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***Inter –University <sup>1</sup> Linkage Approach to African Studies of Australasia:  
Some Reflections on Jimma-Flinders Universities Recent Academic  
Linkage***

**Keynote Speech**

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to begin by expressing my profound gratitude to the organizers of the 34<sup>th</sup> African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP), especially to the convener - Dr Tanya Lyons- for giving me the privilege to deliver a speech on this occasion. I am here by her invitation resulting from the academic linkage we have recently created between Jimma University (Ethiopia) and Flinders University (Australia) about a with a view to promote joint research, human resource capacity building through training and staff exchange. I would also like to thank AUSAID for funding my attendance of the Conference. The topic of my speech is thus derived from this new partnership which I believe is one of the best ways of promoting African studies. I shall, however, start my speech by saying few words about the subject matter of African studies to show how such linkages can strengthen African studies here.

As you all are well aware, African studies as a field of enquiry exists both in the continent of Africa and abroad. In fact, there are hundreds of centers of African studies all over the world. Particularly African studies in the USA and Europe have relatively longer history not least because of the historical connection between Africa and those continents. Nonetheless, even experts in the field had no uniform view of the subject of African studies. For instance, in a survey made with African studies experts to assess the decades of African studies in the USA as to the subject matter of 'African studies', a variety of answers were given including: the study of sub-Saharan Africa (22%), the study of the entire continent of Africa (33%), the study of the people of Africa, both in Africa and the diaspora (41%).

However, Olukoshi (2006) and Melber(2009) argue that African studies should also address not only Africa and its people but also Africa's relations with the rest of the world.

From the diversity of papers (both in content and area (country coverage) presented on the 34<sup>th</sup> AFSAAP Conference and previous conferences as well as the articles that appear Australasian Review of African Studies one could rightly hold that African studies of Australasia and the Pacific follows the comprehensive view of African studies, i.e. not only Africa (as a whole) and its people (both at home and abroad) but also the place of Africa in the world (African peoples' relation with the rest of the world). This comprehensive approach to the study of Africa makes

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<sup>1</sup> Interuniversity linkage for our purpose may mean possible academic linkage between Africa and Australasian universities and also similar linkages such as those between colleges and other research institutions.

interuniversity linkage approach even a more viable means to advance African studies here in Australia and elsewhere as a matter of fact.

As in the USA and Europe, expansion of African Studies in Australia could be traced back to the end of World War II, the upsurge of African nationalism, the initial phase of decolonization, and the deepening of the Cold War (Tanya 2003). Over the last three decades AFSAAP has remarkably contributed to the understanding of Africa and its people in general and those in Australia and the Pacific in particular, albeit with some challenges.

For instance, in their assessment of African studies of Australasia back in 2003 Lyons and Dimock figuratively concluded that, "if Africa is in crisis, African studies of Australia are under siege". The fact that there's no African studies centre in Australia at the moment also indicates that more needs to be done.

It has also been observed that "Australian scholars are more able to focus on the problems facing Africans once they get here, rather than being mobile and active researchers across the Indian Ocean, researching Africa."<sup>2</sup> With the already emerging keen local talent for African studies in Australia<sup>3</sup> and the Australian government's renewed commitment for better engagement with Africa, AFSAAP and African studies in Australia will have even better role to play in the years to come.

Back in 2000, *The Economist* declared Africa "the hopeless continent". Nonetheless, Africa 2011 is very much different from Africa few decades ago.

The recently issued report by Africa Progress Panel chaired by the former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan provides:

*"What was termed "the hopeless continent" ten years ago has now unquestionably become the continent of hope. Hope that strong growth rates will translate into jobs, incomes and irreversible human-development gains; that the continent's enormous wealth will be used to foster equitable and inclusive growth and generate opportunities for all; that economic transformation and social progress will drive further improvements in democratic governance and accountability as the middle classes grow and demand more of their politicians and service providers; and hope that rulers who abuse their power to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor and of democratic processes are, at last, seeing the writing on the wall. That many of these hopes actually seem attainable shows how far the continent has come. Hope, however, is not enough. Positive trends are being offset in too many countries by structural governance deficits. Violence, political turmoil, and uncertainty still scar too many parts of the continent and add to the challenges already at hand. The slow progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the difficult task of providing productive employment for rapidly growing numbers of young people, increasing inequalities and food insecurity, the*

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<sup>2</sup> Tanya Lyons , "Africa in/and the World", *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 30:2(December 2009):4-6

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

*risk of contagion through increasingly interconnected systems and the effects of climate change all threaten past and future gains. Despite repeated promises of reform by the world's most powerful countries and institutions, Africans also remain heavily marginalized in world affairs, with little say in and control over how decisions affecting their countries are taken.”<sup>4</sup>*

Thus Africans home and to large extent people of African descent still face a myriad challenges which seems to have triggered the UN to proclaim 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent, with a view to strengthening national actions and regional and international cooperation for the benefit of people of African descent in relation to their full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights, their participation and integration in all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society, and the promotion of a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture<sup>5</sup>.

The 34<sup>th</sup> AFSAAP Conference of 2011 which has drawn its theme from this Resolution, therefore, resonates with the spirit of the Resolution which calls for the strengthening of national and regional actions with international cooperation. In this context, AFSAAP could continue playing its commendable role in promoting the understanding of Africa and Africans in Australia and beyond. The interuniversity linkage approach I am referring to can also be one possible way of this coordination of local action and international cooperation.

