



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

MONDAY, 27 MARCH 2006

CANBERRA

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**

Monday, 27 March 2006

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

Members in attendance: Senators Eggleston, Kirk and Parry and Mrs Irwin and Mr Randall

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

- Investigate and report on current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration for:
 - Skills stream migrants who obtain assessment prior to migrating;
 - Families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/registration/upgrading after arrival;
 - Temporary residents who need skills assessment/recognition; and
 - Australian citizens returning after significant time overseas, with overseas qualifications.
- Consider how Australia's arrangements compare with those of other major immigration countries.
- Identify areas where Australia's procedures can be improved including in terms of:
 - Communication of processes to users
 - Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers
 - Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading (e.g. bridging courses)
 - Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers
 - Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators
 - Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications.

WITNESSES

ARTHUR, Dr Evan, Acting Group Manager, Innovation and Research Systems Group, Department of Education, Science and Training	20
BYRNE, Dr Anne, Branch Manger, Skills Analysis and Research Strategy, Department of Education, Science and Training	20
CONNELL, Ms Jenet, Group Manager, Workplace Relations Services, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.....	1
COX, Mr Gregory, Manager, International Policy and Recognition Branch, International Education Group, Department of Education, Science and Training.....	20
DONNELLY, Ms Jennifer, Assistant Director, Skilled Migration Section, Migration Branch, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.....	29
FOX, Mr James McLaren, First Assistant Secretary, Migration and Temporary Entry, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.....	29
HICKMAN, Ms Jacqueline Ann, Assistant Secretary, Delivery Innovation Branch, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs	29
JAMONTS, Mr Andy, Director, Operations, Trades Recognition Australia, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.....	1
JARVIE, Dr Wendy Katherine, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, Science and Training.....	20
KONTIS, Mr Peter, Director, Compliance, Office of Workplace Services, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.....	1
MILLS, Mr Gregory Paul, Assistant Secretary, Migration Branch, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs	29
PRESS, Ms Jane, Director, Migration Policy and Analysis Section, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	1
SPELDEWINDE, Mr Peter, Director, Skilled Migration, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.....	29
STEWART, Mr David Edward, Director, Compliance, Integrity and Offshore Students, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.....	29
THOMAS, Mr Stewart, Assistant Secretary, Workplace Programs Branch, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.....	1
ZANDERIGO, Mr Tony, Director, COAG Skills Recognition Taskforce, Department of Education, Science and Training	20

Committee met at 9.05 am

CONNELL, Ms Jenet, Group Manager, Workplace Relations Services, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

JAMONTS, Mr Andy, Director, Operations, Trades Recognition Australia, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

KONTIS, Mr Peter, Director, Compliance, Office of Workplace Services, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

PRESS, Ms Jane, Director, Migration Policy and Analysis Section, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

THOMAS, Mr Stewart, Assistant Secretary, Workplace Programs Branch, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

CHAIR (Mr Randall)—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry into overseas skills recognition, upgrading and licensing. The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has asked the committee to examine whether the current process by which migrants are assessed for entry to Australia under the skilled migration system is functioning efficiently or needs 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 a 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 representatives from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 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 understand that the witnesses have provided a supplementary document. Is it the wish of the committee that the document tabled by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations be accepted as a supplementary submission to the inquiry? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

Senator PARRY—Can I ask a point of clarification: how much does it vary from the original executive summary and submission that was placed before us? Is it substantially different?

Mr Thomas—It provides an update on the operations of TRA since the last submission was made.

Senator PARRY—Is that basically in the executive summary or is it throughout the detail as well?

Mr Thomas—It is throughout the detail, but the executive summary of course provides an outline of that.

CHAIR—Thank you, Senator Parry. Can I also express some disappointment that we received it this morning. I too have read your submission and examined it, as you can see. Now I am somewhat on the hop, you might say, in terms of the most recent information and I may be going off old information, which does not necessarily please me. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Ms Connell—I will, and hopefully it will help you in the absence of having read the supplementary submission in detail. DEWR first made a submission to the inquiry in June 2005. Since that time the committee has examined a number of issues relating to TRA's work and our role in the skilled migration process. I am pleased now to have the opportunity to respond to some of the statements made in relation to TRA and also to update the committee on our performance, particularly over this financial year. The submissions to the inquiry in June 2005 and *Hansards* of subsequent hearings in capital cities suggest that there is a need to clarify TRA's role and our procedures. It is certainly worth noting that TRA has responsibility for two streams of assessment, one international and the other domestic, and these two streams are quite separate and are governed by different acts and different business rules. TRA has made significant improvements to its operations during this and the previous financial year. It has introduced new key performance indicators, it has significantly reduced its assessment turnaround times, it has revised its assessment processes and it has improved client access and information flows to key stakeholders.

The demand for TRA has increased significantly over the past 12 months, particularly from applicants seeking skills recognition for pre-migration purposes in the trades that are on the MODL. In turn, TRA has significantly improved its own assessment turnaround times. Over 14,000 applications have been finalised to date this financial year—that is a 50 per cent increase on the same period last year. The success rate of applications has also increased by around 19.4 per cent on the previous year. The vast majority, 98.8 per cent in fact, of international applications on the MODL are being finalised within 10 working days.

TRA has the authority to set its own assessment standards and adopts a flexible approach to assessing applications from skilled tradespeople, including the recognition of prior learning. Another significant development is the new COAG initiative to develop a streamlined and robust offshore skills assessment process to Australian standards which will be put in place in five main source countries for skilled migrants in selected trades by December 2008. The overseas assessments will be conducted under the auspices of TRA by organisations with proven credentials in delivering high-quality skills assessments. There will also be parallel onshore assessments for people living in Australia who want the skills they have obtained overseas recognised, and there will be provisional licensing so that people with recognised overseas qualifications can work under supervision without delay.

In summary, the department considers that Australia's skill recognition arrangements, as outlined in the department's two submissions to this inquiry, are working well and changes and improvements made to TRA in the last 12-18 months will further enhance the services we provide to skilled migrants.

CHAIR—Thank you for that update. We are pleased that you have returned to the inquiry today. It would be an understatement to say that the evidence received before this committee has overwhelmingly been negative in relation to the performance and the operations of Trades Recognition Australia. I do not think I am on my own in saying that TRA has been described as probably one of the reasons why this inquiry was called because of TRA's inability to get the job done. If you have read the evidence to this committee, you would see that, almost universally—from state to state—government agencies, private operators, migration agents et cetera have all been quite negative in their comments about the performance and levels of competency of TRA. So it is good that you are here and that you may be able to address some of the questions that we have for you today. I will turn to some of the issues in your update. First of all, is it correct that you have had a 50 per cent increase in your business in the current financial year?

Mr Thomas—That is correct.

CHAIR—Do you have the staff to cope with that? Have you received increased financial support through your department? What are your staff numbers at the moment compared with last year or two years ago? Has your capacity been beefed up to meet your obligations to represent all the states and stakeholders?

Ms Connell—We have an increased number of assessors. I will have Mr Thomas give you the details on that. TRA is a fee-for-service arrangement and the financial support for TRA comes from its own assessment work.

CHAIR—Do you look for full cost recovery?

Ms Connell—We do. It is a fee-for-service and cost recovery service that we provide.

CHAIR—I will come back to the fee shortly. Could you give us an update on your personnel and your budget. I believe it was \$6 million last year—is that correct?

Ms Connell—I believe so.

Mr Thomas—In terms of revenue, Chair?

CHAIR—Is it \$6 million?

Mr Thomas—Somewhere around that figure. I think it was about \$5.8 million.

CHAIR—How many people work for you and where do they work?

