**Australia Awards – boosting Nigeria’s agricultural transformation**

With his Government focused on the country’s agricultural transformation agenda, Nigerian recipient of an Australia Award scholarship to study agriculture in Australia next year, Longinus Chukwuma Ejiogu, spoke last week of his good fortune.

Longinus was awarded a Scholarship to study a Masters in Agriculture at the University of Queensland in 2015. Speaking about his Award: “It has come at a time when Nigeria is shifting its agricultural policy and agriculture is seen as a business venture and not in its original state. I will gain skills that will enable me influence policy to ensure that men, women and youth participate fully in agriculture as a profitable venture. This will foster Nigeria’s efforts to achieve food security, create employment and reduce poverty.” Since 2011, 42 Nigerians in the agricultural sector have been recipients of Australia Awards.

Longinus is one of 18 Nigerian professionals, and among the some 200 Africans from 22 countries, who will take up Australia Awards Scholarships at Masters and Doctorate level at Australian universities in 2015. The Nigerian recipients participated in a three-day pre-departure briefing in Abuja last week to prepare them for their studies and life in Australia.

Opening the event, Australian High Commissioner to Nigeria, H.E Jonathan Richardson congratulated the professionals for emerging as the best among the more than 4,000 applicants across the continent.

The High Commissioner also hosted an official reception at his residence to congratulate the Awardees and bid them farewell. In his address he reiterated the importance that higher education plays in developing countries.

“Australia recognises that education has a central function in development,” he said. “Higher education improves the country’s prospects for economic growth, social cohesion, democratic reforms and good governance which contribute to the elimination of poverty.”

During the pre-departure workshops, Awardees discussed issues relating to life in Australia and how to adjust as students, family support as well as social inclusion. Part of the training required them to focus on how they would use their acquired skills to impact on the development of their country on return home. At this point, representative from the Coordinating Authority in Nigeria, Sylvester Adegbemi offered advice on how to liaise with their employers to ensure their work plan on return was realistic and achievable. Australia Awards alumni from Nigeria were also on hand to share their experiences on return.

Speaking at the reception, Alumni Ambassador Chikezie Isiguzo encouraged the recipients to make the best of their time in Australia, acquire the skills from their academic institutions and return to Nigeria to contribute to their country’s development.