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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Review of state-specific migration mechanisms

THURSDAY, 20 JULY 2000

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Thursday, 20 July 2000

Members: Mrs Gallus (Chair), Senators Bartlett, Eggleston, McKiernan and Tierney and Mr Adams, Mr Baird, Mrs Irwin, Mrs May and Mr Ripoll

Senators and members in attendance: Senators Bartlett and McKiernan and Mr Baird, Mrs Gallus, Mrs Irwin and Mr Ripoll

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To review and report on the suite of State-specific Migration Mechanisms and the extent to which these meet the needs of State and Territory governments for skilled and business migrants with particular reference to:

- The adequacy of consultations with States/Territories on the mechanisms that have been developed;
- The level to which State and Territory Governments have utilised these mechanisms;
- Steps that might be taken to increase take-up; and
- Other mechanisms that might be developed.

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Committee met at 2.22 p.m.

CHAIR—I now open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's review of state specific migration mechanisms. These mechanisms relate to the issue of bringing overseas migrants to regional Australia, so it is appropriate that the committee is holding a public hearing in a regional centre here in Brisbane. The review was referred to the committee in June 1999 by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The purpose of the review is to examine and report on a range of state specific migration mechanisms and the extent to which these meet the needs of state and territory governments for skilled and business migrants. At the conclusion of the review, the committee will table its findings, conclusions and recommendations in the parliament in a report that will be publicly available.

The committee has received 51 submissions from state and territory governments, migration agents and people with an interest in these issues. The committee normally authorises submissions for publication, and they are placed on the committee's web site. The committee has received a number of new submissions specifically for this hearing. Is it the wish of the committee that submissions from the following organisations be accepted as evidence to the inquiry and authorised for publication: Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (supplementary submission); State Government of Victoria; Cairns Chamber of Commerce; WorkNorth ACC; Mackay Regional Council for Social Development; Mr Farvardin Daliri, Manager, Migrant Resource Centre, Townsville; and Thuringowa Ltd? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

If anyone would like further details about this review, please feel free to ask for them. I now turn to the proceedings at hand. The committee will take evidence from witnesses as listed in the program. However, if any member of the audience wishes to comment on any aspect of the issues raised, please let our secretary, Gillian Gould, know and we will try to make the time available for you.

[2.25 p.m.]

HICKEY, Mr John Francis, Manager, Marketing and Commercial, Toowoomba City Council

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I think you have an opening statement you wish to make.

Mr Hickey—Yes, I do. I suppose I should declare that I am a little bit of an imposter appearing before the committee this afternoon in so far as I am honest enough to admit that I do not know a great deal about migration or business migration. My job, as the marketing and commercial manager of the Toowoomba council, is to manage its economic and job development role. It is in that capacity that I have dealings with these programs. I should apologise for Councillor Michelle Alroe, as she is unable to join the committee this afternoon.

Toowoomba was alerted to the advantages that it possesses in relation to business migration some three years ago. Toowoomba, besides its natural environment, diverse economy and relaxed style of life, is the first regional centre outside of the Brisbane–coastal conurbation to qualify for the 846 business migration visa.

In consultation with the Department of State Development, we identified a number of migration agents to work with. We already had our city promotional material, and we were developing a web site—ToowoombaNow.com.au—to answer 80 per cent of the usual questions posed by prospective business people and settlers: population, growth, economy, education, transport and communications, housing, sport, lifestyle, et cetera. We also advertise in specific magazines and other publications to coincide with specific agent in-country visits.

We find that most clients we deal with are very attuned to the Internet; indeed, 90 per cent of the people we deal with have visited the Net and emails to us are frequent. Of our clients, 70 per cent are agent referrals, 20 per cent are from the state government and 10 per cent are from word of mouth. As I have said, it is not unusual for one group to be ‘shopping’ for others; in fact, it is very common practice. We refer these people to the state government for migration advice. We are very careful not to provide that advice. We are not migration agents and do not pretend to be. We simply market Toowoomba and the region and highlight what it has to offer these people.

Since 1998 we claim to have been directly responsible for settling 12 families in Toowoomba and on the Darling Downs; others claim that 30 families have been settled. Our activity rates vary from a low of two couples per month to 22 a month. Today there are 11 Zimbabweans and an English couple in Toowoomba investigating business opportunities for themselves. Although most of our clients come from South Africa and Zimbabwe, we have and are continuing to broaden our market horizons. I have to tell you that a proposed trip to Indonesia last year was aborted due to the Timor crisis.

We manage a business network in Toowoomba that introduces our clients to the city, its economy and its lifestyle. Our network includes bankers with international experience, business brokers, estate agents, all the schools, and accountants. In fact, one of the accountants that we use emigrated from South Africa in January 1999 under the provisions of the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. Also, I am aware that there are a number of South Africans who have settled in Toowoomba under that category.

We arrange itineraries to suit the client and to match the time that they have invested in Toowoomba. Some clients walk in on us for a couple of hours, and we have had other couples come in for seven days and stay. We, as a council, see the Business Migration Program as an ideal avenue for us to attract both people and investment to our region. In the main, our clients are good people. They possess sound business acumen and a very high work ethic. What they are doing is good for Toowoomba, the Darling Downs and, I believe, good for regional Queensland. I believe also that Cairns is developing a similar program.

On behalf of the Toowoomba City Council and regional Queensland, we support the current program. Also, we would strongly support any actions taken to further expand access for skilled and business migrants to the regions. I thank you very much for the opportunity to address you here this afternoon.

I have taken the liberty of providing you with some packs of our marketing material. This is what we provide to our clients. I have also included—not very well, I have to say—the downloading of ToowoombaNow.com.au. I was talking to the committee secretary before the hearing commenced, so perhaps you are aware that our program received a bit of coverage in the *Weekend Australian* of 8 July. Because of that article, I was interviewed this morning on the ABC's Radio National and, at the conclusion of these proceedings, I have been asked to do two further media interviews here in Brisbane about the program. That concludes my statement, thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. First of all, before questioning commences, I will introduce the members of the committee. First of all, we have the Deputy Chair, Senator Jim McKiernan; Mr Bernie Ripoll; and Mr Bruce Baird. We seem to have lost Senator Bartlett and Mrs Irwin. They may or may not turn up later. They are probably in transit or at the state parliament.

In your presentation you have mentioned South Africa and Zimbabwe. I think you mainly placed emphasis on Zimbabwe. Is that true?

Mr Hickey—No. We started with South Africa. I get a little embarrassed in that we seem to concentrate too much on Zimbabwe and South Africa. We have tried other countries, but at the moment, for obvious reasons, Zimbabwe is the flavour of the month. Initially we started with South Africa. It would not surprise you to be told that, for safety reasons, South Africans and Zimbabweans are very Internet attuned. As I have said, 90 per cent of the people we have spoken to have already checked us out. The good thing about having our web page is that, when we get an email, we simply refer those persons to the web and ask them to check us out on 'ToowoombaNow.com.au'. They do that and then come back to us, once they have identified opportunities.

CHAIR—How was that initial contact first made? Did they phone or email you from Zimbabwe or South Africa, or was there a connection already in Toowoomba who knew some people in Zimbabwe and South Africa?

Mr Hickey—It was serendipity. What occurred was that, three years ago, one of the people I work with attended a business seminar in Brisbane and then came back and said that they were sitting next to a business migration agent who was quibbling about a 456 visa. I did not know what a 456 visa was—and I understand that that is now an outdated document anyway. The particular gentleman was a business migration agent who was educated in Toowoomba. We had lunch in Toowoomba that week, and we identified that we had a comparative advantage because of the regional Business Migration Program. We said, ‘We will provide you with our marketing material.’ As I have said, we were doing our web page. So we commissioned that agent to act for Toowoomba City Council and carry our marketing material.

I should also say that we were quite lucky in that Roger Green, the gentleman whose picture appeared in the *Weekend Australian*, is a Zimbabwean farmer who has been living in Toowoomba for 16 years. Roger also is involved in the program as a person who has been there and done that.

CHAIR—In a year, how many approaches would you get from either Zimbabwe or South Africa? Perhaps you could just give a ballpark figure.

Mr Hickey—It certainly will be only a ballpark figure. It is difficult to say because, as I have said, there have been months when we have had about three or four and there have been weeks when we have had 10. So I would suggest from five to 10 a month—and these are personal visits.

CHAIR—These are people coming here in person?

Mr Hickey—Yes. In fact, I would say as low as five maybe, but as high as the month we are in right now—and that would be the largest—during which I think we probably will get from 20 to 25. In terms of email, a low week would be when we would get maybe one or two; in a high week, five to seven.

CHAIR—Do the people who are making contact here have any connection with people who are already here, or have they just come because they have seen the Internet site or talked to a migration agent?

Mr Hickey—As I have said, there is contact through a number of sources. As you can understand, there are those times that the agent is going over there—and I am sure that you will have people appearing in front of you, saying that they have to lock the doors when they hold seminars. So there is that which is done. As I have also said, we have had, I think, three families who about 12 months ago stayed in Toowoomba; they were on a shopping mission for about 15 other families. So, in the main, it is through agents, but certainly it is through word of mouth. Because of their situation, one family does not leave Zimbabwe and come to Queensland to see what it is like; they go, I would suggest, partly funded by at least five to 10 other families.

CHAIR—Are you aware of which specific state sponsored mechanism they come under? There are several of those mechanisms. Perhaps I can just suggest them. There is the state-territory nominated independent, which is the independent category in a skills scheme. It is like the national scheme, except the state can nominate specific skills that are needed and get people in who would not normally get into the general program. Then there is the Employer Nominations Scheme, where an employer in the area needs somebody, cannot get local labour and can bring somebody in to fill that job. Then there is the scheme relating to business skills. But there is also the Australian links sponsorship. That is where a family already here can sponsor somebody to come, having given the assurance of support. With that, slightly fewer points would be needed than at the federal level.

Mr Hickey—This is dangerous territory because I can be prosecuted and I know nothing about what I am saying.

CHAIR—I just wonder whether you have any feeling at all about which one they seem to be coming under.

Mr Hickey—In the main, it is the 846, the regional ‘established business in Australia’. That is where the client has four years in which to invest a certain sum of money in a business and employ a certain number of people. As I have said, the Tischendorfs came in under the employer sponsored scheme. As I have also said, I am aware of a couple of those in Toowoomba, but we do not generally deal with such people.

CHAIR—So, as far as you are concerned, the one that has been successful is the one where the people establish a business here and qualify under that.

Mr Hickey—Yes, indeed.

Senator McKIERNAN—Mr Hickey, thank you for your attendance here this afternoon. I must say that it is quite pleasant to find that witnesses are not opening up with a complaint about the system they are involved in. That is quite refreshing, so I thank you for that.

