



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

THURSDAY, 24 NOVEMBER 2005

MELBOURNE

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:
<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

Thursday, 24 November 2005

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

Members in attendance: Mr Keenan and Mr Randall, and Senator Kirk

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

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

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

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

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

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

WITNESSES

BADAWY, Mr Emile Michel, Executive Officer, Australian Institute of Radiography.....	78
BERKLEY, Ms Karen, Executive Director, Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services.....	13
BURROW, Ms Sharan Lesley, President, Australian Council of Trade Unions.....	47
COGHLAN, Dr Leigh Ross, Deputy Chairman, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council	86
COX, Mr Michael, General Manager, Education, Adult Multicultural Education Services.....	26
HAMILTON, Mr Stuart, President, Australian Institute of Radiography	78
HUMPHREYS, Ms Jillian Christina, Executive Officer, Professional Areas, Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists	58
HURLEY, Ms Franceyne Carole, Qualifications Assessment Unit Team Leader, CPA Australia	36
JOHNS, Mrs Ann, Director, Education, CPA Australia	36
KAMALA BASKARAN, Mr Steven, Director, Systems Information, Best Start.....	93
MESSENGER, Mr Robert Edward, Director, Five Star Freight Systems Pty Ltd and Best Start	93
NICHOLLS, Ms Hayley, Manager, Accreditation and Research, CPA Australia.....	36
PARKER, Mr Barry, Manager, Qualification Assessment Service, Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services	13
PATERSON, Mr Brian, Chief Executive Officer, Adult Multicultural Education Services.....	26
PHILLIPS, Emeritus Professor Garry David, Director, Professional Affairs, and Past President, Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists	58
REDFERN, Mr Kevin Maxwell, General Manager, Industrial Relations and Training, Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce.....	68
STROUS, Dr Julie Ann, Executive Officer, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council	86
STUDDERT, Professor Virginia, Member, Board of Examiners, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council	86
TATE, Ms Alison Margaret, International Officer, Australian Council of Trade Unions.....	47
TKALCEVIC, Ms Irene, Manager, Skilled Migration Program, Employment Programs, Department for Victorian Communities, State Government of Victoria.....	1
WARD, Mr Stephen, Acting Director, Employment Programs, Department for Victorian Communities, State Government of Victoria.....	1
WEAVER, Ms Heather, Coordinator, Youth Services, Adult Multicultural Education Services.....	26
WILSON, Miss Margaret Bronwen, Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council	86
YILMAZ, Mrs Leyla, Manager, Industrial Relations, Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce	68

Committee met at 8.44 am

TKALCEVIC, Ms Irene, Manager, Skilled Migration Program, Employment Programs, Department for Victorian Communities, State Government of Victoria

WARD, Mr Stephen, Acting Director, Employment Programs, Department for Victorian Communities, State Government of Victoria

CHAIR (Mr Randall)—Good morning. I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration for its inquiry into overseas skills recognition, upgrading and licensing, and I welcome you all here today. The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs has asked the committee to examine whether the current processes by which migrants are assessed for entry to Australia under the skilled migration scheme 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 looking at whether greater consistency in the recognition of qualifications might be achieved among Australian states and territories.

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

Mr Ward—The Victorian government's written submission to the inquiry is currently being finalised and should be with you very shortly. Today we will be presenting a number of key points we would like to put to the committee for its consideration. Then we will obviously answer any questions you may have. In making those few key points we note that since the time that we drafted the submission there has been very much movement in a number of the areas where we are making some points, so obviously we need to take that into account. I now pass to my colleague, Irene Tkalcevic, who will go through the key points in detail. Then we will be open to questions and queries from you.

Ms Tkalcevic—I will take you through the points. The first point is that we felt that more work needed to be done by the Commonwealth government in consultation with state and territory governments to consider how to fully integrate the skills assessment processes with licensing and registration requirements that occur offshore as well as onshore. We note that COAG is looking at this issue and has done some work and made some progress on how we might trial a number of occupations to integrate the migration assessment that occurs overseas with the licensing requirements onshore. We endorse the work that is being done there.

The second point relates to what happens onshore and the fact that we need to look across all Australian jurisdictions—that is, state jurisdictions as well as the Commonwealth jurisdiction. We need to look at the role of industry bodies, professional associations and employer groups

and at how they can work collaboratively to clarify processes around recognition and registration for professions and trades. Particularly, we need to consider ways to streamline processes and to reduce costs and time frames. The processes themselves are not well communicated to the migrants. The processes are actually quite complex for migrants themselves to manoeuvre around, and more work needs to be done in that area. We need to look at the role that industry bodies, employer groups and professional associations might have. While qualification recognition is important, it is only the first step towards entering the labour market. Qualification recognition has been viewed very much from a migration rather than a labour market point of view, and we need to look at how some of the organisations that have a better understanding of the labour market itself can contribute to the qualification recognition process.

The third point is related to that, and it is about coming up with some strategies whereby government, industry and employer bodies can provide industry specific employment, workplace orientation programs and links to industry networks for newly arrived migrants. A lot of migrants might have their qualifications recognised but despite that are not able to enter the labour market to use those skills. This raises the issue of the effectiveness of the qualifications or whether some other work has to be done around orientation to the labour market. Those two areas have to be brought together.

The next point is also in relation to some work that is under way. Essentially, we endorse the work which has been led by the Commonwealth government, and which has involved state and territory governments, to develop the national skills recognition portal. We feel that this is a good example of how, from a communication point of view, we might better communicate the requirements around qualification recognition to migrants, whether they are offshore or onshore. Again, we might look at how that portal arrangement could be expanded to look at labour market information and labour market orientation programs as well. It is important that there are very strong partnerships between the Commonwealth and state governments. We also see it as an opportunity where you could have partnerships with the licensing bodies and the assessment bodies responsible for migration.

In addition to the portal, more work needs to be done on some of the other information tools that exist. In particular, we note the welcome kits that are provided by the department of immigration to new migrants. We might look at how the information that is provided to new migrants might be better able to inform them about assessment requirements, education and training and employment pathways as well.

Our point about research is simply that independent research should be carried out on best practice migration arrangements, looking at some of our key competitor countries as well—such as Ireland, Singapore, Canada, UK and New Zealand. We felt that this was the best way to look at whether there were other ways to streamline some of the licensing and recognition requirements. That is the gist of our submission. Our main point is that we endorse the work that is already under way, but we feel that more work is needed, particularly around the next steps past qualification recognition looking at how we then assist migrants into the labour market with those qualifications.

CHAIR—There are a number of matters we would like to address. The Victorian government, like other state and territory governments around Australia, has the ability to sponsor migrants for particular areas of work force shortage. Can you tell us the extent of the sponsorship of the

Victorian government in that area and the processes that you are involved in? Do you find the process satisfactory from a migration point of view? What areas are you targeting in particular?

Ms Tkalcevic—We are involved in the sponsorship of both skilled and business migrants. I take it you are interested in the skilled migrants rather than the business migrants?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Tkalcevic—In relation to skilled migrants, there are two programs that we use. The first one is the State/Territory Nominated Independent Scheme. The state government compiles, as it is required to by the Commonwealth, a skills in demand list. That list is updated every six months.

CHAIR—Is the skills in demand list based on DEWR's list?

Ms Tkalcevic—The DEWR list is a starting point; it is where we start. We then take the Victoria-specific information from DEWR's list and circulate that information to industry sector specialists in the Victorian government. They then consult their own networks, which include industry associations, employers et cetera. We ask them to verify the list of occupations. They might provide us with additional information that tells us about particular specialisations in occupations that are in demand, whereas other specialisations in that occupation might not be of interest. We finetune the list by consulting with our industry sector specialists and, in turn, they would consult with industry associations where they have those networks. We also receive feedback direct from employers, local governments and others that we liaise with, and we would verify that information in the same way by going back to the industry association to basically get an understanding of the nature of the skill shortage before we put it on our list.

CHAIR—How successful do you think this sponsorship arrangement that the government is involved in has been in addressing skill shortages?

Ms Tkalcevic—The STNI scheme, which we have been using for the longest period of time, is certainly supplementing the skill needs in those particular areas. It is effective in being able to attract to Victoria, to send out a message or a signal to say, 'If you've got these array of skills, these are the skills that are needed in Victoria.' So it is successful in supplementing those skill needs. We sponsor about 1,000 migrants under that program each year. So the labour market is supplemented by about that much each year. The outcomes that we have seen through the monitoring that we are required to do are very good. The employment outcomes are above 80 per cent. Migrants are using their skills and going into the labour market using those skills. That is an important aspect of it as well. So we would say that it is effective.

CHAIR—Have you had any problems with the overseas qualifications issues—people that you attract here having their skills or qualifications recognised? I see you have an overseas qualifications unit which obviously addresses this area. Is that successful in cutting through or are there still road blocks that this committee needs to know about to assist in making a more seamless transition into work for migrants?

Ms Tkalcevic—The overseas qualifications unit is a very effective service because it particularly targets migrants who have not had their qualifications assessed overseas. Everybody

who has an overseas qualification can use that service. However, many of the clients are refugee humanitarian migrants, family migrants or spouses of skilled migrants, who would not have had their skills assessed overseas. So for those individuals, the OQU is a first stop for them, where they can get guidance on what their qualification is equivalent to from an academic point of view. They are referred to education, training and employment services, professional registration bodies et cetera. So it is a referral point. Without that service, you would have quite a huge gap there, in that those migrants would not be serviced at all. They would have to find their way through the system. They would have to contact the qualification recognition bodies, who would charge full fees as well, so it would be more costly for them. The service we provide is free. With respect to the qualifications unit and the assessment it does, it does not make the pathways easier to navigate in that we are still having to advocate for the migrant and negotiate the system. So if the system itself and the qualification recognition steps can be streamlined, this would benefit the migrant. We are using this service to help the migrant to negotiate the system, which in itself is telling us that there is a problem with the system.

Senator KIRK—I look forward to reading your written submission. I want to ask about the skilled migration program that you have. We were in Sydney yesterday and there were a lot of complimentary comments about your program in particular. It seems that in New South Wales there was a similar program until recently that has now been abolished. They were lamenting the fact that it had been abolished because it was a very good scheme. Could you outline for us the way that your scheme operates?

Ms Tkalcevic—Was that the qualifications unit or the migration—

Senator KIRK—The skilled migration program. It is the one that assists Victorian employers by providing resumes, curriculum vitae—that kind of system. Don't you have that?

Ms Tkalcevic—I will outline the whole of the skilled migration program and the elements of that.

Senator KIRK—Yes; how it is that employers are assisted in being made aware of the existence of skilled migrants and trying to match skilled migrants with job vacancies.

Ms Tkalcevic—The skilled migration program basically includes the skilled migration unit, the business migration unit and the overseas qualifications unit. We also fund a program called the overseas qualified professional program, which I will touch on. The skilled migration unit attracts skilled migrants to the state using the state sponsored programs and promoting Victoria. We also offer a service to employers that enables them to promote their job opportunities via our web site, and it is that service that enables skilled migrants to make direct contact with employers, wherever they might be located in Victoria. It is a free service to employers, and the idea of that is that we are trying to identify where the skill needs are to satisfy employers and to help direct migrants to where their skills can best be utilised. That is a component of that scheme.

In addition, we are funding 11 regional communities through the regional migration incentive fund, and those 11 communities are led by a lead agent, which is local government. Local governments in each of those 11 areas are pulling together in a committee—they are basically partners that might cover health, education, business and other sectors—looking at how they can

attract and retain migrants. That work is important for us, because we are assisting those communities in 11 regional areas of the state to pull together their own services and consider ways they might attract migrants to their region. In time, as that develops, we expect that that will also provide opportunities for employers in those regions to have better contacts with migrants. So the communities are doing things such as forming partnerships with agencies in Melbourne to attract migrants who are unemployed or underemployed who might be looking for opportunities. That is another way in which we are building the connection between migrants and employers.

At the moment, we are also conducting skills audits in partnership with DEWR, and those skills audits are being conducted in those 11 regional locations. Again, that will help us to get a better understanding of what the skill needs are in those communities. We feed that back into the skills in demand list that we use to select migrants so that we can refine the migrants we select and attract to Victoria and, again, better link them to employers, industries and regions where their skills are needed.

The overseas qualified professionals program is a program that we fund. The Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE runs that program for us. That addresses a barrier that overseas qualified migrants face in lack of work experience. We are targeting here overseas skilled migrants whose qualifications are recognised. Their English language skills are good, yet they are still unable to enter the labour market. We are trying to address workplace cultural issues here. Basically the program offers a six-week classroom based education program, which would take the migrant through their resume and interview skills, teaching them to cold call employers and bringing industry representatives into the program to talk to them about anything they need to know about entering the labour market in that industry. The program also offers a six-week work experience placement. The aim of the program is to get at least 60 per cent of the participants into employment at the end of the program so that their qualifications are used in a directly related or a closely related field.

Another point to add is that we released this week the government's Provincial Victoria statement. In that statement there is also a point around skilled migration and regional migration. What we are doing there is looking at extending this model to regional Victoria. So we are looking at how we can, again, provide a similar service of workplace orientation and work experience for new skilled migrants who are entering regional areas. The point of that is that we have done a lot of the attraction side of migrants, and we continue to do that, but we are now starting to work more on retention and how you ensure that migrants are making the best use of their skills; are linked to industries, regions and employers that need their skills; and remain, particularly in those regional areas that we are trying to target. That is an example of some of the services.

Senator KIRK—That is very helpful, thank you. With the Overseas Qualified Professionals Program, they are basically professionals—in other words, university qualified professionals?

Ms Tkalcevic—Yes. The program has tended to focus on professionals because that has been our speciality. The Overseas Qualifications Unit also specialises in professions rather than trades. However, we have run the Overseas Qualified Professionals Program previously. We have just started a new contract. Within this contract we have made it open for trade qualified

people to participate in the program as well. So the title seems a bit misleading, but it is actually open to trade qualified people as well. Historically, we have tended to focus on professionals.

Senator KIRK—We have received some evidence that, particularly with trade qualifications, unless people can get work experience they find it very difficult to gain full-time employment.

Ms Tkalcevic—We know also that in regional areas trade skills are in particular demand. It was for that reason that we opened up the program to trade skills. It is a sort of precursor to the work that we will do now through the Provincial Victoria statement that is looking at funding an extension of that program into regional areas.

CHAIR—If I heard you correctly, you said you tried to arrange six weeks of work experience.

Ms Tkalcevic—Yes.

CHAIR—We have heard other evidence where it has been organised that six months is an ideal work experience time. I know all the contingencies that go along with that—how do you pay insurance and all those sorts of issues. It appears that, if somebody does six months work experience, in a trade in particular, that generally leads to a job outcome or a far better job outcome. Is that something you would be looking at? Are there any programs that you have that involve that period of time?

Mr Ward—In addition to the initiatives under the skilled migration program and the work of the Overseas Qualified Professional Unit, including their six-week programs and their recent extension of that through the Provincial Victoria program which will start taking effect early next year, the Victorian government has recently announced the Workforce Participation Partnerships Program. One of the key target groups of that program is recently arrived migrants, to basically pick up what the Overseas Qualification Unit can do and extend what the Overseas Qualified Professionals Program can do. It targets recently arrived migrants who have had trouble getting into work.

The brokers that we will be establishing and contracting through that program will be identifying and working with these people and, through a case management approach, identifying what areas of extra assistance they need. They will also be working with employers who have skills needs, whether they be in Shepparton, as in a recent example, or other areas in regional Victoria, but also in metropolitan Melbourne, to place them into sustainable employment. If that requires six weeks, six months or longer then that broker will have the flexibility to engage in those sorts of programs. As well as providing support to that particular migrant, that program will also be able to provide support to the employer in terms of cultural awareness and cultural training both to that employer and to their staff.

What we have found in terms of programs—I suppose if we are looking at a time span—is that, if a person is in employment for three months or 15 or 16 weeks, usually by that time their employer has made their mind up as to whether that person is a good employee as well as being able to do the skills. Often it is not just a matter of whether they can do the skills; it is a matter of attitude and cultural issues for that particular person and their workplace. In terms of a program, if we were looking to it, we would think that, once a person has been in a job for 15 or 16 weeks, there is a good chance that they will stay for 26 weeks and beyond.

CHAIR—Thank you. I want to ask you about the issue of insurance for people doing work experience. Previous evidence has indicated that it has been an inhibiting factor for employers to take people on in this capacity if they have to pay for their insurance. Do you think that is an issue? Have you got any suggestions as to how it can be addressed?

Mr Ward—I will perhaps ask Irene to explain how it works in the OQPP initiative, then if there is a need for any more general comment I will come in.

Ms Tkalcevic—The OQPP initiative is covered by the training organisation, which is NMIT. As I understand it, it is not an issue for the employer through our program, so it is covered by the training organisation.

Mr Ward—I think the clarification there is that the OQPP is run by a college of TAFE, so they will get covered through their student arrangements. If they are covered as a student with an institution then they are covered for work experience. Generally, the programs we will put through our work force participation partnerships with employers will not be work experience as such; they will be paid employment. It will be a placement arrangement with that employer or an employee-employer relationship. So insurance will be covered by the normal workers compensation arrangements.

CHAIR—For your information as well—and this tends to jell with what you were saying—yesterday Dr Wagner from the University of Western Sydney gave this committee evidence about a pilot project she was running. That was the way they covered the insurance aspect of that project. The university included the insurance; you are saying TAFE does that in this case. That is probably a good bit of supporting information to find out how it can be done.

Senator KIRK—Just going back to the Overseas Qualifications Unit, I understand that industry forums are run as part of this program and that expert speakers from specific occupations come together to provide information and guidance to recently arrived overseas qualified professionals. Can you tell us a bit more about how those programs are run and the speakers that you organise to speak to the professionals?

Ms Tkalcevic—We started running those forums because we felt that, if we could get the industry representatives—whether they be the professional bodies, key recruitment organisations in that particular field or training organisations—to come and directly interact with the migrant, we could actually pass on information that was very industry specific to those particular migrants. What we have done is target particular occupational groups that we know have large numbers of underemployed or unemployed migrants; engineering is one, for example.

We are about to run an industry forum in collaboration with Engineers Australia, the industry association. In that particular case Engineers Australia will talk about the engineering industry, about training options and about recruitment. They talk very frankly about tips in relation to how you actually get employment in that particular field, how you might present yourself et cetera. In a way, it is like a shorter version of some of the tips you might get through our three-month Overseas Qualified Professionals Program. It is like a variation on that. We have done other forums in the past with accountants and IT professionals. We will have the Australian Computer Society there in the case of IT. Again, we will look for a key recruitment organisation that is

familiar with the labour market at that time to talk directly with migrants about the labour market. So it is basically to give them an insight into the realities of the labour market.

Senator KIRK—Are these held in Melbourne?

Ms Tkalcevic—Yes, they are.

Senator KIRK—What sort of attendance do you get at them?

Ms Tkalcevic—We have between 80 and 100 attendees at each session. It is not hard to get that sort of number; they are very popular.

Senator KIRK—How many people have you had go through this program? Perhaps I should ask: how long has the OQPP been going for and how many people have gone through it?

Ms Tkalcevic—We have just started a new contract of the OQPP, so that will run for 2½ years. There are about 510 places available under the current program. Previously, the program was a little smaller. We had about 280 people go through the program previously. This new program has doubled the number of places that we are providing.

Senator KIRK—Do you keep figures on employment outcomes from that?

Ms Tkalcevic—We do. The contractor is required to report on employment outcomes on a regular basis, and is funded according to those. It has to achieve a minimum of 60 per cent employment outcomes through the program.

Senator KIRK—And they are achieving that?

Ms Tkalcevic—Yes, we do achieve that overall. By the end of the program, there is at least a 60 per cent employment outcome. That certainly was the case with the first program, and currently we are on track to achieve that. We are close to a year in on the current contract, and that is on track.

Mr KEENAN—I apologise for being late, and I hope we do not have to cover ground that you have already covered. What sorts of shortages are you facing in Victoria?

Ms Tkalcevic—In terms of the particular skills that we have identified for migrant attraction, there is a range of trade skills and there is quite a substantial range of professional skills in the health sector. There are other skills: there is a selective need around town planning and some very specialised engineers; some teaching, but again in very specialised areas. It is predominantly trades and health professionals.

Mr KEENAN—Are you finding the migration system is proving to be a good way to fill these shortages? Is it successfully helping plug these gaps?

Ms Tkalcevic—Yes, we see it as one strategy, along with training and employment strategies, to address skill shortages. It certainly supplements this particular area. It will be promising for regional areas as we develop some of our other strategies to try to target skilled people to

regional areas. As I mentioned earlier, we are doing a lot of work with 11 regional communities in particular to get a better understanding of the skill needs there and target migrants into those areas. We found that a lot of migrants are very willing to consider moving to regional areas, and so that is a very big opportunity in that area.

Mr Ward—Just to reiterate Irene's point: it is one part of a balanced approach to addressing local supply needs and skill needs of employers. So as well as the migrational strategies, we also have in place our own skills strategies, obviously. I mentioned before the work force participation partnerships program, which is particularly addressing the needs of jobseekers facing significant barriers in getting to work—so looking at how we provide them with the skills, training and support and assistance to get skills and get into labour-needs areas which are in short supply amongst employers. In addition to the skilled migration strategy, we have other initiatives, in both metropolitan areas and provincial Victoria, to get local people into local jobs as well.

Mr KEENAN—You talk about regional areas. Are you finding that if migrants go out to do particular things in regional areas that they tend to stay there? Or do the people tend to gravitate back to Melbourne?

Ms Tkalcevic—The two programs that we use are the state-territory nominated independent scheme and the skilled independent regional—the new SIR visa. The SIR visa is very new and it is too early to say. We need to see that run for a while longer and refine how we target people. Through the STNI scheme, we have seen about 50 migrants settle in regional areas. They are all still there. We monitor them for two years after arrival, and they have remained. We tend to find that being linked to a job is one of the most important factors for a migrant staying in an area. Because under that program they have arrived in Victoria—they might come into Melbourne—they have the opportunity to go out to a regional area, have a look at the environment in which they will be living and talk to the employer et cetera. It is a matter of matching the person to the job and, if they are happy with the community that they are going to, they tend to stay. As I said, the 50 or so migrants that have gone to regional areas under the state nominated scheme are all still there. We do not have a high loss rate.

Mr Ward—The other things with which we are complementing the Commonwealth initiatives in attracting migrants to regional areas are the programs we put into effect in each of those areas to help a migrant's transition into those communities. For example, in the south-east Victoria area—Dandenong and Gippsland—those programs are helping the people that we are bringing from, say, Africa to integrate and settle effectively into the communities in the Gippsland area. We are providing additional assistance in the transition services—whether it be housing, cultural awareness programs or whatever it might take—for those people to settle effectively in those other areas.

CHAIR—There are a number of other things I wish to pass on briefly in the time left. Are you aware—I am sure you are—of the immigration outreach officer program? For example, in Western Australia, there are two full-time officers—one working with the chamber of commerce and one split between Industry and Resources and another department—who actively assist industry to identify and source skilled professionals in particular and get them through the system rather quickly and then place them. You obviously have officers in Victoria. To what extent are they being used? Do you find them successful?

Ms Tkalcevic—It is early days with that particular program. We have certainly met with the industry outreach officers here in Victoria. That was prior to them starting with their respective organisations, so it was a bit early. We would like to meet with them again. We see that as a really big opportunity for the Victorian government to work closely with those industry officers, particularly to help with some of the work around the workplace orientation side of things that programs such as our industry forums or the Overseas Qualified Professionals Program are trying to deal with so that we can get a better understanding of what it is that industry wants. They might be able to assist with those industries working more closely with migrants in order to employ them. That way we can learn a bit more about how those industries might employ migrants. That would be a useful thing.

CHAIR—It is early days, but you think it is positive.

Ms Tkalcevic—That is right. The role of industry is something that needs to be explored further. I think this is a big opportunity because it is one of the first times that we have seen migration and industry working this closely together. From that point of view, it is a very exciting opportunity, because it is a recognition that migration and employment need to work more closely together.

CHAIR—In a similar vein, you would probably be aware of the exhibitions run by DIMIA in overseas areas such as London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Chennai. Did you have any input into that at all? Did the Victorian government send any representatives? Has there been any spin-off from that in any manner to you?

Ms Tkalcevic—Yes, we were involved in those expos overseas. We are looking at the outcomes now. There seems to have been a strong increase in inquiries over that time, so it seems as though people have made inquiries about migrating to our state as a result of participating in the expos, so that is a positive thing. I think the preregistration that occurred at the expos was a very good thing. Targeting is critical here. We work towards the refinement of that targeting, so that was a very positive thing. We had rather short notice for the expos, so logistically it was very challenging to get it all together in such a brief period of time. We did represent our regions, and they certainly have an interest in exploring whether they can attract migrants to regional areas the next time around, but we need a little bit more time to work on the logistics there.

Mr Ward—I will not comment on that second point. I will comment on the first point about the industry out-placed officers. As Irene has explained, I think a key tenet or a key part of our strategy for attracting skilled migrants has been working with local industry and local business, particularly through the Regional Migration Incentive Fund. Regional industry is heavily involved in that. So, in terms of the direction in which DIMIA has gone—placing out-placed officers in VECCI, I think it is, and one other organisation—I very much support that and very much support perhaps a potential extension of that program with other associations as well. Obviously, if we do not get that buy-in of industry and then working with their members, the effectiveness of these programs is going to be somewhat reduced. So I very much support that direction into the future.

CHAIR—I take your point about the effective screening of the applicants to that program. That has come through in previous evidence.

Ms Tkalcevic—I will just add that there was a Melbourne expo. All of our regions were represented at the Melbourne expo, and some have already employed migrants as a result of that who have expressed interest in going to regional Victoria. So, from our region's point of view, that Melbourne show was very effective—coming to Melbourne to source migrants and attract them out to the regions.

CHAIR—Yes, I have had some feedback. On overseas posts, though, there has been some criticism of the fact that the assistance from the Australian embassies, posts or whatever in countries where we are sourcing skilled migrants is varied. Have you had any experience of or do you have any points of view on that?

Ms Tkalcevic—Do you mean the assistance at the shows themselves?

CHAIR—No, I mean just generally, whether it be in the Philippines or somewhere in Europe. How are you finding the Australian posts' service, firstly, in helping new migrants come to Australia but, secondly, in helping with their qualifications before they migrate?

Ms Tkalcevic—Our experience with immigration has tended to be with the Adelaide Skilled Processing Centre primarily, so we do not have a direct connection with the posts. So, if there are any delays associated with the posts or any issues there, we tend not to notice them, I suppose, because our dealings are direct with the Adelaide Skilled Processing Centre with the programs that we deal with.