Mr Thomas—TRA has two operations. One is based in Canberra in the DEWR national office and is principally for the assessment of international applications, and we also have an office in our state offices in Melbourne which processes domestic applications, hence the two streams. The Canberra office employs approximately 30 staff. Approximately 15 of those are assessors, with a number of support staff. Similarly, in the Melbourne office we employ approximately nine assessing staff, with an additional support resource. The staff numbers since June have increased by about 10 overall.

CHAIR—In both locations?

Mr Thomas—In both locations, yes. We currently have further recruitment action under way.

CHAIR—That goes to my point. You talk about a 50 per cent increase and you have described the total number of staff that you have. As a Western Australian member of the committee—and all members from their various states may well support me on this—I find it quite poor that you do not have an office in Perth, for example. Perth, with its huge boom in mining, resources development and construction, is sucking in skilled migrants at a record rate, and yet there is no office in Perth. I believe you took away the one position in Perth several years ago. If people wish to contact you in Perth they have to do so over the internet or by phone. Your phone hours are from two to five on Mondays and nine to 12 on Friday. Is that correct?

Mr Thomas—That is correct.

CHAIR—When you have a three-hour time difference, I can assure you, people cannot ring you. I understand that even the staff from this committee that have tried to ring the TRA office here in Canberra have had difficulty contacting you in working hours. What does the poor old skilled migrant do when he wants to contact you regarding his qualifications?

Mr Thomas—Of the two streams of assessment that TRA undertakes, one is for pre-migration purposes, and the general number of applications under that are from migrants who reside overseas. There is also domestic processing for recognition of Australian citizens for their skills.

CHAIR—Based in Melbourne.

Mr Thomas—Based in Melbourne.

CHAIR—What happens in Perth, Adelaide and, dare I say, cities in Tasmania?

Mr Thomas—There are local trades committees established in each state, and they comprise employer and employee representatives. They are the actual bodies that approve applications for domestic skills assessment. TRA's role is to provide them with administrative and secretariat support. It is actually the local trades committee that approves the issuing of Australian recognised trades certificates for domestic purposes.

CHAIR—So you divest your authority to local assessment panels.

Mr Thomas—They have that authority under the trades recognition act. The trades recognition act establishes a central trades committee, and they determine the criteria by which local trades committees approve certificates for domestic applicants.

CHAIR—Do they then have to come back to you, though, for confirmation of that certification?

Mr Thomas—TRA's role is to provide an assessment and a recommendation to the local trades committee. The local trades committee generally meet, although they do do assessments

out of session. TRA's role is to provide them with the information necessary for them to make an assessment of an individual's application.

CHAIR—Forgive me but, if I am a person in Perth wanting to get my skills recognised, how do I find out where I go?

Mr Thomas—TRA advertises through its website and through a number of media forums its operations for issuing of Australian recognised trades certificates. ARTCs have been in existence for some years now, so the establishment of ARTCs is quite well recognised within industry. In the first instance they would more than likely contact TRA either through the website or perhaps through phone contact. They would then need to complete an application form. We also operate a website email address contact line that they can provide inquiries or their details to and we respond to those.

CHAIR—This does not reflect the evidence we have received at all. The evidence we have received is that, firstly, they have difficulty contacting you and, secondly, they have difficulty in getting assessments done and turned around in a timely manner. This might be because they do not know about your operations. In fact, if the committee can correct me, please do. I understand that the outlying states have all complained that, in some form or another, they have difficulty in locating personnel in the outlying states. You are telling us it is well known; they are telling us it is not well known.

Mr Thomas—I think there have been a number of changes. We have certainly put in place a number of changes and improved our processes since the committee started its hearings. Whether the experiences that have been relayed to the committee are based on experiences prior to the work that we have undertaken, I do not know; but, in terms of the work that we have done to ensure our processes meet the needs as well as the increased demand of applications, a significant amount of work has been undertaken by TRA.

CHAIR—You have been going since 1946, haven't you?

Mr Thomas—The act has been in place since then.

CHAIR—I put it to you that, in some respects, you are operating almost in a time warp in the way that you conduct your functions. People find it very difficult to access your services. I have to say that, unless I have missed something all the way through, I did not know that this is how you do your assessments in Perth. My point, which I go back to again, is: why won't you place TRA officers in DEWR in the outlying capitals so that we do not have to operate through one of your agents, for want of a better word? Why don't you actually have dedicated officers in these cities, particularly cities in Western Australia and Queensland—and South Australia is booming as well—where they can have face-to-face contact with officers rather than somebody acting on your behalf?

Ms Connell—With due respect, there is simply no business case at the moment. We will take the point, and we will certainly take any feedback as a result of this inquiry in terms of how we may better promote the services of TRA and the contacts that we have and look at our contact hours and that sort of thing but, as Mr Thomas said, the actual local trades committees that exist within each state are the bodies that make the decisions. We merely provide an administrative

service, and it is more cost efficient to do that in a centralised fashion. In terms of turnaround time and performance—having applications approved—we are meeting all of our targets and we are exceeding targets that were set 12 months ago. As Mr Thomas said, perhaps that message is not getting through. Some of the concerns in the states may pre-date that.

Senator KIRK—Just to clarify, is it the case then that individuals are not really meant to deal with TRA directly—rather with the trades committees—

Mr Jamonts—No, that is not the case.

Senator KIRK—So individuals do deal directly with you.

Mr Thomas—TRA provides the administrative support for the LTCs. That would include all the direct contacts with applicants. Under the committee structure, TRA provides the secretariat to them, so they relay the decisions that are made by LTCs, including where LTCs regard that the skills in the individual may need some further assessment through things such as trade tests. Indeed, trade tests are conducted within the individual's home state or territory. As much as possible, we try to make the location for that as close to their place of residence as possible. Someone in Western Australia, for example, may be asked to attend a trade test in Perth. In terms of the completeness of the assessment process, the paper assessment is done through the office in Melbourne. That may be supplemented through interviews that are conducted over the phone. But, where a trade test is required, an appointment is established for the individual within their home state or territory as much as possible, within the confines of the trade. Again, I think it is critical to point out that there are two types of skill assessment. One is the overseas pre-migration skill assessment, and the other is the domestic one.

CHAIR—We will get onto the overseas one shortly—

Senator KIRK—I agree with you, Chair. I did not distinguish between the two processes either during the evidence. I do not think that I fully appreciated either that there were local committees. I do not know whether I misunderstood or if that is just the evidence that has been presented. It is certainly the perception out there in the community that there is just the one body.

CHAIR—Do you really think that it is sufficient to have your telephone inquiry line operating from 2 pm to 5 pm on Mondays and 9 am to 12 pm on Fridays? People have given evidence that, as a result of this, they can wait and be on hold for up to 30 minutes to get service through your phone lines.

Mr Jamonts—That inquiry line relates to the international application stream of applicants. In response to that sort of commentary and feedback we have been conducting analyses of applicants who have got through to test to see how long they may have been waiting. We have found that the majority of applicants have waited only a short time. The minority of applicants on occasion have waited a longer time. Those hours are flexible inasmuch as they relate to resource availability to enable our business support unit to deal with applications that come in—

CHAIR—‘Resource availability’ means you are suggesting that you are underresourced.

Mr Jamonts—No, I am saying that to deal with the application flows that come through we have to manage our time to ensure that we provide the service to the worldwide public as well as the domestic public. The times are set at this stage but we are looking to review that in the future and indeed to open up the hours—

CHAIR—You are saying that those phone hours are the hours for your international office in Canberra?

Mr Jamonts—That is correct.

