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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

Monday, 14 November 2005

Members: Mr Randall (*Chair*), Senator Kirk (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Bartlett, Eggleston and Parry and Mr Laurie Ferguson, Mrs Irwin, Mr Keenan, Dr Lawrence and Dr Southcott

Members in attendance: Mr Laurie Ferguson, Mrs Irwin, Mr Keenan and Mr Randall

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

Investigate and report on current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration for:

- Skills stream migrants who obtain assessment prior to migrating;
- Families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/registration/upgrading after arrival;
- Temporary residents who need skills assessment/recognition; and
- Australian citizens returning after significant time overseas, with overseas qualifications.

Consider how Australia's arrangements compare with those of other major immigration countries.

Identify areas where Australia's procedures can be improved including in terms of:

- Communication of processes to users
- Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers
- Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading (e.g. bridging courses)
- Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers
- Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators
- Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications.

WITNESSES

CUNNINGHAM, Mrs Mary Adelaide, Director of Business and Skilled Migration, Department of Business, Economic and Regional Development, Northern Territory Government.....	1
DENG, Dr Robert, President, Sudanese Community Association.....	52
FRITH, Mr David, Director, Workplace Policy and Business Services Development, Business SA	41
JEREMIC, Ms Sally, Executive Officer, Training and Skills Commission, South Australia	14
KARANASTASIS, Ms Tina, Acting Executive Director, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia.....	27
LABLACK, Ms Karen, General Manager, Policy, Business SA.....	41
LEWINSKI, Mr Stanislaw, Coordinator, Community Participation, Employment and Training, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia	27
LISTON, Mr Kevin, Director, Australian Refugee Association	52
MACHAR, Mr Bol Ring, Settlement Officer, Australian Refugee Association	52
MASIKA, Dr Joseph, Consultant, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia	27
MWANRI, Dr Lillian, Community Member, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia	27
O’CONNOR, Ms Fiona, Director, Traineeship and Apprenticeship Services, Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology, South Australia	14
PAINE, Mr Nathan, Senior Business Advocate, Business SA	41
ZAMANI, Mr Hafez, Manager, Employment Services, Australian Refugee Association	52

Committee met at 9.33 am**CUNNINGHAM, Mrs Mary Adelaide, Director of Business and Skilled Migration, Department of Business, Economic and Regional Development, Northern Territory Government**

CHAIR (Mr Randall)—Good morning. I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry into overseas skills recognition, upgrading and licensing and welcome you all here today. The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs has asked the committee to examine if the current processes by which migrants are assessed for entry into Australia under the skilled migration system are functioning efficiently or whether they need to be improved. The committee is looking at skills recognition not only for migrants but also for those who come to Australia outside the skilled migration system, such as temporary residents needing skills assessment and Australian citizens returning to Australia with overseas qualifications. In addition, the committee is comparing Australia's overseas skills recognition arrangements with those of other major immigration countries and whether greater consistency in the recognition of qualifications might be achieved among the Australian states and territories.

I welcome the representative of the Northern Territory. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement if you wish before we proceed to questions.

Mrs Cunningham—Thank you. I have a point of explanation. Our submission laboured very much on the trade side of skills recognition. It was deliberately so, because, with the economic growth that is happening in the Territory at this time, trade skills are absolutely essential. The skills shortages are principally with trade skills. Like most of the other jurisdictions, we have skills shortages in health and those sorts of areas of profession, but trade skills seem to be the area that, from our perspective, is most cumbersome.

Skilled migration will continue to play an important role in the Territory in the future. We have a population of 200,000 people. We have an annual tourism influx of about a million people. We call on imported skills, whether they be from down south or from overseas, all the time. Our perspective is facilitation. We are not asking to diminish the level of skills recognition or anything like that but rather to improve the process to one of facilitation rather than one of barrier.

The observation is that, for most professions, most of the processes for overseas migrants now are facilitative. Yes, there are some issues in relation to some of the processes, but in most cases if a migrant lodges an application there is a process where people go back to them and say: 'You're not going to make the grade. Do you have further information to support this submission?' That does not happen in a trade recognition process. There is limited feedback. It is almost as if it is one strike and you are out. I do not believe that, if we are looking to bolster the trade skills within Australia, and particularly within regional Australia, that is a really good approach.

Of course, being extremely selfish—because the Territory is very parochial—the regional aspect of it is extremely important. We are dealing with small employers in a lot of cases—the tradie who may have one or two people. The ability to keep apprentices depends on having those tradespeople there. On the facilitation, from the regional point of view, the time factor is really important to them. Basically that is the explanation for why we have focused on that. That is about all I need to take up your time with.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. In your submission you seem to be rather scathing about Trades Recognition Australia and their delivery to you. Would you like to expand on that?

Mrs Cunningham—I understand that Trades Recognition Australia have improved their processes in recent times. This submission probably reflects a period of time where their turnaround times were not facilitative, where people were waiting for months and sometimes years for responses, where some of the decisions were made without any explanation whatsoever. I understand, from speaking to the new director, that they have started to put comments on the response sheets, but at the time this was written people were being refused without any explanation, being told they could make an appeal but not being advised on what grounds their application had been refused—whether it was the basis of their formal training, an absence of evidence of their on-the-job experience or a technical problem with their documentation. It was on the grounds of some real issues.

Our focus at the time was airconditioning and refrigeration mechanics, because they need that trade recognition to be able to go through the next process to get to the licensing side of it. It is an absolutely essential skill in Central Australia and in the tropics at this particular time. Everywhere you turned, there were barriers. I spoke to somebody in London recently at one of the commercial promos that we have been doing and they basically said, ‘We’ve got this tradie that wants to migrate but we’re probably looking at another 12 to 18 months before you’ll actually have them in Australia.’ That is not just the trade recognition process; it is process upon process upon process.

CHAIR—That begs another question, but before I ask that I will say that this is exactly what you were saying in your introductory comments about the fact that, when somebody makes an application and they get knocked back, there is no feedback on whether they might try some other form of approach to address what they are deficient in. I suppose they would say: ‘It’s not our business to offer advice and give guidance. We either say that you qualify or you don’t.’ Do you think there is an avenue for them to be more facilitative in their feedback? Can you give us some examples?

Mrs Cunningham—I guess I am working from the other side whereby I think that we are looking for skills at a level that is appropriate for our country. If what has been presented to Trades Recognition Australia is clearly deficient in skill, training or something like that, a simple response is to say, ‘You don’t have the necessary qualification.’ The feedback I have received is that rejection can result from something as basic as a checklist where one piece of documentation is missing. I do recognise from discussions I had in Sydney last week that there have been process improvements because TRA has been under the hammer for a long time from people involved in the migration field in states and territories because they were feeling frustrated. I recognise that the processes may have improved but, to my way of thinking, we are

not looking to stop people coming in who have appropriate standards; we are looking to maintain our standards but let the people in that can meet the criteria.

CHAIR—On the final position with TRA, have you raised your concerns on behalf of the Northern Territory with DEWR?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes.

CHAIR—What has been the response?

Mrs Cunningham—I believe that some of the recent changes have been as a result of that. The issue of TRA was raised very strongly in a regional certifying body conference in Adelaide in April. Some less than diplomatic language was used. I believe that went back and has possibly influenced the change. We have not had a direct response, but the advice we received from the director at the meeting last Tuesday was that the processes have been changed, that the turnaround times have now been reduced to 10 to 15 days and that there is no overseas backlog.

CHAIR—That is the anecdotal feedback.

Mrs Cunningham—That was the advice that we received from the director last week.

CHAIR—So which TRA office do you deal with from the Northern Territory?

Mrs Cunningham—It depends. In a lot of cases my inquiries are channelled through one of the people from DEWR, a lady called Jane Press.

CHAIR—South Australia, I understand, deals through New South Wales?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes.

CHAIR—And Western Australia deals through Brisbane, believe it or not.

Mrs Cunningham—Most of ours go through Sydney.

CHAIR—So you don't have one direct office that you deal with?

Mrs Cunningham—No. The employers do, but most of my stuff is at a policy level.

CHAIR—Most of the employers would go through New South Wales?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes.

CHAIR—I have lots of other questions but I will throw it open to other committee members.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Today you have been talking about facilitation but in the submission you state that the role of TRA should not be that of acting as a gatekeeper. The word 'gatekeeper' to me implies a defence of the skill system—a belief that there should be certain

standards. Today you have been talking more about facilitation and you said you do not want to undermine the conditions.

Mrs Cunningham—No.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You talk about most processes in immigration getting responses. I put it to you, by way of a parallel, that most people who apply offshore under the refugee humanitarian category get a pro forma letter; they do not even get an interview. That is the first point. If we say that we should start responding to everyone regarding what is wrong with their applications, I put it to you that that kind of process would involve an enormous use of staff resources—to tell each individual what is wrong with their particular application. At the same time this is one of the most litigious areas of public life in this country. If the department were to start sending letters to each individual outlining the specifics of their rejection, I would be concerned that this whole area would be opened up to further litigation.

Mrs Cunningham—Obviously I have not made my position clear. First of all, I was not suggesting that we change our skill standards. I believe that Australia's standards are very high and I, for one, do not want to erode them. Secondly, when I say 'individual letters', it would not necessarily need to be a detailed response to people. If you receive a 'Sorry, your application has been unsuccessful' letter, there could be a few extra words such as: 'Your skills have not met the level,' 'Your documentation was insufficient,' or, 'Your work experience was insufficient.' I am not suggesting it should be chapter and verse; there should be some indication as to where the failure has been. If it is simply a piece of paper that they have failed to provide, to my way of thinking it is of no benefit to either the applicant or Australia for them not to be reassessed.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Are you aware that there is a self-assessment document which gives people some indication of what is required?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes. I am also aware that a lot of our trade skills people now are coming from countries that are not used to the sorts of systems that we have. Places like England, Scotland, Ireland and, to a certain degree, Europe may be familiar with it. But places like Singapore, and certainly places like India, are not familiar with that sort of process. I think a little more facilitation would be beneficial to both the applicant and the country.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—When you say you had discussions with people involved in the migration field with regard to problems, would they be mainly migration agents and people who are trying to facilitate entry?

Mrs Cunningham—Some of them, yes, but others have been applicants.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—In regard to the situation in the Northern Territory, what is the actual performance at the moment with respect to TAFE and your intake of people for training in the Northern Territory?

Mrs Cunningham—I am sorry, I can't answer that. I could certainly get some information back to you, if you would like me to find out.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—In regard to NOOSR, you talk about some people being able to utilise the European Community and there being different distinctions regarding what is acceptable. Were you making a point there or was it just commentary?

Mrs Cunningham—It was just commentary.

Mr KEENAN—With regard to some of the changes you suggested were happening in trades recognition, we have been led to believe that the process has been vastly improved in response to the shortages that Australia is having. Is that your perception?

Mrs Cunningham—I have been advised by the trade recognition people that it has happened. I have yet to hear it filter through from the employers.

Mr KEENAN—I have spoken to employers recently who told me that they are getting a much better turnaround time and that they think that things have improved. That would not be your perception?

Mrs Cunningham—So far, no. But, as I said, this submission has a bit of a lag in it, and I do know that there has been a lot of representation, through DIMIA and directly to DEWR and the trade recognition people, to try to improve. I guess the issue is that in a lot of cases that recognition is the first step to getting a lot of the skills into Australia that we need, and that is why it has been under the hammer, particularly with the growth in Western Australia and in the resources area.

Mr KEENAN—What sorts of trades are lacking at the moment? I suppose everything, in the Territory?

Mrs Cunningham—You can basically name it. The Territory, Queensland and Western Australia have got the resources boom. We have the mines, we have LNG plants being built, we have the development of an Alcan site, there is a second train for LNG to be built early next year, and we have got a convention centre being built. We have metal trades, automotive trades and construction trades. Anybody who supports the tourist industry: chefs, cooks—

CHAIR—The way you are going, you might be able to become a state one day.

Mrs Cunningham—Soon. I guess the population base is an important issue too, because human capital is the issue for us. With 200,000 people and some of the remote issues that we face, having people with those skills, having people who want to be in the tropics and stay in the tropics, is really important to us.

Mr KEENAN—Is it the case that some of these projects are being held up because of the inability to find skilled people?

Mrs Cunningham—No, I do not think the projects are being held up. The issue for us, more than anything else, is that you see a drift of the people who have been working for the local businesses move to the higher money for that period of time, and because there is one major project after another, there is a skills deficit more in the local businesses. So they cannot

capitalise on the contract opportunities that they get from these major projects if they do not get access to those skills.

CHAIR—In your submission you stated that it is important to ensure that the processes and pathways for qualifications and skills recognition are transparent, integrated and facilitative. What changes could be made to the skills recognition process to ensure that it is transparent, integrated and facilitated? Or didn't you write that?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes, I did. I actually did write it. There is already a move to try to improve that. There is a three-way process for trades that are licensed. You have got the TRA process, which gives people the right to migrate; you have got the ARTC process, which tells them where their skills differ from what is required to be licensed; and then you have got the licensing process. I would like to see those improved. I believe that there is a committee for COAG that is looking at trying to improve those processes, so much so that I believe they are looking at the possibility of having some of those processes combined overseas before people arrive here.

A lot of people—particularly people who have not been in contact with people in the trades here in Australia; I am talking about electricians, airconditioning and refrigeration mechanics, plumbers—arrive in Australia and find that they still cannot work in their trade because they have to go through the ARTC process and then the licensing process. In a lot of cases, they have got to that point without realising that that is what they have to do. Even information at that point would improve the process, I believe.

CHAIR—You have suggested that that might even start in a better fashion overseas. On page 3 of your submission, you said that the Northern Territory has launched its five-year business and skilled migration strategy. Does this strategy address any of the specific issues relating to skills and qualifications?

Mrs Cunningham—No, it does not. It focuses on how we can increase our share of migrants. We have not done really well in recent times. I think we are one per cent of the population and about 0.3 per cent of the skilled migration intake. It is about putting some resources behind highlighting to employers the possibility of accessing skills from overseas, about awareness raising and promotion and also about doing a fair amount of lobbying of the Commonwealth government to remember the needs of regional areas.

CHAIR—You think it could be even more enhanced than it is now, do you?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You said that you get 0.3 per cent as opposed to a national population balance of one per cent. Do you know how many people the Northern Territory government has specifically sponsored in the last year or so?

Mrs Cunningham—No. I cannot give you the figure offhand, but I can tell you that we have a policy of being selective about the people we sponsor. We do not sponsor people just because they ask us to. We look particularly at employment and settlement opportunities. Under the new skilled independent regional program, we are sponsoring all regional students who qualify

through the Charles Darwin University. If they have studied an eligible program and are eligible for the scheme, we will sponsor them. We will sponsor people with family and friend connections in the Territory, and we sponsor people who are on our skills shortage list or have job offers. We know very well from past experience that, where regional programs exist and you do not monitor integrity, people tend to use the soft entry point as a gateway to somewhere else. I have been in the migration game for about 17 years and have seen some entrepreneurial people use soft entry points, and I am determined that we do not put our resources into those programs that do not provide the benefits back to the Territory. We are not a sponsor of high numbers, but that was a considered decision.

CHAIR—You said some people use a soft entry point to abuse the system. Can you give us an example? It might help us in understanding what you are saying. Are you talking about coming through New Zealand?

Mrs Cunningham—No, I am talking about some of the regional programs. If you do not scan your applicants really well and match them to a real job need in the particular region, they will struggle to find employment and, therefore, move across borders or to one of the larger metropolitan areas.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—People who would not qualify to migrate to Sydney or Melbourne.

Mrs Cunningham—That is right. It does not take—what do they call them?—fast-moving entrepreneurs long to erode the integrity of a program if they work out that there is no penalty for their client using the soft entry point. The regional migration programs deliver to us what we need, but I think we have a responsibility to make sure that they maintain their integrity as well. I think the robustness of the processes that we use will do that.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You gave what I assume was anecdotal evidence—they might have been actual cases you know—of some cases taking years. In a sense, that would not seem to me to be a very pronounced tendency, if we have a system that does not even bother responding to individual cases by sending individual letters. Do you know of any cases that took years? Do you know that there were not reasons for those particular cases?

Mrs Cunningham—I do not know that there were not reasons. I can certainly cite a couple of instances where correspondence was not responded to. One of my employers got a first letter back saying, ‘Don’t contact us—it will take six months.’

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—What field was that in?

Mrs Cunningham—Airconditioning and refrigeration.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Do you know what country they were from?

Mrs Cunningham—Fiji.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You would think that Fiji’s system, with their being part of the British Commonwealth, and their TAFE structure would be fairly close to ours.

Mrs Cunningham—The particular employer I am talking about is a former skilled migrant who came in to work for a company. After he had fulfilled his agreement with the company he bought the company. He was actually using his own experience on what he needed for TRA to go and select his people. He not only selected people for himself; because there is so much work in that particular area, he also went and selected people for his competitors as well.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Do you think that was a pro forma letter because of the waiting time?

Mrs Cunningham—It was a pro forma letter.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—How long ago was this?