But let us be a little frank. You have said that you do not know much about the migration aspects of the schemes. What would be your greatest criticism? Now that you have had some contact with the schemes, what would your greatest criticisms of the schemes be? Are you able to access the information you want at the time you want to access it? Are you able to speak to the real human beings within the department when you need to speak to them? Are you able to get the sponsorships from the designated bodies at the appropriate moments? What have been the greatest frustrations of your involvement with state sponsored migration schemes?

Mr Hickey—I suppose my greatest criticism is that we did not know about it. I am responsible for job growth in a city and, as I have said, it was pure and utter serendipity that we found out that Toowoomba has this advantage—and I will not call it a ‘natural’ advantage because, let’s face it, it is not natural. That is why I am here: to make sure that that advantage stays. But we did not know about it. This lady came back to me and said, ‘This is 846; give this fellow a call.’ I said, ‘What’s it about?’ It took us a couple of weeks to find out exactly what the program was. I now deal very closely with the state government. I do not have a great deal to do with the federal government because, as I have said, I shunt people off for migration advice.

I suppose in response to the general question about what criticisms I see as a citizen, I do not have any deep criticisms of the program. Having worked with quite a number of people, they have to meet some fairly stringent requirements—and I think we as a nation have got that right. But that does not mean that we should not capitalise on our ability to select very good people—and, in the main, they are—and also their bringing of capital into regional Queensland. I suppose I sound like a public servant with my having no criticisms. But, honestly, I can see their frustrations. As I say to them, ‘I do not profess to understand your situation nor to be able to sympathise with you.’ They are making a decision to leave investments and family and the lot and to shift around to the other side of the world.

My frustration with some of them, I have to tell you, is that we do get people knocking on the door and saying, ‘Look, we’ve just arrived in Toowoomba and we’re leaving early in the afternoon; what can you show us?’ We simply say, ‘Here’s the material, read it. Cup of tea or coffee? Toilets are down the hall.’ When people come to us, as they do now—and I will be going back to such a group in a minute—and say, ‘We’ve been to Perth, done Brisbane here’—some of them move on to New Zealand, and that appears to be the migration trail at the moment—they will then say, ‘We know what you’re about, and we’re here to check you out.’

We have a group of 18 agribusiness people up there at the moment. They arrived on Saturday at lunchtime. They saw small-acreage farming at Crows Nest on Saturday afternoon. They watched the rugby match at the Spotted Cow, which was a highlight for them, I can tell you. Sunday was relaxed. But on Monday, they saw three commercial bankers and two business brokers. They had an interview with two representatives from the Department of Primary Industries and they spoke with the editor of our rural weekly. They finished at about half past eight. On Tuesday and Wednesday, they hired three cars. One went to Kingaroy to check out peanuts; one went to North Star, which is south of Goondiwindi, for broadacre farming; and the other one went to Dalby for cotton. I know that yesterday they were down at Redland at the DPI laboratory, checking out horticulture and going to the flower markets. So they are pretty serious, they are pretty professional and they do not waste their time.

Senator McKIERNAN—When somebody has been making a query directly of you, have you at any time had cause to make contact with the department of immigration for advice or contact?

Mr Hickey—Yes.

Senator McKIERNAN—Have you been able to do that?

Mr Hickey—Yes, I have.

Senator McKIERNAN—You have not had any problems in talking to someone within the immigration department?

Mr Hickey—No, not at all. I am sorry for deferring to the state government, but that is our practice. I have a list of all their web pages and we use, I think it is, file 26 on the Business Migration Program in ‘immi.gov.au’. That is virtually how we refer them, but we refer them to the department.

Senator McKIERNAN—You have stated that your Indonesian initiative fell down last year for obvious reasons. Are any initiatives in place to set that up again, now that things appear to be settling down in Timor—although there are some problems in other areas of that country?

Mr Hickey—The short and correct answer is no, and that is a deficiency in what I have been doing. I mentioned to my counterpart in the state government opportunities in Indonesia and Fiji, but we have not taken any steps.

Senator McKIERNAN—The targeting of migrants coming from your region is mainly to agribusiness. You are not trying to get any high-tech persons, people with high technology experience in things such as computerisation?

Mr Hickey—We would take anybody—I do not think that came out in the way it was intended. We are open to all genuine migrants. It is just what has occurred. Frankly, I would suggest that we are aware of the advantages that we have in regional Australia in terms of business migration—and that is as it should be. But, frankly, if the fit does not fit, they would not be wasting their time.

An ex-parliamentarian from South Australia was in Toowoomba about a month ago. This gentleman is in the beef industry and he has very strong contacts in the South African beef industry. He and his wife were in Toowoomba for over a week and they got a bit frustrated. Towards the end, this gentleman looked at me and said, ‘You know, John, I could give this away and buy a flipping motel and come into Australia tomorrow. But I’m not going to, because this is what I am and this is what I am going to be.’ I think that is right. As I say to them, ‘If you own that expanse in South Africa or wherever, it does not necessarily mean that it’s going to happen on the Darling Downs; take it steady and don’t invest it on the first day’—and, of course, they are not that silly. Then I say, ‘But if that’s what you are and what you’re good at, then stick with it.’

CHAIR—I would like to welcome Senator Bartlett, who has just arrived.

Mr RIPOLL—Have you had any feedback from people? I think you have said that about 12 families have settled, or perhaps it was even up to 30. Have you had feedback from them about their experience with the program and how their settlement has gone and their business and so forth?

Mr Hickey—Yes, we have. In fact, the wife of the accountant provides a service for us whereby, if prospective migrants bring their wives and kids, she will look after—this sounds sexist, I know—the domestic side of it. It is usually the small things that people do not think about. We have a list up in Toowoomba that Brenda compiled.

The first thing we do is say, ‘Make sure that you get the Toowoomba *Chronicle* on Saturday’—even though this is a parliamentary inquiry, perhaps I could give them a plug here—and they do that. They subscribe to the Saturday newspaper of wherever. In that newspaper is the sport, the jobs, the real estate and, through that, you get a feel for the community. That is the first thing that Brenda put us on to. It is obvious, but I had not thought about it.

The more serious things are education documents for the kids, banking references for the parents, business references—the sorts of things that you think you have but the list that you need to go on. It covers such things as medical and dental records, inoculations and those sorts of things. Brenda makes the point that really, when they fly over, these people arrive in Toowoomba with virtually what they are standing in, some pyjamas and a change of clothes and maybe a blanket. Usually that is it—no toys for the kids, or whatever. So we have a bit of a network that is starting to look after that for them.

Mr RIPOLL—In terms of the program itself, has there been any formal feedback mechanism through your council, or is it just anecdotal feedback?

Mr Hickey—It is not formal; it is anecdotal.

Mr RIPOLL—What sort of a stay are we talking about? Has it been a stay of two years for those 12 families in Toowoomba?

Mr Hickey—It was three years ago that we commenced the program that we are doing. The first family came in on the eleventh month.

Mr RIPOLL—Is that family still here?

Mr Hickey—Yes.

Mr RIPOLL—Are they planning to stay on and continue with their business and so forth?

Mr Hickey—Yes.

Mr RIPOLL—Would you say it has been successful in those terms?

Mr Hickey—Outstandingly so, yes.

Mr BAIRD—Firstly, John, congratulations for getting out there and doing some promotion in relation to regional migration. I know that there is a bit of a relationship there; was it the shire clerk that you mentioned as having come from South Africa?

Mr Hickey—The accountant.

Mr BAIRD—For example, have you thought lately about Fiji? They currently have a lot of Indian farmers who are talking about looking to Australia. Have you thought about that? Has any program been developed or been thought about in relation to Fiji?

Mr Hickey—The answer to your question is: yes, I have thought about it. I presume you also want to know what actions I have taken? The answer is—from chatting with Jacob Reinders, my counterpart in the state government—I have taken no action. The internal auditor of the Toowoomba City Council is, in fact, a Fijian Indian. So we intend to use that gentleman with his network to see what we can do there. I must apologise, but it is still early days and I could always point to lack of resources and those sorts of things. But it is a fair commitment. As I

have said, in the main they are wonderful people—of course, there are exceptions. But looking after these people and arranging meetings is quite time intensive.

I met a group of eight at about half past two on Saturday afternoon. They departed for Roger Green's place at about half past five on Saturday afternoon. All those bookings and appointments they had on Monday were organised by me, with their looking on as I used the mobile phone. To the credit of the Toowoomba network, when I say, 'Excuse me, I've got some people here,' they all say, 'Not a problem; give us a time and we'll fit them in.' So it is time intensive and from time to time, I have to say, it does stretch relationships. A good friend of mine who is an international banking representative for the ANZ was stood up cold on Tuesday afternoon, so I had to ring up and apologise. These things happen. I would like to say that it is all sweetness and light, but it is not.

Mr BAIRD—Is there a serious intent to look at Fiji?

Mr Hickey—Yes, there is.

Mr BAIRD—What about other countries? I know you have mentioned Indonesia.

Mr Hickey—Ideally, I would like Fiji and Indonesia. If you do not mind me saying, I come from an agricultural area and it is a conservative area. I am conscious, as is my council, that if we are seen to be focusing entirely on Zimbabwe—and that is not the case—frankly, it is not good PR.

Senator McKIERNAN—Would many people on working holidays come into your region? Do many of them seek to remain under any of the state sponsored migration mechanisms that we are inquiring into?

Mr Hickey—The answer is no because, in the main, the Darling Downs is broadacre farming. I presume you are talking about backpackers and those sorts of people?

Senator McKIERNAN—Yes.

Mr Hickey—They go mainly to Gatton and the Lockyer Valley, which are only a 20- to 30-minute drive, where fruit and vegetables are grown. So we do not have a great deal to do with them, although they do things for our economy.

CHAIR—Toowoomba is not very far from Brisbane; I think you told me that it was an hour and a quarter's drive away. Does the fact that you are closer to a major centre help attract people into Toowoomba?

Mr Hickey—Yes, very much so. We market the city. I live there by choice. I would say to anybody that we are a city of over 100,000 people; we are a regional centre for over 200,000 people; we have the best schools in the country, and we have more schools per head of population than any other place in the country; we have every sport you could require; and we have an internationally recognised theatre. But if you want to go to Brisbane, the Gold Coast or the north coast, you can do so and come back the same day.

CHAIR—You have mentioned there being an emphasis on skills. But I note that most of the people who come over look at farming to be the business they will set up. Is that right?

Mr Hickey—Yes and no. Most of the people whom we see come from a farming background—be it farming, agribusiness or whatever. One farmer from South Africa now works for a major transportation firm in Toowoomba and uses his mechanical skills. I know of a couple of farmers in Gatton who now run an irrigation firm. It all depends on how broad your definition of ‘agriculture’ is.