CHAIR—So when, as a government, you sponsor particular migrants, you go through the Adelaide Skilled Processing Centre rather than—

Ms Tkalcevic—That is right, so we have good communication with that office. They have been quite effective in responding to issues that we might have. At times there are processing delays and so on, so we have worked very closely with that office to rectify things there.

CHAIR—The committee would be disappointed if I did not ask this question. I understand that Trades Recognition Australia have a large presence in Victoria. There has been a fair amount of evidence on Trades Recognition Australia. Do you have any points of view you would like to offer?

Ms Tkalcevic—I have nothing to add there.

CHAIR—Do you work with them? Do they work with you to try and establish the qualifications of people overseas, for example, before they come here or once they get here? How effective are they in the time taken to assess the qualifications and trades of new migrants?

Ms Tkalcevic—That is going to be a difficult one for me to answer. I think that we have an association with TRA in our state nominated program, in helping us to select migrants there, but I am not aware of any particular issues at this point.

CHAIR—You do not have a lot to do with them?

Ms Tkalcevic—Not a huge amount, no.

CHAIR—Time is nearly up. There was one more question, but you have touched on CHOGM before. I might conclude by saying 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, as soon as possible, any additional material that you have undertaken to provide. Thanks for attending.

Ms Tkalcevic—Thanks.

Mr Ward—Thank you.

[9.33 am]

BERKLEY, Ms Karen, Executive Director, Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services

PARKER, Mr Barry, Manager, Qualification Assessment Service, Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services, or VETASSESS, 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.

Ms Berkley—Thank you. I am going to open, and Barry will support me through any questions or if I need any support during this address. First of all, thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry. VETASSESS is very pleased to be working on behalf of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to provide educational assessments for people who intend to migrate to Australia under a broad range of generalist occupations within the General Skilled Migration Program or the Employer Nomination Scheme.

In addition to this work, VETASSESS also provides a range of other assessment services for individuals, organisations and national and international government agencies. Those services include a Chinese verification service, which consists of verifying Chinese higher ed qualifications for Chinese nationals. We are the only agency outside China to be able to do that and to actually provide a verification certificate for applicants. We also have a skills recognition service for individuals wishing to gain an Australian qualification via an assessment-only pathway. We have a test and examination service as well, which we provide to many licensing bodies here in Victoria. We also provide a consultancy service to governments on assessment, system development and design.

Since 1999 VETASSESS has been assessing Australian and international qualifications for individuals seeking to migrate through the General Skilled Migration Program in over 200 generalist occupations. We do 10,000 to 12,000 assessments per year. Since 1999 we have undertaken over 50,000 assessments covering about 115 different countries. The categories are generally manager/administrator level, professional and paraprofessional and we assess the 40- and 50-point occupations, which are degree and diploma level. We also do a very small number of certificate IV qualifications.

The outcome of the assessment for our clients is a statement about whether their postsecondary qualifications have met the requirements of their nominated occupation under the skilled occupation list. We believe that the assessment process we have developed is extremely efficient, user friendly and extremely flexible for applicants. We have a web site which provides comprehensive advice about the application process, where people can download application

forms and view information about the process. If they wish, they can also apply online, pay online and then check the status of their application online. We also offer this for migration agents. We also provide, obviously, print based forms and information for individuals.

On receipt of an application, we check the documentation and then go through the process of undertaking the assessment. The assessment is undertaken with reference to the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition's country educational profiles. The assessment is about looking at whether the applicant's qualification is equivalent to the Australian qualification which is required for the skilled occupation they are wishing to migrate under. The CEPs provide for a highly consistent process. Where an individual's qualifications fall outside of that process, we need to go in and do an individual assessment, often with reference to NOOSR, looking at in particular the education system of the country, the awarding institution, things like the nature of the program, and any previous cases or identical cases, obviously, that we have received. We will then undertake an assessment based on the outcome of that fairly lengthy research. We usually provide an applicant with a result within 30 days. We give them notification of receipt of their application within one to two days. Feedback from applicants and migration agents is generally very positive.

In terms of improvements, we have, obviously, a written submission, but just to summarise: we believe that anything that assists people wishing to migrate to do so in a very streamlined, economical and efficient way is something that always needs to be looked at. We think there is still room for better information to be provided to applicants—always in plain English, well structured, simple. Now that many of our applicants are using the web, more use could be made of web sites and web portals in providing information with hyperlinks to other or all assessing agencies as well as licensing bodies and skills councils—wherever individuals can get up-to-date relevant information. We also believe that people could be making more use of online applications and online advice so that it is more timely and, again, more efficient. In addition, we consider that there is always a need for the training of migration agents, who have such a big part to play in a skilled migration program, working with their clients. They need to really be up to date on processes and procedures.

We think that the guidelines could be more effective—I am talking about the country education profiles—if more competency based assessment programs and work based assessment programs were included. These are quite well developed now in countries like the UK and South Africa. But there is often a reliance on higher education qualifications which require a lot of theoretical knowledge and more of a suspicion of qualifications which include a lot of work based experience. Yet the experience in Australia with a competency based vocational education and training system is that this is obviously a superior way to provide training and assessment to people.

In addition, we believe that in terms of our own processes, while we are at the moment limited by the confines of the contract and the way that we have to provide an assessment statement to individuals, we could do more to assist post migration in relation to that statement. For instance, we could do things like provide the content of the qualification that people will receive from their awarding institution so that their potential employers have a better understanding of those overseas qualifications and people gain greater recognition of those qualifications.

As I mentioned earlier, we have an agreement with the Chinese government which is not just about verifying the qualifications to ensure that we are not receiving forged documents or fraudulent applications but also about having a better understanding of those qualifications and how they change—being able to always be up to date on that information. So we think there is some way to go there. We also have arrangements with the Philippines government. We have built a system for them so that all their qualifications are registered on the system and we can check the content of those qualifications and also whether applicants have actually been awarded the qualification they claim to have. We are working with other countries like India and Pakistan to develop similar communications systems which we hope will provide better outcomes for our clients at the end of the day. Perhaps I had better stop there and wait for questions.

CHAIR—You are doing well. Mr Parker, did you want to add anything?

Mr Parker—I do not think I have anything to add at this stage.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission. On page 4 of your submission, you mention that your fees are competitive and that they have in fact ‘reduced over the past 18 months due to improved efficiencies’. Could you explain your fee structure to us?

Ms Berkley—Yes. I will let Barry undertake that.

Mr Parker—Basically, the fee structure has arrangements in place, and some of them include GST features as well. For example, if someone is applying from outside Australia, they are not liable for the GST payment, so that factor is also part of the fees. The fee structure is based on simply an application. So the application is lodged and, with that application, the fees then become payable up front, if you like.

There is not a range of fees, in the sense that the qualification itself does not determine the fee. If, for example, we say there is a fee of \$310 for an application, or \$295, whether it includes GST et cetera, those fees relate to the lodgment of the application; they do not relate to the content of the application itself. We know also—although we do not always know this beforehand—that many of the applications will take longer. There was a mention before of the verification of qualifications. If we have applicants with, for example, Chinese qualifications that need to be verified, that verification is an applicant fee as well, because of course we are relating to China and we pay them a fee as well. Let us take the example of a Chinese applicant who is wanting to have verified, with the application that they lodge with us, the academic record as well as the certificate or testamur. That is \$65 each service as such, or either one of them of course. So that could be in addition to those people’s applications.

Senator KIRK—You say you have had some improved efficiencies. What have those been and how have they resulted in reductions in fees?

Mr Parker—One of the improved efficiencies in particular—and I can talk about a few—is that the presentation of an online system has enabled that efficiency to be greater. When an applicant applies online—whether from in Australia or outside does not matter; it is a world feature now—they tend to make fewer mistakes but, also, we do not need to enter as much data because in a sense they are entering the data that we download and that becomes part of the application and the records that we keep. So there is a saving in that regard. There are also

savings in that the systems in place internally—in other words, our own record keeping and those sorts of things—are more efficient. I would also suggest that the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition online—which has only been on since, I think, 14 July—helps too because, firstly, we can now search those profiles online and, secondly, they can update them very quickly. There are those sorts of efficiencies that have enabled us to make savings.

Ms Berkley—I would like to talk about the Chinese verification service that Barry mentioned. Before the agreement was established with China, applicants, as a requirement for DIMIA, had to contact their awarding institution and get certified documents. It often took a long time and it was quite costly—we estimated about \$150 to \$180. Because we now have a direct relationship with China and we actually access their database over a secure network, we now have that application down to about \$65. It is very efficient—within a week or two—and we have really cut the costs for applicants, which they greatly appreciate.

CHAIR—On the issue of your efficiencies because of your online program, it is all in English—is that right?

Ms Berkley—It is at this stage, yes.

CHAIR—It has been put to us that that is not as user friendly as it could be—not your program necessarily—because of the fact that a lot of people applying offshore, and even onshore, have limited English and would find that difficult.

Ms Berkley—Absolutely. It is one that we wrestle with. There is an English test requirement. When we are looking at the skilled migration program we are also assuming that individuals have a certain level of English. We are very keen to ensure that the online process is very simple and that any technical language is only what is required as part of the application. However, we are looking at providing information especially for families, because there might be a primary applicant whose English is very good but there might be other family members who are interested on behalf of that person or who just want to look anyway. So, yes, we are looking at a non-English version.

CHAIR—Would that include interpretation services or access to them?

Ms Berkley—We have a number of individuals within our organisation who are bilingual. That has never been an issue for us. We have people who speak Arabic, Chinese, Indian, Nepalese—

CHAIR—So it is not an issue?

Ms Berkley—No. One of the strengths of VETASSESS is that we have a quite large multicultural staff.

CHAIR—You seem to be quite proud of your Chinese achievements—

Ms Berkley—Absolutely!

CHAIR—Do you have people who are fluent in Mandarin?

Ms Berkley—Yes, we do. We have Mandarin speakers and writers. I am extremely proud of our organisation's work in that area—as are the Chinese, I might add.

Mr KEENAN—Why the emphasis on China? Are we getting a lot of skilled immigrants from China?

Ms Berkley—It is probably because we have a significant number of applications from China. China would have the second or third highest number of applications. Also, when the service was established it was because of the huge fraud and forgery issues from China, which is the biggest country in the world. What is interesting is that DIMIA is now using our service for all visa class applications from China.

Mr KEENAN—How do you get an equivalence between a Chinese qualification and what we would understand it to be here in Australia?

CHAIR—That was going to be my question. How do you benchmark a Chinese qualification?

Mr Parker—Benchmarking Chinese qualifications in principle is the same as any other country, because we use as our base the country education profiles published by NOOSR. They are now online, so they are quite accessible to us, and to other people too. We use that as the benchmark. Should we have problems with anything like that, we have internal reference panels. Also, if we need to, we have contractual arrangements with NOOSR to forward them any particularly vexatious cases. We have that three-tiered approach. That is consistent across countries. If we have a qualification from China, it is designated in its Chinese title, of course, but we have the translations and the links, so it is relatively straightforward. I am not trying to say that there are not individual cases that have to be looked at in much more detail.

Mr KEENAN—I would have thought the awarding institutions in China would vary in quality enormously. Is there a hierarchy of institutions?

Mr Parker—Yes, there is. Again, that is reflected for every country within the NOOSR guidelines. If you look at India or China, for example, you will find a range. They range from section 1 institutions, which in India will be a particular group that has a high status, to section 5 institutions, which are obviously further away. That benchmarking of institutions and their quality is part of the material which we use in reference.

Senator KIRK—You said that the NOOSR guidelines are now online. We heard yesterday that the subscription fee is \$1,600 a year. Is that correct?

Mr Parker—The current fee, which we have paid, is about \$363.80 for the first year, and we were proud to be the first group online with them, so I am well aware of the fee. I believe—I should not try and speak on their behalf—that they are going to increase that fee for the next 12-monthly renewal. I think the idea was to give it a trial in its first year so that it could get as many people involved as possible and then extend after that. The good feature for us at the moment is that all of our assessors have access for that amount.

Ms Berkley—We also subscribe to a similar UK service, which costs about \$2,000 a year.

Senator KIRK—That has not affected your fee structure, though, and it will not?

Ms Berkley—Absolutely not. No, it will not.

Senator KIRK—On the Chinese higher education verification process, which is obviously excellent—

Ms Berkley—Thank you.

Senator KIRK—I think you said the Chinese qualifications are the ones you are having to verify the second most often. Which are the first?

Ms Berkley—At the moment it is India, then I think China, then the UK, then the Philippines. The Philippines is actually a large-growing area as well.

Senator KIRK—I thought it might be India.

Ms Berkley—It is India. It changes. It is really interesting how dynamic that list is.

Senator KIRK—I do not know if I can say this here, but, with respect, I was going to say that there might also be some cases of fraud—

Ms Berkley—Absolutely.

Senator KIRK—with Indian qualifications too. I wondered if there had been any moves to perhaps establish a similar kind of system with India.

Ms Berkley—Yes. In fact, we are in the process of doing that at the moment. I think what has made it very easy in China in many ways is that they are centralised and their databases are centralised. So the database that we have has close to 150 million applicants on it and it is growing all the time, obviously. In India it is far more segmented. It is about arrangements with individual institutions and agencies—government agencies. So it is a little bit more problematic but certainly doable. As I said, at the end of the day it is a terrific outcome for our clients, because it is so much more streamlined.

Mr Parker—I think it is important to note that, in checking the verification of qualifications, although that might make some people sound nervous or whatever, it values the people who do work hard and earn the qualifications they get. Unfortunately in the world today, there are so many ways of purchasing qualifications, of undertaking study courses of one week to get your PhD—these sorts of things. I think we have got to be quite aware that this service in fact helps people's credibility and the clients at both ends. The individual who applies, the employer and DIMIA all benefit from knowing that a qualification has been verified. I would have said years ago that qualifications that were fraudulent would be easy to pick up. I think we are finding the fraudsters now are in fact much more adept at their craft. Even a few weeks ago I saw original documents of a Chinese qualification that, when we checked with the service, was fraudulent. Yet, to look at it, any of us would have had a hard time telling that it was fraudulent documentary evidence.

Senator KIRK—As I say, with the service that you are now able to check with, you can check directly with the authorities and you no longer are just relying on the documentation, which is excellent.

Mr Parker—It is an extra level, but I think it value adds to everybody—except the fraudsters of course. They do not get the value adding. I think there are a lot of people in the world, unfortunately, in that fraud business. It is estimated at the moment to be worth billions of dollars. The last figure I saw was \$20 billion. It is not my figure, I know, but I am just saying that that is the sort of dimension that fraud is pulling towards it.

CHAIR—What sort of checking—that may not be the correct word—process do you have when the people you assess overseas come to Australia and begin work here or use their qualifications here? What is your ability to confirm your original assessments? What has been the feedback? What is the general percentage of success? Have you had reason to adjust your assessments once they arrive in Australia?

Mr Parker—I think, firstly, that because our main role is involved with the assessment of qualifications for applications, that is the bulk of what we are about. However, we had recently a case where the material became available—through DIMIA, actually—which questioned the integrity of the application and the qualification. So we are responsive to that, and that is important as well. We are not involved in the employment directly of any of the applicants. So when we have done the assessment, they take that assessment and use that in the application with DIMIA. But once those people arrive or in fact are here—because people can apply from inside Australia, of course—we are not involved in that other step. However, the verification service, of course, is available for that purpose. So the assessment service with the DIMIA arrangements is for applications for migration. The verification service is involved with the applications but also can be applied in local situations.

Ms Berkley—Often for privacy reasons, we do not follow applicants. We do follow studies of the skilled migration program and the outcomes for applicants and we watch very carefully the extent to which applicants are employed in occupations for which they have applied—the percentage—how well they are doing in terms of income and their levels of reported satisfaction, and they are all high.

CHAIR—That sounds all generally positive.

Ms Berkley—Absolutely. There has been a recent study, which we have been able to see the outcomes of.

CHAIR—Do you have the name of that study?

Ms Berkley—It was undertaken by a South Australian professor.

CHAIR—Can you undertake to find that out and give it to us?

Ms Berkley—Absolutely; no problem at all. Our main cohort, actually, were interviewed. Something like 85 per cent are employed, six months after migration, in occupations where they

sought employment and are earning above the Australian average income. For us, that is an endorsement that we are getting it right.

CHAIR—Forgive me for saying this but alarm bells ring a little bit when you talk about NOOSR. We have had evidence as recent as yesterday saying that the NOOSR profiling is way out of date—in fact, that it has not been updated since 1992-93—and that the ability to rely on the profiles provided by NOOSR is fraught with danger because they are so out of whack with current arrangements. Given the fact that you seem to put a lot of credence in NOOSR's profiling, how do you respond to that?

Ms Berkley—There are things called in-house guidelines. NOOSR may have published guidelines but they also do an enormous amount of research day to day. Remember, we see qualifications coming in all the time. So there are the published guidelines and there are the in-house guidelines. The in-house guidelines are usually pretty accurate. We are also working with government agencies around the world and we are also working with other assessing authorities, so there is a pool of research that we are drawing from. But our understanding is that, while there are these published guidelines, we are also privy, thankfully, to in-house guidelines which supplement that. So we are well aware of where there are shortcomings but we work with that organisation. I guess one of the things about working with the Philippine government and with China is that it is more problematic because they are difficult countries. But I can say that I think our intelligence would be absolutely on the money. There have been problems—

CHAIR—Basically you are saying that cross-referencing deals with it.

Ms Berkley—Absolutely.

Mr Parker—If anyone looks at the online guidelines they will see that a lot of work has been done prior to their release. So many of the 1992-93 guidelines are now updated. In fact, the guidelines page clearly shows which ones have been updated. India, for example, is one of them. I am just saying that because when guidelines are updated it can very well make a difference to the outcome of an assessment. I think NOOSR have spent quite a bit of time in recent months in making sure that they updated a lot of the material before the release of their online system.

I do not know about the evidence provided to you where the person was referring to the published guidelines, which basically are now outdated. Unfortunately, maybe—whatever the case may be—if someone is now relying on the published data in terms of the booklets that they used to provide, that has now been literally superseded. In our work, we now use the online guidelines, many of which have been updated. I understand your concern about the 1992-93 type guidelines. Up until that July date, they were in force. We had extra information that work was being done, and we were using that, but now that online system is available I believe you will find some of that material is now available to everyone.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. That helps to clarify matters. But I take Senator Kirk's point that online guidelines are rather expensive. That might be all right for an organisation like yours—a business—but it could be prohibitive for an individual.

Mr Parker—I am not trying to speak on behalf of NOOSR, but I believe there is a plan at least—if it is not currently in operation—for an individual who wishes to have access not to be

liable for the figure of, say, \$1,600 from next year. They can have limited access for a much lower fee.

CHAIR—On that point, DIMIA is establishing a web portal, which I am sure you are aware of. You may or may not have had some input to that, but certainly you would have a view on it. Will NOOSR have an economic link to individuals who may use it?

Ms Berkley—I am sure it will.

CHAIR—Do you see that as a positive?

Ms Berkley—Absolutely—anything that streamlines the process. It is such an expensive exercise for so many of our clients. We charge what I think is a very reasonable fee, especially if you look at other assessing agencies and costs. Migration agent fees, however, run into thousands of dollars, sometimes for extremely straightforward assessments. If individuals understood that the qualifications they held were within the guidelines and there was clear equivalence with an Australian qualification, it would be so much easier.

CHAIR—You raised the issue of migration agents.

Ms Berkley—I did not mean to!

CHAIR—Migration agents came to talk to us in Sydney yesterday and they had a number of issues as well. You say they are rather expensive. Do you have a view on their services? Like everyone else, migration agencies have quality and—

Ms Berkley—Absolutely. We work very hard to provide them with up-to-date information and professional development in relation to our procedures. I think some of them are extremely expensive. They really are. Given the way that we understand the process, in many cases it is not justified. I might let Barry talk in more detail.

Mr Parker—A variety of services are provided, and many of those agents are people of integrity and they desire to assist their clients as well as to operate their business interests. I think that is the case. The regulation system for agents is important because, if there were none, we would not have any way of controlling applicants who are in fact quite vulnerable. The other aspect is that legally it is very hard for Australia to have control over overseas agents. That is often an area of difficulty.

Ms Berkley—Perhaps we could talk about the case that we have—

CHAIR—I like individual case studies.

Ms Berkley—We have a case from, I think, Somalia.

Mr Parker—We have a number of cases we could use. We get a lot of cases from Nigeria.

Ms Berkley—Let us talk about the Nigerian one, which is very sad.

CHAIR—Nigeria is the fraud capital of the world, apparently, in terms of paperwork et cetera.

Ms Berkley—It is.

Mr Parker—We have had some cases recently where we had Nigerian examples of applications being sent to us by agents. Then we discovered that there was no fee being paid with them, which puzzled us a bit, and then when we tried to contact the applicant or agent we found the task very elusive. My suspicion of course is that a person touting themselves as willing to lodge an application—and I guess, technically they do lodge an application; they just do not pay for it and it will never go anywhere—is taking fees from the applicants. There are cases in Nigeria, Somalia and the Soviet Union, all of which, unfortunately in some cases, point to the fact that there are many people who would wish to migrate to Australia or find information about migrating, and pay for it, only to have those people disappear or not to be people of integrity.

Ms Berkley—VETASSESS is considering advertising in local newspapers to warn people about these practices. So many people are in very poor circumstances, having already spent many years saving to be able to get a chance at migration. They often do not have the education requirements anywhere near the mark and they are being extremely poorly advised and absolutely ripped off.

CHAIR—To clarify, are the migration agents you were talking about Australian?

Ms Berkley—In the main, they are international and unregulated.

CHAIR—Do you have any evidence though of Australian migration agents involved in large-scale fraud or misrepresentation?

Ms Berkley—No.

Mr Parker—No, we do not have evidence of that. I know that the Migrant Agents Registration Authority, should they have concerns about agents, will take action and, if necessary, will contact us if we are involved—

CHAIR—So you think that MARA does its job well, do you?

Ms Berkley—Yes.

Mr Parker—I think that is a very important aspect of the operation. I have to say that we have made a submission to them recently about one case, but that is the only one in quite a long period. I know that their investigations do go on. I would not have a perspective on the volume and effectiveness over a large number of cases because we have just not had a large number of cases.

CHAIR—You talk about competency based programs rather than academic assessment. For competency based programs you need a lot more face-to-face integration, don't you?

Ms Berkley—You need more work based experience. You need an assessment process that assesses someone to workplace performance standards and ensures that someone can actually do the job in the workplace. That is something that is obviously a major feature of our current VET system and I think that it is extremely successful and has industry support. I think that it would be good if in looking at the skilled migration program and the need to ensure that people have workplace and relevant skills we were able to broaden perhaps the type of qualification that we look at and accept more of those competency based and work based ones. At VETASSESS we offer a service for people who are often in work and are not in a training situation and have many years of experience and terrific skills. We offer them a comprehensive assessment service and out of that, if they are successful, they gain an Australian qualification. It is considered an extremely viable way of attaining the qualification and I know that there are a number of people overseas in similar circumstances.

CHAIR—It must be difficult though to do this competency based program for a potential migrant coming from overseas?

Ms Berkley—Not necessarily. A number of them have already been awarded that type of qualification but these are often not seen in the same light as more academic qualifications. So the institutional based component of their training or their education would be decreased and the workplace component would be increased. There is some suspicion that people may not have the level of skill of someone who has been in an institution but in fact they could have a higher level because they have been doing it and working in and facing a number of situations. I think there is still some suspicion and perhaps some snobbery around that type of qualification.

CHAIR—I am rather intrigued by and I compliment you on the huge amount of assessments that you do in a year. You say 10,000 to 12,000.

Ms Berkley—Absolutely. We have a fabulous team.

CHAIR—That is just within Victoria?

Ms Berkley—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have like bodies that do the same sorts of volumes in other states?

Ms Berkley—No, I think we are the largest. We also have regular audits. We have a very high consistency and high quality. We get it right 99.9 per cent of the time, which is good. That is thanks to Mr Parker and his team.

Mr Parker—I am not sure whether your question also meant that we have other offices in other states.

CHAIR—No, it did not, but do you?

Ms Berkley—No, we are Victoria based.

Mr Parker—But, of course, now, particularly with the web based materials et cetera—

CHAIR—Given your success, though, you might want to open up some branch offices, particularly in Western Australia. I will get onto my hoary chestnut. We have a problem with the fact that there is no Trades Recognition Australia office in Western Australia. As a result, Western Australia has to deal with the Brisbane office of TRA. South Australians have to deal with the New South Wales office in Sydney. Given the fact that we have a huge amount of resource projects on the go it has made it very difficult with regard to the time taken to do assessments. We have heard figures of up to nine months, which is quite extraordinary. I do not want to give you commercial advice, but you might want to look elsewhere.

Ms Berkley—We appreciate it.

CHAIR—Do you have much integration with TRA at all?

Ms Berkley—Not through this process—the skilled migration program—but, because we are a competency assessment service as well, we often do verification. We have actually helped TRA in the past to process a number of their applications. They have come to us—

CHAIR—For a fee?

Ms Berkley—They have commissioned us to do that work, yes. We have done that very gladly to assist them. So we are aware of the pressures that TRA are under.

Senator KIRK—Do you undertake a similar sort of process to TRA?

Ms Berkley—We try not to because that is TRA's work. We try to mind our own business. We work in Australia. I have often been approached to do similar work but we figure that we should stick to our knitting, I guess. So at this stage we have not. We are certainly happy to go in and work with TRA when they invite us, though. We are certainly interested in that work.

Senator KIRK—You would be interested in doing that work?

Ms Berkley—Absolutely, yes.

CHAIR—As to the pressures that you talk about TRA being under, can you tell us what you understand them to be?

Ms Berkley—I think it is well understood; they have certainly approached us when they have had difficulty meeting the number of applications within particular timelines. I think we have fairly good service standards and they have in the past been able to rely on us to help clear some of their backlog. So that is the pressure that I understand them to be under.

CHAIR—It is interesting, though, to hear that they farm some of their work out. Finally, do you give feedback to applicants on your assessments? Do you tell them why they succeeded or why they did not?

Ms Berkley—Absolutely. If they request it we do. Sometimes we will also assist in terms of guiding them to where they need to go to improve it. But that tends to be informal. We do not have any formal structure yet for doing that.

CHAIR—Is that for an extra fee or is it part of the service?

Ms Berkley—It is part of the service.

CHAIR—I am not saying that facetiously. We have heard that people get rejected then ask another question and get charged another fee.

Ms Berkley—No, they do not. I guess if we were to put that in as an integral part of the service for all of our applicants, that would take a fair bit of work and we might have to look at the fee structure. But, certainly, when applicants come back to us—and many of them do—I know that Barry and his team always provide that advice and assistance on what they need to do. Often we have applicants who take that up, come back to us and enjoy a successful outcome the next time around.

