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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

Tuesday, 15 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: Senators Eggleston, Kirk and Parry and Mrs Irwin, Mr Keenan, Dr Lawrence 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.

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COLLINS, Mr Gary Thomas, Executive Director, Client Services, Chamber of Commerce and Industry Western Australia

ENGLISH, Mrs Claire Joanne, Project Officer, Western Australian Skills Advisory Board

FITZHARDINGE, Mr Christopher Berkeley, Chair, Western Australian Skills Advisory Board

HILL, Mr Warren, Manager, Skills Migration Unit, Department of Industry and Resources

CHAIR (Mr Randall)—Good morning. I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's 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 to Australia under the skilled migration system are functioning efficiently or 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 Australian states and territories.

I would like to welcome representatives from the Western Australian Skills Advisory Board 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 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. Do you have a brief statement?

Mr Fitzhardinge—I do, and I have prepared copies of the statement for circulation. Western Australia makes a huge contribution to the productivity and wealth of Australia from its export-oriented economy. Over 30 per cent of Australia's \$126.8 billion in exports comes from Western Australia, and the location of much of this economic activity is spread across a sparsely developed landscape. In many areas, employment is treated as an excursion.

Migration has made up around half of Western Australia's population and employment growth over the last 10 years and has helped support the development of a more skilled work force to respond to the needs particularly of the resources sector. Western Australia has been through a series of booms and busts in the past, where skills and labour could be readily attracted from interstate and from countries such as New Zealand. The current strength of the Australian and New Zealand economies has limited those options and, despite strong overseas migration, the

number of vacancies in the Western Australian work force has steadily grown from 10,500 in May 2004 to 16,900 in August 2005. Typically, vacancies run at between 6,000 and 8,000, so these are quite high levels.

Record employment growth has been experienced in the Perth metropolitan area and the south-west, but little growth has been experienced in areas such as the Pilbara and the Goldfields, despite the major resource development activity within these regions. It appears that the operation of fly in, fly out has limited the benefits of economic expansion of more remote regions. An estimated 26,000 employees are involved in fly in, fly out in Western Australia. That is out of a work force of one million.

Western Australia's principal sources of skilled migrants are the United Kingdom—over 27 per cent—and South-East Asia, and we have also been successful in attracting migrants from South Africa. sub-Saharan Africa accounts for about 18 per cent of Western Australia's migrants. The proportion of UK migrants is about double Australia's percentage of UK migrants, and we also attract about double the rate for South African migrants. Worldwide, migrants make up around 2.5 per cent of national populations. As at June 2001, Western Australia has the highest proportion of overseas born residents, at 29 per cent, compared to other states and territories.

There is a table that shows the top 15 countries of birth for Western Australian residents. This is included particularly to show the dominance of the United Kingdom and New Zealand in terms of proportion of population but also the broad spread of countries that contribute to Western Australia's multicultural community. The structure of other countries' skilled work forces is different to Western Australia. In some countries it is not unusual to complete a trade and then a university degree.

Combinations of skills in other countries are also different. The Australian skills assessment seems to require specific experience in an individual skill and multiskilled individuals are disadvantaged. The recent completion of a PhD can actually make a migrant ineligible for many visa classes because they do not have current experience. A plumber who also works as a tiler and a cabinet-maker may not meet the work experience that is required for a plumber. Australia's skills recognition process needs to recognise the changing nature of work and allow for multiskilled and highly educated individuals.

Migration to Australia has an increased skill component being driven by a strong demand for skilled employment and the sustained high level of job vacancies. There are currently 140,000 vacancies across Australia. Over 40 per cent of the Western Australian work force now falls into the categories of managers, administrators, professionals, associate professionals and tradespersons, with the number of labourers declining as a proportion of the work force. But emigration from Australia is becoming more skilled.

The growth of the Western Australian work force has been 60,000 in the last 12 months and this has been filled partly by working holiday makers and by people on temporary visas. Working holiday makers are filling a wider range of job vacancies as well as being a pathway to temporary or permanent migration. The number of working holiday makers has rapidly increased, with a 26 per cent lift in the visas that were issued in Australia between 1999-2000 and 2003-04. There are around 10,000 working holiday makers in Western Australia at any one time.

Migration has moved from being part of bilateral arrangements between countries to an individual choice, so the process of migration becomes more important because an individual is making the decision based on their own situation and their own understanding of the migration process. In recent years, the proportion of the local work force that is employed outside the worker's country of birth or citizenship has expanded. In a global work force of three billion, there are around four million people that work outside their country of birth, but the churn rate of migration has also increased, so we see that for every two permanent settlers that arrive there is one permanent resident that leaves.

We also see a significant churn rate between the movement from Western Australia to other states and in return, so each day 87 people arrive in Western Australia from interstate but 80 leave, so we are getting a significant churn both within Australia and within the global work force. Even within Western Australia our regional residents are highly mobile. The Living in the Regions survey in 1999 found that only 16 per cent of respondents had grown up in the area where they now live and more than half had been living in their current region for 10 years or less.

The proportion of overseas migrants in regional Australia is lower than that for Perth. The 2001 census data show that only 19 persons per thousand had moved to regional Western Australia from overseas compared to 56 persons per thousand in Perth. Whilst the current migration policy positively discriminates towards regional migration, not enough is being done in terms of encouraging people to remain within regional Western Australia, particularly where key skilled individuals can make such a difference to the life of a small community.

The availability of skilled labour at reasonable cost has an impact on the timing of major investment projects and the form in which they will proceed. There has been a lot of discussion about construction moving offshore and modularisation taking place, which reduces the potential for local content, for local growth opportunities and local employment, and also opportunities for maintenance during the life of these facilities. In Western Australia Perth is the dominant city, with around 74 per cent of the state's population. Part of the challenge in dealing with skill shortage is to encourage temporary and permanent visa holders to move to regional areas.

I mentioned before that the growth in the work force depends on temporary visa holders. There are around 10,000 457 visa holders in Western Australia, and this is a very important process because it allows 'try before you buy' for employers before they make a commitment to employ a nominated sponsorship, it allows working holiday makers to work for an employer for more than three months, and it allows companies to carry out intercompany transfers. This visa does not require a skills assessment but could require licensing.

There was a concession which was introduced under the employer nominated sponsored scheme which allowed migrants to avoid a skills assessment if they were licensed within Australia. But this concession only relates to employer nominated sponsored visas. There are around 90,000 working holiday maker visas issued for Australia but there are limits on how long a working holiday maker can work with one employer. Working holiday makers should not be narrowly perceived as being seasonal harvest labourers or hospitality workers. We have had many instances of nurses, engineers and other professionals that had their first exposure to the Western Australian work force through their working holiday maker visa.

The performance of Trades Recognition Australia has in the past been characterised as poor and unresponsive. There have been recent improvements in processing time and there has been more flexibility provided with appeals, but Trades Recognition Australia is such a crucial part of the migration process that it is important not only that it be responsive and efficient, but also that its processes are well understood and transparent and that it has a footprint right across Australia. At the moment, there are no TRA representatives in Western Australia or South Australia, and this seems to be an omission where Western Australia has such a significant rate of migration and a significant rate of skilled migration.

There will be pressure from the Western Australian government and from the Western Australian community for TRA infrastructure to be present within Western Australia and for there to be a good relationship between TRA and the licensing bodies within Western Australia.

The continuing strength of the Western Australian economy depends on skilled migration to meet the skills gaps predicted over the next five years and to partially offset the loss of skills through retirement from the existing work force. The resources sector has estimated that there are 20,000 jobs just within that sector alone that need to be sourced within the next 10 years. We anticipate a growth in the Western Australian work force of at least 100,000 over the next five years

The age limit of 45 years on many visa classes limits our ability to attract skilled migrants and should be lifted to 50 years. Recent research has identified that skilled migrants aged between 45 and 50 years still make a net positive contribution to the economy and that the financial impact of older migrants falls more heavily on the states than it does on the Commonwealth, so there should be the facility for states to be able to sponsor older migrants in occupations which are considered to be critical for the economic development of the state.

There has been a lot of discussion, in the assessment of migration, about English language skills and the need to improve English language skills amongst migrants. I was in Canberra last week and there was a discussion about lifting the IELTS score from 5 to 6 for all skilled migrants. To me, this is quite a blunt instrument and may impact on our ability to attract skilled trades. A preferred alternative is to look at the specific communication requirements for each occupation and to incorporate any higher IELTS scores that are required into the skills assessment process. An example of this approach is the assessment of engineers, where there is a requirement for a minimum score of 6 across the four categories of IELTS.

Australia needs to have a world-competitive skilled migration program. Countries such as Canada—interestingly, speaking the English language is not a mandatory requirement for being able to migrate to Canada—have flagged a significant increase in their migration program, to over 300,000 people. The complexity, cost and time taken for skills assessment and licensing are key components of a world-competitive skilled migration program. Australia has been in the fortunate position of being able to readily fill the migration quotas in the past, but this could rapidly change with a strong global economy and where there are large numbers of growth, investment and development opportunities around the world competing for these skills.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Fitzhardinge. That was a very comprehensive and, I must say, a very informative submission. Are there any other members who are appearing today who have any statements, before we move to questions?

Mr Hill—I have a couple of quick comments from a Department of Industry and Resources perspectives. There are two issues that we have looked at within skills migration and skills recognition processes. As Chris touched on briefly, the TRA process has been perceived as a barrier in the past and, whilst we acknowledge some recent advice that the system has been improved somewhat lately, it is probably worth reinforcing again that the TRA process ultimately needs to be able to support the Australian government's objective of attracting more skilled migrants to the country rather than being a barrier to the process. It really needs to be a much more customer-focused service. At the moment the feedback we get from individuals and migration agents who are assisting people with their migration processes is that ultimately it is not a particularly user-friendly process. Individuals do not get feedback as to where their shortfalls are, in a lot of cases. It tends to be that if you get it right you get it right, if you get it wrong you get it wrong, and that is the end of the process. It does not allow for further information to be submitted to assist the application.

Again, the advice is that a lot of that customer focus has been due to the backlog of applications and the lack of resources, so the current advice that TRA has more resources and is changing its processes to be more user friendly is certainly welcomed, and we just hope that that is maintained; otherwise, we will end up with the situation we had several months ago with several months backlog of applications. Ultimately, whilst the state governments and the Commonwealth government were trying to facilitate the process of getting skilled migrants into the country, it was that first step in the process—the trade recognition—that was proving to be a barrier, and it was taking many months to work through before we could do the state-sponsored skill visas and DIMIA could then assess the visa application. The process comprises three steps and the TRA step was taking longer than the state sponsorship and the DIMIA visa assessment steps, and ultimately that is a disincentive for skilled migrants.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Hill. We are very aware, from the witnesses that have appeared before us so far, of the concerns with TRA. It causes us great concern that this is a consistent complaint about the activities of TRA that has come before this committee already. Inasmuch as you and others have said that it is on the improve, it does appear to be a continual sort of foot on the hose, if I might say so, to getting a timely process moving for new migrants, particularly skilled migrants, into industries where there is an urgent need. Have your bodies raised with DEWR at a state level their concerns about TRA? If so, what is the response?

Mr Fitzhardinge—The concerns about TRA have been raised with Senator Vanstone. They have also been discussed with TRA directly: the issues about the structure of how they go about skills assessment, their appeals process, and the way in which their processes are poorly understood by clients. Warren is correct in that there is a general perception that they are not a customer-focused organisation, they are a process-focused organisation, and I believe that they have a fair way to go, but I suspect that the COAG processes and the parallel processes of licensing and skills recognition will also flow through and that some of the changes that will be made to TRA will be effected through the agreements that are made by the Council of Australian Governments.

CHAIR—COAG do not report until the beginning of 2006 on their inquiry, which means that there is still a lead time, and, as much as our committee will not be reporting until later next year as well, I think we need to examine how we can actually deal with this. Not having a TRA office in Western Australia, I understand that you have to deal with the Brisbane office, and even

though we have excellent telecommunications, I am told, in this country, are you still able to do effective business or do you think there should be an office in Western Australia?

Mr Fitzhardinge—The requirement for Western Australia to deal through Brisbane is a burden. It is a burden to the Western Australian government; it is a burden to the applicant; it is a burden to the employer. If anything becomes complex or requires detailed explanation, it is far more difficult at a distance. It is easy with straightforward applications from straightforward countries, but it becomes more complex when you are dealing with countries where there can be concern over documents and concern over references and where there is a need for extensive follow-up. The fact that there is not a structure that operates from within Western Australia is of major concern. We suspect that it has influenced employers' decisions to not take on skilled migrants. We suspect that it has influenced skilled migrants' decisions either not to come to Western Australia or not to come to Australia.

CHAIR—You would then agree, pretty obviously, that greater resources need to be given to TRA, and there need to be structural changes, just for the record?

Mr Fitzhardinge—Yes. We have seen the benefits of DIMIA becoming involved with the community with their outreach officers, and engaging at a local level with their outplaced officers, and we see that there would be significant benefits in TRA having a local presence and a strong arrangement with bodies such as the overseas qualifications unit from the Western Australia government.

CHAIR—I was going to save the outreach officers until later, but just very briefly, they have been in the field for only a short time. Have you any views on the effectiveness or otherwise of the officers? There are two for Western Australia. I believe that South Australia has someone two days a week instead of full time, so Western Australia has probably done reasonably well.

Mr Collins—I think the outreach officer program is highly dependent on the individual officer's capacity and ability to get out and engage with the business community. We are fortunate that the person who has been allocated to the chamber in Western Australia is a highly motivated, enthusiastic individual, so his results have been particularly good. My understanding of the program across the country is that it has had mixed results—some placements have not been as successful as others—but we are happy with the arrangement that applies to us; again, because of the individual efforts of the person involved.

CHAIR—Could it be extended or are two sufficient at this stage?

Mr Collins—I think that in the Western Australia market two are sufficient. My understanding is that the person who is allocated across the other industry bodies in Western Australia is not fully occupied.

CHAIR—That is interesting.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission. I notice that on page 4 of your submission—it is not actually marked page 4—you talk about alternative pathways to skills assessment and you suggest that there should be, in your view, alternative state based pathways to skills recognition. Perhaps you could elaborate somewhat on that for us.

Mr Fitzhardinge—There is provision under the Employer Nomination Scheme for a person who holds a licence or a registration of any kind to be able to have that as evidence of skills instead of a skills assessment. It seems to be sensible to apply this to the whole migration process. If somebody is registered to be able to carry on a trade or an activity within Australia, why do they need to go through a skills assessment? Essentially, a body within Australia has confirmed that they have the ability to carry out that activity.

The other area as an alternative pathway is where there is a gap in training and where what you are wanting to do is to start the migration process and then fill the gap and enable the person to operate. For instance, European based nurses are required to undertake an eight-week bridging course to be acceptable within the Western Australian government health system. To me, rather than them having to come in on a temporary visa and then apply for a permanent visa, if a commitment is made to undertake that training, a permanent visa could be issued which was dependent on them successfully completing that eight-week training course.

What that does is make the process more welcoming and it means that nurses do not have to go to Bali or Singapore because of the difference between onshore and offshore visas, which is another element of our migration process which discourages people. When I talk about alternative pathways, I think that there are a wide range of options that could be explored which would give you the same outcome but with greater flexibility and lower risk.

Senator KIRK—Currently there is just the first method you identified, the employer nomination scheme. Is that correct? Then it is in any area where there is a gap in training, not just for nurses, I gather.

Mr Fitzhardinge—No. It is where a plumber may not have skills in gasfitting or where there is a difference between the skill sets which are assessed in one jurisdiction and in Australia. What you are wanting to do is to have a small bolt-on course which then allows the person to be able to operate within Australia. Because there is a move towards more multiskilling and it is not as easy to use an ASCO or an ANZSCO code to define a person, there is a need to have this flexibility to be able to attract people, particularly in areas like petroleum where some of the traditional approaches to trades have been turned on their heads, and to have a combination of activities that make up a person's skills set.

Mrs IRWIN—At page 1 or page 2 of your submission you state under Skills Assessment:

The recent announcement by Senator Vanstone about accepting a skills assessment from State Departments for the Employer Nomination Scheme has caused widespread confusion and has not been effectively implemented.

Could you expand on that comment.

Mr Fitzhardinge—The first that I was aware of this was, in fact, the release of the skilled occupation list in May 2005, where this option was identified as being available. It also provided that, as an alternative to TRA, the department would accept a skills assessment from the department of industrial relations in the state or territory where you would be working. The discussion with the different departments in the different states apparently had not been worked through, which then meant that a potential migrant who sought this pathway (a) did not know

who to contact, (b) did not know what it would cost, and (c) there was not a process in place which allowed that pathway to be followed.

To my knowledge, that pathway has yet to be established. What has happened is that there has been a policy change or a concession that has been made but there have not been the parallel processes set up so that that is an effective concession and a real option that can be undertaken by a migrant seeking an alternative to the TRA process. An example in Western Australia is electricians, where in theory the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection could issue the licence and de facto skills assessment. Because they did not have the process for the skills assessment in place, the individuals were referred back to TRA. So it did not resolve any of the obstacles or facilitate the process.

Mrs IRWIN—This is like a trial at a cost to the applicant of \$1,000, isn't it, where they come from Brisbane to Perth? We heard a similar complaint from South Australia yesterday, where their office is in New South Wales. Those fees add up. One thousand dollars is a lot of money. Have you had any feedback from migrants who have either had complaints or been happy with the system, prior to departing their homeland to come to Australia and since arriving in Australia?

Mrs English—We have only just received our first migrant onshore. We have only been participating since January and processed our first visas from February, so we are in the newer phases for visas and we are not able to give you that answer.

Mrs IRWIN—There are no hassles, for instance, when they apply to come or when you apply for them to come?

Mrs English—No, not at the moment. We have just done a trip around Europe. We are getting a lot of inquiries now, so we will be trying to turn those around, but at the moment we have not had any problems at all with the migrants.

Dr LAWRENCE—After what seems like 15 years, we still do not have mutual recognition of skills across Australia. That has to be something we address, Mr Chair, as a serious shortcoming. I do not want you to comment on that necessarily, but I have a sense of frustration about it. You mentioned in your submission that there is a need for better projection of skills demands to inform training and migration decisions, but it strikes me that in much of this area there is a certain faddishness about it. Suddenly we are looking to overseas sources as almost the only source of improvement in skills in our community, and yet there are pools of Australians who are available, with training, one would think.

I look particularly at underemployed people who turn up on the list as employed. They clearly want more work but cannot get it. Some people have estimated that in some areas—particularly professional management and so on—with appropriate backup and retraining, you could get significant increases, women being the classic case. There are a lot of underemployed women out there with the basic skills but where training is the issue rather than migration.

In your work, you are obviously required to balance these two sets of questions. Are we underresourcing the existing pool of work? I know it is probably not sufficient for the resources sector, but for the other areas of skill that are required how much emphasis should we be placing

on retraining and reskilling a work force that is underemployed—and there is a significant number of those around, even in Western Australia—and also arguing things like adequate child care, flexibility in their working conditions and so on?

