 2011 the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has funded a total of 58 Scholars to study on this course. Targeted at health professionals, the course teaches Scholars the skills and knowledge related to public health concerns at local, national and international level. Scholars develop the ability to apply relevant theory and scientific principles to practical situations and meet core-competencies in public health including transferable skills in effective communication, critical reasoning and systematic approaches to problem-solving and decision-making.



University of Manchester.

To identify the impact of the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme, the CSC Evaluation Team conducted in-depth interviews with Dr Isla Gemmell, a Senior Lecturer and Scholarships Lead on the programme at the University of Manchester. Also interviewed were two Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars, Boniface Bongonyinge from Uganda and Denis Juma, from Tanzania, who are both studying for a Master's Degree in Public Health and Primary Care at the University of Manchester. Dr Dithan Kiragga, Boniface's employer at the University Research Company (URC) in Uganda, also shared his experience with having a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar working within his organisation.

### Motivations and Expectations for Participating in the Distance Learning Programme

For the University of Manchester, the opportunity to acquire funding from the CSC to support the distance learning programme, and to recruit more widely, was a primary motivation for participating in the programme, as detailed by Dr Gemmell, **'Access to CSC funding enables us to recruit students who otherwise wouldn't be able to pay for their education. Recruiting CSC scholars to the programme is an opportunity to contribute to the internationalisation of the programmes offered by the university, and is key for the development of the institution and our social responsibility goals.'**

Meanwhile, Dr Kiragga, employer of Commonwealth Scholar Boniface, highlighted that the continued timely delivery of work project goals by his employee was key. Therefore, the flexibility for Boniface to study part-time alongside his work was expected to work well for both the organisation and the Scholar. Moreover, Boniface would study at no financial cost to the organisation, and this was attractive for both Employer and Scholar, **'The fact that he would remain performing his duties was always a bonus for us. This is a USAID contract where we have very tight deadlines, strict delivery goals, so for him to pursue that option was a win-win for us in many ways. And the fact that the employee wouldn't strain himself financially.'** Dr Kiragga added that obtaining the Master's qualification would create opportunities for his employee's career progression, which as an Employer, he was keen to support.

**He's an individual that we are looking at for growth and promotion within the organisation based on his performance. I felt that he was at a stage in his career where he has had enough field exposure and experience to pursue the Master's qualification.**

Similarly, Scholar Denis highlighted that encouraging high-level qualifications for employees is a mission and vision of the hospital he works for, the Bugando Medical Centre, **'Because this is a tertiary hospital, they are expecting a high-level qualification of their employees so they can support the mission and vision of the hospital. The hospital management encourages the employees to obtain higher qualifications because of the level of the hospital.'**

By undertaking the Master's degree course, both Scholars had hoped to improve their work-related skills and knowledge to address and improve public health related issues in their communities, as Boniface explained, **'Initially, as a medical officer in a Regional Referral Hospital, my work centred around caring for persons who are living with HIV and AIDS. I then joined a project which focused on delivering comprehensive HIV prevention, care and treatment services, as the District Technical Co-ordinator. It is from here, that I realised that for me to be able to deliver on my tasks better, I needed appropriate skills which were unfortunately missing. This motivated me to apply for the distance learning Master's Degree in Public Health.'**



Boniface Bongonyinge, Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar (Master's in Public Health and Primary Care).

Similarly, Denis saw the studies as being directly relevant to his work tasks as he explained, **'I am a physiotherapist and mostly I deal with non-communicable diseases, but apart from that we are also dealing with patients who have complications from communicable diseases like HIV, people with diabetes, and chest problems due to COVID. Seeing patients with complications already got me motivated to take a course in public health which will equip me with knowledge on control and prevention of complications.'**

Moreover, the opportunity to access funding from the CSC was a major incentive for Denis to apply for a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, **'I had no funds for my studies and being sponsored by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission to do distance learning while working, has been a great opportunity for me.'**



Denis Juma (second from the right) attending training in a Research Methodology Course (RMC) hosted by Mwanza Intervention Trials Unit (MITU) in Mwanza, Tanzania.

## Resources and Mentorship: UK Provider and Employer Support to the Scholars

Throughout their studies, the Scholars have received invaluable support from both the University of Manchester and from their employers that has enabled them to progress smoothly. Upon enrolling, the University of Manchester provides extensive information and guidance about the demands of the programme and setting expectations for Scholars, which Boniface described as being extremely useful, **'I must really say that the university was very supportive, they did enough to prepare me mentally as a student to help me know what I was getting into, that it is not as easy as it looks, but it's manageable.'**

His employer, Dr Kiragga also offered key support to Boniface's applications for the study programme and for the Scholarship, providing resources and equipment such as research documents and internet facilities, and by integrating the Scholar's studies within his regular work routine.