CHAIR—But that really is their background: they are white farmers from Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Mr Hickey—Yes.

CHAIR—Although I do note that a Zimbabwean went into a solar heating franchise business. I was just thinking that you are really talking to people who have that sort of background and you are not going out looking for specific skills—and the Deputy Chair raised that point earlier. Really, you are looking for people with money rather than any specific skills.

Mr Hickey—Frankly, I think we respond to the market; whatever the market wants, we respond to. In the main, as I have said, they come from an agricultural background. We send them to our business brokers in town so that they are aware of what businesses they can buy. But, in the main, if they come from an agricultural background, that is where they are most comfortable.

CHAIR—Do any employers approach you for skilled people from Africa, saying that they cannot get the skills in the town?

Mr Hickey—I cannot say yes to that. What has occurred, I think only on a couple of occasions, is that employers have phoned me and said, ‘I’ve just been approached by XYZ or ABC and this is what they’re after. I think we could use them. What should I do?’ I refer them on.

CHAIR—Because you have obviously had some success with this program, have you been contacted by other regional centres asking about it and how you have worked it, how it works and getting some advice from you?

Mr Hickey—No, I have not. I attended an economic development conference late last year. There, everybody did a bit of a wash-up. I did a little bit on that and I was quizzed a little bit. But nobody has followed up on it.

CHAIR—At the beginning, you said that your only criticism would be that you did not know about it and that it was just serendipity that you found out. How would you recommend that regional areas be informed? What would be the best way for them to learn about such programs?

Mr Hickey—With a direct letter to the mayor of every regional centre, because we are all faced with the same problems in regional Australia. Here we are talking about growth, jobs and investment into these centres.

CHAIR—I am sure that such correspondence was entered into when these schemes were set up. But it occurs to me that perhaps what we need to do is continuously remind new councils, as they are elected, that these opportunities exist.

Mr Hickey—Yes, I would certainly support that, and I think that one letter would do. The other thing, as I have said, is that I find the federal department's web site very friendly. That could be provided as a reference point, and you could say to people that finding out what it is about is as simple as going to that web site and being presented with what has happened in other centres. There is nothing new under the sun. We all plagiarise. You could say, 'This is what's going on in other centres; this is what can be done, so why not do it?'

CHAIR—I would also welcome Mrs Irwin who has now joined us. As there are no further questions from members of the committee, Mr Hickey, I thank you very much for your attendance here today. If there is anything that you need additional information on, please get back to us. You will be sent a transcript of the evidence to which you can make editorial corrections. Thank you very much for coming here today and telling us about Toowoomba's experience, and thank you for the information you have provided to the committee.

Mr Hickey—Thank you. As I said, I have lived in other places besides Toowoomba, and I believe passionately in regional Australia. I think what we are doing has been quite successful, and there are opportunities for other regional centres to capitalise on it.

CHAIR—Even though we have finished with your evidence, I would ask: do you send these to other countries? Do you send these to Zimbabwe and South Africa?

Mr Hickey—Yes, we do. In fact, we provide those one per couple so that they can take them home and have video shows. Again, thank you very much for the opportunity to give evidence before the committee.

[2.57 p.m.]

BOULTON, Ms Veronica Mary, Human Resources Officer, Bond University

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the parliament itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. You have given us a submission. Are there any corrections or amendments you would like to make to that submission?

Ms Boulton—No.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement before we proceed to questioning?

Ms Boulton—Only to reiterate what we have put in that submission. We have two issues of concern. The first issue is of real concern to us, being the changing of the 16-week rule to 12 weeks and the difficulties that we have had there. The second issue of concern is the definition or interpretation of ‘full-time’.

CHAIR—But these are in relation to very temporary appointments, aren’t they? They are people who, I think you have said, were staying for 14 weeks.

Ms Boulton—Yes. We bring them in from overseas to teach for a 14-week period or maybe for two semesters. They normally take one subject, which equates to about four hours’ face-to-face teaching, plus consultation, plus preparation. Also, they normally do joint research. But it normally is only for one semester.

CHAIR—Do you know whether any of the people who have come out on these teaching sabbaticals have stayed on or applied to stay on in Australia?

Ms Boulton—Not that I am aware of, no. There are none that I am aware of at Bond University. They go back and teach at their university. They will come back on a yearly basis to take the same subject again.

CHAIR—Is that because the vacation in the Northern Hemisphere coincides with teaching terms?

Ms Boulton—Although we have many visitors in our May semester, these visitors will come throughout the year depending on when they are on sabbatical from their university.

CHAIR—Do we have people who leave Bond University and go over there, or is it a one-way traffic?

Ms Boulton—No. Our academic staff have a research semester or sabbatical every year, and they do go overseas. From the business school, they would go over to universities in the US, yes. I am not sure of the exact number, I am sorry.

CHAIR—The people that we have got coming in: from which country or countries do they come?

Ms Boulton—They are mainly from the US. It is mainly our business school that is affected. Those people are from leading business schools in the US.

CHAIR—Is there any way in which the government's migration programs could assist you, other than in the way you have mentioned—and that is, changing the visa back from 12 weeks to 16 or 14 and with the definition of 'full-time'? Are there any other ways in which people could be helped in this area? Do you ever think that you would need to bring people in from overseas on a more permanent basis?

Ms Boulton—We do from time to time recruit several academics from overseas—from Asia and England, USA and Europe; we have never really encountered any problems there. We have met the testing criteria.

CHAIR—Do you know whether you have brought them out through employer nomination?

Ms Boulton—Yes.

CHAIR—Has that been successful?

Ms Boulton—Yes.

CHAIR—Have they stayed?

Ms Boulton—Recently, after many years, we have had one return to Singapore—I think that is where he went. He was here for probably about five or six years. But, as far as I am aware, most of them have stayed.

CHAIR—Have they stayed in Toowoomba or in Australia?

Ms Boulton—We are on the Gold Coast.

CHAIR—I am sorry, I flipped back. The previous witness was from Toowoomba.

Ms Boulton—Many who have stayed have stayed with Bond; others have moved on to other institutions around Queensland or Australia.

CHAIR—I imagine that the Gold Coast is a fairly attractive place for somebody to stay.

Ms Boulton—It is. I think that is why many of them want to come here.

Senator McKIERNAN—Why would the Gold Coast be so attractive? I am not from this part of the world. I am aware of Bond University, however. How many numbers are we talking about? How many per year would you be utilising?

Ms Boulton—Around 10.

Senator McKIERNAN—Was there any consultation with the university when the rules were changed—first and foremost, in relation to the rule requiring a sponsorship which also required the application fee? I understand that there is a national body of universities.

Ms Boulton—The AVCC, yes.

Senator McKIERNAN—Would they have been consulted?

Ms Boulton—There may have been some consultation but nothing that I am aware of. It was only brought to our attention when we had an applicant rejected. That was two years later. The 16-week rule changed in 1996, from memory, although I could be wrong, and it was first brought to our attention in 1999 when we had an applicant rejected. Prior to that, we were still recruiting people from overseas for this 14-week period, overseas consulates were letting them in and there was no sponsorship fee. So they were still staying for the 14 weeks, even though it had changed to the 12-week rule. So it was not brought to our attention until immigration actually rejected one of our faculty coming in. Then we had consultation. We had several meetings to try to resolve and come to some agreement on how we could accommodate our needs.

Senator McKIERNAN—How would you describe your relationship with the department in relation to these sponsorships?

Ms Boulton—It is good now. We have a very good relationship. Any problems that we encountered we have managed to work through. The department has been flexible in its interpretation of the full-time rule, because that is one of the problems we have encountered. We have received advice from them that they will allow our staff to work the 14 weeks and consider them to be full-time because they are on sabbatical from their overseas institution and still receiving full-time salary—if that makes sense.

Senator McKIERNAN—How long does it take for an application to be approved—that is, from the lodgment of the sponsorship until the visa is issued?

Ms Boulton—We have quite quick turnaround now. It does vary. I think we are probably around four weeks, but I would have to confirm that.

Senator McKIERNAN—On a more general issue and perhaps something which is more specific to the inquiry: does the university get involved from time to time in searching for a particularly skilled academic that you need for your teaching staff? Is it the case that you search the world for that person and then seek to sponsor their coming into Australia? Have you ever been involved in that?

Ms Boulton—Yes. We have been looking for two deans: a dean of business and a dean of law. We have recruited for them internationally, in the UK and the US, as well as in Australia. We are still in the process of short-listing, so I cannot confirm whether we are going to recruit from overseas or from within Australia. It is certainly a leadership role that has to be filled by the persons that we are looking for, and they would certainly have to be skilled within their discipline—either business or law. The dean of law position was filled by an internal applicant.

Senator McKIERNAN—In undertaking that recruitment and to facilitate the individual entering Australia once the appointment has been made or is ready to be made, have you or has the university explored, with the department of immigration, the migration requirements?

Ms Boulton—No, we have not done that as yet.

Mr RIPOLL—What sort of skill shortages are particular to your university, or are there other reasons for your getting people from overseas?

Ms Boulton—The academics that we bring in from overseas to teach for 14 weeks have international experience and they teach international curriculum. So they meet our needs in those terms. If we can find someone within Australia to teach the same thing, we certainly would be using him or her. These people are normally leaders in their field worldwide and they meet the curriculum that we are offering.

Mr RIPOLL—So, if you were looking for that international perspective, you would not be able to source those same skills in Australia?

Ms Boulton—Not generally, no.

Senator BARTLETT—How much of your overall student body is made up of overseas students?

Ms Boulton—Around 45 per cent.

Senator BARTLETT—This question probably goes a little outside of the scope of this particular inquiry, but do you have problems in connection with visas for those people?

Ms Boulton—No. I made inquiries with the director of our international office and, from what he has said to me, there are none that we have had problems with.

Senator BARTLETT—Of the sorts of courses that you offer there, it is those in the business area that seem to be the ones that are relevant in this context?

Ms Boulton—Yes.

Senator BARTLETT—Are they courses with an international focus? They are not specifically for an Australian degree about how do to things in Australia, necessarily.

Ms Boulton—No, they certainly do have an international focus.

Senator BARTLETT—The systems, as they work at the moment, other than the bits you have raised, are I guess adequate to meet your needs, by the sounds of it. But are there other areas in terms of skill shortages that the university encounters at all that you think need—

Ms Boulton—No, I do not think so, none at this stage, none that come to mind. The only real problems that we have had have related to our overseas faculty for this one semester.

Senator BARTLETT—I think you stated before that, as well as having people coming for one semester on a sabbatical or whatever, you also access people who stay for a long period of time or potentially permanently in the long-term. Is that correct?