Mr Fitzhardinge—Any skilled migration program needs to be part of a much broader policy that relates to training and development within the existing community and also looking at better skills recognition for people who have overseas qualifications. Western Australia has always relied on migration for its growth, and typically half of that work force growth comes from migration. It is a question really of the extent to which migration is promoted and the component that skilled migration makes up of the broader migration program.

If you look at the demand out for the next five to eight years, it cannot be achieved by simply retraining Australians. At the moment we are only getting a couple of thousand people a year coming from the other states to Western Australia. There is not a massive industry restructuring taking place within Australia which will provide the opportunity for the growth states to attract people from the other states. Employment has grown significantly in all Australian states. The participation rate at the moment in Western Australia is up to 68 per cent. The unemployment is down to four per cent. There is not much option to squeeze a greater proportion of people out of the community.

Our work force is also becoming more skilled. Typically, within the resources sector, 70 per cent of the people employed are in ASCO codes 1 to 4. Western Australia's economy now has over 40 per cent employment in ASCO codes 1 to 4 which are covered by the skilled migration area. It is important that we upskill locals and have courses such as those supported in Kalgoorlie by the WA School of Mines, particularly where there is a worldwide shortage of those skills. It is important that engineering courses are supported: over 1,000 engineering students have been turned away at a time when we are looking to encourage people to migrate to Australia as engineers. We are going to have long-term shortages of doctors and nurses, and it seems that these professions are ones which we should encourage Australians to move into, rather than being too cute and providing these as elite courses or having universities talk about the high entry barrier levels for these courses.

CHAIR—Mr Collins, did you want to add to that?

Mr Collins—Yes. Most employers in Western Australia would be happy to employ local people if they were available. I do not know of one member of my organisation who would not choose to employ locally rather than source people offshore. The current arrangements require employers to go offshore because there just are not enough people available. In terms of the capacity of the local education training system to upskill people to fill gaps in the marketplace, there is some more work, we believe, that is required in that area. It is not an issue about availability of resources; it is about the flexibility and responsiveness of the education training system to deal with industry's immediate demands. There seems to be a long lag time in terms of industry demand for particular skill areas and the capacity of the education training system to service that demand.

Dr LAWRENCE—Can I just insert a little question mark on the end of that? Do industry groups or individual companies feel any responsibility for providing some element of training for their own work force, or is that an old-fashioned idea?

Mr Collins—No, not at all. My organisation's position is that education training is a joint responsibility of the employer, the individual and the funding agency—government. There is no expectation that employers will not carry their weight in relation to training.

Dr LAWRENCE—It was the way you expressed it. I thought that was what you were saying.

Mr Collins—No. In fact, the latest ABS figures clearly show that employers—both in Western Australia and Australia as a whole—are spending more on training their employees than they have ever done.

Dr LAWRENCE—I wanted to get that clear. I have a question in relation to skills recognition. I suppose it comes from the earlier discussion. You recommend:

The Inquiry should consider removing the requirement for skills assessment, points assessment and for the occupation to be on the Skilled Occupation List for skilled occupations where the State Government is a significant employer and where the applicant will be employed by the State Government.

Would you care to elaborate on that? What particular areas of skill would that cover, in your view?

Mr Fitzhardinge—A new category of migration visa was introduced recently—the state and territory nominated independent visa—which was specifically designed for states to be able to support the occupations that they considered necessary for the economic development of their state. The constraint is that, for a person to be sponsored under the state and territory nominated independent program, the occupation needs to be on the skilled occupation list and have points allocated on that. I am suggesting that there should be further flexibility so that the state can sponsor those occupations—whether they be linesmen in some of the state utilities or positions within the health sector; whether they be police officers—where they have particular shortages and can identify and demonstrate those shortages to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. For that to work, it means that they need to have a non-points-tested category.

We have also discussed this with the resources sector. There are occupations such as process workers, plant operators, people that are in the heavy haulage area that fall outside of the skills occupation list, yet some of these people may be earning \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year. A process operator in the oil and gas sector earns over \$100,000 a year, but these are occupations that are not on the skilled occupation list. These are areas where I consider that the state should have flexibility to be able to support these occupations under the state and territory nominated independent visa scheme.

Mr KEENAN—As well as taking in migrants to plug the gaps that we have in the work force, are we still losing people to other parts of Asia? Obviously Australians are still leaving to work overseas. Is that a significant factor?

Mr Fitzhardinge—Whilst Australia has a very good understanding of what happens within Australia in terms of the cohorts that have been analysed, we do not have a good understanding of the motivation of people seeking permanent residency and whether they continue to be employed outside of Australia. I do not think we have a good handle on the churn rate that

happens. Around a third of migrants eventually return to their countries of birth, so migration can be treated as an excursion rather than as a commitment. There is also a global demand for skills and high salaries are paid for particular projects in different parts of the world. About 800,000 Australians live overseas long term and probably 300,000 of those work overseas, so you have this elevated level of churn.

Things like the taxation policy and HECS impact on this. There are a number of disincentives that are embedded in the Australian taxation system that discourage people from remaining in Australia on graduation. To me it is crazy that we say to our graduates, the people who are deciding where they are going to live and work, 'For every month that you haven't worked, we'll take a proportion of the tax concession from you,' so that somebody graduating in November, instead of getting the \$6,000 tax concession, only receives \$3,500. There is a huge amount that can be done to make Australia more attractive to its expatriates and to people who are just launching their careers.

There are other countries that have this churn rate—the United Kingdom has people moving in and out—but an economy is much better served where it has people that remain with one employer, in one region, in one state for a significant period of time. They have a sense of ownership and participation in that community.

CHAIR—While you are on that, are you aware that overseas students who have come to Australia to study are required to do work experience before they can apply for a permanent visa? They cannot apply for permanent residence here, I am sure, unless they have a job and they cannot apply for a job if they are not a permanent resident. Are you aware of some of those anomalies?

Mr Fitzhardinge—There is concern that study is being seen as a pathway to employment and that we may end up with a lot of migrants that are essentially following the cheapest education pathway, rather than looking at the skills that are needed to support our economy.

CHAIR—If we educate them, wouldn't it be nice if we kept them?

Mr Fitzhardinge—It really depends on the employment outcomes. At the moment we are in the fortunate position that after migrants have been here for a number of years their earnings and their employment profiles—where they have come here under skilled migration—are either equivalent to or better than the Australian population. That is something which needs to continue.

But if we follow some of Canada's migration practices, we can end up with a pool of people who, whilst skilled, are not necessarily employable, and that is a concern which is causing tensions right around the world. It is my view that, in having a skilled migration program, anybody who enters under that program should be directly or immediately employable.

CHAIR—It is interesting that you say that, because in Adelaide yesterday we met somebody just like that, who is educated as a demographer, but there are not many demography jobs around.

Senator PARRY—I do not want to get into a philosophical debate about education and how we should educate people in our country, but could you see merit in having a competency based assessment on particular skill sets rather than a qualification for a particular vocation? I know it would be unpalatable to a lot of people because of a philosophical issue, but, for example, in the case of an electrician, to expand our program and to get people we want, could you see merit in just saying, ‘Okay, you have competencies in this portion of being an electrician but you’re not qualified as an electrician,’ providing they were assessed by a competent assessment panel?

Mr Fitzhardinge—Yes, a move away from regarding a trade as being a block and seeing it more as being composed of a bundle of individual competencies that can be measured. There are some areas where you simply cannot replace experience by having people studying up to pass a competency test in a short period of time. I think there still is scope for having some areas where experience is counted as well as competency. As I understand it, the COAG assessment is looking at moving from time based courses to competency based courses which are made up of building blocks, where you can assess the individual competency.

Mr Collins—There is a current project that is under way—the national skill sets program. Our colleagues from the Western Australian Department of Education and Training will be able to give you more information on the program. Groups of skills that are compatible in terms of particular occupational areas can be blocked together and it allows people to learn particular skills without going through the full trade program. That is a program that is currently under way and, as Chris just said, the work of COAG in this area has already identified that a move to a competency based system is long overdue.

CHAIR—Evidence was given yesterday that the danger in going down this route, though, is that we tend to dilute the quality and competency of that particular profession or skill or trade if we allow it to be diluted into silos or components, as you say. I am sure a lot of people have different views on that. There is an alternative view.

Mr Collins—The way to guard against that is to allow multiple exit and entry points so that you build your skills over the life of your career; you come in and out at the time that the market needs the skills. It is not about diluting the skills. It is about allowing people to learn the components that they need at the time they need them.

Senator PARRY—Who would assess?

Mr Collins—Under the current Australian qualifications training framework, registered training organisations would do that. That is part of the tension between licensing and the vocational education training system, because we have a dual system in this country. The Australian qualifications training framework recognises people’s skills against the competencies in the various national training packages but regulatory authorities then insist on having a licence that sits over the top of that, and part of the issue in terms of mutual recognition is to remove that dual system.

CHAIR—You talk about regional migration and fly in, fly out and there seems to be some exasperation about the fact that we are not relocating our skilled migrant force in the regions—particularly, I suppose, in the mining resource areas.

What can we do to address that? For example, would you suggest that we give greater point weighting to those who would stay in the regions? In addition to that, on the English-speaking requirements that you have referred to, I had some frustration the other day in endeavouring to get a welder out from the old Yugoslavia. His English was not sufficient for the visa class that he applied for, but, strangely enough, when I carried on a bit they then said to me, 'Oh, there's another subclass of visa you can try where English is not a problem as long as they commit to studying it.' They might be relatively unrelated, but does somebody have an opinion?

Mr Hill—Through the state government we are actively encouraging people to locate in regional areas. The skilled independent regional visa gives people a bonus or a discount—however you interpret it—of 10 points if they nominate to go into a regional or low-growth area. In terms of how we market employment opportunities in Western Australia from a state government perspective, there is a strong focus, a strong emphasis, on the range of employment opportunities in regional Western Australia. We actively encourage people to consider that option almost before they consider Perth. In theory—I guess in reality—most people look at the capital cities but, because of the growth in the employment opportunities throughout Western Australia, we are saying to a tradesman, for instance, 'You can work from Albany to Kununurra.' It is really up to that person. It depends on their lifestyle or family circumstances and a whole range of other factors that influence their ultimate decision. We are actively encouraging that. We work with our regional development commissions. They understand what the employment opportunities are in the regions and then feed that information back to us so that we can provide that information to potential migrants. There are things like our web sites, and the international expos we attended recently, where we had two officers from the regional development commissions with us.

CHAIR—Can I get you to expand on that. You did attend in London, was it, or Berlin?

Mr Hill—We attended the DIMIA Australia Needs Skills expos in London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Chennai, and then there were two major public expos which were attended by the state government and several other states and industry bodies.

CHAIR—How did you or the West Australian representatives see the effectiveness of the exhibitions in those capitals? Did we get any bounce out of it at all for Western Australia?

Mr Hill—The response from the public was overwhelming in every location. It pre-screened people; you had to have an occupation on the skilled occupation list. It was extremely beneficial. Most of the people coming through the door were skilled potential migrants. Certainly we have had a spike in inquiries for Western Australia. Western Australia is probably the preferred destination, which is interesting. I think it is to do with our brand awareness, and the desirability of WA's location is extremely high, particularly in Europe—in India as well, actually. We would expect, as we are doing more follow-up with people, that we would see a spike in applications for migration or state sponsorship through STNI visas.

CHAIR—Has there been any immediate flow-on?

Mrs English—There has, yes. The first day we were in London there was a spike on our web site and in applications. We have had an increase of probably 30 emails a day since our visits to Europe.

Mr Hill—Some of the people coming through the London show, for instance, had already gone through the trade recognition process, so they were looking at, ‘Which option do we take?’ Through state sponsorship we were able to advise them that we can accelerate that process for them and that there are some good employment opportunities in regional areas. I think within two days I had formal applications for STNI lodged and approved, so there were some immediate results where we accelerated the process for people and so got some very quick runs on the board. What our state government did was to conduct skills assessments for people at all the public and DIMIA expos, and that, I guess, provided an additional incentive for people to consider Western Australia. We are following those people up that would appear to be eligible for state sponsorship, as a means of securing their movement to WA.

Mr Fitzhardinge—To give some idea of scale, we were getting around 17 visitor sessions a day on our web site before the DIMIA events and we are getting 175 after, and the rate of visa processing has tripled for state sponsorship following the events.

CHAIR—Is the processing of these particular people going a bit more smoothly than we have found before? Is there a willingness to expedite it?

Mr Hill—Again, TRA have said that they have done their utmost to clear the backlog, so a rush of applications, which everyone is expecting, should be processed. As Chris said, the easier countries to assess in the UK and Europe are saying a 10- to 15-day turnaround time, whereas a few months ago the advice was anywhere between three and six months. They are committed and they understand that there should be a rush of applications so they need to clear the decks to be able to cope. Some of the feedback at the public shows which followed on from the DIMIA shows, where people had started the process or had gone through the TRA process, was that people were saying to us over there that they had their TRA processes approved and completed within a matter of weeks. That was before TRA told us that, so we were pleasantly surprised.

Mr Collins—Mr Chair, the Chamber of Commerce participated in the London and Chennai expos on behalf of its members, and we were highly sceptical before the event in terms of whether it would be a successful exercise or not. We were pleasantly surprised. The work that DIMIA did in screening the applicants to make sure that they had the skill requirements before they attended, we thought, was a really useful exercise.

CHAIR—Do you see merit in DIMIA extending it, say, to the Philippines and some of our other nearer neighbours?

Mr Collins—We certainly see some benefit in continuing with the skill expos. We are not certain yet about where they should be. We had an inquiry, I think yesterday, about whether there should be one in Bangladesh, for instance, and we just do not know enough about the market there to determine whether that is an appropriate location. We think that the principle of having tags at skill expos, where people are screened prior to their attendance, is a useful exercise.

Mr Hill—I think the UK and Europe will continue to be an excellent source of skilled migrants. We are already talking to DIMIA about cities outside of the capital cities. For instance, in the UK we are looking at Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle et cetera, outside of London. The other locations are South-East Asia and the Americas. As Gary said, we have said to DIMIA,

‘Look, give us some more information about the size of the potential target market and what particular skill sets we could be targeting in the Philippines versus, say, Brazil or China.’

The issue for us is also that we need to be reasonably comfortable, if we are going into those locations and attracting either ex-pats or residents in those countries, that their skills can be translated into Australian qualifications. It is pointless us going to China, for instance, and looking at Chinese welders if their qualifications are not likely to be recognised and in general their English language skills are at a low level that would preclude them from passing the various tests.

CHAIR—That leads me to the other part of my question about the English requirement which you referred to earlier, Mr Fitzhardinge—that we could give concessions in some respects to different categories as long as they committed to English courses. Did I get you wrong?

Mr Fitzhardinge—No, that was a statement that you made! What I said was that, if there were to be a change in the IELTS test, it should be looked at on an occupation by occupation basis. Clearly, there is a difference between a vehicle spray painter and an electrician in terms of the work environment, the degree of communication required and the consequences of their activities. If there is to be an increase in the level of requirement from IELTS 5 to greater than IELTS 5, it should be looked at on an occupation by occupation basis. There are concessions that are available under some visa schemes for people with lower levels of English, but that needs to be supported by a parallel program.

You need to look at the infrastructure that is available to support that, particularly in regional Western Australia. We have been looking at a multicultural communities program, where we get a partnership with local government, federal government and state government to look at improving the employability of humanitarian migrants, but combining these with skilled migrants and their families, to try and set up an infrastructure that is going to make the broad migration program settlement more successful in the smaller communities where up until now settlement services have not been present or effective.

CHAIR—Unfortunately, we have not had time to discuss humanitarian migrants, who are an untapped source of potential skills or work force. We will obviously be dealing with that with some other witnesses here today. I would like to thank you for the quality of your submission this morning. It has been very helpful and informative. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat any additional information you think may be needed or that you have undertaken to provide us with as soon as possible. Thank you for your attendance.

[10.11 am]

HULL, Ms Eileen, Manager, Career Development Services, Department of Education and Training

JONES, Mr Michael, Research and Development Officer, Overseas Qualifications Unit, Department of Education and Training

PLAYER, Mr Robert, Executive Director, Vocational Education and Training and Career Development, Department of Education and Training

CHAIR—Good morning. I would like to welcome the representatives from the Department of Education and Training, Western Australia to this public hearing. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise 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.

Mr Player—Thank you, Mr Chair. Let me say firstly that the department appreciates the opportunity to present to the committee. You would probably note from our submission that we absolutely concur with many of the skill shortage and recognition issues expressed in your information package. The Department of Education and Training itself is playing a strong role in delivering, we believe, responses to alleviate the current situation in relation to skills recognition and skill shortages. I would like to run through a couple of those relevant initiatives which are detailed in the paper. Some of them have been updated just a little.

The first initiative is the establishment by the Minister for Education and Training of a Skills Formation Taskforce to address reforms required in the apprenticeship and traineeship area of the system, including particularly consideration of improving the flexibility and responsiveness of the training system to industry needs. I have a recent brochure on that particular task force, of which I have enough copies for the committee. There are a couple of other handouts in there which I think are relevant to your inquiry.

The second initiative I would like to raise with the committee is the department's overseas qualifications unit or OQU as it is known in this state. The unit was established in 1989 and it has had a very successful track record in assisting around 30,000 people who obtained their qualifications overseas and residents wanting to have their skills and qualification recognised interstate. The unit itself facilitates individual requests for skills recognition and gives one on one assistance and direction in terms of training and employment options available. That is the important point I would like to come back to, that one to one contact.

The OQU has recently also awarded grants of up to \$10,000 to nine organisations across Western Australia to foster recognition services for migrants in the building and construction, nursing and child-care industries and we are in the process of updating a guide for assessment authorities in Western Australia. This brochure is quite a high-quality document. I appreciate that

in our submission we placed a lot of attachments in it that referred to this. It is not quite finished. It has a couple of weeks to go to sign-off, but I would like to forward that to the committee to demonstrate the type of work that the OQU is doing.

The department itself is also taking steps to improve recognition services in WA. In fact, we have created a recognition unit within the career development directorate. But I think more particular to the considerations of this committee, we have initiated a pilot and we have given it a working title of 'Good practice skills recognition for migrants with a trade skills background'.

The aim of this pilot is to work with major stakeholders, including the previous group, the Western Australian skills migration unit, working with TRA and working with DIMIA, to overcome a number of the issues and barriers that we see people confronting in skills recognition both in this state and nationally. What we hope to do as a result of that particular pilot is to streamline a number of the barriers faced by overseas and skilled migrants. We hope it is going to identify good practice. We will develop and trial a number of what we hope will be responsive and timely state based models in respect to skills recognition. We are very optimistic that that will overcome much of the complexity that people see in the current process.

The complexity and barriers which I am talking about we have highlighted in our submission, but I would just like to take the time now to draw your attention to a number of issues as we see them. The first one is that some migrants are not aware upon arrival and entering the labour market that they will need to comply with state based regulations and licensing requirements, for example. You would be well aware of the plumbing, electrical and teaching areas. To us it is extremely important that applicants are made well aware of this before in what they have obtained in terms of scope under TRA before immigration itself, or migration.

The current DIMIA project to develop a national skills assessment web portal in partnerships with the states we would hope will go a long way to alleviating—

CHAIR—Have you had input into that?

