

Nothing About Us Without Us

Disability Rights Scholarship Program Portfolio Review April 2015



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I. Introduction

The Disability Rights Scholarship Program (DRSP) is a comprehensive issue-driven individual grants scheme operating both within a larger context of Human Rights Initiative Disability Rights work and Scholarship Programs MA-level individual grants work. Its funding streams (HRI, Scholarships, international law schools), its positioning relative to other Disability Rights work, and the choice of beneficiary countries have produced a unique model for linking individual grants to a targeted issue area. A retrospective on how the trajectories of various grantees align (or not) with our original expectations will help us evaluate this complex model. Our intention here is not to look for success in terms of dramatic progress for the disability rights movement; it is still too soon for that. Yet with 37 alumni¹ who were selected from roughly 175 applicants over three sequential competitions, we can reasonably review a key element of the program design: how good was our selection?

Choosing individuals for any openly competed merit-based scholarship is an exercise in calibrated risk. Weak professional experience can be forgiven in the face of surprising essays, excellent transcripts might fall flat against lackluster civic engagement, and erudition in print can be overshadowed by poor interactive communication. Publicized eligibility criteria establish definitive parameters; guidelines to selection committees introduce more nuance and flexibility, and interviews elicit qualities that frequently turn everything on its head. The interplay of graduate school admission requirements, issue-area agendas, scholarship expectations, and of course the motivations of the applicants themselves becomes an intricate dance of fact and projection; selection is, in the end, far more art than science.

II. Origins

In 2008, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provided a framework for developing innovative legal arguments, yet implementation at the local level proved elusive. For implementation to succeed, rights must be enshrined in law, the law must provide remedies for rights violations, and disability rights advocates and actors in the legal profession must be prepared and able to utilize legal tools to address violations. By 2010, the Disability Rights Initiative identified an acute need for training lawyers who could exploit the opportunities offered by the Convention. By Spring 2011, HRI staff initiated conversations with Scholarships to explore how scholarships might play a role within HRI's overall approach to disability rights support. By Summer 2011, a trial effort was launched to support three students at Galway with a grant from surplus funds the Scholarships African program development budget. In the 2012 Scholarship budget request, a new line appeared for a full-fledged Disability Rights Scholarship Program; a year later, this line item shifted to the HRI budget.

III. Program Design and Implementation

Our first challenge in program design arose from an unexpected quarter: potential host law schools had capacity gaps of their own. We learned that most disability related courses tended to focus on domestic legislation and national legal precedent; very few schools approached the topic from an international perspective, much less through the lens of using the CRPD for strategic litigation. We eventually identified six institutions with nascent capacity for disability rights education and, importantly, a strong

¹ A list of alumni and associated grant details can be found in Appendix A.

interest in forming a consortium dedicated to improving legal curricula with informed international perspectives. In hindsight, creating such a consortium early on proved far more productive than we anticipated; it remains one of the striking success stories behind this initiative. Joining the DRSP consortium meant each school agreed to mainstream disability rights into existing human rights curricula, and to participate in collaborative workshops, faculty exchange, and research efforts in the field.

The DRSP awards were initially offered in Nepal and select countries of Latin America and Africa. These countries were chosen by Rights Initiative colleagues, in keeping with the intention of the program to address capacity gaps and strengthen fledgling disability rights movements. With strategic litigation goals in mind, we limited the field of study to law (Master of Laws, or LL.M); we have since questioned this limitation as we see non-lawyer activists drawn to the awards. We framed the program goals as follows:

“The program aims to advance the rights of persons with disabilities, and through legal channels, help overcome the effect of exclusionary practices, so that persons with disabilities achieve a state of full and effective participation and inclusion in society. The program intends to provide disability rights advocates and lawyers with the necessary expertise to develop new legislation, jurisprudence, impact litigation, and scholarship, thereby taking advantage of the innovations and opportunities offered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).”