CHAIR—How do you go if you are ringing in from overseas? There are time differences and you have to make sure that people at an overseas post know they can only get Canberra on Mondays from 2 pm to 5 pm and on Fridays from 9 am till 12 pm. Some poor person in Beijing wanting to ring your office in Canberra has to make sure that they get the daylight saving hours right so they can ring you and sometimes, as we have heard in evidence, they can spend 30 minutes on hold.

Mr Jamonts—That could be the case on occasions but we do have other portals available.

Ms Connell—We have a message system on at all times. Of course we cannot cover a 24-hour service, but we do have message service so that if people call at any time in the day—

Senator EGGLESTON—Why can't you cover 24 hours?

Ms Connell—We do, through message bank. Anyone can call in any time of the day and it will go to message bank. It will be responded to as soon as we receive a message or within working hours. Those open hours are when we can take calls directly but if anyone calls outside those hours, even outside our business hours, they will be captured through the message service and we will contact them directly.

Mrs IRWIN—It must be very frustrating for someone who is applying from overseas who wants to speak to a person in Australia just to get a recorded message. We have a skills shortage in Australia and we need more skilled migrants. If you get a recorded message saying, 'Please leave your name and telephone number and what your inquiry is about,' it must be frustrating. The person might be in a work situation in their own homeland and they might get a phone call back from Australia when they are not there.

Ms Connell—The vast majority of our international applicants have also come through our migration agents who are well aware of our services. They are the main avenue by which people come. I do not believe that we have had any complaints—

Mrs IRWIN—Are they migration agents in our overseas posts or officials in Australia?

Ms Connell—Within Australia. I do not believe that we have had any complaints from overseas callers—

Mr Jamonts—Not to me directly.

Ms Connell—on our call back service.

CHAIR—We have had evidence that when they left messages on your answering machines you did not get back to them.

Mr Thomas—Whether there are specific cases, I cannot tell you, but certainly we take live calls between those times and outside of those times. If people ring from overseas and leave a message, we endeavour to get back to them at the first available opportunity. We have an email address at which people can submit questions or request information, and of course we respond to those inquiries as soon as we can. That is the international side of our operations. As for the domestic side of our operations, we generally take the calls live but if someone is unable to take a call it goes to an answering machine and we respond to that call as soon as can.

CHAIR—The Western Australian Skills Advisory Board told us that, as part of the assessment practice, you attempt to contact nominated phone numbers only three times within working hours and if there is no response then the application is rejected.

Mr Jamonts—That is not necessarily the case. The application is then considered on the merits of all the information to hand. It may not necessarily result in a rejection.

CHAIR—They are saying that because you could not get back to them after having left a message three times they could not get their application up and that three times seems to be a cut-off point. Anyway, I will pass the questioning to other members.

Mrs IRWIN—I am looking at the second briefing paper that you have given us. You have stated that TRA has received 12,374 international applications. Do you have the figure for the number of applications onshore Australia-wide?

Mr Thomas—Domestic applications?

Mrs IRWIN—Yes. So that 12,374 is correct for international applications?

Mr Thomas—They are for pre-migration skills assessment, yes.

Mrs IRWIN—What is the figure for domestic applications?

Mr Thomas—It is 905.

Mrs IRWIN—Right, I see it here.

Mr Thomas—That is to 28 February.

Mrs IRWIN—Let us talk about both of them, international and domestic. How many have been approved?

Ms Connell—In this financial year?

Mrs IRWIN—Yes.

Mr Thomas—Some 82.6 per cent of international applications have been approved. We have not got a figure for domestic ones.

CHAIR—Can you take that on notice and get that, please?

Mr Thomas—Certainly.

Mrs IRWIN—In answer to a question that the chair asked earlier about trade tests, you talked about the Western Australian situation. How many people out of the 905 domestic applicants are called in to do a trade test? The reason I am asking this is that a lot of people out there are really frustrated—\$500 is a lot of money to find, then they have to put in the application, their English skills are very mild and they are finding it hard to put pen to paper although they feel they have the qualifications to pass the trade test. I am curious to find out how many of the 905 attended a trade test.

Mr Thomas—We would have to take that one on notice as well. You mentioned \$500 in fees. For domestic applicants there is a fee of \$300 to undertake a domestic assessment. A successful assessment results in an ARTC. If required to undertake a trade test, the applicant pays \$270. The rest is subsidised.

Mrs IRWIN—Can they do that trade test in the state that they are living in?

Mr Thomas—We endeavour to arrange the trade test as close as possible to their residence.

CHAIR—After they have paid their fee, how quickly can you arrange that test? What is the turnaround time?

Mr Jamonts—That is dependent on the timing during the year, especially if the committee meets in December and the trade test providers are closed over Christmas. The test is arranged at the first available opportunity when those providers are open in the new year.

CHAIR—You have said that your fees are under review. Can you give us an update?

Ms Connell—Not as yet. We are preparing a paper to go to our management board in the next couple of weeks. Pending their approval, the review of the fees might be effected. We are constantly reviewing them. We are a cost recovery service. Given the improvements to our assessment processes, we are looking at streamlining our fee structures.

CHAIR—You mentioned cost recovery. Do you aim to make a profit?

Ms Connell—That is not the aim.

CHAIR—International applicants were charged \$300 for a standard application and \$500 for a priority application. I would have thought that, with some exceptions, all international applications are priority applications in the current climate, so I would imagine that most of them are paying \$500.

Mr Thomas—The government has established priority for occupations on the Migration Occupations in Demand List, or MODL, and we certainly aim to process those applications as a priority. If an individual provides a priority fee, then TRA processes those applications within their category. There are many reasons why someone might include a priority fee. One reason of which I am aware is that the age of an applicant may have an impact on the speed with which their visa application is processed.

CHAIR—I will make the point again. I believe that, in the current climate, all applicants would consider themselves as priority applications because they want a quick turnaround. That is one of the criticisms. I would not mind knowing, if you could give me the feedback, how many international and domestic people pay \$500 and how many pay \$300—the percentages and the raw numbers.

Mrs IRWIN—The committee has heard at several hearings that employers prefer local experience and that many people are doing jobs outside their occupation. Has the department looked at any work experience programs?

CHAIR—I think Mrs Irwin is talking about competency based assessment.

Mrs IRWIN—We are getting feedback that while some people might be recognised as having a trade overseas and their qualifications are most likely recognised here in Australia they are finding it difficult to get jobs because employers would like them to have some kind of work experience. These people are getting very frustrated because they want to work in their trade but they are finding it hard to do work experience. Has the department been looking at that?

Ms Connell—Perhaps through our Employment colleagues, but it is beyond the purview of TRA, which is very much for international applicants and pre-migration assessments. Once they obtain migration and are in the country, the sorts of skills they develop and the opportunities for them to get into work fall outside the responsibilities of TRA. But I know that through COAG and DEST there are a number of initiatives in place to try and encourage people back into the workforce whether they are overseas migrants or welfare to workers.

Ms Press—There are two sides to work experience. One is that, as a condition of visa grant under most of the general skilled migration arrangements, they are required to have relevant recent work experience, which is meant to increase their employment prospects when they come to Australia. Outside of that, I am not really aware of any specific work experience program we manage which targets anyone.

Mrs IRWIN—That might be something the department wants to have a look at.

CHAIR—Mrs Irwin is referring to the evidence that, for competency based assessments, quite often some states are providing top-up courses so that they can be deemed more competent. So how do you involve yourself in competency based assessments and what sorts of considerations do you give if people need a little extra help?