***Ladies and Gentlemen, but how can interuniversity linkages foster African studies here in Australia and beyond?***

Academic linkage between two or more institutions is not a new phenomenon. But, it appears that at international level, such linkages appear to be the function of the relationship between the respective countries of the partnering institutions. It is recognized that academic linkage between local and international universities is one of the best ways of coordinating local and global knowledge to advance a field of inquiry such as African studies.

In fact, some scholars in the field of African studies pointed out ***“territorialization”*** of the production of knowledge -a view that only those people who are physically living in Africa can produce, within a closed circle limited to themselves alone, a legitimate scientific discourse on the realities of the Continent, and ***“geographical pre-determination”*** (e.g. a view that only African scholars are the ones qualified and legitimized to undertake African studies) as some of the dangers to African studies.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it is argued that African studies to date are dominated by western scholars.<sup>7</sup> Interuniversity linkage approach to African studies can thus foster the harmonization of such conflicting tendencies through practical recognition of local and international inputs so long as they contribute to the advancement the field. As one major component of academic linkage is usually joint research among researchers of partner

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<sup>4</sup> Africa Progress Panel Report 2011 : The Transformative Power of Partnerships(2011): 4-6

<sup>5</sup> UN, The International Year for People of African Descent, UN General Assembly Resolution No. A/RES/64/169, (19 March 2010): 1-2

<sup>6</sup> See Stichporoben PP. 189-190

<sup>7</sup> Id at P. 190

institutions, African studies could best benefit from such pool of experts. The linkage can provide the researchers based out of Africa (particularly those who otherwise do not have exposure to the continent) a platform to better access, assess and synthesize the reality on the ground. As Kassir(1997) concluded “both global knowledge and local knowledge are necessary for contemporary scholarship; only together are they sufficient”.<sup>8</sup> Thus interuniversity linkage will provide us with a platform to generate sufficient knowledge which can in turn enable relevant decision makers to make a constructive intervention on issues pertaining to Africa (African countries) in general and Australia Africa relations in particular.

The re-emerging relationship of Australia and Africa provides a further conducive environment for such cooperation.

With Australian government’s recent ‘Western looking policy’ , it is now clear that-at least at strategy level- Australia wants to have a robust engagement with Africa. In fact, Australia has already notable presence in Africa in terms of business companies especially those working on mining, humanitarian services and development aids and peacekeeping missions under the auspices of UN.

It, however, appears that academic linkage between African and Australian Universities seems limited to few Australian universities having link with mainly South African universities and those in few other African countries. According to the report by the Committee on Inquiry into Australian relationship with the Countries of Africa confirms that there’s no government to government education MoU and half of the existing agreements between African and Australian universities is with South African universities. But the recent recent initiative of Australia-Africa university network could be a significant step forward in this regard.

In his 2009 address to the African Union, Minister Smith announced that ‘*Australia will increase by up to ten-fold the scholarships and fellowships to students from across Africa which could reach 1,000 per year by the year 2012/13.*’

Apart from equipping the scholarship beneficiaries with the skills and knowledge required to influence the development of their countries, this move is yet another important opportunity for the future of African studies here in Australia particularly if coupled with formal institutional linkages (for those coming from the academia).

Beyond African studies, interuniversity linkage could also contribute to capacity building of African academicians and institutions by setting a platform for joint research, students/staff exchange, sandwich masters and PHD studies, sharing of relevant information such as e-resource. Such staff/student exchange will ultimately foster mutual understanding.

The responsibility that AFSAAP has been given in facilitating the implementation of Australian scholarship for Africans shows the significance of the Association as a professional Association

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<sup>8</sup> Melber P. 188

and is indicative of the potential of the association for similar roles in the future. And the Institutional linkages approach we are advocating for could give AFSAAP more leverage to pool the necessary local talent to play even greater role in similar engagements of Australia with Africa.

Now, let me say few words about the good start of Flinders -JU experience. With a student and academic staff population of over 33,000 and 1300 respectively, Jimma University is a national pioneer in community based education through which the University integrates research and training with real societal needs on the ground. This CBE philosophy of the university has enabled the university to engage the students of both undergraduate and post graduate levels to directly participate in the development efforts in their respective disciplines. This practice has proven to be effective in preparing the graduates for the challenges in the real world. The university has won a cup of best performance by competition with all the 22 public universities in the country for the last two consecutive years.

Thus Flinders partnership with JU and any positive outcome from the partnership will have a profound multiplier effect. This also squarely fits into the long standing relations between Australia and Ethiopia, a relationship which is now even boosting following the opening of the new Austrian Embassy in Addis Ababa which is also responsible for the AU and ECA (both head quartered in Addis Ababa).

Over the past few days, I have been talking to some of the Flinders staff members and we will soon have students exchange and joint research in various disciplines notably social sciences and humanities, and health. Australasian Review of African studies will have a special issue on Ethiopia sometime next year. Indeed my presence here as a newcomer to AFSAAP is mainly the result of this new partnership.

I believe that similar linkages between African and Australian Universities both in the context of the Australia-Africa University network or bilateral arrangements will have important contribution to the advancement of African studies here.

Let me conclude by saying that while interuniversity linkage approach is not the only recipe for fostering African studies and may not be an entirely new approach, the approach has a multiplier effect in terms of curbing even the dangers surrounding African studies, capacity building, enhancing mutual understanding and development outcomes. And I encourage all AFSAAP members to play an active role in facilitating such linkages and continue contributing to this dynamic field of study, a field of study which seems to have a brighter future in this era of better engagement between the two continents.

**Thank you for your attention!**