Ms Boulton—We have recruited previously for academic staff from overseas, if that is what you mean.

Senator BARTLETT—Yes.

Ms Boulton—Yes. I cannot say how many off the top of my head, but we have made appointments in the business school and in our humanities and social sciences from overseas—from Asia or America.

Senator BARTLETT—Is it the case with those sorts of appointments that these days, when you have a position, instead of advertising just in Australia, you tend to advertise more globally?

Ms Boulton—Yes. Most of our positions are advertised within Australia in the first instance. Then we source leading publications in the US—if it is for the business school—or the UK. And of course we advertise on the World Wide Web, which just goes everywhere.

Senator BARTLETT—In handling that type of recruitment, do the current regulations and laws in relation to migration seem to get in your way particularly?

Ms Boulton—No, we have not really encountered that many problems in that area.

Mrs IRWIN—You have just stated that 45 per cent of students at Bond University are from overseas.

Ms Boulton—International, yes.

Mrs IRWIN—As the students come to the end of their three- or four-year course, do they ever approach you for guidance about their staying permanently in Australia? Supposing there is a specific job they would like to target into, do they come to the university for assistance in staying in Australia?

Ms Boulton—I have not had much dealing with that. I could make inquiries for you as to the number of such students and what their inquiries have been. But, to my knowledge, I am not aware of that.

Mrs IRWIN—Do you know much about state specific migration?

Ms Boulton—No, not a lot, other than what I have to deal with in terms of recruiting for academic staff. I do not do a lot for students.

Mrs IRWIN—How did you find out about state specific migration?

Ms Boulton—From the documentation I received from Margaret May and other documentation that we receive on a regular basis.

Mrs IRWIN—From the department?

Ms Boulton—Yes, we do get some from the department, and some things also come through from the AVCC.

Senator McKIERNAN—Exactly how far away is the university from Brisbane?

Ms Boulton—It took me an hour to get here today from the campus, which is located on the Gold Coast at Robina. It probably takes from about one to 1¼ hours to get from the campus to the Brisbane city centre.

Senator McKIERNAN—So you would be outside of the Brisbane metropolitan area; you would be part of regional Queensland?

Ms Boulton—We are part of the Gold Coast. Yes, we are regional—South-East Queensland.

CHAIR—It is not a designated area.

Senator McKIERNAN—Thank you. That is what I was getting at.

CHAIR—We have designated regional areas for which some of the mechanisms particularly operate. We have noted that the Gold Coast is not a designated area, which suggests that you attract migrants without any extra help.

Senator McKIERNAN—I thank you for pointing that out, because my questions were going to go down that track. Do you think there is greater difficulty in recruiting people to a non-metropolitan campus, a non-metropolitan university in a location such as the Gold Coast or outside of the main metropolitan area?

Ms Boulton—From my experience, we have not had that many problems in recruiting people to the Gold Coast. To a lot of people coming from interstate as well as overseas, the Gold Coast is an attractive place to live. Most of the people that we have recruited have given positive feedback about their stay here and continue to come back every year. So I am not sure that we have that many problems in recruiting to the Gold Coast.

Mrs IRWIN—How many students are at Bond University?

Ms Boulton—At present, approximately 1,800.

Mrs IRWIN—Concerning the 45 per cent from overseas countries, what countries do they come from?

Ms Boulton—We have students from all over: Asia, Sweden, Norway, America. I could provide you with an exact breakdown, if you would like.

Mrs IRWIN—That would be wonderful. Please take that on notice.

Ms Boulton—Sure.

Mrs IRWIN—What sort of courses do these students do; would they be more the business courses?

Ms Boulton—We only have five schools: business; law; humanities and social sciences; health sciences; and school of information technology. Business and humanities would probably be our biggest, with law and IT just behind. But, if you would like, I could give you a breakdown of the students and the schools—a breakdown of which countries the students are from and what areas they are studying in.

Mrs IRWIN—That would be wonderful. Please take that on notice.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ms Boulton, for coming here today and talking to us. If you require any information about the hearing, please contact the secretariat. You will be sent a transcript of your evidence by Hansard for editorial correction, if needed. Once again, thank you very much for coming. I for one envy your working at Bond University on the Gold Coast. I think we will ignore the comments of the Deputy Chair, who is from Perth, who pretends that he does not know what the attractions are.

Is it the wish of the committee that the items tabled by the Toowoomba City Council be accepted as an exhibit and received as evidence to the inquiry? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

Proceedings suspended from 3.16 p.m. to 3.37 p.m.

[3.37 p.m.]

MCCARTHY, Mr Paul, Acting Manager, Business Centre, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Brisbane

MEREDITH, Mr Stephen James, Deputy State Director, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Brisbane

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. You have given us a submission. Are there any corrections or amendments that you would like to make to that submission?

Mr McCarthy—I do not think either of us was personally involved in those comments, but the submission can stand.

CHAIR—That can be dangerous, as we have found on other occasions when we have cross-examined people about submissions that other people have written. Before we ask questions, do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr Meredith—I think the only comment I would make is that, in Queensland, the focus is very much on the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. I guess that outcome is partly because of the way the Queensland government, from whom we take our lead in terms of the level of support for the various regional initiatives, has focused its level of support. It is very keen on the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme because it is employer driven. Also, it has a greater level of confidence that those who are sponsored under the scheme are likely to stay in a regional location for a length of time, partly because of the employment factor.

CHAIR—You mention that it is ‘employer driven’, but there are obviously a number of different programs. Are you saying that in Queensland the one that is accessed the most is employer nomination?

Mr Meredith—That is correct. The highest number of entrants are those entering through the skills Australian linked category, where there are some bonus points awarded because they have a relative in a regional area. But we do not have very much control over that. It is a fairly demand driven outcome. But where we are talking about a program over which we do have some control, the regional sponsored category is by far the largest. From a state perspective, that is where it has most of its focus.

CHAIR—What about the state and territory nominated independent? Do you have many coming through that one?

Mr Meredith—None at all.

CHAIR—Is that because the state is specifically concentrating on employer nominated?

Mr Meredith—My understanding is that South Australia is the principal state that has utilised the state and territory nominated mechanism and that a number of other states are reflecting on their position. Without putting words in the mouth of Queensland, my understanding is that it is not confident of entrants under that category because they are not committed in an employment or other sense to remain in the area that they might indicate they are prepared to settle.

CHAIR—Does that mean that in Queensland there are not areas where is a shortage of specific skills?

Mr Meredith—I am not sure that I am in a strong position to comment on that. I am sure there are pockets of particular skill requirements in Queensland. But there is a big difference, I believe, between an employer driving the process and saying, 'We have a skill requirement,' and having an obligation for an employee to stay with that employer. That contrasts, I think, quite considerably with the situation where someone indicates, for whatever reason, that they might be prepared to go to a location and there is not really a strong factor for them to stay in that region.

CHAIR—You have indicated that the employer nominated scheme has been successful here. In the last year, how many have you had come into Queensland under that?

Mr Meredith—The figure for last year, 1999–2000, was 60 visa grants. That is roughly equal to the numbers in the previous year. It would be about 10 per cent of those who were approved under the program on the national level.

CHAIR—Are they going to any particular region? Where would they be going?

Mr Meredith—The outcome there, I guess, partly reflects where the certifying bodies that we rely on under the scheme are located and the level of activity of those certifying bodies. The locations vary, but there is certainly a high level of activity in the Cairns region, for example. The Cairns Chamber of Commerce is particularly active under this scheme.

CHAIR—So there is a certifying body at Cairns?

Mr Meredith—There is. But beyond that, there would be approvals in other areas. There are some seven certifying bodies in Queensland variously located—Mount Isa, for example. The state development department also has overarching approval, as a certifying body, across Queensland. So that picks up any gaps where there are not specific certifying bodies.

CHAIR—How does Mount Isa go in attracting people into the region? Do you know whether Mount Isa has been successful?

Mr Meredith—I am not sure whether I can tell you. I am not aware that there are any significant numbers in Mount Isa. It does fluctuate. The nature of the scheme is that there are fairly small numbers. It is very much a supplement to other mechanisms. It is employer driven, as I say, and it depends on the employer having a particular requirement at a point in time. The nature of the occupations that are nominated under the regional sponsored scheme varies

greatly, and I think that indicates the nature of employment in regional areas. Some of those occupations over time have been fairly unique ones. They are certainly not always in the mainstream category that we might anticipate. I, personally, have seen nominations ranging from gem cutters and polishers through to other fairly unique occupations.

CHAIR—So Cairns would be your main success area?

Mr Meredith—Cairns would be a significant focus. But there is a reasonable spread across the larger regional centres in Queensland. We would have some, for example, in Toowoomba Bundaberg, Childers, Warwick, Gladstone, Dalby, Port Douglas—a reasonable spread.

CHAIR—And do they pick up pretty well your certifying body areas?

Mr Meredith—Yes, all of Queensland is covered by certifying bodies.

CHAIR—But, where they are in the local region, do they tend to do better?

Mr Meredith—I think that is a fair comment. Where the certifying body has a narrower regional focus, they tend to be more active.

CHAIR—Earlier on did you start to give me some of the skills that have been brought in under the employer nomination?

Mr Meredith—I can tell you, particularly in relation to the last year, the sorts of nominations that have been presented. They have ranged from certain medical professions—dentists, nurses, a couple of those—mechanics, accountants, electrical technicians, sheet metal people, chefs, mining specialists, radiographers, pharmacists. So it is a fair spread.

CHAIR—It is a fairly professional group, isn't it?

Mr Meredith—They are fairly professional, yes. That might contrast with other states, and I have certainly seen different patterns in other states. I am not sure that the pattern is a predictable one. Next year the occupations might be quite different from those presented this year.

CHAIR—Can you tell me a bit about the chef? Do you have any details about that?

Mr Meredith—I do not have details at the moment, but—

Mr McCarthy—Longreach, I think.

CHAIR—So Longreach had a problem in getting a chef?

Mr McCarthy—Yes. I believe that the local hotel had expanded to the point where it was providing hundreds of meals a day and they could not get a chef and were willing to sponsor under RSMS.

CHAIR—Can you remember where the chef came from?

Mr McCarthy—I cannot offhand, I must admit. But I am sure it was Longreach that was involved.

Mr Meredith—There are two chefs on my list from last year, one from the UK and one from Thailand.

CHAIR—Is there any bias towards any particular country they are coming from, or is it a spread around the world?

Mr Meredith—That is hard to generalise, I guess, based on those sorts of numbers and my own experience. But I think there would be a reasonable spread from around the world.

Senator McKIERNAN—Mechanics were mentioned, and I will stay with that theme for now. Why would we need to bring a mechanic into Australia?