IV. Eligibility Criteria and Selection

Scholarships employs a multi-stage selection process which prioritizes academic excellence, professional aptitude, leadership potential, and (for DRSP) commitment to work in the field of disability rights, ideally in the home country. The overall selection process is as follows:

1. Eligibility Review: Applications are reviewed by in-country colleagues, host university faculty, and OSF staff. Applicants who meet eligibility requirements and show promise are invited to interviews and must take an official language test of English proficiency.
2. Interviews and Final Selection: Semifinalists are interviewed by a similar mix of in-country colleagues, host faculties, and OSF staff. The interview panel recommends candidates for finalist status.
3. Placement: Staff work with host universities to shepherd finalists through graduate admissions.

Eligibility marks the first threshold that must be crossed, and some of the key criteria² for DRSP include:

- work experience in legal profession or advocacy focusing on human/disability rights;
- excellent academic record with a Bachelor's degree in Law (in exceptional circumstances, those without a law degree may be considered);
- demonstrated leadership in field of disability rights;
- proficient in spoken and written English or French and able to meet university-designated minimum scores on standardized language tests; and
- clear commitment to return to home country to aid ongoing disability rights work.

² A sample announcement with program description and full eligibility criteria can be found in Appendix B.

It is axiomatic that finalists must be admissible to host university LLM programs. However, these programs present a wide variety of admissions standards. For international applicants, North American schools require an undergraduate law degree (LLB); UK and Ireland however will consider applicants with policy or social science degrees. As well, UK immigration policy sets a minimum language test score as a condition for visas, exempting in most cases students from Commonwealth Anglophone countries. North American graduate schools, however, do not recognize the UK exemption. Becoming a finalist, in other words, is hardly the final step in the selection process.

In addition to factual data criteria such as citizenship, language test scores, and academic transcripts, eligibility factors include fuzzier indicators of the applicant's strengths and weaknesses. For example, although we require work experience, we set no minimum length of employment. We require academic achievement, but we do not list a finite set of acceptable undergraduate majors. We do not specify what we mean by "leadership" or "clear commitment to return home" (return home *when?*). Our selection metrics deliberately allow significant flexibility: we are looking for qualities that are not easily defined. Hence the value of the current exercise, where we assess how well this flexible and inclusive process produced the outcomes anticipated in the program description.

In this portfolio review, we take a closer look at the initial assessment and subsequent trajectories of 4 grantees, each one embodying selection dilemmas common to much of our work. How do we gauge true commitment to OSF values (in this case, to promoting disability rights)? Is the candidate at a place in her personal trajectory to make best use of this opportunity? Are we offering the right degree for the the profiles we seek (ie, LLM curricula for non-lawyers)? What capacities do we as staff need to effectively handle the profiles our inclusive practice produces? In short, what did we think success looked like when we started, and what do we think now?

A. How do we gauge devotion of applicants to issues of disability rights?

A fully-funded LLM scholarship presents a very attractive opportunity, and the selection committee must determine whether a candidate's motivation for applying comes from devotion to disability rights or is more about general personal advancement. Applicants may have strong backgrounds in human rights, but if their interest in disability rights is recent and unproven, will they "stay the course"? One reliable indicator of dedication to the field is length and depth of experience in disability rights, whether as an activist, lawyer, academic, or a civil society representative. On the other hand, applicants with disabilities themselves but weak professional histories also present convincing commitment: for them, it is a personal lifelong engagement. Which profile is more likely to fit program goals?



