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Australian Research Network for African Academics (ARNAA): Speech at Africa Day Indaba Australasia and the Pacific 2024

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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

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Levi Osuagwu: Thanks, everybody, for making time to be here, and what a way to go after the Vice Chancellor of Wollongong has spoken and elegant speakers like the Ambassador himself and Noël, my good friend, is some sort of pressure but, again, that's why we're here. It is important to exchange those ideas and share some experiences. So, my name is Levi Osuagwu, like they have said. And intentionally I put on my first slide a Nigerian optometrist, because it all makes sense with some of the things that I am going to share with us today. I work in Bathurst Rural Clinical School; it is part of the School of Medicine at Western Sydney University. Now, just like everybody else, I also want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from which I am speaking from today, the Wiradjuri Nation.

I do acknowledge the elder's past, present and emerging, and I also want to state that they have given us a wonderful opportunity to be part of this land that they have cared for several years and magnificently looked after it for. So, we do appreciate that as well. So, I will quickly give an overview of the things I am going to speak about today. So, I will talk to you briefly about one of the African Research Network that we built in Australia, and how that has shaped the research that we do here as well. I will take you through a small journey about my international collaboration that we have started, keeps going as well, and I will talk to you about some mentorship opportunities that we have opened up for African young people as well. So, the Australian Research Network for African Academics is a movement that started with just two young men who are now a bit older, a Ghanaian and a Zambian, who saw the need to start to think about ways to overcome the disadvantage that African academics face in Australia.

At this point, it was a personal experience, and then somehow, they got another professor who also got involved but did not want to be in the limelight, Professor Sefa. And from that onwards, this group has emerged and took some while a bit from 2020 up until 2023 when we officially got registered. And at this point in time, there is about 206 members across different Australian institutions. This includes both research centres, professional bodies, and academic institutions as well. Now, currently, the leaders of this group are listed on this slide, Obed, David, some of the directors include myself, Edith, who is also here, Christine, and recently, we have a new addition, Irene Ngune. So, we have come slightly a little bit long way now. Now, so these are the objectives of what the group is about.

So basically, what we want to do is to promote and encourage research and collaboration among Australian academics of African origin and those also working with people who are not of African origin. Now, this is because we see the need for collaboration, we see the power in working together. And through this also, we extend mentorship to younger people who are doing their Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) studies, we share ideas, we look at their documents, we ask them what their challenges are, and there is always somebody to share experiences as to how they move past the challenges. So, this group have really energised some of the young people who are part of the group, to be able to speak in a space where they are free and they are not being judged, and we are able to give our opinions as well as academics.

So that is basically what we do in the Australian Research Network for African Academics (ARNAA) group. Now, I just want to show you a little bit about the people that make up this group. So, across institutions, there are about 46 of us. And when I was sent this invitation to present today, I kind of thought, "Why would they believe that me?" and I am going through the data, I understood why it was me. Because Western Sydney University makes up the largest proportion of these individuals in the group, and I am part of that team. So that really tells why I got that invite and it justified that I will be speaking about ARNAA today. So, interestingly, we are growing and there is also a call for membership. If anybody is interested, it is a free group, we will welcome you. We will gladly think that there is a role for everybody who is a member of that group as well for us.

Now, recently we have been involved in so many projects, and these are the four that I could list here because of time. And just because some of these four are almost completed or somehow manuscripts are being drafted. Now, the first study here, which I want to highlight to you, is improving mental health, help-seeking behaviour through a culturally responsive mental health literacy process. Now, this we did a systematic review to look at what evidence is actually there on how Africans seek help, and they find it astonishing. It is published in PLOS ONE journal, and I will just give you a snapshot of what we found in that study. As a way of practice, just because we are all here to celebrate Africa Day, if you will be happy enough to just share on the chat window for me, what term do you describe mental health in your language in Africa.