Mr Meredith—What underpins the scheme is the fact that a regional employer cannot obtain, from their local labour market, the skills they are after. As to why there might be the shortage, I would not want to speculate on that. But what the program does is respond to the fact that there is a shortage of a particular skill.

Senator McKIERNAN—How is that shortage tested?

Mr Meredith—Under the regional sponsored scheme, the principal focus of the certifying bodies and the objective of that structure was to allow a body that is closer to the detailed knowledge of the local labour market to establish that, within that labour market, those skills are not readily available. The historical alternative under our employer sponsored categories is for employers to go through a formal labour market testing process. That would normally involve advertisements in the newspapers and the examination of professional journals and the like. But, under the regional sponsored scheme, it pivots very much on the local labour market knowledge of the certifying body. That is one advantage. The other advantage of that is that it also considerably hastens the assessment process, with the time to get someone on deck being very critical to employers.

Senator McKIERNAN—In some of those occupations and professions that you have mentioned, there are shortages all over Australia. At the moment particularly because of the Olympics, there is a shortage of chefs. But mechanics I find a little bit strange. In an earlier hearing of the inquiry, we were told of a mechanic being brought in who had very specialist knowledge of four-wheel drives. Sometimes I wonder whether the scheme is not bent in order to fit individuals who are being sponsored by other individuals. In the case of mechanics, I would have thought that there would not be a particularly great skill shortage Australia-wide. There may be here in Queensland, but I am not so sure that is the case Australia-wide. Would that be right?

Mr Meredith—There is obviously a difference between the Australia-wide labour market situation and what might exist in a particular location. But also often the description might not do full justice to the skills of the individual. They might be described as a mechanic, but they

might have very specialist mechanical skills that might relate to diesel technology of tractors or something similar that is a critical skill in a regional area.

Senator McKIERNAN—But Australia is a world leader in this particular field. Take mining technology, we are a world leader in that field. We should be a world leader in the training of people within those fields. If the individuals are not there, if the training is not being given, maybe we then have to go overseas to get the people to do it—and one can understand that. But we would not want to see schemes that we have in place being rorted just to suit the interests of individuals and the rules being bent to accommodate a particular sponsorship from time to time. I certainly have some suspicions on some of the sponsorship that has been engaged in to date—as I mentioned before, the specialist on four-wheel drives. Our not being able to get our own people here in Australia I think is a bit ludicrous.

Mr Meredith—There are checks and balances in the sponsorship and nomination process. Under the employer nomination mechanisms, there is consideration of the training record and effort of employers. There are other examinations of a sponsor's credentials to sponsor in terms of their ability to support and so on.

Senator McKIERNAN—I am not trying now to put the committee in a position where it is reviewing the decision to allow this particular sponsorship to go ahead and that particular individual to come in; I do not want to second guess who made the decision. But I would like to know what checks and balances were put in place in this particular instance. We have already done that on a different one— not the four-wheel drive specialist, but another one who was being sponsored. I do not want to make a song and dance about it, but it seems that some of the rules were overlooked in the applicant being allowed to come in. Then they got the job and only stayed for a relatively short while, with residency being attached to it and so on.

Could you, without going into the personal and intimate details of that particular one, provide the committee with an overview of what checks and balances were done to ensure that this was a legitimate sponsorship in order to meet a very specialised vacancy in that particular field? I will re-emphasise this: I do not think it is the role of parliamentary committees to be second-guessing individual decisions of the department. But it is important, if there are checks and balances in place, that those checks and balances are working.

Mr Meredith—I will certainly do that. But, as I said before, there is a level of devolution of some of that checking to the certifying bodies to look at the labour market situation. We do necessarily rely on their assessment in terms of the capacity to fill that position from within the local labour market. But, against that backdrop, I will certainly provide you with further advice.

Senator McKIERNAN—Thank you for that. Can you say where the accountability is? Is the accountability with the certifying bodies or with the department? Who issues the visa?

Mr Meredith—The department certainly issues the visa. In the case of the regional sponsored scheme, there are two stages in the processing. One is the nomination stage, which focuses on the position to be filled, and that is where the focus is of the certifying body. But, while the certifying body does a lot of the assessment work, the final decision as to whether to approve or refuse the nomination is a departmental decision, along with the visa decision that follows—and the visa application is a separate application.

Senator McKIERNAN—What you can provide on that will be appreciated. In terms of the promotion of the various schemes, can you briefly outline what is done from a central position here in Brisbane, from the department's point of view, to promote the various state sponsored schemes that are in place?

Mr Meredith—There is a level of cooperative effort between DIMA and the state department to promote the suite of regional visa schemes. The focus has been pretty much on, as I said, the regional sponsored scheme because of the state's position there. On a number of occasions—I cannot give you precise dates offhand—we have jointly undertaken travel and promotion of the schemes. The focus has been very much on employer groups and on chambers of commerce and so on. That is because our experience is that that is a much more effective way of doing it than trying to target individual employers, given the relatively small numbers and given that individual employers tend not to focus on the availability of different mechanisms until they have a need to recruit somebody. Our promotional efforts have been focused very much, as I say, on those peak bodies and chambers and so on.

As I have said, it is very much a cooperative effort. We necessarily take a level of our lead from the state. The Commonwealth's position is that we are guided by the state in terms of what level of activity it wants to happen in this area and what its level of support is for promoting regional migration.

Senator McKIERNAN—Do you have day-to-day contact with the certifying bodies, informing them of your initiatives and, in turn, giving them the opportunity to inform you of what they are doing?

Mr Meredith—Our business centre would have very regular contact with the certifying bodies. Each time a nomination is put forward we need to deal with it, and there would be communication with certifying bodies over it. Beyond that, there is also a national level coordinated contact with certifying bodies. When we are appointing new certifying bodies, we would undertake the training and awareness briefing and so on of the objectives of the scheme and the requirements.

The regional sponsored scheme is not that old. It has been going through a fairly rapid growth period where the number of certifying bodies has grown fairly quickly. We do now have a wide coverage across Australia and certainly a full coverage across Queensland. So there are a couple of layers in the way we contact and relate to the certifying bodies. But there would be very regular dealings, I believe, between our business centre and the certifying bodies.

Senator McKIERNAN—I asked that last question because, when we were in Kalgoorlie taking evidence just recently, we were told that the state business centre had come up to attend a very large mining exhibition or show in Kalgoorlie and had not told the local certifying body it was coming. The certifying body and the individuals found out about it when they saw it there. I considered that to be a breakdown in communications. Things have been done now to weld the relationship together so that things such as that will not happen in future. Have you had any like experiences?

Mr Meredith—That certainly would not happen in Queensland, Senator.

Senator McKIERNAN—Have you seen Dr Deborah Kuchler's submission? We will be meeting with her tomorrow.

Mr Meredith—No, I have not seen her submission, but I know her quite well.

Senator McKIERNAN—Do you want to read her submission, take it on notice and then, in turn, respond to me?

Mr Meredith—I could probably anticipate some of what she may have said. Dr Kuchler is, in fact, on the minister's business advisory panel. Dr Kuchler and one other member of that panel have focused in the past on the regional sponsored scheme. So she would have a fairly detailed knowledge of the scheme and, no doubt, would have a number of suggestions to make about the program.

Senator McKIERNAN—You may have comments on the submission and the suggestions that Dr Kuchler makes. We will be talking to her tomorrow, so it would be unfair to try to canvass them with you now.

Mr Meredith—I could do that from a state perspective, but you may well want to get comments from our central office in terms of the national perspective that she might have on the program.

Senator McKIERNAN—We like to take evidence from state officers before we get into national bodies. We can do that at a later time when we are back in Canberra.

Mrs IRWIN—Mr Meredith, you have mentioned dentists, nurses, accountants, sheet metal workers and mechanics. Are they the skill shortages that are being experienced in rural and regional Queensland?

Mr Meredith—I am not expert in all of the skill shortages in regional Queensland. I think it is fairly well publicly documented that there are particular shortages in medical profession areas. From past experience, I know that there certainly is a shortage of medical practitioners and nurses and the like and that there is a difficulty in attracting those sorts of professionals to, and retaining them in, regional areas. Beyond that, I do not have any general sense of widespread skill shortages in regional areas. It will vary from region to region. But the program numbers, as I say, are low. They respond to particular, and in many respects unique, labour market shortages. I do not think you could read into those numbers or occupations that there is a widespread skill requirement.

Mrs IRWIN—So you could not name the areas that have skill shortages in Queensland?

Mr Meredith—Not in the sense that you pose the question, no.

Mrs IRWIN—You have mentioned Cairns. What shortages would there be in Cairns that are attracting employer nominations?

Mr Meredith—This is a bit anecdotal and based on prior experience before I arrived in Queensland: because of the high level of tourism in Cairns, there are a number of tourism companies, restaurants and the like where they might have particular skill requirements. I think there are even some that I have seen in the past that relate to the diving industry, for example. Again, they would tend to be fairly unique skills but normally skills surrounding the tourism industry.

Mrs IRWIN—Like hospitality?

Mr Meredith—Hospitality type positions, yes.

Mrs IRWIN—I find that amazing, mainly because we have so many unemployed people who have finished TAFE hospitality courses.

Mr BAIRD—They will not go up there.

Mrs IRWIN—If I had done a hospitality course in Sydney and I had the opportunity of going to Cairns at the age of 21 or 22, I think I would take that opportunity.

Mr BAIRD—I was interested in Mrs Irwin's question because I know that this area was causing concern for the tourism industry—the difficulty in getting people to Cairns, particularly in the basic hospitality areas of waiting, cooking, washing, short-order cooking and so on. Do you get many requests from Cairns to come under this special migration program?

Mr Meredith—No, we would not get a lot of requests. I guess I should indicate that there are threshold criteria that apply to this program, which means that we are talking about skilled entrants. Even though the threshold criteria under the regional scheme are slightly lower than in some other program areas, there are nonetheless threshold requirements there that relate to age, English ability and skill.

Mr BAIRD—So suppose you have a short-order cook who speaks English. Does that work? What works in the hospitality industry? I am just aware that this was a real issue for getting staff there. I want to know to what extent these programs assist with that. They seem to me to be a way of getting people into regional areas. From my point of view, Mrs Irwin's question is particularly relevant. The tourism industry is the biggest employer in the country. As I understand it, there are two major trouble spots in getting people: Darwin and Cairns. If your shake of the head indicates that short-order cooks, for example, cannot come into this program, then what can? I heard you speak of diving instructors or whatever. But, if you are trying to encourage people to go to regional areas, shouldn't you be taking the opportunity of what the shortages are overall? If there is a perpetual shortage of people to make beds and do short-order cooking and to wait on tables, shouldn't they be included in the programs? My first question is: are they or are they not?