Juan Sebastian Alarcon
Colombia
McGill University
Cohort: 2013-14

Juan Sebastián came to an awareness of disability issues from his experience as a gay man living in a conservative, religious society. “I have experienced the ease with which other citizens can exclude, stereotype and discriminate against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer community first-hand. Therefore, I am able to better understand the discrimination that people with disabilities receive.” The desire to help minorities led him to conduct research on the economic, social and cultural rights of Indigenous people and the LGBTQ community, as well as on migration, forced displacement, domestic violence, and volunteerism. As a disability rights advocate at the Program of Action for Equality and Social Inclusion (PAIIS), a legal clinic at Universidad de los Andes, he led a study on access to justice for women and girls with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities and drafted a report on sexual violence against girls and women with disabilities for the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Selection and Award Notes

Juan Sebastián impressed the committee with his legal experience in a broad range of human rights issues. At the same time, this range raised concerns about long-term involvement in disability rights. One reviewer felt Juan was more focused on his personal agenda than on disability rights. But another noted that his perspective would enhance the international disability movement by linking disability and LGBTQ rights (and HIV issues). Ultimately he was selected, and performed well at McGill, completing a thesis titled “Beyond Discrimination: A Reading from the Social Model of Disability to the Mental Health Conditions of LGBTQ People.”

Post DRSP activity

After graduation, Juan Sebastián won a fellowship at the Center for Reproductive Rights in New York. He reports that he has “conducted trainings on the intersection between disability rights and sexual and reproductive rights for the Global Legal Program at the Center, to ensure a disability rights perspective in the litigation of our cases at regional offices and to continue the debate among reproductive rights advocates on the tensions between reproductive rights and disability rights with respect to abortion.”

He has also been involved in significant international case-work. In [L.C. v. Peru](#) (CEDAW) and [F.S. v. Chile](#) (Inter-American Commission of Human Rights) he used a disability rights perspective to address reparations for the victims, challenging the medical approach to disability. He also argued for the implementation of CRPD standards regarding reasonable accommodations applicable for each case.

Juan Sebastián also continues to be involved in multiple human rights issues. He has expressed an interest in pursuing a PhD to continue his research on the intersectionality between LGBTQ issues, disability rights, and human rights, but as yet a commitment to disability rights work in his home country is not apparent.

In some ways, a profile like Juan Sebastián’s is a win-win. Even if disability becomes a secondary focus, he has already contributed to sensitizing and training staff at a major player in the reproductive rights movement on disability rights issues, and he is sure to remain engaged in other issues of importance to OSF. Yet, what is the state of strategic litigation on disability rights in Colombia? Is this what success looks like for DRSP?

B. Is the candidate at a place in her personal trajectory to make best use of the opportunity?

Yet another complex selection challenge relates to timing: is this the right opportunity for this person at this time? Will the award significantly advance their capacities such that new pathways are open to them, or do they already operate at a level at which further credentialing and education will have less of an impact? If the latter, is there value in bringing this individual into the cohort as a motivator for others and a strong voice for the program’s goals? The two profiles below offer food for thought.

Felecia represents a great “fit” for DRSP: she had a strong commitment to disability rights, but lacked a deeper understanding of the rights discourse—the committee was confident that an LLM at this time in her life would propel her forward to an influential leadership position.



Felecia Magiri Mburu
Kenya
Washington College of Law
Cohort: 2013-14

Felecia’s interest in disability started when she signed up for Kenyan sign language classes in order to communicate better with an art teacher. She is also engaged to a visually-impaired man and her aunt has a mental disability and visual impairment. Felecia earned an LLB with 2nd Class Honors at Moi University, and worked as policy and advocacy coordinator at the Kenya Alliance for Advancement of Children, where she focused on issues of education for children with disabilities.

Selection notes

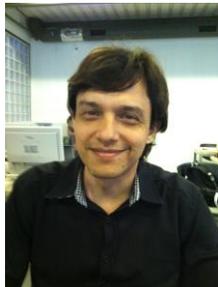
Reviewers were concerned with Felecia’s unimpressive grades and gaps in her employment. During the interview, Felecia explained that the challenges of single motherhood took a toll on her academic and professional record. The interview committee was very impressed with her level of commitment to the disability movement. They noted her excellent interpersonal skills and sharp, incisive answers to the questions, which demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the Kenyan context relating to persons with disabilities. She was selected and placed at Washington College of Law (American University), where she completed an LLM in International Legal Studies with a GPA of 3.6. Before leaving the U.S., she secured a three-month internship at Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities. She wrote an article on mental disability in Kenya which was published in the Africa Law Blog, run by the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria. She also submitted a paper for the 2014 African Yearbook, for which the editors recommended revision and resubmission.