Mr Player—Yes, we have had input into that and are appreciative of it. We think it is a necessity. Also, for the current worker, the COAG Skills Working Group in consultation with the states is something that we see as being particularly beneficial and a move in the right direction.

One of the other issues that we are confronted with—and Mike may be able to talk to this later—is the conflict between a qualifications based assessment and competency based assessment in the current model. It seems to pose a major barrier to migrants with incomplete qualifications or those that in fact have predominantly obtained their skills through mechanisms other than prescribed training. The current processes employed by NOOSR, VETASSESS and TRA are largely based on full qualifications and time based experience, though there is provision for competency based assessment. The time based requirements mean that people may not have the opportunity to enter the assessment process and to demonstrate their skills.

Feedback, identification of skills and gap training analysis are also areas which are particularly limited. At the moment we deem these particularly necessary. There is also a need, in any assessment practice, to embrace agreed good practice in assessment and training. What I am talking about there is accessible, fair, reliable, valid assessments; and, again, flexibility in

skills gap training when they are identified. One of the problems in this state is that many of our migrants are initially assessed on the telephone and that is a known area of poor performance. It limits their ability for subsequent trade testing within the system at the moment.

The fourth point I would like to raise is the cost and time associated with the present system. They present real obstacles to people. I will not go into that because you have probably had a lot of information about those problems. There is one area where we see inconsistency: that is the current restriction placed on fee-free translations of training documents. My understanding—and Michael will be able to elaborate—is that DIMIA will fund one translation and often it is the case that multiple translations are needed of multiple documents and that imposes quite a barrier and complexity that people have to appreciate.

In conclusion, I have attempted to highlight some of the barriers that we see are currently impacting on skilled migrants in achieving recognition of their qualifications and their ability to work within their area of expertise in Western Australia. We have to acknowledge the work of the COAG Skills Working Group and we are really optimistic that, with the pilot that the overseas qualifications unit has initiated here and our involvement with TRA and DIMIA and those two organisations coming to the table for that pilot, we will be able to provide some innovative solutions to the current issues.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Player. Do other members have any opening statements? Okay. Before I move to the other committee members, I would like to continue on your line about the relationship between TRA and DIMIA. You may have heard the other witnesses talking about TRA. They were rather disparaging in their comments about TRA's performance: they do not have an office located in Western Australia and their responsiveness. First of all, would you concur with them that it is ideal that a TRA office be located in Western Australia? Should it be better resourced? What is your current experience of their overall performance?

Mr Player—I think it would be good to hear from the person who is working with the clients at the moment. Ideally, yes, it would be great to have a TRA office in Western Australia. There is no doubt about that. But in undertaking this pilot, we are attempting to establish a working relationship with TRA on an agreed basis, whether or not they are here or in another location, so that we can facilitate, speed up and minimise the complexity in terms of time, costs and inconvenience to the people seeking recognition.

CHAIR—In saying that, you are sort of indicating, aren't you, that it is not very timely at the moment and the responsiveness—I am not trying to verbal you—is something that you are concerned about; the flexibility of dealing with cases in a timely fashion?

Mr Player—Yes, we are. As I said, the initial contact over the telephone is difficult for people in Western Australia, particularly if you are a migrant and you do not have great competency in English.

CHAIR—That is the point. This is something relatively new. It is obvious to me that, if you are based in Brisbane, you will be doing most of your work over the telephone. If you cannot have face to face interaction with the people you are dealing with, that is not ideal.

Mr Player—The strength of our overseas qualifications unit, which has been operating since 1989, is its face to face contact with clients and its ability to give feedback to people and options on training and employment. Its strength is, in fact, to try and ascertain what the skills gaps are and point people in the right direction. That is very difficult.

CHAIR—That is the feedback that we have received from other witnesses—that TRA tends to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. They do not say what you can do to qualify or to achieve recognition. However, they would say, ‘It’s not our business to give advice.’ At the moment it seems to be an unresponsive—that is not the right word—organisation in terms of taking people forward. It is almost a guillotine.

Mr Player—In a training system, assessing people’s competency level is fine but there also needs to be an analysis of the gap between where they are at the moment and where we want them to be and then how to bridge that gap. Mike deals with these people every day.

Mr Jones—It is not just flexibility within the system; it is flexibility within the mind. I will give you a couple of short examples. This is one case study of a UK plumber that was in the submission. He has done heating ventilation, which is not accepted by TRA, but he has run his own business in the UK for 15 to 20 years. He makes an approach to TRA who immediately start to add up the numbers. They look at the type of work he has been doing and, as he is a sole operator, he has been putting in splashbacks, tiling, as well as the plumbing because people do not want three or four tradespeople coming through. TRA say, ‘We’re not convinced he’s got six years of experience in that area.’ He is very keen to come into the country. He puts his hand up for a trade test and he flies over, but they will not let him have a trade test.

We referred him to the Plumbers Licensing Board in Western Australia who were prepared to trade test him. They are confident, as we are, that he will get through this situation. But in the dialogue, TRA has said to him, ‘Even if you get your licence’—which we said in the paper would give him the ability to work as a plumber in any state; in Western Australia—‘we still won’t accept you for the purpose of migration.’ We had two employers in the regions that were keen to engage this person. These things could have been done through the SMU, but in the end he said, ‘I’ve got a family to feed in the UK,’ and he went back.

Coming back to the telephone interview, the other case we had was a West African gentleman who was mildly dyslexic. He was getting work in the mine sites in the remote areas. He had a heavy mechanical background and wanted to get a trade certificate through TRA. He wanted to get a job locally with his family, start a family, and so on. He got to the stage of a telephone interview, and the interview was basically asking a five-shot set of questions: what would you use a left-handed second rated wrench for? He would not have known the terminology. He was certainly able to converse but he would not have known the specific terminology.

If he had been in a practical environment—and he is coming into the pilot and TRA have agreed to that, thank goodness—I am convinced that if you said, ‘I want that stripped down and that put back together,’ he would instinctively reach for the right tools, the right spanners. It is a nonsense to be interviewing people over the telephone when English is not their first language.

Senator KIRK—You make mention in your submission on page 4:

Lack of information about State-based registration and licensing requirements have impacted adversely on employment outcomes of some migrants who have obtained assessment prior to migration.

Then you go on to say that, as a consequence of that lack of information, some people have gone on and pursued quite expensive training pathways to get here. You also mention that information that is available should be in plain English and should be translated. I was quite surprised to read that: I thought that would be pretty obvious. Could you tell us what languages the information is in? How accessible is the information to those people who are looking to come here?

Mr Player—One of the best examples is to try and navigate the current web sites—whether it be TRA, NOOSR, VETASSESS or DIMIA. It is quite an operation. It is the navigation, it is the finding of the information and it is the understanding of the information. Again, Mike would be able to give you some insight into the problems that that creates, but this has been recognised by DIMIA trying to bring that together, linking it to the web sites within the particular states and so on. The test will then become whether or not that is understandable and whether or not that has any impact, so that people know what is required and do not undertake unnecessary training but also, by the same token, understand the scope of what their current limitations are.

Mr Jones—And the portal certainly is simple, linked to specific requirements. One of the things we encounter is where migrants come in, having been preassessed by TRA, only to find that there are additional requirements. They are often complex, but they may be as simple as oxyacetylene welding as opposed to propane gas. Many of these people have persuaded their families to come over for a better life, as you would know, and every single delay is costing them money. Psychologically, the barriers are making them feel, ‘Well, maybe this isn’t the place for us.’ They all say, ‘Why didn’t I know this beforehand? I’ve known about this for 12 months but not the specific needs. I could have undertaken this training offshore,’ or, ‘I would have been perfectly happy to tap into a local institution for some online distance education to bring myself up to speed.’

Senator KIRK—You also mention in your submission a system whereby on the web you could do some form of self-assessment to try to determine in advance whether or not you are likely to be accepted. Is there any suggestion with this web portal that is going to be established that such a facility might be made available?

Mr Player—I am not certain. Mike has been our rep on that committee.

Mr Jones—We are meeting on the 25th, and it has certainly been talked about. DIMIA have said that they are happy to support whatever state based bodies feel they want to do in terms of linkages to training and so on. The detail will be worked out in a couple of weeks time. I think DIMIA and the Commonwealth, as they have acknowledged through COAG, have some responsibility to make clear what the responsibilities are, what the needs are and what the requirements are. That is being looked at and hopefully it will come to fruition.

Senator KIRK—I take it from that that the Western Australian government is playing an active role.

Mr Jones—Yes.

Senator KIRK—Have all of the other states been involved in the process as well?

Mr Jones—Yes, they have.

Senator KIRK—You have been given quite an opportunity then to provide information and feedback as to how the current system is working and how the web portal might be designed.

Mr Jones—Yes. We as a department have always looked for ways to help migrants. We have established a lot of good relationships with individuals in DIMIA, in TRA and so on. We have undertaken country visits with TRA. On the basis of that, we have always been invited to contribute, which is good.

Senator KIRK—What is the time frame for the web portal? When is it likely to be up and running?

Mr Jones—I am expecting a predraft into the department in the next couple of days, of a CD-ROM. We will be shaking that down in a couple of weeks, then there will be a version released that we can take out to networks and, obviously, other states and territories to get some feedback from migrants and people that work with migrants and then that will be developed. I think that that would be up in about six months.

Senator PARRY—It was great to read your case studies. Case studies like that add weight to a submission. They are real practical examples, and you have given another one this morning. You may have heard the previous witnesses. I discussed with them the issue of competency based assessments. You alluded to that, whereby people would be assessed in the field rather than over the telephone, which is ludicrous. I do not know how that could occur in the first instance, but obviously it has. What is the greatest obstacle to competency based assessments for skill packages or skill sets that are required for particular tasks?

Mr Player—I will generalise, because the question is relevant to competency based assessment and recognition as well as to the specific area of the assessment of our assessment conditions for individuals. You have to have in the first instance—and this is coming back to the point about the self-assessment and the review—the assessment tool. The assessment tool has to be reliable, it has to be valid and it has to be transparent. Good principles say that that has to be developed and it has to be accepted as such.

Senator PARRY—Could that be industry based?

Mr Player—Yes. At the end of the day, if that assessment tool does not reflect the competencies required by industry, it does not get there. If you have that assessment tool, you have to ideally have the mechanism, as I said earlier, to ascertain where the person stands in relation to that competency, or group of competencies, and what the gap is between where they stand and what is the expected standard. Then a mechanism for flexibly linked training—whether you want to call it remedial training or skills gap training—has to be in place. Unless you put that together as a total, it does not make a lot of sense.

Senator PARRY—Do you see a jealousy factor from existing participants in the work force, particularly Australian workers and immigrants coming in with not the same sorts of qualifications but obviously with the skill sets to do the job?

Mr Player—No, I do not. Mike, do you?

Mr Jones—No. I would like, if I may, to add something on the competency based assessment issue. Competency based assessments are obviously the way to go, and the feedback on that is critical. Rather than a stop-go model, you need a facility model that identifies what is missing. I thought competency based was the absolute thing for our group of migrants when it first came in, but the danger for our group is that there can be an atomised approach to assessments and there needs to be a peak skills approach. If you look at the child-care model that we gave some information on, where we brought all the sectors together—the unions, the training providers and so on—and we looked at the critical peak skills associated with child care, we start right at the top of the pyramid. We make sure the assessors have the same philosophical basis they have across cultural understanding in training, and that is important as well. I know, Rob, you are very keen on a peak skills approach yourself.

Mr Player—Yes. Gary Collins from the previous group mentioned the Australian Quality Training Framework. We have the mechanisms, I believe, to do that. Recognition of prior learning—basically the general area that we are talking about—is high on the agenda in a number of areas within the training system.

Senator PARRY—Recognition of prior learning or current competencies is too difficult, though, isn't it? I understand that that is a time-consuming process on its own.

Mr Player—It is difficult in determining the assessment tools. It is then difficult maintaining it, but you weigh up the costs of that, and the difficulty, with the benefits that are derived from it.

Mr Jones—We are looking at an on-the-job pilot, in child care again but as a model, because there is a critical shortage in child care. There are high numbers of unqualified workers supporting the system, many of whom have been there for 10 years. Why are they not being acknowledged for the skills they pick up? Why are employers not engaging in facilitating them through the system? That is something we hope to start in a couple of weeks. We have already done some preliminary work and identified five centres in Fremantle. I caught your comment earlier. 'I want Mike to come in and know everything about everything. He might know 90 per cent but if he does not know everything I am not going to let him through the door.'

Dr LAWRENCE—That is probably a good point to follow on from. I would be most interested to have a look, because I think there is a big question of underemployment—people who are already here, whether they are migrants or people whose families have been here for generations.

One of the things that struck me as you were talking is that in this whole question of mutual recognition we have not looked at a model—perhaps you have, but I am not sure that we have in the committee so far—that says each of the state governments clearly has the skill set, the organisation, to deal with the question of recognition. Why do we have another body at the Commonwealth level? Why don't we license the appropriate bodies at a state level and say,

‘That is your responsibility. You make the recommendations to DIMIA. We know that you will get it right’? You will simultaneously cover both the question of what is right for your state, and whether these are skills that should be recognised, given the Australian training environment. I put to you the question of whether you would be in a position, without too much additional work and resources on your own part, to give the tick-off on people who are making applications to come to Australia under various categories of visa, if you were licensed to do that, if it was agreed that you would do it for the Commonwealth. I know you cannot speak for the state government.

Mr Player—No, it is very difficult.

Dr LAWRENCE—But is it feasible?

Mr Player—As you said, there is a resource issue. Where would these resources come from?

Dr LAWRENCE—Yes, but is it feasible?

Mr Player—Yes, it probably is feasible, but it would have to be considered very closely and analysed. I think it is feasible. Yes, it is a relevant question.

CHAIR—Dr Lawrence, while you are on that, I hope you do not mind me butting in.

Dr LAWRENCE—Sure.

CHAIR—We had a witness yesterday who suggested that the Commonwealth take over the responsibilities because of the concern that if you have state based organisations having the control that is being suggested, again you have all these individual state levels of competency or of expectation or whatever, so you do not have a uniform application. You might want to address that.

Dr LAWRENCE—Why is this preoccupation with Stalinist uniformity coming from a conservative? It is getting weird!

CHAIR—It is just that when you go from one state to another as a plumber, for example, you want to be able to—

Dr LAWRENCE—That is a mutual recognition question, which has to be dealt with separately.

Mr Player—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—But in terms of the sorts of issues that you have raised today, it would make a lot of sense, because the states have not only the responsibility but the skills and training and assessment.

Mr Player—Yes, that is right.

Dr LAWRENCE—The Commonwealth, frankly, does not have them, which is why these things get so complicated. It is not something the Commonwealth is familiar with. It is not something that is their daily bread, as it is for state governments.

Mr Player—Again there is a parallel within the training system. We have a national training system. We have a national Australian Quality Training Framework.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is right.

Mr Player—In each state we do have a registration and accrediting body responsible for the registration, accreditation and quality assurance of our training programs. There is a parallel there.

Dr LAWRENCE—We do not need two levels of government dealing with this, and I think the states are more flexible.

Mr Jones—We do mention this in the submission as well. Our thoughts were more where people are not getting through the NOOSR/VETASSESS/TRA system. Those that perfectly match get through perfectly, obviously. It is those that do not that we feel the states should be able to assess and say, 'Yes, we'll undertake assessment out here,' or, 'We'll look at it ourselves,' or, 'We'll look at it over here,' and then we can say to DIMIA, 'Yes, this person will meet requirements and will be an asset to Western Australia,' and, 'We do have a shortage and they are prepared to go into the—'

Dr LAWRENCE—'And we will supervise the additional training that they need.'

Mr Jones—Yes, if it is an orientation program, and the VETASSESS example is a good example of that.

Dr LAWRENCE—Can I just follow up. It is not really directly related, but one of the problems that you have hinted at is that people sometimes withdraw their applications or become disaffected because they have had to go through a process that has been quite onerous. Have you done an evaluation of the performance of skilled migrants who come here in terms of their willingness to stay, their willingness to use the skills for which they were originally accepted? We have heard a little bit about the churn factor, that there are quite a few people who return home, but are they actually employed in the industries and using the skills that they were accepted for? Do you have any evaluation?

Mr Player—I am not aware of any data that we have on that, or any studies that we have undertaken.

Dr LAWRENCE—I am not sure if the Commonwealth does either.

Mr Player—No.

Ms Hull—I think you might find that Murdoch University has done some research.

Dr LAWRENCE—It might be worth our while to get our hands on that, too, because it does raise the question again about what precisely it is you are getting when you get a skilled migrant if they are not using the qualifications for which they were accepted.

Mr Player—Yes.

Ms Hull—They have looked at it under the underemployment issue.

Mr Jones—Certainly one of our small grants is looking at that, particularly with a survey of the Croatian Australian community, and, although it is a small grant, there are already people coming out that are feeding into the TRA projects. We have had about seven electricians come through, we have got about four nurses, and so on. Our own bridging programs in the early nineties when there was a shortage of nurses, we put an ad, it went into the system and we had 120 nurses come out who hit brick walls. The first one went through in eight weeks.

Dr LAWRENCE—They were sitting here, waiting to be ticked off.

Mr Jones—Sitting here, yes.

Mrs IRWIN—Michael, would that be through the state-specific and regional migration mechanisms, like these nurses you mentioned?

Mr Jones—No, they were permanent resident nurses.

Mr Player—The OQU particularly works with permanent residents, more so than people offshore.

Mrs IRWIN—What is the process that Western Australia undertakes to sponsor a migrant under that state-specific and regional migration initiative? Do you consult industry?

Mr Player—We are not managing that. It is probably more of an issue for the previous group. I would be reluctant to comment with any authority on that.

Mrs IRWIN—Michael, I think you were discussing some case studies before.

Mr Jones—Yes.

Mrs IRWIN—There was the plumber.

Mr Jones—Yes.

Mrs IRWIN—I think at the end of it you said that he got really frustrated and threw his arms up in the air, but I think that you were concerned that he was going to seek to migrate to New Zealand, where he had been more positively received. I think, Chair, we might have to look at the New Zealand model. Do you know much about the New Zealand model?

Mr Jones—I do not know anything about that. I think unfortunately for us, he ended up going to Cyprus.

Mrs IRWIN—Regarding the web portal, have you taken into consideration the number of languages you are putting on that portal?

Mr Jones—When we were involved in the Independent Assessment Service, which is an English language translation service, we looked at 14 languages, but we would certainly consult with the current groups. We have an Overseas Qualifications Network that has been established through the department for about 12 years and we would certainly consult strongly with that service provider network as to what the current languages were. As you would appreciate, they do change, depending on what groups come through, and you might want to focus on humanitarian refugee entrants, for example, or whatever. But we would certainly take guidance from DIMIA and our own networks on that.

Senator EGGLESTON—I would like to make a comment on the issue that was raised about state based systems or an overarching federal system. It seems to me quite clear that it is much better to have a state based system sensitive to the needs of each state. There is an administrative model in the environment and biodiversity act where Environment Australia sets broad parameters and the state environment protection agencies carry out environmental assessments which the federal authorities then look at and, if they are satisfied, they tick them off.

CHAIR—Doesn't that lengthen the system, though, if they are looking?