As a Commonwealth Alumnus himself, who completed a Master's Degree in International Primary Health Care at University of London in 2010 as a distance learner, Dr Kiragga draws from his own personal experiences to offer guidance and mentorship to Boniface, as confirmed by the Scholar, **'I remember I talked to my chief of party, Dr Kiragga about my study plans to pursue a career in public health. Luckily enough, he is a Commonwealth Alumnus, and he advised me that the Master's Degree in Public Health was good for the work that I am doing, and the skills gained would enhance my performance, and when I asked him to be my referee, he was totally on board.'**

Similarly, Denis has received much encouragement and support from his workplace to pursue his studies, **‘My employer supported me in terms of allowing me to take these studies while working. When I informed my director about my studies, he thought they were relevant to my work tasks. As a tertiary hospital we deal with consultation, and we do research. And the Human Resource Officer offered a recommendation letter for my Scholarship application.’**



Denis at his office, studying and working.

## **The Value of an International Perspective: Benefits for Scholars and their Communities**

Both Scholars highlighted the immediate benefits and impact of their distance learning studies on their day-to-day tasks in the workplace and in their local communities. Boniface reflected on the value of the knowledge, skills, and exposure to international perspectives gained from his studies to date.

**For the work that I do, you need to be very analytical. And these were some of the skills that I was really lacking initially in my practice, but also in my day-to-day operations. I spend a lot of time trying to look at best practices, and evidence from other regions and countries that we can adapt and bring into our own programming. One of the course units that I started with was Evidence-Based Practice, it opened my eyes to be able to synthesise evidence, but also translate evidence into practice. My analytical skills have immensely improved. And of course, there are a number of other skills acquired, I am better organised which of course, I've come to learn through working with my tutors.**

By applying the skills gained through his studies to expand biomedical interventions to improve health and livelihoods in his local area, Boniface is offering invaluable services to his community, **‘Being able to expand some of the new interventions is changing lives and communities. For example, if you look at the high burden of HIV and AIDS, we know that if we can avert new infections, and provide better care for persons living with HIV our communities are going to be healthier and more productive. I am able to deliver and contribute to these efforts because of the skills that I've acquired through the CSC Scholarship.’**

Denis commended the flexibility of the study course which allows Scholars to select courses that are most relevant to their work tasks. This has facilitated the immediate application of knowledge from his courses to improve delivery of his day-to-day work activities, **‘In the module I am currently doing, I selected a management course on decision making. I'm applying a lot of knowledge gained from the module on health system management. This includes working as a team, listening to colleagues, making decisions together, and programming any issues together as a team. I'm looking forward to engaging so much in public health interventions, and research.’**

Participating in the study programme has also created opportunities for Denis to interact with Scholars, Alumni, and organisations in his field of expertise, establishing important professional networks and learning from their experiences to shape his career development, **‘I have also gained from the general exposure to international organisations and international students which has exposed me to different opportunities. By participating in seminars, listening to Alumni and what are they doing has motivated me. The knowledge, skills, and experience I have gained through the university is invaluable.’**

Moreover, Denis noted that his professional relationships within the workplace have improved since he commenced his studies, something he attributed to the implementation of a participatory decision-making approach adopted from his course of study, **‘As the head of the department when it comes to decision-making in the department, we work as a team. Before that people used to argue here and there. Now, with participatory decision-making we come to a concession or an agreement, and we work smoothly.’**

Providing the perspective of the UK-based course Provider on perceived benefits of the distance learning programme to the Scholars and their communities, Dr Gemmell concurred with the Scholars experiences, highlighting their exposure to international perspectives and best practices, **'While studying, Scholars interact with other Scholars and they share knowledge and experiences of what works in the health sector within their contexts. Scholars get a global view of health challenges and how they are being tackled by their fellow colleagues, and this knowledge exchange is key in developing the health sector. They also get exposure to best practices that can be implemented in similar contexts.'**

Reiterating the value of the programme, and how it has benefited Scholars and their communities, Dr Gemmell convincingly flagged the importance of immediate and direct application of skills.