What single term would you say, this is what mental health means in my language? That would be helpful because at the end of this talk, I will collect those suggestions, and I will look at them later. I do not want to see what way we describe mental health. What is the term that you know mental health is used to describe in your locality? That would be very good if you can help us do that. So, some of these studies as well are ongoing. Some of the manuscripts have been drafted and some of them as well were still collecting data at some stage. So, these are some of the groups in which we are involved. Now, from this particular group, we have been able to also apply for small grants. And in the last two years, we were successful at two small grants which has helped us to do some of the studies on mental health.

And the second study as well will be rolled out just about in the wintertime, and some of the people in this meeting as well will be contacted for help with the questionnaires and the interview participants I will be looking for. So,

it is really a group that has come to stay, and we are doing lots of work. Now, just a highlight of what we found in the systematic review. We looked at literature that involved Africans who migrated to Australia voluntarily. We avoided any impact of trauma, so it was easier to then look at this evidence from those who came into Australia not being forced, and we found that there were barriers for them that they identified for why they could not seek mental health support. Some of those barriers have highlighted, the ones that are very close to us in the sense that we all have a chance, a role to play in changing the mindset of the people that we belong to as our community, including those back home and those who are here as well.

We found that our culture, I believe, is still a big issue. Some of us also think that religious groups can take off the way we feel, and that is the solution. There's cultural shame and stigma that surround mental health challenges that is still endemic in our society. The issues of racial discrimination from health providers during maternal care was part of the roles that we see play in making people not seek help. There is also the issue with temporary immigration. When you arrive here, your status does not give you access to health care easily. That also impacts the way people seek for help. There's lack of trust in the community that we are part of as well for fear of being stigmatised and profiled if you are able to say that "Look, I'm going through something like depression." So, this is one of the main findings of that study.

The study is in PLOS ONE, its open access, anyone can download and read, so I won't go into many details about that. But just to highlight that we also found that proficiency in English language and higher educational status was one of the first indicators for why people could seek help. It is important that we did not find lots of literature on this subject. In fact, I think it is about seven or six documents that we were able to review. That shows you the large gap in this space for African migrants who are living in Australia. So, we do need a lot of evidence to also substantiate these findings and to find out other ways as well that we can help to support this cause. So as part of ARNAA, we do not just do research. We try to catch up again because this physical contact, being able to bond, to connect with people is part of human life.

And for us Africans, this is a very important part of our connection. So, we tried to meet once in a while. There was a meeting held in Melbourne, which was hosted by one of the members of the group. Each time we would travel, find somebody to whom we can connect. One of these pictures, I went to Melbourne, and I found David, and he was able to leave work and come out and we had some time out. I also visited some of our friends as well while in Melbourne, and Kathomi, who is also here, very known in our community, we had a visit to her place with my family and we had a good time. These are people that I would never have connected with before, if not through this group. So, there is really benefit besides the research we do in connecting with others, and we have begun to do some work together through this connection.

Now, I will take you through some of the little international collaborations that we have built. So somehow in 2021, we became celebrities in Western Sydney University. I say celebrities because it is not common to see our faces on the university web pages. So, this is because we did some work in Africa. We started a group around the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. For this group, we thought it was necessary because all the projections from different stakeholders, different groups were saying that Africans at this time, almost half of us would have been dead. That was very scary, and we thought, "Why don't we start doing something? We can get the data before all of us leave." But we knew that there was need for evidence from the grassroots to show what is happening in Africa. And one way that we did that was to make sure that we can provide factual information to combat the myths around COVID-19.

A lot were going on in our community there. People thought COVID-19 was there to destroy the world. Some people thought God sent it so somehow all of us would die. Some even thought that COVID-19 was not existing at all. Some went into a full tank of hot water just to get COVID-19 off their body. There was a lot happening in Africa that we thought, "Why don't you look at the evidence? What is it that is true and what is it that is not true?" and we were able to provide that information. We had different workshops across Zoom. We had so many community groups that we had to have a chat with. We spoke to our own families to tell them what we know about COVID. It also made us open up our expertise to read wider around COVID-19 so we can understand what the facts are and what is not.