Senator EGGLESTON—It at least means that the state systems are given an opportunity to work. In this case with DIMIA, obviously the federal government has an interest in migration, but the employment opportunities and needs in Western Australia are perhaps very different to those in Tasmania and it makes a lot of sense to have a West Australian based system to, for example, look at the needs of the developments which are going on in the Pilbara and so on, but support a continuation of that kind of model.

I was also interested in the degree of local assessment and local training. I have come into this a little bit late, so you might have covered it already. Where, for example, we had this plumber, I notice that he had to go through quite a long period of assessment. Is it possible to set up some sort of different process? These days a lot of professional bodies do computer based examinations, with questions and answers, and that is a quick way of assessing people's knowledge, with perhaps practical tests. The long process which this person found he could not accommodate might possibly be avoided with a different format of local assessment. Is that something that might be considered?

Mr Player—Yes, that is quite timely, too. I mentioned earlier that in this state there has been a general level of recognition. We have established a recognition unit within Eileen's directorate, and one of the tasks that we are looking at is in fact speeding up the process and trying to move it away from a paper based system to a skills achievement testing system.

Ms Hull—It has been problematic. There are two schools of thought, which are also perhaps reflected in the VETASSESS trial approach to the competency based system. There have been those who almost want to be the police of the system and there are now those who are trying to

facilitate that assessment so that people can get their competencies assessed relatively quickly. It is about finding a balance to make sure that we do not lower standards because there would then be massive criticism. That is not our intention at all. Our intention is to facilitate the skills assessment as quickly as possible.

We hope to have a new model immediately after Christmas, particularly in the building trade. The building industry peak body estimates that hundreds of workers are employed under their trade capacity—as labourers and TAs—because they have not been able to get their skills assessed in order for them to get their trade qualification. That creates a lot of barriers for people. So we are starting with the building industry and we are hoping that model will make a significant difference.

Mr Player—But there is no cookbook solution.

Senator EGGLESTON—No, but it sounds to me as though you are going in the right direction. At least it will speed it up.

Mr Player—We would hope so, yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—In your submission you mentioned the inflexible application and attitudes of some professional registration bodies. Could you expand on that? Who is particularly difficult: which groups? Are there any signs of change?

Mr Player—One of the reasons why we have gone down the pathway of the pilot program is in fact to work with not just TRA and DIMIA but with our local industry training advisory bodies and the licensing boards and so on. We have a very close relationship with most of those bodies but there is a need to move forward. One of the aims of the pilot program is to identify best practice across the various disciplines and then to apply that best practice in other areas.

Mr Jones—Can I give you a case study example?

Dr LAWRENCE—Yes.

Mr Jones—This happens in many of the professional bodies. A leading Bulgarian plastic surgeon came into the unit. Again, she had many years of experience, not only as a specialist plastic surgeon but also as a specialist dentist. One part of her work was taking people that looked basically like elephant man or elephant woman and, over a period of anything up to two or three years, she would work on them and enable them to go out into society. She had also pioneered procedures in Bulgaria. She came to Australia and applied to the Royal College of Surgeons, who initially said they would exempt her from the theory but she would need to do four years of training. She was assessed by a couple of plastic surgeons who did not ask her any questions about the procedures involved in all of this complex surgery—and I was privileged, in one sense, to see all of the photographs from whoa to go on several cases. The one question that stuck in her mind was, ‘How many melanomas have you removed?’ She said, ‘Well, there’s not a big call for it in Bulgaria but maybe eight,’ and the gentleman said, ‘I’ve done 127,’ and leaned back.

We undertook some advocacy with the Royal College of Surgeons and managed to cut that period down to two years, which meant she could get conditional registration in Western Australia. But how could you say to someone at that level, 'You need four years of training'? That is unbelievable. That is just one of the many case studies.

Dr LAWRENCE—Sections of the medical profession are notorious for gatekeeping. It is not necessarily about skills recognition.

CHAIR—The state government has recently made announcements about the reduction in time for some apprenticeships. Do you see this as being positive in terms of providing greater skills in a more timely fashion for the areas of shortage?

Mr Player—The particular area where that has happened is in the residential building industry. It flows from the Skills Formation Taskforce. One of the subsets of that is building and construction. There is a group headed by one of the leading builders here, Dale Alcock, which has representatives from the peak bodies—the master builders, the Housing Industry Association, the unions and so on. Under its terms of reference for flexibility and responsiveness to training, the group looked at the residential building area. Currently we have a four-year trade—for example, carpentry and joinery—and there are many competencies within that trade that are not necessarily required in residential building.

That group went through the competencies and recommended that a number of new trades be brought in and embedded within the former building and construction area so that we now have residential carpentry, residential tiling and so on. So will the skills level requirement be relevant and applicable to the industry? Yes, it will, given that we have a significant attrition currently in a four-year trade, because people get to a particular point and say, 'I'm residential. Why do I need to go for a few more years?' There is a degree of poaching from subcontractors and movement out of the trade. It is recognising the skills that are required within the trade. It will be more attractive. In fact, we are seeing evidence straightaway with inquiries from young people, older people and employers. It is in line with the COAG agenda. That is a long way of answering, 'Yes.'

CHAIR—The answer is 'yes'. Thank you. In the same vein, you have mentioned a shortage of child-care workers and, believe it or not, hairdressers.

Mr Player—Yes.

CHAIR—Will the reduction in time be applied in those instances as well? From the migration point of view, everybody talks about construction and the building industry, but we do not talk too much about hairdressers, even though there is apparently quite a shortage in that area. Are we looking at migration outcomes in those areas as well?

Mr Player—The task force has a number of priorities—building and construction, oil and gas, metals et cetera. They are being tackled at the moment, but there is a phased approach and there will be a couple of layers as we move through particular industries. Hairdressing is on the agenda at about phase 3.

CHAIR—DEWR have a database of areas of work force shortage. Are you aware of that?

Mr Player—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you use it? Do you have an input into it?

Mr Player—We have an industry and community planning directorate within the department which works with DEWR and other organisations to ascertain what the level of skills requirements and shortages are at any stage.

Mrs IRWIN—Have you got any suggestions about how to improve, say, work experience for skilled migrants who might apply for a job but who have not had great experience onshore?

Ms Hull—Through our Employment Directions Network we have a couple of programs. One is work experience. We cover the insurance for people to undertake work experience. We also offer a very small amount of money just to help out with fares, because that is an additional cost and most of those people are on very limited incomes. We set targets that they have to meet when offering work experience opportunities to the general population, and particularly to migrants through the migrant resource centres, where we fund career services.

Mrs IRWIN—Do you have any figures on the number of people who have done work experience and been fortunate enough to get a job?

Ms Hull—I certainly do not have the figures off the top of my head, but we are very well aware that eight of 10 jobs are never advertised, that people get them through networks and through things like work experience, through being in the environment and being able to demonstrate that they are capable of undertaking the tasks, so it is a very important pathway.

Mr Jones—I used to work with migrants in Fremantle in the precursor to the EDN that Eileen is talking about. We had the same work experience program that Eileen mentioned. Our figures showed that between 60 and 80 per cent obtained some form of paid work as a result of facilitating work experience.

Mrs IRWIN—How do you think governments can improve that?

Ms Hull—We think our Employment Directions Network is a fantastic model. It is unique to WA, I have to say. We need more of those across Australia. We need the sort of focus. It is patchy. It is a particularly valuable model for people who are trying to find something local and free and supportive.

Mrs IRWIN—I have to agree with you. It is unique and it would be great if we could have that throughout Australia.

CHAIR—Could Work for the Dole be modified to do that?

Mrs IRWIN—If they got the correct training?

CHAIR—Yes, with training.

Ms Hull—My concerns with Work for the Dole, having spent many years working with labour market programs, is that the training component came out, and the length of time is problematic. What we learnt from labour market programs was that you actually needed a longer period of time and you needed really good quality training in there, and that came out of the Work for the Dole model. It does not include those any more, which is a shame.

CHAIR—If it did include far better training, it would be a good place for work experience?

Ms Hull—Yes.

CHAIR—That might be a good suggestion from the committee to the minister who administers Work for the Dole. You have talked about some of the complexities and problems. One of them was the fee for translations. We again have not gone into the humanitarian entrants in this inquiry because we are speaking to some people this afternoon about that. What you are suggesting is just more money be provided for translation services, probably by the Commonwealth.

Mr Player—Yes.

Ms Hull—In relation to humanitarian entrants, our department is involved with a whole-of-government working party looking at the needs of African refugees, significant numbers of whom are coming into WA. Obviously they do not have paperwork related to their qualifications, so the issues we have been talking about today—skills recognition, bridging courses and those sorts of issues—are really being highlighted with this particular new group of entrants, and the state government is looking at a whole-of-government approach to see how we can tackle that.

Mr Jones—Cost is always mentioned and it is obviously an important factor but there needs to be a macro view: what is the cost of keeping an electrician or a nurse or a child-care worker out for the sake of a \$30 translation? I know there is a multiplier effect, but with the courses that we have been involved in, for a \$60,000 outlay, if you multiply the training costs, you are looking at \$2 million to \$3 million worth of training costs.

CHAIR—That is certainly something we will take on board as a committee. Thank you for attending the hearing today. It was, again, a quality submission and input to this inquiry. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat as soon as possible any additional material that you have undertaken to provide.

Proceedings suspended from 11.05 am to 11.16 am

Evidence was then taken in camera but later resumed in public—

[11.50 am]

WINTER, Ms Lynda, Manager, Employment Services, South Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre

CHAIR—I would like to welcome the representative from the South Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre 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 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. You have provided us with a statement.

Ms Winter—Yes. I responded to some of the terms of reference, just in case.

CHAIR—Thank you for providing this material. The committee will consider the material at its next meeting and resolve its formal status, but you may wish to speak to it now.

Ms Winter—Yes. The work that I do is hands-on with migrants and refugees and I have been working in that area for nine years. The work that we do looks at people's career directions when they come to Australia, and a lot of that involves skills recognition issues and how they are going to fit neatly into the labour market here.

Over the nine years that I have been working in this area, I have observed considerable obstacles that seem to be ever-present and never seem to be resolved. A lot of those obstacles relate to the processes, which are inflexible and inconsistent. There seems to be a gatekeeping mentality of, 'You're out there, we're in here, and you have to jump through all these hoops before we're going to let you do anything in Australia.' It is quite difficult, time-consuming and costs a lot of money. I am not talking only about skilled migrants; I am talking about humanitarian entrants as well, who are probably my main concern.

CHAIR—Do you wish to speak to your paper in more detail?

Ms Winter—Yes. In relation to skill stream migrants, over and over again clients come to see me for general direction as to how they are going to obtain employment. They believe that when they have been assessed offshore they have actually been recognised offshore, so that when they hit Australia they can work as a nurse or an electrician and there are going to be no impediments to that. They do not realise they have to seek recognition—that it is going to be costly; that they may have skills gaps—even though they have a letter. I sometimes point out to them that it states quite clearly that it is for assessment purposes. I would say that 99 per cent of the people that I have seen believe that the letter means they are recognised, because it has an ASCO code and looks quite official.

So I think the offshore assessment processes need to be looked at and reviewed—not just the fact that they have had an assessment but to look at the occupation in Australia against what the

occupation is in their country of origin to see if it is exactly the same and if there are skills gaps, so that they know when they come to Australia what is going to happen. There are many settlement issues for humanitarian entrants that need to be dealt with, which relate to their families, settling their children in schools, health issues, trying to quickly get a job so that they can send money back home to their families in their countries of origin, in addition to problems with seeking recognition of their skills. That all adds to the stress of settlement, and very often clients will fail because of that. People with non-English-speaking backgrounds face particular barriers because of the language and the cultural understanding, and very often clients will rush at the recognition process and fail.

In relation to identifying where some of the procedures can be improved, I think the communication processes of a lot of recognition authorities are very poor. A lot of clients feel intimidated by the process. They find it difficult to get through the maze of information that is out there. It might be web based information and they may not have computer skills. The perception is that they are not very helpful and accommodating. It is generally not a customer service approach; it is more, 'Here's the form, fill it in. Go away and bring it back filled in.' It is sometimes very difficult to advocate for clients. Even though when you call you say you are advocating for somebody from a non-English-speaking background, you very often have to put the client on the telephone because they do not want to deal with an advocate. I have encountered that quite a lot. I think good customer service is just not there in a lot of cases.

In relation to the efficiency of the processes, as I said, I think it is a gatekeeping mentality. It is exclusive rather than inclusive. There is not a lot of account given to language and cultural understanding. Very often people, when they first enter the country, will try to seek recognition straightaway before they understand how difficult the process is. If you do not have a recognition body within the state, you have to deal with them via the telephone or by letter. Several of my clients have been telephoned and have been given an assessment over the telephone, which includes industry terminology which the clients are not yet familiar with.

CHAIR—You are talking about TRA again, aren't you?

Ms Winter—Yes. That has happened twice this year, involving two electrical tradespeople, and they both failed.

CHAIR—Can you give this committee any documented evidence of the cases where they have failed? Are you willing to do that?

Ms Winter—Case studies?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Winter—Not with names.

Dr LAWRENCE—I think if you could give an example without a name even, of that experience, that would really help.

Ms Winter—Yes.

CHAIR—Yes, because we are onto TRA's case a bit.

Ms Winter—I was reluctant to bring up individual bodies but, yes, that is a difficult one.

CHAIR—Feel free to bring them up!

Ms Winter—An example is a person from the former Yugoslavia whom I dealt with this year. He has several qualifications from that country—electrical engineering/electrician/electronics—so there are quite a few areas that he could fall into, which often happens and it is often difficult for people to decide where they should go. An approach was made to TRA, the form was filled out and all the supporting documentation was put in, with my assistance. When the letter came back to say that this person would have a telephone interview, I rang TRA to say that I thought it was an unfair process and that I would like to try to sort something out in this state where this person could be assessed—maybe at a TAFE or somewhere here face to face with somebody—which they refused. The telephone assessment occurred and the client failed. The client was completely demoralised and did not contact me for about three months.

Since I found out about that, I have tried to put other processes in place. I have placed his name on the pilot program that one of the previous speakers was talking about to try to facilitate the process for him and I have also tried to advocate to get him directly into work with a lot of employers recruiting from overseas on the 457 visa. That has also failed.

CHAIR—That sort of real-time or direct anecdotal evidence, if you do not want to give names, is important to us in building a case about the timeliness and the adequacy of the delivery of service.

Mrs IRWIN—Did they offer to send someone from Brisbane to Perth at a cost of \$1,000?

Ms Winter—No. One of my other clients was prepared to pay for assessment here, to pay for that process, and they refused, so he actually travelled to Queensland to meet them face to face. He also failed. Both of these people are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, so they have heavy accents and it is a difficult process for people in that situation.

Mrs IRWIN—When was the TRA office closed down here in Perth?

Ms Winter—It would be maybe three or four years ago.

Dr LAWRENCE—Was there any reason given at the time, do you remember?

Ms Winter—I really do not know. I think it is a funding issue, that they just operate out of Queensland and I believe they have an office in Canberra, but I have only ever dealt with Queensland and, because of the time difference, it is sometimes very difficult. You can have a client sitting there with you when you phone TRA and you might get the answering machine and when you next have to try to contact them the client may not be with you. It is fraught with difficulties for the worker but also for the client. And then all the interaction is via the telephone for the client or via letters or application forms. I think the client is better off being face to face, with somebody being able explain.

Mrs IRWIN—We heard a similar thing in Adelaide yesterday. They have to go through Sydney. You can understand their frustration.

Senator PARRY—What was the personnel strength of the TRA office when it was opened?

Ms Winter—Here?

Senator PARRY—Yes.

Ms Winter—I cannot remember the name of the gentleman, but he—

Senator PARRY—Just one staff member?

Ms Winter—One staff member, yes. But he was very accommodating. I could ring him and say, ‘Look, I’ve got somebody from this country with this qualification,’ and he would give me some feedback over the phone. He was always willing to see people and you could make an appointment directly then. The client would go off and see him and he would not only assess whether they had any chance of gaining a qualification but also give alternative directions, such as, ‘There’s a huge gap here so you might need go and do a little bit of top-up at TAFE,’ or something. The client had instant feedback. That just does not happen now. It is: fill in the form; assessment over the phone; failed.

CHAIR—As we have said to other witnesses, there is no saying, ‘If you did this, you might do better.’

Ms Winter—No, not to my knowledge. That may occur. I should say that most of the clients I see obviously need help or they are people that have already failed, or they are seeking their first advice, so there would be people out there that probably seek registration and succeed, but I do not see them. These are the people who are having difficulty.

Mrs IRWIN—One of your recommendations or suggestions would be for this committee to look at recommending the opening of a TRA office again in Perth?

Ms Winter—Yes. That would be great.

CHAIR—Do you want to finish this, and then we will ask you some more questions.

Ms Winter—I was talking about assessment by telephone. I think the processes are costly. If a client attempts a recognition process and fails, they then have to pay again. It is a significant issue for not only humanitarian entrants who have no money but for migrants who have a two-year wait period for any sort of assistance. It is hard enough for them to live here, without having to pay again and again for recognition processes, all sorts of assessments, upskilling, those sorts of things. And the processes take a long time.

I think it is a huge issue that, if people do not quickly get employment when they arrive in Australia and they fail at assessment or recognition, they will look for alternative sources of employment. I have lots of nurses who are working as aged care workers, doctors who are working as taxidivers, cleaners, factory workers, and all of those skills are being lost.

I currently have a nurse who has been waiting for a response from the Nurses Board for the last three years and she still does not have an answer from them, so she has given up and is now working in aged care.

CHAIR—If it were in my electorate—and I am sure everybody here would feel the same—you could try to expedite it through your representatives. Have you tried that?

Ms Winter—We have discussed that, but we have recently received funding. I managed to get the Nurses Board to partner me to look at the information that they supply to overseas trained applicants. We are in the process of doing that at the moment and I do not want to go to a local member while we have that process going, because we could end up with a good partnership—but, having said that, we have had a lot of difficulties!

Dr LAWRENCE—We deal with plenty of cases of a similar kind.

CHAIR—That is right. One on one quite often we can do something.

Dr LAWRENCE—But that is unsatisfactory ultimately, isn't it, Mr Chair?

CHAIR—Yes, it is.

Dr LAWRENCE—We really need the system to change.

CHAIR—The system needs to change if somebody who has been out here for three years has had no response.

Ms Winter—This particular case is difficult because she has a friend who was a client of mine, who is currently working at the Fremantle Hospital with identical qualifications. She went through about two years earlier than my other client. They have changed the processes since then and she just cannot get registered. They just do not accept her qualifications. Also, there is a time limit for nurses. If you have not practised as a nurse for a five-year period, you literally have to start all over again, looking for alternative employment. Bridging courses are very difficult to access; there are not many of them.

I think employers are very prone to wanting local qualifications and experience because that is what they understand. I think at the moment employers are very flexible and they are accepting overseas trained workers because there is a skill shortage, so it shows that they can employ people if they want and they can be accommodating. I think employers are put off by accents and obvious difference, which colours their judgment when they are recruiting, and their recruiting processes. I have given some solutions to that.