Mrs Cunningham—Five months ago.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You just said that he was getting work for other people as well. You also said it was a pro forma response—I hear that. Do you know whether there is any tendency to sponsor people in his family as employees?

Mrs Cunningham—No, I do not.

Mr KEENAN—I am interested in your recommendations about plain English information. Is there evidence to suggest—and the chair touched on this earlier—that people at that actual entry point overseas are just not getting information that they can really understand?

Mrs Cunningham—I suppose that plain English is one of these lovely buzzwords that everybody uses at this time. I think it is just about information. Having just come back from doing a raft of promotions overseas—

Mr KEENAN—Was this part of the Australia-wide trip?

Mrs Cunningham—No, one of them was the department of immigration's promo in Chennai, but the others were commercial migration exhibitions. The commercial side of it, particularly in Europe and the UK, has just gone through the roof at the present time and I think everybody was being quite mercenary about the push factors out of the UK. So all of the states and territories fronted up. We are very mercenary, aren't we!

From talking to the individuals themselves, I do not know whether it is because they do not research appropriately because of the nature of what they do—they are trade people; it is generally the trade people I am talking about—but they just do not seem to get the information they need to understand what the processes are and what they have to do. I know we rely a lot on web sites and I know that that is the cheapest and most effective way, or it appears to be the most effective way, of communicating with a lot of people. In some of the areas I wonder whether that actually gets through. People who are working in construction sites and offshore oil rigs and all of the rest of it—who, of course, are the ones that we are really interested in—probably do not have that ready access to that electronic information. I wonder whether perhaps we should still have access to paper based systems.

CHAIR—While we are on that, there is a web portal. The Commonwealth government has a national skills web portal. The information I have suggests that it might be essential that the information provided on this web site is easily understood, accurate and up to date. Are you aware of that portal?

Mrs Cunningham—I am.

CHAIR—Do you think it is sufficient?

Mrs Cunningham—It has not yet been launched. I think we are about to get the prototype for testing this month. There is a meeting at the end of next week or the week after. It is certainly under very advanced development. I have not been in the office, so I do not know whether we have the prototype or not, but there has been a meeting called by DIMIA in Sydney on 25 November to discuss the launch and implementation of the national portal.

CHAIR—So the Northern Territory has been consulted?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes, everybody has been consulted. My concern with raising that is this is a moving feast. We had no sooner put our submission in when we saw a cabinet submission come through that suggests that some of what we have done is going to be inaccurate by the end of this year. As far as the maintenance aspect of it, we are going from ASCO codes to ANZSCO codes in 2006, when there will be a major upgrade. So, yes, it is fine. It is terrific. But there are some real issues about the maintenance.

CHAIR—As recently as yesterday I was listening to Perth radio. There was a hairdresser on there complaining about the lack of hairdressers. I think she said they were chasing 70 hairdressers and could not get any responses. They were after a stylist or something like that. This might sound a bit flippant but in your recent overseas presentations, both commercial and for DIMIA, have we drilled down to the level of trying to attract hairdressers to Australia? How successful are we? Can you give us some feedback on these exhibitions?

Mrs Cunningham—I cannot give you feedback in relation to other states and territories or the Commonwealth. I have to tell you that five of the job descriptions I took overseas with me were for hairdressers: two from Alice Springs and three from Darwin. In doing this, we actively seek out small businesses who do not have the capacity to go out and do their own recruitment in that sort of forum. We do not recruit for them, of course. We just take their positions over there and hand them out to people who are interested. One was for a senior stylist technician. Another was for an artistic director. I thought that was something in the theatre but apparently not; you actually have an artistic director in hairdressing. Another was for a colour technician. There were similar positions in Alice Springs. I handed out those job descriptions to several people in Ireland and England.

CHAIR—What was the response?

Mrs Cunningham—I do not know really because the contact is directly back to them.

CHAIR—So you have not had any feedback?

Mrs Cunningham—I have not had an opportunity. I only got back to Darwin on Thursday last week and I have already had another trip to Canberra and Sydney since then, so I have not had an opportunity to follow up.

CHAIR—I know we are slightly digressing but, in terms of attracting the necessary skilled migrants, what is your feeling about the success or otherwise of these DIMIA sponsored exhibitions, particularly? They were in London, Berlin, Chennai—

Mrs Cunningham—I cannot comment on London, Amsterdam and Berlin. Unfortunately, somebody forgot to tell the Territory they were happening. By the time I found out, I read about it in the *Australian*. We picked up Chennai because we were doing some work with Charles Darwin University in India. India, like lots of other developing countries, will continue to be a source of human capital. Some of the issues about qualifications, particularly for IT specialists and doctors, probably overwhelmed everybody else. But there are issues in relation to the appropriateness of experience and qualifications, so I think that, with more lead time, you would screen better. I understand from the European and UK exhibitions that the states and territories and employers that participated were very pleased with the quality of the candidates, particularly from London and Amsterdam. I think the English language is a bit of a challenge in Germany. English was not a challenge in India, but it was the understanding of the processes. I understand that with an electrician in India there is about a five per cent pass rate against our skills assessment, which is understandable when you see the way they handle electricity in India.

I think one of the challenges for Australia in the future is where we will source our skilled migrants, because it is very plain that our traditional sources of migrants in the trades area—places like England and Ireland, Canada and the USA—are going to dry up very rapidly. I think we are going to be faced with how to assess and upgrade the skills of people from other source countries to be able to meet the needs in the future. I think strategically we need to be looking at where the human growth is—probably China, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, and maybe Africa and the Pacific—and I am talking maybe 10 years down the track, because that is where our sources of skills will be.

CHAIR—You talked about the Territory sponsoring migrants. What is the experience of individual employers sponsoring specific migrants? Recently a program was launched by DIMIA to assist employers to source specific skilled migrants for their businesses. Are you aware of that program?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes.

CHAIR—Is it being used and does it seem to be running well?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes. This will be a bit of a commercial for the Northern Territory. The Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme was initiated by the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth in 1996. So that RSMS scheme, that permanent residence scheme, has been operating for nearly 10 years, and it has been extremely successful for the Territory. The employment outcomes for the migrants have been very high, and the adhesion, the sticking, of the people to the employer or to the Territory has been very good as well. We are also using the 457 temporary residence and the regional program, but certainly not to the volume of other

states, simply because we do not have the volume of employment. We certainly are using it to fill skill shortages.

CHAIR—I suppose the follow-on from that question is whether they would be both employer and state sponsored programs. Is there any feedback on the remainder of the family? Let us say the skilled migrant is a husband, which they quite often are: do the wife and siblings then try and achieve employment outcomes? Do they have any difficulties?

Mrs Cunningham—I have not encountered any feedback that there are difficulties. I certainly have evidence of cases in regional areas where the husband or the wife gets work as a skilled migrant and the others seem to slot in to work. Whether it is the ideal work outcome, we have not done any assessment on. An initiative is about to be implemented that is going to look at those settlement aspects in the Northern Territory I think early next year. I have not received any feedback of people having difficulty, but that probably reflects the job opportunities that exist in the growth phase. We are in a very high level of growth in the Territory at present. It is probably more because of the growth and the skills opportunities that are there.

CHAIR—I suppose in some respects, if somebody comes as a skilled migrant, some of the balance of the family may take up unskilled positions.

Mrs Cunningham—Either unskilled or skilled. When we look at the Territory sponsorship we always look at the migrant's spouse's skills as well. We do not use them as a barrier to it, but it is always nice to have somebody who is an automotive mechanic with a wife who is a nurse.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—I think you said you had been involved in immigration for 17 years. This question is more from that perspective than to do with your current position. You spoke just now about 'appropriateness' of experience. In the Northern Territory there are either going to be people with a dedicated job and great interest in going there or this minority who are going there so that they can migrate to Melbourne. There is one thing I notice in my very high-migration electorate in Sydney—and, of all the issues you have raised, this one has not been mentioned with regard to our problem—and that is the requirement of employers that people have Australian experience. Have you come across that as an issue?

Mrs Cunningham—Yes, I have, but not so much in the trades area. I have actually had somebody who has migrated as an independent migrant come to me and say, 'I can't get work because they want Australian experience.' I am not trying to diminish that issue, but it was interesting that the gentleman who came to me was in a job and he wanted a senior job in Treasury because he had had a similar job back in his own country. I tried to explain to him that we just could not do that. I think in some cases the expectation of being able to transfer from a very senior job in your own country to a very senior job as an independent migrant might be a bit high. But I also recognise that, particularly in engineering fields, they are saying that the experience that people bring does not reflect what we need in the Australian workplace.

I am not really sure whether that is because people do not understand what the experience is or whether it is to do with a different way of speaking. I notice that a lot of people will come to you and say, 'I am a mechanical engineer,' when in actual fact, when you look at it, they are a fitter and machinist. People will come in and say, 'I am a fitter and machinist,' and you will say to them, 'Can you explain to me what you do?' and you find out that they are a mass-produced

CNC machinist that only works in a production field and would not have a hope of working in a workshop that is doing mine maintenance. I think that the dissimilarity in experience can be important if it is a very small operation. I do not know whether that answers your question. I waffled a bit; I am sorry.

CHAIR—I am sure you didn't waffle.

Mr KEENAN—This is a national issue, obviously—all around the country they are facing problems with the skills shortage—but how is the Territory government seeing the COAG process that has been instituted to address some of these issues?

Mrs Cunningham—I cannot really comment on that. I have been an observer on the working party that has been working on that, so I do not have a real role in commenting on the process. But I am sure if you would like some feedback on that I can talk to my colleague who is actually the member on that and we could give you some feedback on it.

CHAIR—I will get you to talk to the secretariat about that. Your submission notes the frustration in the experience for refugees in understanding the relevant skills recognition pathways. Have you got any suggestions on how to improve the skills recognition process for humanitarian entrants?

Mrs Cunningham—Again, that is not a section I wrote, because I do not work in that area, although I do know some background on that. That is why I could not respond to Mr Ferguson's comment on the humanitarian and refugee side of it. Again, I think it is an information issue. I know that some of the information issues have been addressed. I know that there were some situations where people were arriving in Australia not even knowing what Australia was. Some of that has been addressed, but there is an expectation that people can move to another country and immediately become the doctor or the teacher that they were in Africa, for example. There is an expectation issue and there is a cost issue. There is an issue of what it costs to move. There is a time issue too. People may say, 'In my country I used to be a highly trained accountant, but to become an accountant in Australia I now need to do another six, 12 or 18 months of study.'

I do not know how you address that apart from working at the coalface and trying to get information to the people who have these expectations before they arrive and then trying to work with them to move them in. They are an extremely valuable source of skills. It is just that there is a whole work culture and also a whole professional culture that is totally different, particularly for the recent sources of refugees. The African refugees in a lot of cases are coming from situations where they have been in refugee camps for a decade. So the work culture is quite a challenge, as well as having to upgrade their skills.

CHAIR—Good point. We are hearing from some refugee advocate groups later today, so that will assist us.

Mrs Cunningham—I am sure they are far more informed than I am on this.

CHAIR—Do you have any final comments?

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You will come back to us on the pattern of TAFE intake—

Mrs Cunningham—Yes.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—and the number of people rejected et cetera over the last decade or so, long term?

Mrs Cunningham—That is fine, yes.

CHAIR—So, Mrs Cunningham, do you have any final comments?

Mrs Cunningham—No, thank you very much. Thank you for your time.

CHAIR—Thank you for attending today's hearing. The committee does greatly appreciate you having travelled from Darwin to be here today. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made, and I would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat some of the additional information that we referred to that you undertook to provide as soon as possible.

Mrs Cunningham—Thank you. I invite the committee to come to the Territory in the dry season.

CHAIR—We would like to!

Proceedings suspended from 10.21 am to 10.44 am

O'CONNOR, Ms Fiona, Director, Traineeship and Apprenticeship Services, Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology, South Australia

JEREMIC, Ms Sally, Executive Officer, Training and Skills Commission, South Australia

CHAIR—Thank you for appearing today. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, after which we will proceed to questions.

Ms Jeremic—Thank you. Today I would like to provide some context for the submission to the inquiry by the South Australian Minister for Employment, Training and Further Education. I am the Executive Officer of the South Australian Training and Skills Commission, a statutory body appointed under the state's Training and Skills Development Act. From the department, Ms Fiona O'Connor, Director, Traineeship and Apprenticeship Services, will bring some different perspectives to this issue.

The industry-led commission provides strategic advice to the government on skills needs and programs to meet them, and is also the regulatory body in relation to vocational education and training and non-university higher education for the state. The commission accredits courses and registers training organisations under the Australian qualifications framework in this state. It also sets the state arrangements for the operation of traineeships and apprenticeships.

The scope of the commission's powers includes the authority to assess the competency of persons who have acquired skills or qualifications other than under the Australian qualifications framework and, where appropriate, grant qualifications or statements certifying competency. This includes overseas skills and qualifications.

The availability of skilled labour is a major strategic issue for the South Australian economy. The state government's population policy is working to increase the population and strengthen the skills base of the work force. Skilled migration is one element of this push and is part of a much wider work force development strategy of the government. The success of skilled migration depends on migrants finding jobs that use their skills, and finding those jobs quickly.

In formulating its population policy, the government set out to ensure that assessment and recognition of overseas skills and qualifications was occurring effectively. At the end of 2004, the government established an overseas qualifications reference group of the Training and Skills Commission, chaired by a commission member, to identify barriers and advise on innovative solutions to the recognition of skills and qualifications gained overseas. The group had representation from industry, training, registering bodies and multicultural and migrant service agencies. The group has consulted extensively with those involved in the various aspects of overseas skills recognition, including government agencies, ethnic communities, migrant service providers, employer associations and individual employers, unions, and recognition and licensing bodies to identify problems and solutions in the overseas qualifications recognition arrangements here.

The reference group conducted an industry survey into the issues and barriers to recognition and employment of overseas trained people in South Australia. A forum of about 40 people held in May 2005 also identified action needed to improve the system for the overseas qualified and for South Australian industry. In October this year, the reference group submitted its report to the Minister for Employment, Training and Further Education, and the government is now considering that report and its recommendations.

Consultations revealed that, while there were many good practices and initiatives in train, there were still barriers to the effective assessment and recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. Some of the issues raised included lack of information, problems with assessment processes, costs of assessment and registration, support for migrants and negative community and employer attitudes. People want action to improve access to services, and to speed up and make cheaper the processes involved in skills and qualifications recognition.

The solutions proposed include improved information about qualifications and skills assessment and recognition for intending migrants offshore and for new arrivals; more general and coordinated support for newly arrived migrants; and targeted skilled migration campaigns, encompassing both attraction and coordinated bridging courses, fast-tracked assessment and employment placement for specific occupations currently in shortage. In my capacity as Executive Officer for the Overseas Qualifications Reference Group, I am able to provide information about the reference group and its work. The reference group's report is presently being considered by the government and for that reason I am not able to table it today. My colleague Ms O'Connor is able to address the committee on government activity in relation to skills and qualifications assessment, especially trades recognition. Ahead of the findings of the reference group, the government has already put in place a number of initiatives to meet increasing demand for services from skilled migrants and to ensure their successful transition to work.

CHAIR—I might start very briefly, before I ask my colleagues to ask questions. The first question is one we asked the representative from the Northern Territory as well. You also have made known your concerns regarding Trades Recognition Australia and what appears to be an inadequate service, particularly as they do not have an office in South Australia. Could you tell us the current status of your views on TRA and make any other comments you wish to in relation to them?

Ms O'Connor—Similar to what it seems you heard occurs in the Northern Territory, the anecdotal evidence we have from people who contact staff in my area but also from other stakeholders in South Australia is that the time for people to gain services from Trades Recognition Australia—and we are talking here particularly about their domestic activity as opposed to their international strength—can be three months or so. It can take that for a person to go through the Trades Recognition Australia processes.

CHAIR—Sorry to interrupt, but it might be relevant to what you are saying. The Northern Territory suggested it had taken up to 18 months. Have you heard of experiences like that?

Ms O'Connor—I have not heard of it taking quite that long. We are using three months as an average, and I know there are some examples of it being longer than that. For example, I recently heard of someone who took several months even to make the first contacts to get the

process started. We certainly hear that there are delays, and that is of concern to us. We should make the point that we probably do not hear the success stories so much, but we do hear enough about delays to suggest that that is a fairly common situation.

CHAIR—You would see them at the moment, in relation to this inquiry, as a major roadblock to skills recognition proceeding in a timely way?

Ms O'Connor—Yes, we would.

CHAIR—Can I further tease out the location issue. You do not have a TRA office in South Australia. Would it be beneficial to have one or do you think that in the electronic age we can do things without that? The office you deal with is in New South Wales, isn't it?

Ms O'Connor—Melbourne, I believe, is where people from South Australia are relayed to. I might need to check that, but that is my understanding.

CHAIR—You can communicate, but do you have a view on whether it should be in situ or on whether you could deal more efficiently with the interstate office if the processes were more efficient?