Post DRSP activity

Felecia has worked as program associate with the Coalition on Violence against Women, focusing on persons with disabilities; as a consultant on a USAID project intended to change laws and policies relating to sexual violence against women with disabilities; and as consultant with Crowne Court Consults in Nairobi, where she completed a project with Handicap International and United Disabled Persons of Kenya in drafting the parallel report to the CRPD committee. She completed another project with the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights on implementing CRPD Article 12 (the right to legal capacity).

After 5 months, Felecia began an OSF internship with the Resource Center for People with Mental Disability “ZELDA”. She will conduct a six-month research project on CRPD Article 19, which guarantees the right to live independently and be included in the community. As she says, “My career is on an upward climb. Not only has the Master’s given me the recognition in my home country, but I have finally switched to disability rights work full time. In future I hope to set up my practice in partnership with a law school focusing on access to justice for [persons with disabilities].”

Facundo, on the other hand, probably did not need an OSF award to keep moving ahead. He already had solid achievements in the field, and the committee debated whether further study and credentialing would significantly increase his effectiveness. Yet, it is hard to turn down an impressive profile; he joined the DRSP community, but we are not sure it was a wise choice. Facundo’s profile, and that of others who have joined international or regional movements, raises questions about the original goal of bridging capacity gaps in order to support **local** CRPD implementation. How do we evaluate outcomes if alumni engage primarily on the international or regional stage? One might argue that encouraging strong voices from the global south to take up positions of influence in multilateral organizations of the global north is worthwhile in and of itself; should we change the language of the program goals?



Facundo Chavez Penillas
Argentina
Washington College of Law
American University
Cohort: 2012-13

Facundo’s commitment to issues of justice drew him to law, and during his studies he got involved in disability activism. As a wheelchair user himself, he was particularly struck by the lack of opportunities for persons with disabilities to access jobs in the open market. He opted for postgraduate work in business law to ensure his own employment, while also becoming active in a national worker’s union, focusing on job opportunities for persons with disabilities. His commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities led him to join local disabled persons’ organizations (namely in REDI –Network for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), then regional groups as Vice President of RIADIS (a Latin American Network of NGOs of persons with disabilities and their families), and ultimately international work at the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and the Global Partnership for Development and Disability. Facundo served as a lawyer for nearly three years at the Disability Rights Department of the Buenos Aires Ombudsman Office. In 2011, he secured a three-month internship at the IDA headquarters in Geneva. This drew him into international human rights at the UN, which allowed him to augment his local activism with international standards.

Selection notes

The selection committee was struck by Facundo’s impressive experience, legal accomplishments, and clear understanding of the CRPD. One member raised the question, “Why does he need an LLM when he is already so accomplished and active?” The committee did not seem concerned that Facundo was increasingly active in the international sphere, despite the statement in his application: “I believe that [after the scholarship], I will be able to project my work in a better way in my country but also I wish to broaden my activism internationally. ... I wish to be offered in the future a position in the field of international human rights organizations.” Ultimately the committee voted to select Facundo, convinced that the award would boost him to the next level of influence and efficacy.

Post DRSP Activity

Facundo excelled at Washington College of Law but left the program early to accept a position in Geneva as the Human Rights and Disability Advisor in the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) at the UN, a position of international influence and prestige. With assistance from DRSP staff, Facundo arranged with WCL to finish his degree remotely by May, 2015. As Human Rights and Disability Advisor of the OHCHR, one of his core functions is to support field offices in the process of policy development and reform, so his work has regional relevance to Latin America. Currently, he supports the UN Resident Coordinator in Peru to review civil code reforms around legal capacity. OHCHR has a broad mandate on human rights education and he has conducted several trainings for OHCHR staff members on the rights of persons with disabilities. He plans to collaborate with universities in Argentina on teaching the rights of persons with disabilities, as part of a curriculum development project supported by OSF. Facundo has also become a mentor to other DRSP fellows. In fact, he was the impetus for several Latin American finalists to apply and is attempting to arrange internships for DRSP fellows at the OHCHR.