Mr Meredith—I do not believe that they are. I do not think they would meet the requirements in most instances. The minister has made some comments in recent days. He wrote an article in the *Australian* newspaper a few days ago in which he indicated that the focus for employers is now very much on temporary entry. Many of the categories that you are mentioning there would be filled under the temporary business entry arrangements, temporary long-stay ar-

rangements. The numbers are far greater. There are a number of advantages for employers in terms of the speed of processing and the degree of leverage that they have over employees. Employers generally go down that path if they require someone to sponsor someone on a temporary basis initially for the reasons I have mentioned, plus they have an opportunity to assess the value of the employee before they might consider sponsoring them for permanent entry. But, if they wish to sponsor them for permanent entry, there are those higher threshold requirements that do not always—

Mr BAIRD—So let us take the tourism industry because most of us understand the jobs there. Which ones would make it? What jobs in the tourism industry would get in under the program?

Mr Meredith—Under this program, I think you would be talking more about managerial positions. It might be someone coordinating the activities of the tour company, or perhaps somebody doing marketing work and liaising with other countries in terms of the source market. It might be someone with perhaps a more hands-on skill where it is a specialist skill but at a reasonable level.

Mr BAIRD—What were the overall numbers that you brought into Queensland under these programs last year?

Mr Meredith—As I think I indicated earlier, there were 60 visa grants in 1999–2000 under regional sponsored scheme.

Mr BAIRD—That is hardly exciting.

Mr Meredith—The numbers are not large.

Mr BAIRD—How many people do we have working in that area in the Brisbane office of DIMA?

Mr McCarthy—The business centre does not take up a great deal of time. There are no specific resources allocated to it. It is attached to the much larger employer nomination functions.

Mr Meredith—What are the overall staff numbers?

Mr McCarthy—Eleven people work in the section.

Mr Meredith—We have 11 staff. They would cover the whole range of skills entry, the employer nomination scheme, the regional scheme, the various business skills categories.

Mr BAIRD—So you are saying that there is only half a person who sometimes does some work in this area in terms of regional?

Mr McCarthy—In terms of regional sponsored migration, the numbers are just not huge.

Mr Meredith—That would be true.

Mr BAIRD—Is it because we do not do enough work in promoting it, or is it because there is just not the demand for it?

Mr McCarthy—It fulfils a demand. Somebody recognises a shortage. It does not fit the other category, the employer nomination category. There is a slightly lesser test skills-wise. It will suit them. They can get their person in under that particular scheme and solve their skill problem. So it does satisfy a demand, it is there to be used, but the numbers are not huge.

Mr Meredith—To give you a better sense of that, the regional sponsored scheme numbers have been running in the order of 600 or 700 per annum in the last couple of years.

Mr BAIRD—For which one?

Mr Meredith—The regional sponsored scheme, the permanent entry. That would contrast with the temporary long-stay category that I mentioned where we are probably visa-ing 33,000 to 34,000 a year.

Senator BARTLETT—Are they national figures?

Mr Meredith—They are national figures, yes. As I have said, the minister has indicated in recent days that there is a strong business focus on temporary entry, at least initially.

Mr RIPOLL—How successful do you think the program has been overall in terms of Queensland? Is it delivering what you might have as a goal? What is your goal with this mechanism?

Mr Meredith—The program is still relatively young, and there is some research being conducted at the moment as to how well the program has operated. My observation of it is that there is a high level of satisfaction from those employers who have used the scheme. There seems to be a high retention rate for those employees who are sponsored, which is clearly the objective of the program. So, anecdotally at least, I think the program is achieving the outcomes that were intended. But you would probably have to ask yourself what sort of success rate or retention rate you might consider to be successful. It is a very difficult game, trying to sponsor or encourage migrants to go to regional areas and have them stay on in those areas because, historically, they are attracted to employment or to family. Without trying to coerce them into staying there, it is a difficult task to achieve that. As I say, the indications that I am aware of are that there is a reasonably high retention rate and there is a high level of satisfaction with the scheme, albeit the numbers are low, as we were saying.

Mr RIPOLL—Do you have a formal feedback mechanism where both employers and people coming across in the programs can feed back in so that you can gauge the success from that angle?

Mr Meredith—I am not aware that we have established, in any formal sense, that sort of mechanism. But, as I say, a considerable amount of research is being undertaken at the moment.

A lot of the focus of that work has been on South Australia, because the South Australian government has been fairly active in this area.

Mr RIPOLL—If there were one or two changes that you could suggest to make the program better, more successful, what would they be?

Mr Meredith—I do not really want to speculate on policy, but there has been feedback from certifying bodies saying that we do need to raise the level of awareness of the program's availability. As I say, I think there has been a level of success. I think the certifying bodies believe that the criteria and the mechanisms are about right, the settings of the program are about right. Perhaps it is about creating a higher level of awareness from the industry groups right down to individual employers.

Mr RIPOLL—That makes sense. A witness who appeared earlier this afternoon said that it was great once they knew it existed, but prior to that they did not know it was there. So that may be something to look at.

Mr Meredith—I think that is acknowledged already. I understand that within our central mechanisms in our Canberra office there is a high priority attached to promoting not only the regional scheme but the suite of schemes that we are talking about. I believe that the minister considers that one his top priorities as well.

Senator BARTLETT—There obviously are other mechanisms that draw in greater numbers than this scheme in terms of that goal of getting people into regional areas. But there is no target or cap in terms of the overall numbers with this specific one, is there?

Mr Meredith—No. They are demand driven programs. In fact, the minister has challenged employers generally around Australia to sponsor more skilled workers to Australia, if the numbers of skilled vacancies that are claimed are actually out there. That is why the minister has included in the program the 5,000 contingency reserve places.

Senator BARTLETT—You have submitted that public inquiry levels are extremely low and that there is the potential for a greatly enhanced role in marketing state-specific migration mechanisms by certifying bodies. That would suggest to me that there is scope for a fairly significant expansion of people under this program or these mechanisms if the marketing were done, if the awareness were there.

Mr Meredith—That may well be the case. But, as I say, it is demand driven, so it depends on the needs of employers. But the minister certainly sees this as a key program within his suite of regional programs in terms of influencing location. So I am sure that the minister and the government would be keen to see the numbers grow in this area, at least in a relative sense.

CHAIR—That is what part of our job is: to make it grow.

Senator BARTLETT—It would seem to me that a significant part of that would be just to increase awareness of the mechanisms that are there. Is that a priority not just for this scheme but the whole—

Mr Meredith—I think it is a priority right across the skilled entry area of the migration program. Effectively, the minister has challenged employers and industry groups to be more directly involved in sponsoring skilled workers to Australia where there is an identified need. But there has not been a strong response from business in terms of sponsoring people for permanent migration. There has been a strong response and interest in using the temporary business entry mechanisms.

Senator BARTLETT—What about with the not so skilled, whether it is tourism jobs or other areas such as fruit picking where obviously there is a demand and they cannot get temporary or permanent workers, is there scope there for temporary or permanent? A lot of those jobs are in regional areas. Even in Longreach tourism is double the value of agriculture in that part of the world now. Are there other schemes which perhaps do not focus on skills? They are not necessarily highly skilled jobs but there is still a demand there and labour is not available.

Mr Meredith—Those sorts of workers will not gain entry under the skill mechanisms because of the skill requirement variously across the programs. To some extent, they may gain entry under the family programs, but there is no guest worker scheme on a temporary or permanent basis to fill those positions. That is often why a lot of the public focus is on the number of working holiday makers in Australia, for example, because they tend to supplement the labour force to the horticultural and other industries where there are lesser skills required. But there is no guest worker scheme, nor would those sorts of workers gain entry under the skilled permanent migration mechanisms.

Senator BARTLETT—So if you are looking at a way of meeting labour needs in regional areas or indeed attracting people, even temporarily, there are not necessarily mechanisms currently available that enable local economies to be boosted through migration?

Mr Meredith—Not on a permanent basis. The temporary long stay might accommodate that where the employer is able to demonstrate that they have been unsuccessful in recruiting Australians to do that work. Under that mechanism, there is no specific skill requirement. For the most part, they would still be highly skilled, but if there were a semi-skilled position that was unable to be filled, that could be filled on a temporary basis, but it would be very problematic for that same person to gain permanent migration.

Senator BARTLETT—Is that part of what you focus on promoting, particularly when you are going out to regional areas and talking about some of the mechanisms that are available?

Mr Meredith—We certainly do try to make employers aware of the sorts of mechanisms that are available. We do that in a whole range of other ways as well, not only in the skilled entry area but across a whole range of migration visas. There is a wide suite of employer focused programs available. Yes, we do try to educate and promote those programs as best we can. The majority of them are, in fact, employer driven.

Senator McKIERNAN—Queensland is one of the states that continues to have designated areas. From your perspective, is having designated areas an advantage or a disadvantage?

Mr Meredith—The use of a designated area varies from program to program. It does not have any application under the regional sponsored scheme that we have been talking about today. It does apply with respect to certain business skills categories in particular, and I know the debate that surrounds that and the designation of Melbourne, for example.

Senator McKIERNAN—And other cities.

Mr Meredith—In relation to matters we have been talking about today, it really does not have any relevance.

CHAIR—Can I take up what Senator McKiernan has asked you because one of the questions I was going to ask is whether you have heard from the Queensland government about how they felt about Brisbane not being a designated area and Melbourne being a designated area. Have you ever heard any comments made on that?

Mr Meredith—I have not heard any comments on that, no. That is not to say that there are no comments. But the states are consulted on the decisions made in relation to designation. I do not know what the response there has been from Queensland or other states as to the question of Melbourne.

CHAIR—So you are not dealing with incredulous people who say that Melbourne is a designated area but Brisbane is not?

Mr Meredith—No.

CHAIR—As DIMA give the final approval to the people who the certifying bodies put up, would you know how many you would refuse in a year, if any?

Mr Meredith—Refuse certifying bodies?

CHAIR—Yes. If a certifying body has put somebody up, have you refused any?

Mr Meredith—Do you mean the nominations that they put up?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Meredith—We certainly would refuse the nomination.

CHAIR—But have you refused any?

Mr Meredith—We certainly have. Paul, do you have a sense of the numbers?

Mr McCarthy—A very small number—two or three.

CHAIR—Can you remember the grounds on which you knock them back?

Mr McCarthy—Usually it is because they do not meet certain core criteria. Essentially, the certifying body did not have the full story when they made the decision. All they had was the application form which said something like, ‘I want somebody to be a farm manager. I am going to pay him \$40,000 a year.’ When we got the contract it was actually not really a farm manager, it was to look after some olive trees and they were going to get \$15,000 a year.