We need consistency of recognition processes. They are different from state to state. Clients are not aware of that until we point it out. One of the issues that we have had with the Nurses Board is that they can refuse registration to somebody in this state but tell them to go to Victoria, where they could seek registration; if they are successful, come back to this state, and then they will recognise them.

CHAIR—Under the mutual recognition provisions.

Ms Winter—Clients say, ‘This is crazy!’ Imagine a refugee, which in this case the person was, having to go to another state. There is the airfare, the accommodation, the price of assessment. I cannot see why we have to have different systems in different states, and different processes.

Mrs IRWIN—How many of your clients have actually left WA to go to other states and have not returned?

Ms Winter—I could not say how many. Some people have but, mostly, clients that come and settle are so keen on getting their kids into school, buying houses and things like that that they do tend to stay in the metro area. Some of them have gone into remote locations or gone interstate. I have had a couple of teachers that have gone interstate because it has been easier for them but I cannot really give you numbers.

CHAIR—Here is a bit of a dorothy dixer for you. Is the 510 hours given for refugees and humanitarian interests adequate for English teaching?

Ms Winter—No, because it is not competency based. It is just that you have 510 hours and that is it. If you are suffering from torture and trauma and they do not identify that, and you do not learn a thing, once your 510 hours are up, that is it.

CHAIR—Not competency based?

Ms Winter—No. It is 510 hours, whether or not you have learnt any English by the end of that time. It is time based, not competency based.

CHAIR—Unbelievable!

Ms Winter—It is not industry specific. I mean, it is good, but most clients that want to get into workplaces need English but they need industry-specific English. If you are going to be an electrician, you need to know what the tools are called and what the different things are. If you are a doctor, you need medical terminology. A lot of our clients go on and do higher levels of English, which they have to pay for, but still they come out without sufficient English, I think, for their industries. What I have suggested as an alternative approach is that clients need to be in the workplace from day one, even if they are doing English classes and they are filling a skills gap and they are seeking recognition.

We put people on work experience, but I am talking about maybe a program sponsored by employers where they might get a training wage or it is like a one-year induction program in that industry, where they can buddy another worker or something like that, so that they are covering all the bases at the same time. They are filling the skills gap; they are learning workplace English; they are being fully inducted into Australian workplace practices in the industry that they want to end up in.

We have a shortage of nurses. We could have nurses that are seeking recognition buddying with other nurses, working as nurse assistants, rather than working in aged care. They could be going to professional English classes and seeking registration with the Nurses Board—doing all

sorts of other things—and they could be in one place being streamlined into that occupation. I believe that is the answer to every single skills recognition issue.

CHAIR—It was brought to our attention yesterday that there might be an opportunity to put in place a HECS type of arrangement for the bridging courses—in other words, until you get to a certain level and salary you do not pay anything back. Do you think that is an option?

Ms Winter—Yes. But is that training or is that bridging courses?

CHAIR—No, upskilling.

Ms Winter—Upskilling.

CHAIR—Bridging courses, yes.

Ms Winter—I am in favour of bridging courses, but I am more in favour of on-the-job training, where the English and all the skills training occurs on the job.

CHAIR—Did you hear my comment to a previous witness that Work for the Dole structured with skills and training as a component might be an appropriate mechanism?

Ms Winter—Work for the Dole is 12 to 15 hours a week. It is not proper training.

CHAIR—But if it was?

Ms Winter—If it was, it would be good. But it should not be called Work for the Dole because it is a very demeaning term. There needs to be something real; something in their industry. If it is a nurse, the training needs to be in the medical profession. If it is an electrician, it needs to be in the electrical field. They need to go where they are going to end up or where they hope to end up so that they do not get lost.

Mrs IRWIN—I agree with everything you have just said.

Senator EGGLESTON—That sounds like a good idea. I notice here—as someone else did earlier—that you talk about employers being given a monetary incentive to encourage them to create on-the-job induction, bridging work experience et cetera. Could you expand on that? How would you see the incentive provided?

Ms Winter—Similar to the SkillShare days in previous Labor times, where employers then were offered maybe up to six months incentive to take on a long-term unemployed worker or a worker with a disability, and even then a migrant or refugee under a special program. I think they do that now for Aboriginal people. The employer has to be given something to take these people on, but with migrants and refugees they are already getting someone who has skills. It supplements the wages; it offsets the wages for the employers. They are not going to do it for nothing, I do not think. It would need to be for six months or a year, so that even if the person comes out at the other end and they are not going to be employed by that employer, they have been in the work force long enough to have good skills. They can go off and work as a TA if they

are not going to become an electrician or whatever it is. They know what they have to do because they are in the workplace.

Dr LAWRENCE—You have mentioned a couple of times by way of example that there are professional registration boards that are pretty inflexible—the around the world in 80 days example you gave of nursing I do not think is unique. Do you see any moves from state or federal government to attempt to educate those bodies? In a period of skills shortage you would think state governments—especially with nursing, where everyone has been leaping about with concern about shortages—might be trying to educate some of those registration bodies and saying, ‘It isn’t satisfactory to have someone waiting for three years for their qualifications to be properly assessed.’

Ms Winter—I do not know. We are always lobbying them, and I know the overseas qualification unit is also. I think because they are all independent bodies and operate independently it is sort of a hands-off approach—‘Don’t tell us what to do.’ The Nurses Board has said to me that they do not believe that there is a nurse shortage.

CHAIR—Really?

Ms Winter—Yes. I do not know what you do with them.

Dr LAWRENCE—It is very difficult. You want the professional independence.

Ms Winter—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—You want those standards to be maintained.

Ms Winter—Of course.

Dr LAWRENCE—But if they are rigid and inflexible, then it makes it very difficult for everybody. Presumably nurses coming back into the work force, too, who have been out of the work force perhaps while their children have been young, must be having difficulties with that five-year gap in their professional practice.

Ms Winter—Yes, but I think they have fast-track programs for them.

Dr LAWRENCE—Yes.

Ms Winter—I have not dealt in that area, but we need fast-track programs for migrants and refugees.

Dr LAWRENCE—There is no reason why they could not be comparable.

Ms Winter—Yes. No-one wants a lowering of standards. I do not want a substandard electrician coming in and fixing my house. That is not what I am asking for. I am asking for a fair go, a shorter time period; maybe programs that fund these clients, because if clients do not get into their occupation and they do not find satisfactory employment or cannot get employment, we then have social problems.

Dr LAWRENCE—There are costs.

Ms Winter—We have mental health problems, and we see that in our office all the time. We have family breakdown. It costs the society a huge amount of money, and some up-front intervention I think would eradicate a lot of that. It probably would help the skills shortage as well. I do not know who would drive our taxis or clean our homes and things like that, but those people would be in other occupations.

Dr LAWRENCE—It would be more a matter of choice than necessity.

Ms Winter—Yes.

Senator PARRY—You mentioned that you do not believe that employers readily accept migrants, unless there is a skills shortage when the supply and demand rule kicks in. I have had different experiences with employers where they regard some migrants as better workers than the local pool.

Ms Winter—Yes, some do.

Senator PARRY—Do you have that experience as well?

Ms Winter—Yes.

Senator PARRY—It is great to see you put down frank statements, I must add. Do you have experience on the other side?

Ms Winter—Yes. Every client and every employer is different.

Senator PARRY—Yes.

Ms Winter—Yes, we do have employers who are migrant friendly and they will come to us and take clients on work experience and offer them employment. But generally I think most employers want to feel safe and have a person whose skills, they know, are from UWA or wherever, and who speaks English. If they have an accent or are a different colour, the employer feels less comfortable.

Senator PARRY—You mentioned in your opening remarks, when you were telling us what you do, that it is ‘career identification when they come to Australia’. You put in your paper, too, that we need to do more work at the point of people leaving their country. You don’t have any prior contact?

Ms Winter—No.

Senator PARRY—Do people have any idea what they want to do when they come to Australia? For example, do they say, ‘I want to come out and be a plumber,’ or, ‘I want to come out and be a nurse’? Does that happen?

Ms Winter—People apply for skilled migration and they apply, say, as an accountant. Quite a lot of people like that, when they come here, want to do something different anyway. That is one of the things we assess: ‘What is it you want to do? Do you still want to be an accountant?’ or whatever. If they want to change their career, then we assist them in that process, too.

Senator PARRY—Really, the main guiding factor of people wanting to come to Australia is purely to come to Australia and the career path is a secondary issue?

Ms Winter—I do not know. We get a lot of clients that come and want to do the same thing and we get clients who want to change. I have a teacher at the moment who is the spouse of a 457. His wife has come here as a nurse who is employer sponsored; he is a primary school teacher. He is panicking already because he has been unemployed for two months. The process of registration as a teacher is quite a process to go through, and he is looking at alternative types of employment. He is upskilling with forklift driving at the moment, for which we are providing funding.

CHAIR—I thought there was a shortage of male schoolteachers.

Ms Winter—Yes. But it is the end of the year. He has to go through the education department. He wants to get work quickly. They need to support themselves. They have two or three adolescent children, I think. The wife is working but he wants to get a job quickly, so he could be lost to the teaching profession if he takes a different road.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We do thank you for attending today’s hearing and providing your submission. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. We would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide to the committee.

[12.20 pm]

FLETCHER, Ms Stephanie, Acting Manager, Policy and Projects, Goldfields Esperance Development Commission

CHAIR—Good afternoon. I welcome the representative from the Goldfields Esperance Development Commission 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 and 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.

Ms Fletcher—Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. In my role at the development commission over the last more than nine years since the first introduction of the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme, I have been the officer responsible for the regional migration programs and the certifying of regional applications, and in that time the role has changed and adapted many times to cater for the needs of our clients.

Over the last nine years, the Goldfields Esperance Development Commission's role—its interest in migration due to the skill shortages in the Goldfields Esperance region—has expanded a number of times. Currently, GEDC's chairperson Bill McKenzie is not only a member of our board, he is also a member of the WA Skills Advisory Board and the WA State Training Board, so we have a varied approach to migration and look at it on a number of levels.

I am here today because GEDC's involvement with migration is more than providing a certification service. If we stuck to what we were supposed to do, we would just certify applications when we received them on our desk. I suppose because of the interest that I show in the people and our companies that employ people, it is far more than this. We provide employers assistance in going through the migration application process. I even assist them with applications when they require it, to get through the immigration process.

I have come up with the saying that we demystify the migration processes for the people that we assist. I do hand-holding in many instances to make sure that people are not put off by the prospect of going through the process and I will assist them in any way possible to get through that process. That assistance has even included an appeal to the migration regulatory authority, and we did win that appeal.

Companies and individuals need local contact and support to make them feel secure throughout the process. Without the regional certifying bodies or people like myself out in the regions to provide that, then a whole section of this state is not covered. There are no migration agents in the Goldfields Esperance region, there are no DIMIA officers and we have only one federal member that covers the Goldfields Esperance region, or Kalgoorlie-Boulder. We also have a state member down in Roe. It is very sparse in terms of access to government bodies to assist them, so our state government body being the regional certified body, we are the first point of contact out there.

We have direct contact with people seeking employment these days. We have people through our previous involvement that now come direct to me with CVs and different bits and pieces, requesting assistance to find employment. We also support the activities of the skills migration unit that has recently been established and recently I have been to Dublin and the United Kingdom to support the skills migration unit in promoting Western Australia as an option to people.

CHAIR—That was a DIMIA program, was it?

Ms Fletcher—No. I did one DIMIA one in London, but there was Working Down Under, which was organised by private people.

CHAIR—Two private ones?

Ms Fletcher—Yes. I did the two private ones. We had 8,500 people through in two days in Dublin then another 5,000 people through in Earls Court in two days. They were just the weekends.

CHAIR—I know I should not be interrupting, but I will at this point. How did you find the success or otherwise of those and has there been any feedback to your region as a result?

Ms Fletcher—There will be feedback. There is something in the pipeline from Dublin that will make my trip worthwhile, one appointment that I know is happening. We are waiting on the final sign of that to the Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital. It is a position that has remained unfilled for three years, so the result of that trip will make a big difference. If that is the only one that comes out, it has been very successful. And I know there have been other contacts made to the employers, because prior to going I contacted the employers. Our region is different. Our employers are using migration as an avenue to address their skill shortages. I have in excess of 30 companies that are pre-qualified as sponsors under the 457 scheme and, adding in the one that I spoke to yesterday, there are in excess of 300 positions readily approved, waiting for people to go into. So these positions are waiting to go. They have been pre-qualified by the department and they are sitting there, just waiting to find suitable people to put into them.

CHAIR—Three hundred vacancies?

Ms Fletcher—At least. They represent just the tip that I know of. And if I can fill those, other companies will also start putting their hands up. But they are there, they are waiting to go and they are pre-qualified. I am hoping to have them filled within the next two years.

CHAIR—Are you getting any help from the immigration outreach officers?

Ms Fletcher—Yes, I do get assistance, and they are always at my call when I ring them. I have found it really delightful working with Marg Abbott and Le Augustes, who have held the position in the Perth office here, as I do with the whole staff at the department of immigration in Perth. They are very contactable and will assist me wherever possible, so I have no problem with department of immigration staff.

But in saying that, it is a position that we are not funded for and, since its inception, the demands on the workload of the commission have grown to a state where either we find alternative funding or obtain some different sort of funding to resource my position, or we need to look at what service we do provide because, quite simply, combining my role as acting manager of policy and projects with the migration work is too much. A person with experience deals with these cases because it is a complex issue, and having that built-up knowledge base is what people want to access when they are there in front of you.

CHAIR—I am butting in again, but have you approached both your federal and state members to find out if there are programs where you can fund such a person?

Ms Fletcher—We were looking at accessing state government funding through the skills migration unit and we have been told that that is not going to be possible at this point of time. At regional certifying body conferences that the department of immigration have organised, it has been clearly stated that, no, there is no avenue.

CHAIR—I am not talking about going to the government departments. I am talking about the members of parliament.

Ms Fletcher—We are currently trying to utilise cabinet submissions and bits and pieces to obtain funding for my position, but that is not going to help all the other development commissions as well, even if that is successful.

CHAIR—If we start with you as a precedent, it might not hurt.

Ms Fletcher—Yes, I would be very grateful for everything. We are in a good position in Kalgoorlie-Boulder in that our member for Eyre is the Minister for Local Government and Regional Development, so we have had a pretty close working relationship and he is well aware of the work that we are doing for migration and supports us. That is the background. I have been listening to the previous submissions and I have noticed things that members of the committee have asked. I have some information on where you might be able to find some of your answers.

Dr Carmen Lawrence asked about reporting on migration, and success and retention rates. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs has compiled a report on the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. Retention rates put that program—because it has been going for nine years and they have had the time to research it—at over 80 per cent in terms of retaining people with the original employers that sponsored them, three to five years after that process, and within the region it is about 85 per cent. The people that are coming to the regions are staying in the regions.

That report is available on the department's web site. If you cannot find it, then let me know. I have a copy so I can provide you with that. Mrs Irwin, you asked about regional migration programs. They have changed and been adapted over numerous years and every regional certifying body in Western Australia is a regional development commission, so we utilise those networks. Since the skills migration unit has been formed in Western Australia, there is now an officers working group that meets every two months to discuss migration at a state level, and we try and use the skills migration unit to assist us wherever possible and we assist them through certification and supporting their activities.

Senator EGGLESTON—Are you saying that each development commission has this role?

Ms Fletcher—Yes, in Western Australia.

Senator EGGLESTON—So Pilbara, Kimberley, Peel—

Ms Fletcher—Yes. The workload that they do may be different, depending on the individual development commission's program, but we all certify the applications. It is our actual role.

Senator EGGLESTON—That is very interesting.

Ms Fletcher—You also made reference to the New Zealand model. I can let you know that migration agents actually recommend to their clients that they go to New Zealand and it is also recommended to health professionals that they go there and then come across. I have come across that one.

Mrs IRWIN—Have you ever seen examples of why that happens? Is more information the difference between our model and the New Zealand model?

Ms Fletcher—They find it very cumbersome to get through the process with Trades Recognition Australia and the assessment process to get into New Zealand is a lot quicker. They have said that you can go there, do your two or three years and then come across more quickly than you can get through the processes here, if you get rejected in the first place. The same situation applies with the health professionals.

Senator EGGLESTON—You mentioned specifically doctors, medical and allied health professionals. What is the difference with the New Zealand process?

Ms Fletcher—They are more welcoming in terms of the college assessments that they have to go through. I have recently spoken to a person that has been offered a position in Victoria, and this is making me even more concerned. There is a psychiatrist in Kalgoorlie that has been offered a position in Bendigo and the health department in Victoria are saying that they will give him unconditional registration, or process his permanent residence application without it. I do not know how they can do that, but that is the sort of promise that is being made. He has been on a temporary residence visa for six or seven years now. He is in his 50s, loves Western Australia, but wants to be a permanent resident. He will go wherever he can to get help through that process.

As a psychiatrist who has not done his general medical examinations for 25 years, the thought of sitting for a practical general medical test is just too hard, but he has to do that before he can go to the next level.

Senator EGGLESTON—In Australia they do the AMC. Do they have a general test like that in New Zealand or do they have a specialist test?

Ms Fletcher—It is a specialist test. It is a different system. We do have paediatrics, I think, and another field that have made it easier for them to get through.

Senator EGGLESTON—That is a major difference, isn't it?

Ms Fletcher—Yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—If someone is a recognised specialist in their home country, they are tested in that speciality?

Ms Fletcher—Yes. That would make a world of difference. When you have a person that is never going to treat you for a sore throat or an ear infection, why they need to have that test is of real concern when we are screaming for these people, especially in the regions.

Senator EGGLESTON—It is a really interesting difference.

Ms Fletcher—We are competing with the world market to get these people, so when they considering where they are going to move to—Australia, Canada or any other country—they look at the assessment process that they will have to go through and find out whether it will be welcoming or not before they make a decision. If we do not have a streamlined system, we are in trouble.

CHAIR—It sounds like the committee needs to go to New Zealand to find out what is going on there.

Senator EGGLESTON—It does, doesn't it?

Ms Fletcher—Yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—Were you here earlier when we heard about the plastic surgeon—

Ms Fletcher—Yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—who was obviously a faciomaxillary superspecialist and had to go through the AMC process? She did not meet their standards, so we lost that very skilled individual.

Ms Fletcher—The Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital could not operate without our overseas trained doctors and nurses. There are 25 nursing positions currently on offer in Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital alone, and they are putting people through the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. Overseas, you can actually access those positions right now on the Migration WA web site and see that they exist, that they are there. They are currently bringing in four other specialists to service the Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital. The process is happening at the moment.

CHAIR—Are you getting your 25 nurses?

Ms Fletcher—I am hoping to get some of those nurses.

CHAIR—But do they stay?

Ms Fletcher—They stay, yes. They do stay. The hospital is not making them remain on temporary visas for a long period of time. There is a difference here. Once they are there and settled and they know it is going to work, they are supporting them on the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme application. So these people can obtain the permanent residency and then do their two years. Within a matter of months, the hospital is supporting them, which ties them to the hospital to get the regional sponsored migration residency. They are using that—‘Yes, come quickly and we will support you if you’re willing to stay.’

Mrs IRWIN—What countries are the nurses coming from?

Ms Fletcher—From South Africa, Ireland, the UK. They will take them from anywhere.

CHAIR—Can they bring their families?