Mr Jamonts—We are currently participating with the Western Australian government, through the Overseas Qualifications Unit, in a trial in relation to those applicants who were initially unsuccessful through our processes. Subject to their approval they willingly participate

in having their shortcomings analysed with a view to identifying the gaps. As I understand it, that trial then invites those individuals to do courses to fill those gaps. When they have satisfied the requirements of those gaps, they are re-presented to us with a view to our committee reconsidering their application for recognition. We work very closely with the overseas qualifications units around Australia and we have been an active participant in this trial, which I understand is coming to a conclusion very shortly.

CHAIR—So the answer to Mrs Irwin's question is that you do rely somewhat on competency based testing?

Mr Jamonts—Yes. The trade tests, as provided nationally, are competency based.

Senator PARRY—Coming back to income, you indicated that \$5.8 million, I think, was your income for last financial year.

Mr Thomas—Revenue earned.

Senator PARRY—Revenue earned. And that is basically through fee charges, or is there any other source of revenue?

Mr Thomas—Through application fee charges.

Senator PARRY—That is the total source of income?

CHAIR—You do not have your own budget? DEWR does not provide you with any other—

Senator PARRY—No operating grant?

Ms Connell—There is a departmental budget that is allocated. The revenue that comes from TRA applications goes into the departmental budget and is considered part of the overall budget, so it is not an exact like-for-like match. So we do have a departmental allocation.

Senator PARRY—But basically operational requirements rely upon application fees? And, as you said, it is fee-for-service cost recovery.

Ms Connell—The objective is to be a fee-for-service cost recovery service and has been since its inception.

Senator PARRY—Okay. You indicated a 50 per cent increase in applications had occurred and then you indicated there was an increase of 10 staff—full-time equivalents, I assume. Which occurred first, the 50 per cent increase in applications or the staff increase?

Mr Thomas—The staffing increase has been occurring since June 2005. Of course, we have had some turnover in that time, so that increase of 10 is actually from baseline numbers.

Senator PARRY—What I am trying to determine, though, is whether you have had an increase in applications because you have more staff or whether you had an increase in applications and then required more staff.

Ms Connell—There was an increase in applications and we were staffing up to meet that need. That growth has continued. So we try to ensure that the number of assessors we have on hand matches the demand for our services. It is not an exact science. As Mr Thomas said, we are recruiting more people now. It is a bit hard to tell whether this number of applications is a trend or whether it is a bit of a spike. Mr Jamonts has been overseas on a number of missions with DIMA trying to promote TRA and the skilled migration processes to Australia; that has created an increase in our applications. Again, determining whether that is a sudden increase or a trend is something that we continually have to assess.

Senator PARRY—So it would be a fair comment then that the staffing increase occurred basically as a result of the increase in applications?

Ms Connell—To try to meet the application increase; that is correct.

Senator PARRY—Moving on to the DEWR original submission, page 13, attachment A, there is a table there of application trends. Is that table still relevant? Even though you have provided a fresh submission which does not include that table, is that table still accurate?

Mr Thomas—The figures contained in that table are still accurate.

Senator PARRY—And, from what we have deduced from evidence so far this morning, for the 2005-06 figures, 12,374 would be the number of applications year to date or to the end of February—28 February?

Ms Connell—Correct.

Mr Thomas—They were international ones to the end of February.

Senator PARRY—Yes. And then domestic applications, 905 to the end of February—is that correct? Because that would go on the end of that table if we logically extended it.

Mr Thomas—So we have a combined total of 13,279.

Senator PARRY—Thank you, yes. So year to date we are tracking fairly well, in the sense that you are expecting a fairly high volume by the end of this financial year. The 82.6 per cent I think you indicated was the success rate for the 12,374 international applications.

Mr Thomas—Yes.

Senator PARRY—And you were going to provide on notice—

Mr Thomas—The success rate for the domestic applications.

Senator PARRY—Good. Chair, if I could ask that when that information is provided maybe that table could be updated and we could see it on the extension of that table. That would help us when we see that again. With that break-up of the table, do you have a geographical analysis of the domestic and international applications—although for international it would be hard to work out what domicile area of Australia they would apply to, but certainly for domestic?

Mr Thomas—We could provide a breakdown of the domestic application numbers.

Senator PARRY—That would be good. If that could be in table form also, that would be of great assistance. Maybe you could even go back a few years, if that is convenient, to look at geographical distribution. The final area I want to discuss is the supervision of the trades assessment committees locally. Is that a responsibility of TRA? Do you have to supervise those committees to establish that they are operating correctly, or are they a state government jurisdiction issue? How does that work?

Mr Thomas—The local trades committees are established under the Tradesmen's Rights Regulation Act.

Senator PARRY—Federal legislation.

Mr Thomas—That is right. The central trades committees play a key role in determining the criteria. They are established in their own right.

Senator PARRY—Who supervises them? Who determines whether they are operating effectively, whether they are operating in a timely fashion? Who does that?

CHAIR—Who assesses the assessors?

Mr Thomas—They are established under that act. They are responsible for their own performance.

Senator PARRY—If they were not operating in a timely way, would you say something to them? Would you say, 'This application has taken two months to get to us from the day of the assessment'?

Mr Thomas—We have been working closely with the local trades committees to try and improve the processing time.

Senator PARRY—That could be an issue, then, in the delay factor, and the complaint factor is that the local trades assessment committees are not operating effectively.

Mr Thomas—Generally they meet approximately once a month. In terms of presenting a case load to them, because they meet once a month, that is when we are able to present to them applications for domestic assessment. We can approach them out of session, but, again, it is the local trades committee that makes a decision on whether to accept someone for an Australian recognised trade certificate.

Senator PARRY—And that is Australia-wide—every state and territory would have their own ones?

Mr Thomas—They have their own local trades committees, yes.

Senator PARRY—And they all meet monthly—there is no variation to that?

Mr Thomas—The local trades committees are based around the electrical and metal trades. So it is not a single committee within each state. There are three or four committees based around electrical and metal. They generally meet at the same time. We also endeavour to undertake assessments out of session, via providing them with paperwork and recommendations of the assessment, in order to ensure that applications are processed in a more timely manner.

Senator PARRY—Are the international applications allocated, if it were required to have that assessment process, to a local trades committee?

Mr Thomas—The international assessment is completely separate to the domestic process, although, in establishing the criteria that we use, we have had regard to the criteria that central trades committees established for domestic assessment. But the international process is done under the Migration Regulations, in which TRA has been nominated an assessor. As part of that, TRA can establish its own criteria, which it has done through the UAC. We undertake assessments based on that.

Senator PARRY—Finally, on page 3 of the new submission that was handed in this morning, under ‘Executive summary’—and it was read out this morning, too, by Ms Connell—the final sentence says that some information to the committee was based on outdated information. Can you highlight what the outdated information was?

Mr Thomas—From our reading of the *Hansard* transcripts, our take is that some of the information that has been provided has been based on applications and assessment processes that were in place pretty much before we started to really re-engineer and look at our processes, prior to June 2005. Since June 2005 we have made significant progress on not only our processing but also our performance. When we talk about the number of international applications received, the number of staff we have and our performance, we are currently tracking at roughly 1,500 international applications received a month, which we have said is at least a 50 per cent increase on the same time last year.

We introduced a performance indicator on 1 January. That provides for 95 per cent of international MODL applications assessed within 10 working days. We are achieving that. We have done so for both January and February. Our performance towards the end of 2005, under the previous performance indicators, was a significant improvement—and we were achieving those performance indicators towards the end of last year as well. So we have done a lot of work to ensure that our processes keep pace with the applications we are receiving and also with the demands put on TRA as part of its key role within the skilled migration program.

Senator PARRY—So that statement basically refers to process and procedure of operational changes more than anything else?