Ms O'Connor—Yes, I do. I think that for Trades Recognition Australia, because they are dealing with people who are in quite a complex part of their lives—in that they are moving to a new country and getting established—the ability to work face to face with someone is probably a really important thing. The other issue that we do hear, and you mentioned electronic communication or the telephone, is that when people do ring Trades Recognition Australia at the moment they do not get to speak to a person. I think that compounds the difficulties they are having. The ideal situation, I would have thought—given that there is often individual case management required for these people—would be an office in South Australia and if possible some face-to-face services. That would be hugely beneficial.

CHAIR—Ms Jeremic, earlier you suggested that this skills shortage is becoming a great concern to the South Australian government. You used those sorts of words. Are there any other bodies that you are finding, in some respects, inhibiting the ability of migrants to get jobs or to have their qualifications recognised here, besides TRA? Are there any other processes or agencies?

Ms O'Connor—I think that would be the key one. Of course, if people are working in licensed trades, they then need to get their licence for that trade through—in South Australia—the Office of Consumer and Business Affairs, if we are talking about trades in particular. So there are processes that they need to go through there. I understand that they might take several months on occasion, but we would hope that the work that has been done to streamline those processes, that is on the COAG agenda at the moment, would start to work towards some better processes there, as with the overseas qualifications.

CHAIR—We might come back to the COAG situation shortly.

Ms O'Connor—Certainly.

CHAIR—Do you have any views on the fact that with new migrants to Australia this probably should be dealt with offshore rather than when they arrive here?

Ms O'Connor—Whether it is offshore or onshore, the key is that the processes can occur very quickly, that they are quality processes and that the new migrants have the range of information that is necessary for them to come here, in relation to both qualifications and employment issues—and there is a whole package of issues that these people are dealing with. Being offshore, as you know, is one of the things that are being proposed. I think that Trades Recognition Australia has had some offshore services in the past. What I hear from people is some concern about the quality of those processes if they were to be offshore—that there would need to be some very strong, quality processes in place to ensure that, where people have qualifications recognised, they are fully acceptable.

CHAIR—To that end, has the South Australian government involved itself in the DIMIA exhibitions overseas, such as those in London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Chennai?

Ms O'Connor—Yes, I believe we were involved in the exercise in London. I am not from our immigration area, and I cannot provide you with details on that, but we could probably get a report on that if that were useful for the committee.

CHAIR—It would be interesting to see how you saw the value of that and the sort of people that you may well have targeted through those exhibitions, as they are called.

Ms O'Connor—We would need to get that through another government department, but we can do that.

CHAIR—If you do not mind.

Ms O'Connor—Absolutely.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You spoke of negative attitudes held by the community and the employers. Would you talk broadly about those and then more specifically about your analysis of the demand for Australian experience by employers—that is, broadly about negatives and then about that specific knowledge?

Ms Jeremic—Some of the evidence that came through the reference group's inquiry suggests that employers are not always as welcoming of those with overseas qualifications as they are of people with local qualifications and that, if there are difficulties in understanding what is intended by a piece of paper, they would rather, if they can choose, choose a qualification that they understand and know. It is not helped by negative press about what I believe are fairly isolated cases. We will find—for example, with the 'Dr Death' inquiry—that there are always some individuals who do not do the right thing. That seems to get a lot of press. We do not hear as many of the success stories. But I do think that employers are not going to be able to pick and choose. We are going to find not just a skills shortage but a labour shortage, particularly in a state like South Australia, where we are feeling the bite with the ageing population just a bit quicker than in some of the other states.

There are some major projects that the government wants to take forward, and skills are key to that. So we really cannot afford to have anything that adds to perceptions by employers that overseas qualifications are not equivalent in standard to Australian ones. The response to that, of course, will probably be in part that there are limits to how much government can do. But there seems to be a view that there is potential, through government working together with employer bodies and so on, to try and overcome some of these negative approaches.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You spoke of overseas pieces of paper, but I do not know whether you encompassed this point. You said your husband was an engineer, I think. My experience is that, particularly in that field, there is an attitude of employers that, if you have not got Australian experience, regardless of what pieces of paper you have, there is a disinclination to hire people. Have you come across that at all?

Ms Jeremic—We have had some people say that to us and yet at the same time I am also aware that employers are likely to feel the same way about graduates from Australian universities, and that sometimes what they talk about as a ‘skills gap’ is an experience gap. Certainly, people talk about the need for local work experience. Indeed, there is a lot of motivation amongst skilled migrants—who have invested very heavily to come to Australia—to do work experience, whether that be paid or unpaid, simply to get another element to their CV that will give them greater employability.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—There is a fairly persistent complaint about TRA and timely response. This year the intake will be roughly four times what it was in 1996 in the skilled category, and I guess you have got to ask questions about how much the Australian taxpayer is willing to pay in regard to staffing levels in that section. You spoke about quality processes overseas. I put it to you that there might be quality process issues within the department as well. You did cite the example of it taking three months to contact people. If we have got a situation where a person claims to have had on-the-job experience overseas in some godforsaken village, rather than formal qualifications, and the department is faced with that kind of issue, then these things will take time. But otherwise we do have the same quality processes here, as well, in our intake. Have you got a response to that kind of issue?

Ms O’Connor—I agree with you that wherever the processes occur, whether overseas or in Australia, and in fact whatever processes are being used, we do have a nationally recognised training system in Australia, the Australian Qualifications Framework. I would agree with you that we need to be very careful that none of these actions, taken at the moment to address particular needs, would actually be detrimental to the quality which has been set up through the AQF.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Do you have any experience of people utilising South Australian or regional migration schemes, because of extra points et cetera, to basically migrate to Sydney or Melbourne? What is your view of that issue?

Ms O’Connor—I do not have any particular experience of that. I suppose I would say that we would be concerned if the time taken for recognition processes to occur meant that people then decided to go elsewhere in the hope of picking up employment rather than staying here. Obviously, we would be concerned about that. We would like to promote South Australia as a good employment destination and as a place where people would like to stay.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—I notice that there has been a 30 per cent intake increase in one of the streams there, and I think every state is cognisant of South Australia's particular demography and problems. But I am not talking about people going interstate because of delays, but the actual issue of people getting extra points or extra sponsorship to migrate to South Australia and then basically landing in Sydney anyway. You are not aware of that kind of phenomenon?

Ms O'Connor—No, I am not. Again, it would probably be people from our immigration department who would be able to provide you with information about that.

Mrs IRWIN—It would be interesting to find out, Chair, if there is any data on this because I, like Mr Ferguson, have heard that people are coming to Adelaide—or those states where you do not need as many points as you do for Sydney—and, once they arrive there, are then moving interstate.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mrs Irwin. If we cannot get that information from the department or it is not easily available, we will ask the secretariat to see if we can get some evidence from the South Australian immigration people.

Mr KEENAN—What are the specific shortages you are having in South Australia? Is it across the board for all skills or are there specific gaps that need to be filled?

Ms Jeremic—That is a difficult question to answer simply. In general we are experiencing particular shortages in construction and certain elements of a range of other professions. We are feeling distinct pressure in the trades at the moment—I could generalise there. Underneath that you would need to look carefully at the data. The DEWR data gives us some information about what occupations are in shortage, but that is affected by regional factors and also does not tell us whether those shortages are due to lack of experience or difficulties in attracting people to a particular location or region or indeed whether you cannot retain people in an occupation for various industrial reasons. The trades are a particular area of focus for this government at the moment.

CHAIR—Not doctors and nurses as well?

Ms Jeremic—Yes, doctors and nurses as well.

Mrs IRWIN—Would you like to put a figure on the number of skilled migrants that you feel South Australia would need over the next five years.

Ms Jeremic—I believe the state government has put a figure on it. I believe they are aiming to attract 5,000 in the medium term—over the next three to five years—but I would like to check that figure with our Department of Trade and Economic Development and confirm it with you.

Mrs IRWIN—Are these jobs in rural and regional areas?

Ms Jeremic—They are widespread. We have a number of major projects in the state that are going forward. The air warfare destroyer contract is going to create demand for skills in a new way that we have not seen before. Fortunately, we have time to plan for that and to put in place

activities to grow our own skills here but also to import the right ones. What is harder to address is the short-term shortages that arise in regional areas and so on.

Mr KEENAN—Have you noticed any improvements in the process? There is certainly recognition that migration is a very important aspect of solving the skills crisis and certainly the anecdotal feedback I have had is that the process has improved over time. Would you care to comment on that? Do you think that it has improved?

Ms Jeremic—The processes for skilled migration?

Mr KEENAN—Sorry, the process for skills recognition—is it getting better?

Ms Jeremic—I believe it is getting better at the state level, most certainly. I reiterate the concerns expressed by Ms O'Connor about the processes nationally. Some of the things that I think complicate it at a national level are the great number of different visa categories and the difficulties that people report about getting information about how to apply for those various visas and, as I mentioned, the delays and difficulties associated with getting information when you are offshore to help make the decision to migrate or not. At a state level there has been quite a degree of activity over the last year or so to improve things for local migrants. I think it would be worth while perhaps you, Ms O'Connor, outlining some of those actions that the South Australian government has taken—if that would add to that response.

CHAIR—Yes, if you do not mind, Ms O'Connor.

Ms O'Connor—There are three key areas that we have been working on fairly intensively recently. The first is the establishment of a trades recognition unit in my area. It is similar to the sorts of processes that have already been established in Queensland and New South Wales previously. We will have a series of industry based committees that will assess not just skilled migrants who are looking for those assessments but people who are already in Australia and requiring assessment. Having done that assessment and possibly having suggested some gap training, trades testing and so on, we will make a recommendation on the issue of a certificate of recognition. We are in negotiation at the moment, but that certificate would be acceptable to the Office of Consumer and Business Affairs for licensing purposes, for example.

There are quality processes behind the establishment of those committees. They have to demonstrate their governance arrangements, the processes that they use, and they would regularly report on that to the department. But they are basically industry committees that are being set up to do that. That was the first initiative. The second and third are not just to do with the trades but with some improved recognition processes for people with overseas qualifications. There are two streams to that. One is to set up a one-stop shop web site, which we hope will provide the full range of information that people requiring those services would need, and the other is a shopfront which will be staffed with experts in these areas who would be able to provide face-to-face advice and services to people who require recognition of their qualifications.

Mr KEENAN—One thing that struck me about your submission, and something that I was not aware of, is that if you have an Australian qualification as an overseas student, that still

needs to be assessed if you are applying for permanent residency in Australia. It was news to me. Could you expand on that a little bit?

Ms Jeremic—We were given to understand, when the reference group made its inquiries, that overseas students who had studied here and who subsequently sought permanent residency here had to undergo the assessment of their qualifications for migration purposes—which entails time and expense. It seemed a rather unusual addition to the process for those people to have an Australian qualification assessed for migration purposes.

CHAIR—I understand, in addition to that, that overseas students who wish to have those qualifications recognised have got to be in the process of applying for permanent residency. That further complicates it. That is something that this committee will certainly take on board.

Mrs IRWIN—I think you talked in your opening statement about the reference group. The recommendations have not been tabled as yet. Is that correct?

Ms Jeremic—They are with the government at the moment.

Mrs IRWIN—Once they are tabled, could we possibly get a copy of those recommendations? It would be very helpful.

Ms Jeremic—Yes.

CHAIR—I think Ms Jeremic is happy to tell us a bit about them. Is that correct?

Ms Jeremic—I could probably tell you that the thrust of the recommendations is very much consistent with the sorts of activities that the government has set in train by way of additional efforts in regard to information and referral for intending migrants and new arrivals once they get here. That was something that we could not afford to wait on, so without pre-empting the findings of the reference group or the government's decision, the department, which has responsibility for that, has gone ahead.

The general thrust of the recommendations is in three areas. First of all, I talked about the importance of targeting support for particular skilled migrants, so trying to attract people in particular trades or occupations in demand and then fast-tracking the assessment processes. This is a thrust of the recommendations of the reference group. They talked about the need for better information and better coordination of information. That is something that came through time and time again, and they have made some broad suggestions about how that might occur.

They have talked about the need to address community and employer attitudes to generate more positive acceptance of overseas qualifications. They have talked about the need for general services to support migrants in a much more individual way than can occur through a web site. They have talked about the need to work, as best they can, with the Commonwealth to ensure that the services that the state and the Commonwealth provide complement one another and work more satisfactorily.

Mrs IRWIN—In the minister's submission to this inquiry, she was stating, I think, her frustrations that there is no Trades Recognition office, or TRA, here in South Australia. You are

virtually using the office in New South Wales. Has the South Australian government made representation to the Commonwealth department to see if you could get a TRA here in Adelaide?

Ms Jeremic—I am not aware that any formal representations have been made but this is one of the early comments that came from the reference group's report, which sits presently with the government for consideration at the moment.

Mrs IRWIN—The South Australian government?

Ms Jeremic—Yes.

Mrs IRWIN—I think the minister stated on 15 August that you are utilising the New South Wales office. I thought to myself: has there ever been any sort of approach? Could you just check and take on notice if there has been that approach and what response you got from the government?

Ms Jeremic—Yes, I will do that.

CHAIR—Thanks for telling us about your overseas qualifications reference group. The comment I would make is that you seem to be mirroring the Commonwealth agencies in some respects by developing a quasi local trades recognition authority. Also, you seem to be talking about your own web site. Did I get that right?

Ms O'Connor—That is what I was talking about. But we will make sure that these are not duplicating services that are provided and that there are appropriate links. We see what the state is doing, and that would be complementing the kinds of information and the kinds of services that might be provided through the Commonwealth.

CHAIR—I did say I would come back to COAG. You spoke about COAG having met earlier and discussed the Commonwealth and state systems working together—that they had put together a group to examine overseas qualifications, mutual recognition of skills and qualifications et cetera. Do you know how this group is progressing and how the work of this COAG subcommittee is going?

Ms O'Connor—The skills working group? The working group is continuing to meet. In fact, the next meeting is tomorrow. The recommendations and implementation plans are being developed. I think the time line on that is that they should be completed by December. I think those papers will go to COAG when they meet in February next year.

CHAIR—You have basically said it, but the inconsistency between state and territory licensing criteria and standards is somewhat of an impediment to skills recognition.

Ms O'Connor—I think it is recognised.

CHAIR—This is what COAG, hopefully, is dealing with.

Ms O'Connor—Yes. The work that has been done by the group on the recommendations for licensing and mutual recognition is really key to the success of streamlining overseas qualifications recognition.

CHAIR—In terms of migration agents, how do you believe they are performing their functions?

Ms Jeremic—This recommendation came about because individual migrants and their advocates represented to the reference group a big problem. They claimed that they did not know that there were so many stages involved in having their qualification recognised. Even once it was assessed for migration purposes, there was an assumption then that, when people landed somewhere in Australia, they could immediately seek work in that particular field.

There was a sense that perhaps there were agents overseas who were either not informing people or not sufficiently informed themselves about what the processes were and that individual migrants felt rather helpless about what they could do once they got here and found themselves in this predicament, which was costing them time and their savings to address. There was a sense that either migration agents, who are an important part of this chain, were not informed themselves or their services were not being evaluated through client response to the extent that they might have been.

CHAIR—So in other words—you probably cannot say it, but I will—they were more interested in getting them here than getting them a job when they got here.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You are saying that the problem is perceived as being more with external agents.

Ms Jeremic—Yes.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You are aware that there has been a debate about getting extraterritorial powers to MARA to be able to deal with external agents. Most of it is external, outside Australia, from what you have perceived.

Ms Jeremic—Yes.

CHAIR—You have obviously been involved with the national web portal, which DIMIA is negotiating and working with states and territories on, at the state level.

Ms O'Connor—Yes.

CHAIR—How do you think that is progressing and do you have any views on its effectiveness or potential effectiveness?

Ms O'Connor—I think that having something along the lines that DIMIA has been promoting can only be a good thing. In South Australia we have provided basic information that would contribute to the web site—for example, information about the range of licensing processes that exist in the state. For people who are looking for particular types of qualifications recognition or

licensing, those processes have been described. I do not believe the web site is up at this stage. We would certainly be looking forward to it being finalised.

CHAIR—You have talked about state government sponsorship of migrants, which you can do. Are you also aware of the dimensions of employer sponsorship of particular skill categories?

Ms Jeremic—I do not have any details on that. We could get some information about that for the committee.

CHAIR—You know that is an option.

Ms Jeremic—Yes, absolutely.

CHAIR—This is obviously not in your area, it is more in the migration area, but has any anecdotal feedback about how successful that has been or the take-up of it come through your inquiry at all?

Ms Jeremic—No. We did not specifically seek it.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—On the way through you made reference to problems of costs, support, negative attitudes by the community and employers, information et cetera. Turning to costs for a moment, if this system is too costly for the applicants at the moment, who should foot the bill—state governments who seek people to move to their states, or the employers, or should the taxpayer basically carry it? If it is too costly for the applicants, what is the outcome you would perceive?

Ms Jeremic—That is a difficult question to answer. I think probably the responsibilities for payment need to be shared. There was a comment to us that the money of some people from the developing countries who have to expend their savings on this does not have as much purchasing power as that of people who come from wealthier countries. I think we need to look more closely at that question.

Mrs IRWIN—Could you outline the process that South Australia undertakes to sponsor a migrant under the state specific regional migration initiative?