Mr Parker—I think it is important to add the key point that often an applicant comes to us and asks, ‘Why did I get that assessment?’ That is fine; we can often advise them or advise them of what they need to do to change that. From time to time, we also get applicants—and I know this sounds unbelievable—who say to us: ‘Oh, I’ve actually got extra documents now. I’ve got extra information.’ They might wish to do a reassessment or, in fact, an appeal, because we have an appeal process for people who feel that there is not a good reason for what we have done. That is also possible. Of course, if it is a reassessment or an appeal, that attracts a fee, which is part of our understanding with DIMIA.

Some of that giving advice to people and assisting them, I should add, is done even though people do not become applicants. I had two or three of those cases yesterday. I guess they would have to be seen as potential applicants. I gave them advice to try to assist them and to see where they were at. We cannot do pre-assessments in detail because, obviously, with documents and fraud issues, a pre-assessment would be fraught with danger. So we give advice to people without prejudice.

CHAIR—Can I thank you and say that I, in particular, am—and I am sure the other members of the committee are—rather impressed with the service and extent of service that you provide. It has been refreshing listening to you. As I said, you may wish to extend your services because where we have been we have found that there is a need.

Ms Berkley—Thank you so much.

CHAIR—I thank you for attending the hearing today.

Mr Parker—Thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 10.21 am to 10.34 am

COX, Mr Michael, General Manager, Education, Adult Multicultural Education Services

PATERSON, Mr Brian, Chief Executive Officer, Adult Multicultural Education Services

WEAVER, Ms Heather, Coordinator, Youth Services, Adult Multicultural Education Services

CHAIR—Welcome. Is there anything you would like to add to the capacity in which you are appearing?

Ms Weaver—I also work in the vocational counselling area, which provides assistance to people with overseas qualifications.

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

Mr Paterson—Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to appear at this important inquiry. I thought that what I might do is just briefly explain what AMES does as an organisation and the experience that it has. AMES has been in the business of providing multicultural services for about 55 years. Over the last 10 years it has expanded its services to include virtually a full range of pathways for providing settlement services for migrants and refugees in Australia. This includes English language provision, Job Network provision and also the new IHSS settlement services for newly arrived migrants under the humanitarian program and the normal refugee program. We service somewhere in the vicinity of 45,000 people. We operate in Victoria and New South Wales. So we now have quite extensive experience in settlement pathways, from picking up the migrants and refugees as they arrive in Australia right through to taking them into English provision and into jobs as well. So we feel quite competent to provide evidence to the inquiry. I will ask my colleague Heather Weaver to explain briefly what our submission contains.

Ms Weaver—I will just very quickly cover those areas that we particularly wish to draw to the attention of the committee. The first is the issue of cost for all migrants and refugees coming into Australia for the assessment and recognition processes but particularly for people coming in with trade qualifications, where there are no subsidies or low fee loans programs available to them. Professionals do have those subsidies et cetera available to them. We also want to draw to your attention the area of access, particularly in regulated trades. People who come into Australia with trades that are prescribed have access to recognition services onshore despite the fact that they may not be employed. People coming in with regulated trades are not able to seek access to those assessment services unless they gain employment in Australia and that is very much a catch-22 situation for adults.

CHAIR—Can you give us a few examples of the regulated trades that you are talking about?

Ms Weaver—Within the regulated trades area you have the building trades; some of the metals areas, although many of the metals areas are covered by trades recognition of prescribed trades; and trades in the hospitality and bakeries area et cetera. But it particularly applies to those people within the building trades and some of the metals trades. However, for those trades that are licensed, Trades Recognition Australia, which undertakes that process across Australia and whom we deal with in Victoria, is actually able to validate overseas experience and assess competency despite the fact that somebody may not be employed in Australia. The other area we particularly want to draw your attention to is the area of the descriptors with regard to vocational shortages in Australia. We feel that those descriptors need to be much more rigorous to adequately meet the needs and skill requirements of employers in Australia. Do you want me to go into more detail about those? I am not sure whether we want to get to the question stage fairly quickly. We have quite a bit of detail to give to you but we thought we would wait.

CHAIR—We will get to it as we go. If you wish to expand on these areas if we do not ask you all of the questions to elicit that information, please feel free to do so. In terms of the descriptors which identify shortages, don't you rely on DEWR's list, for example, in identifying areas of work force shortage?

Ms Weaver—It seems that the Australian posts overseas do rely on those descriptions, but what we are observing onshore are people coming in with a skilled migrant visa but not having the level of qualification nor the set of skills that are actually required by employers onshore and for whom the opportunity to upgrade is extremely limited and extremely costly. And many skilled migrants have not factored that into the level of support that they thought they would need to provide for themselves across their first two years in Australia.

CHAIR—But that suggests to me that those seeking to come to Australia under certain skill categories have not been properly or well enough assessed before they come.

Ms Weaver—That may be the case; we are not in a position to judge that. What we are looking at is the individual once they are onshore. Part of the process that we undertake in our skill centres et cetera is looking at the set of skills that they have and looking at the requirements of the employers and we are noticing some very real gaps there which decrease the individual's opportunity to find employment, and it takes time for that individual to upgrade in Australia.

Mr Paterson—It might not be such a problem if it were easier to get access to upgrading in Australia, which in the regulated trades is difficult. There are systems in other skill areas, through a program called recognition of prior learning or recognition of prior experience, where they can enter into a skill set and get an Australian qualification. That is predominantly in the areas of aged care, child care and those sorts of things—the soft skills. But in the harder skill sets such as electrical, plumbing and the building trades, where there is also a skill shortage, it is more difficult to get into those sorts of processes. Those processes are readily available in Australia through the TAFE colleges or through vocational providers, but they are not able to access those because of, I guess, the attitudes of those particular trades.

CHAIR—You say they are not able to access the TAFEs or other institutions that help them upskill. Is that because their residency status is such that they cannot get into these institutions without paying hefty fees or is there some other inhibiting factor that stops them?

Mr Paterson—My understanding is that they cannot enter because to obtain the RPL process they need to be in a job, to be employed, and there is reluctance to employ them because they are an adult and they have to be paid adult wages, as opposed to going in at the apprenticeship level, which is at the lower level and obviously has lower wages. That is my understanding.

Ms Weaver—One of the issues around gaining access to RPL is that in the trades area the assessment of a person's level of competency involves validating overseas work experience or work experience in Australia. For people who cannot obtain work in Australia, if they are not able to validate that work experience overseas then undertaking the RPL process is of no advantage because of requirements they have to meet. For example, in the case of an electrician, they have to meet a six- to seven-year requirement—the requirement is actually seven but we manage to sneak them in at six years. So RPL does not become an appropriate method of obtaining competency assessment in a TAFE college in that instance, nor, for example, for someone in the very heavily regulated trades. An electrician is actually a fairly classical example of the issues around that.

In the case of a skilled migrant, they will receive their assessment of the level of their experience and their training overseas, but when they come to Australia they have to undertake a licensing process. The training for that licensing has to be undertaken in Australia, so an electrician will have to study wiring codes and so forth in Australia before seeking registration and licensing through the final licensing exam. But for someone who comes to Australia as a refugee, if they are not able in some way to validate that overseas experience, then the competency testing does not assist them in that process. That is where we get into an issue.

In the classic case of an electrician, the problems are that electricians have to establish their overseas work experience; they then have to proceed through competency testing; and they then have to go to the office of the chief electrical commissioner, for example, and receive a licence which then enables them to take on the licensed electrical mechanics course to prepare them for licensing. Because it is a heavily regulated trade, it is extremely difficult for an adult to go to a TAFE college and, for example, seek a pre-apprenticeship program, because that is the domain—and rightfully—of young people. It is also a waste of training dollars for Australia to be training at such a low level people who already have a level of expertise. They cannot get into a certificate III or an apprenticeship program because they do not have a sponsor in Australia. An adult who faces an employer and needs to be paid an adult wage who does not have either assessment or recognition in their qualification has a very limited chance of getting work.

CHAIR—On this issue, we have received evidence previously which would suggest that maybe one option to assist in this area would be to provide a HECS type arrangement for older workers.

Ms Weaver—Yes, that is very much our recommendation. For example, for an electrician, it costs well over \$1,000 and refugees simply do not have those resources. Even skilled migrants coming into Australia—because there may be a protracted period of time when they have to undertake English language training and then move through to the licensing programs—do need access to some support in some instances. One of the issues there is that, unfortunately, at this point in time, we seem to be receiving wide variations in the assessment of English language skills overseas. Often someone will come into Australia with an assessment that is well above that of their actual proficiency level. They therefore have to pay for English classes, in many

cases, because they do not have eligibility to English language training under, for example, the DIMIA program. So there is a period of time when that person is not employable, and nor are they able to fully resource themselves through that process.

CHAIR—So, if this committee were to make a recommendation that people in these categories—at a state level in particular, because that is where the training is generally done—could, in a shared sort of way, which I understand is being discussed through COAG, have an arrangement whereby they enter into training with a HECS sort of component, would that be something that you could support?

Ms Weaver—Absolutely. That is also the recommendation of a working party of the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee. We come together as a large group of organisations—representatives from the overseas skills program, representatives from the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition, DEWR et cetera. That has been the overwhelming recommendation of people involved in that working party.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission. On page 4 you quite rightly point out that the timeliness of advice, the quality of the advice offered and the ease with which advice can be accessed are critical factors relating to effective communication processes for users. What feedback have you received from those that you deal with in regard to timeliness, quality and accessibility of advice on the skills recognition upgrading and licensing processes that are available?

Ms Weaver—One of the reasons why we commented on that in our submission to you was the comments from a large number of individuals that we meet with on a daily basis, who have been in Australia for a long period of time in some instances, who have not received adequate or correct information re their recognition or assessment processes. The process can be lengthy and complex, and for each occupation it is different. So there needs to be a high degree of training for people who are going to give advice to people. There needs to be adequate resources available for those people to resource that advice and a constant updating of that advice.

We find, for example, that people who have been out of their skill area for a long period of time obviously reach a point where they are becoming rapidly deskilled and their opportunities for moving back into the work force become much more difficult. There is a longer period of time required for updating those skills and for taking them through the process of improving their knowledge of the labour market et cetera.

Mr Paterson—The other difficulty in providing advice is that each of the states have a different approach to trade regulation, trade qualification and trade recognition. I think it would be made easier if there could be some consistency. I understand the difficulties in getting that consistency, but like any skill or qualification there should be some consistency across the country, particularly if we are going to remain competitive. I think that certainly is a factor in terms of providing clear advice, whether you are doing it for Victoria, Western Australia or Queensland. There are subtle differences as we move from state to state.

Ms Weaver—We find that particularly in the area of refugees they require some support and advocacy in moving through that process. As we commented, the process is quite complicated with a large number of steps involved. For example, just recently I was dealing with an overseas qualified plumber. He has to move through a document check and a skills assessment to gain provisional registration. He then has to proceed to a number of TAFE programs in order to achieve licensing in a number of areas before he can finally achieve the full licensing. For people who come to Australia, particularly from countries that are very culturally different to Australia, it is a complex process and one that they tend to stumble through if they are not provided with advocacy along the way.

Senator KIRK—We heard yesterday that in Canada, I think, they have some sort of mentoring system in place. Do you have any suggestions about how that might assist in the process?

Ms Weaver—I think there are two issues. One is to very quickly look at providing these people on arrival with a skills audit and programs that assist them—providing their English language skills are ready—with information about access to and knowledge of the Australian labour market, finding work here and acquiring interview skills et cetera. We then provide the opportunity for a work placement to enable that person to see first-hand what it is like to work in Australia, what the requirements are et cetera so they can start developing that network for their own provision. That is one of the really critical areas. Then I think the opportunity for some form of ongoing mentoring from somebody from their profession is obviously ideal as well. But I think you need that first stage in order to take people through the process and then they can go onto the mentoring stage.

Mr Cox—We deliver a skilled migrant program. One of the aspects of that is volunteering to mentor those people who participate in that program. That has been quite positive in terms of the outcomes it achieves. But, again, it is related specifically to professionals in this case, so it is people from professional areas providing advice. It does not pick up on the trades area.

Mr Paterson—I think it would be good if these people could access traineeships, which is quite a divergence from your apprenticeship style. As they do have a level of qualification and skill, if you could move them into a form of traineeship, for argument's sake, then they could top it up whilst they are in employment and get access to the RPL processes or the normal qualification processes available in Australia, which operate very successfully. RPL is a very successful program. So if there was a mechanism for getting them into a position through a traineeship or something similar and then providing them the other services that Heather has mentioned, then I think you could move them into the employment cycle very quickly.

Senator KIRK—Then there is some structure in place through which these processes can occur.

Mr Paterson—That is right.

Senator KIRK—You mention on page 5 of your submission, I think it is, the potential for employer prejudice against accepting overseas qualifications and you propose providing:

... appropriate training for skilled migrants in orientation to Australian workplaces and opportunity to participate in supported work experience placement—

as a means to address the issue. In your experience, how aware and accepting are employers of overseas qualifications? Is it possible to generalise about any employment sectors in relation to this?

Ms Weaver—We find the antidote to degrees of prejudice or a simple lack of knowledge of what an overseas qualification means in terms of a level of skill et cetera is having someone with an overseas qualification in a workplace. So that work placement is absolutely critical to developing a knowledge within the employer group in Australia of the value of an overseas qualification and the value of the mixture of skills in terms of culture and knowledge, particularly for those companies who are exporting and wishing to develop markets overseas. For many years we ran an overseas qualified professionals program which had a very large component of work placement and exposed a large number of companies to a range of, in this case, professionals. In many instances, those companies kept those professionals on at the end of the placement period or recommended them to other companies because they realised for the first time that an overseas qualification indicated a level of skill that was appropriate to their business. The key component to that program was ensuring that, prior to somebody going out into the workplace, they had a knowledge of the requirements of Australian employers and a knowledge of interpersonal interaction and culturally appropriate behaviour in the workplace.

Mr Cox—The workplace placement is critical, and we get an 80 per cent outcome in terms of those skilled professional migrants as a result of that workplace cultural training and then the work placement. Quite often it leads to an employment outcome or an appropriate employment outcome with another employer. It is in the range of 80 per cent of the clients.

Mr Paterson—That is a gap in terms of the professional skilled migrant coming to Australia and not having the soft skills to know how to go about getting jobs and those sorts of things. We provide services, but it is on a fee for service basis. Once the intervention is there, we find that we have a high success rate of placing people in employment. So it is that initial gap of giving them the confidence and the wherewithal to go for the jobs in their particular skill area and connecting them to employers.

Senator KIRK—That is just in the professional areas, did you say?

Mr Cox—We have been doing that in the professions.

Ms Weaver—One of our concerns is that there is limited access for those with trades qualifications, which form a large majority of our skill shortages in Australia. One of the other areas that we will touch on perhaps, if we have the opportunity, is the area of access to assessment for those people within one area of the trades group because it is of huge concern to us at this point in time and those dealing with people with overseas trade qualifications.

Senator KIRK—You can touch on that now if you like.

Ms Weaver—I touched on it briefly before but I want to reiterate that where we have the range of trades coming under the regulated area with no opportunity whatsoever for individuals

approaching VETASSESS, who do that assessment, to validate their overseas experience and to put them through a process of competency testing in Australia unless they are employed is a huge barrier to overseas trades qualified people. It is a barrier that we find for the reasons we discussed previously very difficult to overcome.

With the prescribed trades, while the costs are high at least there is a process that those people who arrive on shore without the assessment and without the recognition can go through. They can have their overseas experience validated. They can proceed through competency testing to demonstrate that they do have skills. They can then look at, where feasible—and it is not feasible when we are discussing the electrical trades et cetera—upskilling through TAFE courses where they can get into them. But where you have that inability to validate and put through a process of competency testing, people are simply locked out of their professions, which means for Australia that we lose the value of skills developed overseas at no cost to our taxpayer base and, in many instances, we have to totally retrain someone in a slightly different area. It seems ludicrous to me that we cannot build on the skills, knowledge and experience that they have.

Senator KIRK—So these were the trades that you mentioned earlier in the building trades—metals, hospitality?

Ms Weaver—I will just refer to my list very briefly. The trades that we are particularly talking about are the building industries, the food industries, some electrical—the lower level electrical—industries but not all of them though, the furnishing metal industry and vehicle industry, although Trades Recognition Australia does do some of the vehicle industry and obviously some of the metal industry.

Senator KIRK—Just to be clear, TRA will not recognise these?

Ms Weaver—TRA does not cover that range of trades. We can forward you a list of those if you would like them.

Senator KIRK—That would be useful.

Ms Weaver—I think it is probably helpful to have a look at the list of trades not covered by the TRA process, which does provide that opportunity for validation and assessment.

CHAIR—Are you saying that TRA does not cover metalworkers?

Ms Weaver—TRA does cover a group of metalworkers, yes. They certainly do.

CHAIR—Other building trades.

Ms Weaver—There are a number. For example, within the metal industry the jobbing, moulding and core making, sewing machine mechanists, textile mechanics, and watchmaking and clock making metal industry areas are covered by VETASSESS. All of the other heavy metal areas are covered by TRA.

Senator KIRK—So which ones are excluded?

Ms Weaver—Within the trades recognition area, we have the metal industries. The majority of metal industries are covered except for those that I just mentioned then.

Senator KIRK—Okay.

Ms Weaver—Under TRA, the electrical industries are certainly covered except for the linesmen and meter mechanics. They are not covered. They are covered by VETASSESS. So the majority of the metal industry and the majority of the electrical industry is covered by TRA but there are just a few categories there.

CHAIR—While we are on TRA, what is your relationship with them or your experience of their assessments and capabilities?

Ms Weaver—We have worked with TRA over a large number of years. We have worked on a number of committees with them. We have always found that they—together with VETASSESS—are very approachable. TRA has assisted us with the migrants and refugees that we are assisting in the process of recognition in the sense that we can, for example, send somebody along or get on the telephone and say: ‘I have so and so here. He’s got this qualification. He’s from this country. He has undertaken this training. He has this experience. What do you think? Do you think he’s got a reasonable chance of getting through the recognition process and therefore it’s well worth while that person paying fees in order to do that?’ That has also been the situation with VETASSESS—that we are able to have that communication with them on behalf of our joint clients.

CHAIR—How do you view the timeliness and the efficient turnaround of assessment by both of those organisations?

Ms Weaver—I probably have not formed a view on that because, quite often because the process is lengthy, we start the process with our clients but we do not have the opportunity to see clients move through that process because they are with us during a period of time that they are undertaking language training and then at the period of job searching. But we do not see the middle stages quite often when they are proceeding through.

CHAIR—You did say it was lengthy, though, didn’t you?

Ms Weaver—It is a lengthy process, yes. However, we have not heard—

CHAIR—Does it need to be lengthy?

Ms Weaver—The first stages certainly do not need to be lengthy, except where there are issues around validating overseas experience from some countries. That can be quite difficult, particularly for war-torn countries.

CHAIR—But, if TRA do not have overseas offices, how do they evaluate overseas experience?

Ms Weaver—TRA do have overseas offices, because they do the offshore assessment for those coming into Australia as skilled migrants.

CHAIR—We heard evidence yesterday that TRA have closed all their overseas functions.

Ms Weaver—I have not heard of that; that is news to me. We have always been able to get validation of overseas experience. I am not too sure under those circumstances how they undertake that. I guess that is a question for TRA at this stage.

Mr Paterson—These evidentiary processes can be held up as a consequence of those providing the evidence not quite understanding what evidence they need or how to present it. The process itself, which is a recognition process, should not take that long but it can because people who are providing the evidence do not understand what sort of evidence they need, how they have to present it and those sorts of things. I imagine that would be a difficulty for anyone providing evidence for submissions. If you have good evidence guidelines and processes, the process should not take that long.

Ms Weaver—That is another area we were talking about—the need for mentoring and programs that assist people to undertake the process of assessment. You need to be able to work with individuals in gathering their evidence and assisting them to put the experience and skills that they have from overseas in terminology that can be understood in Australia. That is a really important component of programs that assist people to move through the process.

CHAIR—That is what this committee is investigating—any inhibiting factors, given the current skills shortage, which do not allow this to happen in a timely way.

Mr KEENAN—What percentage of your client base would have entered Australia on refugee and humanitarian visas? Is it the vast majority of them?

Mr Cox—Possibly a third of our clients in the adult migrant English program—approximately 3,000—come through on refugee and humanitarian visas.

Mr KEENAN—I know that our program is very much skewed at the moment. We are getting a lot of people in from Africa, and I know that they have a lot of trouble getting their qualifications recognised. What sorts of outcomes are you getting in Victoria for people from Africa who have entered under that sort of visa type?

Mr Cox—That is proving problematic, particularly with obtaining evidence, given the nature of the countries that they are coming from. The point has been made about the sort of direction we are giving in the evidence that is required.

Mr KEENAN—We get a lot of arrivals in my electorate, and I know anecdotally that they are having a lot of trouble. I worry about what the first generation not getting jobs means for the subsequent generations. Do you have any suggestions that the government could look at?

Ms Weaver—One of the areas where NOOSR has improved its services is in providing a wider range of information about institutions in the countries from which we are currently sourcing refugees. That has helped the process immensely. For example, previously, we had absolutely no information in Victoria about the level of assessment of the qualifications of people coming in from Sudan. People had to forward their qualifications to Canberra, which meant that they had to pay a fairly high fee to get that advice.

Again, NOOSR have been helpful. Over the telephone, they will give us a rough idea as to whether it is useful for somebody to go through that process and pay the fees involved. But you were talking about timeliness previously, and that did draw out the time in which we could get some information about the level of their qualifications. It then drew out the time of our advice to them as to what kind of upgrading they would need because we did not have a base level — most people from those countries have to do some upgrading of their skills. It was quite difficult in many instances. The quality and breadth of the information are really important, and we rely on that information coming through from NOOSR et cetera. I am quite dismayed to hear that TRA has closed its offices overseas, because that makes we wonder how we are going to get on in the future.

CHAIR—That is the evidence. We will have to establish that. There will be some recommendations from this committee, obviously. We have taken on the main themes of your evidence here today and we appreciate your submission. We thank you for coming today and the secretary will send you copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also send any additional material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible. Thank you very much.

[11.14 am]

HURLEY, Ms Franceyne Carole, Qualifications Assessment Unit Team Leader, CPA Australia

JOHNS, Mrs Ann, Director, Education, CPA Australia

NICHOLLS, Ms Hayley, Manager, Accreditation and Research, CPA Australia

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

Mrs Johns—Thank you, I would like to do that. Firstly, I would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Migration for the opportunity to present today. CPA Australia certainly supports this as a very timely government initiative. CPA Australia is the largest professional accounting body, representing more than 107,900 members working in public practice, industry and commerce, and the government sector. Some 25,000 of our members work offshore, mainly in our Southeast Asia divisions in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore.

CPA Australia is one of three accounting bodies involved in assessment of overseas- or Australian-trained accountants for migration. For the past 20 years, CPA Australia—we were previously called the Australian Society of CPAs or the Australian Society of Accountants—have been gazetted by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and its predecessors to evaluate accounting qualifications for people wishing to migrate to Australia.

In 2004 CPA Australia commissioned Dr Bob Birrell, who is from the Centre of Population and Urban Research at Monash University, to prepare a report on migration and the accounting profession in Australia. This report was published in 2005 and has informed our submission to this inquiry. Once accounting became a 60-point occupation there was a focus on this occupation in late 1999. From mid-2001 a further inducement to overseas students wishing to apply for permanent residence was introduced. On completion of their course they could apply for permanent resident status without leaving Australia, and the work experience requirement was waived.

These new rules virtually guaranteed overseas students with appropriate Australian accounting qualifications permanent residence. So these government reforms have led mostly to the growth in students studying accounting courses at Australian universities over the past four years. This, in turn, has been reflected in the large numbers seeking migration assessment from CPA Australia. The number of migration assessments received by CPA Australia has increased from 2,965 in 2002 to 5,468 in the first nine months of this year. So the numbers are directly affected by the position of accounting on the Migration Occupations in Demand List. I would like my colleagues to address some of the specific areas of reference in their opening remarks.

Ms Hurley—I am going to address a number of areas that CPA Australia has identified, where Australia's skilled migration procedures can be improved in terms of communication processes with users, efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers, and achieving greater consistency in qualification recognition. An improved flow of clear, accurate and regularly-maintained communication that is easily obtained by assessing authorities, agents and migrants, needs to be established to remove barriers that currently exist. We suggest further improvement of government agency web pages to facilitate information services that are more user-friendly for international students and potential migrants. For example, an interactive web tool may be developed that would visually guide people through the migration process for their chosen occupation.

The information on skilled migration should be more accessible and comprehensible for people who speak English as a second language. Our experience shows that the level of English language skills is the greatest barrier to understanding the skilled migration process. If we lift the English language requirement skilled migrants will not only be able to navigate the system with more ease but also be better equipped for employment. There is no systematic communication flow between DEST, AEI, AEI-NOOSR, DIMIA and the assessing authorities. Improved communication would assist the assessing authorities to plan and prepare for regulatory change and the subsequent periods of high demand. Improving communication between the assessing authorities would facilitate the sharing of knowledge, processes, experience, tools and resources as there is unnecessary duplication occurring while the assessing authorities work in isolation.

The government needs to establish a centralised hub of information, ideally internet based with call centre support, to assist in providing the level of information and service required by a potential skilled migrant. Such a service could provide information from one source to cover all aspects including visa types, ASCO codes and definitions, assessing authority information, employment information and university requirements and contact information. I would like to hand over to Hayley Nicholls, who will address further areas.

Ms Nicholls—My comments are going to address skills upgrading, awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications and alternative approaches to skills assessment. The research on migration and accounting professions in Australia that Ann referred to showed that in 2003 there were 6½ thousand domestic completions in accounting qualifications from Australian universities and another 2,450 overseas students with accounting qualifications who became permanent residents over the year 2003-04. Notwithstanding this supply, there is still a national shortage of accountants. Although skilled migrants have the requisite technical skills, our research suggests that English language skills are the key determinant for gaining professional accounting employment.

Data drawn from the 2001 census shows that persons qualified at the degree level in accounting who have been trained overseas and come from English-speaking countries do very well in obtaining professional level work in accounting or managerial positions. By contrast, those with similar qualifications who come from non-English-speaking countries find it more difficult; however, persons trained in accounting in Australia from non-English-speaking countries do better than their overseas trained counterparts from the same countries. We would support any move by DIMIA to increase the English language competency requirement for skilled migration. We would also support the inclusion of additional points in the points system for relevant professional work experience.