Mr Thomas—Yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—As a Western Australian, I am very conscious of our skills shortage, especially as it applies to the Pilbara mining industry and the great developments going on up there. I see in your submission at 4.4 that you deal with international applications and you talk about having streamlined the process. We have heard a bit about that today regarding your telephone service. Paragraph 44 of your submission states:

One area for possible improvement is the way in which skills recognition and statutory licensing arrangements interact.

You also say that your trade skills assessment in the international stream is made for migration purposes only and that state licensing bodies will make separate assessments. In evidence we heard in Perth, that was quite a big hold-up point: the fact that there were two levels of assessment. Is that issue being addressed, so that there is some sort of synergy between your assessment and the state licensing bodies to facilitate quicker assessment?

Ms Connell—That is a major initiative being undertaken by COAG, which we are heavily involved in. They have separate working groups in place to review what they call mutual recognition of state licensing to align it with our assessment processes. We mentioned our overseas offices. We are working toward having five overseas offices in 2008. The object of those will be that there will be a one-stop assessment shop which will go to the source of the skills.

CHAIR—So you will have five overseas assessment offices?

Ms Connell—Correct.

CHAIR—Where will they be located?

Mr Thomas—We will be establishing overseas assessing authorities in India, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Sri Lanka and South Korea.

Ms Connell—They will be the initial offices. They have been based on the source of the skills that are in the highest demand here in Australia. As one-stop assessment centres, they will be assessing applicants for their skills and also with a view to being job ready when they arrive in Australia so that they do not have to go through that second process.

CHAIR—That is excellent.

Mrs IRWIN—So they will be able to do a trade test overseas?

Ms Connell—Correct.

Mr Thomas—Can I add that the success of the establishment of overseas assessing authorities and overseas skilled migration is very much dependent on mutual recognition, which is a separate but very much related initiative being undertaken through the auspices of COAG. All the states and territories will be playing a role. Initially, there will be six occupations within those five countries, gradually extending over time.

Senator EGGLESTON—That sounds very good. What is the time line there? When will we see this?

Mr Thomas—The establishment of the overseas assessing authorities in the five countries for the six priority trades is to be by 1 July 2007.

CHAIR—That is too far away. We have an absolute crisis in skills in this country and you are talking about 2007.

Mr Thomas—This is a timetable or time frame that has been agreed by COAG.

CHAIR—COAG might be one entity; we are another. I am saying to you as a representative based in an electorate in Western Australia that the feedback that I would receive is that it is too far away. That is the point I make.

Senator EGGLESTON—That is an interesting point. I understand your administrative requirements might take a while but Mr Randall is correct. There is a huge demand now. I notice you do not include the Philippines. We have Filipino workers working in shipbuilding in Cockburn Sound at the moment. They are much closer, and one would have thought that some Asian countries like Singapore and Indonesia might also be sources of skilled migrants. Is there no demand to put some sort of assessment centre there?

Ms Connell—It is our understanding that these five centres will be the first and, based on their success, it will be extended beyond that. The decision for which countries was a combination of where the skills are available, the MODL and what is in demand here in Australia. The decision was made by COAG.

Mrs IRWIN—How many staff are you having in each overseas assessment centre?

Ms Connell—We have not actually got to the detail of how many in each office but there will certainly be sufficient numbers to process the applications in tight time frames, do the assessments and any of the skills testing that is required all in a one-stop arrangement.

Mr Thomas—TRA's role in that process is to establish the offshore assessment authorities and then undertake a monitoring and auditing role of the performance of those assessing authorities. We are still working through how we might best achieve that. It is our expectation that it might be conducted through an open tender process.

Mrs IRWIN—Have you been given any indication as to how many applications you are expecting from those five countries?

Mr Thomas—Those five countries have been historically the countries where the greatest number of international applications have been received.

Mrs IRWIN—What trades are you looking at from those countries?

CHAIR—There is a long list. There are about 170 different trades.

Mrs IRWIN—You can take that on notice.

Mr Thomas—I have them here somewhere. There are electricians, plumbers, motor mechanics, refrigeration and air conditioning mechanics, carpenters and joiners and bricklayers.

Senator PARRY—When did you start to implement this program?

Mr Thomas—On 10 February this year.

Senator KIRK—Has there been a budget allocation made as yet in relation to setting up the five-country program?

Mr Thomas—The cost will be subject to the next financial year's budgetary process.

Senator KIRK—So for this budget?

Mr Thomas—Yes.

Senator KIRK—How are you able to make any plans if you do not know? You must have some idea as to the amount of money that is going to be allocated.

Mr Thomas—We have fed into the costings of it. That will be subject to the budget process. We have looked at the costs of establishing offshore assessment authorities and TRA's role in that which is, once established, to prominently be an auditing and monitoring body of those to ensure that the assessments are done to Australian standards within time frames that we will establish with those assessing authorities.

Senator KIRK—Will that be monitored and audited from here?

Mr Thomas—It will be monitored and audited from here in combination with cooperation from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. We will undertake field trips and they will be supplemented by actual on the ground activity through the department.

Senator KIRK—I have one more question in relation to the mutual recognition initiative by COAG. I understand there have been pilot exercises that have been undertaken already in relation to that. Is that correct?

Ms Connell—I am not aware of any pilots on mutual recognition. I could not comment.

Mrs IRWIN—I think you mentioned those at the last hearing.

Senator KIRK—That is what I thought. They were pilot exercises to bring state licensing requirements and trial requirements closer together. I understand you mentioned that at the last hearing—maybe I am referring to a different pilot exercise.

CHAIR—Could you take that on notice.

Ms Connell—We will take that on notice, thank you.

CHAIR—We are almost out of time. I want to follow up on two more issues and then the rest of the questions may come as questions on notice, if you do not mind, to satisfy our great raft of queries. In your submission you mentioned that there had been an increase in occupations TRA assessed beyond the electrical and metal trades, for example, to include hospitality, building and construction, horticultural and hairdressing. You said:

The expansion of trades covered by the TRR Act could unify the occupations to be assessed for migration purposes under the one regulatory vehicle.

Has there been any progress in this regard? Has this list of trades assessed by TRA expanded since we last spoke to you to include these new areas?

Mr Jamonts—We are still to assess the same number of occupations. At this stage there has not been any other progress to go into the establishment of a jurisdiction in relation to the other industries.

CHAIR—When is that likely to happen? If not, why not?

Ms Connell—The primary focus, certainly in the short term, will be aligned very much to the MODL, the list of the occupations that are deemed to be in demand across the country.

CHAIR—But the MODL is growing as well.

Ms Connell—As the MODL grows then the TRA requirement to meet the 10 working day time frame to process those applications will also grow. As the MODL changes or increases then we will adapt our process to keep up with that.

Mr Jamonts—I think that initiative was proposed under the umbrella of dealing with domestic applicants in those industries. The only vehicle through which we can deal with domestic applicants is the TRR Act, and that is in traditional occupations. State based recognition authorities and the AQTF deal with those other industries and the state based network deals with those occupations nationally.

CHAIR—In your supplementary submission to this inquiry you mentioned TRA accredited overseas organisations or individuals. I am not asking you in the last few moments we have to give us details of that, but could you take on notice the sorts of people you are dealing with, why you choose them, what sorts of fees they require from you, and the success or otherwise of those individuals or organisations with proven records in terms of assessment of overseas applicants?

Mr Thomas—If I understand the question correctly, that goes to the initiatives that we will be implementing as part of the COAG offshore skills recognition—

CHAIR—No, it says here, ‘Overseas assessments will be conducted under the auspices of TRA or accredited organisations or individuals with a proven record in delivering high-quality skills assessments.’