Mr Meredith—I can give you another example of why we might refuse them. I mentioned the threshold criteria under the program. In fact, applicants need to be generally less than 45 years of age, they need to have functional level English and they need to have diploma level or higher qualifications. There is provision for exceptional appointments where an argument can be mounted that the position that the employer is trying to fill is unique in a way that we should not limit ourselves to those criteria. Sometimes there are nominations put forward by certifying bodies that effectively accept the exceptional arguments and we subsequently assess that and disagree with their assessment. Previously, I indicated that the decision on a nomination was an immigration decision.

CHAIR—Okay. We had in other states complaints from certifying bodies that they had gone to an enormous amount of trouble and then it had been knocked back by DIMA without sufficient explanation from DIMA as to why it happened, but that was not in Queensland.

Mr Meredith—No. The normal practice is that we would liaise very closely with the certifying body about that decision. We would often follow up and ask further questions where we are contemplating refusal.

CHAIR—The other question I want to ask you—I am not sure that you will know the answer—is: do you know whether any of the people who have been sponsored or employee or employer nominated have come already knowing somebody in the Australian community, or would your feeling be that pretty well 100 per cent had come not knowing anybody.

Mr Meredith—I could not give you a precise background on that.

CHAIR—I will give you some background because we found in two areas that there seemed to be a connection, that the people being brought out came from a particular church group.

Mr Meredith—I am aware of that group.

CHAIR—You are aware of that, so you are not experiencing that here?

Mr Meredith—Generally, I do not believe that there are prior family associations with people who are sponsored onshore or offshore. I am aware that there have been entrants from a certain country who have an association.

CHAIR—We are actually talking about South African and a church, are we?

Mr Meredith—We are, yes.

CHAIR—Can I ask you how you know about it?

Mr Meredith—I know about it from my previous position in Canberra where I had overall policy responsibility for this area.

CHAIR—That is interesting. We did not know that anybody else knew about this. We discovered this through our own questioning. We were somewhat stunned when we followed up certain questions and found this as a parallel in two separate places that this was happening. It is interesting to us that Canberra is already aware that this is happening.

Mr McCarthy—I visited them. In Maryborough they have a huge wood processing business. A family would start off in one section and as soon as that gets to a certain level, the eldest son takes over and gets another one going. Then there are three sons with three businesses. They let a business get to a certain size and then somebody else runs it.

CHAIR—That is a family one, yes.

Mr McCarthy—Yes, with as little mechanical machinery as possible and even the machinery they have is very old. They like things that are old.

Mr BAIRD—What religious group is it?

Senator McKIERNAN—We had better not say.

CHAIR—We probably will not say now, but we can get back to you on that.

Mr Meredith—We have had discussions on a policy level with representatives of that group and we have otherwise assessed applications on a case by case basis. There has been no particular approach taken to that group, other than assessing applications on their merits.

CHAIR—But you are obviously not finding that happening here. My final question—Senator Bartlett and Mr Baird have raised this—concerns the issue of people with no skills or limited skills. Senator Bartlett referred to the fruit picking industry and Mr Baird referred to the hospitality industry. I know public servants do not make estimations, but if you had a category where you could let people in with these lower skills, would you not be absolutely flooded with applications? What is your feeling on that.

Mr Meredith—Without giving a personal comment, other countries seem to have had that experience.

CHAIR—It is not that you are just going to bring in a few for here or there, but that once you have allowed that type of migration there is an almost unlimited capacity of people to apply to come to those positions.

Mr Meredith—There have been approaches to the government in the past and there have been pressures from various countries to allow that to happen. The government has clearly indicated that they are not interested in a guest worker arrangement.

CHAIR—As you would be aware, agricultural industries are very interested in that for fruit pickers. Also, once you start to say, ‘Let’s bring in fruit pickers,’ you have somebody saying ‘I can’t get a housekeeper here. Why can’t I bring in a housekeeper?’ Then where do you make the distinctions?

Mr Meredith—The focus of the skill program really is on providing a benefit to Australia. The argument around benefits in those sorts of areas is greatly diminished.

Mr McCarthy—We have had a request for 2,000 Azerbaijani cotton chippers.

CHAIR—Azerbaijanis are good cotton pickers, I take it.

Mr McCarthy—That is where a lot of cotton comes from and these are people to weed, essentially, I think.

CHAIR—Yes, you chip with a —you were there. Stephen and I can tell you all about cotton chipping. We did it.

Mr McCarthy—Temporary residents would come for just the cotton season and then go back each year.

Mr Meredith—You will find that a lot of those proposals are employee driven where they are really trying to gain entry. There is not all that often a parallel request from employers or employer groups for that sort of labour force.

Senator BARTLETT—You mentioned early in your evidence that you target chambers of commerce and groups like that, rather than individual employers in regional areas. Do you connect much with local councils in regional areas as well?

Mr Meredith—In some cases, local governing bodies are in fact certifying bodies—not on too many occasions. If the point you are leading to is that by being closer to the action we are able to more directly target employers, I think that is correct, and I think there is a place for those certifying bodies with a narrower regional focus to promote the scheme more directly to individual employers rather than to peak groups. That is one part of the package; the other part is targeting the chambers and employer organisations. In a direct sense, we have not utilised the local government network to any extent, not in this particular area, but I think that is probably a good suggestion.

Senator BARTLETT—I will suggest it then. The second was probably slightly broader again than these particular schemes, but with the general theme of getting people moved to regional areas, with the aim of trying to keep them there. I am aware of some circumstances—indeed some in Toowoomba and Mount Isa where I was last week—where people who migrate to Australia move to these areas, not necessarily under these schemes or with a particular employer sponsoring them. We are not necessarily picking those people up and plugging them in. Does the department have any role once you have issued the visa and people are in Australia? You do not necessarily monitor where they are going in terms of settlement process or anything like that, do you?

Mr Meredith—No. If they are here as permanent residents that is really the end of our interests until such time as they present for citizenship ceremonies.

Senator BARTLETT—Is there any other department that does focus on that sort of thing in terms of saying, ‘Okay we have these people here; let’s plug them in’? That is part of the role of the settlement schemes I suppose. They do not necessarily focus on the employment and business aspect of it, do they?

Mr Meredith—On the skills side of the program, no, and I am not aware of anyone apart from ourselves—state governments or others—that would monitor migrants in that way. We do for a short period with some of the humanitarian entrants where we are trying to accommodate their short-term needs, but I am not aware of any broader monitoring of those sorts of movements.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Meredith and McCarthy, for coming here today. Obviously, if there is anything you want to get back to us on, you know the procedure to do so. You will both get a copy of the transcript of the evidence, should you want to make any editorial corrections.

Mr Meredith—Just one point of clarification, Senator. How quickly did you want comments on Dr Kuchler’s paper?

Senator McKIERNAN—I want to talk to Dr Kuchler live and then hear your views afterwards. It is more a question that should be directed to the Chair. For the completeness of our report, it would be useful to have the other side of the comments.

CHAIR—Do you have a copy? I believe there is a copy on the Internet or we have a copy here that we can give you.

Senator McKIERNAN—You do not need to do it by the end of the week. We probably some more hearings to come.

CHAIR—We will take a five minute break while we wait for the next witness.

Proceedings suspended from 4.29 p.m. to 4.45 p.m.

WOOD, Mr Richard, Regional Councillor, South-West Regional Council, Queensland Chamber of Commerce

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the parliament itself. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. As you have just given us your submission, obviously there are no amendments you may wish to make to it.

Mr Wood—No, it is fresh off the press.

CHAIR—Before we ask you questions on the submission, do you wish to make an opening statement?

Mr Wood—Yes, if I could, I want to address policy objectives for the chamber; first of all some overarching ones and then specific ones. The overarching policy objectives of the Queensland Chamber of Commerce include: (a) a non-discriminatory immigration policy which does not take into account characteristics such as race, religion or ethnic origin; (b) a stable and predictable net migration intake set over a rolling five-year period with minimal variation; (c) an annual net migration intake set at a minimum of 0.67 per cent of the Australian resident population or around 123,000 persons at present.

Specific immediate policy objectives include: (a) the active engagement with the federal government in its periodic reviews of the general migration program and/or aspects thereof to ensure such exercises act as platforms for continuous improvement of the programs rather than result in fundamental or partisan shifts in underlying objectives of policy; (b) ensuring migration policy makers and planners develop and implement effective strategies to ensure Australia is viewed competitively as a destination of first choice by business and higher skilled labour migrants; (c) promoting to the federal government the importance of adopting a flexible ceiling approach to the target number of business numbers with the capacity to accept above planned level numbers, within reason, where potential business migrants meet qualitative thresholds.

Concerning the policy framework, in economic terms, immigration has added to the demand side of the Australian economy by expanding consumption, business and government, in the latter case, through the additional spending on health, education and welfare, while on the supply side it has introduced new sources of labour, skills, technology, business investment and awareness of valuable export markets. In so far as commerce and industry has a preference in the migration mix, we favour increasing economic business and labour skilled migrants as a proportion of the total intake with commensurate reductions in the family stream rather than refugee stream. A target for economic migrants of 50 per cent of the net program intake, subject to maintaining selection standards, would be appropriate. Concerning economic migration, just as Australia must compete in the global marketplace to win and hold export markets and international investments so, as a nation, we must vie with a number of other countries, most notably the US and Canada, to win and hold economic migrants. While Australians may regard

an invitation to migrate to this country as a special privilege to be offered carefully and selectively to suitable individuals, potential economic—especially business, but also skilled labour—migrants regard Australia as one of a range of possible destinations.

In short, as much as it may challenge our national esteem, Australia must compete in the global market place for business and skilled migrants, giving particular attention to key determinants of migrant decision-making, such as relative commercial and economic conditions, skills recognition, simplification, streamlining migrant application processes and ensuring ease of temporary movement. Migration policymakers and planners must develop and implement effective strategies to ensure Australia is viewed competitively as destination of first choice by business and higher skilled labour migrants, rather than second choice behind the US and Canada.

Australian governments in recent years have placed increasing emphasis on attracting and retaining business migrants with the objective of encouraging successful business people to settle permanently in this country and to develop new business opportunities. Business migrants bring with them valuable knowledge of overseas markets, commercial networks in those markets and language and cultural skills, all of which benefit the Australian economy by, inter alia, developing international markets, transferring investment funds and expanding the nation's capital base, creating or maintaining employment, introducing new technologies and exporting goods and services. A discrete and distinct business migration stream must be maintained within the broader immigration program. The core objective of this stream should be the attraction, selection and settlement in this country of migrants with business skills who will add commercial and economic value to Australia. While the federal government should periodically set a target number for program planned purposes, this view should be viewed as a flexible ceiling with the capacity to accept above planned numbers, within reason, where potential business migrants meet qualitative thresholds.