C. What is the role of non-legal profiles in an LLM-centered program?

DRSP from the start was open to individuals without a previous law degree. We believed these individuals would gain useful expertise in policy, research, or advocacy that would complement litigation and law reform efforts. We assumed however that the non-law backgrounds would be an exception; as it turned out, selection committees were drawn to the potential of such individuals, especially those who had been barred from law school due to disabilities. The competition for academic year 2012-13 brought forward several such profiles in Africa. Five of the nine applicants ultimately selected as finalists lacked LLBs; interestingly, all were persons with disabilities, with backgrounds in teaching, advocacy, or policy.



Simate Simate
Zambia
University of Leeds
Cohort: 2012-13

Despite having multiple disabilities (visual and hearing), Simate completed his education in mainstream institutions, earning a Bachelor of Education from the University of Zambia in 2007. He had wanted to become a lawyer but lacked resources; instead, he opted to become an activist and teacher for hearing- and visually-impaired pupils (teaching being one of the few occupations persons with disabilities are encouraged to seek). He held a number of leadership positions in national disability organizations, including the Zambia National Association of the Hearing Impaired; Zambia Federation of Disability Organizations –ZAFOD; Zambia National Association of Sign Language Interpreters, and the DeafBlind Association of Zambia-DBZ. He was selected for two national councils: the Electoral Commission of Zambia and the Zambia National AIDS Council. He also led high-level research projects, including “Three Country Studies: HIV/AIDS and Disability in Zambia, Uganda, and South Africa,” an investigation supported by the World Bank and conducted by KwaZulu Natal University.

Selection notes

Reviewers were impressed by Simate's clear dedication to disability rights advocacy, his accomplishments at the national and regional level, his research capacity, and his leadership positions in prominent disabled persons' organizations (DPOs). Simate seemed well-acquainted with the CRPD and gave "clear, thoughtful answers" during the interview. He was ranked in the top 5 African semifinalists: "He is a leader and from this position has the potential to influence many after his training. Well versed in CRPD but needs a more nuanced understanding. Further credentialing would likely serve him well in moving to full time work at a DPO or government agency." Placed at Leeds University, Simate's disability challenges were well accommodated with assisted note taking and transcription of reading materials into accessible print. OSF equipped him with specialized hearing assistive technology, a laptop, printer and accessories for easy reading, a genie radio system to enable aural comprehension, and a voice recorder, all essential for academic performance. Despite having no background in legal studies, Simate successfully completed the Master of Laws degree in International and European Human Rights Law.

Post Program Activities

Since his return, Simate has resumed teaching (to fulfill requirements of his leave of absence). He has also reconnected with a range of DPOs, in some cases at a higher level of responsibility. He serves as advisor to the Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities; as volunteer child protection officer for a UNICEF-supported project; as volunteer human rights training advisor for Zambia Disability Rights Watch; and as consultant with the Ministry of Education on inclusion of deafblind children in the Zambian education system. He was also elected secretary general of the Africa Federation of the Deafblind. Simate continues research via a project supported by the Norwegian Association of the Disabled on the inclusion of disabled persons in community-based rehabilitation programs in Zambia.

Reflecting on his experience, Simate claims that the program "made me a more competent disability inclusion/rights consultant" and that he "gained higher self esteem, self confidence, and a greater positive outlook of disability."

Like Simate, all finalists without prior law degrees have successfully earned LLMs at UK hosts. While we can conclude that we were correct in believing that non-law backgrounds could perform well in LLM studies, we are still left wondering if these profiles will significantly improve the pursuit of strategic litigation in the home countries. Will their improved advocacy skills and civic leadership create better environments for CRPD implementation? If they are not lawyers, was the LLM the right award to offer?