CHAIR—Good point.

Ms Nicholls—Consideration needs to be given to offering transition to employment programs to assist skilled migrants to improve their opportunities to secure professional accounting positions. We believe that further assistance could be provided to equip migrants and overseas students with an understanding of Australian culture and ensuring generic skills and English language skills are at an appropriate level to function in professional positions. Some not-for-profit agencies are trying to address this issue. CPA Australia is currently working with the Department for Victorian Communities to offer a transition to work program for our migrant members in 2006. The program will focus on success strategies, interview skills, training and workplace communication skills. Professional bodies and government organisations have a role to play in assisting skilled migrants into professional jobs for which they are qualified.

Reluctance may also exist on behalf of Australian employers to accept overseas qualifications and therefore employ migrants. More needs to be done to promote the benefits to Australian employers of employing skilled migrants to address the skills shortage of professional accountants in Australia. Thank you, that concludes our formal comments.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission, ladies. I think it is very interesting to see an all female panel from the CPA—that is excellent. To begin with, I was interested to hear that there are 4,000 overseas persons each year with accounting qualifications coming into the country. You were mentioning about English speaking versus non-English-speaking and the likelihood of getting employment depending on whether or not you come from an English speaking or non-English-speaking country. Out of that 4,000, what sort of breakdown is there between those who come from English speaking or non-English-speaking countries?

Ms Hurley—Yes, the largest numbers, so the greater percentage. At the moment the only English as a first language country in our top 10 is South Africa. I think that is the only one at the moment. It is mainly Asia: Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea and then India and China. India and China make up the biggest numbers.

Senator KIRK—So of the 4,000, would 3,000 be from India and China?

Ms Hurley—Easily.

Ms Nicholls—Our proportions directly reflect the proportions you would see in the higher education export industry—that is, the top source countries for students coming into study at universities here. There is a direct comparability between them. The top source countries are China, followed by India and then the south-east Asian regions. Our table looks pretty similar to that.

Senator KIRK—I was interested in the transition to work program that you are holding next year. I know you mention a bit of detail in relation to that, but I was wondering exactly how that was going to work, how many participants you are going to have in that and the sorts of skills you are going to be transferring to participants.

Ms Nicholls—We are interested in moving into this area because we see that we have a role to play for those migrants who do become members of CPA Australia. We are concerned about what we know is an increasing group of qualified, skilled migrants who join us at our associate level of membership—that is, our first level of membership. We are concerned about a growing number that we know are either not employed, and therefore studying our professional licentiate program on a full-time basis, or are employed in positions that we do not consider to be at professional level—that is, a bookkeeping, technician level. Those people will never be able to become full CPAs because they are not working in appropriate professional positions, even though they are university qualified.

We will be running a pilot for this program, which we hope we will be able to roll out nationally throughout our divisions. We are starting in Victoria, and then we would like to move to Sydney, Melbourne and Sydney being where most of our migrant members are residing. We want to partner up with a recruitment service provider so that there will be an employment outcome for those people who go through the program. From that, we then want to use our networks of not only our members, of which we have a huge number, but also our contacts with industry trying to promote the benefits of employing someone who has come through the skilled migration pathway. We have been speaking with the Department of Victorian Communities. They are assisting us in an advisory capacity to get the pilot going, and then we hope to work in partnership with them to put some larger numbers through it later in the year. But the first program will be a pilot of 20.

Senator KIRK—You said that is only for associate members of your organisation.

Ms Nicholls—Yes.

Senator KIRK—Is there any additional fee charged to them?

Ms Nicholls—There will be a fee. They will be charged for the cost of running the training program.

Senator KIRK—Ms Hurley, I was also interested in your suggestion to establish a centralised hub, as you described it, with a web site and an attached call centre in order to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort occurring with isolated assessing authorities in the recognition of qualifications and occupational licensing. Can you expand on how you see that working? I thought it sounded like an interesting idea.

Ms Hurley—We have a lot of applicants come in that are looking at skilled migration but are very unsure about who should be assessing them, what the ASCO codes are, what determines which ASCO code they choose, the long-term implications of it—all those sorts of steps. They are finding that they have to run around and ring a whole lot of different bodies or search on a whole lot of different web pages. We thought it would be very beneficial to them if they could go to one point where all the information was, where they could go in and follow through. If they chose ‘accountant’, for example, they knew then what that entailed, which bodies assessed, what was required of them.

We do a similar thing for our members. We have a visual tree where they can go in and the links are on the different stages. It lets them know what they need to do, who they need to do it

through and all the requirements. They can go in and go, 'Yeah, I'm up to this step—what's my next step?', and in very simple language so they do not have to run around and miss bits out. Also, they will go to a particular body to ask questions. They will come to us to ask migration questions. I instruct my staff to tell them to go back to DIMIA, but there is that risk there that someone will give poor information or not enough information.

Senator KIRK—Sort of a one-stop shop is what you are suggesting.

Ms Hurley—Exactly.

Ms Nicholls—It is a highly emotional area for the applicant, particularly when there is time pressure—and there always seems to be. So, if the wrong information is given at any step along the way which causes delay, it is a very difficult situation for the candidate.

Senator KIRK—It is really their life at stake, isn't it?

Ms Hurley—Yes.

Ms Hurley—Life-changing decisions.

Senator KIRK—Absolutely. Yes.

CHAIR—You are an assessing authority in your own right—for example, you obviously do not have any problems assessing people who want their skills assessed onshore and students, obviously. I noticed a very fine initiative that the work experience requirements are waived from foreign students. Are you the only organisation that has had that concession?

Ms Nicholls—No, that was a change to federal policy.

CHAIR—So it is across the board. I thought there was a six-month work experience requirement—

Ms Hurley—For new graduates, so they have that window of opportunity to not have work experience when—

CHAIR—Are you saying that, for potential members, that is not a requirement for your profession?

Ms Hurley—We are a degree entry organisation, so our requirements are a degree and our core knowledge—that is our academic requirements, a 12 core knowledge requirement. Potential members can meet some of those core knowledge requirements with offshore qualifications. There are some that are Australia-specific taxation or company law that they need to do through an Australian university, but they do not need to have an Australian qualification as such to become a member. Does that answer your question?

Ms Nicholls—I think what we were referring to was the policy change in 2001 which meant that, if you were an overseas student, were seeking permanent residence and had been trained through the Australian education system for a minimum of two years, the work experience

requirement is waived. That has had a tremendous impact on the numbers of overseas students seeking permanent residence.

CHAIR—I must admit I am not an expert or an authority, but that is news to me. I think it is a good move, obviously—particularly, as you said, from an academic point of view, because the difficulty in anybody getting six months work before they can apply for permanent residency is obviously an impediment to them actually getting a job. So I am interested to see how widespread it is across the professions. That is something we will have to investigate, unless you can tell us otherwise.

Ms Hurley—As far as I understand it, it is just for the occupations on the MODL—the occupations in demand. It is just for accountancy.

Mrs Johns—I think it is because accounting is such a profession in demand and therefore most of the students come and take accounting courses so they can get the PR status. But when they join us to be a CPA, as Hayley said, they have to have three years work experience. They cannot progress with us unless they can get the jobs.

CHAIR—I see you also give, as an incentive, applicants who become associate members who are applying for skilled migration a free-of-charge assessment.

Ms Hurley—We provide that service free of charge to our members. So for people who have become members—because we offer membership internationally—if they then want to migrate to Australia we do that as a free service for them. We already know they meet the requirements for migration because they have met the requirements for membership. The assessment is exactly the same except migration has a leeway of three core knowledge areas whereas they have to meet all 12 for us.

CHAIR—So what you are basing that on is obviously that to become a member they have to meet core requirements. So you must have a category of institutions overseas whose students you sanction, for want of a better word, to become members. For example, there is great disparity amongst universities or institutions. You mentioned China and India. I imagine there is probably a very good ‘ivy league’ Indian university or whatever and then there is the downtown Calcutta sort of backdoor show that might not necessarily have the same quality of education. Do you have a list or category?

Ms Hurley—We use the guidelines in the AEI-NOOSR country education profiles, CEPs, which are all online now, as of 1 November, which makes it even easier. We use their guidelines as well as our own policies. They let you know the standing of the university and then from there we assess the content of those degrees that are comparable. There are some big differences in countries.

CHAIR—There are 6,000 or more domestic completions and 4,500 overseas completions, yet you are saying there is still quite a shortage of accountants and members of your profession. Are you seeing the need for overseas trained migrants as a short-term measure or a continual source?

Ms Hurley—Probably a continual source because the onshore student—the Australian resident student—numbers are not high in the accounting field.

Mrs Johns—One of the reasons is that there is a cap on the numbers in commerce courses for domestic students. The universities are encouraged to take overseas full fee paying students and that is one of the reasons that they take so many offshore people. There is also currently a cap on domestic full fee paying students at universities in Australia as well—35 per cent.

Ms Nicholls—There has been very marginal growth coming from the domestic student area in Australia; the growth has all been coming from the international students.

Mrs Johns—The universities have become very dependent on the income that they get from these overseas students. If accounting changes and goes off the MODL then it affects their numbers. They are quite worried about that because they need some lead time.

CHAIR—You also mentioned—and I think Senator Kirk referred to this as well—the English requirement and the success of those who have proficiency in English. As a migration outcome, we provide 510 hours, I think it is, of English tuition. Is that seen as helpful?

Ms Hurley—I am sorry; I did not understand the question.

CHAIR—I understand that for new migrants we provide 510 hours of paid English tuition. Some of your people take advantage of that, which allows them to accelerate through the process so that they are better qualified. As you say, English is the prime requirement. What do you think of that?

Ms Nicholls—I am not sure whether it is available to someone who has been through the Australian training.

CHAIR—We are talking about offshore.

Ms Nicholls—Are you talking about people coming in from offshore?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Nicholls—We are not aware of whether or not they take up that free training.

CHAIR—You also talk about a one-stop shop and you are concerned about there being no integrated flow between the assessing authorities, the government agencies, which I see as a bit of a problem if the agencies are acting as silos and not talking to each other. However, are you aware of DIMIA's new web portal?

Ms Hurley—Yes, I got the CD the day before yesterday. That looks like a great initiative. I have not gone totally through it yet, but that is exactly what we are looking for. That is the sort of initiative.

CHAIR—And your organisation has not had any input into the construction or the content of that?

Ms Hurley—Not yet.

CHAIR—But what you have seen so far you have liked?

Ms Hurley—Yes.

CHAIR—And you think that will do something to address what you see as this non-integration of information between agencies? In other words, all the agency information is on the one site.

Ms Hurley—It will address that. It will address the contact details as well as that access to information. One of the other things that I was pointing out was about the assessing authorities speaking to each other. When we go to the different seminars with the assessing authorities, it comes up again and again, especially when you have smaller assessing authorities that may only do 300 or 400 a year talking to some of the bigger bodies. While we will deal with an issue over and over again and have ways of dealing with it and things to look for, to them it may only be one a year and it becomes a big headache. So sharing that sort of information with the assessing authorities would benefit everyone.

CHAIR—You know that DIMIA ran exhibitions in overseas countries. Were you attached to those at all? Are you aware of the results of those? Have you had any feedback from professionals that might have come through that to your organisation?

Mrs Johns—No, although we were aware that that was happening.

Ms Hurley—Nothing has come through to us.

CHAIR—Because it is relatively new, you might wish to find out about the sort of attraction and also about the people that are attracted, because they were well screened before they went and my understanding was the response was quite outstanding. That might be helpful to you.

Mrs Johns—Thank you.

Mr KEENAN—What is the status at the moment in terms of accountants? Is there an oversupply or an undersupply?

Mrs Johns—There is an undersupply. There is still a shortage of accountants not only in Australia but worldwide.

Mr KEENAN—Are we finding that Australian accountants are being—

Mrs Johns—poached offshore?

Mr KEENAN—Yes.

Mrs Johns—Yes, they are. Certainly the big four firms come from Europe to poach our professional accountants.

Mr KEENAN—What would be the largest barrier in terms of the regulations to our bringing more accountants into the country?

Mrs Johns—We are getting them coming into the country but they are not being employed as professional accountants. We have raised the issue of English language skills but I also believe there is some bias by employers. I think some of the big firms find it difficult to put on somebody who does not have English as their first language and has not been trained here.

Mr KEENAN—Which countries are the main source of supply?

CHAIR—Mr Keenan was outside when we had this.

Mrs Johns—China and India are the two main sources. With a lot of them the English language is not that good. They can get into a postgraduate program with a score of 6 or 6.5 but that is not adequate enough. While they can get through their degree, they still have not got the cultural background and that sort of thing, so when they go into a job interview the employer does not necessarily want to take them on.

Mr KEENAN—To prevent making you repeat yourself, I will hand back to the chair. I apologise for that, but I have to do some business back in Perth.

Senator KIRK—I have one more question and it is in relation to resource issues. You mentioned to us at the outset that two or three years ago you had about 3,000 applications that you were assessing and that now it is about 5,500. On page 2 of your submission you say that consideration needs to be given to options to assist assessing authorities such as yours to meet this increased demand. Do you have any suggestions about addressing the resource issues that obviously arise from this and do you have any suggestions as to the role the Commonwealth could play in relation to this, given that we are a Commonwealth committee making recommendations about the role of the Commonwealth?

Ms Hurley—Our main issue with this is that we usually do not hear about changes in policies or regulations until they are in the media or our applicants come back and tell us. We are on the back foot and it takes time to have staff skilled up to do the assessing. So we end up with long queue times because of the numbers. I suppose the most obvious way to combat that is by being advised of those changes earlier so that we can prepare for them.

Senator KIRK—Clearly, the increased number of applications that you have to process has some resource implications?

Mrs Johns—We just keep putting on more staff but we are also looking at technological solutions to see if we can streamline our processes. Certainly over the last few years Ms Hurley's area has grown, with more and more assessors.

Senator KIRK—It must have almost doubled—or close to it?

Ms Hurley—Yes, it has nearly tripled.

CHAIR—I want to ask questions about something you have slightly touched on but which I want to confirm. On page 3 of your submission you say:

It would be appropriate to give additional points for relevant professional experience, attendance at English language and communication workshops. Recognition could be given for higher level generic/communication skills.

To accelerate the flow of migrants with these skills are you suggesting a boost in the points category in this area?

Ms Nicholls—Yes, we are suggesting that, for people with a high level of competency. It is just another way of being able to address the skill shortage more appropriately through the skilled migration program. There really is a gap at the moment. We will attempt to assist the people who come into our membership by upskilling them but recognition could be given to people with a higher level of skills.

CHAIR—I am sure that this will be in our report and that DIMIA will take it on board.

Ms Nicholls—The other thing is that there seems to be a trade-off in the point system with age—the younger the better. That is not necessarily the case in terms of professional experience.

CHAIR—So age is an inhibiting factor too?

Ms Nicholls—Yes. Somebody over 30 is going to have more difficulty qualifying on the point system and yet—

CHAIR—I would never get in then, would I?

Ms Nicholls—You wouldn't.

Ms Hurley—Often the employer is looking for three to five years of experience where the high numbers are in the new graduates coming through. Those new graduates who are young and who have just completed an Australian qualification are—as Ann mentioned earlier—almost guaranteed migration. That can also be seen as them buying migration. They do the course and migrate but they never want to be accountants.

CHAIR—Yes. There is much more chance that somebody who has had five years experience will become an accountant because that is what they are practised in. I take your point.

Ms Hurley—Exactly.

CHAIR—My final point is about achieving greater consistency and recognition of qualifications and licensing across the state and territory authorities. You are obviously of the view that recognition and consistency across the states needs to be ironed out because there are too many variances.

Ms Hurley—Yes, there are. The three assessing bodies have slightly different requirements for membership. CPA Australia requires a university degree for entry. The institute sees accreditation with some overseas professional bodies as equivalent to a degree, whereas we do not. That is just in accounting. There are wider discrepancies with other bodies. So that was not in reference just to accounting but to assessing in general. I often hear from assessing authorities that one state will do such and such a thing and that a person will meet the requirement there,

while in a different state they will meet the requirements differently—and they shop around. So we need to try and smooth that out.

CHAIR—That is a good point. We have met with the representatives of state government authorities and that is something we can put on the radar as far as they are concerned. Thank you very much. It is unique to have a specific profession represent its concerns as you have done. Your ideas are very well targeted and we appreciate your submission. We thank you for attending today's hearing. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript so that you can make any corrections that are needed. I would be grateful if you could send to the secretariat as soon as possible any additional material that you have undertaken to provide.

Mrs Johns—Would you like a copy of the Burkett report?

CHAIR—It would be good if you could give us a copy of that. I agree with Senator Kirk that it is good to see affirmative action alive and well.

[11.53 am]

BURROW, Ms Sharan Lesley, President, Australian Council of Trade Unions

TATE, Ms Alison Margaret, International Officer, Australian Council of Trade Unions

CHAIR—Welcome. 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 before we proceed to questions.

Ms Burrow—It is probably more important that you get what you need out of this inquiry, but let me say a couple of things. The ACTU and the unions have become very concerned about the whole way in which skilled migration is now being managed. If we go back a little way in our history, we had a very clear capacity to analyse shortfalls in the labour market and to operate collaboratively across employers, government and unions to manage the process so that we effectively got the appropriately skilled migrants on a short-term or permanent basis to fill gaps in the labour market and, by association, we could also make sure that the appropriate training provision was in place to plug those gaps in the longer term by training Australian citizens.

As an organisation, we are pro-immigration in the sense that we are a land of immigrants. We understand the economic case. In fact, not only are we not opposed to increasing immigration but we promote it in general terms. However, having said that, there is now a series of problems with skilled migration, and it goes to both the temporary and the permanent arrangements. We are sympathetic on the permanent arrangements, but we believe that when you simply have categories of skilled immigrants and people come if they fit those categories and there is no planning around either demographics or the actual skills base that is necessary then you find too many people do not get jobs. We are more concerned for the migrants themselves in that arena than we are for the nature of the program.

It probably was not so significant when it was a smaller number, but now it has grown to be quite a large number. We are particularly concerned, though, with the notion of temporary migration for skills. Again, I want to put up front that we know there are areas where you will require some migration that is specific in terms of skills and could well be temporary. But we believe this has to be managed very effectively and efficiently; otherwise, we put at risk the program itself, the security and the opportunity for the people involved and the goodwill and public support there is for these programs. I would like to say a few things about that and then I will hand it over to you.

We have had employers as late as yesterday sitting in my office saying that they want to bring in an unknown numbers of migrants, particularly those with trade skills, on a temporary basis to work on large projects. There are now ideas around about how you might do that on a lower wage rate, on the basis of some goodwill towards training investment and the like. But we can categorically say that this cannot happen, and it will not happen. If it does then popular support for migration is put at risk, and that is a very big issue we all need to be cautious about.

We will entertain temporary migration to plug skilled labour shortages where there is consultation and it is established that there is, in fact, a skill shortage that cannot be filled by the local labour market. Testing of the local labour market has to be appropriately demonstrated; otherwise, you run the risk of popular opposition—rightfully so—from workers themselves who cannot get employment and from parents who are concerned that their children cannot get apprenticeships or other opportunities. So you must test the local labour market.

Any company that is given any capacity to sponsor migrants has to be able to fulfil the requirements of 456 visa demands—that is, they have a recognised training history. There is no way of assessing that; there are no sanctions when in fact a company simply pays no heed to its responsibility for training or for planning. Most big infrastructure projects take years to conceive, to finance, to actually put in place. But unless there is a training plan, we do not believe that employers should be rewarded for lack of planning and lack of responsibility in that area. But assuming there is a training history that is reasonable, assuming there is a genuine skills shortage and assuming you have tested the local labour market, then of course we will sit down and work out a basis on which we should encourage people to take up those jobs from overseas.

Having said that, they can only be on equivalent wages and conditions or we will run campaigns against them. In fact, I think employers down the track will risk the ruin of their own reputation in that regard. We have made it clear, and good employers accept that. You cannot discriminate, as it is international law, against migrant workers in any occupation in Australia—so host wages and conditions, and appropriate entitlements, of course, to the extent that there are portability arrangements for superannuation and the like.

Then, of course, we would say that this should be like any job and adhere to the international conventions. If the job is ongoing, then there is the point about being on temporary visas for four years. These were initially set up with regard to the mobility of people taking up high-flyer contracts or those professionals who more often than not brought their families with them.

You are now talking about this sort of time line for temporary migration without families having access to services, even though the workers are paying taxes and the like. We think there is incredible discrimination there. So we say, 'Let's settle on a time frame.' We would prefer 12 months. As for any casual employment, if the job is ongoing the worker should have two choices: they should have the choice of pathways to residency and they should be able to access services for themselves and their families—and, of course, where they choose to go back they should have support to do so.

So on the skilled migration front we would urge the parliament to get it right—to think through how we manage a positive, proactive program. It cannot be done without tripartite consultation and it cannot be done if it loses the confidence of the local community—where there ought to be job and training opportunities. And it certainly cannot be done if it does not have broad public consent across Australia.

Turning to the licensing questions, COAG is doing a lot of work around this. Mutual recognition is not the issue, but you cannot walk away from the fact that you have to get the licensing issues right. Frankly, you cannot simply say, 'We'll dilute or do away with the licensing requirements,' because in the construction industry, in particular, but across the skilled

trades—even in many of the professional areas—there is an issue of public risk that goes to those regulatory arrangements and licensing procedures. We have made some of that clear in our submission.

CHAIR—Thank you for your input and the issues that you have raised. I will say at the outset, though, Ms Burrow, that I am not aware, in terms of this inquiry and the general aim of attracting skilled migrants to Australia, that that is done on a temporary basis. I see our attracting skilled migrants to Australia and recognising their qualifications, including trade qualifications, as something which would eventually end up in a migration outcome on a permanent basis.

Ms Burrow—That is something which we would support, frankly. That is the appropriate way to maintain what Australia has—a very serious and significant reputation as being a country whose management of migration is amongst the best in the world. So we are very worried. But I can tell you right now that the question of skilled immigration on a temporary basis is breaking open. There are other proposals which we find abhorrent. Take, for instance, the regulations—I am not sure they have been through parliament but they were scheduled to be discussed from 1 November—for a scheme that I think parents in Australia would find abhorrent. This is where we would train apprentices who are on a temporary immigration visa and the apprentices would pay all of their costs. They would have a contract of employment, paying about \$7.90 an hour, but not only would they have to live on what is effectively half a wage; they would be required by the government to pay for their training costs, the entry costs associated with their visa application, health checks, accreditation et cetera. We have already indicated that we will not allow that kind of abhorrent scheme and will oppose it at every turn.

CHAIR—Again, I would say that—

Ms Burrow—We are in your camp, to the extent that if we can make this efficient and related to skills deficits where they exist, and if people can be given permanent status, then, frankly, that is the best option.

CHAIR—Thank you—as I will say again, I am not aware of any move to promote temporary migration, other than that in the skilled area where there have been some public discussions. But there certainly have not been legislative moves, as I understand it, regarding guest workers—a la Italy and places like that—where you fill temporary shortages but they never, ever get the opportunity to become permanent residents and ultimately citizens of, in our case, Australia.

Ms Burrow—You actually do have them now. The 457 visas require a four-year stay, and initially they were set up for very different reasons. I can introduce you to a Filipino woman 20 minutes from here who is denied her children because she cannot have her children here with the uncertainty. She and her husband are both on 457 visas. They are hanging out to do their four-year term and hope to get sponsorship from an employer in an ongoing way so they can get pathways to residency. I can take you to all sorts of construction sites and so forth where the expansion of these visa categories is something that has not been planned but is being promoted. I would suggest you ask the department—in fact, we would be grateful, frankly, if you would—to map the expansion, because what was anticipated as a few thousand is now tens of thousands in these categories.

CHAIR—That is a good point. That is information we have not received, and we will seek a response from the department about the expansion of 457 visas because, as you quite rightly point out, there obviously is very little in the way of training matters associated with that sort of category of visa or employment. On the issue of the critical identification of work force shortage that you outlined initially, my understanding is that most people that have responded to us are relatively happy with the list that DEWR provide of areas of work force shortage within Australia. Do you have any views on their competency?

Ms Burrow—We would not argue with a general list. The problem you have got is that—DEWR itself will tell you—it cannot manage the current target numbers for government and, with the expansion of another 100,000, which is effectively about 30,000 when you count families, it is looking to manage this immigration category in different ways, through business sponsorship and the like. Some of it is appropriate, but you have got to look at whether we would not be better off going back to an older system where you could actually identify skills shortages and you did it on a tripartite basis. People agreed that there were jobs available. You got the qualifications match right. People were assisted so that there was broader support for availability of jobs, because usually they were sponsored by government departments, big companies or whatever, and we got the mix of rights absolutely up front and centre so people had pathways to residency, access to services and all those sorts of things.

We would say we are nervous now about the expansion of this category when we know that too many people that come in against those lists are being left unemployed or in jobs that are not appropriate to their qualifications. It is one thing to say, ‘You are welcome to come, and you fit this category,’ but then suddenly there is no training, no assessment of whether your qualifications will be accepted and no support into employment other than what you can engineer yourself. We are seeing too many of these categories of immigrants who are in jobs that are not applicable to their qualifications and, frankly, are much more lowly paid jobs than they would have expected to be employed in.

CHAIR—That is what this inquiry is largely about: to see the recognition and the appropriateness of qualifications assessed offshore and then, when they come to Australia, to see how they are matched and recognised. We have had evidence from a large range of people who suggest to us that one of the ways—particularly for some of the older workers that come with trades where Australian employers are reluctant to take them on—is that we assign six months work experience so that they can get on-the-job training, because then they are far more user friendly, for want of a better term, to employers if they have got the experience component. A lot of them come with an overseas skill or qualification, yet, because they do not have any recognition or acceptance here, they cannot get a job. What do you think about that?

Ms Burrow—I think any of those support schemes would be very valuable. There would be an issue, of course, of wages and what the nature of the work experience was. We would oppose, for example, a scheme that simply saw people as free labour. But with genuine work experience, where employers would get productive labour and employees would get some on-the-job training, if there were discussions with the skills councils first and foremost about qualifications and assessment—we would call it recognition of prior learning in a domestic context—if there were a training plan, and if the issue of wages and conditions were sorted with us or the relevant union, then we would say that is a very positive suggestion.

We are very concerned that we do it right. There is no opposition to sound immigration programs from us, but we cannot be seen to go from being a high watermark country for immigration management standards to one that is now, I think, involving itself in practices that are increasingly not in the long-term interests of the individual but really quite shonky and open to discrimination, where employers see that they might be able to get a group of people for whom cheap labour might be an option, or whether they can avoid their training responsibilities.