The second main element of Australia's economic migration program is the labour skilled stream, that is, those individuals with labour skills which are in short supply within, or which can enhance the quality of, the domestic labour force. Skilled labour immigrants bring with them financial as well as human capital, with economic research indicating a positive relationship between the flows of skilled labour on the one hand and investment and trade on the other. In general terms trade leads skilled labour flows which lead investment, which in turn leads to skilled labour flows and trade, and so the virtuous cycle continues. The existing skilled labour migration streams—independent, employer nomination, distinguished talent and skilled Australian linked—are broadly sound.

While the Australian government operates a national migration program, the intake has not been distributed proportionately around the country either by state, territory or by urban regional rural locations. Official statistics indicate immigrants have a relatively stronger preference for locating in New South Wales and Western Australia and a relatively weaker preference for locating in South Australia and Tasmania. These locational decisions may result from a number of factors, including place of first disembarkation, existing networks of families, friends or cultural groups or relative awareness before arrival.

The Australian government should operate a national immigration program where location of potential residents is of much lesser importance than the inherent characteristics of the potential

immigrant. It is not appropriate for the Australian government to discriminate between potential migrants according to their willingness to settle in one or other state or territory. The Australian government should operate a national immigration program where location of potential residents is of much lesser importance than the inherent characteristics of the potential immigrant. It is not appropriate for the Australian government to discriminate between potential migrants according to their willingness to settle in one or other state or territory.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Wood. In your statement you suggested that the chamber believes that Australia should have 120,000 migrants a year. On what does the chamber base that number?

Mr Wood—On 0.67 per cent of the Australian resident population.

CHAIR—Why 0.67 per cent?

Mr Wood—That was just a number that was agreed upon.

CHAIR—So it could have been 0.78 per cent, but you decided on 0.67. You also made a comment that you thought there was a need for skilled entry rather than for refugees.

Mr Wood—Not one or the other, but as a preference. It does not have to be one or the other. With a flexible ceiling, you can retain the same numbers of refugees, but as a proportion to business migrants.

CHAIR—Is it your understanding that refugees do not come with any skills?

Mr Wood—It is not black or white. It is not that they are coming with no skills. It may be we can introduce individuals with targeted skills to industries where we have skills vacancies. The refugees may well have, generally speaking, lower levels of skills than specifically targeted individuals.

CHAIR—I just wish to comment that on one of the boats carrying people who were claiming refugee status that arrived up north, of those on board six were doctors. I do not think we can necessarily assume that they do not have fairly high level skills.

Mr Wood—That is right.

Senator McKIERNAN—Your submission addresses issues much more broadly than the terms of the committee. I would like to confine my remarks to the terms of reference. Is the Queensland Chamber of Commerce a certifying body for the regional sponsored mechanisms?

Mr Wood—Through the state based migration program?

Senator McKIERNAN—Yes.

Mr Wood—No we are not.

Senator McKIERNAN—I understood you were. Is the Queensland Chamber of Commerce involved in any of the sponsorship bodies or certifying bodies?

Mr Wood—Yes, I would say so. I am from one of the regional councils which sits on the overall board. What happens at a state level, I could not be sure, but we formulated this from a regional perspective? The south-west region is the Lockyer Valley west of Brisbane through to the southern border, to New South Wales. What happens at a state echelon is probably another matter.

Senator McKIERNAN—I understood you were appearing on behalf of the state body. You are here merely as the regional representative?

Mr Wood—Yes.

Senator McKIERNAN—What is your direct involvement in the state sponsored migration schemes from a regional perspective?

Mr Wood—My own involvement is that I am a chartered accountant. I work in corporate advisory and I am quite often referred work by migration lawyers. For example, they may be saying that an individual wants to come over from Zimbabwe or South Africa. Either they want to buy a farm or a business. They say, ‘Richard, can you do a business plan for a plumbing business?’ or something like that. ‘Value it, and he will be able to buy it when he gets here.’ My direct experience as an individual, professionally, is in that kind of an area—hence my skills that I bring to the board from my background.

Senator McKIERNAN—Within that sphere that you are operating in, have you encountered any difficulties from your contact with the migration department in terms of recognition of the individual, the issuance of visas, the time it took to process the applications and so forth?

Mr Wood—Maybe a bit longer than is desirable. I would have only hearsay evidence on that. I would not be able to bring any figures to the table today—some anecdotal evidence but nothing else.

Senator McKIERNAN—In your submission, you talked of regional migration. From what you said in your presentation here today and what is included in your written submission, would you favour greater incentives being given to persons who wished to come into Australia and settle and remain within regional Australia? Should they be given incentives to do that?

Mr Wood—People should be free to settle wherever they choose, whether it be on the coast or in the regions, but there should not be barriers to going out west. There could be targeted incentives, perhaps along the lines of being employer nominated. If they signed some sort of a document that indicated they would be employed for five years and there would be an onus on the employer if that contract was broken, maybe creating some sort of a free immigrant zone perhaps where that would apply and then be given a bond of some type to the employer, perhaps that situation may be appropriate.

Senator McKIERNAN—To develop what you have termed a free immigrant zone is beyond the terms and the scope of this inquiry. For example, in the regional sponsored migration

scheme—the RSMS—there is a two-year job offer. Two years has been criticised by some area witnesses to the inquiry as being too onerous and in actual fact it does not mean anything because once the person is here the individual is then free to move. There are no chains to hold the individual to that particular place where they have been offered employment and where they have initially settled.

Mr Wood—That would be true.

Senator McKIERNAN—And you would be in favour of continuing this? That is why I was asking you about incentives. You said they should be completely free, did you not, with no barriers to moving into regional areas?

Mr Wood—They should be free to settle where they choose, but there should not be any barriers to be able to go into the regions. It is obviously further away from where they may disembark when they get to the country, but creating incentives and reducing barriers is probably not the same thing. They may be viewed sometimes as the same.

Senator McKIERNAN—With the regional sponsored applicant it is a two-year contract. You have mentioned five years.

Mr Wood—In here, yes.

Senator McKIERNAN—Do you think five years is more appropriate? In your conception of the scheme, what would happen if the individual wanted to move from that regional area within that five-year period? Should permanent residency be withdrawn from the individual?

Mr Wood—Indeed. Over the five year period, yes.

Senator McKIERNAN—Okay. Would there be community support for such a proposal?

Mr Wood—That would be difficult to say. I would not know for sure.

Senator McKIERNAN—If we, as a committee, recommended that to the parliament to adopt and we said we did it on your recommendation, you would then have to be in a position of defending the recommendation that you have made to the committee to change policy on the thing. Are you prepared on that?

Mr Wood—On that basis, yes, I would be prepared to defend it. I think that there would be community support, around my region at least. One problem that would be identified is a lack of assimilation in some of these rural towns, on both parts—the existing residents not being too willing. If I moved in Roma, it would be difficult to live out there, being a new person from outside. For someone from a foreign country, I can understand that would be even more acute. But it is from both sides that the existing residents are also a little reluctant as well.

Mrs IRWIN—What is the region that you represent? I know you are from the Queensland Chamber of Commerce, but I think you have also a head office here in Brisbane. What is your region?

Mr Wood—From Toowoomba, where the regional office is located, it encompasses everything from the Lockyer Valley, which is, say, Gatton, an hour west of here, around to the south boundary which includes Kingaroy and then directly out to the western border which includes Charleville, and down to the New South Wales border, which would include Roma, St George and Goondiwindi. It is a very large region.

Mrs IRWIN—What skill shortages are there in your area?

Mr Wood—Specifically, the highest skills shortages are in building and engineering professions, as well as information technology industries, and some of the trades as well, perhaps along the lines of metal and automotive.

Mrs IRWIN—How many positions would be available in those fields? Would you have any idea?

Mr Wood—It would be difficult to quantify. I did not bring any figures specifically with me.

Mrs IRWIN—Are you aware of any small businesses in your region that have applications in for employer nominations?

Mr Wood—I could not name them, but yes there are.

Mrs IRWIN—So there are a number?

Mr Wood—I am not able to give a number or any names of businesses.

Mr RIPOLL—In the executive summary, you say that business migrants have created on average six new Australian jobs. Was that meant to be six or 60?

Mr Wood—For every migrant that comes in, it creates an extra six jobs.

Mr RIPOLL—So for every new migrant who comes in, that has created six new Australian jobs—that is fine.

CHAIR—Where did you get those statistics from, Mr Wood.

Mr Wood—The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr RIPOLL—You said earlier that there should not be any barriers to where migrants go, and you are right—I do not think there should be any barriers. The purpose of these mechanisms often is to encourage people to go out into the regions. What could you see the program doing to encourage, firstly, migrants to go to the regions and then to stay there as well?

Mr Wood—Initially assessing specifically what the skills vacancies are in the individual regions. Then when the applications are being scrutinised, that greater preference is given to those

where identified shortages are. One cannot be forced to go anywhere, but perhaps individual businesses can be matched to those who are putting the employer nominated forms in.

Mr RIPOLL—Taking the perspective of your region, for example, anecdotally, what do you know of as the skills shortages in your region?

Mr Wood—As I said, in the engineering field, there is a big shortage generally on the dams. There is a lot of construction going on, but we have had to outsource a lot of that work to Brisbane and they are not local businesses by any means. Specifically, in that industry or profession there is a big shortage.

Mr RIPOLL—I am trying to determine some level of how this scheme would benefit regions. What can you not get locally, and by locally I mean a bit further afield than just say from Toowoomba, Ipswich to Brisbane? Even interstate might be local if you are looking at an international program? How can this scheme fit in to fill gaps where there is no other way of finding people to fill jobs for your region, for example?

Mr Wood—How have I not answered the question from before?

Mr RIPOLL—I do not know. I am just looking for your point of view from your region to say, perhaps, ‘This scheme works particularly well for us because we have had one or two examples of where we really could not find’—we have been given specific examples of a diesel mechanic that just could not be found locally in South Australia. They advertised nationally for this position, but quite readily found a person from overseas that could come and fill the position. I am trying to gauge whether, in your region, there is anything similar, where a particular business came to the chamber of commerce said, ‘We’ve looked everywhere. We cannot find anybody in Australia who will fit this particular job, but here we have someone overseas ready to come over. Can you give us some assistance on getting that person?’ using this scheme to get somebody across?

Mr Wood—I was just advised that we could research this paper. So it has been difficult to find specific examples. I would, if I could. I am just unable to do that.

CHAIR—Thank you for your attendance here today, Mr Wood. If there are any matters on which we might need additional information, the secretary will write to you. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence in which you can make editorial comments.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator McKiernan**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 5.12 p.m.