D. How successfully have we met the administrative challenges of providing responsive disability accommodations?

Respecting the disability rights motto, "Nothing about us without us," DRSP staff have tried to ensure that the entire program, from recruitment to placement, is inclusive. Our efforts have not been wholly successful. To arrange testing accommodation, applicants with disabilities must provide medical evidence to the agency's head office in the US or UK, which starts a complicated bureaucratic process that leads to a local testing center securing the necessary equipment or technology. Managing this in a realistic timeframe has proven impossible in some cases, and those finalists unable to sit for the exam

were therefore placed at universities able to waive the testing requirement. This solution is not ideal, as it may result in a weak academic program fit.

Our Academic Writing Summer School in Istanbul also presents challenges. SP staff need to sensitize instructors to accessibility issues, find and employ local qualified personal assistants, and ensure adequate housing and transport. Palantypists and interpreters of relevant sign languages are unavailable locally. In the future, we may need to ask finalists to locate an interpreter willing to accompany them to summer school, a solution that is both complicated and costly.

Host universities are generally well-equipped to provide assistance (accessible classrooms, transcription and note-taking services, and assistive technology) on campus, but we learned that they lack the capacity and resources required for off-campus support (personal assistance for navigation, shopping, and home care). Such services are essential for quality of life, integrating into the community, and retaining autonomy. Many universities do not offer housing for graduate students, so DRSP students with disabilities face even greater challenges—and expense—in locating appropriate lodging. Although most schools are legally obligated to provide necessary on-campus assistance for domestic students, foreign students (like DRSP fellows) do not qualify for this aid. With the exception of Leeds, which has cost-shared accommodation expenses, OSF has covered most costs associated with accommodations, as illustrated in Appendix A.

Accommodating deaf students has presented a particular challenge: sign languages differ greatly among sending and hosting countries. The sign languages commonly used (and available for interpretation support) at host universities are often entirely foreign to our grantees. Palantypists (providing real-time speech transcription) can help in a classroom setting, but this technical assistance does not accommodate two-way communication and does not extend beyond the classroom.

All of these issues require highly sensitized program staff who can anticipate the needs of the grantees and work with university bureaucracies to create viable living conditions for them. We (in particular Wing Mai) have learned a lot and continue to improve our capacities. We nevertheless highlight a case that was particularly instructive, and has relevance for the department as a whole since we welcome differently abled applicants and grantees to any of our programs.



Sindile Kevin Mhlanga
Zimbabwe
Cohort: 2012-13
National University of
Ireland-Galway

Sindile has been hearing impaired since a childhood case of meningitis at age 12. He completed studies at King George VI School and Rehabilitation Centre, and then moved on to a prestigious mainstream high school, where he was the only deaf student. He finished successfully, despite having no sign language assistance. He was not admitted to a Zimbabwe university—he was told his disability could not be accommodated—so he sought opportunities abroad. At the Rochester Institute of Technology (National Technical Institute of the Deaf), Sindile earned a BSc in Management Information Systems on a full scholarship from the Nippon Foundation. He has been a teacher of the deaf since 2001 at King George VI Memorial School in Bulawayo. He has been very active in disability rights advocacy, focusing on the deaf. He served as secretary for disability affairs in the Bulwayo Progressive Residents Ward Three, a citizen-driven initiative designed to address municipal challenges. He has served 3 years as Secretary of the National Council of the Deaf, of which he was a founding member. He is National Coordinator for the Deaf Advancement Programme, administered by the King George VI Centre, which lobbies for the consistent use and availability of sign language in schools.

Selection notes:

Reviewers were impressed with Sindile’s level of activism and his advocacy on behalf of the deaf in Zimbabwe. He was considered well placed in a network of civil society organizations, where his position and influence could be bolstered by further education and credentialing. He showed a basic understanding of the CRPD and the challenges for implementing it in Zimbabwe; however, the committee thought he lacked a more comprehensive understanding, which the scholarship could provide.