A lot of the reason why we have skill shortages is that we have seen a change in the economic base. When you had big public utilities they were, in fact, required by governments to train apprentices. Those apprentices were always trained for the common good. People knew they would go off into the marketplace, but it was part of a government management system. With privatisation or corporatisation—whatever the modern structuring of these utilities is—that does not happen to the same extent. Big firms that would always have seen it as their responsibility to take on apprentices on an annual basis have downsized that component of their responsibility.

We have not got a recognition of prior learning system in place in this country yet, which would mean you could upscale existing workers; employers agree with us on this. We have aspirations to do it, ANTA was charged with doing it, we have now got commitments from governments all around the place and COAG is looking at it again, but it has to be fixed for both domestic and migrant workers.

Finally, if we had not frozen TAFE funds in 1997, and if we were actually serious about investing in skills in this country, we would be a lot better off. But that would not mean that we did not need immigration. We are very scathing about, collectively, the governments' approach to investment in training and apprenticeships, and the responsibility of the corporate sector as well as the government. We do not deny that we have to get this bit of the bundle right, but we would ask you to mix your recommendations appropriately because otherwise we are denying our kids and grandkids opportunities, while being pro-immigration in the same framework.

CHAIR—That point is well taken. Yesterday the Electrical Trades Union spoke with us in Sydney and they had a fair bit to say about trades and skills recognition and the role of Trades Recognition Australia. Do you have any views on Trades Recognition Australia and the job they are doing?

Ms Burrow—The ETU, I would say, would no doubt have put forward a range of views that we would support, because they have a very strong commitment across the industry to both the skills benchmarks and the licensing arrangements. It is for good reason: it is actually about public safety and the quality that you can guarantee the public. We were distressed by the Western Australian government's move in the area of construction skills to put in place what we have since understood is not a two-year apprenticeship at all but a lesser apprenticeship for the domestic housing industry than for the commercial construction industry, because of the question of quality and public interest guarantees as well as the portability of skills that would allow young people in the construction industry to get qualifications to move across the trade. In terms of the licensing arrangements, which the ETU probably focused on in detail, I would draw your attention to the no doubt briefer summary from us on pages 4 and 5 of our submission.

CHAIR—The ETU were more concerned about, firstly, that one's ability to make proper assessments had been reduced due to full cost recovery and hence a lack of funding and,

secondly, the fact that TRA seems to be now almost an insular organisation which does not spend a lot of time and energy in assessing overseas skills because its overseas posts are not operating very well. As a result, the ETU are concerned about the assessments, particularly as to the fairness to people who want to be assessed properly.

Ms Burrow—I agree totally. In fact whether it is overseas assessment, whether it is domestic assessment or whether it is recognition of prior learning so that you can do training plans, it is absolutely shoddy business; it is not done well. It ought to be in the public interest to do it. As for immigrant labour, it does lead immigrants to a sense of optimism about employment in Australia that is unfair, given the context of them then not finding it easy to get jobs because their qualifications are not recognised or, more importantly, they cannot meet the licensing tests—which was my point. So we would agree entirely.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission. In relation to skills shortage, no doubt you are aware of the MODL. I wonder whether the ACTU had any input into the compilation of that list.

Ms Burrow—No, and we are trying to encourage the department to re-establish some of the tripartite structures that used to exist. We can see that without industry and unions managing this with government it will get to a certain point. Already, as we have said, we have now got alarm bells going off about some of practices particularly in the temporary migration area. But there is also the fact that employers are exploiting undocumented workers and we are not doing as much as we can to make sure that those workers are protected and are given some capacity for access to proper employment and residency status. We have just submitted internationally on two things. One is the Global Commission on International Migration report on migration to the UN. The second is work that we have been doing at the ILO which is about guidelines to manage migration. Australia sits right up there with Canada as two of the best examples, but there is something underneath that history of good practice. I think this inquiry is really timely, because we must manage these things whether it is the category so that it genuinely reflects skills shortages, whether it is the assessment, as Don pointed out, with regard to giving people accurate information about their opportunities for employment or whether it is about the support structures, of which work experience could be one very good initiative. We are simply not doing this well now. So we would much rather see some capacity for genuine consultation between industry, unions and the department—and that includes the list.

Senator KIRK—As far as you are aware, was industry consulted then? Was it only the unions that were excluded from the process of the compilation of the list? How was the list compiled?

Ms Burrow—To my understanding, the list is drawn up by the department. There may well be some input from certain areas of business where they are saying that they are having shortages. The department's door is not closed and you do have a capacity to meet with its officials but there is such a pressure on them at the moment to expand the migration categories, particularly as to the temporary visa arrangements and the skilled area, that I think they are in danger of putting in place practices that, frankly, will blow up in all of our faces and will make the positive approach that Australia has to migration much harder to manage. You can understand why: these are very sensitive issues in terms of people who are unemployed themselves and do not feel they have got opportunities for themselves or, indeed, their kids.

The other area we are really concerned about is the department's management systems around auditing and the like. They look good on paper, but we do not believe they are effective enough, and you have got to start at the front end. If there is one thing I would urge you to do up front, it is to look at the licensing requirements for the labour hire industry, whether it is immigration agents, whether it is labour hire companies, whether it is businesses themselves or employer organisations—whoever is the sponsor of the migrant. Then we need clear licensing arrangements that hold dual responsibility for the contract of employment and all its associated conditions, inclusive of training or work experience or whatever. Frankly, that is not adequate. That is where you need to start, and then beyond that any kind of tripartite consultation we can get to manage this is very welcome.

There should not be a natural adversarial relationship around these questions. This is about a labour force. We are interested in making sure we have got a dynamic labour force that is going to grow the economy, but we will not stand for discrimination or for inadequate treatment. These migrant workers are our colleagues, and we will represent them as well as Australian workers. We need to get it right from the beginning.

Senator KIRK—You are right. The reason why I asked about the list is it is very easy to say there is a skill shortage and there is a skill shortage in this area but, unless there is some basis for so saying, it is easy to generate this idea that there is a need and so, therefore, there is a need for the temporary filling of these vacancies. You indicated all of the problems that arise out of that at the outset.

Ms Burrow—And, despite the fact that we have been really proactive in promoting an understanding of the skills deficit, it is not everywhere. It is not in every occupation. If you go to IT—I have not seen the figures for quite some time—you have got perhaps 16 per cent to 18 per cent of IT professionals who are not in jobs that meet their qualifications. Of course people trained for this in the dotcom boom, but the bubble burst and the jobs were not there.

CHAIR—I am sorry to interrupt, but I want to reinforce what you are saying as well as Linda's point. It is correct that there is still a view that we are importing IT workers, but we had evidence yesterday that something like 82 per cent of these people were programmers, which we have an abundance of. We actually need specialist—I forget who it was; Oracle or something—

Ms Burrow—And in quite small numbers.

CHAIR—Yes, a very small percentage.

Ms Burrow—If you could look at the skills council for this area, they will tell you that with an appropriate training plan you could upskill a lot of current IT workers if you took a medium-term planning view of three to five years. We need to disaggregate the labour market to see where the real skill shortages are. There is no credible research in Australia that does that on a macro basis. We have tried collaboratively through ANTA. Frankly, people have said they could do it. I have found that the research is quite poor.

I know the department do the best they can. I do not have a particular criticism of their capacity, but they are often operating on common talk rather than on the data. To the extent that you get a more accurate basis of skills shortage and skills shortage projection, we should be

doing it through the skills councils, where industry and unions are represented, where people know from their company networks and the union networks where you can get labour from and where you cannot.

That is not to say we do not need good, robust research; we do, but you have got to manage it with the knowledge in the industry itself. For example, we were talking about plans by Alcan in the Northern Territory, in the Gove Peninsula, just yesterday. There will be skill shortages in the skilled trades area, but we also know, to be very frank, that youth unemployment has gone up again. These companies take four to 10 years, depending on the planning cycle, the investment and financing structure, to come online. If we were sensible we would be doing the analysis from all sources—good research, the skills councils, us, the peak business bodies, all working together—and we would create an associated training plan. We could put a lot of young Indigenous people into training now who would get jobs on that Alcan site if we were serious about it. That is just one example. I suppose what I am saying to you is, the cautions that you raise and the processes that you recommend could make a very big difference in us getting our management capacity back on board about these questions.

Mr KEENAN—From your submission, and from the submissions that we have had from unions which I assume are constituents of your organisation, I tend to get a general impression that there is a lack of enthusiasm for using migration to plug gaps in the work force. You seem to blame a lot of that on inadequate training. As well as the skills shortage, certainly in Western Australia, it is fair to say we are facing a labour shortage. Without migration, projects are grinding to a halt. I have not seen that covered in your submission or by the submissions that we have had from any of your constituents. I was just wondering whether that is something that you had considered.

Ms Burrow—I point you to a submission we did jointly with the BCA before the current IR debate, which has pretty much broken down relationships. The report was called *Age can work: a business guide for supporting older workers* and it goes to the demographics of the country, the population issues, the work force demands and how we have to tackle the problem from all of the sources. We have to maximise participation of women, in particular through their childbearing years—and take into consideration what that means. We also have to maximise the capacity of older workers, particularly through transition to retirement.

So we are very conscious of the labour force issues. We know that Canada will run out of growth in their labour force by 2010 unless they increase immigration. We are not that far behind them, although there are some question marks, I have read about lately, from demographers who suggest that we might be a little bit slower than previously anticipated. There has been a bit of a blip in the birth rate but I do not know that it is going to be sustained unless we can create much more family-friendly workplaces.

So we absolutely agree that you have to plan around a work force, that there are areas of labour shortage, and that they will increase. We are saying two things. Firstly, we all agree that we need increased immigration. Let us get it right; let us do it properly in terms of a sustainable work force for Australia and so that we treat migrant labour respectfully and give them the opportunities we would expect for our own citizens. That includes pathways to residency—if not permanent migration up-front, which is now preferred priority. Secondly, we should licence recruiters so that there is no discrimination.

Having sat on the global commission for 18 months and having done consultations around the world, I can tell you that Australian people would never want to be in the position of exploiting migrant labour, as I have seen happening in other parts of the world. We are seeing increasingly that women in many areas have their papers taken from them by their employers and they are effectively introduced into slavery. They do not have rights of freedom of association or any kind of representation. That is why we fight so hard against guest labour and we say to you that we will never have guest labour in Australia. That is why we promote increased labour mobility—and that means increased immigration—but not on the terms of exploitative guest labour which, by the way, we see differently from well-managed, short-term, temporary migration where we as a community deem it essential, for the reasons you raised. But you cannot go beyond the fact that we have a huge number of young people unemployed and we have a responsibility to do our work force planning to give them opportunities, as well as to plug the gaps on a short-term basis.

Mr KEENAN—Another thing that has been mentioned in your submission—and I think it is something that the committee has been surprised about—is that the recognition processes for trades vary markedly between the states. Is there a collective position on that from the ACTU?

Ms Burrow—We would refer you to the COAG work. We have all made very big submissions to COAG on this and we can make those available to you. What I would say—in summary, so that I will not bore you with the intricacies, because this occupies a lot of time in my ranks, as you might appreciate—is that it is not about mutual recognition. Everybody agrees that mutual recognition—portability of training qualifications and the like—is absolutely essential. Ironically, the business community and we promoted the establishment of a national training authority for that reason. Unfortunately, it has been unpicked in the last 12 months. While it needed some reform, to do away with a national training authority was, I think, very short-sighted. But it is the licensing bits that we have to get right, and that means that state systems have to come to terms with the question of a commonality of licensing benchmarks—that is at the top end, not the bottom end. That is in the public interest, as well as in the interests of the highest possible skills and portability provision for the tradesperson involved.

CHAIR—You have mentioned COAG a few times—do you have an optimistic view of COAG providing some solutions to these outstanding issues that we were talking about: the Australia-wide approach, consistent approaches et cetera? In some respects, it has been suggested that we might be duplicating some of the functions of the COAG group that are also inquiring into this. We are going to be talking to or liaising with them. Do you see COAG as a solution?

Ms Burrow—I am just about out of optimism for 2005, to be honest!

Mr KEENAN—It is almost the new year.

Ms Burrow—Yes; I won't go there. I think the process for this COAG work was set up in haste. I do not think it was well thought through. If I might say so, it is in the political context of the question: 'What is the national structure now that ANTA no longer exists?' It is imperative that they get it right at the high-water mark. So I would encourage you to see yourselves as potentially providing some leadership in this area, because there will be a natural inclination for states to want to do their own thing and go their own way, to settle on benchmarks that they think they can easily achieve—and I am not meaning any disrespect here; it will not be with bad

intent. But you know what happens in a negotiated settlement where you are trying to get some sort of consensus across Australia. It would be good for the parliament, I think, to set high-water marks—to see that standards are at the highest possible level of licensing public interest qualifications.

We say to COAG: ‘If you seriously try to disaggregate training standards, then you are doing everybody a disservice.’ We did away with Taylorism—at the request, I might add, of the business community—in the late eighties and early nineties and it served Australia’s economic growth well. It caused us some pain, but multiskilling and upskilling were incredibly important. We now have, at this economic point, a different set of challenges. It does go to the heart of productivity—multifactor productivity inclusive. We need to do something about upskilling and higher standards.

The AI groups worked with the AMWU where they have gone the other way—they have kept their trade skills but they have included it up to and including level 5, I think, and level 6 at a minimum in the Australian qualifications framework. So I would say: push COAG a little. See it as being in Australia’s interests to get the processes, the benchmarks and the standards right, and use your leadership capacity to see that you work collaboratively with them where you can. I do not think that duplication in this area is a bad thing.

We are at risk, really, of three things. Firstly, we are at risk of a permanent underinvestment in skills. That will damage both our economy and our community in terms of opportunities for decent work. Secondly, we are at risk of seeing a licensing or regulatory framework that we should not be ashamed of as being too hard to maintain, and so diluting it, or worse. Thirdly, we are at risk of not managing our work force. We need to have a robust capacity to integrate opportunities for Australian citizens—making sure we give our young people opportunities—with getting management of migration right.

CHAIR—We are out of time. Far be it from me to end on a controversial note after all the goodwill this morning, but you talked about the lack of training even though there have never been more apprenticeships available in this country than there are today.

Ms Burrow—We are out of time, but let me send you something on that. This is the biggest myth. It has not been a bad thing to introduce traineeships into industries that traditionally did not have apprentices, so I am not arguing that that has been a bad thing. But we have aggregated the numbers and we have not applied economic growth as a correlation test against the increase in traditional apprenticeship numbers. We have not done the planning you have talked about and said: ‘Are numbers that are 10 years old as a baseline data piece adequate for an economy that has had 15 years of economic growth? No.’

CHAIR—Yesterday, for example, we had Restaurant and Catering Australia saying that they just cannot get enough apprentice chefs and cooks.

Ms Burrow—And this is problematic too.

CHAIR—It is not that there are not the places; they just cannot get the kids.

Ms Burrow—Exactly. So here is where, again, you can provide leadership, and I urge you to do it. I get this every day: employers are saying they cannot get apprentices and apprentices are saying they cannot get apprenticeships. We say: ‘Come to us. We’ll find them. We’ll advertise and get people to remote locations if you are prepared to pay the money to make it happen.’ But we have a lack of management and planning here that is denying our kids opportunities and denying employers the labour they need. The short-term fix is not to simply say, ‘We’ll go out and get a labour force from somewhere else’—although it may form part of a short-term stopgap measure or a longer term general work force viability demographic in terms of increased migration. But, for goodness sake, let us get the mixing and matching right.

Let me finish on this: as a former schoolteacher and someone who went to bat in the early nineties and promoted vocational education in schools, I can tell you it frustrates me that we do our planning so badly, we advise kids so poorly and we provide the breadth of training so inadequately that I think the skills match is less than five per cent from those vocational education courses into opportunities for apprenticeships and employment under other conditions. Let us do better. Of course there will be skills redundancy. You are not going to do everything you do in school as a career, but we have to do better than under five per cent. The planning around the work force issue is a critical factor.

CHAIR—As an ex-schoolteacher as well, I would also like to ask: do you have any paper or submission that you could give us—this is not totally directed at our terms of reference, but I would be interested personally—about the lack of planning? Have you got any evidence on that that we could look at?

Ms Burrow—We can probably draw some we have done and others together, but we will try to get something back to the committee.

CHAIR—Thank you very much and thank you for attending today’s hearing.

Proceedings suspended from 12.38 pm to 1.32 pm

HUMPHREYS, Ms Jillian Christina, Executive Officer, Professional Areas, Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists

PHILLIPS, Emeritus Professor Garry David, Director, Professional Affairs, and Past President, Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists

ACTING CHAIR (Senator Kirk)—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Prof. Phillips—I am a retired professor of anaesthesia and intensive care from Flinders University, and I am also the Professor of Anaesthesia at the University of Papua New Guinea.

ACTING 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 proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Prof. Phillips—Thank you very much for inviting us to appear. I would like to spend about six or seven minutes reading through my statement. You already have copies, but I would like to explain it as I go, if you do not mind.

ACTING CHAIR—Thanks, go ahead.

Prof. Phillips—Firstly, I think the college regards this as a very important process, particularly because it impacts on the immigration and recognition of overseas trained specialists and specialists in an area of need. I would like to clarify issues relating to the college's role in assessment of both area of need candidates and overseas trained specialists, because they are two separate processes. I will explain that as I go through. I would also like to clarify some misconceptions arising from Dr Mulrooney's appearance in Perth and from his submission, but I will come to that a bit later on.

As the committee would know, overseas trained specialists are assessed under a process that has been agreed by state and federal authorities including the state and territory medical boards. In general, there are two types of overseas trained specialist assessments. The first is area of need, which is really an assessment of fitness for task. That is getting an overseas trained specialist assessed to go into a particular job which is required by the local health authority. An AON is a position that is declared as such by the respective health department for the purpose of providing short-term assistance by filling a position of work force shortage. This system was introduced by the then federal health minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge. The other type of assessment is the full overseas trained specialist assessment, which culminates in a recommendation for specialist recognition and also allows the doctor to apply for fellowship of the Australian college. It is an assessment, therefore, of equivalence of education and training with an Australasian trained specialist.

As you know, the Australian Medical Council is the Commonwealth body that acts as a clearing house for all areas of need and overseas trained specialist applications. All of these applications go in the first instance to the AMC, which determines the applicant's eligibility for assessment and checks their documentation. The Australian Medical Council then forwards the applications to the appropriate specialist medical college for assessment. We want to emphasise that the College of Anaesthetists and in fact all specialist medical colleges do not license doctors to practise in Australia. We have nothing to do with licensing—that is up to the state and territory medical boards. The health departments and hospitals employ doctors. They may employ them at any level they see fit. In turn, Medicare Australia grants provider numbers for rebates. Both of these bodies may seek the advice of the colleges, but they are not obliged to adhere to that advice. I have put in my submission that the matters in Bundaberg involving alleged medical malpractice are examples of an employer and a medical board not seeking advice or the assessment of an applicant trained outside Australia.

The advice that the College of Anaesthetists offers to the bodies in charge of licensing doctors is in the form of a recommendation for specialist recognition once the requirements of training and assessment have been achieved. At that point those doctors recommended for specialist recognition are eligible to apply for admission to fellowship of the college. I thought I would go through two or three sections here just to clarify some of that. To go into a bit more detail, as far as anaesthesia services for areas of need in Australia are concerned, the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists currently adheres to the process outlined in the AMC assessment process users guide 2002. This requires that assessment of individual doctors for AON posts comply with that process.

What happens in effect is that the employer and the health authority which declare an area of need post together with the applicant complete the documentation required by the AMC, send it to the AMC to check eligibility and completeness of documentation and also send it to the college. The college carries out a fast-track paper assessment based on the position description and written application. That normally takes about two weeks. An onsite visit by a specialist anaesthetist representing the college is carried out once the doctor has settled into their area of need position. The follow-up onsite assessment and requirement for subsequent full equivalence assessment are conditions of support put into an area of need placement so that the college adheres to its mission of providing certification to a quality standard of training while at the same time assisting in filling areas of unmet need. If the assessment by the college representative is satisfactory then the area of need specialist may work independently in that designated position. The practitioner is then expected to pursue the college overseas trained specialist pathway, the objective of which is to enable him or her to achieve recommendation for specialist recognition.

The second point is that the overseas trained specialist assessment process, which is separate to the area of need process but usually follows on from it, begins with applications to the Australian Medical Council which again checks the documents and refers the matter to the college. The college OTS assessment process has three components: a face-to-face interview with an overseas trained specialist assessment panel; a performance assessment with written and clinical sections; and a clinical practice assessment period, which may be for 12 months or 24 months, or less than 12 months under certain circumstances. An overseas trained specialist who satisfies these requirements is then recommended by the college to Medicare for specialist

recognition. That person may then apply for admission to fellowship of the college and, provided they have fulfilled all the requirements, that is normally granted.

The third point is that the submission by the college to the AMC, copies of which have been provided, gives an overview of the history of the development of the assessment processes in Australia. I have summarised them there because I think it is relevant when we get on to talking about some of the issues that have come up. This includes details of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing request to the AMC to provide advice on a national approach to assessment and registration of doctors for area of need positions. I have put there 'after many vicissitudes' because, if you read the AMC's submission to your committee, it points out that the government periodically changes its view and overturns its previous decisions. The agreed national process was introduced from 2002. The AMC, in its submission, stated that medical boards have sole responsibility for granting registration—in other words, medical boards not colleges have the sole authority for doing that.

To bring us up to date, the ACCC review of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons began in 2000. The authorisation determination was granted in 2003, but the final report of that review of the assessment of overseas trained surgeons was not completed until 2005. In 2004, the Commonwealth department contacted the college to progress classification of anaesthesia qualifications into three categories for area of need practitioners. What they wanted us to do was to say which overseas qualifications were substantially comparable to our own, which were partially comparable and which were not comparable. We spent a fair amount of time and effort on obtaining information from overseas training programs, and we matched them against the criteria that the Australian Medical Council had used to assess our college. Those documents went to our council in October 2004, and the council noted that the holders of UK and Irish qualifications who had a certificate of completion of specialist training and were involved in continuing professional development should be regarded as comparable to our qualification, provided they were participating in continuing professional development.

We had a number of reservations, which meant that we believed—and we put it to the government—that, even if we said in agreement with them that a UK/Irish qualification was comparable to our own, we would still want to see the paperwork from each applicant. The reasons I have put are that the UK and Irish final examination is usually taken over two years before the end of training, and often before subspecialty training is completed—which is different to ours, which is at the end of training—and the UK and Irish exams are not comparable in structure to ours. There are no rural hospitals in the UK comparable to rural hospitals in Australia. Also, their training can in fact allow somebody to stream to become a specialist anaesthetist rather than a general anaesthetist. The difference is that you can actually complete your training in the UK specialising in, say, cardiac anaesthesia. Such a person coming to Australia would not be familiar with current trends in things like obstetric anaesthesia or paediatric anaesthesia because they had specialised early in their training. Many of them are fully comparable, but not all.

Unfortunately, this process was suspended by the government at the end of 2004 and was replaced by the ACCC Australian Health Workforce Officials Committee review of medical colleges, whose report was published in July this year. A week ago the college and the Commonwealth department signed off on a contract to form a rapid assessment unit to pursue area of need and overseas trained specialist recognition. The AHWOC committee met with the

colleges in September this year and their project begins with us in 2006, at which stage we will review everything.

The fourth issue relates to Dr Mulrooney. I put in my statement that under normal circumstances the data relating to trainees, fellows and overseas-trained doctors are kept strictly confidential in accordance with privacy legislation. However, insofar as Dr Mulrooney has placed some events on the public record by his submission and appearance I feel I must comment, if the committee agrees.

CHAIR—He has appeared before the committee and we had some concerns regarding the evidence he gave to the committee. We have a copy of the *Hansard* transcript. I do not know whether you have seen that.

Prof. Phillips—I have. That is why I have addressed some of the issues here.

CHAIR—We had some concerns, as you can see from the *Hansard*. If you are happy to address them, we are happy to hear them.

Prof. Phillips—I am not releasing anything that I should not, anyway. Firstly, Dr Mulrooney stated that the college had put artificial barriers in place for overseas-trained specialists, and applied these barriers indiscriminately in his case. The college has neither put any artificial barriers in place for overseas-trained specialists nor applied any barriers indiscriminately against him. The reality is that we have specific, transparent criteria for exemption from having to sit a portion of the examination and Dr Mulrooney did not meet those criteria. Dr Mulrooney has, in effect, completed the required practice period that he was assessed as requiring but he has not applied to have this approved or to sit the examination.

Secondly, Dr Mulrooney alleged that his training in the UK was far in excess of any Australian anaesthetist because of the excessive hours he worked and the number of patients he treated. The college is firmly of the view that quality of training is not determined by hours worked per week or by the number of anaesthetics administered but by quantity and quality of teaching and supervision. If Dr Mulrooney's assertions about his clinical experience are correct he should easily pass the examination should he choose to sit it. We can produce information about the high pass rate of UK- and Irish-qualified anaesthetists who choose to sit the exam. Dr Mulrooney stated that a factor in his claim of superior training in the UK was that UK patients suffered from more complicated pathology than Australian patients.

I think there is simply no evidence for that. UK patients do not suffer from different diseases than Australian patients, and I wish our patients were less complicated. Dr Mulrooney fosters the mistaken impression that ANZCA licenses anaesthetists in Australia. We do not do that; that is the prerogative of the medical boards.

In conclusion, I make the following points. ANZCA has cooperated with the government and its agencies and our current processes are fully in line with the existing policy. We are fully supportive of working with government at all levels to respond to unmet need in the community through agreed assessment processes. There is a serious misperception that the college has sought to discourage overseas-trained specialists, which has had the effect of denying the community the opportunity to fill unmet areas of need. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The sole mission of the college is to promote and uphold quality standards in anaesthesia which serve the community by ensuring that doctors who perform anaesthesia are fully qualified so that the community can have confidence in that certification process. The college does not have any other agenda.

The college trains and graduates anaesthetists and assesses overseas-trained specialists. It does not license doctors. Any attempts to circumvent the agreed college processes weaken the standard of health provision to the community and have the potential to expose the community to risks and consequences such as happened in Bundaberg.

Finally, following your invitation to attend this meeting we expected to be asked what improvements could be made to the current situation. I would just like to assure you that the college will move rapidly with the establishment of the Rapid Assessment Unit, assisted by AHWOC, to pursue the question of comparison of overseas-trained qualifications with our own. I believe that because we started the process last October, but it was interrupted because the government stopped talking to us, a statement by the college regarding English and Irish qualifications will be made by the college early in the new year.