Ms Jeremic—I do not have the details of that at this stage, but I am quite happy to provide them for you afterwards.

Mrs IRWIN—Naturally you would be consulting with industry as well.

Ms Jeremic—There are a number of players involved in this. The state government is very keen to promote schemes such as this, but I am not sure whether it has a stronger role here or whether it is driven nationally.

Mrs IRWIN—If you could take that first question on notice, that would be good.

Ms Jeremic—Yes, I will.

Mrs IRWIN—Thank you.

CHAIR—Because I asked the Northern Territory this same question, I suppose I should ask you. We have heard recently that there is even a great shortage of hairdressers. Is that the same here in South Australia?

Ms O'Connor—Hairdressers are on the skills shortage list. They have been fairly consistently on the DEWR skills shortages list. However, it is one of those areas where there may be qualified people within the community who, for their own purposes, do not want to exercise or practise those skills. It is a good example of skills shortages being a reasonably complex problem. If you cannot get someone to undertake a particular role, there may be people in Australia who could do it, but there are reasons why they choose not to.

CHAIR—This is a bit of a loaded question, but do you think the TAFEs have dropped the ball a bit, given there is such a shortage in some of these skills?

Ms O'Connor—It is a loaded question, but I think in South Australia the TAFE institutes are increasingly involved in work force development with their clients. I would say that that is an area that they are showing a lot of interest in.

CHAIR—Do you think it would help if the apprenticeship times were less, or would that produce a less satisfactory outcome in terms of apprentices?

Ms O'Connor—I think that remains to be seen. In South Australia at the moment, there is a small percentage of apprentices who apply for and receive an early completion, which would normally be 75 per cent of the term. That is the guideline the Training and Skills Commission has, but shortening the term of the apprenticeship is something which is different.

CHAIR—I only say that because it is one of the options my state of Western Australia has taken now to help address the skills shortage.

Ms O'Connor—Yes, I am aware of that.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—In a similar vein, I asked this of the Northern Territory. I do not want to be too burdensome to you, but could we get some statistics from you of South Australian TAFE uptakes and how many people are being sent away because of nonavailability of courses, particularly in the areas that you see as South Australian shortages? Could you come back to us with what has been happening in the last decade or so?

Ms O'Connor—I do not know if those—

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—I was just asking whether you could come back to us.

Ms Jeremic—On the unmet demand?

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Yes.

Ms Jeremic—Certainly, we could. I should also complement that response. The South Australian government sees skills shortages as not just something that needs a training response. Its recently released work force development strategy takes a much bigger look at the skills issues and suggests that we have a problem with the quality of employment. We need to engage employers in thinking more broadly about attracting and retaining their existing staff—upskilling the existing work force. Simply pumping more money into the training providers to produce more trained people will not solve the issues that employers are complaining of. Compound that with the labour shortage that is going to be facing us in future years, and we really need to do something that is much broader than just pumping money into training. I think there is potential for a much bigger look at this picture. That strategy supported by an action plan is something that the government has put in train this year.

CHAIR—I would like to thank you for attending the hearing today.

Ms O'Connor—Thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIR—I would be grateful if you could send the secretariat as soon as possible any additional material that you have undertaken to provide.

Proceedings suspended from 11.29 am to 11.45 am

KARANASTASIS, Ms Tina, Acting Executive Director, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia

LEWINSKI, Mr Stanislaw, Coordinator, Community Participation, Employment and Training, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia

MASIKA, Dr Joseph, Consultant, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia

MWANRI, Dr Lillian, Community Member, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia to this public hearing. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. Please make an opening statement, if you wish, and we will then proceed to questions.

Ms Karanastasis—Good morning. I am the Acting Executive Director of the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia. With me today are Mr Stan Lewinski, who is the coordinator of our employment initiatives program, and Dr Joseph Masika and Dr Lillian Mwanri, who came to Australia as skilled migrants. Dr Mwanri has been through the process of having her qualifications recognised in this country and is employed by the Communicable Disease Control Branch of the South Australian Department of Health. Dr Masika is currently going through the process. I believe, Joseph, that you will be sitting for examinations soon?

Dr Masika—Yes.

Ms Karanastasis—They are here today to provide you with their personal testimonies and insights into that process.

In its capacity as the principal community settlement services agency in South Australia, responsible for the settlement and integration of people of refugee background—and this is generally in their first five years of settlement—the MRC responded in writing in June 2005 to your committee's review of Australia's current system of assessing the skills and qualifications of people wishing to migrate to Australia under the skilled migration stream. Needless to say, we welcome this review and we look forward to the outcomes of your deliberations.

We expressed in our submission some concerns about the parameters of the review. A major concern is that, in focusing on people entering Australia through the skilled migration stream, you are perhaps overlooking the significant number of people who enter Australia through the humanitarian stream who held professional or trade qualifications in their country of origin. We estimate that it is anywhere between 15 and 20 per cent of our client intake.

The misconception often exists in the broader Australian community that if you are a refugee you are most likely to be uneducated and unskilled. If productive diversity is what we aspire to, let us begin the process of eroding the barriers to skills recognition, upgrading and licensing for

all new settlers to Australia, including people of refugee background. It is true, however, that the skills recognition process is likely to be a more arduous and disheartening one for people of refugee background. They may have arrived in Australia without the required documentation, they may not have access to the same supports in terms of not being employer sponsored, and certainly the costs involved in the process are well beyond the means of most refugee entrants. Meeting the myriad costs associated with their initial settlement, addressing English proficiency issues, especially within a vocational context, and the imperatives of getting a job—and often any type of job—to support their family, balanced against the time, energy and cost required for them to pursue recognition of their professional or trade qualifications, can quickly become insurmountable issues.

In addition, there are systemic barriers, as you are probably all aware, underpinned by protectionist attitudes and practices of accreditation bodies, the lack of national standards and practices with respect to licensing and registration, cumbersome skills recognition processes often involving having to navigate a number of different service agencies and authorities, and employer attitudes that often reflect a devaluing of overseas skills and a reluctance to invest in and nurture such prior learning, particularly that which has taken place in non-Western countries.

What the MRC would like to see in a very broad sense is a furthering of accurate and current information at the pre-migration stage for all new arrival categories regarding qualifications and skills recognition processes in Australia, a more inclusive, flexible and standardised system of skills recognition, upgrading and licensing that is driven and strongly sanctioned by the federal government and based on a real valuing of overseas qualifications, and a commitment to furthering productive diversity through the harnessing and development of such skills. This system, while adhering to high standards of practice and expertise—because we certainly do not question the need for Australia to maintain very high standards—should also be an enabling system, not a restrictive one and one that is fraught with hurdles at every turn.

We would also like to see early identification and intervention through processing and service support systems that actively utilise settlement services such as our own as a one-stop shop to facilitate more seamless and integrated information service and referral pathways. As the sole provider of IHSS services in this state—and this will be for the next five years—the MRC is particularly well placed to undertake such a role in South Australia. We would also like to see a concerted examination of how the costs associated with the skills recognition process can be minimised in order to make the process more viable for new arrivals, including refugee entrants. We would like to see an audit and assessment of current bridging courses in order to examine the efficacy and availability in all states and territories. What must underpin this whole process is strong Commonwealth-state coordination.

The South Australian government has just released its draft *Community learning statement* for 2005-10 developed by the Training and Skills Commission through its adult community education reference group with the support of the Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology. One of the key strategies identified in the community learning action plan is to facilitate effective pathways and recognition arrangements across qualifications and institutions with a view to individuals gaining accreditation for prior learning and being assisted in identifying pathways between formal and informal learning. So we feel that in view of current state processes and your own investigations that the time is right for renewed dialogue and action around some of these issues.

Finally, we also need a marketing campaign and advocacy training for employers that dispels misconceptions about employing overseas qualified people and provides incentives for doing so. We also need to build on previous work undertaken with professional and trade registration and accreditation bodies in order to truly open up pathways to recognition. I think at that point I might stop—I have probably gone on for too long—and hand over to Stan.

Mr Lewinski—After that eloquent presentation, I am not sure that I can add much more. I have come here to offer support as the employment training coordinator. I come across many people from predominantly refugee backgrounds—not so many skilled migrants; a few—coming as humanitarian entrants. On a one-to-one basis, I hear about the additional challenges our clients face in seeking employment and having their qualifications recognised. I come across both tradespeople and professional people. There is not much more I can add to Tina’s presentation. I can give you case studies of people I have interviewed who have explained to me the frustrations and the challenges they face.

I will give an example of a pharmacist from the Sudan. He came here a number of years ago now and went through the system. When I interviewed him, he pointed out to me that he understood that he had to do a bridging course but that the costs involved in that process were prohibitive. Firstly, on top of that, he had to pay to have his existing qualifications from the Sudan assessed—it was a considerable sum; I think he said it was \$800. Thereafter, he had to repay the cost of his studies through the HECS system—that was acceptable—but he had to pay \$1,800 for each exam and he had to do four exams, in the end. A man coming here with 10 children just could not afford the costs associated with bridging courses. He explained to me that he had to work for the first few years in order to save some money and support his family. Tina has explained the cost factor. I just want to emphasise that most of our clients have explained to me that the cost factor was a major issue—and maybe extra support. I know that Centrelink give \$800 towards training and that goes a little of the way, but the majority of our clients just do not have that sort of money. The other thing this man pointed out was that some professional mentoring was needed during studies because of the emotional stress associated with trying to settle here and go through the study process, through the bridging courses, while trying to support a family at the same time. He said that, if he could have had it along the way, mentoring would have been a bonus.

There are others—mechanics, electricians—but I do not want to go on too much, because I realise that time is limited. That is why we have asked our two friends to come along to give first-hand evidence, rather than it coming through me explaining the various case studies. They have their own case studies to explain. Looking from the point of view of a trade qualification, last month a man came here as an electrician. He was aware that the systems here are different, and he was prepared to go through any bridging course that he had to. He went to TAFE and had his existing trade qualifications assessed. He had to pay \$300 but, because he did not provide sufficient details, he had to pay another \$200. I told him that I would see whether we could have that refunded to him somehow. Once again, he said: ‘Where do I get the money? I’ve come here with nothing.’ To get them going, once again it comes back to a cost factor.

The other thing I want to mention is work experience. Many refugees are prepared to do work experience in order to understand the different working structures in this country, but it is very difficult to get work experience. A lot of schools have booked out manufacturing organisations,

hotels and hospitality et cetera. It is a lot of hard work and, once again, it is time consuming to find organisations that are prepared to take on our clients as work placements.

Another issue that I quickly want to raise is that of educating employers and professional industry associations. There needs to be some campaign, some advocacy—we do it anyway—for employers to be prepared to take on people from other cultures and lands and give them an opportunity to get a better understanding of what is required in the work force and how our workplace is structured here. An advocacy and marketing campaign is important to employers and to industry associations.

I say that because of the way industry associations assess qualifications. I will give you an example of a Sudanese doctor, William. He asked me at an African men's talk one day, 'How come there's a skills shortage in doctors and nurses here? We come here with qualifications based on English standards?' In the Sudan the education system is based on English standards, and it is the same in India, yet they are not able to practise within a short period of time after doing a bridging course. He explained to me that they go right back to basics and he said, 'This needs to be fast-tracked.' If professional industry associations could have that in mind, they would not need to go back to the basics. If they could fast-track that assessment process it would be a huge help to the industries and also to those persons holding the qualifications, our clients.

Dr Mwanri—Thank you for the opportunity to come here and speak in front of you. I am a qualified medical doctor from Tanzania, but I also have other qualifications in public health, which means I am better qualified and multiskilled. But I know there is a shortage of doctors in Australia and I would like to be employed as a doctor.

CHAIR—Can I ask you under what program you came?

Dr Mwanri—My husband came under regional migration. Because I am a qualified person, I would like to get work within my qualification. Practising as a doctor is one of the professions I would like to work in. But I found that it was really difficult, first of all, as Tina and Stanislaw said, because it is very costly. First you have to be assessed on your English proficiency. You have to pay \$800 to sit the exam, which is very bad. Then you have to pay for the Australian Medical Council exams, which are very expensive—about \$1,500—and you also need to study. If you come as a skilled migrant, you need to work. I found it very difficult to work and pass exams to be able to do what I wanted. That process was very torturous. You have to work to support the family as well as support yourself through very difficult exams. The bridging courses are really difficult. One bridging course cost about \$5,000. The support is not there, as Stanislaw said. There is no mentorship. The environment is a little different. I think a bridging course which included mentorship or at least support would really be appreciated.

CHAIR—Can you tell us your situation now? Is it satisfactory?

Dr Mwanri—Because I am multiskilled, I was able to get another job. But before that, it was very hard to be recognised as skilled. So initially I had to accept a position in Whyalla with the university. That was very difficult because my husband was working here and he could not get a position there, and my children are different ages, so they could not go to school there. It was hard to divide the family—some of the children had to be in Whyalla and the others had to be here. For my job I had to commute. Every week I had to help the family set up everything for the

week and then go back. That was very torturous. I decided not to go ahead with that because it was hard. Fortunately, because I am multiskilled, I got this opportunity with the Communicable Disease Control Branch. It is okay, although I am not reaching my full potential.

CHAIR—Do you work as a doctor?

Dr Mwanri—No—as a public health officer. You do not have to be a doctor to do what I do now. My situation is different because I can compete with the mainstream, whereas other people, who are mostly doctors, can not go into work because they can only work as doctors, which is difficult.

CHAIR—Do you have anything else to add?

Dr Mwanri—No.

CHAIR—We may come back to you.

Dr Mwanri—The main issues are cost, the lack of mentorship and the lack of programs which are well known or which help people go through the difficulties and support them during that time because of the nature of the environment. If you have a family, it is hard to support the children and the family while you are working or studying. You find that you are splitting your time in different ways and it is hard to achieve the outcome that you want.

CHAIR—Just out of interest, what sort of employment does your husband engage in?

Dr Mwanri—My husband is Joseph. He can tell you himself.

CHAIR—I am sorry; I will ask him.

Dr Masika—I was waiting for her to finish and then I was going to speak. Let us let her finish and then I will tell you.

Dr Mwanri—Most of the issues are the ones which Stan and Tina have described, but this is my personal scenario, which I find very difficult and challenging. Sometimes we hit a hard wall and we cannot really see the end of the tunnel, so we decide to take whatever is available.

Dr Masika—I come from Tanzania. My qualifications are partly from Tanzania and partly from Australia, because I did my master's with the University of Adelaide's Department of Public Health. Since then I have been moving up and down trying to go back to the profession I loved. I still have a desire to help my fellow citizens. But whenever I try I find that I am thrown from one door to another, without knowing who is responsible. I started this effort of going back to become a doctor in 1998, but since then I have been trying and trying and I keep going around in circles. I am still chasing my tail, and I cannot catch it.

I came to discover that the process is not that short when someone is working for an overseas qualification to be recognised in Australia. I found that the road map is too wide and very complex. It is like a tangled web. You cannot find where point A and point B are. Even if you

identify point A, in the middle people do not know which side you are supposed to go. So you are either referred back to where you started or you cannot go past where you have ended up.

In 1998 there was a program established by the federal government which said that any overseas qualified doctor who had been a permanent resident in Australia for two years could apply to go to university for two years and from there they would be assessed and could go back into the work force. I was short, by four months, of qualifying for that program. After four months I wrote a letter to the University of Adelaide saying, 'This is what was said. I have got support from GPs in the mainstream and I would appreciate it if I could get a chance to go to university for the two years and then join the work force again as a GP.'

From there, things became interesting. I could not understand where some of the answers were coming from. The university was saying that giving me the chance to join the program would be discrimination against other people. They said the university was an equal opportunity organisation and everyone has to be seen in the same way. I asked where this was coming from—I was the only person who applied and I had been advised to do so by the Australian Medical Association and some other GPs, who had said, 'With this program you can just go in; you are very good.' At that time my medical skills were still intact and what I needed was a brush-up, because when you come from another country you need a few months to catch up with the new technology in the other country. That is what I needed. I did some testing with other GPs and they appreciated my knowledge. At that time I had 15 years experience in medicine, as a GP, and my knowledge was still intact.

The university threw me out. They said, 'No, you won't get a chance because it wouldn't be equal opportunity.' When I was told to appear here today I was happy. There are long-established rules, norms and laws which today probably need to be re-examined to allow people with skills from overseas to be recognised and to go back into the system. We are trying to integrate, but it is not a two-way process. We find that it is only one way. We are the ones who are starting and we have to complete up to the end.

There is nobody from those government bodies or non-government bodies looking after accreditation or licensing of people with overseas qualifications trying to streamline the process or saying, 'This is what you are supposed to do to end up here.' We are being tossed from one door to another and back again and we find that, year in, year out, we are still going through the same process. Last year and this year I have received so many positions to work as a GP, including with the Department of Health in South Australia. There was a position in Canberra to look after the health of African people. Because of the language barriers they need some interpreters and things like that. So they came up with another position. They call it a position of public interest. It was offered to me.

