**SPEECH BY H.E. GEOFF TOOTH TO THE AUSTRALIAN SCHOLARSHIPS FOR AFRICA PROGRAM RECEPTION**

**SERENA HOTEL, KAMPALA, 10 OCTOBER 2012**

* Honourable Charles Bakaboolindi, (holding portfolio for Minster of Education and Sports);
* Honourable Members of Parliament;
* Excellencies;
* Australia’s Honorary Consul to Uganda, Patrick Bitature;
* Australian Alumni, Australian Volunteers
* And particularly the Australian Scholarship Awardees, my warmest congratulations to you all on your awards, a fantastic and well deserved achievement by each and every one of you.

It is my very great pleasure to welcome you all this evening to celebrate the departure of Australian Scholarships Awardees for 2013 from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. Given I am Australia’s High Commissioner to Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania and Ambassador to Burundi you will understand why I am especially happy about tonight.

This is the first time an Australia Awards Pre-Departure Briefing has been held in Uganda and it is the first of African briefings for this year. And we of course have two reasons to celebrate, as it coincides with Uganda’s 50years of Independence! Please join me in congratulating the people and government of Uganda on this historic achievement. I have been lucky enough to be in East Africa for the 50th anniversaries of four countries and the birth of another in South Sudan, and complete the set next year with Kenya.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the most important things about our scholarships program is that it is delivered in cooperation with our partner governments so it is also a pleasure to have senior government representatives from all the five East African countries here tonight.

Our scholarships are a key part of the Australian Government commitment to supporting African countries reach their development goals. I am pleased to say that the Australian Government will continue to give a very high priority to the scholarships program as part of our aid engagement to East Africa.

Our scholarships are awarded in fields nominated as priorities by countries in the region and in areas where Australia is recognised for its expertise. These include:

* agriculture,
* natural resource management – particularly mining governance,
* public policy,
* water and sanitation,
* and health.

I am proud to say that the Australian Government has been providing scholarships for African students for over 50 years and the Australia Awards initiative is a major expansion of this support. It demonstrates the high value we place on our relationships with Africa; based on mutual understanding, respect and people to people links fostered by education.

And Australia also wins. We get greater diversity in our education institutions leading to fresh ideas, better understanding of other countries and wonderful new people to people links.

Recent studies show clearly that through the creation of a skilled workforce and influencing individual behaviours, values and attitude, higher education improves the prospects for economic growth, good governance, social cohesion and democratic reforms.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A key part of the Australian Government enhanced development engagement strategy was to significantly expand its scholarships program to 1,000 scholarships across African by 2013.

Australia has met this target**,** andwilldeliver over those 1,000 development scholarships one year ahead of schedule.

A record number of African scholars are now departing for Australia to commence their post graduate studies at Australian universities.

This year there were over 4,500 applications for the Australian Awards and we held over 800 interviews. It was a highly competitive selection process. I congratulate all the successful awardees here today on being selected from among a very strong field of candidates. Over 150 students were selected from East Africa this year.

I want to particularly highlight that 48% of the successful scholars were women. This is a great achievement for the women selected. This is a demonstration of Australia’s commitment to being a firm and persistent advocate, and practical supporter, of gender equality. But it also shows the talents and strengths of women in this region. We shouldn’t be surprised at this result when a number of East African countries lead the world in women’s representation in government, and women like the East African Community and Ugandan speakers are smashing down barriers that many thought would last much longer.

Honourable Minister, Ladies and gentlemen,

I would also like to highlight the achievement of a small number of students who have been granted a supplementary Award - an Australia Leadership Award.

These awards are made available on an annual basis for high achieving applicants who have demonstrated particular leadership capacities or potential for influence in their own countries and in their region.

The selection for Australia Leadership Awards is of course extremely competitive.

I wish to acknowledge the presence of 7 Australia Leadership Awardees who are amongst us tonight. They are:

* + **Mr. Hillary Alima- from Uganda**
  + **Ms. Eveline Langat- from Kenya**
  + **Ms. Naomi Rono- from Kenya**
  + **Ms. Romana Mbinya (*binya*)- from Kenya**
  + **Ms. Irene Gwatibe- from Tanzania**
  + **Mr. Cassian Kahezella- from Tanzania**
  + **Mr. Boniphase Kyaruzi- from Tanzania**

Please join me in congratulating these students.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome some of our recently returned alumni who are with us here today.

* **Christine Munyeshuli**, **from Rwanda, and**
* **James Natukunda,**
* **Chris Lubangakene and**
* **Richard Okello, all from Uganda,**

Can I offer my special thanks to you for taking the time to share your experience of studying and living in Australia with the departing students.

Our alumni are ambassadors for the scholarships program and linchpins for continued and deepening links between Australia and Africa. We want to continue to support and strengthen alumni networks as we know how important such networks are for career development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am aware there a number of local country-level scholarship alumni networks have been formed or are in the process of establishing themselves.

We are fortunate to have with us this evening, Mr Patrick Barugahare, who is the current Chair of the Uganda Australia Alumni Association and who will speak later, and Mr Mahul Shah, the current Chair of the Kenya Australia Alumni Association .

Over the last few years, we have run a number of professional development workshops for alumni. This year, we ran three such workshops on: Organisational Performance; Public Policy Making and Analysis for Development; and a Leadership workshop for Senior Executives in Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa. Others will follow.

There is also a Small Grants Scheme to support alumni as they become involved in development activities in their home countries.

So there are a number of ways students can continue to be engaged after the completion of the scholarship. I urge all those who have not yet registered on the alumni database to do so and to encourage others you meet in Australia and East Africa to join you. Networking opportunities and long-term friendships will be amongst your rewards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In closing, I would like to wish all the departing students a safe journey and an enjoyable and fruitful experience in Australia. Remember always, that you are travelling to Australia as Ambassadors and High Commissioners for your country and for the scholarships program. Make the most of this opportunity to get out and see Australia, have fun, meet a range of Australians, and bring home with you fond memories and lasting friendships.

Thank you all for making me feel so welcome tonight and for supporting this program. Please enjoy the food, the drinks, and the company and take advantage of myself and all the other Australians in the room to ask lots of questions.

I would now like to invite the Honourable Minister for Education and Sports, to say a few words, followed by Patrick Barugahare who will speak on behalf of the alumni.