Senator KIRK—Could you provide the committee with an estimate of how many applications the college receives each year for overseas qualification recognition?

Prof. Phillips—Yes, Jill Humphreys has brought along the data.

Ms Humphreys—From 2002 to 2004 we had 11 from the United Kingdom, three from Ireland, 12 from South Africa, three from India and one each from Germany, China and Denmark. In 2005 there have been 10 from the UK, two from Ireland, four from South Africa, one from Holland, 10 from India, two from Germany and one from Japan.

Senator KIRK—They are relatively small numbers then.

Ms Humphreys—In total, we have 236 overseas-trained doctors within our system at the moment.

Senator KIRK—Is that in total in the entire system?

Ms Humphreys—Yes—84 of whom have become fellows since 2002. There are 152 who have yet to complete the process.

Senator KIRK—In his evidence, Dr Mulrooney said that prior to 1997 the college automatically recognised training from the UK. Is that correct?

Prof. Phillips—I can explain the history. There were a number of things that happened between 1991 and 1995. Up until 1995, all the Commonwealth or former Commonwealth countries—which were the UK, Ireland, Canada, South Africa and Australia—had mutual recognition of each other's qualifications. Between 1991 and 1995 a number of things happened which resulted, in 1995, in all those bodies deciding that they would no longer recognise each other's qualifications. There were several reasons. One was that their training and examination systems had changed so that there was no longer comparability. There was comparability in,

obviously, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and all of those things, but the way in which the programs were structured, the access to subspecialty training, where the exam was placed in training and the nature of the exam became quite different.

The second thing was that it was an era of much concern about racial discrimination. I was vice-president at the time that a Dr Siddiqui went to the antidiscrimination people and accused the Australian Medical Council of racial discrimination because he failed their exam. The relevant body upheld his submission and criticised the AMC. That was in 1995 and our college, early in 1996, decided we did not want to be involved in that sort of process, so we said we will not selectively recognise certain qualifications and not others—we will treat everyone the same. As it happened, the Federal Court overturned that decision the following year, but by then the decision had been made. In any case the other Commonwealth countries had already withdrawn recognition, so that is where we stayed. To add to that, if I want to go to England, Ireland, Canada or South Africa and practice they would not let me in, not just because I am old, but because they do not regard my qualification as appropriate.

Senator KIRK—So you would have to sit exam?

Prof. Phillips—Absolutely.

Senator KIRK—Is there an appeal process in place?

Prof. Phillips—Yes, there is.

Senator KIRK—Dr Mulrooney suggested that your appeal process is not in accordance with the ACCC guidelines. Is that the case?

Prof. Phillips—I have read all that correspondence and I have looked at our appeals process and compared it with the appeals process recommended by the ACCC for the college of surgeons. I believe our college was in error in stating to Dr Mulrooney that our appeals process was approved by the ACCC. The ACCC wrote back effectively saying that they did not approve anything for anybody and that the processes of the college of surgeons were authorised but not approved. So that was an error. However, the principles of our appeals process are certainly comparable to the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons appeals process and are currently being reviewed again by our legal adviser to make sure that we are compatible.

Senator KIRK—Can you seek authorisation then from the ACCC in the same manner as the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons has?

Prof. Phillips—No, we do not intend to do that. Our college has never seen the need to go to the ACCC to seek authorisation in relation to the Trade Practices Act. The ACCC AHWOC have now reviewed all the medical colleges and released a report a couple months ago. They said that they want all the colleges to follow the processes outlined for the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, bearing in mind that there will be variations between colleges. For example, the college of surgeons decides on how many training posts they have and also selects the trainees. In 2004 we got rid of posts so that anyone can register for training. And we do not select and appoint trainees; that is done by the health departments in each state. So, insofar as we are

different from the college of surgeons, the AHWOC will look at us somewhat differently, we anticipate.

Senator KIRK—So there is no suggestion that there is noncompliance with the Trade Practices Act? The Trade Practices Act would not apply, would it, to your operation?

Prof. Phillips—I do not think so, but I thought that was what the ACCC was about. I may have misunderstood.

Senator KIRK—I did too, but I wondered what the consequences would be if there were noncompliance with the guidelines?

Prof. Phillips—I have no idea.

Senator KIRK—I do not know either and I am a lawyer, not an anaesthetist.

CHAIR—Professor Phillips and Ms Humphreys, as you are aware, one of the terms of reference for this committee is to find out what impediments there are to attracting skilled migrants to Australia. Given the fact that anaesthetists are in pretty short supply, we are endeavouring to do what we can to poach brains from other countries—if I can put it crudely. We are trying to do the best we can to make sure that nothing stands in the way of an orderly and proper system for doing that. You will have seen in *Hansard* the evidence taken in Perth from Dr Mulrooney. Dr Lawrence, as a former health minister, gave insight into her view about what happened when she was a health minister. She said:

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.

I put it to you, Prof. Phillips, in the most polite way, that there is a view, particularly in the cases that have been outlined to us—and given some of the evidence, including Dr Mulrooney's—that you tend to act as a bit of a closed shop. As a result, it is inhibiting the flow of anaesthetists to Australia. You may say that this is only one case but if that sort of information gets back to source countries like Britain, Ireland and South Africa it would not send a very good message to people wanting to come to Australia, would it?

Prof. Phillips—Can I make a few comments about that. One of the difficulties, as you know, is that perceptions do not always relate to facts. The 'children overboard' event was a classic example of confusion of perceptions and facts. Leaving that aside, Dr Lawrence was health minister at a time previous to what is currently happening. There are a number of things I would like to comment on. Firstly, I think that Dr Lawrence's perceptions date from when she was health minister. As you know, people tend to maintain perceptions for a long period of time. I do myself. I have views of journalists, terrorists—

CHAIR—Politicians.

Prof. Phillips—politicians, lawyers, accountants and other doctors, I must say. Secondly, since 2001 the college has been reviewed by the Australian Medical Council. It has provided data on a regular basis to the Medical Training Review Panel, it has been reviewed by the ACCC

AHWOC process and we have acted on the reports that have come to us from those bodies. We have not solved all the problems yet, but we are working towards that.

The other thing is that, in these days of modern communications, our web site gives a pretty comprehensive picture of all aspects of our training, assessment and overseas trained specialist area of need program. We communicate regularly with the royal college in England, the faculty in Ireland, the college in Canada, the faculty in South Africa and with the American boards. So a lot of English and Irish people who think that they would like to settle in Australia have ready access to the facts.

People can get into this country in several ways, but a common route is via the area of need. If they come into the area of need situation then they are quite clearly told that if they want to proceed to get specialist recognition recommended by the college to the relevant bodies then, firstly, they should spend a year in a post approved by the college so that they get to know Australian conditions and they can have some supervision of their practice. Secondly, they should do a modified examination to show that they have the knowledge to be equivalent to an Australian specialist. If they do that then they can apply for fellowship and I think without exception they have been granted fellowship.

So I think misperceptions of other people in England and Ireland come as much from the statements that have been made in submissions to this committee as they do from the facts. I guess the reason we are here today at your request is to try and provide the information which suggests that the college is in fact not a closed shop. Yes, we have a training program to a standard; yes, we have examinations; and, yes, we have processes for continuing professional development. But the aim of all of that is to provide safe anaesthesia to the community. That is the only aim that we have. I spent my professional life working in the public hospital system in both Sydney and Adelaide, and I have never seen the college, as an educational body, as being a closed shop which was there to restrict numbers to increase my income. If it was that sort of a body it was very unsuccessful, I can tell you.

CHAIR—I am sure that is subjective and well meant. But let me say, Professor, on his evidence, for example, I find it almost archaic that you have somebody who says: ‘I came here as a consultant anaesthetist, having been in the UK for approximately 10 years as a consultant anaesthetist. I was chairman of my department for about eight of those years.’ He then states the number of people he had under him and says: ‘My training consists of approximately nine years of supervised training, including time in the Air Force. I passed my fellowship exam, which was based on the Australian fellowship,’ et cetera. He said, ‘To my horror they decided I would need to undertake the overseas training exam and be supervised until I had passed that exam.’

Don’t you think having to be supervised would be insulting for somebody with his experience and of his calibre, having made the commitment to Australia that he did—bringing his family out, cutting ties with his previous job, et cetera? I would feel insulted if I were Dr Mulrooney, coming to Australia when we have basically invited him to do so to help us in this area. We are not talking about extremes. We are not talking about a Dr Patel in the Bundaberg hospital; we are talking about somebody whose CV you had access to. It was obviously of high quality, and here you are still supervising him. I would see that as being pretty much in your face.

Prof. Phillips—To just clarify, I did try to explain in my opening statement what the process was.

CHAIR—But surely there are mitigating circumstances. You do not just take a blanket approach and apply it to everybody in any area of law if there are mitigating circumstances.

Prof. Phillips—No, you do not. I was going to refer to the tax department but I will not. All of the things you say sound reasonable: that he was a fully trained anaesthetist in the United Kingdom system, that he had completed his higher specialist training, that he was head of a department—all of those sorts of things. The paperwork that we have to look at is assessed, and he is assessed, against a number of criteria, which are spelt out in the overseas trained specialist assessment document that you have. Everyone goes through that process and the Overseas Trained Assessment Committee has criteria against which they assess the qualifications, training and experience of the person.

Following consideration against the criteria, they make a decision as to whether the person needs to spend a period of time in an Australian hospital and whether they need to do the examination. That was the decision made in his case, as it is for the majority of people who come from the UK. The only exception to that is if somebody is so eminent in the UK—or anywhere else in the world—that they are appointed to be a director of a teaching hospital department or a professor heading an academic department. Then there is a regulation in the college rules which says that such a person can be elected to fellowship without going through any of these processes.

That happened a few years ago with a German anaesthetist who came to Canberra. He was coming into a chair of anaesthesia, he was eminently qualified in Germany and there was no problem. But Dr Mulrooney did not come to head an academic department in Australia; he came to an area of need position and, therefore, the college treated him along the guidelines which had been agreed with the Australian Medical Council, with the medical boards and with the Commonwealth department. We do not have the option of saying: ‘Look, we’ll ignore that. Because he seems terrific, we’ll let him through.’ We do not have that option. We will certainly be reviewing that. The purpose of the rapid assessment unit and the AHWOC process is for us to speed ahead with saying, ‘Yes, we’ve looked in more detail at English, Irish, South African and Canadian qualifications, and the following ones we believe ought to be accepted and they don’t need to do any training or have any supervision.’

But the other point I will make is that Dr Mulrooney was not required to work under supervision. He was required to have an assessment on-site visit. Dr Turner—from the Royal Perth Hospital or Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, I am not sure—came to Joondalup, reviewed Dr Mulrooney’s practice and said: ‘He’s fine. He can work unsupervised.’ He was not constantly under supervision at all.

CHAIR—It is interesting that you say that, because it takes away the almost patronising element of him being continually supervised. I do not want to get too bogged down. We have heard what you had to say but, by the same token, from our point of view of inquiring into areas attracting skilled migrants, we do not want to lose people of this calibre. I say to you: in your eminent position with the college, whatever you can do to assist would be good. We do not need to say any more on that. Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

Prof. Phillips—No, just to assure you that within the constraints put on us by all these bodies that keep reviewing us, we will be very happy to plough ahead at as rapid a rate as we can to improve the situation, because there is no question that we are desperately short of people to do the work, particularly in rural and remote Australia. We would like to see the public have access as well.

CHAIR—We have appreciated you coming here and giving us your time today. Hansard will record your responses, and that will be good. 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 material you have undertaken to give us or wish to provide as soon as possible.

Prof. Phillips—Thank you very much.

[2.14 pm]

REDFERN, Mr Kevin Maxwell, General Manager, Industrial Relations and Training, Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce

YILMAZ, Mrs Leyla, Manager, Industrial Relations, Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce

CHAIR—Good afternoon. I am sorry we have gone over time a little bit. I would like to welcome representatives from the Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce to this public hearing. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Mr Redfern—Mrs Yilmaz will make that brief statement. Then we can proceed to the committee's questions.

Mrs Yilmaz—The Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce is an employer organisation with a membership of some 5,000 employers in the retail motor industry in Victoria and Tasmania. The majority of our members are small business, and 90 per cent of our members have less than 20 staff. Our membership is almost equally divided between the metropolitan and regional areas. The automotive industry is experiencing severe skills shortages, and those skills shortages have been prominent since the early 1990s. The industry relies on trade based qualifications. Advancement in technology has also subsequently changed the nature of skill acquisition in the industry, the way in which industry competes amongst itself and the division of industry, or what we call segmentation—the development of industry in general.

The conventional labour supply into our industry has been through the youth labour market. However, with a shrinking youth labour market, the industry is exploring alternative avenues for labour sources. VACC has piloted a fast track apprenticeship program—a traineeship program—for mature employees. The candidates for that particular program have included both recent migrants or mature type employees who may have had some experience in the industry, although limited, or in an area of a technical nature. The purpose of that particular project was to try to fast-track those individuals into a trade qualification within a shorter time span. It has worked quite well and it is something that we wish to proceed with, with a more detailed process.

Our industry, particularly our middle to larger size employers, has attempted to recruit or is in the process of recruiting from overseas, although that in itself has been a somewhat difficult process. Those employers who have been successful in recruiting from overseas have clearly managed to engage in some form of networking program in the chosen countries to be able to properly assess the qualifications and the suitability for migration.

The industry itself is becoming a lot more global. We are more heavily influenced by international developments. There is a lot more brand marketing in the industry than there has

ever been in the past. This does, of course, influence the decisions of employers when considering the employment of overseas trained personnel. The experience of our membership has been that, when they are recruiting from overseas or recruiting recent migrants from overseas, there is a general understanding in terms of what the qualifications are of those who have been trained in Western Europe, the US or the UK; however, those coming from underdeveloped countries are a little bit more of an unknown source, and there is a need for further testing of their capacity.

In our written submission, we also made comment on the DIMIA web site and we are pleased to announce that we have had some feedback from DIMIA that they have chosen to incorporate some of the positive feedback we have given. That is very much welcome. VACC does work collaboratively with a number of bodies, particularly Trades Recognition Australia and VETASSESS. From our experience, we have found that it is always preferable to do some form of practical assessment rather than simply paper based methods of assessment.

Some observations include that we have found it difficult to verify documents when they are supposedly certified. What is certified in one country might not be in another—they may have a different form of certification. The assessment of internet based applications has not been altogether successful because of the fact that applicants may not necessarily be aware of the level of detail they need to include or comprehend the expectations of employers in Australia. The other observation we wish to make is that, given that most of our employers are small employers, setting up networks overseas to recruit from those particular countries is actually quite a costly process, and so that process is out of reach for the majority of our employers.

One of the difficulties we have found has been in the dealership area. Our members have advised that where they have recruited individuals from some undeveloped countries there is some expectation that they would be on the same level as someone who is trade qualified in Australia. However, given the fact that in some of those countries they do not have full exposure to the technology that we are required to have here, they can sometimes be dissatisfied because their level of experience is not equivalent. Therefore, they tend to be placed in the more mundane type of servicing work, and that can create problems for both the employer and the individual employee.

In our paper we list a series of recommendations and we also comment that, in our view, when individuals are applying for positions in Australia there is a need for them to have some level of knowledge of English given that technology has changed. Because of the rapidly changing technology there is an increased need to rely on research skills and communication skills simply because of the range of work within Australia.

CHAIR—I suppose the first observation is that having competency in English is a desired requirement because they slot straight in. But I do note in your submission that one of your members says that because of his agency's large size et cetera, he is recruiting welders from China. Is English not a problem there?

Mrs Yilmaz—No. The nature of the work itself does not require the level of English. However, if they are working on modern vehicles, they do need the capacity to research manuals and the internet et cetera for information on current technologies. Therefore, English is required.

They may be working in a dealership environment where they have to communicate with customers simply because that is the way in which the business is structured.

Mr Redfern—I think in that particular instance, while that business had some success, it is a body-making operation and involves welding processes. That does not rely on that interactivity with clients that Mrs Yilmaz referred to and the necessity to be able to read a workshop manual or look at a laptop in terms of instructions on how to rectify any problems with a motor vehicle.

CHAIR—You would not know this but the committee will. I notice you have a fair bit to say about trades recognition in Australia. You mentioned in your opening remarks that paper assessment is highly undesirable because there is no way of assessing skills or verifying certified documents and so on. Do I glean from that that you see the current assessment methods by TRA as being inadequate?

Mr Redfern—While it is not so much an issue for countries like the UK where there are City and Guilds and so forth where things are easily recognisable, for countries like the Philippines where the assessment of competency might state that a person is working in a trade that does not necessarily align with the expectations here. I think it is as simple as that. While we accept that there has to be some documentation, it is our view that, if there can be some mechanism arranged between the Australian government and governments in these countries for a practical assessment, we think that would markedly decrease the burden on both the applicant for migration in terms of their expectations and of course the expectations at this end from an employer. I am contemplating some sort of practical test as opposed to a straight statement on a piece of paper that somebody has worked in a car dealership or a retail repair operation as a mechanic, because in some instances there is a very different definition of a mechanic from what you or I would perhaps understand to be a trade qualified mechanic.

CHAIR—That is right. At the end of the day, competency type testing is obviously the most desirable type. To get that done overseas, you need somebody who can go and observe the person. You are indicating there is a concern about being able to verify qualifications.

Mr Redfern—Yes.

CHAIR—I think we are singing from the same hymn sheet there.

Mr Redfern—I think so. We are not trying to impose obstacles; we are trying to make it easier for the people who are applying and easier for employers. One mechanism might involve connections between vocational colleges in Australia and those in other countries—some mechanism that is regulated. Again, it is really about having a level of understanding and comprehension between the two so that the assessments that are carried out there are in line with what we would expect in Australia.

CHAIR—You also mentioned NOOSR. Have you had much to do with them?

Mrs Yilmaz—Yes. They have been in touch with our technical department. Our technical department consists of a number of people who are trade qualified and have extensive experience. We are often called upon to assess applications. The comments in our submission actually go to those issues. So whether they come through Trades Recognition Australia or

NOOSR, the comments are relatively the same in that, whilst we are trying to assess the qualification that is alluded to, we also look at the level of experience. Certified documents is sometimes an issue; sometimes it is not. In our view there is sometimes a need for the applicant to provide additional information, particularly if the terminology is not the same; perhaps they can provide additional information about the nature of the work they do so that we can provide greater guidance to those particular bodies.

CHAIR—With respect to NOOSR, have you found their web site user friendly and informative?

Mrs Yilmaz—We have not been using the web site. What usually occurs is that they contact our department to provide some form of guidance in terms of the assessment—

CHAIR—They contact you?

Mrs Yilmaz—Yes.

CHAIR—Being a Victorian based organisation, are you aware of VETASSESS—Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services?

Mr Redfern—We are. In fact, we have an arrangement with VETASSESS to do some qualification and assessment work with us in the airconditioning field. We are aware of the work of VETASSESS. I am in fact on the board of VETASSESS so I have a reasonable knowledge of what they do.

CHAIR—You are going to give them a good tick, aren't you?

Mr Redfern—Yes. I have declared myself; in this case there are conflict of interest issues. I think VETASSESS would be the first to agree that there are some real limitations in terms of trying to glean what you want to find out regarding the status of an applicant, their real knowledge and their level of comprehension. It goes beyond '5.5 for English' and so on. I should also note that although we are a Victorian based organisation representing employers in both Victoria and Tasmania, the national secretariat dealing with industrial relations and training issues for the other retail motor trade organisations is located with us. So while I am not purporting to speak on their behalf, I can give some indication of their views, if the committee so wishes. With respect to New South Wales, where there is a regime of licensing for businesses and individuals in the trade, their views might differ in terms of what they might wish to indicate about licensing. So I will not go down that road.

CHAIR—I want to return to VETASSESS. It appears they are highly regarded and do a very efficient job. You could recommend that style of operation further than Victoria?

Mr Redfern—Yes. Again, in our submission we referred to trying to streamline the bodies where various sources of information are channelled through, how they are handled. In my view, it is clear that an organisation such as VETASSESS is reasonably well placed to undertake that work.

CHAIR—You raise the issue of temporary visas. We had the ACTU here this morning saying how horrified they would be if that became the normal practice. You are indicating it is a good, to put it crudely, suck-and-see type mechanism.

Mr Redfern—Our approach to skilled migrant labour has been a bit mixed over the years. Some time ago we had a number of members who were interested in going down that road. But, frankly, five or 10 years ago it was just too hard for the small business; they just did not have the mechanism to deal with the level of obligation that was placed on them. I can assure you and the committee that as far as the 457 short-term visas go, our members do not necessarily see this as a first resort. In fact, in our work as an organisation that is vitally interested in vocational training and education, we will not be reducing or diminishing in any way our activities in terms of recruiting apprentices or the like or enhancing the skills of those who are already working in the industry.

But, realistically, we have members who are saying: ‘We are short of tradespeople. We can’t recruit the number of young people that we need as apprentices for a variety of reasons.’ We have presented this as another option, and only an option. We have been working recently with one of DIMIA’s outreach workers, Mr Ian Ingle, together with a labour agent from the Philippines and a Melbourne legal firm. We have been working together to try and inform and advise members as to what their obligations are and how the 457 visa works. I do not think I could say that we expect a tidal wave of applicants through this particular process. We will be targeting areas such as some of the body trades, some motor mechanics, some automotive electricians. It is very much an area where our own members say, ‘We’re not too sure that we want to go down this road, but we really need to examine it as an option.’ That is the best material I can put before you and the committee as to our industry’s attitude, at least from our organisation’s viewpoint.

CHAIR—So you are happy enough with the immigration outreach officers program?

Mr Redfern—It is working well with us. We have found the material that DIMIA has provided has been clear and easily understandable by our members. I think it has come as a bit of a surprise to our members that the obligations are set out so clearly. I think they were expecting a lot more complexity. It has been very useful. We found the particular outreach officer that has been assigned to our industry to be well-informed and very willing to work with us.

CHAIR—On the 457 visas, though, you say you believe the jury is out on them in some respects, and that you have some concerns about the training component and those sorts of issues.

Mr Redfern—On the training side, I believe we would have that reasonably well under control. In the mentoring role that we would obviously have as an organisation supporting our members, we would be assigning our apprenticeship officers to work with employers who are looking at going down the road of putting somebody on. Most people realise it is not just a matter of popping a new entrant to Australia in a workshop and saying, ‘Away you go,’ et cetera, without the necessary support.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission and for your attendance here today. I was interested in what you had to say on pages 7 and 8 in relation to the skill-matching database. You mention that this is now on DIMIA's web site. You say that it has enormous potential as an effective tool for prospective employers, although you say that it has limitations. You mention that when you have looked at it you notice that there is limited information there in order to properly ascertain qualifications and the like. What sorts of changes would you recommend to the database in order to make it a more valuable resource for prospective employers and also for employees who might be accessing it?

Mrs Yilmaz—For instance, with the two examples that we provided, you can see that with the references to diploma in engineering automobile there is only a reference to award year. There is no indication of how long it has taken for that individual to complete that level of training, so for all we know it could be a six-month course or a four-year course—it could be anything; we do not really know. It is not the sort of terminology we use in Australia and certainly not the terminology that is used in the US, UK and Western Europe. A simple thing such as putting in date of commencement and date of completion would give us some level of understanding about whether it is more traditional type of program or a short course of some kind. We know that in some countries you can call certain qualifications diplomas or degrees, but they are nothing like the diplomas and degrees that we have here.

Additional information such as requiring the country of qualification would be useful. We do not really know where qualifications are from. As you can see, they are not required fields. Also, some detail about the type of modules, competencies, standards or whatever it is that may comprise that particular qualification would be useful. Some information about work experience and the type of employer that had engaged them would also be useful. The difficulty we have is that most of those fields are voluntary. There is no compulsory requirement to fill them out, and it creates a bit of a problem.

We managed to forward those comments through to DIMIA through ACCI as well. One of our suggestions was to perhaps use some ASCO codes so that we have a clear understanding of where they fit in the context of occupations. DIMIA have indicated that ASCO codes are extremely difficult to incorporate, but certainly some of our suggestions about start date, finish date and the type of work they do is something DIMIA will follow through on on that database. We believe that would be much more helpful and make that web site a lot more user friendly.

Senator KIRK—I think the chair was asking you about one of your members who has taken on welders from China. You mention on page 5 that the company has set up a process in China to assess, in practical terms, levels of competency of these Chinese welders and has established a reliable means of assessing qualifications. Can you tell us a bit more about how they have managed to set up this process? It sounds quite good.

Mrs Yilmaz—That particular company had extreme difficulty in attracting young people into the trade here in Australia. It was a last resort for them. Their HR manager went to China and found that there were a lot of Chinese who were keen to migrate to Australia. There were a number of people who had some skills in welding. He then undertook to establish links with various providers there who could provide some level of practical assessment. The other purpose was to look at the level or potential that individual had to further build on their training. The company also conducts its own level of training.

The other issue that they had to consider was the possibility for those individuals to make that transition over to Australia and, if they had families, what sorts of systems they would need to put in place to assist in that transition and ensure that it was done well. It took them quite some time to set up those networks, but they now have an agent which they rely on and there is not that need for them to continually travel up and down. They have arranged for an agent to do the preliminary testing and they have various checks that need to be conducted before they offer the position.

One of the interesting things that they have found is that in the main they start off with males applying for the positions and then the wives of those applicants also express an interest. They have found that the wives also have the types of skills they need and they have been able to train them up as well. There is a slightly different breakdown in the work that they have for those individuals. So they do accommodate the whole family making the transition to Australia, and that is working quite well.

Senator KIRK—How many have they brought over, approximately?

Mrs Yilmaz—I cannot recall the actual numbers.

Senator KIRK—Would it be 10 or 100?

Mrs Yilmaz—No, it has not been 100. It has been in double figures. I cannot recall the number; I am sorry.

Senator KIRK—What sorts of visas have these people come out on?

Mrs Yilmaz—They come out on permanent visas.

CHAIR—Are they sponsored?

Mrs Yilmaz—They sponsor them out, yes.

Mr Redfern—One point I should make in addition to Mrs Yilmaz's comments is that that particular member is not atypical of our members, because most of our members do not have HR managers; they are employing people in the six to 10 range. So I think there is a level of sophistication in terms of how that was done. The reality for the bulk of our people would be that we would have to look to a reliable labour agent in other countries to do that assessment work. It would not be realistic for the average member to be popping up and down to China, the Philippines or anywhere else. That is one of the things we are looking at at the moment—how we can facilitate somebody who is reliable and able to undertake that work. The other thing is that, and I do not know how much you know about body making on trucks and heavy vehicles, these are welding processes. Again, without denigrating that work in any way, because it does need to be structurally sound and able to withstand heavy stresses and loads, I suggest that it is a lot different to repairing a vehicle, and I put it no higher than that.