But I find I am chasing the same tail again. I went to the AMA and they said, 'You are fine.' I went to the South Australian Medical Board and they said: 'You're fine. Your credentials are very good. Your qualifications are good. But you have to go through the Australian Medical Council.' At the Australian Medical Council they said, 'You have to check with this one here.' I did not know. Who should I follow, this one or that one? The position was still there. We received another communication from Canberra saying that the Royal Australasian College of General Practitioners would like us to meet them to see if we can go back into the work force.

So what they are trying to offer is not something which will take us anywhere. And there is the cost. They said, 'Come up here and do counselling.' I said: 'Okay. But after counselling where are we going?' They said: 'No, we are not assuring you of a position. You have to go back and do the exams.' Who is going to pay the cost? And when we do the bridging course, who is going to pay the cost? When I am doing the bridging course, who is going to feed my family? Everyone says: 'It's not me. Try Centrelink.' Centrelink came back and said, 'It's not an approved activity for the payment of the Newstart allowance.' So we have to work and, at the same time, appear for the full day of the course. It was quite impossible. Although we would love to go back, we have found that the doors are not open for such a thing. That is why I came here today, to request that the committee see if the process can be streamlined for the Australian community, where we can be assessed and make sure that any shortfall is identified and someone can enter the system and through the system be assessed and then get work.

CHAIR—If you had to put your finger on it, so to speak, which body would you suggest is the most obstructive? Is it the AMA?

Dr Masika—No. The other thing I came to realise and what I wanted to say was that it does the opposite. On the one hand the professional body is trying to safeguard the profession and at the same time acting as a union. You find that you cannot move left, you cannot move right. Whenever you say, 'Here are my papers,' they accept them and say, 'Okay, fine.' They say: 'Don't do the AMC exams, just go to the Royal Australasian College of General Practitioners. They've got another scheme where you can work towards accreditation but it will take you about two to four years depending on how quickly you go. Go there.' I say, 'Okay, that is fine,' but you have to be registered first. You go out again. You do not go this side, you do not go that side, and you are forced to face the same situation. To work as a GP is not our side. I must find something else to do.

CHAIR—So, in summary, it is the cost of upskilling, much like Lillian said, and the frustration of being thrown from one department to another that does not take responsibility. What else?

Dr Masika—The other thing is that I was personally led to believe that there was a solution to the shortage of doctors or a solution to a shortage in other skills areas. When the government came up with the program and said that anyone who is a permanent resident and has been here two years can go back to uni and medical school for three years and be assessed there and come out. That was a very good initiative, but the government did it for one month and backed out without even letting anybody know what was happening.

CHAIR—It would be interesting to find out more about that.

Dr Masika—It was back in 1998.

CHAIR—We could find out more about the program and why it was cancelled. We might get somebody to appear before us to tell us why that happened. From your point of view, when you came to Australia in the skilled migration program—

Dr Masika—It was the regional migration scheme.

CHAIR—Did you receive advice from the overseas post as to your qualifications being accepted or otherwise? Or did they just say that if you go Australia as a doctor you will get a job. What was the advice to you before you left Tanzania?

Dr Masika—The advice was valuable. If you showed that you had experience and recognition of qualifications from Australia, it was easy compared with someone who had no qualification from Australia. For example, Lillian did a master's at Queensland University in 1993 and a PhD with the University of Adelaide. So she knew that it would be easy for her, because of the previous qualifications. And for me, because I did my master's with the University of Adelaide, I knew that things would not be that complicated. And another thing: when we came up here, I had a position where I worked for quite a while. When I came up here, they said, 'Look, Joseph, there is this position working in Aboriginal health throughout metropolitan Adelaide.' I was happy, because I was combining medicine and knowledge to try to manage the whole program, which I did for the last five years. From there, I said, 'I can see there are some problems. Why can't I go back and help in the area I was trained in?' From there I started following up around Adelaide.

Mrs IRWIN—What year did you migrate to Australia?

Dr Masika—I came in 1996. Lillian came in 1998.

CHAIR—Are there questions from other members?

Mr KEENAN—Mr Lewinski, you mentioned that the pharmacists, for instance, have to pay the up-front costs of any exams. There is no way of making that part of some sort of HECS scheme or something? Are the expenses always up front? There is no way of deferring them until you have got your qualifications and are working?

Mr Lewinski—I am not sure why, in his case, he could not repay the bridging course through a HECS scheme. I have spoken to others who are prepared to do that, but they just did not have the money up-front. For some reason, he had to pay the money up-front.

Dr Mwanri—I can answer that. I think it is the same thing I did. I had to pay for exams first—about \$1,500. That was for the Australian Medical Council. They needed to firstly assess your qualifications. If they are happy with them, then there are the exams. You have to pay the exam fee. Then if you want to prepare for exams, there are several bridging courses, which are not widely known but you might find out if you inquire hard enough. Some of those are bridging courses which, in the case of medicine, are conducted by the Australian College of General Practitioners, and there could be another one for pharmacists. The cost up-front is quite high and is not available on HECS.

Mrs IRWIN—Following on from that, how many people in your community in South Australia who have professional skills do not continue with recognition of their skills due to the cost factor? Have you got a rough figure?

Dr Masika—I can answer that one. Last year I convened a meeting for Middle Eastern and African people, especially refugees, to find out how many people were registered as medical practitioners in their countries before they came here. There were 40 of them from the Middle

East and Africa who had good experience in medicine, and now most of them are taxi drivers in Adelaide. I invited people from the department of general practice to that meeting, and I also invited people from migrant health services and the community leaders to say, 'How can we work in partnership to pass that barrier of recognising the overseas qualifications?' I went from consulting someone from the Division of General Practice, the University of Adelaide, then going from this door to that door, to that door. Eventually it went quiet, without anything being done. And those 40 people are still around.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—How many were refugee-humanitarian intake and how many were skilled?

Dr Masika—Lillian and I were the only two who were skilled migrants. The rest came under humanitarian settlement.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—When you speak of alternative approaches with regard to recognition of work experience, what do you mean by that?

Mr Lewinski—I get the feeling from the majority of people I have spoken to that they do not mind having to do additional studies, bridging courses et cetera. But they would also like the opportunity to do work experience.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You are talking about work experience in Australia?

Mr Lewinski—In Australia, yes.

Ms Karanastasis—There has also been a lot of discussion over the years on the importance of initiating some kind of work-based assessment. I have been involved in the sector for 25 years now and these issues are not that different. We were trying to address them when the first wave of South-East Asian refugees arrived on our shores. There has been a lot of discussion about the importance of, the need for and the value of workplace assessment processes. But we do not seem to have progressed very far in that respect.

Dr Masika—To add to what Stan said on using alternative methods of assessing their qualifications, the one which was established in 1998 was a very good one. If someone was skilled and went back to university for two years, it would be picked up there. They would study with the other students, sit for exams, be assessed by lecturers and come out very well. When people come in, until they start to study a bridging course, their knowledge becomes decayed. Anything which you are not using will eventually start to slowly disappear. But when they go back to university for that bridging period of two years, it is stimulating their thinking. They go back into their normal mode and it is very easy for them to be more productive at the end and pass their exams.

We also communicated with the Division of General Practitioners so that when we take up those people who are already qualified and put them into the process it will be cheaper and they will come out more quickly and fill a position in rural areas. They will not spend too much time; it will be like brushing up on their skills. The important knowledge to give them in Australia is about our health care system, because they come from health care systems which are completely different to the one here. There are people who learn that. They are taught about the Australian

health care system, how it operates and what to ask for. Because the technology can be more advanced, it is not always what they would ask for where they come from. It would be a very good and easy process which would help people go back to what they used to do.

Mrs IRWIN—Stan, do you agree with what Joseph has just said? I think in your opening statement you said that we should be able to fast-track. So do you agree with what he said about the 1998 model?

Mr Lewinski—Yes. I spoke to a pharmacist and this was a dilemma for him. He could not understand why they had to go back to basics; the bridging course included very basic information which they already had knowledge on. He felt he did not need to go back to that stage. As Joseph said, he felt he just needed to upskill and update to the Australian systems rather than go back to basics. It was the same with an electrician. He needs to know the system in Australia. He is prepared to do that but the cost factor is prohibitive.

Mrs IRWIN—And Joseph, you are saying that the 1998 model that they had is no longer in place?

Dr Masika—No. I just missed out because I was four months out of the time bracket. I chased it up. I have all the letters in which I communicated about it with the University of Adelaide.

CHAIR—It sounds like it only lasted for a short time. It closed down pretty quickly.

Dr Masika—Yes. To whoever was there by that day, they said, ‘Go and sit for the English test. If you pass that one, you are in.’ I was out by four months.

Mrs IRWIN—It would certainly be great to know that that system was still in place. I am sure that is something that we will definitely take on.

Dr Masika—I raised the issue with the Hon. Gary Hardgrave MP when he was still the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs. We said that we needed to do something that would not be seen as discrimination against the majority of the population but which would boost our clients who want to be economically self-sufficient. He came back with the answer that it would be discrimination. The government was not prepared to do that.

Mrs IRWIN—We are desperate for doctors in our rural areas.

CHAIR—He is no longer the minister. Can I ask one question, in line with what we are asking here, on your experience of the undervaluing of overseas qualifications by some Australian employers. Is it sometimes country-specific? For example, there are many Nigerian doctors in Australia. Why would they have a greater ability to come to Australia without the problems that you experienced?

Dr Masika—I have gone through the process of the way they recruit the doctors from overseas. The way they do it is this. They look for doctors from South Africa and from Singapore. Most of the doctors who come from Nigeria do not come from Nigeria straightaway; they come through South Africa.

CHAIR—Or through New Zealand.

Dr Masika—Yes, or through New Zealand. That is what is happening. I was astonished and puzzled by the process. At the medical school I went to, Professor Rankin from Adelaide was my professor in anatomy.

CHAIR—Which university did you go to?

Dr Masika—The university of Dar es Salaam. Professor Rankin was my professor in anatomy. He is from Australia; he is a well-known professor in Australia. But they said they do not recognise my qualification. I said, ‘But I did it under Australian lecturers.’ They said, ‘It doesn’t matter.’ Most who came from Nigeria and Ghana moved from their country, went to South Africa and worked there and then moved from South Africa to Australia. They never came directly from their country.

CHAIR—I am mindful of other questions.

Mrs IRWIN—I am interested in this. Could you quickly tell us your story. At my electorate office, in Western Sydney, people have come in and made complaints about the overseas post. They have said they had the skills, went in and felt that they were not given the proper advice. When the two of you sat down and decided to migrate to Australia and then went to our overseas post—and I think the chair has just asked this—did they tell you about the time frame, about what you would have to do once you arrived in Australia with your skills and about the cost factor as well?

Dr Masika—No, that was not discussed at all. It was not discussed. We went there with the knowledge that we had a position to come to work in Aboriginal health. We never concentrated on the other side or asked, ‘What will happen when I want to go back to medicine?’ It did not come up.

Mrs IRWIN—You had that position already when you arrived in Australia?

Dr Masika—Yes, I had that position already.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—In a similar vein, given that 38 of the 40 people at this meeting were refugee humanitarians, you might not have had a big enough sample group to talk about this. Let us put the refugee humanitarians to one side for a moment. People say, ‘This is unfair; we have to pay this money et cetera.’ Let us just say that in an imperfect world that is the way it is. What is your knowledge of other people in the medical field as to what they are told—not what they like or do not like—before they get here with regard to payment et cetera? Do you have much knowledge of that?

Dr Masika—Absolutely not. The majority of those in the group of people who attended the meeting came as refugees; we were the only two who came through another scheme. As far as I can be 100 per cent sure, there was a meeting with the assistant director at the DIMIA office. He came to the meeting and was addressing the people about what to do in order to integrate into the wider community. This issue of employment came up and the answer which he gave out caused everyone to be puzzled. He said, ‘Look, the aim of the government is not to give you

employment in Australia. The aim is to give you a good place to come, to get you out of the war zone. If you come up here and you ask for a job, it is up to you.' It was not the primary intention of the government.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—That is for refugee humanitarians?

Dr Masika—Yes. The majority came under humanitarian settlement. I believe that they were not told. So, when they asked in Adelaide, that was the answer they got—that it was not the primary role of the government to give them employment; it was to give them a place to live.

CHAIR—It might not be the primary goal, but it would be a very good outcome if people got a job.

Mrs IRWIN—I have one last question. Stan, you were talking about work experience being very helpful for people and that more assistance should be given to educating employers. You also said that you have done that. How have you done that yourself? Have you gone out and knocked on doors and talked to the employers?

Mr Lewinski—Yes. It is a bit hard to go to every employer but, in a number of prevocational courses that we have run through state government assistance, part of that was a week of work experience. That was through door-knocking.

Mrs IRWIN—Some MPs have got into parliament through their door-knocking.

Mr Lewinski—The cafe skills course was just finished. I walked up and down Hindley Street knocking on cafe doors. Most of the hotels were full with school students doing work experience. They had already been booked out, so I was door-knocking. We are not a Job Network provider, but I have contacts in various industry organisations like the Engineering Employers Association, the Civil Contractors Federation, the manufacturing industry and the hospitality industry. I have approached those industry associations for their advice when speaking to their employer members to seek out work experience and possible employment opportunities for our clients.

Mrs IRWIN—With regard to the success rate that you might have had with people that have gone through you doing the work experience, have some of them got jobs after that?

Mr Lewinski—It is almost 50 per cent. We feel quite proud of that. After the first manufacturing course, seven out of nine men got jobs. After the hospitality industry and housekeeping course, six out of the 12 women got jobs. After the last one finished, only two out of the six have so far, but we are still case-managing those people and the outcomes look positive.

Ms Karanastasis—That was almost a by-product because, as Stan said, we are not an employment agency. Our role is to prepare people for employment, to skill them and empower them and to also advocate to employers, so that was a lovely by-product of that particular program.

Mr Lewinski—The reason I was going on about the work experience is because TAFE, for example, would give a certificate to say that these people have completed a seven-week course in so many modules. Because a lot of our clients have not had any work experience in this country, it is a good precursor to the employment field and they can show that they have developed some skills at least and that they have a certificate to say so. That is why we find that important.

Mrs IRWIN—Congratulations. I keep coming back to what Lillian was saying as well, which relates to the expense of bridging courses. This is why people are not doing them—that is, because of the cost factor. What would you suggest? Would you suggest something like the HECS system or a loan from government, or would you do away with the fees?

Mr Lewinski—It would help. From my experience in speaking to our clients, they just do not have the money to pay up-front. Often, they cannot study because they have to work to feed the family. Even if they could do it part time and repay it through a similar system like HECS, that would be good. Not all of our clients are university educated; they may have trade qualifications, but even for trade qualifications there could be some system put into place whereby they could pay it back later once they have a job.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—If we put to one side the complaints about the recognition of overseas skills and the issue of actually getting employers to take people for work experience here, do you think that too big a premium is put on Australian experience by employers? Is that a problem you find—that is, that they stress too much whether you have done the work here or overseas?

Mr Lewinski—Yes, experience is a major concern for employers. What I have found is that, firstly, English language skills are a big issue, because if a person cannot follow occupational health and safety instructions or workplace instructions it is a risk for the employer. Our clients particularly are in high-risk areas, mainly manual work. Yes, it is an issue. And their qualifications—they do not mind being trained, but the most important area is the English language, more so than skills. Even for young people here, if you do not have skills, I am sorry, we cannot employ you. So how do we develop these skills? That is why even short pre-vocational courses, work experience et cetera assist—

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—The points system over the last few years has oriented itself more strongly towards English. So someone who would have got in here 10 years ago as a skilled fitter and turner is probably not going to get in here now because of English. Right?

Mr Lewinski—Yes.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—But do you find that, in the context of that demand now for English to get in here, there is sometimes too big a demand by the employers for actual Australian experience, as opposed to somebody who has done the same thing and it was evidenced overseas? Do you think that is sometimes a barrier?

Mr Lewinski—Yes.

Dr Mwanri—I think that is one of the prerequisites here, because you have to have referees. The referees will know you only when you have worked with them. If you have not worked within the Australian system, it is hard to get a referee who will recommend you for the job which you would go for. So that is one of the big issues, because you have to start somewhere. If you have not got a support or a bridging course or something like that then you cannot really go into the job or whatever system.

Ms Karanastasis—Certainly our experience at the MRC is that while of course standards have to be maintained and there has to be a degree of protectionism—just look at the recent ‘Dr Death’ thing, which is so unfortunate, because it cast aspersions on all overseas qualifications; it is very sad, actually—there is a devaluing of experience and qualifications gained overseas, particularly from non-Western countries. The reality is that there are employers who are highly suspicious, particularly within a broader context of looking at what is happening post 9-11 and whatever. It is not just the African community that is being impacted upon; it is the Middle Eastern community as well. So there is a lot of devaluing and a lot of suspicion on the part of many employers about not only taking on people from these non-Western cultures but actually providing them with incentives and nurturing their process of skills recognition. That has been our experience anyway.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We have gained a lot of valuable information from all of you, and we appreciate that. I take on board, Tina, your point about an audit of the state reference and accreditation type groups. You mentioned that. The cost factor is something that I am sure we will come across again and deliberate on. Thank you for attending today’s hearing.