Ms Fletcher—Yes. I recommend family migration to the majority of companies that I deal with, because if you want people to settle they need their support networks. I have one engineering company that has pre-qualified for 60 positions. They have purchased eight houses that they bring their people through. They give them eight weeks there. They help them settle and they will then move on. But they will only sponsor families. They are not interested in single people. That is the way that the companies that I am dealing with generally look at it. If they want people to settle, then they need to have their family networks around them.

Your next question was about TRA and when it ceased to operate in Western Australia. Dr Geoff Gallop put in a submission in which it says it was five years ago. It happened because the person in the position retired and the department were looking at centralising the service. The centralisation of the services did not occur. However, they have not replaced the person in Western Australia. That is taken from that submission. That is your answer.

Mrs IRWIN—You would like to recommend or suggest that we definitely have that person here.

Ms Fletcher—Or we have an alternative solution to Trades Recognition Australia.

Mrs IRWIN—What is your alternative solution?

Ms Fletcher—Depending. I can say this because I started raising trades recognition in electrical licensing 2½ years ago at the very first regional certifying body’s conference that the department of immigration organised. Until that time the department had not heard of any problem. I have compiled briefings that have gone to several ministers in August 2003 and again in August 2005 on this issue. With the DIMIA change that said, ‘If the position actually requires licensing or registration at a state level, then the state can determine its own processes,’ we do not have to stick to the DIMIA criteria of going to the assessment process if we can tell them what is required at a state level.

So any profession—hairdressers, nurses, electricians—that requires licensing at a state level, we could just say, ‘This is what we find acceptable,’ and they could apply straight to our state bodies. We could do that today. If we could come up with a network that says, ‘This is what we want on a state basis,’ then we could do that. DIMIA have given us that wording in their

paperwork to allow us to do that right now. I do not know how well that has been communicated to the states. I think that is where the block is, because I do not think that has been readily accepted, and I do not think that the departments here are even aware that they have that power—‘How are we going to handle this at the state level?’ If it is a state licensing issue, I think we can make that a lot quicker and a lot easier because we basically have the powers now.

Mrs IRWIN—If they got that state licence, they could virtually then move to, say, New South Wales, South Australia? You would virtually need all the states to agree and, of course, some states will say, ‘Well, you got the licence in Western Australia but our conditions could be a little bit different.’

Ms Fletcher—That is already happening with the nurses and electricians: you cannot come here from South Australia and work. You cannot come here from New South Wales. You still have to be licensed at a state level. They do not just say, ‘You can work anyway.’ That system is already in place. That is just another level of the whole scenario.

CHAIR—I want to tease out Julie’s point. We talked about the nurse that went to Victoria so that she could come back to Western Australia. Doesn’t that apply in this case? What did you call it? Once you are recognised in one state—

Ms Fletcher—Mutual recognition. You can be an Australian who has done your study in New South Wales as an electrician, and practised your trade, and you cannot come here and get an electrical licence. You have to sit a test.

Mrs IRWIN—I think it is like that for teachers as well.

Senator EGGLESTON—You have to go through a reaccreditation process.

Ms Fletcher—You have to do a four-hour written test. I have a flow chart here and I am going to expand on electrical licensing, because one of my pet hates—

CHAIR—This is something that should be addressed at COAG, obviously.

Ms Fletcher—Yes. It is something that they could certainly look at.

CHAIR—And resolve.

Ms Fletcher—Yes. You queried the reduction of time for apprenticeships. I have a son who is undertaking an auto electrical apprenticeship. In past eras, apprenticeships were eight to four hours in terms of 7½-hour days, and you would do about 37½ hours a week to obtain an apprenticeship. In the mining industry these days—and I think increasingly as skill shortages are felt—some apprentices are working far more than 37½ hours a week. For example, my son works an average of 60 to 70 hours a week as a second-year apprentice. If we could have flexible apprenticeships based on the completion of competencies and times allocated, the times of those apprenticeships could be reduced purely by recognising the hours they work rather than the years they work. I am happy to take questions.

CHAIR—Do you want to show us your flow chart?

Ms Fletcher—This has been compiled by an electrical company in Kalgoorlie that has been bringing people through the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme process for nine years, and they are happy to do that. They have found people to be very loyal, very professional and they like them to train their work force as well. They have had great success with these people.

In terms of the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme, they apply to the development commission for certification of the migration application. We certify the application and the individual then receives approval from the immigration department to start the migration process. That says, ‘Yes, you can apply.’ There is then a delay as the applicant applies through Trades Recognition Australia to qualify for migration purposes. The Trades Recognition Australia assessment is assessed to the DIMIA list, so they are basically given a general electrician form.

The person then migrates to Australia, after getting his application approved by the department of immigration, and arrives onshore to find that he has to apply to Trades Recognition Australia for the Australian Recognised Trade Certificate. That is assessed to the trades list, which is a totally separate assessment. They do not do them at the same time and you cannot put in your application until you arrive onshore. This bit of the process could be improved if they could split the electricians class into being a fitter or a mechanic in terms of electrical recognition; that alone will help the next stage of the process.

Once they have their trade certificate, they then have to apply for state licensing. So they put through another lot of paperwork to the individual state licensing body for electrical work, which in WA is approved by the board of the Office of Energy. Then they can go to TAFE to sit their exams, which is a four-hour theory and a four-hour practical assessment of their qualifications. That process at the moment is taking about three months. Only once that examination has been passed—and they may have to go back a couple of times—can they get an A-class licence.

When Trades Recognition Australia say it is only taking 120 days, that is 120 working days. That is 24 weeks from assessment, just to get to them to say, ‘Yes, you can migrate.’ They have to then put in an application to get their migration approval done. The Office of Energy will not take them until they have had a TRA done.

They have to get here onshore and put basically the same paperwork in again to the same organisation to be assessed for their trade certificate. Isn’t there a better way? Can’t they combine the list? Can’t they do it while they are offshore? Why do they have to wait until they are onshore? They are not allowed to work as an electrician until they have it done and until they have state licensing.

Our Office of Energy requires people to have a trades recognition assessment done before they can even apply to sit their tests, and it is taking anywhere between six and nine months, if you are lucky, just to get through that part of the process. If you arrive onshore and you are with a small company that cannot give you work as a trades assistant, or any other work, and you cannot work as an electrician, how do you support your family? You came here thinking, ‘I’ve got employment and I will be able to get through this process because I’ve got the trades recognition assessment already.’ It is not giving people the impression of ‘Welcome to Australia.’

I think that is one of the main issues that needs to be addressed. Currently on that web site that I mentioned, there are 65 positions for electricians in Kalgoorlie-Boulder alone that I know of. Employers have pre-qualified to bring electricians out, and if I have to go to my companies 65 times while they are going through this process, to support their new people and their families, you can imagine the impact it is going to have on the community and the people that are coming out. I will leave that flow chart of the process with you, because this particular company has been through it more than once.

CHAIR—Particularly with these exhibitions and so on, isn't there some sort of intention to expedite all this?

Ms Fletcher—You can pay extra to have a trades recognition assessment processed within 90 working days. That is only if you pay the priority assessment fee.

CHAIR—How much is that?

Ms Fletcher—It is an extra \$270, I believe. The standard fee is about \$300 and the priority assessment fee is about \$570, from memory. But 90 working days is still—

CHAIR—It is still not good, three months.

Mrs IRWIN—You are saying that it is better to do it offshore.

Ms Fletcher—If the same organisation is checking it to one list and then waiting for you to get onshore and checking it to another list, surely they can get the one lot of paperwork and expand it to whatever they need so that they can cover both lists with the one application.

CHAIR—So there is unnecessary duplication.

Ms Fletcher—They are the ones saying, 'We cannot give you an ARTC until you are onshore.' Why can't they do it?

CHAIR—We have certainly taken that on board and we will put that in bold type in the report.

Mrs IRWIN—Where are you based?

Ms Fletcher—Kalgoorlie-Boulder.

CHAIR—You are a one-person band, by the sound of it.

Ms Fletcher—In terms of migration, I certainly am. We are a small organisation, with four offices and 14 staff members. Regional migration is what takes up most of my time, and it would take up all of my time if we had the resources. We cover a broad range of issues in terms of providing services, infrastructure and support.

CHAIR—Are the regional migration officers helpful to you?

Ms Fletcher—Yes, they are very helpful.

CHAIR—Sorry, I asked that earlier.

Ms Fletcher—For the routine stuff, they will find answers.

CHAIR—Are they cutting through this?

Ms Fletcher—They cut through as much as they can, but you need people out there. People do not want to go through the department of immigration, which they think is big and scary because that is the way it is portrayed in most of the media. They just want somebody that they can talk to about their individual case—

CHAIR—Face to face.

Ms Fletcher—Yes, and who can look at their paperwork and say, ‘That’s fine.’ It is the same with businesses. If you go to a business and say, ‘It’s not hard to do a regional 457 application with the department,’ they will look at you and say, ‘It sounds hard to me,’ and, ‘I don’t want to know,’ but if you sit there with them, they will say, ‘Well, that wasn’t too bad.’

Senator EGGLESTON—That is very interesting. What kinds of people are you bringing into the Goldfields, just as a matter of interest?

Ms Fletcher—We are bringing in nurses, teachers; if I can find boilermakers I will be very popular; heavy-duty diesel fitters, geologists, surveyors—the whole range.

CHAIR—Child-care workers, hairdressers?

Ms Fletcher—Child-care workers, if I could find them. We have a new child-care centre opening in Leonora and they would be very happy to have one up there, as is in Kalgoorlie, Boulder and Esperance.

Senator EGGLESTON—You mentioned the sources for doctors. What are the countries for sourcing all these other people?

Ms Fletcher—They are varied. I have had people from Romania, Yugoslavia, England, UK; mainly South Africa and Zimbabwe because the mining related fields give us the right expertise. There are certainly companies who are targeting South Africa and Zimbabwe because they know that they have the relevant experience to cope with the positions.

Mrs IRWIN—The last time that I was in Kalgoorlie was with the Joint Standing Committee on Migration. I cannot remember whether it was 1999 or 2000.

Ms Fletcher—I went in front of that one, too.

Mrs IRWIN—That is right. I thought I might have known the face. I am great on faces but not on names. The concern that you had when I was there was with doctors. There was one

doctor who came to Kalgoorlie to practise and everything was fine, but he had a son who wanted to go to university and they had to virtually pay up-front fees.

Ms Fletcher—While the people are on 457 and temporary visas, they have to pay international student rates. I think that is going to be one good thing about the new trade skills training visa: if people are on 457 visas and their kids do not want to go to university or they cannot afford for their children to go to university, at least it is a bit more affordable for them to do a trade skills training visa and access an apprenticeship. I think that will be one major source of new apprentices for those hard-to-fill apprenticeships that we have.

Senator EGGLESTON—I was very interested in the New Zealand method of skills recognition for medical professionals in one of the submissions. I think, in general terms, that concept of recognising and testing people for skills in particular specialties is perhaps a more productive way to go than the way we do things in this country by taking them back to undergraduate level and asking them to pass a general medical exam. A psychiatrist, for example, might not remember too much about how an appendicitis presents or something like that.

Ms Fletcher—It is streamlining those processes so that they do not have to put one set of paperwork into one agency and similar paperwork into another agency, which happens with, I think, paediatrics. They have to do one and then the other. If they are going to be submitting an application, why can't the two bodies talk to each other and say, 'We've done our bit. This is your bit. This is where the licence is issued'?

Mrs IRWIN—That is too easy.

Ms Fletcher—Yes. If we could streamline these processes for everyone, regardless of whether it is for a trade or a doctor, to make it easier for these individuals, then we should be doing it.

Senator EGGLESTON—A kind of one stop shop.

Ms Fletcher—Yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—Do they do that in New Zealand with, say, professional qualifications of various kinds?

Ms Fletcher—I cannot comment on that. I just know about the information that has come from the doctors that have come through, that that was the information, and they were the countries that they were considering because of that fact.

Mrs IRWIN—That is how it all started. I think it might be a very good idea, Chair, if we looked at the New Zealand model, because I have also heard that in my electorate, where people have gone to New Zealand out of frustration. They have their qualifications recognised; they work in the field for two years; they have been good for the economy; and then they would probably come back to Australia.

Ms Fletcher—And it has been easier for them.

Mrs IRWIN—Correct. This has been an excellent submission, and thank you very much for answering our questions before we could even ask them.

CHAIR—I have to say that it is good for Kalgoorlie that it has the talent of somebody like you. Putting my chair of the Sri Lankan Parliamentary Friendship Group hat on, I would suggest that you maybe do some sort of exhibition or trip there from the Goldfields, because they speak English, they are a Commonwealth country. They have a similar sort of educational framework, legal framework et cetera. They are blessed with engineers, teachers, nurses. You might want to think about that.

Ms Fletcher—Thank you very much. I have supportive companies in Kalgoorlie and since the inception of the skills migration unit they are now looking a bit more at how we can target people overseas.

CHAIR—Let me know if I can help you with that. We have a very good relationship with the high commission et cetera. Anyway, that is sort of left-field-ish. I want to thank you for attending the hearing today. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. We would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat any additional material that you may have undertaken to provide as soon as possible.

Proceedings suspended from 12.55 pm to 1.45 pm

Evidence was then taken in camera but later resumed in public—

[2.17 pm]

COLIC-PEISKER, Dr Val, Private capacity

TILBURY, Dr Farida, Private capacity

CHAIR—I welcome Dr Colic-Peisker and Dr Tilbury. 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, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Dr Colic-Peisker—How much time do we have?

CHAIR—You are going to have about five minutes each, I understand, and then we will ask questions of you.

Dr Colic-Peisker—I would like to say a little about our research. This is a nationally funded three-year project titled ‘Refugees and Employment: Exploring the effects of visible difference on discrimination’. Qualification recognition is one part of the whole problem of labour market integration. We sent an interim report to the committee and it was taken, I understand, as an exhibit. I would be happy, further to that, to send a very brief submission which focuses more on qualification recognition. The report is more general.

We look at the most vulnerable and potentially disadvantaged category of immigrants. Some of our insights can be applied beyond humanitarian entrants, because in the area of skills recognition it is important to note that, contrary to common perception, there is a considerable proportion of people among refugees with post-school education. We list those percentages in our report on page 4.

Most refugee communities, or predominantly refugee communities, such as people from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq et cetera have a higher percentage of post-school qualifications than the Australian general population. The common perception is that many refugees are uneducated or poorly educated because of interruptions to their education due to time spent in refugee camps et cetera. They come from poor countries which are socioeconomically and culturally different from Australia. However, they are still chosen by Australia for their resettlement potential, and that includes education. A lot of them have the same problems—a bit worse probably—than skilled migrants.

Because of various factors, employment outcomes among refugees are relatively poor. In our sample we interviewed 150 people from three refugee communities, broadly conceived: black African refugees; people from the Middle East, mainly Iraqis; and ex-Yugoslavs, mainly Bosnians. Our sample was deliberately skewed towards people who had at least functional English and who had skills and who were, therefore, employable. But even among that group employment outcomes were fairly poor.

We asked people, among many other things, what they perceived to be the barriers to securing adequate employment. The most often stated problem was the requirement to have Australian work experience, the second most stated problem was the requirement to have referees in Australia and the third most stated problem was the problem in getting qualifications recognised. The main point I would like to make today is that those three things are mutually connected, and I would like to talk about that.

Qualification recognition should be thought of in a broader context, as it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for successful labour market integration, because sometimes people do not have formal qualifications but get jobs and sometimes they have formal qualifications but those qualifications are not recognised or their skills may be inadequate in spite of recognised qualifications. Those three reasons that our respondents stated as the main barriers to securing adequate employment bring me to the issue of what I would call formal versus informal or de facto recognition of qualifications.

Formal recognition is what I understand this committee focuses on. But the formal recognition may not mean much without finding a way to secure some Australian job experience and, via this experience, being able to provide Australian references. In this respect, people from non-English-speaking countries need and deserve equal opportunity policies or positive discrimination before they are left to their own devices in the competitive labour market in Australia. Governments should invest more to prevent a waste of skills, through more funding for programs to secure work experience in an adequate occupational or professional environment for migrants from a non-English-speaking background.

When I say 'work experience', I am primarily thinking of securing a chance for people to have voluntary or non-paid work experience that would then provide them with some Australian experience to show to potential employers. According to our research, it is not easy to secure this work experience. It should not be forgotten that among skilled migrants, as well as refugees, Australia receives a number of elite professionals and people from various occupations that come from non-English-speaking countries but have very good skills.

We also interviewed 40 mainstream employers and asked them what they thought about employing people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, especially refugees, and they tend to see overseas qualifications from non-English-speaking countries, whether formally recognised or not, as something they cannot rely upon. This is again this point about formal recognition versus informal recognition.

One can have formally recognised skills from a non-English-speaking country and employers just do not take them seriously, so this is a problem that does not solely depend on whether skills are recognised or not. Lip service is paid to productive diversity in the workplace. A lot of people actually do believe in that, but many Australian employers, we found, are too insular to be aware of potential gains; therefore, the result is that highly skilled people fluent in English often have to take jobs much below their qualifications and this loss of skills among refugees is massive.

It is less so among skilled refugees but from New South Wales, for example, there is a report titled *Doctors become taxi drivers*. It is a very good report. I understand you have received a submission from these same people. We met a lot of such examples, where doctors, engineers

and others become taxidivers. Although this may be in a way functional for the country, loss of skills is a problem for these people. When I say functional, I mean that someone takes certain jobs that locals sometimes are not keen to take. But for these people it presents a problem that spills into family problems and all sorts of other problems.

In relation to the current approach to skills recognition, DIMIA's submission pretty much says everything is perfect and much better than in any other country. It may be the case that it is better than in other countries; I do not have that detailed a knowledge of other countries' procedures. But certainly the Australian approach is not perfect for at least several reasons. I cannot mention every reason now because I do not have time.

One of the reasons is that it is not as transparent as we may imagine for people who have just come to Australia, and people are very confused about what to do and where to go. The system is very decentralised, which is good in one way but not good in another way. Between professional organisations, accreditation bodies and government, it is all over the place.

Also, it takes something that I would call a collectivist approach. If you are from a certain country or a certain university, then your qualifications will be judged this way. But I think that professional organisations and their accreditation bodies, together with the relevant government departments, should be able to offer a path to professional recognition for people who feel ready to take certain tests or exams to prove that they can work in the Australian environment, instead of having to repeat their degree, which is an awful lot of time. It is a huge investment of time.

I would like to mention one particular instance from Western Australia, because we are here. Left to the market, certain categories of immigrants, especially refugees, are likely to end up in pockets of disadvantage in the large cities. Poor integration—economic and social—causes social marginalisation of whole communities. This is a well-known phenomenon around the globe, which causes long-term serious social problems. It has been argued lately that the current rioting in France is a consequence of one such long-term marginalisation of immigrant communities.

We do not have that in Australia, but, in recent communication with the metropolitan police here in Perth, I became aware that they actually fear a creation of such a marginalised community, ridden with welfare dependency, crime and other social problems, in two areas of Perth with high concentrations of African refugees. They stated certain statistics that do not come from the 2001 census, so I am not sure how reliable they are, because the situation has changed dramatically since 2001. Most of these refugees are very recent arrivals and before the 2006 census we are not going to know what is really happening.