So, this is how we built this group. And across this group, we really were focusing on how we can use international collaborations to provide factual evidence to people back home and those living in the diaspora. And today, I can tell you that that group has done excellently well. It is still functioning. We have changed our idea. We are going into malaria vaccine now, which is being rolled out across Africa. And just within that time space, we are able to achieve a lot of things. That collaboration was built out of trust and the need for evidence-based to provide information to our people. Majority of those in that group joined by invitation. Somebody knew someone, they referred the person to us, and there we tried to bring them along, but they were all academics, different schools across Africa. We have members across Cameroon, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, some in New Zealand, Australia as well, and this all came together.

United Kingdom and Scotland as well were part of it. And we were able to work together across night-time meetings, trusting each other, making sure that we can always relate this back to the community that we come from. And this is some of the achievements that I want to share with you as well today. Within this timeframe of

15 members across nine countries, we were able to publish up to 18 articles. This group was a multidisciplinary team. It included people from different species of life who had optometrists, who have people from computer science, public health, global health, psychiatry, nutrition, epidemiology, so it's a very diverse group, and together, our expertise was brought together just for a common goal. And you can see the learning that comes from this. I learned how to do social work research just because I work with people in that group.

I learned what it is to do business change. All these separating languages, the way articles are written, they all came because we opened our mindset to learn, and that's how Africans work together. We have a mutual respect. We meet every night as well, and that was ongoing for a very long time, and the commitment was something you cannot understand. We were just over the moon. So, we did that as well. And through that collaboration, we also looked at different ways as well that we can mitigate the impact of COVID-19, like I said. The group's goal was mostly to drive empirical research from an African perspective. We tried to engage policymakers from our findings. One of our papers was sponsored by WHO, so we can start to combat the misinformation across Africa.

So, the group did well. And that is what Africans can do together if we bring our forces for a common goal. And like I said, we got a grant as well from the Nigerian government, which we used to do a study during the COVID-19. The second phase of that study is ongoing. We had almost all members of that group got promotion of some sort. In fact, three members became professors. Others went from one stage of their career to the other. They got peer recognition. We had all these interviews as well. These were all the benefits that they were recounting as part of being members of this group. Now, one of the big things that came out of this group was the publication of this article.

Rugare Mugumbate: Sorry, I will be stopping you now, Doc, if you can please wrap up.

Levi Osuagwu: So, we were launching a book from that collaboration as well, which is being sponsored by Western Sydney University Library. And just a quick one here, this is the other group about iFOCUS. World health organisation (WHO) has come up with recognising their refractive error is one of the main causes of preventative blindness. We started this group with colleagues in South Africa. The website is all there for you to have a look at. And again, that is another collaboration that has impacted the society as well across Africa through research and mentorship. Now, very recently, we started a group of students who are engaged in mentorship. We are training them to do research. And across the board, we are seeing the energy and the zeal from Africans to be part of this group. A lot of them have gone up to obtain fellowships and were able to save through advocacy, got sponsorship for research. I have also got some scholarships for some of them to do PhDs and some are also doing their master's program now in University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) in South Africa.

So, at the end of this, it is just that the little contribution you make is important. Do not underrate what you can bring on board. Africans need your expertise. You do not have to have everything, but the little you can offer, somebody will benefit from it one way or the other. So, I do commend everybody here who is looking back home to see how they can contribute to the welfare of the people that we are also representing here. So, thank you for being part of this group. And again, happy Africa Day to everybody.

Aisha Setipa: Thank you so much, Dr Levi. I think in the interest of time, I will quickly bring up our last presenters for this session of the event. So, Adjoa Assan and Samuel Sakama are going to be discussing the topic of African Australian youth Fit for the 21st century. And Adjoa is passionate about Africa young people and creating impact and is the current postgraduate representative of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific, also known as AFSAAP. And Samuel Sakama is a lawyer and a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra. His research focuses on the deportation of young people of African heritage who are non-citizens from Australia and the impacts of deportation on African families. So please, round of applause for our next two speakers. Thank you.

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