Ms Karanastasis—Thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIR—I would be grateful if you could send the secretariat as soon as possible any additional material you have undertaken to provide.

Proceedings suspended from 12.38 pm to 1.34 pm

FRITH, Mr David, Director, Workplace Policy and Business Services Development, Business SA

LABLACK, Ms Karen, General Manager, Policy, Business SA

PAINE, Mr Nathan, Senior Business Advocate, Business SA

CHAIR—I would like to welcome representatives from Business SA to this public hearing. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions.

Ms Lablack—Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting Business SA to present on the important matter of skills recognition, upgrading and licensing. Business SA, also known as the South Australian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is a peak body for industry in South Australia. Directly and indirectly Business SA represents the views of over 80,000 businesses employing well over half a million people. It is from our membership base that we have listened to the problems that businesses are having in accessing appropriately skilled labour. We will endeavour to present their views here today.

Over the past four years or so Business SA has received growing levels of feedback from its members about their increasing difficulty in obtaining appropriately skilled labour. The lack of skilled labour has a substantial detrimental impact on overall economic growth through limiting business operations and increasing business costs related to training new and underskilled employees, and by the ever increasing salary levels as in-demand employees move from one business to the next. This is an issue that is affecting every business and every industry. It results in lower economic growth for South Australia and Australia as a whole.

Whilst Business SA recognises that a large part of the solution to this problem is to improve domestic training systems in senior secondary, vocational education and training, and universities, this is a long-term solution and one that will not alleviate the current circumstances. In addition, this issue cannot be separated from the broader context of Australia's ageing population. This is not just an issue of people having the right skills; it is also about having sufficient population with the right skills at the right time.

A short-term solution is to source Australia's skilled requirements from overseas. There are a number of issues involved with this option. Australia is not the only country currently suffering from skill shortages, which means we are competing globally in the market for these skills. Another major problem is that in most skill areas Australia's diversity of licensing and qualification processes across state jurisdictions presents a significant impediment to overseas skill recognition. An overall streamlined process to reduce time and cost barriers is needed.

The impediments this presents act as a deterrent for potential migrants when they are making a determination on which country to migrate to. As a generic example, a South Australian business

may employ an electrician from the United Kingdom. That electrician may have to undertake training over a significant period of time to become qualified to work in that field in South Australia. That is time the employer will have to pay wages to the employee and time that the employee will be unproductive for the business. In this environment, that is not a business case that will stand up, nor is it an attractive situation for current or potential migrants.

What is needed to resolve this issue is improved and transparent migration systems and improved, cheaper and speedier recognition of qualifications processes. These are two ways that the needs of the community can be met. On the first issue—the need for improved and transparent migration requirements—the best mechanism that Business SA can recommend to resolve the issue is to look at the federal government absorbing responsibilities and powers for licensing and registration of all skill areas if they are not able to be resolved at a national level. This will assist in reducing the complexity of the system and increase the usability and clarity of the different state jurisdiction systems.

It has also become apparent to Business SA that it is not always the case that new migrants to South Australia or the businesses involved understand the time period required for the recognition of overseas qualifications. This information is not always clearly conveyed to the business or person involved. It can result in new migrants arriving on our doorstep only to find that, despite a skill shortage, they are not able to work for a period of time and are required to take an assessment of their overseas qualifications. Businesses and new migrants need to have clearly explained to them the processes and time frames involved in skill assessment procedures, and the costs involved, to enable them to make an educated and informed decision on whether to proceed. Any process for immigration should be integrated with information on the requirements for each skill area and should be seamless. It is not enough to just refer migrants to some other body to source the necessary information. Australia wants and needs these people and should have in place processes that encourage them to come.

On the second issue—improved, cheaper and speedier recognition of qualification processes—one of the common criticisms that Business SA hears from its members concerns the time frames and costs involved in getting overseas skills assessed. In many areas there are time and financial barriers built by local industries to prevent greater sources of labour entering the market, in order to protect workloads and to increase pay levels. While these barriers may benefit the few, they disadvantage the many. For example, they do not assist in resolving the community's need for access to greater sources of skilled labour. Governments at all levels should be working with organisations that set the legislated and/or regulated skill levels and recognition processes to establish transparent, cheap and speedy skills assessment procedures to improve the process for the benefit of the people involved and the broader community.

Australia is competing with many other Western nations for skilled labour. One mechanism to encourage new skilled migrants to come to Australia as opposed to the United States, the United Kingdom or anywhere else is by being able to offer a quick and easy assessment of skills that can occur before the person arrives on our doorstep, and without compromising quality or safety issues. All of these issues should be wrapped up in an education campaign which includes information tailored to specific countries and specific skill areas, information that clearly explains the processes involved and how they can be of benefit to businesses, migrants and the community.

Finally, Business SA would like to acknowledge the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs for its new program of outposted offices to assist businesses across Australia to access overseas labour requirements. This is a positive program that begins the process of breaking down the barriers and educating and assisting businesses to achieve their needs.

That concludes my formal presentation. We are at the committee's disposal to answer any questions you may have. If we are not able to provide an immediate response, we will endeavour to provide a written comment to the committee.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ms Lablack. What I appreciated about your presentation was the fact that you identified problems and, rather than just giving a critique, you also offered some solutions. I found some of them quite interesting. For example, I am not sure whether the state government of South Australia would be happy that you want the federal government to take over the responsibilities and roles of this program, unless there can be a seamless transition process. Are you aware of the concerns of federalism and those sorts of issues—the fact that the federal government seems to be taking on more and more powers and responsibilities and the states do not like it? Are you still happy to stand by that statement?

Ms Lablack—We are a business organisation and our interest is in what is actually going to work practically. I add the caveat that, if it cannot be resolved nationally, you could approach this process by trying to get agreement between all jurisdictions and trying to get the processes streamlined. So, from our perspective, we are interested in anything that is actually going to work. But the chances of that occurring, and how long it will take, are of more concern.

CHAIR—Your contention, quite clearly, was that it is not working as efficiently as it could and that, as a result, there are time delays and inconsistencies.

Ms Lablack—There are gaps between who owns what and who will make the process work and integrate it.

Mr Frith—Certainly, Australia has identified significant shortages in the trades area. There are challenges regarding being licensed to do certain trades, in that the licence or registration is unique to the state, and transportability between the various states is very limited. We understand there is a COAG working party or project under way to look at this, but we need a much more uniform national system than is in place at the moment. One area in which this is being looked at, which presents as a microcosm of what could be achieved, is in the occupational health and safety area for the licensing of high-risk occupations—scaffolding, dogging, rigging—where they are looking at a national system. It will be administered by the state bodies but it will be a national licence and it will be maintained nationally.

CHAIR—From that point of view—and we have mentioned this a number of times today—TRA, Trades Recognition Australia, does not have an office in South Australia; you deal through the New South Wales office. How do you feel about that; is it adequate? With modern communications, is that sufficient, or do you realistically think it should be located here in South Australia?

Ms Lablack—I have had a number of comments around TRA, and I am not quite sure what it is; whether they have a lack of resources—I understand there are not too many people involved there—or whether it is a connection with local needs. The needs of the South Australian population are vastly different to New South Wales needs. If having someone located on the eastern seaboard is not going to serve the interests of regional Australia, then we need to look at how to get a sense of the importance or the relevance of, or the difference between, different areas of Australia. There might be overcrowding or problems with infrastructure, access and that sort of thing because there are too many people in, say, Sydney, but that is not a true reflection of what the issues are in other states.

CHAIR—That argument is almost self-defeating in some respects when you talk about the Commonwealth taking over. Canberra is a long way from Adelaide as well. I can understand that you could have an office here, but they tell me the best form of government is local government because it is closer to the people. In the same vein, if you have a local group of people that are cognisant of the South Australian needs, as you have suggested—

Ms Lablack—I think David was alluding to it being a multilayered thing. You can have consistent standards determined nationally, and you can have delivery locally. The tiers of determination—these are the standards; these are the processes—are going to get an efficient system operating so that we have a consistent approach. Consistency is an important part of it. Achieving that by getting a lot of people together is, as you see in the COAG process, going to take a very long time, and these are very urgent issues for the population of South Australia. We need to move on them quickly; we cannot wait too long. We cannot wait two years, in some cases, because we need to get some of these processes under way.

CHAIR—I understand the urgency—

Mr Frith—You mention having South Australia missing out, but I think there is a broader issue—lots of the information at this stage points to skills shortages in regional areas. Even if the TRA were based in Perth, it would not necessarily do anything for the north-west of the country, because the distances are about the same as those we are talking about between Adelaide and Sydney.

CHAIR—That is a good point.

Mr Frith—The approach needs to be to ask where the needs are and then to service those needs.

CHAIR—The only thing I will say before I hand over to Mrs Irwin is that what you suggest happens often, and it seems to be concerning for the Commonwealth in terms of cost shifting. You have heard that all before. We do not mind picking up the problem if the states have a little bit of a problem administering things, but we then pay for it at a Commonwealth level. I will leave that with you.

Mrs IRWIN—We had the South Australian government before us and asked them what they felt the number of skilled migrants required for South Australia would be. They said they needed about 5,000 in three to five years time. Do you reckon that would be correct? What areas would you be looking at as having a shortage of skilled migrants?

Ms Lablack—I think that is really coming down. We do not know what the areas are off the tops of our heads. We have the air warfare destroyer. Try and say that fast! We know some of these things are on the horizon—the Roxby Downs expansions, for example—and there is obviously a need. Before you have the jobs available, it is hard to get the people there; it is about building the case. For some of the migration processes, you are talking at least a two-year lead time before you can get somebody interested, packed up and relocated. There is that timing issue between the opportunity they have to be part of some of those areas, and getting the attraction processes happening.

Mrs IRWIN—I also want to go to your *Trade News* of July 2005, which we have a copy of here. It stated that DIMIA was stepping up the business migration push. Can you give me more details on that? How is it working? I think you have someone two days a week.

Ms Lablack—Yes, we have John Haren from DIMIA with us two days a week. We have been focusing on looking for particular businesses or groups of businesses who have an interest in understanding and being familiar with migration as one of the many tools they use for sourcing appropriately skilled people. We have been looking at particular industry sectors where there is an interest, and we have a couple of groups of businesses that we are looking to target particular countries—

Mrs IRWIN—What countries are you looking at targeting? I am sorry for interrupting.

Ms Lablack—I am not sure how far the matter has progressed. It might be, say, in the United Kingdom, looking at a particular skill area and making sure that the system works from go to whoa—knowing the differences, perhaps, in the sorts of skills. If you have certain sorts of qualifications in the UK, how do they equate in Australia? Are there issues? Can we streamline that? Can we have exactly the information and exactly the steps that people with those qualifications can step through in order to make that transition as seamless as possible? That is the strategy we are attempting to do, working with a group of businesses—not just an individual business but a group of them—to see a pool of people. Then we work out a process for how they might select somebody from that pool. So it is looking at that pathway to South Australia and making that system work the very best that it can.

Mrs IRWIN—Knowing that those people have got the skills and that the skills have been recognised from virtually day one.

Ms Lablack—And being able to tell them what the differences are, if there is a difference; how we can streamline it; how we can short-circuit it—what they can do at home, for example, in the UK before coming to Australia so that they do not have to do it when they get here.

Mrs IRWIN—Have you found that there have been a number of employers who—and obviously the United Kingdom is an example—have employed someone who has migrated to Australia with their skills; they put them on the job but they find out that their skills are not recognised in Australia? Do you have many cases there or not?

Ms Lablack—I have not heard of any. There are other issues. One of the big problems that one company talked to me about was medical insurance. In Australia, once you are over 30 and if you have not had medical insurance in Australia for 12 months, you are on a waiting list. This

is not a government issue; it is private sector medical insurance. But to try and work it out, for a company which was sponsoring somebody to come to Australia, where they had been in their state government funded medical insurance scheme—there was not an easy transition for them. The company was doing all the sponsorship. It was providing support to make the transition easy, and here was a problem it had to try and work out. It was well beyond the company's abilities to take it on board with the medical companies to say, 'Hang on; we shouldn't be making this sort of penalty for somebody so that a highly skilled person has a problem like this to settle in Australia.'

Mrs IRWIN—You are talking about private health here?

Ms Lablack—Yes, private health insurance. So some of those sorts of things start coming up when you try to start looking into just what the impediments are, what the difficulties that they are experiencing are and how they can be streamlined.

Mr Frith—Part of our discussion in looking at the terms of reference was that, clearly, while you can look at the migration of the person with the skills, it is rarely just that individual by themselves; they are generally part of a family that is looking at making the migration to Australia. You really cannot ignore the total family unit and their needs in any of the migration. So, whether it is education, schooling or the health sector, as Karen has just outlined, there is a broader context than just getting the skills into the country.

Mrs IRWIN—I can see your point. I have heard this before. A similar case, I think, was a doctor who was coming to Kalgoorlie. He was highly qualified. His skills were virtually recognised in Australia because he had come out here on a part-time basis before he made a decision to migrate here. The problem was that they had a child who was going to university, so there was HECS, because they did not have that permanent residency in Australia. So I can see your point.

I am also interested in the event—I think it was on 17 August—on 'Population and prosperity: creating new opportunities for South Australian business through skilled and business migration'. Can you provide more information on the discussion and the outcome of that event?

Ms Lablack—Because that is in a different area—

Mrs IRWIN—I would find it interesting.

Ms Lablack—We might have to get some more details on what actually happened for that event and provide those to you, because none of us are actually from that section of the department. While we are familiar with some of these processes, it would be best if we can get you some specific details.

Mrs IRWIN—If you could take that on notice, that would really help us as well.

Mr KEENAN—What sorts of shortages are you experiencing in South Australia? Is it just across the board with any skills, or are there specific areas?

Ms Lablack—I think that information would be obtainable. Would the Training and Skills Commission have that information here?

Mr Frith—DFEEST, I am sure, would be the area able to drill down into the detail that you are requesting. We would not ourselves have access, at this stage, to the detailed figures on the skill shortages.

Ms Lablack—We just have anecdotal information from particular people we run into, like those from the finance sector who are trying to get people in rural banking. We know there is a shortage in the finance sector. A lot of our younger people in South Australia are moving out of the state. South Australia is continuing to lose numbers—people from right across the board: truck drivers, nurses, doctors and teachers. There is a whole range of skill areas where that is constantly commented. I think you would need to drill down to really understand why that is; whether it is due to a group of people moving around and there are vacancies that are difficult to fill as opposed to just how many people we actually have in the state who can do that job, or whether it is due to people not actually working in the job for which they are qualified. I know of people who have come in as electricians and found it too hard to get their licences and have said, 'No, I'm taxi driving.' We have not got that information, but we hear about it.

Mr Frith—While there is perhaps some information available, in going out to regional areas and meeting a diversity of networks I think there are hidden skills shortages developing in some unique areas where there may be only a few people doing some unique role. Given the ageing of the work force, these skills shortages are simmering there and will happen when those people move on. There is no replacement strategy or training program available to fill those gaps. Again, I think there are some hidden areas which have yet to be identified.

Ms Lablack—Yes, because people are still employed in those roles at the moment.

Mr Paine—We are aware that there are some labour shortages in the traditional trades: the electrical and carpentry trades and the automotive trades in particular.

Ms Lablack—We know that air haul are talking about the need for systems engineers. But I understand that, internationally, there is a shortage of systems engineers too. We are not unique there.

Mr Paine—And linesmen.

Ms Lablack—Yes.

Mr KEENAN—How enthusiastic would your members be about employing a newly arrived, skilled migrant? Would they be considered to be as good as getting someone locally or is there some resistance?

Ms Lablack—Of the people who hire from me who have been involved with migrants, the only issue is the difficulty in getting them here. In some circumstances, I have talked to the employer and the employee at the same time and they have been highly enthusiastic. For some of them, it is just the way they do business. For example, the games design and special effects industries recruit most of their staff from overseas. They now have a well-recognised process for

doing their recruitment. They are very comfortable with doing it because there is nobody locally or nationally that they can access. For most of their staff, they rely on people from overseas.

Mr Frith—Anecdotally, at this stage, I would back up what Karen says and add that, especially as time goes on and these skills shortages get more critical, they will take them from wherever they can get them because it is fundamental to their business survival.

Ms Lablack—One of the ways we want to use outplaced DIMIA officers is to have them show businesses that here is a tool that they can use for recruiting, along with their traditional means.

Mrs IRWIN—I do not know whether it was Karen or David who said that we need a quick and easy assessment of skills. I think this is the most frustrating thing for employers when they are employing someone from overseas. They do not realise how long it can actually take to get those assessments and skill qualifications recognised. You are the law-makers; what would you like the government to do? What is the quick and easy way?

Ms Lablack—I think one of the things that I would be encouraging would be to look at the top areas of skills shortage where we are trying to attract people, rather than starting with everything. We should be working those countries where it is most likely we will get those people from—say, the United Kingdom or Europe or, in the case of welders, it might be from China. We should work that system from go to whoa in terms of understanding the sorts of qualifications that people might be coming with and the differences between them and what we require in Australia, and having a check list of steps that they have to go through to get it. It needs to be a very simple process that is presented to an employer: ‘This is the process that you go through. You have to do this, this and this. This person will need this much study. Here is the package they can do by distance education to bring them up to speed. It will arrive on their doorstep or they can do it before they leave.’ You need to ensure that they know exactly what is required and that everybody understands their place in the process.