**The Scholars apply knowledge and skills in their work activities, as they study. They are in the health sector, and therefore knowledge applied directly benefits the communities they work in, and they implement their learning directly into their practice, including life-saving interventions.**

### **Enhanced Skills, Projects, and Relationships: Benefits to the Employer**

Dr Kiragga revealed how having an employee such as Boniface enrolled in the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme has been mutually beneficial to both the Scholar and his organisation. According to Dr Kiragga, the academic exposure of the Scholar has contributed to improved articulation of issues in the workplace, as Boniface translates his learnings to date into his work tasks. He added that the Scholar has been instrumental in implementing programmes to strengthen access to vital health services for the key populations targeted by their organisation.

**The experience that the Scholar has is quite immense and he has been able to translate a lot of that learning into his work. One of his most recent accomplishments was that he was part of an excellent video story about our key populations, where his team captured stories about how the activity is implementing programmes to strengthen access to services for key populations.**

Based on his improved performance of duties, Boniface has recently been promoted to a more senior position. In this new role, Boniface has effectively represented the employer in supporting a local partner organisation, **'We promoted him to HIV Prevention Advisor and DREAMS Advisor. He was asked to step up and support a local partner, The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO), which is implementing a USAID Transition Award, The Local Partner Health Services in Acholi Activity.'**

Dr Kiragga added that he has developed more interest in the Scholar's studies over time, and his personal relations with the Scholar and his professional development have also improved, **'I guess it influences my subconscious mind as he is pursuing something that I'm involved in, it generates more interest. He has some attachment to me as a supervisor, in terms of offering him support.'**

Describing the benefits of applying the knowledge and skills gained from his studies to his work tasks, Boniface identified the importance of informal knowledge and skills transfer within the workplace. By sharing his knowledge on data for programming with his colleagues, this has not only helped upskill his team, but also improved relations with his work colleagues.

**Several of my colleagues that I supervise or those in the same level have really benefitted from the support that I have given them. They can now appreciate better the importance of data use for programming and they've been able to improve their own skill sets and apply some of these transferable skills.**

He added that, by drawing from his newly acquired knowledge and skills, he is performing his work tasks more effectively and has contributed to new workstreams. By researching and implementing successful community interventions, he has added value to his organisation, and to his local communities.

Meanwhile, Denis is currently conducting research on health issues and implementing community health interventions with the continued support of his employer, **'My target is researching and doing community interventions, and I intend to work with the department of research or community health of my hospital to support the mission of the department of community health.'**

## Looking Ahead: Scholars' Plans for Future Developmental Activities

As they progress with their studies, both Scholars revealed their personal plans and ambitions to continue contributing to developmental activities at their workplaces, in their local communities and beyond. Using the skills acquired through his studies, Boniface hopes to make a meaningful contribution to HIV prevention efforts in his country by supporting stronger health systems, influencing the implementation of HIV prevention programmes, and expanding the scope of this work beyond the regional level.

Ultimately my interests are to contribute more to HIV prevention efforts in my country. My influence on HIV prevention interventions and programs is growing, I intend to expand my scope of work from regional level to national level programs and thereby, contribute significantly to the attainment and sustainability of HIV epidemic control.

For Denis, who is passionately dedicated to research on community interventions and promoting health education, his top priority is to embark on research collaborations with Commonwealth Distance Learning Alumni and other stakeholders in the region who have experience in the field. Upon completing his dissertation research project for his Master's degree course, he plans to share research findings with local communities to improve awareness on public health issues, 'After completing my dissertation I plan to work out of the hospital, with the community and give health education and promotion mostly on non-communicable diseases. This will prevent people from coming to the hospital with complications.'

To advance his academic career and further improve his knowledge on public health issues to deliver quality health outcomes to local communities, Denis plans to pursue PhD studies upon completing his Master's degree.

For his PhD studies, Denis intends to engage in research exploring the integration of non-communicable diseases care with communicable diseases programmes, specifically the interventions of care for cardiovascular conditions with well advanced programmes such as that of HIV and AIDS and Tuberculosis.

In preparation for his future plans to undertake PhD studies to advance his career, Denis has made several consultations with experts in his area of interest as he explained, 'I have made several consultations with experts in the area of Non Communicable diseases (NCDs) such as Dr Robert Peck who is the Associate Professor of Medicine and Pediatrics working with Catholic University and Allied Health Science (CUHAS) seeking mentorship and advice.'

Furthermore, Denis and colleagues in collaboration with his hospital-Bugando Medical Centre (BMC) and Catholic University of Health and Allied Sciences (CUHAS) have started a programme known as Non-Communicable Diseases Awareness Programme (NAP) For Healthy Communities and Well Being, which works with Catholic churches in Mwanza urban. To expand the services to all lake zone regions of Tanzania, Denis and colleagues are currently seeking for funds from interested donors, stakeholders, collaborators, and supporters of the programme.