

Declan Trevor Kintu (right) a research associate at Durham's AI Hub where he builds custom AI applications for businesses with his colleague. PHOTO/COURTESY OF D.T KINTU.

Ugandan computer whiz holds Canada spellbound

From coding in Kampala school labs to building custom AI systems in Toronto, Declan Trevor Kintu is proving that Ugandan talent can compete and win on the world's toughest tech stages.

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

When 27-year-old Declan Trevor Kintu left Uganda for Canada in September 2023, he carried with him more than luggage and transcripts. He carried a quiet confidence forged in computer labs from Kampala to Nairobi — and an obsession with artificial intelligence.

Less than two years later, that obsession has paid off handsomely. After completing a master's degree in Artificial Intelligence at Durham College in Toronto, Ontario, Kintu was head-hunted by the same institution and appointed Research Associate for AI and Machine Learning at its innovation arm, the Durham AI Hub. There, he develops custom AI software solutions for clients, precisely the kind of job he had dreamt about since he was 12 years old. But this success story did not unfold by accident.

Hackathons and hustle

From the moment he arrived in Canada, Kintu threw himself into hackathons, high-pressure coding competitions where teams build functional tech solutions within hours, sometimes over gruelling 48-hour stretches.

"Hackathons are like marathons for the brain," he says. "My motivation for participating in these events was to challenge myself, to create AI applications that could benefit real users, drawing from my background in consumer applications."

In the 10 months he spent as a student, he competed relentlessly, and consistently finished on the podium. His name began circulating in Toronto's tech circles. In July 2024, he graduated with honours. But instead of slowing down, he accelerated. He took on short-term contracts building applications while continuing to compete in hackathons, testing his ideas against some of the sharpest minds in the field.

Then came June 2025. Kintu entered the HackTheBrain hackathon, a 48-hour coding battle featuring participants from across the globe. When the dust settled, he and a teammate emerged victorious. Their winning project? An AI-powered tool that helps immigrants translate foreign work experience into Canadian equivalents, a deeply personal innovation born from lived experience.

Winning a major hackathon in Toronto is no small feat. It demands technical stamina, creativity, and mental resilience. Sleep is scarce. The competition is fierce. For Kintu, it was a defining moment. Soon after that victory, Durham College came calling.

From Kampala to Toronto

Before Canada, there was Kampala and a young boy mesmerised by computers.

"My interest in computers began in my teenage years," Kintu recalls. "I got into video games and computers around the age of twelve. I spent a lot of time learning the ins and outs of Windows Vista. Then I watched the 2008 Marvel movie Iron Man, which further sparked my curiosity."

The fictional genius Tony Stark made technology look magical, and possible. At Kampala Parents' School, Kintu had already shown a flair for science. At King's College Budo for O-Levels, he leaned further into mathematics and physics. But it was at Taibah International School during his A-Levels that his passion crystallised.

"I focused on Physics, Mathematics, Economics and ICT," he says. "Taibah had an impressive computer lab, where I served as student senator responsible for overseeing its operations. That allowed me to explore more complex topics like writing simple HTML, CSS and JavaScript files."

After A-Levels, he worked as an IT assistant under the mentorship of his uncle, Nelson Kituuka, managing director of Card Pesa, a microfinance institution. The exposure strengthened his resolve.

He later enrolled for Applied Computer Technology at the United States International University-Africa (USIU-A) in Nairobi, specialising in Mobile and Distributed Software Systems. That technical grounding proved critical.

From USIU-A, he joined the inaugural cohort of Refactory Academy's Software Engineering programme in Kampala, an institution known for producing industry-ready developers.

"There, I learnt how to apply my theoretical skills to real-world scenarios," he says.

For their final project, Kintu and his team built a Mobile Money Payments API for Xente Business. It was named the best project in their cohort.

Stanbic Bank Uganda quickly offered him a job as an Applications Developer straight out of Refactory, a rare achievement for a fresh graduate.

Banking on AI

At Stanbic, Kintu developed and maintained the Agent Banking platform, a high-volume, high-value system where precision and security are non-negotiable. "It was daunting because of the volume and value of transactions," he says. "But it was also my most rewarding professional experience to date."

He earned bank-sponsored certifications in AI through Microsoft Azure and AWS, gaining practical exposure to AI in commercial settings from fraud detection to customer analytics. After one year, he had a pivotal conversation with his parents about his long-term ambitions. That discussion led to his decision to pursue a master's degree in Canada.

Today, as a research associate at Durham's AI Hub, he builds custom AI applications for businesses — helping organisations automate processes, analyse data and innovate faster.

The promise and peril of AI

Kintu believes artificial intelligence will profoundly reshape the financial sector. On the positive side, he says, AI can strengthen fraud detection, improve credit scoring, enhance customer sentiment analysis, optimise risk management, personalise services and power algorithmic trading. But he is equally aware of the risks.

"AI also creates opportunities for bad actors, secure channel decryption, biased profiling, trade inflation, manipulation of customer feedback," he notes.

That is why he advocates for thoughtful regulation. "The finance sector is subject to strict regulations. By establishing clear guidelines and effective enforcement mechanisms, AI can significantly enhance the financial experience for everyday users. That said, regulations should not be so restrictive that they stifle creativity."

Beyond AI, he is bullish on blockchain technology, which he believes will revolutionise how value is stored and transferred.

"Blockchain is a shared digital ledger that records transactions across multiple computers, ensuring no single individual has control. Once a record is added, it becomes very difficult to change," he explains. "By combining blockchain with AI to automate ledger management, we can create systems that track value autonomously without being vulnerable to human error."

From cryptocurrencies to blockchain-based land titles, he sees early signs of a transformation that could extend to bonds, stocks, art, music and literature.



"Uganda vs Canada. Kintu has not been back to Uganda since September 2023, so he misses home. He says he misses his siblings, his friends, and the fresh chapatis from street vendors. It is always the simple things that make one homesick. "I also miss the warmth of Ugandans, as many people in Canada can be quite cold and stoic. Despite these cultural differences, Canadians share a similar sense of hospitality. Declan Trevor Kintu, research associate at Durham's AI Hub