But apparently there is huge unemployment, especially in the second generation—young adolescent people—mainly in the city of Stirling and the city of Canning. We are not talking about just social justice and fairness, because some people do not want to hear about these concepts at all, but also about the common good of preventing problems in the longer term. Therefore, qualification recognition is, in my view, only a part of the larger issue of labour market and consequent social integration of the diverse immigrant population that the policy-makers need to take into account, because in isolation from other issues even the best policies of qualification recognition may not mean much. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you Dr Colic-Peisker. Dr Tilbury.

Dr Tilbury—Thank you.

CHAIR—We will ask you questions afterwards.

Dr Tilbury—The research that Val has been talking about is Australian Research Council funded research which we both participated in. Since she has covered that, I thought that I would talk a little bit about a more recent project that I have been involved in with a number of people, funded by the Department of Education and Training here in Western Australia, which is looking at barriers in terms of access, and pathways to apprenticeships and traineeships for people from CALD backgrounds. The parallel between these two projects is that the same issues keep arising.

The issue is one of the loss of human capital for migrants who come to the country and who are unable to practise, whether they be professionals or whether they be people with trades or other sorts of skills that are produced out of the apprenticeship-traineeship side of things. There is also a personal effect in terms of the self-esteem of the people who are unable to work, unable to retain the identity that they may previously have had in terms of their employment role. There is also a loss of productive and creative benefits that diversity can bring to the workplace. Again, both projects recognise that as a key factor.

This project that was funded by the Department of Education and Training is called Pathways to Apprenticeships and Traineeships for People from CALD Backgrounds. We were looking at first-generation migrants and second-generation people from migrant backgrounds. Obviously, assessment of overseas qualifications was a big deal; again, not just for professionals but for people who have trade sorts of qualifications.

It is recognised that appropriate retraining, upskilling, supervised practice et cetera, is necessary in order for migrants to learn appropriate trade terminologies and the Australian regulations. Australian materials and climatic conditions may be different. Industrial relations and workplace culture, these sorts of issues, may be quite different. Therefore, it may not be possible to completely equate a qualification from overseas to one here. That is recognised both by the migrant communities and by the people who provide the training for such communities. However, both projects again found that migrants are working below the levels that you would expect from their qualifications and skills. For example, the ARC project found that 50 per cent of the people that we spoke to were working below their qualification levels.

The Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia, which you are probably all familiar with—the LSIA—found that around 72 per cent of migrants seek assessment of their qualifications. Of those, about 70 per cent complete the process of assessment. Of that particular cohort, about three-quarters of those who are assessed as needing further training had begun training.

Non-English-speaking migrants are disadvantaged. They take between two and six years to upgrade their qualifications, depending on their level of language skill and the type of course that they have undertaken. Unsuccessful assessments are far more likely for those who do not speak English as a first language at home, and this may be related to the fact that their qualifications are from countries where English is not the first language.

What is interesting also is the difference between the various cohorts of migrants. From the LSIA research, 80 per cent of migrants who had come on the independent and concessional visa categories sought assessment of their qualification, whereas only 25 per cent of all preferential, family, employer-nominated scheme and business skills and humanitarian entrants had. There is a massive difference in the migration category by which people arrive here and whether they actually seek assessment.

This is partly from the literature review: while some improvements have been noted over the last decade or so, there is still what is called an occupational mismatch—underemployment of new migrants—whereby their skills, experience and expertise are underutilised in their current occupations. From the DET Pathways project, we have developed a number of recommendations. I will not go through all of those, but there are a couple that I do want to highlight. First is the importance of targeting CALD communities for any activities or programs that are to do with upskilling, particularly in terms of programs which might be available as bridging programs or gap training kinds of programs. These are the sorts of things which were found to be really important for people from trades backgrounds.

A second issue is that there needs to be an integrated approach between what is going on at the Commonwealth level and at the state level. Currently there does not seem to be enough communication between those two levels. That was a really important point. We have suggested that a one stop shop is needed. I know that Val was talking about the complexity of the system. It is difficult enough for people from English-speaking backgrounds to find out how to get their qualifications assessed and then where to go for upskilling et cetera. Imagine how much more difficult that would be for people who are not familiar with the system and do not have English as the first language.

Our recommendation is going to be that there should be some sort of one stop shop which has all of the information about career pathways; practical skills recognition services; information on training including bridging programs; information about employment options, including apprenticeships and traineeships, as well as TAFE. One of the main issues that we found, particularly for older migrants who come, was that in order for them to actually get an apprenticeship they needed to be able to find an employer. Both of our research projects indicated that, without the social networks available to find an employer who was willing to work with you, people are seriously disadvantaged.

Another issue is the importance of getting practical skills assessments rather than paper based. I know that this is developing in some areas, and certainly that is something which is needed. There is a web site Worldskills which is an international endeavour devoted to trying to encourage countries to use practical skills assessments rather than paper based ones—task based assessments. Another suggestion is that it is important to identify specific gaps, rather than generalised gaps, between individual skills and the Australian standards for trades. People get their qualifications assessed and they do not know what is missing—what is it that they need to upskill, to improve? That would identify the bridging training necessary. There are training and information centres within Western Australia in which some of this information is available. That sort of model would be useful to roll out elsewhere.

I know that part of the brief of this particular forum is to look at what is going on internationally. I wanted to draw your attention—and you may be aware of it—to the Lisbon recognition convention.

I can give you the reference for a number of web sites that are associated with that. The convention was a forum where concerned countries came together—Canada was one country—to look at what could be done for refugees in particular. Often the qualifications assessments are paper based and if people do not have their qualifications with them, how can they prove that they have those qualifications? It is specifically targeted to refugees and there are a number of recommendations that the Lisbon recognition convention makes that are contained within section 7.

These include encouraging alternative evaluation methodologies: things such as interviews to determine whether people know what they need to know in terms of their profession or trade; special competence examinations which could establish whether an individual has the knowledge or skills needed to enter educational programs or the types of programs that they need; sworn statements is another one—I know that Canada is moving along the path to implementing some of these recommendations, so that if you do not have your piece of paper with your qualification on it, it may be sufficient for somebody to simply provide a sworn statement; prior learning assessments, which I know we are trying to do here; and also systems of provisional recognition whereby it can be assumed that a person knows the skills which they say they have and they can be put on the job and then ongoing testing can occur.

There are a number of different strategies. I will not go into them because they are available at that web site. But those are really positive suggestions, I think, and Canada is certainly looking at ways in which they can introduce some of those recommendations. I can make that web site available to you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. There is so much material and obviously trying to fit it into a very short period of time is not easy but we have your submission and you have given us an opportunity to find further information in a number of ways. You say that it is difficult for people to find information in this area. Are you aware of DIMIA's development of a national web portal on skills assessment and the recognition process? Have you been involved in that and what do you think of it?

Dr Tilbury—Not particularly closely. Again, I am thinking of how a new migrant would access that. Is web based information the best way of providing information?

CHAIR—They are potentially skilled migrants, not unskilled. You would think they would be able to use the internet.

Dr Tilbury—Some will be. For apprenticeships, for people in the trades, it is perhaps less likely.

CHAIR—Good point.

Dr Tilbury—Language is always an issue and, where it is written in English, while some people might have good oracy skills, they may not have good written skills. I am thinking about

the barriers for information provided in that sort of way. An answer to that would be that, if migrants know where to go—if they go to migrant resource centres, for example; if they go to people associated with Centrelink who are able to access that information themselves—then the information can be passed down to them. It is good to know that there is an attempt to get information at one site available. It does not really solve the problem of the difference between the state and the federal systems.

CHAIR—That is right. We have been discussing the two systems this morning—the national system and the state based assessments. Dr Colic-Peisker, you suggested that part of my electorate was one of the hot spots for disadvantage. I am sure you were only talking about part of the city of Canning, not the Canning electorate.

Dr Colic-Peisker—Yes.

CHAIR—I understand the area that you are talking about. It is around Bentley.

Dr Tilbury—It is around where I live.

CHAIR—Queens Park et cetera.

Dr Tilbury—Gosnells.

Dr Colic-Peisker—I live in the city of Stirling.

CHAIR—You are probably correct. I do think that there need to be measures to address those areas. They are almost becoming enclaves of people who are suffering disadvantage in a number of ways and, as you say, quite often visibly.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission, ladies. On that point, we see what is happening in France at the moment, and I thought of that when you were giving your examples. Are you aware of any international research that might have been done—in Europe, for example—where this has occurred? We may have people in enclaves who have been unable to get work, perhaps as a consequence of not having their skills recognised.

Dr Colic-Peisker—There is a lot of research, and the problems are very similar. Australia has a smaller population, has more room for people, has good economic performance and has had low unemployment for a while now. The problems are subdued. We do not have those big problems. We do not have big ethnic enclaves. Nowhere in Australia, I do not think, is there a local government that has a non-Anglo white majority, so we do not really have the British situation. It is better than there.

We are doing research on refugees and we are aware of the problems, but I was told about this particular problem in a rather dramatic fashion by an inspector with the metropolitan police, and I was taken aback. I asked, ‘Is it that bad?’ and he said, ‘Yes, it is. We need to do something now while the problem is still small.’ He is a very well meaning man and he really wants to help, but in his account I detected a little bit of that assumption that, because people are visible, they are problematic. It is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, in that people who look that way do not get jobs, become unemployed, cannot provide for their children properly, have family problems and

their children become unruly teenagers. There are cultural differences—all sorts of issues—visibility, conflict with the Indigenous population in the Mirrabooka area, which would be fascinating if it were not so bad. That is the sort of problem that I did not expect to hear about.

So there are all sorts of issues. Now we have several thousand people there and it is expected that the population will rise because about 80 per cent of the humanitarian intake is now from sub-Saharan Africa and I do not think that is going to change. We are by no means suggesting that it should change, but I think that once people come here it does not seem to be enough to give them accommodation on arrival, throw a lot of leaflets at them about going to this web site and going to that web site and then leave them alone. Some of these people have spoken English as a second language for most of their lives and are fluent in English. They do not need this sort of in-depth language learning, which is very problematic for adults, but they need more attention than they get, that is for sure.

That is an extreme example. These problems pertain to a lot of skilled migrants as well. I can give you two examples. One relates to research done by one of my students on Indian immigrants—whose English is okay, of course—and a woman, who was highly positioned in the work force in India, who got a job at level 1 in the Australian Public Service. She describes it as a brain-dead job. I have read the transcript, and she is a very articulate and intelligent woman. There is absolutely nothing wrong with her. She claims that she cannot move from level 1, because of sexism, ageism, racism—all sorts of issues that are very subdued but need to be addressed—whereas young Australians hop up very quickly.

My impression, from reading material from New Zealand and from talking to people who worked in England in very similar jobs, which are basically equal opportunity jobs, is that Australia is falling a little bit behind in that respect. I think we need to catch up, to prevent further problems.

Senator KIRK—I think that is perhaps what I was trying to get at: whether or not there are experiences in other countries where they are doing good things or things that are not so good that impact upon these communities and perhaps they then find themselves in these situations. I am interested in the UK experience—and France—of what was or was not done that perhaps could have contributed.

Dr Colic-Peisker—As a rule of thumb, the more government money spent on programs for the potentially disadvantaged the better. There was long-term neglect in France and in England, with the Pakistani community especially. The second generation has a different sense of entitlement. They were born in the country, they speak the language, they went to school there and they still feel they cannot get ahead. This sense of entitlement creates a lot of anger and that anger comes out later on.

Mrs IRWIN—Because they feel like they are second-class citizens.

Dr Colic-Peisker—Yes, absolutely. This is one of the interpretations, but it is quite widespread. There are far right-wing interpretations about why this is happening, but I think the disadvantage thesis is fairly realistic because of what the statistics show. This sense of entitlement among young people is a thing that needs to be thought about, I think, sooner rather than later. Other countries do more but they have many more migrants—illegals and all sorts of

migrants. England's problems are much bigger than ours. We talk a lot about our problems, and they seem very big, but when we look at the numbers they are not so big. They could be addressed. Australia has enough money to address those problems; it is just the will.

Senator KIRK—Put things in place now and, hopefully, avoid those problems.

Dr Colic-Peisker—Yes. I think it is just the political will; it is not the lack of means.

Dr Tilbury—There is also a difference, as Val says, between first- and second-generation migrants. It almost seems as though, while there are a lot of programs available for first-generation migrants, a lot of parents—if you think of them as parents and children—think, 'I've had my life. I will simply take up a job as a taxidriver or a cleaner. I won't spend the time and put my family into hardship while I do the upskilling and so on. What I will do is devote my time to my children and hope that they are successful.' You can see evidence of that within Australia.

There is a 2002 report called *Second generation Australians*. The authors are Siew-Ean Khoo, Peter McDonald and Dimi Giorgas. It indicates that the second generation are doing very well compared to the mainstream population. They are staying at school longer, they are going to university et cetera. The question then becomes, 'Do we simply say the first generation of migrants is a lost generation, that their skills are not going to be recognised and we're not going to be able to make any use of them? We recognise that their self-esteem will go out the window, and we'll just focus on the next generation and making them integral Australians,' or are we really going to be committed to saying, 'No, we've offered people a life here and it should be the best life that they can have.' That is a dilemma.

Mrs IRWIN—I want to congratulate you. I think your presentation was wonderful. The interim report is very interesting reading. Once you have completed the report, you will definitely send us a copy?

Dr Colic-Peisker—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—What you are obviously pushing for is an integrated approach, number one, but comprehensive migrant settlement services. I guess that is the way to describe it.

Dr Colic-Peisker—Absolutely.

Dr LAWRENCE—You are implying that there has perhaps been some retreat from that model. Perhaps it was never adequate, but there certainly seems to have been some retreat.

Dr Colic-Peisker—A lot of ethnic settlement services have been cancelled in the last 10 years. As I said, I see qualification recognition as the first step but a step that may not get people very far. One Croatian respondent said that the biggest problem was that his work experience was not taken into consideration by employers at all. The fact that he had offered documents of qualification that were recognised did not mean anything to them. Interviewers told him, 'We are not interested in what you were doing before. We want to know about your work experience in Australia.' People need the opportunity of a couple of months of work experience and someone to provide references for them, otherwise this piece of paper is really just that.

When we talk about first generation and second generation, it is not equal for everyone. If you take the examples of Greek Australians and maybe ex-Yugoslavs, all the migrants and their children are now businesspeople, artists and all sorts of things. But these are people that fitted into this idea of what the majority of Australians look like—Europeans. A lot of other migrants are falling behind—the more recent migrant groups that do not have all this. They are not included in the same way.

Senator EGGLESTON—That last comment is interesting, because I have a personal view that as each wave of migrants has come—going back to the Italians and then the Slavs and so on—there has probably been the same sort of resistance to them from the Australian community. Probably the first-generation migrants have experienced similar problems but their children go on and get educated, often become professionals and so on. I would love to ask you about some international comparisons.

CHAIR—But we do not have time! Doctors, thank you for attending today's hearing. The secretary will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also send the secretary any additional material you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible. Thank you very much. We look forward to the final report.

[2.56 pm]

CONTRERAS, Mr Pablo Enrique, Private capacity

CHAIR—I would like to welcome you to this public hearing. Is there anything you would like to tell us about yourself?

Mr Contreras—I am an international student at Curtin University. I am doing their Master of Applied Economics.

CHAIR—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 that may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief opening statement?

Mr Contreras—I organised my submission in a couple of parts. One was dealing with the short-term problem and the other one was dealing with the long-term problem. Regarding the short-term problem or the short-term policies that could be implemented in order to give easiness to the labour market, I have gone through a lot of the submissions and I find that almost all of them complain about or signal this situation of the assessment and the agencies that are in charge of the assessment of the skills that are needed. They talk about it taking too long or the standards being too high, or maybe they are overqualified. All of these are problems with the assessment proceeding.

In my submission I have focused on taking the pressure off these agencies. That is one difference between my submission and the others. How could you take the pressure off these agencies? I would say that putting the problem onto the people that would benefit the most if the problem of immigration is solved would be a great thing to do. Then Australia would be trying to solve its problem. Motivating people who are having a problem right now would help. Who would those people be? The people that are unemployed. Australia has on its hands a good problem: it has a lot of jobs but does not have the people to fill them.

Where are the people that could fill those jobs? I would say that there are a lot of those people here in Australia. Who could they be? International students will be a lot, so we should keep our eyes on them. How come? The usual issue with regard to this is that Australia does not need, let us say, business administration people and Master of Accounting or Master of Economics people because there are a lot of Australians that can do those jobs. But, if you grant permanent residency to international students that are doing those kinds of degrees, they will have to find jobs.

And, if people say that there is no need for them, they will not be able to find jobs, so they will have to channel themselves to the positions that are available—let us say, those trades and skills that are needed—so they will have to go to that position. If they cannot find jobs as business administrators or economists, then those skills are also needed. The thing is to try to put the pressure not on the agencies; rather, on the people that are going to benefit the most if the

Australian problem is solved. So we are trying to coordinate who out there is going to benefit if we solve our problem.

That is a problem for them, because they do not have the jobs. They will try to channel themselves towards those positions that need to be filled. That is a short-term solution which could be implemented fairly easily. A provision could be built into legislation that says in the first place that if those internationals are going to get citizenship or permanent residency they would be able to apply for unemployment benefits and the like.

So I would say that, first, a provision should be built into the legislation that says that, in order to draw from those social benefits, you should have paid in taxes an amount—let us say \$100,000—in order for them not to start drawing from unemployment benefits until they have given their share, because they are getting permanent residency. In that way you could counter that.

In order to avoid the lapse that it takes when people in the parliament have to get together and pass legislation to address a given problem that could appear out there, built into legislation could be a provision that says, 'If Australia is growing at this pace and we are having these numbers of inflation, if inflation is going up and unemployment is going down and the forecasts are that in the next couple of periods the numbers are going to be this or that, then automatically a given percentage of the international student community would be allowed to apply.' Let us put a couple of bars over there with regard to—I do not know—marks or that sort of thing.

All of that would focus on the short-term problem, a solution which could be implemented very fast because they are here, they are integrated into the community, they are buying, they are renting stuff—and they hopefully have better English than mine!

CHAIR—No. You are doing very well, Pablo.

Mr Contreras—That would be one thing for the short run. For the long run, it is a bold idea also. Let us say that Australia wants engineers but England, Ireland and Canada want engineers too. So what is the need for them to come here and not to go over there, places that are closer? We are very far away here.

We need engineers and people that are highly qualified, just like those other countries. We could start looking at targeting engineers, doctors and lawyers at an early stage, before they have reached a particular level of skill. We would target them when they are younger, when they are in their late teens. How would you spot somebody who is going to be an engineer? That is where their year counts. We could try to test them with psychological intelligence tests, run overseas by Australians in the Australian embassies, in order to spot the people with a high IQ and target them very young. We would test them in three runs, in order to make sure that they are the real thing, and then they would come here and Australia would provide them with an education, which would be an investment. Australia would then have not only engineers but good engineers, the best maybe, if they are all people with high IQs.