Senator KIRK—That does suggest, doesn't it, the benefits of having that testing and the competency based testing taking place overseas?

Mr Redfern—Indeed. I could tell you in a minute whether you can run a good weld or not, but that is no use over there.

Mr KEENAN—From having a look through your submission, it seems to me that the industry has done a number of different things to try and solve what is obviously an acute skill shortage, including things like trying to get young people into the apprenticeships. How is the mature age program going, by the way?

Mr Redfern—It is interesting. Like every other industry, our people are still making the transition from the typical time served indentured to a competency based structure. I think they have difficulty with it, and there is a contradiction in that on one hand we are saying, ‘Four years,’ and on the other hand we are saying, ‘If you can go through the modules and do the training on the job, you should be qualified, and if that takes 2½ years, so be it.’ That does not sit well with many of our members who have come through the trade traditionally. But I think that is changing, for a number of reasons. One is that technology will force it. Our industry, as Mrs Yilmaz has said, has become a lot more segmented. You only have to drive down any street around metropolitan Melbourne to see the automatic transmission specialists, the front-end specialists, the brake specialists and so on. The days when we would see dotted around the suburbs general repair shops that were able to fix any and all vehicles are changing markedly.

The other aspect is the mix of people that our members engage. We have made reference to people who are coming in at a semi-skilled level—at a cert II level. They are adults usually in their 20s or early 30s. It will assist those people if they are able to make the transition from a cert II to the cert III.

We also want to get our members to recognise that they need a different labour mix. Let me give you an example. In the dealership area it is pretty traditional to put on a number of apprentices at the start of each year. There is a fairly high churn rate of apprentices in our industry, regrettably. I think one reason is that the work is now either at the very high level of diagnostics or routine servicing, and there is not much in the middle. That is because of the technology of the motor vehicle. We are suggesting to our members that when they recruit they need to be much more precise and have a look at the job that they actually want done so that we do not see this churn rate, where a young person comes in, gets tired of doing routine, mundane tasks and decides that they will go somewhere else.

In answer to your question, we see that the cert II is going to be a big area for us as well as the traditional trades. It is going well but we have to persuade people that they need to look at it as another option. We are also working closely with a number of the automotive colleges to make sure that the program that the cert II people are doing is good—that they will learn something of value—and that they can be moved and not be stuck in a cert II if they have the potential to move to a trade qualification. That does not necessarily sit well with folks who have traditionally done a four-year apprenticeship and think that that is the only way to go. But we are getting there.

Mr KEENAN—I am interested in the fact that the industry has tried a number of different ways to do this and is now looking at skilled migration. We have had evidence from other organisations who have appeared before the committee who essentially said that employers have failed to train and now they reaping what they failed to do in the past. They said that skilled

migration is not necessarily the answer and that the organisations should be looking at doing these other things as well. So it is interesting that your industry has looked at doing these sorts of other things and is now looking at skilled migration as another option.

Mr Redfern—As I indicated earlier in my comments to the committee, we do not see it as a total fix. It is just one element of a number of possible solutions. We are perhaps approaching it on a broader front than a number of other industry organisations. As I said before, being craft based, our people are fairly mindful and conservative in their outlook as to how training should take place. They were very cautious in accepting that a short-term skill visa is the way to go, but now they are much better informed. We have put the information from DIMIA up on our web site and we are holding a number of forums in metropolitan and regional Victoria.

I think that is all I can realistically say. We are taking a broad brush approach to these things—not just in terms of the traditional apprenticeships but for those gaining a cert II and for the young adults. We had a fast-track program for people from non-English-speaking backgrounds who were, in the main, tertiary qualified. They were like the people you see driving cabs around Melbourne who have a degree in engineering or some such but whose qualifications are not automatically recognised in Australia. That approach has worked reasonably well. We put those people, within about 18 months, through an apprenticeship where they get a formal qualification. They certainly have the theory, the knowledge and the intellectual capacity but they do not necessarily have the hand skills and the fitting skills.

Mr KEENAN—I am conscious of the time but could you say briefly what it would mean to your industry if there was not any skilled migration?

Mr Redfern—That would certainly close an option. I should have added, in response to your query, that what you say is quite true; the employers are now reaping what they sowed in terms of—

Mr KEENAN—No, I was not saying that; I was just repeating the argument they put to us.

Mr Redfern—I will withdraw that. What needs to be understood, though, is that those pressures that bring that about are not always of the individual employer's making. If you look at our body repair industry for a moment, you will find there are pressures brought on by insurance companies that do not in fact equate to training apprentices in terms of getting jobs done very quickly: churning them out and requiring a tradesman's skill only. Again, we are seeing the body repair industry now and the insurers recognising that they need to take a step back and go back to some of the traditional training. What would the 457 mean? As I say, it would close another door that we think should not be closed.

Mr KEENAN—Have you given any thought as to who might run the skill-matching database?

Mrs Yilmaz—No, we have not given any thought to that. DIMIA already runs it, and I am not quite sure what the structure within DIMIA is in managing that. One of the points in our submission is that more of a collaborative effort is required amongst all the different bodies who work on these sorts of issues to pull their resources together. Applicants from overseas need to be given sufficient advice about the relevant information that they need to put on their

applications. This needs to be reflected on the database of whoever is providing the guidance. I do not really know who is responsible for that, but that is our point and that is our recommendation.

CHAIR—I appreciate you attending this hearing today. 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 secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible. Thank you.

Mr Redfern—Thank you, Chair, and all committee members.

[3.00 pm]

HAMILTON, Mr Stuart, President, Australian Institute of Radiography

BADAWY, Mr Emile Michel, Executive Officer, Australian Institute of Radiography

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I 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 now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions.

Mr Hamilton—Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to appear before the committee. I will reiterate some of what is in our submission. The AIR is the professional body representing radiographers, radiation therapists and sonographers in Australia. Among a whole range of responsibilities, we are responsible for accrediting university courses in Australia. We accredit some 11 university courses in Australia and we reaccredit them after so many years. We are also the accrediting body for individual radiographers and radiation therapists. We issue a statement of accreditation to individuals who have passed a recognised university course and have completed a professional development year, which is like an internship year for Australian residents. We have the Overseas Qualification Assessment Panel, or OQAP, which assesses overseas applicants with overseas qualifications who want to come to Australia to work. It also looks at residents in Australia who have overseas qualifications.

A degree-level qualification is now the standard for accreditation in Australia. It has been that way since the early nineties. There is a bit of a hodgepodge of licensing and registration in Australia, which is state based. Under our constitution, one of our aims is to promote the idea of national registration to simplify that area. With that mixture of licensing and registration across Australia and the differences across states, the AIR statement of accreditation is seen as a national standard. We are the DIMIA/NOOSR-approved assessing authority for applications from overseas qualified radiographers, radiation therapists and sonographers, and that is outlined fairly well in our submission.

I have just returned this morning from an Asian radiation technologists meeting in Japan, which involved 10 countries. Portability of qualifications was well discussed there. We are very interested in what is happening there. We obviously have an English test as the cornerstone of the assessment of applicants in Australia because a good level of communication skills is vital in the medical field. I will end my opening statement there.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your submission and your willingness to appear here today. I suppose it is almost a given that there is a work force shortage in the area of radiography.

Mr Hamilton—There is a general shortage in radiography, radiation therapy and sonography. There are shortages across all three fields in Australia, and world wide, really. So there is a fair bit of competition in attracting qualified personnel to Australia. The shortages obviously vary

state by state. As new facilities open and come online over the next 12 to 18 months, there will probably be another little bit of a jump in shortages of radiation therapists in particular.

CHAIR—Can you tell me roughly the numbers of people in this area—radiography, sonography et cetera—who come as migrants to Australia annually?

Mr Hamilton—The current numbers that are employed in Australia?

CHAIR—No, that come—

Mr Hamilton—Yes, certainly. The current number is that we had 169 applicants.

CHAIR—How many of them are successful?

Mr Hamilton—Out of them—they have just been broken down to diagnostics—59 diagnostics were accepted, 10 radiation therapists were accepted and 22 sonographers were accepted. So that is around a 50 per cent strike rate, roughly.

CHAIR—And the others would have been rejected on the fact that their qualifications were not—

Mr Hamilton—We look at qualifications at the time that they obtain their qualification, what the equivalent standard was in Australia, because obviously over the years it has changed from certificate to diploma to now degree level. So we look at what the standard was when they obtain their qualification and then look at their postgraduate experience and how that would compensate for perhaps not having a qualification that we would see as being equivalent. So it is quite a robust process and there is a lot of information that needs to be supplied to the assessment panel to establish that level. I should also comment that for applicants who are already residents in Australia who may have obtained residency through some other avenue, if they fall short on the level of qualification we can offer a clinically based assessment. But that is only available for people who are already resident in Australia.

CHAIR—I am interested in the fact that you have developed the overseas qualification assessment panel. Can you tell us how that operates—the makeup of it, the functions? It might be a good model for others areas that we have been talking to.

Mr Hamilton—I have a bit of information on it here. We have just expanded it. There are nine members. It is a mixture across the professional groups. It also includes people who have been through the process—so some people who have obtained their qualifications overseas and actually gone through the process—so they have more of an understanding of the difficulties perhaps that people experience in gathering information, understanding what we want and that sort of thing. We felt that it was important to include that kind of knowledge.

CHAIR—They are based overseas?

Mr Hamilton—No, they are here in Australia. These are people who have come into Australia, who have gone through this process themselves and who might have worked for 10 or 15 years or whatever.

CHAIR—Do you assess them overseas before they come or do you wait for them to come here before you assess them?

Mr Hamilton—These are people who are still resident overseas. So they have gone through DIMIA perhaps, been referred to the institute and then they are supplied with all the application documents that they need to complete.

CHAIR—So you do it on qualifications rather than a competency based revision of them.

Mr Hamilton—We do not test overseas based people, no.

CHAIR—So long as they have got their qualification and they do their 12-month clinical experience—

Mr Hamilton—That is the minimum they have got to have—

CHAIR—Then you will take them?

Mr Hamilton—Yes, if they meet the criteria for English language skills and all the academic education levels that are equivalent.

CHAIR—This is all done onshore.

Mr Hamilton—Yes.

Senator KIRK—I am still thinking about—

Mr Hamilton—I could just comment while you are thinking. We understand that New Zealand have a facility where they offer a very short visa for people to come in and be assessed. It is purely just so they can be assessed.

CHAIR—So it is a six-month temporary visa.

Mr Hamilton—Something like that, yes. There are some who get rejected and we know that if they were a resident in Australia then we would probably offer them a clinically based assessment. But we just cannot offer it because they are not going to fly out or whatever to try and get a visa. They cannot get a visa, because it is just too complicated. But if there was that facility, there would be a few we could possibly assess that way.

Senator KIRK—So those people who have come out and they are resident in Australia, on what basis are they a resident in Australia? Have they got some kind of temporary visa?

Mr Hamilton—Yes, spouse or other avenues. They may not have ever intended to pursue their profession, but after being here for a while they decided that they would.

Senator KIRK—So it is kind of fortuitous in a way, isn't it?

Mr Hamilton—It is, yes.

Senator KIRK—And seems unfair in that sense.

Mr Hamilton—It does, yes.

Senator KIRK—So really what you are saying is that the New Zealand model—

Mr Hamilton—It would provide some facility for people. You could even do a preliminary assessment and identify particular ones where, if they were issued with a temporary visa, they would be assessed. You would not bring them without some indication. That is just thinking off the top of my head; it is possible.

Senator KIRK—What sort of indication? Would there have to be sponsorship?

Mr Hamilton—It is clinically based; they would need to have an institution where they can go and do some work and be assessed. So there would need to be some sponsorship, yes.

Senator KIRK—And in what circumstances would it be? From what you are saying, these are people whose written paper qualifications do not meet your standard, but they have sufficient practical experience or clinical experience in their past?

Mr Hamilton—I am sorry; in what circumstances?

Senator KIRK—We were just talking about this category of person whose academic qualifications do not meet the mark, nor does their clinical experience, but you are saying that if they were to do the test—

Mr Hamilton—There would have to be significant clinical experience for us to say, ‘This person is a likely candidate for a clinically based assessment.’ I am not saying that every person who is a resident of Australia would automatically be offered an assessment; they still have to meet a standard. Where their academic qualifications are not quite up to the mark but they might have significant or very good clinical skills, then we can.

Senator KIRK—Does your institute advise or even offer applicants bridging courses to upgrade their qualifications?

Mr Hamilton—We do not offer them ourselves, but we do advise. We have recommended to residents that they seek advanced standing at universities to complete the degree courses that are offered here. I have not got the numbers.

Mr Badawy—It is about four.

Mr Hamilton—In the last 12 months, there has been about four who have done that.

Senator KIRK—I want to turn to another matter. You say in your submission that potential applicants have access to information that they require via your web site as well as access to

application forms. Do you find that this is the best way for you people to be able to communicate the skills recognition process to potential applicants?

Mr Hamilton—It seems to work reasonably well. We get quite a few hits. We have not really had a great number of complaints that they have not been able to access what they need to access. They can also obviously contact the institute directly to get that information and get clarification on information. I should also say that there is an appeal process as well, if an individual is rejected by OQAP—the assessment panel.

CHAIR—It seems like they have to appeal back to you.

Mr Hamilton—They appeal to the board. We really look at the process more than anything, though there have been one or two where the board has decided that individuals—these are particularly ones who are already in the country—should be offered an assessment.

Mr Badawy—A CBA.

Mr Hamilton—A clinically based assessment.

CHAIR—Are you quite confident with the independence and fairness of your appeal system? It is Caesar appealing to Caesar's wife, isn't it?

Mr Badawy—That is one way of putting it. Basically the institute has gone to a lot of trouble to keep the OQAP membership well independent of the board membership. At no stage is the board involved in the actual assessment process and the board of directors hears the appeals. As the president said, there have been occasions where the board has overruled the OQAP decision and awarded the individual a competency based assessment or in fact overruled it, full stop, and allowed that person to get their statement of accreditation and start practising.

Senator KIRK—The registration-licensing process for radiographers, radiation therapists and the like crosses states and territories. Is it standardised? Are there differences?

Mr Hamilton—There is registration in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria, though the registration is changing a little in Victoria because it has not really been an independent registration. It is becoming more in line with Tasmania and Queensland. A bill has been introduced in Western Australia to provide for registration. There has been registration for quite a long time in the Northern Territory for radiographers; they do not have radiation therapists. South Australia has licensing, New South Wales has licensing under the EPA and the ACT is looking at bringing in registration—I think they are fairly well advanced. Although there are some similarities in the registration acts, particularly between Queensland and Tasmania, and there will be with Western Australia, there are still enough differences to make it cumbersome.

Senator KIRK—It makes your job just that bit harder, I suppose, trying to get across all the different standards.

Mr Hamilton—Yes. Theoretically, the individual state registrations mean that those registration boards could bypass, if they so wished, the AIR completely and just issue a registration themselves for an individual coming in from overseas. Under those acts, they could

do that. Fortunately, they still see the statement of accreditation issued by the institute as the gold standard, and we maintain that, which is good.

Mr KEENAN—How many applications would OQAP receive in any given year?

Mr Hamilton—It is around 150.

Mr Badawy—Yes, 150 on average.

Mr KEENAN—How many are accepted?

Mr Badawy—Between 50 per cent and 55 per cent.

Mr KEENAN—Automatic recognition is granted to a number of countries, and we have them listed as the UK, Ireland, New Zealand and Hong Kong. What is the rationale for accepting those four and not others?

Mr Hamilton—That was part of the history of the accreditation process. To save OQAP having to assess each individual, they actually have the professional accreditation board accredit the courses at source, the same way as we accredit the Australian courses. There were a total of 23 courses accredited five years ago which are up for review at the end of this year.

Mr KEENAN—It is just those four countries?

Mr Hamilton—It is those four countries with English-speaking degrees.

Mr KEENAN—There are no courses in the US, Canada or anywhere else that meet the criteria?

Mr Badawy—None of those countries have decided to submit their curriculum for accreditation here.

Mr Hamilton—We have obviously invited countries—and institutions in the case of the UK—to apply to have their courses accredited, so they have basically fast-tracked graduates from their particular courses. But some of those who have had accreditation in the past have decided to decline, essentially for budgetary reasons—that has been the reason in most cases.

Mr KEENAN—What happens to Australian radiographers if they go to any of these four jurisdictions?

Mr Hamilton—They love them, all around the world.

Mr KEENAN—So an Australian radiographer can go and practise in—

Mr Hamilton—Virtually anywhere.

Mr KEENAN—Virtually anywhere?

Mr Hamilton—Just about.

Mr KEENAN—Without any accreditation?

Mr Hamilton—Yes, they will have accreditation, but Australia is seen to have a very high standard. I was being flippant before, but from that point of view they are welcomed. You will find Australian radiographers working virtually in every country that has high standard medical facilities.

Mr KEENAN—So it is hard for somebody to come and practise here but it is relatively easy for an Australian to go and practice elsewhere?

Mr Hamilton—Yes.

CHAIR—I would imagine that radiography—and I probably do not have all the right terms—is galloping along in terms of technology, and you have MRIs and the people who drive MRIs compared to other machines. We have heard from technology people who say that they have far too many applicants that are basic programmers. What they are really after is the specialists at the top end of the profession. Is yours a similar sort of situation? Can you get lots of what you call standard radiographers?

Mr Hamilton—We would call them generalists in radiography.

CHAIR—Are you after more specialists, from the migration point of view?

Mr Hamilton—Yes, that is true, although there is the danger of coming to a point where the generalist actually becomes a specialist because so many people are specialised. Generalist radiographers are the ones that you see in A&E departments and in rural and remote parts of Australia, so they are absolutely essential to the work force. But, as well as that, you are quite right that there are specialists. The institute actually offers an extra certificate in MRI and that is really for diagnostic radiographers who are specialising in that particular area. That is one of the main areas of specialty for radiographers. You will find that a large number of the sonographers in Australia actually have their original qualification as a radiographer, and they have gone on to sonography as an extra. There is also mammography as a specialty area as well. So those are the recognised specialty areas in radiography. Radiation therapy is a specialist area in itself, so it does not really have any subspecialties as such at this stage.

CHAIR—It appears from your submission that you are happy with the way you assess, the quality of the assessments and the program. From that point of view you have come to this committee, in some respects, as a sort of model organisation. That is good because we have had the other end of the spectrum—those who have issues—and it is nice to see somebody who seems to have their house in order.

Mr Hamilton—Thank you very much. We certainly are reviewing it constantly as well, to make sure that we are meeting what the public expects in terms of standards.

CHAIR—Once the *Hansard* gets out and all the disgruntled radiographers ring us up and say that is not true, we may come back to you.

Mr Badawy—We would be quite happy to table our OQAP guidelines for the committee's use. It is an open document that we are quite willing to share with the committee if you want to use it as a model.

CHAIR—On that I will include you in this last bit: thank you very much for coming and the secretary may send you a copy of the transcript for corrections that need to be made, and I would be grateful if you can send the secretariat any additional information that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible. Thanks for your time today.

Mr Badawy—Thank you.

Mr Hamilton—Thank you very much.

[3.26 pm]

COGHLAN, Dr Leigh Ross, Deputy Chairman, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council

STROUS, Dr Julie Ann, Executive Officer, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council

STUDDERT, Professor Virginia, Member, Board of Examiners, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council

WILSON, Miss Margaret Bronwen, Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council

CHAIR—Welcome. 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 now invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Dr Strous—I am a veterinary graduate, 1981, from the University of Queensland. I will spend a minute or two summarising the role of the AVBC and a couple of minutes giving you a bit of background about the veterinary profession in Australia to give you a context. Then I will add a little to the paper that I submitted earlier this year. I will try to keep it to 10 minutes. A real kick start to the incorporation of the AVBC was in 1999, with the devolution of the national veterinary exam from NOOSR to the profession. The members of the AVBC are the Australian veterinary boards; the Veterinary Council of New Zealand; and the Australian Veterinary Association and the New Zealand Veterinary Association, which are non-financial members.

The main roles of our organisation, apart from the national veterinary exam and skills assessment, involve accreditation of veterinary schools, specialist registration, the occupational registration of vets, the harmonisation of standards throughout Australia and New Zealand and also quality assurance of the veterinary services we offer to the community. The quality standards work is carried out by the best vets in the land, such as Professor Studdert and Dr Coghlan here, who give of their time for free and for the love of the profession and service to the community.

That brings me to the profession. I have given you a paper, and on page 3 it summarises the work of Emeritus Professor Trevor Heath, who has been tracking graduates since I graduated back in 1981. He is comparing what it was to be a vet in 1950 to what it was in 2000. Between 1950, when James Herriot and his Australian colleagues hung up their PD gloves, and now, you will see some massive changes. These include the move from three per cent of women in the work force then to 65 per cent now. Further to that, the percentage of female undergraduates in first year is 73 per cent this year. The government used to employ 50 per cent of new graduates; now 95 per cent of new vets work in small business. There is also a significant move away from large animal practice to mixed practice and small animals. In fact, almost no-one works in large animal practice exclusively.

CHAIR—Unless you are an equine vet.

Dr Strous—Yes, that is right, but new graduates probably would not go straight into specialisation. The average new graduate of 1950 worked 54 hours a week, excluding after-hours work, and they were on call most week nights and worked every weekend or every second weekend. I am glad to say that has all changed, except perhaps when you are in a country practice like Leigh is. He was at a colic in the middle of the night last night. Something that has not changed is the proportion of young graduates, then and now, who want to work in the bush.

Let us look at the next table, which is after the first 10 years. You will see a marked shift away from rural industries, with more experienced vets now in small animal practice. Something that has not changed is that there are more males in practices with a mix of large and small animals, with females gravitating to companion animals. Another thing that has not changed is that practice ownership is still a male domain. The significant change is the number of experienced vets who stay in rural areas: less than 20 per cent of vets stay in small towns for more than 10 years. So, although there is no apparent problem with the number of vets in Australia, Professor Heath indicates that the distribution of vets in rural areas could become quite problematic. This may all change in another five years when we get our first cohort of graduates from James Cook University, which has just opened a vet school, and also Charles Sturt University.

Page 4 gives some more stats on the profession. At the moment we produce 300 new graduates each year in Australia. I have shown the increments from the year 2001 through to 2004. As you can make out from that, even though we produce 300 new graduates, a lot of them are either retiring from the profession or heading overseas to England. The total skills assessment is the line underneath that. It has ranged from 43 to 61 over the past four years. I have put in another line, which shows the percentage of the growth in the profession each year attributed to skills assessments. So 25 per cent of the growth in the veterinary profession was due to people coming in from overseas in 2002, and from 2003 to 2004 it was actually 119 per cent. In other words, we lost more vets out of the country than we brought in.

CHAIR—Why is England such a magnet to our vets?

Dr Strous—What do you think, Leigh?

Dr Coghlan—If you have got a degree registrable in Australia, you can almost automatically register in the UK, whereas you cannot do that in the United States or Canada and those sorts of countries.

CHAIR—Don't they train enough vets themselves?

Dr Coghlan—They do, but—

Dr Strous—They all come here.

Dr Coghlan—Yes, a lot of them come here and do backpacking trips and things like that. It is a two-way street, basically. England is the area to which most Australian vets would travel to gain international experience.

CHAIR—We cannot blame *All Creatures Great and Small*, can we?

Dr Strous—It has a lot to answer for in our profession.

Dr Coghlan—It is possible.

Dr Strous—The line shows that the number of international fee-paying graduates is increasing significantly, even over the past four years. They are going to be a major source of foreign graduates applying for a skills assessment in Australia. At the bottom of this page you can see the majority of the candidates for the national veterinary exam come from Sri Lanka and India. We no longer examine South Africans and people from the USA, but it is gratifying to see that they did pretty well in the national veterinary exam. The only other page in this is a budget from the national veterinary exam and a skills assessment. Just to give you some idea, about 30 per cent of the whole of the AVBC budget is spent on overseas graduates. I sent you a paper earlier this year. You asked a question about how Australia's arrangements compare with those of other immigration countries. I have a paper which compares the statutory exams of who I think our major competitors are for skilled immigrants. The examinations in the UK, USA, Canada and New Zealand are very similar in structure and content to ours. Australia and New Zealand require a slightly higher standard of English language than North America. My understanding was that the UK had no requirement, but I have just been informed that they require an IELTS of seven, which is exactly the same as us.

We found English to be very important as a determinant in the success of people going through the national veterinary exam and also for practising in Australia. The other difference is the cost. We charge \$2,400 for the theory examination, the MCQ exam. This year it will cost candidates \$6,000 to do the clinical examination. On the other hand, Massey University in New Zealand carries out the clinical exam as a public service, and the fee is half of what we charge. If I were an overseas graduate, I would do the exam in New Zealand and come across on the trans-Tasman treaty. The Royal Veterinary College rotates its exam amongst its vet schools, which keeps the fees down to £1,000. In America the clinical exam costs \$US6,000, which is a bit more than us. Their MCQ exam is largely computer based, so they can charge less than we do.

In terms of accepting foreign graduates with immediately acceptable degrees, the UK, of course, are bound by the European Community directive, so they need to take in everyone from Europe. My understanding is that the degrees from the AVMA accredited schools worldwide are immediately acceptable in America, but they still need to do the theory examination. That is it. I have given an overview of the AVBC and the profession, to give you a bit of context of the way we welcome international vets to this country. We have looked at some of the statistics related to skills assessment of vets and expanded on some of the responses in this paper. So that is it for me.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. You have been quite comprehensive on a number of fronts. You already stated there is not a shortage of vets in Australia other than possibly in the rural areas.

Dr Strous—That is correct.

CHAIR—Do you think an accelerated or increased point system on visa applications to rural or remote areas would assist that?

Dr Coghlan—I do not know. I do not think so. I guess you need a special person to work in a rural practice. Some of the people coming from other countries may not have the skills necessary to work in rural practice. The two new schools that are set up now, Charles Sturt and James Cook, are designed to get those graduates to work in rural situations and to understand the rural situation. I do not think people coming from other countries like Sri Lanka and so on really are going to want to work in the rural areas.

CHAIR—They do this in medicine and dentistry as well. They offer scholarships to students from high schools—secondary schools—in rural, agricultural and remote areas to study medicine. There is a general belief that if they come from those areas they are more likely to return to those areas. Do you see that as a possibility for veterinary science?

Dr Strous—It has not been tested. The basis of Charles Sturt's entry procedures is to weight applications towards those who come from rural areas.

CHAIR—Do they?