CHAIR—Are you aware of the exhibitions that DIMIA has been running overseas in London et cetera?

Ms Lablack—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you had any input into that or had any feedback from them in terms of their effectiveness or appropriateness for your needs in South Australia?

Ms Lablack—We only found out rather late in the piece. There was a call to say there was nobody from South Australia attending them.

CHAIR—Did somebody end up going?

Ms Lablack—I know somebody from Defence went but I do not know that someone from business—not an industry association but an actual business—participated. I do not know if that is a good mechanism for businesses to use. It is not something that is a good conduit for small and medium sized businesses.

CHAIR—Given that employers can directly sponsor skilled migrants, it might not be a bad pool of people to start with. You might want to suggest to your members that they give some feedback to DIMIA on the success and the categories et cetera in terms of the pool that they have identified.

Ms Lablack—I think at this point in time it is not really seen as a very tangible mechanism. We know how to approach someone down the street because they have worked for Joe Bloggs and we can poach them from somebody else. We know how to advertise. We might use a recruitment agency, but to see this as a mechanism is very new territory. I know Defence got quite a number of CVs, and now they are developing a process to go around and try to show Defence businesses or interest them in what they have found from one of these exhibitions overseas.

CHAIR—Forgive me if I have got this somewhat wrong, but, with regard to your industry outreach officer, did you say you only have that person two days a week?

Ms Lablack—Yes.

CHAIR—I just launched a program in Perth the other day where they have two full-time officers.

Mrs IRWIN—I think what the chair might be saying is: would you like a full-time officer? Is that right, Chair?

Ms Lablack—I guess this was the outcome of the process.

Mrs IRWIN—Would it help your group?

Ms Lablack—It would assist dramatically but during the process we were only able to secure two days a week.

Mr Paine—The DIMIA program has 20 outposted officers to post with industry associations, and they got shared around. Before joining Business SA, I worked at MTAA in Canberra and they received an outposted officer for three days a week, shared with the Australasian Railway Association for two days. They have just been shared around because there was so much—

CHAIR—For your information and to show you have missed out, the Minerals Council got a full-time officer, and the chamber of commerce and I forget the other organisation shared an officer, so there are two full-time officers. I would be asking why you are not getting more help in that area.

Ms Lablack—I think we did.

CHAIR—Have you got an answer?

Ms Lablack—I think we have got someone for two days a week at this point in time.

CHAIR—I think you should make stronger representation to your federal members to start off with—and senators—that you think you are missing out.

Ms Lablack—We will.

Mr KEENAN—The minister is very sympathetic to South Australia.

CHAIR—I would be making a big point—

Mr Frith—If we had the capacity, we could certainly do more.

CHAIR—Just briefly, in terms of employer sponsorship, are you aware of take-up? Are there employers out there actively sponsoring individual skilled migrants?

Ms Lablack—We do have some who are doing that. I think it is still a bigger business tool at this stage for those who have been trying to recruit for those industries where it is quite common to source people from overseas. For South Australian businesses, which are largely small or medium sized, it is one of those tools they are not familiar with yet. The resourcing and the effort of understanding how to do it are some of the sorts of things we are looking at providing them through our services.

Mr Paine—There has certainly been a greater or increasing level of interest from the small to medium sized businesses in accessing overseas skills. It is just a question of the process involved.

CHAIR—Are you aware of the DIMIA web site or portal that is being developed on this area?

Ms Lablack—I cannot say that I have looked at it.

Mr Paine—Personally, no.

Ms Lablack—I know that they have been streamlining and improving their information on a lot of these areas.

CHAIR—It is not operational yet but it is being developed, so you may want to take a greater interest in that. Finally, on the department of immigration's web site, in their business skills entry area, it says that they have set up businesses in regional and rural low-growth areas in Australia. How effectively has the Business Skills Migration Program operated in South Australia, particularly in regional South Australia?

Ms Lablack—I think once again it comes back to the size of the business, their capability to look for those resources and whether it is a common practice in the region. I know, for example, that there are fruit-picking regions where the comment is made: 'Can't we bring some people in because of the difficulty in getting labour for fruit picking?'

CHAIR—You can now—you know that, don't you?

Ms Lablack—Yes. They have been making suggestions about other mechanisms as well. But it is still about understanding what is possible and being able to have someone on board. Certainly, having John Haren on board, we can direct those sorts of queries to someone who knows the system intimately and can straighten out what is possible and what is not possible.

CHAIR—Do you have any closing comments?

Ms Lablack—In closing, one of the things that I want to reinforce is the need to integrate the process. I know there is a lot of effort and energy going into this area, but unless we actually test the mechanisms to see how well they work by having individual people coming in as well as individual businesses and skill areas, we cannot really understand all of the complexities. The medical insurance example I gave you is an example of something that has come from somebody's experience of what has actually worked or has not worked. If we cut the system across, we do not actually see what the experience is like for the employer and also the migrant.

CHAIR—Thank you for attending today's hearing. I would be grateful if you could send the secretariat as soon as possible any additional material you have or that you have undertaken to provide. I appreciate your time. Thank you.

[2.15 pm]

LISTON, Mr Kevin, Director, Australian Refugee Association

MACHAR, Mr Bol Ring, Settlement Officer, Australian Refugee Association

DENG, Dr Robert, President, Sudanese Community Association

ZAMANI, Mr Hafez, Manager, Employment Services, Australian Refugee Association

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions.

Mr Liston—Thank you for this opportunity to address the committee. I expect you have heard detailed submissions from agencies and services directly involved in the business of skills recognition, upgrading and licensing, so I will not spend too much time on that. We will not dwell on these technicalities of process and procedure other than to say that we find the Commonwealth system quite difficult to negotiate. The state system, especially the Overseas Qualifications Unit, is very helpful but needs more resourcing. It is a small unit within the TAFE system here. It is very relevant and very tuned in to the needs that we have, but unfortunately it is underresourced at present.

The adoption of a uniform national system of recognition is imperative, as people do move regularly from one state to another. Our concerns are of course with people who come here under the humanitarian program. We do have some contact with people who come under the skills program, as you will hear in due course, but it is primarily the humanitarian program. People are not coming here primarily because of a career or a job; they are coming for humanitarian reasons. They have to sort out the job and the career after they come here. In that situation there is a lot of movement from one state to another. They may come to Adelaide and find that they have relatives in Sydney or whatever, so they then want to move there. If they have done work in getting a skill assessed here in Adelaide and then find that they have got to go through the whole process again in Sydney, it is very disruptive and time consuming.

The main thrust of our presentation today is to present you with the experience of the association in placing people into employment and to enable the Sudanese people who are here, former refugees, to speak for themselves—their experiences, satisfactions and frustrations. Hafez Zamani is the Manager of Employment Services at the Australian Refugee Association. As such he places more people who have come here under the humanitarian program into employment in South Australia than anybody else in the state. It is an extremely efficient service. He has two people working with him and a part-time assistant. He is himself a former refugee from Iran, so he understands the situation.

Robert Deng is the President of the South Australian branch of the Sudanese Community Association and Bol Ring Machar is an elder of the Sudanese community. I have asked them to come along because, as Sudanese, they represent the largest group of people who are now coming under the humanitarian program. They are both former refugees who understand the process of seeking recognition here. They will speak about that both on their own behalf and on behalf of the Sudanese community. Bol is also a settlement services worker at the Australian Refugee Association.

The context that I would like to put this discussion in is one of work force development and population policy. Those people who come here under the humanitarian program come with an extremely committed attitude, determination and purpose. I myself find that, when I am employing people, it is most important to consider attitude, commitment and intention and then skills and qualifications. Skills and qualifications can be taught or they can be learnt, but more often than not attitude cannot—it either comes with people or they just do not get it.

I have found that people who come under the humanitarian program come with a hugely committed attitude to wanting to be part of Australian life, wanting to be part of the work force and wanting to be part of our society here. It is building on that where we can get most advantage, and that is where my attitude towards skills recognition comes in—that is, we do not just look primarily at the skills that are required in the Australian work force and then formulate everything in those terms but we also have to look at the skills that people bring with them and start formulating some things in terms of those skills which can then be used in the Australian work force. I am not suggesting that we configure the work force to suit the people who are coming—that is not the point. The point is that we configure our skills recognition facilities so that they fit into a career pathway for people who are moving from a position of not having any foothold in Australian society into being part of this society's contributing workers and professionals. It is paralleled by the situation in the school system. Many people who arrive here as teenagers find it extremely difficult to get into the school system because they have missed out on so much and it is so late in their development. If they can be linked to a pathway to employment, they do succeed much better. It works. That is the difference.

I think we can help this to work here. In South Australia, for instance, 20 per cent of the people coming to this state are coming through the humanitarian program—that is a large number. Back in the eighties—

CHAIR—Can you tell us why South Australia is different?

Mr Liston—I am talking about South Australia because I know it.

CHAIR—But do you know why such a high percentage of people come to South Australia under the humanitarian program?

Mr Liston—We have a higher than pro rata proportion of humanitarian program entrants and a lower than pro rata proportion of non-humanitarian program entrants. Traditionally South Australia—

CHAIR—What do you think are the driving factors or the pull factors?

Mr Liston—The pull factors for the humanitarian program are the good services here and a lot of people are intent on helping their families and relatives to get here through the sponsored part of the humanitarian program. Also, because of the services that the Australian Refugee Association and others have set up, there is a high retention factor here under the humanitarian program. Once people come here, they tend to stay here. As an indication of that, in our service we have people coming from Sydney and Melbourne in order to be placed into jobs here. It is not very noticeable under the humanitarian program, but a couple of years ago, when we had a lot of people coming out of detention on temporary protection visas, several hundred people came here because they could get work here, and that was against the trend of the unemployment rates. On the other hand, the negative aspect for non-humanitarian migration is that South Australia has had a reputation of not being a good place to get work. With higher populations elsewhere, people tended to go elsewhere. People know Sydney and Melbourne; they do not know Adelaide. Hopefully with the number of initiatives being taken by the government and others, that will be reversed, and there will increasing employment opportunities here also.

To get back to the point about the 20 per cent of people coming here, in the late 1970s and the 1980s a lot of people, primarily from Vietnam but also from Cambodia and Laos, came in on the humanitarian program. Very quickly the adults of that generation—those who were over 30 or 35—found that they could not get a job here unless it was an extremely low-skilled, basic position. And those low-skilled, basic positions largely disappeared during the recession of the early nineties. Then, when things improved, they were not able to get back into the work force because the qualifications and skills required were higher. To a huge extent there was a generation lost. There were numerous clubs and groups that I could visit in the eighties where I would find dozens of people—adults of working age—who were not working because they could not get into the work force. They had resigned themselves to the fact that they were not going to be able to work and had committed themselves to helping their children get through school and college. They have done that and those kids are coming out of it. But we do not need that to happen anymore. To a large extent it is not happening, because people are getting into the work force, but I think there are still ways we can improve those numbers. That is the context in which I would want to see this. Basically, with the attitude and commitment that people have, we can work on it. To follow up on that, I will ask Hafez to talk a little about his experience, unless the committee has some questions.

Mrs IRWIN—We will definitely come back to that—I want to hear about your success rate.

Mr Zamani—I have been doing this project for the last four years. Before that I did not know that having qualifications was that important, because it was easy for me to get jobs. When I enrolled in this project I found that, for refugees coming to Australia, it is very hard to get a job, especially in Adelaide because it has the highest unemployment. We get people with different skills coming here—for instance, we have toolmakers, doctors, a vet and a carpenter—but they cannot work here without a certificate. My job is to give them the right information, because when they come here a lot of refugees want jobs immediately. They do not want to study. But the reality is different because the system is different here. You have to update your qualifications. I sit with them one-to-one and tell them, ‘Okay, if you want to work, I could get you a job, but in between you could study or update your qualifications. If that qualification takes five years, you could do it for maybe two years.’

By doing that, I can convince them to start doing some jobs. I have people working in a plastic factory as juniors, but now they are studying part-time to upgrade their qualifications—because without those you cannot get a job. That is why we have a shortage of boilermakers, toolmakers and nurses. For a nurse it is easy to get a job, because we need nurses and teachers in the bush, but for boilermaking people need skills that are recognised here. I was lucky to convince a few companies to put on unskilled people on low wages but with training, to make sure the company noticed them. Now they are getting the same pay as fully skilled workers. But at the end of the day I think the government should make it easier for people to update their qualifications—give them more information, help and support. When they arrive in Australia we need to give them a reality check, because a lot of refugees have high expectations. When they get here they want to start a job now, but it does not work that way. I have put a lot of people in jobs in the last four years—I think it is 1,200 or 1,300. I put them in jobs of which maybe 15 per cent are skilled, but the rest are in, say, metal or plastic factories or on farms. The job is not one they have done before, but it is a start for them. Some of them stay on—they prefer to stay in that job—but some of them want to move on. We have a chance to make a better life for them, and on the way we can give them support by making it easier for them to update their qualifications and by giving them information, even before they get to Australia.

Mrs IRWIN—We had representatives of the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia come before us earlier today. They were talking about the frustration of people who arrive in Australia and have got qualifications in their homeland but they are not recognised in Australia. What you are doing sounds good but, from a mental health point of view, how are they coping? I ask that because they were also—and I am going back to my notes—talking about the expense of updating your qualifications to have them recognised in Australia and saying that can cost a lot of money through bridging courses and so on. I think that for one course it was \$1,200 to even sit some exams. It is hard, when you are trying to put a roof over your family's head and a hot meal on the table, to try to get these.

Mr Zamani—That is why the best thing to do is advise them to find a job and then get some money, because then they can study part time or they will have the cash in hand to make a life for themselves. If the person coming here is 45 years old, you cannot tell them to go to school first. They might have a family; they might have come with two or three children. If they have not got a good lifestyle, they cannot perform well. Mentally, they are better off to get a job for themselves, maybe involving a change. I studied computing. I am doing different things now. I am happy with what I am doing because I made a decision that way. People have to make such decisions themselves.

Mr Liston—I think it is important that you put that qualifications recognition in the context of the career, the requirements of home and the need to get some money in order to make something do. For quite a lot of people there is also the reality of people back home who are depending on them as well, so there are a lot of demands on people for money and they have got to balance those too, so skills qualification cannot be seen in isolation. Robert, would you care to comment on that question: the frustration that people experience in getting their skills recognised?

Dr Deng—Yes. Firstly, please let me take this opportunity to thank you for calling us to come and air our views on the issue concerned.

CHAIR—That is a pleasure.

Dr Deng—It is a burning issue for our community and for most Africans who are around in this part of the world. Also, I wish to thank the federal government and the state government for allowing my people to come and be part of your community. I have a BSc in chemistry from the University of Khartoum. I went to Durham University in the UK for my PhD, came back and taught in Sudan for four years, went to Kenya and taught for six years at the university there and spent about 10 years in Botswana at the University of Botswana. During that time I had been going to Dublin to do some research. I went to Durham twice on sabbatical leave. As a member of the Royal Society of Chemistry, I was given an award to go there and do some studies.

CHAIR—What migration program did you come to Australia on?

Dr Deng—Humanitarian, because my age was slightly above what was required as a skilled migrant, so I came on a humanitarian basis. When I came here, they recognised my degree as such but because of my age I really did find it very difficult to get a job. I applied to some of the factories to go and work as an industrial chemist but they wanted a younger person. They not did tell me that I was old but that is what I could infer.

Mrs IRWIN—May I ask how old you are?

Dr Deng—I am 51.

Mrs IRWIN—You do not look 51. When did you arrive in Australia?

Dr Deng—Three years ago. I took up some odd jobs at the university doing some demonstration work for two years until last year when I became a part-time lecturer at Flinders University. Most of the people who have qualifications from Africa, whether it is a bachelor's degree, a master's degree or a PhD, find most of their qualifications are not recognised. You need to come with a degree from the UK, Germany, Sweden or the United States. That is unless you come from South Africa. Most of the degrees from South Africa are recognised, but if the degrees are from any other part of Africa it is very difficult for that thing to happen. Therefore most of the people who come here and look for a job are told: 'Your degree is not recognised. Can you do something else? We can help you find a job.'

If somebody comes here at the age of, say, 45 years and over and family demands on him are great, he would rather go and work in a factory if he can get a job. Going from, say, a lecturer at a university to work in a factory—although there is nothing wrong with working in a factory—the mental impact of that is enormous. Most of the people get frustrated and they find life very difficult. Once they hear that there is a slight chance of peace in the Sudan they will go back, not because they do not like this country but because they cannot get jobs. Some of them have skills which they cannot employ. That is one aspect which is facing the Sudanese community and the African community at large.