Not only would Australia be doing its share—because it would be gathering to Australia strong performers—but it would be doing good for countries that are not able to provide these opportunities for their own people, because of problems such as poverty. I can imagine that it

would have a great impact to have so many people with a high IQ coming to Australia. It would generate a lot of research.

These ideas for the short term or for the long run should be discussed. I was reading the other day that people who are highly knowledgeable say that labour will eventually command its price internationally. Labour is the only factor of production that does not set up its price internationally. Capital, trade, commodities—everything is priced internationally, and eventually labour will follow. They say that labour will eventually set up its price internationally; and Australia should be prepared for that day with the right policies in place.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time on this, Pablo. In a brief response, I can say two things. One is, on your last point, that some countries do this in sporting areas. There was an item on the TV this morning where the Spanish have got a young Australian boy to go and play in their under-age world soccer side, because they see talent there. So that happens in sporting areas, and we have done that in terms of scholarships. In some respects, Australia did that in sponsoring countries like Sri Lanka under the Colombo Plan, where we provided educational opportunities. The result of that is that, in the current climate, overseas students who train in Australia are given incentives to stay. They obviously see a need in those areas, and we are endeavouring to make it easier for the people that we train to stay here. So your point is very well taken, and I appreciate your making a submission to the committee.

As there are no further questions from the committee, and as we have a short time frame, we thank you for your appearance here today. We appreciate your coming before the committee today and sharing your ideas with us.

[3.10 pm]

MULROONEY, Dr Peter Leo, Private Capacity

CHAIR—Welcome to this public hearing. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise 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. Dr Mulrooney, I invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Dr Mulrooney—Thank you very much for asking me to appear. I responded to an advert that I saw in the *West Australian* newspaper, asking for submissions to this committee. I felt it might be useful to give my personal experience of coming to this country as a skilled migrant, albeit currently temporary, and I thought it might be opportune to draw some comparisons. I have not prepared a full submission at this stage because I thought I would be, if you like, cross-examined on what had happened, so forgive me if this is a little off the cuff.

As things stand worldwide in my specialty, which is anaesthesia—and indeed in most of the medical specialties—there is a worldwide lack, so there is competition worldwide for adequately trained specialists. What is the effect of the lack of specialists? There are two effects really. The first is that you may get cancellations of operating lists, which obviously affects patients directly. The second is that you may find that the specialists work excessive hours. There are emergency cases that need doing and there are routine cases that need doing, and if there are not enough fully trained people around to do it that means that the people who are trained will have to do the extra hours to accommodate all the cases that need doing. One only has to look at the pressure within the transport industry, be it airline pilots or truck drivers: they have their hours limited. You will find that the doctors, particularly the consultants, are not limited in the same way, which is interesting.

Basically, this is an account of my personal experience, as I say. I came here having been a consultant anaesthetist in the UK for approximately 10 years. I was chairman of my department for about eight of those. My hospital had approximately 1,400 beds and about 25 operating theatres. The department had approximately 35 full-time equivalent consultants and approximately the same number of trainees. My training consisted of approximately nine years of supervised training, including time in the Air Force. I passed my fellowship exam, on which the Australian fellowship is based, back in 1990.

I came here under the area of need legislation and took up a post in a hospital in the north of Perth and I was assessed from the UK to fulfil the criteria for that post. Having arrived here, I had to apply for specialty recognition from the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists. I could not do that from outside the country—they will not do that assessment—so one has to take the risk of coming across, bringing a family. From my point of view I thought, ‘Okay, normally you get a reasonable response, particularly from anaesthetists. I’m quite happy to be assessed. I’m happy with my training.’ I underwent the overseas training scheme assessment and, to my horror, they decided that I would need to undertake the overseas trained exam and be supervised until I had attained the exam.

Dr LAWRENCE—Meanwhile you are practising?

Dr Mulrooney—Meanwhile I am practising in an unrestricted fashion, doing full emergencies. I was interviewed twice. The first time, the college broke its own policies and procedures. I was interviewed a second time, during which the principal question was whether I had any specialty training at all, which I thought was quite interesting, because at the end of the process I asked what deficiencies had been identified and the response I got was, ‘We have your CV.’ I thought, ‘Why are you asking me what specialty training I’ve got?’ However, I did point out, ‘I am flying back tonight’—or tomorrow—‘and I am doing this really complicated case which not all the anaesthetists at my hospital would be willing to do and yet here I am, someone who is deemed inadequate in the eyes of the college to go ahead and do it.’

Mrs IRWIN—What year was this?

Dr Mulrooney—This was in 2004. I arrived in 2003. My initial assessment, where the college broke its procedures, was in March 2004. I was reinterviewed in August 2004, where they came to the same conclusion but, as I say, where they asked me whether I had any specialty training at all. I have done a sort of back-of-an-envelope calculation in terms of equivalence of training. When I went through the system it was the old system, where they flogged you until you bled, basically. I would say I was doing an average of 80 hours. Some weeks I was doing 100 hours. I believe, Senator Eggleston, you have sampled some of that as well.

Senator EGGLESTON—I have indeed.

CHAIR—It should be ‘Senator Dr Eggleston’, yes!

Dr Mulrooney—Doing this back-of-envelope calculation, I calculated that with my training, averaging it out to 80 hours a week, 48 weeks of the year for nine years, it totalled 34,560 hours. I compared that with the Australian training as it currently stands, which is 40 hours a week for 48 weeks of the year for five years, and that comes out at 9,600 hours. There is quite a difference there. The UK system has actually reduced somewhat. They have struggled down to 58 hours a week, so I have done the calculation on a similar basis there and that comes to 19,488 hours. The Australian system is still rather short of the UK total. The examinations I do not think can be argued to be significantly different.

The other issue is that prior to 1996-97 there was automatic recognition of UK anaesthetists. I came over in 2003. However, I was accredited in 1993, therefore predating that, and yet I was deemed to be inadequate, whereas there are people who have gone through the system—who arrived before 1996-97—and are deemed as adequate. I find this whole thing very odd—or at least, that is the word I am prepared to use here.

I have tried to question the College of Anaesthetists here and, to be honest with you, I have not received a meaningful response—or what response I have received has been misleading. I asked at my second interview—and indeed at my original interview—‘Okay, what deficiencies in my training and the UK training system or the UK exam have you identified?’ I have never received a reply on that. As I mentioned earlier on, in my second interview the answer was, ‘We have your CV.’

Throughout the correspondence, copies of which I have provided to the committee, I have never received any meaningful response. The final letter I got from the chief executive of the college stated that the college was operating under the guidelines of the Australian Medical Council in terms of the assessment process. However, the Australian Medical Council, to the best of my knowledge, has no input into this and the process itself was created by the college.

The second claim in the letter was about the appeal process, which I was challenging elements of there, and I was still asking what the deficiencies were, because I said I would find it difficult to challenge 'that' if I did not know what 'that' was. The chief executive then claimed that the appeals process was as per the requirements of the ACCC and was well regarded. I wrote to the ACCC and, indeed, I referred the college to the ACCC halfway through the process because I just could not get any answers. The ACCC got in touch with the college and pointed out to them, after telling me this is what they were going to do, that, no, their appeal process was not as per the ACCC's guidelines or well regarded by the ACCC.

My final communication with the college to date is that I wrote to the college president and basically said: 'Look, I exceed all the requirements as per Australian training. I have achieved this, that and the other.' They have never really looked into my role as a consultant or what I achieved as a consultant. I said, 'Can you not, as president, look at this and just review what has gone on?' The reply that I got from him was to the effect that he could not interfere with the usual college processes, to which I was tempted to reply, 'So it's usual not to answer questions, to give misleading answers and so on and so forth?' That basically is the experience that I have had as a skilled migrant coming to this country, wishing to become a permanent migrant. As it stands, I cannot.

Mrs IRWIN—That is right—or an Australian citizen.

Dr Mulrooney—Absolutely. So I find myself in a very awkward position.

CHAIR—It makes the TRA sound like a benevolent organisation.

Dr Mulrooney—I am not sure what the TRA is.

CHAIR—Trades Recognition Australia.

Mrs IRWIN—Imagine if your experience got out to other doctors over in the United Kingdom.

Dr Mulrooney—It has.

Mrs IRWIN—We are desperate for doctors in rural and now regional Australia. It would turn them off.

Dr Mulrooney—Absolutely.

CHAIR—But I do know other British anaesthetists who have come here and not had the same problem.

Mrs IRWIN—Yes, but this would be prior to 1997.

Dr Mulrooney—There are those that are prior. There are those that have also come across and have said, ‘Well, okay, I’ll take the exam.’ However, my situation was that from the very outset the college clearly breached its own policies and procedures and, my having challenged it, things became even more bizarre. I now feel that I am in a position where I do not feel desperately confident of going into that process and being treated appropriately.

CHAIR—We can only say that we are as amazed as you are. I am not an expert in any way in your field, but the whole process sounds terribly debauched—there may be a better word. I do not want to put my fellow senator in here, but, knowing the area of expertise, what I would suggest is that you two should talk and write letters.

Senator EGGLESTON—We have already.

CHAIR—Then you will get it on the record, because they are obliged to answer us, generally, honestly and frankly. There are other mechanisms to have people appear and one thing and another. Dr Lawrence and others may have suggestions.

Dr LAWRENCE—I think you will find that colleges are outside, though. I think you will find they are not required to answer this committee. They may well choose to, but I do not think they are required to, and there is inadequate supervision of the medical colleges altogether; there has been for a long time. In 1995-96—if you will forgive me, Chair—I was health minister. We did at that stage want the ACCC to conduct a full investigation into the closed shop that many of the colleges were—surgery and anaesthetics being then visible offenders. Unfortunately, it was never fully followed through. So they are not very answerable; they are not very accountable.

I do not want to not give you hope, because I would certainly be happy to go in to bat too with Senator Eggleston, but one of the things this committee should have a look at is the fact that there is not a transparent process for the original decision and the review. There is not necessarily any consistency, either, in the decision making, which is what you are pointing to.

Dr Mulrooney—Absolutely, yes. The College of Surgeons now will fast-track recognition of UK surgeons, as I believe will the colleges of physicians and obstetricians. According to one of my anaesthetic colleagues, the ED consultants now pretty much push it through.

CHAIR—The committee may invite the College of Anaesthetists to come and answer our concerns. We will see what happens.

Dr LAWRENCE—That would be very interesting.

Senator EGGLESTON—Dr Mulrooney did come to see me. I can confirm that he has a very outstanding professional curriculum vitae, which includes working at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in Hammersmith. This is an example of bureaucrats being overzealous in applying the rules, I think, and it relates to the changes in automatic recognition of 1996-97. I think that this is a dispute that should not be occurring and that Dr Mulrooney’s expertise in his field should be recognised and he should be permitted to have full consultant status in Australia and appropriate benefits flowing in terms of permanent residency.

CHAIR—I am of the same view. From a committee point of view, we have already said what we will do on one point, as long as the committee is happy.

Mrs IRWIN—Most definitely.

CHAIR—Where do you live?

Dr Mulrooney—I live in Duncraig.

CHAIR—That is Dr Washer's area, and Dr Eggleston and Dr Lawrence et cetera have indicated that there are others that would like to see this addressed. Thank you very much. I am quite apologetic, from my point of view, that you have been treated like this.

Dr Mulrooney—Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Thank you for your time.

CHAIR—The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections, and I would be grateful if you would also send any additional information you may have undertaken to provide.

[3.28 pm]

WILSON, Dr Abbie Laine, Private capacity

CHAIR—You are our last witness, so you have heard all the preamble. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Dr Wilson—I am a doctor of chiropractic, representing myself as an Australian citizen returning to Australia with overseas qualifications.

CHAIR—You are the first!

Dr Wilson—I will give you a brief background. I chose to attend Palmer Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa in the United States. It was the very first chiropractic college ever established and is the longest running, at over 100 years. I felt that that would provide me with an elite level of training. It still produces leaders in the profession and in the community. I am not sure when Australia started its chiropractic programs. When I chose to go overseas, Western Australia did not have a program. They have since started a program here at Murdoch.

I felt that that would provide me with the best education I could get. There was no intention to stay overseas. My intention always was to come back to Australia and provide my services to the community of Australia. In the United States, a doctor of chiropractic is considered as a portal of entry physician. Here in Australia, they do not graduate as doctors of chiropractic. It is usually a five-year double degree, as in a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Chiropractic or a Bachelor of Science and a Bachelor of Chiropractic Science. Over there at the moment you need a Bachelor of Science to start the program. That takes two to three years, and then it is three and a third years, the equivalent of five years college. We go year-round, but it is the equivalent of five years of actual chiropractic, so it is equivalent to about seven to eight years of schooling, whereas here it is five.

This whole issue today is really in its infancy. This is what it is today and there is no background. It is hard to find its history. I came back to Australia in December 2004 and up until at least July 2004 Palmer was recognised as an equivalent and the last place to close the loophole was in the Northern Territory. You were able to register in the Northern Territory and then grandfather to any state up until at least July, maybe a little bit later. By December it had closed. Then all states required this new testing.

Up until then Palmer's qualifications were regarded as reciprocal and you were able to come in, apply to the registrar, pay your yearly fee and then they issued you with a certificate. They meet every six weeks, so at the most it would take you six weeks, unless there was something that they needed to look into further—any convictions, any malpractice or anything like that. In a standard case, it would take six weeks. It now takes at least six months to get recognition and obtain your licence to practise chiropractic in Australia.

We have put in a lot of questions and are waiting for replies from different bodies here in Australia. This inquiry gave me an opportunity to take it outside the profession and perhaps get

some support and get this reviewed from an outside perspective. It is still quite a small profession, and a lot of board members sit on multiple boards, so appealing to one board is superseded by another board, as it includes the same members or friends of members.

I have tried to address most of the things in my submission and personal documents. Some changes have recently been made to both the web site of the CCEA and the application process. I believe most of these are in response to my personal questioning and requests of them. If you send them a question, the next week you find the answer to that question on the web site. As of November 2005, they produced a new candidate guide, which provides some of the information that we had requested that we did not feel was right. It was not illegal but it just did not seem to be very professional in its presentation. They have also removed an exemption from one of the written parts of the exam. The exam includes two written parts and one practical part, and now all overseas applicants have to undergo the second part of the written portion, which takes three hours, and the practical, no matter what their qualifications. That equates to another \$800 and another day of testing.

The exam cannot be sat in Western Australia, even though it has its own chiropractic program, so you have to fly to Sydney or Melbourne. It is very expensive to take the test, at a minimum of \$2,900. We had to ring the registration board here to find out whether we had passed or not.

Mrs IRWIN—You sat the exam on what date?

Dr Wilson—We sat it on 11 February.

CHAIR—You passed?

Dr Wilson—Yes, we passed.

Mrs IRWIN—You had to phone to see if you had passed, to get that bit of paper so that you could practise.

Dr Wilson—Yes.

Mrs IRWIN—That was after how many weeks?

Dr Wilson—The last day of the exam. We actually sat the exam on the day they met here. They helped us out with a few questions and a little bit of begging, and they backdated it to the date. They accepted our registration from the last day of testing. We were one of the first groups that went through and did that test. We were in the position that we could come straight back and, as soon as we had that piece of paper, we were able to begin practice. I am doing this from the point of view of an Australian coming back with this qualification. If it was anyone coming in on a business skills migration, the same as the applicant before, you would have to come over, sit the exam and wait for them to decide. They say it is within seven days, but we have not talked to anyone who has actually said, 'Yes, it is seven days to get confirmation.' It could be a problem where they come back, sit the exam and, if they only come on a visitors visa or something, the visa could expire and they could have to return to their own country: again, time and money, which seems ridiculous to us.

CHAIR—From your point of view, though, you are not disputing that a non-Australian citizen should give some sort of demonstration of their qualifications?

Dr Wilson—Basically, what we are saying is that the education in America has not changed. In 2004 they brought in this new testing scheme with no reasoning behind it. It just appeared. As I said—and the applicant before, too—we asked the question, ‘Why isn’t this acceptable any more?’ It was a reciprocal agreement.

CHAIR—So you haven’t had an answer?

Dr Wilson—No.

CHAIR—Maybe that is our job. We will try to get an answer.

Dr Wilson—This new board, the CCEA, was formed in 2002. I think I said in my submission that it was formed from two previous boards or organisations. It is stated on their web site that the ACCE—which is the previous organisation—will be in charge of things until the CCEA is accredited by the CCEI, which is the International Chiropractic Council on Education. That has not happened yet. The statement on their web site suggests that the ACCE should still be granting reciprocal status until the CCEA gets international recognition.

CHAIR—We are meeting the Council on Chiropractic Education Australia in Brisbane early next year. We will certainly put those questions.

Dr Wilson—We are not saying whether there should be testing or not. It should be assessed, and that is not happening. There is no assessment of skills. It is an automatic test. There is no provision for exemption. You have to take the test, no matter what.

Dr LAWRENCE—At a great cost.

Dr Wilson—At a great cost. No Australian graduates have any further testing once they graduate.

Mrs IRWIN—All up, how much have you spent?

Dr Wilson—I spent \$2,900 in testing, plus the flight to Sydney and three days accommodation.

CHAIR—The institution in Palmer—I thought you were talking about Italy at first; that is why I asked whereabouts—is obviously an internationally recognised school of chiropractic, but there would be others that are not. Unless you get some sort of understanding about which institutions are recognised, I suppose it cannot be automatic.

Dr Wilson—On the CCEA web site they have a list of all the schools that are recognised, but that does not grant exemption. I am not sure what ‘recognise’ means in their eyes.

CHAIR—That is another question that we can ask them.

Dr LAWRENCE—Yes, because in other areas of skills it does often mean that you do not have to undertake further testing.

Dr Wilson—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—Strange.

CHAIR—Is there anything further?

Dr Wilson—Not from my point of view. For someone coming in as a migrant with skill migration, there are no rewards for getting any extra levels of education and then coming back to Australia, or even coming in with that. The medical community get rural incentives and those sorts of things but there is nothing for chiropractors. Physios, osteopaths and all those kinds of professions get incentives; chiropractic seems to be left out of that list of complementary care providers.

CHAIR—You might want to ask the enemy of chiropractors—Dr Eggleston!

Senator EGGLESTON—No, not at all. I think we just have a physiotherapy culture here.

Dr Wilson—There are no incentives. Canada has a lot of financial support for any students from Canada who go to America to get their training and then go back. Some students have their tuition paid for them. To get a Palmer education, Canada provides a lot of financial incentives and low-interest loans that they cannot get in the United States. That is all I wanted to say, unless you have any other questions.

CHAIR—Are there any other questions from the committee?

Dr LAWRENCE—No. I think we will follow it up—

Mrs IRWIN—In Brisbane.

CHAIR—You will be able to read the *Hansard* when we have spoken to them and see the responses. We are meeting them early next year, so you might want to contact the committee to find out the dates. We do thank you and we are sorry that as an Australian citizen you have had to go through that, but the good thing is that you have come to the committee so that we know—

Dr Wilson—It was a chance to take it outside the profession.

CHAIR—It sounds as if you have been quite busy in pursuing your own profession about it, which is good. You seem to have been able to change some behaviours, in any case. Thank you for attending today's hearing.

Dr Wilson—Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

Resolved (on motion by **Dr Lawrence**):

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

Committee adjourned at 3.43 pm