Ms Connell—That is correct. That is part of the COAG initiative, which kicks off for us in July 2007.

CHAIR—We would not mind knowing basically who you are going to use and how much you are going to pay them.

Ms Connell—The work has not commenced on that.

CHAIR—You must have some idea about the sort of people you will use and, if you are in negotiations with them, what they charge et cetera.

Ms Connell—That work has not commenced as yet, and that is work for next financial year with a view to having those in place by December 2008.

CHAIR—I can assure you that one of the committee's recommendations will be that you bring your time frames forward. So you might want to get on with that sooner rather than later. I can assure you we will be impressing that upon the ministers involved.

Finally, we have heard from VETASSESS that they are sometimes commissioned by TRA to process a number of applications to clear the backlog. From evidence, we have heard that VETASSESS seem to be a popular organisation and get the job done. Do you think VETASSESS could take over your responsibilities and do them far more efficiently?

Mr Thomas—VETASSESS do not undertake assessment of applications on behalf of TRA. As I understand it—

CHAIR—That is the evidence we received. You commission them to deal with your backlog.

Ms Connell—That is not correct, Chair.

Mr Jamonts—No, that is not correct. We commission VETASSESS as and when required to assist us in carrying out non-credential assessments for AQF applicants in certain occupations—which is the equivalent of a trade test.

CHAIR—Thank you. We need to conclude; however, I will say again: I appreciate your coming before us today. There are still many outstanding questions and concerns, and this may be reflected in our report. Your answers to some of our questions on notice may help. Thank you for attending today's hearing. I would be grateful if you could send the secretariat any individual material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible. As there are some members of the committee who are not able to be present today, the secretariat may also send you some additional questions in writing that we would appreciate your answering.

[10.05 am]

ARTHUR, Dr Evan, Acting Group Manager, Innovation and Research Systems Group, Department of Education, Science and Training

BYRNE, Dr Anne, Branch Manger, Skills Analysis and Research Strategy, Department of Education, Science and Training

COX, Mr Gregory, Manager, International Policy and Recognition Branch, International Education Group, Department of Education, Science and Training

JARVIE, Dr Wendy Katherine, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, Science and Training

ZANDERIGO, Mr Tony, Director, COAG Skills Recognition Taskforce, Department of Education, Science and Training

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. The committee has received your submission and it has been authorised for publication. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions. Do you have one?

Dr Jarvie—Yes, we do. It is a very short one, because I know we have limited time. We welcome the opportunity to talk to you at the hearing today. In our submission in July 2005, we focused on the department's role in approving assessing authorities, which assess the skills of professionals and provide a qualification recognition service. I want to emphasise that our role is mainly in the area of professional recognition, particularly our role around assessing authorities and our qualification recognition services.

In our submission, we emphasised that we thought there were some areas where our procedures could be improved and, in particular, we talked about the communication of processes to users and the development of the web portal, which DIMA is now undertaking. We thought it was very important that migrants have access to good information about how to get their qualifications recognised.

We also drew attention to the efficiency of processes and the elimination of barriers—it was very important that we improved that area—and to the achievement of greater consistency and recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing and, thus, the harmonising of licensing and training.

Since July 2005, when we put in our submission, quite a lot of things have happened—in particular, DEST has been involved with the significant reforms in this area that have been agreed to by COAG. In terms of the COAG processes—you have already talked to DEWR, who appeared before you today—on 10 February, COAG reached agreement on a package of

measures designed to underpin a new, genuinely national approach to training and skills recognition and to alleviating skills shortages. Two important decisions were made there. The first one was about more effective mutual recognition arrangements across states and territories for electricians, plumbers, motor mechanics, refrigeration and airconditioning mechanics, carpenters and joiners and bricklayers by June 2007 and for all licence occupations by December 2008.

The second one was about how to make it easier for migrants with skills to Australian standards to work as soon as they reached Australia, in that we have a new streamlined and robust offshore skills assessment process that we put in place in the five main source countries and that is to be mirrored by a parallel onshore process. The other thing—

CHAIR—Before you continue, can you tell us the main five source countries?

Dr Jarvie—The five main countries are India, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Sri Lanka and South Korea. We have a document here of some three pages that we are happy to table, if that will help the committee with its deliberations.

CHAIR—For the sake of time, we would appreciate that.

Dr Jarvie—Rather than going through it in detail, we thought that would be better. The last thing I want to mention is that there is also some progress on mutual recognition agreements. The APEC architecture register, which we mentioned in our submission, has been established. It was established on 19 September 2005. It applies to all 21 member countries of APEC to help enable architects to work in the various APEC countries.

Senator PARRY—On page 20 of your submission, at attachment A, you have set out the threshold criteria for bodies applying to be assessing authorities. Can you explain how you monitor this once a body has been given the right to be an assessing body? Do you monitor timeliness and effectiveness? What is the ongoing role?

Dr Jarvie—We do some monitoring of the fees charged and we monitor their websites. I do not have details in front of me of the ongoing monitoring that we do. Greg, are you in a position to talk that?

Mr Cox—I could provide the committee with information on notice, if that would be suitable, on the ongoing nature of our interaction with the assessing authorities once they are actually approved and on the monitoring compliance regime that we have with them.

Senator PARRY—How would you know if an assessing authority was not working effectively?

Mr Cox—We are in reasonably good contact with the assessing authorities, and we also receive feedback from people using those assessing authorities for immigration purposes.

Senator PARRY—Have you had any complaints about assessing authorities in recent years?

Mr Cox—I would have to check that for you.

Senator PARRY—What about issues with other agencies—TRA, for example? Has TRA indicated that there is an issue with assessing authorities being slow, being extra efficient or not being efficient? Do you have any communication on that basis?

Mr Cox—I am not personally aware of any, but I can take that up for you.

CHAIR—It would be as obvious as the nose on your face, if you have read the *Hansard* on this, that TRA has been outlined as being, particularly until last year, one of the reasons why this inquiry may well have been called. If you are working with these agencies, we would like to know if you have been aware of their inadequacies, for want of a better phrase. Evidence given to this inquiry throughout the length and breadth of this nation has been about the inadequacy of the services provided by TRA.

Dr Jarvie—Are you aware, though, that we deal with professional assessing authorities, that that is our role?

CHAIR—But even so, you have synergy with the other organisations, don't you?

Dr Jarvie—We do not deal with TRA in that way, but we do deal with the professional assessing authorities. Our role is clearly with the professions.

Senator PARRY—But your attachment A clearly indicates that your department undertakes some sort of monitoring process of the quality and effectiveness of the assessing bodies. Do you have a comment about the process? Do you believe when the assessment is undertaken by a professional body that you have the interaction within the supervisory role, if I can use that term, and that that process then continues through other departmental lines before an assessment is finally given? Does it come back to you or does it go back to another agency before the assessment is given? Do you think it is cumbersome, do you think it is effective and do you think the process is working?

Dr Jarvie—All I can go on is the fact that it has been going on quite quietly amongst the professions for many years. Many of these assessments used to be done within our department. A decision was taken, I think in the mid-1990s, to devolve it to professional assessing authorities to improve the quality and to have the people with the expertise undertake it. That process has been gradually going on over a number of years, and now professional assessing authorities do it for all bodies—except teaching, which we still do. But we are in the process of looking at that and handing that over too. We think that, so far, this model has worked for the professions. It appears to have worked quite well from our perspective, but we will take it on notice to give you a bit more information about that.

Senator PARRY—Does every single individual assessment come through your department first?

Dr Jarvie—No.

Senator PARRY—So where is the first point of contact for someone who is seeking an assessment?