Dr Strous—They do. We will only know in another 10 years whether they can actually keep them there. The signs at James Cook University are good. They have trained a couple of cohorts of pharmacists, who tend to be staying in the area. I think it has been two or three years now. So if vets go along the same pathway then all the signs are good.

CHAIR—This might almost seem trivial but I have an interest in Sri Lanka, given that I am the chair of the Australia-Sri Lanka Parliamentary Friendship Group. What is the attraction from Sri Lanka for vets? Is it just a migration outcome or do we have some particular nexus with the veterinary schools there? Did they come under the Colombo plan and study in the first place or what?

Dr Strous—That is an interesting thought. It seems to be across the board. Is it just the veterinary profession that takes people from Sri Lanka and India?

CHAIR—It is difficult to get a migration outcome, quite often, from Sri Lanka compared to some other countries.

Prof. Studdert—I do not know of any particular attraction, no.

Dr Strous—But we seem to have a lot, indeed.

CHAIR—Very good.

Senator KIRK—I notice that on page 4 of your submission you say that there is difficulty in helping candidates obtain training because there is no bridging course available in Australia for people who are coming to this country. Is the fact that they are unable to enter into such a bridging course a significant barrier, have you found, for people who are coming from overseas?

Dr Strous—It is a frustration. Would you like to add to that, Professor Studdert?

Prof. Studdert—It depends on where we identify the barrier. It probably is not a deterrent to those migrating on other bases, which is where a lot of these skills assessments come in. People have already migrated on other accounts and subsequently apply for the national veterinary exam. The screening test—

CHAIR—You can try to talk over the bells ringing or you can wait four minutes. We need to wait four minutes for the bells to finish because it is the bells being called for the upper house.

Proceedings suspended from 3.40 pm to 3.45 pm

CHAIR—You were saying, Professor Studdert?

Prof. Studdert—There is no doubt that many people who pass the written test and then have to pass the hurdle of the clinical exam would benefit greatly from increasing their clinical skills, which is probably an indirect reflection of the quality of the degree that they got in the first place. There is great demand by them to have a bridging course, and at one stage there was a bridging course funded by NOOSR. It no doubt helped some—we are still talking small numbers—but it did not help all of them to pass an exam. It is a remedial step that many feel they would benefit from and is probably valid for some while maybe not for others.

Senator KIRK—Are there other methods that would enable people to upgrade their skills, whether it be through a mentoring scheme or just more on-the-job experience?

Prof. Studdert—Sure, and there is reference to that in the submission. Certainly the profession endeavours to assist people with practical experience, which, as you might expect, would be one on one with veterinary practices. The greatest deterrent to that has been an inability to insure them. There continue to be efforts to try to find funding or find ways around that by getting them provisionally registered or in some way accommodated. To some extent we have done that in some states by giving them a narrow range of registration, which technically means they are registered but they cannot do anything independently, and this facilitates them going into practice and observing and assisting. But that is not widely available, and that is now increasingly a turn-off for anybody who might be willing to accept a person to come and gain some skills. If they cannot be insured, they are not likely to do it.

Senator KIRK—You say that is only available in some states and even then it is not widely available.

Prof. Studdert—That possibility of gaining insurance because they are provisionally registered or registered in a restricted way is not available in all states—is that right, Margaret? The specific registration for NVE candidates is not available in all states?

Miss Wilson—No, generally only in Victoria, I think.

Prof. Studdert—So that was a way to work around it but not a universal solution.

Senator KIRK—It is a problem.

Mr KEENAN—On the evidence that has been presented about the number of people who sit the exams and the number of people who qualify, it looks like the system is actually working quite well. With some of the other professional bodies that have appeared before the committee it is hard not to be a little cynical about gatekeeping—stopping people coming in and restricting the supply of people in the profession—but it does not seem to be the case when it comes to vets. I do not have any questions, but thank you for your submission.

CHAIR—Page 3 of your submission notes:

General queries have decreased by 50% since development of the AVBC web site.

Can you outline the information published on the web site and what may have led to this?

Dr Strous—It is basically the outline of what is required for overseas graduates to practise in Australia. We work through the process, including the English requirement, and they can download the forms that they need to fill in for the MCQ. So they know precisely what they need to supply to us before they can practise in Australia. The only extra inquiry we seem to get is when people ask if their degree can somehow be assessed as immediately acceptable because of some PhD that they have done or some extra masters work. That seems to be the only area where there is some sort of uncertainty—because, as you would realise, we only assess the basic degree. If it is not from a country where we accredit the degree then they need to do the national veterinary examination. All of that information is laid out fairly clearly. It must be clear, because the inquiries are much more specific these days. That has been a bit of a godsend, actually.

CHAIR—Do you find that larger veterinary practices or even governments tend to sponsor overseas veterinarians? Has that happened? Is that likely to happen?

Dr Strous—Quite a few do. I have seen some wonderful practices which keep taking overseas graduates for specific reasons. You can understand that the Irish graduates are very popular around Scone in the stud industry. One practice in South Australia has taken on five different overseas graduates and helped them through the national veterinary examination process. It is up to individuals, of course, and they do take a risk, because often these people cannot be insured.

CHAIR—Interestingly, and this seems to happen in medicine as well, a huge increase in female graduates has taken place in current times. However, the experience in medicine is that not many of them stay. It is said that they marry too well and do not return to the profession. Is that your experience as well?

Dr Strous—The work practices of males and females are quite different. Is that the sort of thing you are asking about?

CHAIR—No. The point I am making is that, with female medical professionals in particular, there seems to be almost a cultural or sociological phenomenon that they marry people with money—people who are well-off or whatever—because of their profession, and very few of them return to full-time practice. Does this happen in your—

Dr Strous—Unfortunately, no, but maybe that is the exposure to—

CHAIR—You do not marry well enough?

Dr Strous—That is right; that must be it! It is not one of the wealthiest professions in this country.

Prof. Studdert—I think I can speak for graduates in Melbourne, in Victoria. Less than 10 per cent of all graduates from the Melbourne university veterinary school are not practising, so 90 per cent of all graduates are practising. The proportion of women who are not practising would not differ from that at all. Most of them do return to the profession, whether they marry well or not well, or for whatever reason that they may have for wanting to return or not return to work. It is a friendly profession for part-time work, as I would have thought the medical profession is, but there is no evidence that the women drop out of the work force. They may have different work practices—part-time or different types of practice—but not a failure to participate in the profession.

CHAIR—Silly me, entering into the den of the philistines with a stacked committee like this of three women and one man—surely I was going to get that answer! That was meant to be funny—I had better stop while I am ahead! It is getting late in the day!

Senator KIRK—Especially when you are sitting alongside two women!

CHAIR—That is right! Is there any further information, now that we are being serious again?

Dr Strous—Not from me, but if I think of something I can post it to you, I understand.

CHAIR—I thank you very much for attending today's hearing. 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 material that you have undertaken to provide, as soon as possible. Thanks very much.

Dr Strous—Thanks.

[3.55 pm]

KAMALA BASKARAN, Mr Steven, Director, Systems Information, Best Start

MESSENGER, Mr Robert Edward, Director, Five Star Freight Systems Pty Ltd and Best Start

CHAIR—Welcome. Is there anything you would like to add to the capacity in which you appear today?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—I am a director of the company we are setting up; it is called Best Start. So we have got separate companies, and we are coming together.

CHAIR—So you are not competitors?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—Eventually I am sure we will end up hating each other, but at the moment we are working together.

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, and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we move to questions.

Mr Messenger—Thank you for the opportunity to come today to air our views. As Steven just said, we are launching a new idea that we hope will enhance migration and, in fact, look at the reasons why people depart from Australia. I came over as a business owner in 2002 to set up a small business, and my colleague came on a business skills visa and now works for one of the local councils in Melbourne. What I would like to do first is to draw your attention to a brief agenda we have prepared for today. We will talk you through it, and we will answer questions after that. I will hand over to Steven now.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—I am half Sri Lankan, so I feel it is a bit of a shame I am not a vet after the last speech!

CHAIR—I am very pleased to welcome you here. Where in Sri Lanka are you from?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—I left when I was two. I was born in Colombo. My mum is a Polish Cockney Spaniard, so a very mixed family background. As we said earlier, we are setting up a company called Best Start. We originally looked at the idea back in November 2004. We have started a number of sessions. We have had about six or seven sessions that have covered evaluations, and we have visited migration agencies, shipping agencies, employment agencies. We have had about six or seven workshops of 15 people each. We were looking at a number of ideas, and we settled on this one of trying to help migrants coming into Australia and to help alleviate the problem of migrants leaving Australia as well. We are not a migration agency by

any means. We are providing assistance to help people settle in and get the right start, and that is why we are calling ourselves Best Start.

We looked at quantifying and statistically analysing the problem. After several months of work, it turns out there are three main issues, and they come down to an emotional statement. One, a lot of people—and we have used English words, commonsense words here—said, ‘We didn’t understand or we were unsure of how to get reliable information from various sites and from other people who have undergone similar experiences.’ Two, they said: ‘We landed in Australia, we were alone and the first few days really hurt.’ That is a very common theme whether you are skilled or non-skilled or whether you were brought over by a company or came off your own bat. Three, they said: ‘We’re here; we’ve been here for awhile. We’re still not quite sure where to get reliable information from—there are so many sources.’ And the information is not really geared up to the emotional level of trying to achieve a successful migration.

As I said earlier, we started in 2004 thinking there was a single problem and a single solution to the migrant issue. We have discovered that it is a cyclic problem. We have a few ideas about why they migrated—they had a bright idea; they wanted to move to Australia; they had all sorts of information, how much it costs et cetera. We have also lifted a statement from one of the sites we came across, a government site, which said that 90,000 people arrived in Australia in 2003 and 50,000 headed back. Whether they are part of the 90,000, we are not sure, but a big percentage headed back home. After a bit of analysis, we came up with this cyclic definition of the problem. People have a bright idea, there is a financial implication or impact of coming over to Australia, they arrive and then they have to make a decision on whether or not to head back.

There are a number of areas where they fail, or what we term as a ‘failure’ of their migration. The first is that they had a bright idea. They wanted to come to Australia and for various reasons it just did not materialise. There could be insufficient information, they could not justify the risk to themselves and their family or they were not really sure what it would be like to migrate. The second point where they could fail is that they are unsure of their earning capacity compared to their home country—for example, the UK. They are not sure what skills will cross over or what training they need as regards re-education. The skills and qualifications here can be different. They are not sure of the cost of living here. The days, some 20 or 30 years ago, when Australia was a million times cheaper than everywhere else are over. It surprises a lot of people when they come over; it is not the same. I was talking to a director of Capgemini a week ago. He has been here just four months and was really surprised at how expensive Australia was compared to how it was described to him.

CHAIR—I am sure that if he went to the UK he would have got a shock too.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—Except that the earning capacity of certain skills, of certain migrants, depends on the country. There is your earning capacity, what you can do with your money, your taxation levels and all the rest. It is also about perception. When you come to a country, you have a perception of how expensive the country is. Meeting perceptions is the important thing. It is not the actual facts behind it; it is your perception.

When people arrive, they feel dislocated, displaced, isolated and homesick and they have expectations which do not materialise in the very early days. They do not have any assistance on arrival. Then there is phase 4 where, after a period of time, they just give up. It was not what

they expected, their skills did not match up and they still feel lonely. The first year is expensive in whichever country you move to. The first year is always the hardest.

We have defined the problem cycle as having four areas. We have decided that we need to understand that the problem is a cycle and then tackle the problem in each of those areas. We have said that for each phase there is a solution. In phase 1, before people come over, allow them to get and read information about experiences that other people have had so that, if they come over to Australia, they come over with a real understanding of what to expect—not based on the holiday they had several months before or on some company saying, ‘Come over and work.’ For phase 2, the financial phase, within our information pack we have other people’s experiences of how much it cost to set up, pieces of information they need to consider about setting up and earning expectations. You can compare one type of skill set to another between different countries. Once they arrive, which is when they can give up at phase 3, we give personal attention and information. We give them the ability to contact other people in a similar situation, but we also provide a number of physical services which people can request that will help them to settle in so they are not alone. For phase 4—when they have been here and give up—it is the same assistance, the same information and the same idea, but there are different types of information and services we will give, such as counselling. There are opportunities for us to offer counselling and advice to people before they give up and go home. We define the problem as a cycle, and we are packing the problem into four different areas. I will hand over to Bob.

Mr Messenger—Next year, in early 2006—probably at the end of January or early February—we are going to launch our web site, which will be called welcomeaus.com. We are trying to say everything in the header because a welcome is the best thing you can give people. Both of us really wish something like this had been around when we came over. Part of the idea has been devised from that.

As Steven said, we want to have on this site quick and easy factors to use: information, skills sets and skills matching. A very important thing is the contacts board because, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, I have heard many times when speaking to migrants that at the time they migrated they did not know anybody else who was going through the same procedure. So we are trying to say, ‘You are not alone.’ We can explain more about that later. The body of the site is 200 pages of free information which people sitting in their home country can access before they migrate. They can access the site and read up on it. There are sites out there which do this in part, but we have tried to encompass everything we could think of in this site to begin with. That is it in a nutshell.

I turn now to the measure of success. We are running from a standing start next year. We will not have many clients to begin with, but we foresee a snowball effect. We hope that success will breed success and, by the number of the clients logging on and the testimonials provided, to expand the site rapidly, add new services and add a new dimension as we go. As Steven said, the idea of this is to help people settle when they come. It is a huge, life-changing experience for everybody when they land in Australia. I think you have to go through it to actually appreciate that. So we are trying to put out a helping hand and say that we are here for them.

In addition to that, we want to be a bit more sophisticated later on. We want to try and gather information on what these people are doing, what their skills are, whether they found work in their area, whether they have had to go into other areas—intentionally or unintentionally—and

the reasons why they are leaving, which I think is very important, because from what we know already we can get a much more expanded, more valid picture of what is really happening out there. So that is our measure of success.

‘The way forward’ is the last part of our presentation. We are quite far down the track. We have the intention now that we will have an independent Best Start in 2006. We have funded it and designed it, and we are almost ready to go. The pages you can see here in this presentation are literally the first draft, which was printed off overnight for you. This is the first time anyone has ever seen it. We have got there. We are looking at all ways. We know we will work alone. There may be a way that we can work together. From your findings, you may want to enhance your migration policy internally. But we wanted to come along today and show you that this is what we are doing; maybe you can collate some good ideas from that.

Finally, the last part of our presentation is some appendices showing the basic site map of what someone logging on would see. This is not everything, but it will show you important things like the services, the contacts board and ‘Settling in’. The site gives basic information on different topics—for example, I found buying a house very hard when I came over. The site gives information on topics like ‘What is EFTPOS?’ and ‘What are the driving requirements?’ I spent weeks trying to find this information by surfing the net and going around learning it. What we are trying to do is put this to people before they even arrive and say, ‘This is what you do. This is how it happens.’

We have tried in the last part of our presentation to give you some idea of the look and feel of our web site—you can see the green and gold colouring we have used. There will be job matches, social network boards and all the other things I mentioned earlier. That is basically it. Thank you for listening.

CHAIR—Can you tell me how you are going to get this to prospective migrants to Australia?

Mr Messenger—One of the things we have thought of, off our own bat, is that it is not something we can advertise in the journalistic media but more of a bottleneck medium. So I have approached the embassies abroad. They have free distribution of a magazine called *Outlook* in all the Australian government embassies, so we would like to put ongoing advertising in that to say what we are about.

CHAIR—So in every different language, including English?

Mr Messenger—It will be, yes.

CHAIR—So if you are in China, you will have one in Chinese?

Mr Messenger—We do not know yet. We are going for the UK and Europe and the English-speaking countries like the USA and South Africa to begin with. We are going to see how that goes, aren’t we?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—They are easier targets for us to approach in the early days. We know the target markets. We both have European backgrounds, so we understand their mentality better than those of the other markets. They are easier targets for us to approach, but the way the

site is set up it is actually quite easy to translate to another language and still retain the look and feel of the site.

Another target we are having in terms of advertising and building up the site is that there are a number of companies, such as Oracle, Capgemini and IBM, who have international focus who bring over skilled migrants. Their HR departments try to do this but they have to go to various sources. We have already set up a network of service providers whom we can call. For a management fee we can advertise through those companies and take off a lot of tasks and a lot of the problems of bringing people over. The important thing is that we are purely looking at skilled migrants. We are looking at skilled, semiskilled, family based people.

CHAIR—So you are not looking at potential humanitarian migrants who might get a job when they get here?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—The humanitarian area is very difficult to tackle. You are talking about refugees, that sort of thing. The way we are advertising and the way we are enabling our information about the services to get out there tend to be difficult to access, especially for Third World countries. That is the problem. The more Westernised, sophisticated and wealthier countries have media like the internet easily accessible. Virtually everyone has it. In India and Sri Lanka, especially after the recent troubles in Sri Lanka, there just is not the access. If people do come onto our site and ask for services, we do have services geared up from a small level—very inexpensive services—to more expensive services. So we do not preclude them, but we are not specifically targeting refugees and Third World countries.

Mr Messenger—My personal feeling on that is that, with refugees, it is different from someone like me who has actually chosen to live in Australia. A refugee obviously comes to Australia and is very glad to come here. The dynamics of this is about people coming here and not letting them go back to where they came from. We felt that, with regard to the humanitarian issue, once they came they would be here and that would be that.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—You have probably heard a lot about skills sets and people's technical ability and all the rest. Being in IT, I meet some pretty senior technical specialists. We have found that the technical focus does not seem to be the problem. It is part of the problem, but in the end people stay or go based on a notional state—how successful they are. Success is not just defined in money; it is all the other factors. If you are going to base it at the emotional level—if that is how we are interpreting it—it is a lot simpler for us to interpret emotion and translate it based on the background we have. We just do not have the background in the Third World or with refugees. We would love to. The way we have set up the site is that it is very easy to expand. We just do not have the personal expertise to expand it in that area.

CHAIR—Are you aware that DIMIA is creating a web portal with a huge amount of information? I am saying this because you may wish to create a series of links, which you are probably already going to do, are you?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—We already have links to things like that. The difference is that we are actually offering services as well as information, but we will be having links to sites which have information we do not need to duplicate. We are not looking at duplication.

Senator KIRK—How is the fee structure going to work with this? I notice that you say you are going to have a service fee agreement for each migrant client that you register and then a fee payment for each migrant you manage on behalf of the government. Obviously you are hoping to have some kind of contractual arrangement with the government. Can you outline for us how that is going to work?

Mr Messenger—Certainly. Perhaps I can just take the example if we were beginning independently—what our feelings are. Someone can log onto the site and read all the information for free. If they wanted to link into the contacts board, it would cost them about \$30. As Steven has just explained, the service is a different tier of charging. We have a section where they can buy one service, three services or five. The sorts of things I am talking about here include meeting someone at the airport, which may or may not be everybody's cup of tea but it is a welcome. Another thing is short-term accommodation—how to arrange a unit for a couple with two small children before they get here.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—Rewriting your CV. CVs in this country are very different. People come over with a fantastic skills set and they just do not know how to translate that into an Australian market. It is not an expensive thing to do. For instance, it took me four months to get a CV right. My skills set, I would like to think, is very good, but it took me many months to get it right. That is a common experience for a lot of people.

Mr Messenger—I am in the shipping business, so I see a lot of people come in and go out, which gave credence to this idea of helping them on arrival in Australia with Customs and AQIS and delivery of all their goods.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—We would like to expand into some sort of counselling. You will remember the picture from our presentation where you come to the crossroads and whether you should head back or not. There is a bit of a gap, but it is very easy to say, 'Oh God, I give up.' It is very hard in that position to look at alternatives, so we want to help people. We are not trying to solve everyone's problems; we are trying to enable them to understand the problem and fix it for themselves. It sounds a bit like we are becoming a counselling service, but that is just one aspect of it.

Senator KIRK—I am more interested in the fees. Perhaps you could concentrate on the fee structure.

Mr Messenger—We are going to have flat fees for things like writing up your CV. The charge is something like \$80. Is that right?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—It depends on the back-to-back contract. In answer to your question, basically we have an independent start here. We have given a list of things which we could ask you or you could ask us for assistance with. For instance, since we are registering clients, we are going to charge clients to register. It could be that you could take over the onus for that—for example, for every client we register and provide assistance to, you would provide the fee for the client, so it becomes a free service for them, or you could actually pass clients our way and say: 'We've got people who need special attention and we're going to pass them to you'—and for a fee we will manage them. The more clients we handle, the cheaper it becomes. So we have given a graduated list. It would be wonderful if you turned around and said: 'Great. Here are 90,000

migrants. Please handle them.' We are not expecting that; we would like it if you passed on special cases where you want people to have specific or personal attention or something like that. So you will have a client or a certain category of clients that you hand over to us and we will provide a managed service for statistical information and give them information and service.

Mr Messenger—I would like to add something, which is probably what got me to this table in the first place. When I called in answer to your national newspaper advertisement, my initial comment was about how you advertise each year and go through a painstaking selection process to get migrants into Australia. When I came to Australia I was monitored, and I believe rightly so. I came here with an investment and I started a small business. I need to do everything that I have committed to do and then I can apply for Australian citizenship. I will give you an example. A tree surgeon gets off the plane and becomes an Australian postman. It is like there is an agenda for this group but no agenda for that group. One of the things we could do is take over the monitoring of people like that to make sure that the square peg goes in the square hole.

Mr KEENAN—Where is that figure of 50,000 returnees from?

Mr Messenger—That is from the Australian government web site www.immigration.gov.au. If you go to fact sheets and then to emigration, it says that 50,463 people departed in 2003.

Mr KEENAN—So that is Australians going overseas, not just people who have recently immigrated?

Mr Messenger—We have to be careful here. It is not migrants. But it said that a proportion of them had been here less than two years and a proportion had been here for less than five years. So we recognise that it is not 100 per cent migrants—out of that there is a proportion of migrants coming in. I think that what has led us to continue on is the amount of people we have known personally who have come in and gone home. From the Australian government's point of view, I believe there would be a substantial amount of money they would go through in their selection processes overseas to process people only to have them come over and then depart. Steven knows of a case where a couple stayed 72 hours.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—It was a family of five—three kids.

Mr Messenger—And I think what a waste for them in expense, and what a waste for the government.

Mr KEENAN—That seems like an extraordinary lack of patience.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—It is, but it is a very good example of people not giving up because of a lack of skill. It is because of emotional displacement. People come over with an expectation. They stay because of an expectation. In any country you have expectations. We have generally found from the people we have talked to that their decision to stay or to go is due to their expectations being met or not met. It is not often because of a job or whatever; it is just part of the whole package.

Mr KEENAN—Do you think people arriving from the UK find things particularly difficult to negotiate? If we go to the UK we find that things are extraordinarily familiar. We already know how things work because it is very similar here.

Mr Messenger—I would expect people from the UK to blend in the easiest out of most of the races coming into Australia. From personal experience, you have to get used to the basic lingo such as ‘EFTPOS’ and ‘slab’. We have different words for things.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—The more similar it is, the bigger the problem it can create. Because of my background in IT, I do a lot of contract negotiations and meet big companies. I tend to meet a lot of British people and Americans. They expect so much similarity, but they are quite shocked when the little differences are quite big for them. I know people from Sri Lanka and India. Because of their background, they expect it to be different. I was here 14 years ago, for only a year, and went back. I came back here with my wife and children four years ago. I was surprised by the change in Australia. It has taken me a few years to adjust to that.

CHAIR—Had it changed or had you changed?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—Both. You cannot get one without the other.

CHAIR—How had Australia changed in four years?

Mr Messenger—Can I interject?

Mr Kamala Baskaran—Sure.

Mr Messenger—I was living here in the eighties. You are right in saying that the UK is very expensive. On the basis of mortgages alone, you would not go there. In Australia, the cost of general things such as clothing and food has come up to the level of the UK. People have an expectation that Australia is not very expensive and they sometimes get a shock. If people like the place, they will stay. If they have to pay a bit more for their food and shopping, that is fine. I have a story on the web site which I think is fairly typical: a professional person comes to Australia for a new job—a new career. He goes to work and is fine—he is off and running. The wife has two children at high school. If you have kids at primary school, the mother meets other mothers—at pick-up and drop-off they all get together. My wife did this and made friends. After being here six weeks she said: ‘Bob. I don’t want to go home. It’s lovely here.’ But if the kids are at high school the mother does not always have that opportunity. The story goes on to say that the mother does not make friends. There is not that neighbourly over-the-fence chat attitude in Australia—you do not see many people walking the streets. So she does not meet anybody. After three or four months, she is tugging at the husband and saying, ‘I left my mother and father and I want to go home.’ In many cases the wife drives the migration home.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—We recognise that we are targeting two audiences: skilled and business migrants and families. Our web site is split into information for the skilled person and for the family. We are trying to tackle both.

CHAIR—You were going to tell me why Australia had changed for you.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—A lot of it was because of me as an individual. Around 15 years ago, Australia was a lot cheaper than the UK—the taxes were not like they are now—and my earning capacity was a lot lower. In the UK, my earning capacity rocketed and taxes went down—Thatcher, although we did not like her, did a lot for that—

Mr KEENAN—Some people liked her!

Mr Kamala Baskaran—and for one day's work I could take the family on holiday. It is a surprise. If we take the British public who come over here, I have not met a single person or family from Britain who is not shocked about the price of going on holiday in Australia.

Mr KEENAN—Really? I am surprised that people from the UK do not find it extraordinarily cheap.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—The cost of living in the UK can be expensive, although children's clothing is very cheap. But holidays and your leisure life are very cheap. You can almost draw a line in income. Once you are above a certain level of income in the UK, life starts to become quite easy, especially for skilled migrants. I mix with the IT crowd and they tend to have a significant level of skill and a high earning capacity. In the UK they tend to have a very high earning capacity, but in Australia it drops. In Australia your lifestyle has to balance your earning capacity. At the end of the day, it is not just about money; it is lifestyle mix, ambition and all the rest of it. But it is a surprise and it is very hard to convince people that a lot of people from the UK find Australia not that cheap.

Mr Messenger—I think if you compare holidays with the UK, you have got airlines like Ryanair and Buzz, and you can just jet off for £30 to Paris or Milan. A lot of people go there now for the weekend.

Mr Kamala Baskaran—It is perception. I went to India about seven years ago, to Delhi, and I thought: 'My God! This is expensive.' It was not; it was just a few dollars. But I had a perception it would cost me 50c and it cost me \$10 to sew something. Ten dollars is still cheap, but I thought it would be 50c. It is a perception as well as how much you really earn and how much it really costs.

CHAIR—I would like to wish you both well with your venture. It appears that you are finding a niche market and I hope it provides the information you are seeking. I appreciate you attending today's hearing, and 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 material you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible. Thank you very much.

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

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 4.26 pm