The other thing is that even those people who get jobs only get jobs with service providers simply because of the language they speak. If ARA employs somebody, they will employ a Sudanese because there are a great number of Sudanese available. If somebody from Iran is employed, it is because there are Iranians who have come to the country. The government

departments seem to be taking most of the people who are coming from the Third World, simply because they need an Australian experience, which they do not have. It is also difficult to get that experience because, when somebody goes to ARA—I have people who are going to ARA—they do the basic thing. They take people, say, from the airport to somewhere or they do reception. MRC will do the same thing. But if you have a qualification like a MSc or a PhD, you wonder: ‘Did I come to this country to do this job, rather than contribute to the economy of the nation?’ It is all very frustrating. Most of the people have resigned themselves to the fact: let me just sit down and see whether my kids will be educated like perhaps some of the former Vietnamese did, although they are different from the Sudanese because the Sudanese know the language. They can speak English, yet that demand of Australian experience is really a problem for them.

Also, most of the young people who come from the Sudan had gaps in their education because of the war. So when they come here, they are put for two years in what is called the new arrival program. Those two years can be fine for someone who is intelligent, who is able to learn English and maths in that period of time so that they come up to the level which is recognised to enter into mainstream schools. But there are people who are also slow and people who have not had a basic education. When they go on the program and you expect them to go to secondary school after two years, they find it difficult. Therefore, they become frustrated and they leave school. It is very difficult for them to get a job because, once they apply for a job, what they need from them first is a licence: ‘Do you know how to drive?’ We had a terrible incident some time ago where one member of the Sudanese community committed suicide because of some of these stresses. Young people, age 15 to 20, are also facing a lot of problems, because in the new environment you have to work and earn something to maintain yourself. Centrelink is always behind them, saying, ‘You must do something,’ and it is a bit frustrating for these young people.

I will give you an incident. There was a job advertised about 1½ years ago for what they call an African liaison officer who was to liaise between the schools and the minister for education. Out of the 15 people who applied, five of them had PhDs from various institutions all over the world. I was one of them. I did not get that job. So you can actually see that there is a lot of frustration when somebody comes into this country because you expect so much. This is the First World, so if you come here they must be able to recognise the kind of degree you have.

CHAIR—Did the person who got the job have good qualifications?

Dr Deng—She had a PhD from here.

CHAIR—So she was well qualified?

Dr Deng—She got the job, so she was well qualified. But she had Australian experience.

Mrs IRWIN—You have had a lot of overseas experience too, you were saying—in Dublin and so on.

Dr Deng—Yes.

Mr Machar—My position would be this: we have come to Australia and we are going to be here for the rest of our lives. We are not going back.

CHAIR—Dr Deng did not say that. He said—

Mr Liston—No, he is speaking about himself.

Mr Machar—Yes, that is for myself. Having said that, I should also say that we need to be able to participate effectively in Australian society. For us to do that, we need to have a situation where we are able to access employment in a way that will help us and help our kids' education process. I came here 6½ years ago with a qualification. I am from Sudan, but my first university qualification was obtained from Alexandria University in the Arab Republic of Egypt. When I came here I was a cartographer—a map-making person. I found it difficult. My qualifications were recognised because they said that Egyptian universities are equivalent to here. My qualifications were recognised, but that recognition stopped there. I was given a document to say that my bachelor degree, obtained from the Alexandria University in Egypt, is recognised in Australia.

It took me almost another two years to recognise that that recognition was not a good pass for me to get employment. After not getting anything, I had to go back for another two years and become a translator/interpreter, because I speak another two languages. I left my cartography background and I tried to help myself out. Then I went back to university again to do my master's here in Australia. I am now 43 years of age. I came with a very small family—a wife and one son. Now I have four kids. The more I stay in Australia the more I realise that I need—

Mrs IRWIN—That is good to hear. We have an ageing population; we need more children.

Mr Machar—I have a population background. I did my master's on population and human resources studies—population matters. So I am supposed to be doing population data analysis stuff. When I finished my master's at Flinders University I had difficulty in getting employment. It took me two years.

CHAIR—Can you hold that thought there. I should save these questions until we are finished, but I do not have the same retention rate as others. We have heard a lot from people today about how difficult it is for them to have a family and educate themselves when they come to Australia and the costs of even upgrading their qualifications. What was your experience of doing further tertiary studies? How were you able to finance that?

Mr Machar—I was actually among the luckiest. I convinced Flinders University to fund my first year free of charge and they accepted that. I told them point blank that, without upgrading myself, I had no future in Australia. They accepted that. It is a two-year course and they accepted in principle to fund the first year free of charge. When I went to second year to finish my master's off, the system of giving postgraduate loans—they call it PELS—had come in by then and the university asked me to take a loan. I was very lucky—I got the first year free and then PELS came in. So I finished my master's at Flinders.

CHAIR—Well done. Can you go back to what you were saying about getting a job afterwards?

Mr Machar—When I started to seek jobs, it was a little bit difficult. Something that I have not said before—but this is a good opportunity to say it—is that some of the application forms

that we fill in online only accept qualifications obtained in Australia. I tried to apply three times in several places. When I put in the qualifications that I obtained in Egypt, it does not go—the computer does not recognise them. It always sends something right back.

CHAIR—It is only set up to take Australian qualifications.

Mr Machar—It was very difficult for me to put my first degree there. I just ended up putting my master's, so there are always problems for someone coming from outside in settling properly. So I found a big problem there. I spent some time without being employed after my graduation in 2003 and was saying to some of my colleagues, 'I am still not working at the moment, and I may be the only demographer in Australia having a master's who is unemployed.' I am really very scared to go back to Centrelink. I did not want to go to Centrelink, because what I used to do every fortnight was enough for me not to deal with Centrelink. But I was compelled to go back to Centrelink and say, 'Look, I have this skill, I am unemployed and I need those services for me to get a job.'

I came to know afterwards that it is not only about having skills obtained in Australia, but most employers believe that if you have spent a very long period of time studying overseas, even though you obtain a qualification in Australia, that will also be a disadvantage. So I have the skills obtained in Australia and there are not many demographers. They need us to say what the population needs to grow or how to stabilise the society, but we are not fully utilised for that. Perhaps it is because I am 43 years of age, as Dr Robert said. We are not quite sure whether age really is a reason for our not being in employment. If that is the case, we have two things—in my case we will have three things. The first is that I am 43 years of age. No employer would like to employ me because I have already done 16 years of study overseas and only two years in Australia.

They explain it when you go for an interview: you are equalised. When we see on the form 'Where are you from?'—an ethnic background or something—we feel happy because we believe that without that sort of explanation we cannot really compete fully in terms of appearance: the way we dress, the way we go and sit in the interview. It is very hard for us, so the government must do something else—and I just do not know what—to help those with the skills who are here and utilise them. What we need, after all, is to be able to provide services for our children. After 20 years they also become good Australian citizens. If we are not given this chance now, we will have to prepare for a big generation of migrants—the humanitarian section—becoming people who are not able to assist Australia, and we will be disappointed for that.

CHAIR—It strikes me, given Hafez's successful placements, you might want to go and see Hafez!

Mr Liston—But Bol is obviously looking for a job as a cartographer. Hafez is working at a much more basic level.

CHAIR—I know. I understand that, and I said that in jest in some respects, which I should not have done on this occasion, I suppose. But from your point of view—this is not a question that I should be asking—are you able to realign your courses so that they can become more widely applied? Could you do some other associated subjects so that you can make yourself not so narrowly focused as a demographer?

Mr Machar—I started with cartography. That did not work. I studied demography. It is not working. I need to be given a chance to teach, even 10 hours or five hours a week in the university as a lecturer, teaching assistant or anything. But it is not working. I need even to be a teacher in secondary school. It will not work.

CHAIR—So you cannot even get a job in a secondary school?

Mr Machar—It is very hard.

CHAIR—It seems surprising, because male secondary teachers are like hen's teeth.

Mrs IRWIN—We are crying out for them in New South Wales.

CHAIR—Maybe you are in the wrong state!

Mrs IRWIN—I will give you my card.

Dr Deng—Let me just answer that. I tried to teach in a secondary school but they told me that I could not because I do not have teaching qualifications. I can teach at a university, like I am doing at the moment, but I cannot teach in secondary schools.

CHAIR—I suppose that is what this inquiry is about—to find out why there are these hurdles for you in this humanitarian program. It is surprising to us because we have heard other people giving evidence today and previously that there are acute shortages in some of the areas you are talking about.

Mrs IRWIN—We are going to have a teacher shortage within the next two to three years, especially in New South Wales. With your university degrees you can teach in our TAFE system and universities in New South Wales but you cannot teach in the schools. I think you have to do a 12-month teaching course or something.

Dr Deng—There is also a paradox. There is something called a BSSO—bilingual school services officer. Because of my background as a chemist and mathematician some of the schools like me to go to help their students who are preparing for years 11 and 12. I have been doing that for the last two years, yet the minister for education cannot allow me to teach.

Mrs IRWIN—Are you doing this on a voluntary basis?

Dr Deng—No, I am registered with the ministry of education as a bilingual service officer.

CHAIR—You provide a service but you cannot teach. I am sure somebody from the South Australian government will be listening.

Mrs IRWIN—You have high qualifications. You start off by saying that the Commonwealth is difficult to negotiate with. What are the problems? What difficulties are you experiencing?

CHAIR—Before you answer that, I reinforce that all the other evidence has said that the Commonwealth does not seem to do a bad job but the state seems to be the one struggling. Your evidence is contrary to what we have been hearing.

Mr Liston—My experience is that people are finding it very hard to communicate with the office in Canberra—NOOSR—and get a response in a reasonable time. That is the difficulty here in South Australia. There was a lot of difficulty expressed in relation to the office here in South Australia because the resources they have are extremely limited.

CHAIR—Do you mean the TRA, Trades Recognition Australia?

Mr Liston—No, I am talking about the office of qualifications recognition within TAFE. It is very underresourced and therefore they are limited in what they can do. Looking back to when they had more resources, they were able to do things more effectively and they were able to provide responses much more quickly. It was also closely related to the English language services so that they put it in context. They are dealing primarily with humanitarian program people, so they know the kinds of issues they are dealing with.

CHAIR—What was the name of the body?

Mr Liston—The Overseas Qualifications Unit.

Mrs IRWIN—How long is it taking for someone who has put their application in to have their skill recognised? What is the time frame now from the ACT?

Mr Machar—I can answer that.

Mrs IRWIN—That would be good because I would like to compare it with years gone by.

Mr Machar—It is done two ways. The first way is to fill in the form and send it back to Canberra. There is a fee payable for your certificate to be recognised, which I did six years ago. There is another office within any TAFE, the recognition office, and they will do it for you. If you want to deal with the local office it is done within two days, I think—or sometimes one day. If you want to make photocopies and then pay some money—six years ago I paid about \$100—it took almost three weeks for that to come back. You needed to indicate in some way on the form if you needed it quickly, to hurry them up.

CHAIR—I am from Perth. We would offer the same sorts of opportunities as New South Wales would, I imagine. You talked about getting qualifications up to level. On the protection visas, what you are suggesting is that the government picks up the tab, aren't you?

Mr Liston—I am suggesting that the government helps to organise the system so that it is much more streamlined than it is at present. I do not expect the government to pick up all the tab. It is not going to pick up the tab for the training that is required. I think the government should pick up the tab for skills recognition, because it is not easy for anybody else to do it. If there were a fee for getting something done, that would be okay; that may be part of doing that. We as an organisation have what we loosely call a scholarship scheme, which people donate money to. We often use that to help people get their skills recognised. We simply pay the fee for

them to get that recognition done, such as Bol Ring was talking about. It is in terms of coordinating the system as a whole that the government has its most important role.

CHAIR—So that we can get it on the record—which Mrs Irwin was going to do—are you saying that, as an organisation, you are relatively well resourced? Is that right?

Mr Liston—I would not dream of saying that! We get a lot of funding from the federal government and the state government. We also get funding from philanthropic organisations, and we do a lot of fundraising ourselves as an organisation. We have been involved in employment related programs since the early nineties. In 1998 we got a contract as a Job Network provider. We set up a subsidiary company called ARA Jobs Pty Ltd to provide that service, to administer that contract.

CHAIR—And there are fees involved?

Mr Liston—No. The Job Network program operates according to the requirements of Job Network, and ARA Jobs does an excellent job in doing that. But Job Network is designed for people who have lived all their lives in Australia. Humanitarian program people do not even appear on the radar in Job Network. Job Network assumes—and we might talk about this for a while—that people coming into the system are either coming out of school or coming from previous employment and, therefore, they are more likely to get employment themselves in a short while and that, as time goes on, they will need more help.

The reality for people coming under the humanitarian program is that they arrive here without any background in Australia, including school and employment. They are in the same position as the average Job Network client is at six months, but the system does not recognise that. The system will insist that the humanitarian program entrants sit around for six months before they are entitled to the level of service that they really need. So the Australian Refugee Association set up a separate employment program within the association—

Mrs IRWIN—To assist those people.

Mr Liston—not within ARA Jobs—to assist those people. That is where Hafez works. He works permanently as a job placement service officer; he works with people. Obviously, he works closely with our Job Network provider—ARA Jobs—but he deals primarily with people that ARA Jobs and Job Network do not recognise as clients whom it is worth putting any effort into. It is primarily funded by the state government.

Mrs IRWIN—What Hafez is doing is funded by the state government?

Mr Liston—Yes.

Mrs IRWIN—Good on the state government.

CHAIR—What is the name of the program?

Mr Liston—ARA Employment.

Mrs IRWIN—Are you aware of similar programs in other states and territories?

Mr Liston—I am not aware of any others.

CHAIR—This is just a one-off; it is not a South Australian program as such? It is just this one specific set of moneys which goes to ARA Employment?

Mr Liston—We have been running it for four years, but it is funded under the state government Community Employment Assistance Program. They also provide funds for helping some disabled people to get into work, and some mature unemployed people as well. There are some youth programs funded as well as some specialist programs. I can say without fear of contradiction, because the people in the department will acknowledge it, that this program is by far the best performer of the lot.

Mr KEENAN—Obviously, English language skills are very important if you are going to enter the Australian work force. Are the 510 hours provided by the government enough for someone who comes in without language skills?

Mr Liston—No. It is not even designed to be.

Mr KEENAN—It is just supposed to be completely basic?

Mr Liston—The 510 hours program is like the other immigration department programs. It is designed to bring people to a settlement level, which is basically a survival level. You may be familiar with the IHSS services—the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy services—which the immigration department provides. We have been involved with them for five years now. It is an excellent program of services. They are very good. They meet the needs of people when they arrive here. But they are designed to bring people to a basic level of survival in Australia, equivalent to where one might be on social security benefits. The language level within that is one of being able to go to the supermarket and get the right groceries—to know which is dog food and which is not. It does not provide a level of services which enables anybody to be independent, to participate in society or to go and get a job, even the most basic job. Hafez will tell you that even for the most basic jobs you have to be able to read signs, follow instructions given in a rough accent and understand basic occupational health and safety requirements. The English that is required for those and to follow instructions to use the most basic machinery nowadays is such that it is at a higher level than that which those settlement services provide. You really have to move up.

Mr Zamani—When we started the project four years ago, the project was born and designed to help TPVs—temporary visa holders. Seventy per cent of our clients were TPVs who had come from Woomera and those areas. Now most of them have visas and they are permanent. Now there are none coming from that area anyway, because we closed the border. So now we are helping skilled migrants and also refugees. So we are mixing up those things. Our target is good. I had a lot of problems with companies and employers out there when I started the project. A lot of companies did not like refugees. There were Pauline Hanson views and all of those things were happening in the world and in Australia. So I had to fight with the companies and negotiate with them to accept refugees and skilled people into the companies. It was a tough job to do. Now it is easier because they know we can do it and we can make it happen.

CHAIR—So the experience has been good?

Mr Zamani—Yes, the experience was good. But about 80 per cent of the jobs I have got are not skilled jobs. The jobs are things like packing. I have got jobs with Mitsubishi, Holden, and Clipsal on assembly lines. About 20 per cent were skilled jobs. I had to push the companies to take them. They did not trust that they would get the job through.

CHAIR—You have done well.

Mr Machar—There is one thing that I would like to add about the 500 hours. As we understood it when we first came here, everybody who came in under the humanitarian program was entitled to those 500 hours. I did not use my 500 hours. I started with my employment and university studies. People could accumulate those hours somewhere and give them out based on need. There may be someone requiring 3,000 hours but, in this program, they may not be entitled to that. We should allow those hours to be given based on need. If someone requires 100 hours, he should be given those 100 hours based on a particular assessment. The remaining hours should then be left intact to be given to someone else who may need them. People do not go in the same and come out the same. There are various levels of English.

Mr Liston—That is a very important point. I think that making that 510 hours the same for everyone is ridiculous because, obviously, some people, like Bol and Robert, are very well able to speak English but other people have much greater difficulty. Even with the additional hours that people are entitled to, they are still not able to get there in that time. They need much more. The hours that people are entitled to should be designed according to need rather than just some arbitrary figure.

Mr KEENAN—That is so often the case with government services, of course.

Mr Liston—It is not for me to comment on government services!

CHAIR—Thank you very much for attending today's hearing, gentlemen. I would be grateful if you would send the secretariat as soon as possible any additional material that you have undertaken to provide.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Keenan**):

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

Committee adjourned at 3.05 pm