Dr Jarvie—If an individual is seeking it, they—

Mr Zanderigo—With the professional body concerned.

Mr Cox—Yes, that is right.

Senator PARRY—So what is your involvement with the individual? Nothing at all?

Mr Zanderigo—On occasion, they might write to us to seek clarification about processes.

Senator PARRY—So, basically, you would see a group of statistics appear at the end of a month or a reporting period indicating how many assessments have taken place, their nature and the pass and fail rate?

Mr Zanderigo—I think we have been receiving those on a six-monthly basis. We can ask that professional bodies—

Dr Jarvie—But we will take on notice the details of monitoring and what information we get.

Senator PARRY—Okay.

Mrs IRWIN—On page 18 of your submission at point No. 5, we have ‘Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications’. Can you tell us how the recognition of prior learning, RPL, might improve Australia’s overseas skills recognition arrangements?

Dr Jarvie—More generally within Australia I think everyone is interested in looking at how you can more effectively assess people’s existing competencies and therefore minimise the amount of extra training they need to get an Australian qualification. If you can mirror that with overseas migrants then obviously you can again minimise the amount of additional training they might need to come up to Australian standards. So RPL is a very important aspect of streamlining recognition. That is the easy part. Saying how you actually do it is more complicated.

Mrs IRWIN—Okay, tell us the hard part.

Dr Jarvie—I think how you do it is more complicated! I might just have to see whether any of my colleagues can assist me in this area; otherwise I will take it on notice as to how we can expand that for you. I know that many countries are looking at RPL, how you can improve it and how you can make it more useful. Indeed, under the AQF, every registered training organisation in Australia is supposed to be doing that prior to training commencing—looking at individuals’ experience in order to maximise recognition of prior learning. So it is a very important area.

CHAIR—So are you going to take it on notice, or is someone going to help you?

Mr Cox—It is really a matter for BTE.

Dr Jarvie—Our BTE group?

Mr Cox—Yes, so we would have to get advice from them—

Dr Jarvie—So I do not have the right person with me here.

Mr Cox—That is, as it relates to training packages.

Mrs IRWIN—Mr Cox, could you take that on notice and just get the right authority to answer that question.

Mr Cox—Yes.

Mrs IRWIN—Thank you very much.

Senator KIRK—With the assessment bodies and their processing time frames, do you do any sort of monitoring or auditing of how quickly or otherwise applications by persons to these professional bodies are processed?

Mr Cox—We would know from the statistics provided, which Mr Zanderigo mentioned before, which bodies were turning around assessments quickly and which were turning them around less quickly, if you like, yes.

Senator KIRK—Is there any sort of intervention by DEST if it looks like there is a problem in a particular professional body—in other words, if, for example, the processing is very slow: like the physios, apparently. I just wonder whether or not DEST has any role in that.

Mr Cox—We do not have any legislative power to intervene in a regulatory sense, but it would be a matter of ongoing communication with that particular authority.

Senator KIRK—What does that mean?

Mr Cox—Essentially it is a case of us talking to them and saying, ‘Look, from the information you are providing, your assessment turnaround is quite slow compared to other authorities,’ and asking what rectification measures they will take in regard to it.

CHAIR—Can I intervene there, Senator Kirk? We took evidence about physiotherapists. You may have seen some of the evidence about the difficulty with the pass marks and so on. It was put to us that it was one difficult year where everyone failed—that it seemed to be a bad batch, to use a colloquial term. Are you aware of those sorts of things with overseas people? For example, I have a constituent whose visa I have had to get extended again so that they can stay in Australia to sit this rather difficult exam, at great expense. Are you aware of some of the difficulties with these professions, like the physiotherapists? If you are, what do you do about it?

Mr Zanderigo—Could I provide some clarification. Part of the process that we have been talking about is for migration skill assessments. The role that we delegate to professional bodies is in relation to their providing assessments under the Migration Act which allow people to apply for a visa. Subsequently, on occasion, they need to complete further assessment processes that are about being a member of the profession itself as distinct from passing migration processes.

DEST has no role in relation to the conduct by the professions of their requirements to be a member.

CHAIR—But you would want to be aware, wouldn't you?

Mr Zanderigo—It does come to our attention when it has been an issue for individuals. We are in a situation where we can only write in reply and say that DEST has no involvement in any processes subsequent to migration assessments. It has been an issue in some professions, and it can be quite difficult. But there are clearly quite different requirements among countries about what you might need to demonstrate to become a member of a profession. In some cases, it can be difficult for people to fulfil that once they have a visa.

Senator KIRK—So there is no oversight body to which individuals can make a complaint if they have concerns about the time that it is taking to process their application?

Mr Zanderigo—Not that I am aware of in relation to people becoming members of the professions. That is a matter that is effectively with the professions themselves, and they are regulated not by the Australian government but, rather, by the states and territories in the conduct of those membership requirements.

CHAIR—That might change through COAG.

Mr Zanderigo—Not that I am aware of.

CHAIR—A national approach might be taken as a result of the recent discussions with COAG.

Mr Zanderigo—The status of the professions has not been in scope in those discussions that I am aware of.

CHAIR—We might have to make that a recommendation. Senator Kirk?

Senator KIRK—I have finished, thank you.

Senator EGGLESTON—I notice that in your introduction, your summary, you talk about the agencies you use for approving professional qualifications and that you use VETASSESS as well as the TRA in assessing trade skills of potential migrants. In the previous session, we were talking about the need to expedite the process of trade recognition. It was said that VETASSESS is used by the department in some situations, but not extensively, to supplement the TRA's assessments. Do you have any views about a greater use of VETASSESS in expediting the recognition of trade skills in view of our need to meet the skills shortages that we are facing? Or does the TRA need more personnel? What would you say?

Dr Jarvie—I do not want to get into commenting about TRA versus VETASSESS. I am not in a position to be able to make comments about that. My understanding is that VETASSESS has been appointed by DIMA to assess qualifications, mainly in the management, administrative, professional and associate professional areas. It is a commercial arm of Kangan Batman TAFE.

Mr Zanderigo—I can provide a little bit more insight to that from the DEST perspective. The use of VETASSESS by DEST is in relation to helping with educational qualification assessments. We also support them in their work for DIMA in making migration skill assessments. For example, if they are processing applications for particular occupations that are gazetted by DIMA and they need some more detailed advice than they have available to them on particular educational qualifications, then they will come to the area of DEST that publishes country education profiles to get some advice on the educational qualification aspect of that assessment.

Senator EGGLESTON—Thank you. I was trying to work out the relationships and where VETASSESS might be helpful in the process of expediting the assessment of persons with trade skills.

CHAIR—On page 17 of your submission, you say:

... options are under consideration to expand the number of assessing bodies to cover professions that may be deemed to be in high demand.

Have there been any new assessing authorities gazetted since July 2005? If so, for what occupations? Can you briefly describe the process and what alternative arrangements may be in place if there is no assessing authority for a profession at any given time?

Dr Jarvie—That is a very important issue that you have raised. We have had discussions about one further assessing authority, and that was for child-care coordinators. But, since then, because of the issue about what is an appropriate assessing authority—there was in fact no such body—TRA has been developing the assessment for that body.

CHAIR—In evidence given just a moment ago, TRA tell us that they are not ready for that yet—

Dr Jarvie—I am sorry. That was our understanding.

CHAIR—and that they want to concentrate on their core constituency, which is construction and trades. When we asked them about other occupations, I think you will find that they gave evidence that they were not in a position to deal with expanded qualifications in other areas, so there seems to be a vacuum at the moment, and that is my point. While there is a delay in assessing professions, what alternative arrangements are made—for example, with child care?