Special placement issues:

Sindile is fluent in American Sign Language and this presented special challenges for academic placement. Since he lacked a law degree, he could not be considered for a U.S. placement. (In fact, the interview itself proved difficult, since the South African sign interpreter engaged for the event was not fluent in ASL, and Sindile had to adjust without warning to an unfamiliar language.) He was admitted to Galway. While Irish Sign Language is somewhat closer to ASL than British Sign, it is still fundamentally foreign to Sindile. We had hoped to arrange for Sindile to arrive a few weeks early to complete an intensive ISL course, but delays with visas prevented this.

Galway struggled to find an interpreter fluent in ASL and for orientation week succeeded in locating a deaf individual who provided translation from ISL to ASL (resulting in a two-step process in each direction). This temporary arrangement, itself not ideal, proved unavailable beyond orientation. For class sessions, Galway engaged palyntypists to transcribe lectures and discussion. Yet without sign interpretation, communication was one-way: Sindile could read the lecture transcription in real time but could not ask questions or interact with his fellow students through an interpreter. As a partial and imperfect solution, he was issued an iPad to write out his own questions or comments, which others would read out. This cumbersome process discouraged interaction, and Sindile noted a feeling of exclusion both academically and socially: “The fact that we had no choice but to use Irish sign language ... took away a measure of choice and autonomy from me.”

Despite these hardships, Sindile performed very well, earning an LLM in International & Comparative Disability Law & Policy with 1st class honors. His dissertation investigated the impact of equality, non-discrimination and accessibility in the realization of the right to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zimbabwe.

Sindile’s deaf colleague at Galway, Frankson Musukwa, also struggled with accommodations. We have learned that special attention must be paid to the unique challenges faced by deaf candidates early in the selection process. Given what we know now—that sign language interpretation is not one size fits all, even among English-speaking countries—we see the need to work early with universities to ensure appropriate accommodations, and to alert candidates of what accommodations will and won’t be feasible to arrange. What else do we need to know in order to enable these and other grantees to freely pursue their goals?

V. Conclusions

As noted earlier, selection is indeed more art than science. Our own broad view of what constitutes an ideal profile, coupled with admissions criteria that vary widely across our host institutions, allows for significant flexibility. Although we bring a lot of experience to this process, thinking about our history with DRSP reminds us of how much we continue to learn along the way, especially in new issue areas. In the text above, we have outlined four salient selection dilemmas, each illustrated by real life experiences of our grantees. We close with a few lessons learned, and look forward to expanding this list further in discussion.

Dedication to disability rights

Experience level: We have learned that enthusiasm and passion must be backed up by experience and networks. Experience, personal and professional, is essential; those with better networks in the field are also more likely to find traction upon their return home.

Focus: Those approaching disability rights from a multidisciplinary perspective or as a prominent but not exclusive focus in a broader human rights agenda must be carefully evaluated. We want to avoid diluting the program’s focus on disability, but we also recognize the value of intersectional approaches that broaden the power of the CRPD’s rights-based agenda to other groups.

Individual trajectory

The ideal candidate shows proven potential and academic capacity but is not already an advanced player in the field. The scholarship experience should be transformative. Early on, we were more likely to be swayed by “stars” who were “sure bets” for success. Now we endorse the notion of populating international bodies with voices of the global south, but the primary goal of the program should remain local—building capacity for implementation of the CRPD.

Academic background

Individuals without backgrounds in law can successfully complete LLMs. We should nevertheless consider supporting degrees useful for non-lawyers engaged in policy, advocacy, and teaching, recognizing that such profiles can complement what is fundamentally a law-based approach.

Disability Accommodations

As staff expertise deepens, so does our awareness of how important inclusion is at all stages of the program, not just in the classroom but also in the community. Supporting deaf students remains a challenge, so early and frank discussion with candidates about placement options is essential.