Dr Jarvie—At the moment, we do not have any alternatives in that area, but the model does rely, as you pointed out, on having a body that can be an assessing authority, that has the expertise and that meets all the criteria that we laid out. In the past, I believe we have assisted bodies in taking over this role, but that is the only one that has been brought to my attention.

Mr Cox—We have several in the pipeline that we are working with the various authorities on at this point in time. There are seven, off the top of my head.

CHAIR—Can you later provide the committee with details of those seven, because we are just about out of time?

Mr Cox—I can, yes.

Senator PARRY—I will go back to a question Senator Kirk asked about appeal. The fifth dot point of attachment A of your submission reads:

Client service

There is an easily understood, equitable and transparent process which includes review and appeal avenues offered to clients.

Is there an appeal avenue? What is the appeal avenue? Where can people go if they are not satisfied?

Mr Cox—We are saying that the potential assessing authority must have a clear, transparent process—

Senator PARRY—Okay. And you have to maintain that they have that? You have to assure yourself that they have all these criteria in place?

Mr Cox—That is correct.

Senator PARRY—As far as you are concerned, does every single assessment authority have these clear guidelines operating effectively at the time of each assessment process?

Mr Cox—We need to convince ourselves of that, yes.

Senator PARRY—And you will get back to us with what the follow-up assessment and the ongoing assessment are?

Mr Cox—That is right. I have undertaken to do that.

Senator PARRY—Thank you.

CHAIR—Under the migration program for the trades and professions I understand that people have to have their skills assessed prior to lodging a migration application. A follow-on is that DEST and AEI-NOOSR provide comprehensive country education profiles. This is one of the tools used to gain knowledge of what needs to be assessed. Evidence has been given to this inquiry that these country profiles are so out of whack—we heard that some were as far behind as 1986—that they are sometimes irrelevant. I do not know whether it was through evidence or anecdotally but it was related to us that, because the authority applied for funds for NOOSR and did not get them, basically they spat the dummy and said, ‘Okay, we’re not going to update them.’ That is why they are so out of date. Is it a funding issue or is it a process issue that some of these profiles are so far out of date?

Dr Jarvie—Can I simply say that I think that comment is out of date. We have undertaken a major exercise in the last couple of years to update our CEPs and particularly to put them online. We had a big launch in October last year to put 106 CEPs online, and this will also assist in speeding the update and making sure they are quite relevant and current.

Mr Cox—To clarify that, there are three elements within each country educational profile that are used by the assessing authorities. There is the country education section, which provides a background on a country's educational structure—qualifications and those sorts of issues. There is an assessment guidelines section, which is the key tool that the assessing authorities use to compare the overseas educational qualification with the comparative Australian qualification. There is also a list of institutions section. It would be fair to say that across those 106 CEPs not all elements of each CEP are equally up to date, though I could not describe that with any certainty. Certainly the most useful elements of the CEPs are the assessment guidelines and the list of institutions. All the lists of institutions have recently been updated for the CEPs, and we have a program at present to move through each of the CEPs we have online and bring the whole lot up to date. We have a priority listing of countries, which we are moving through at present.

CHAIR—Thank you. We are desperately out of time and there are so many other questions that we could ask you about the overlapping of jurisdictions between state and federal authorities, fees and proactive measures for overseas coordination of institutions. For example, we have heard that people attending the most eminent universities in the US—Australian citizens going there to study—come back here and cannot use their qualifications in their chosen area, and they become taxi drivers. There are many things we could ask you.

Thank you for attending today's hearing. I would be grateful if you would send as soon as possible to the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide. As there are some members of the committee who are unable to be present today, the secretariat may also send you some additional questions in writing, which we would appreciate your answers to.

Dr Jarvie—We are happy to do that.

[10.35 am]

DONNELLY, Ms Jennifer, Assistant Director, Skilled Migration Section, Migration Branch, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

FOX, Mr James McLaren, First Assistant Secretary, Migration and Temporary Entry, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

HICKMAN, Ms Jacqueline Ann, Assistant Secretary, Delivery Innovation Branch, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

MILLS, Mr Gregory Paul, Assistant Secretary, Migration Branch, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

SPELDEWINDE, Mr Peter, Director, Skilled Migration, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

STEWART, Mr David Edward, Director, Compliance, Integrity and Offshore Students, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

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 parliament. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Fox—No, thank you. We do not have an opening statement.

CHAIR—Is there nothing you wish to say before we ask questions?

Mr Fox—No, thank you. The secretariat invited us to come and speak to you as a follow-up to our appearance last year, and we are happy to do so.

CHAIR—Okay. I will begin and then I will pass over to my colleagues. When you last appeared before the committee, you identified five main areas where improvements in Australia's overseas skill migration recognition arrangements could take place. They are: the assessability of information on recognition, licensing upgrading and processing through the development of a national web portal; the speed and integration of the steps involved in the recognition of upgrading of licensing, particularly where the steps are the responsibility of the different agencies at both Commonwealth and state levels; the extent to which these processes could be undertaken so that skilled migrants are more job ready on arrival or are clear on what additional skills they need to acquire after arrival; the establishment of more skill assessment bodies for new and emerging occupations, which we have just heard about, making sure that the assessment processes of existing skill bodies keep pace with changing technologies and skills; and mutual recognition across the different states through COAG. Could you outline the progress on each of these five areas. For example, when will the web portal be available?

Mr Mills—It is being tested as we speak and is expected to commence in April. It will be launched by the minister. We have yet to determine a precise date.

CHAIR—What is the feedback so far from your constituents on the road testing of the web portal?

Mr Mills—The user testing which has been conducted has been highly positive, I am told.

CHAIR—What about the other areas?

Mr Mills—In terms of, if you like, the reforms or improvements to the skills recognition system, the key element was the COAG agenda. As you may well be aware, COAG signed off on a range of proposals in January. Essentially that will mean that, as of July 2007, we will be starting a new offshore process which will involve six trades.

CHAIR—I know where you are heading, Mr Mills. I know COAG said a number of things—and we keep on hearing about what COAG said; that is fine and agreements are in place—but we are concerned particularly with the immediacy of the skills crisis and the professional crisis in this country, about the speed and integration of recognition and upgrading. Can you give us any ideas, from your department's point of view, about how this is being expedited, rather than time-lined?

Mr Mills—That is considered to be a practicable and reasonable time frame given that the essential precondition for the implementation of those arrangements is the agreement of a single national standard in relation to the six trades concerned.

CHAIR—I will stop you there again. I am not being argumentative but we have just heard about July 2007. We have mines in the Pilbara in Western Australia—and Senator Eggleston will be sure to reinforce this—that cannot start because they do not have skilled personnel and people are talking about July 2007 as being a reasonable date. We are here to cut through the bureaucracy, not encourage it.

Mr Fox—That was COAG's time frame, which was set by the heads of government. We are certainly working towards providing as rapid an entry as we can—

CHAIR—What I am asking is: can you be quicker?

Mr Fox—I do not know that it is our position to be quicker. I think that is a matter you would have to raise with the Prime Minister and with the heads of government.

CHAIR—If you are ready earlier, that might help to expedite things.

Mr Fox—That is the time line we have. We have to report back internally in the Commonwealth government by June this year, which we will be working towards. In the meantime, there are various other visa mechanisms that would facilitate entry to, for example, the mining companies you are talking about. There is the temporary entry arrangement through the 457 arrangements. There is the vast range of state and territory sponsored arrangements,

which are quite quick and which we went through in some detail the last time we gave evidence. I am not sure those two things are necessarily—

CHAIR—I think you were in Perth recently when Senator Vanstone held a forum, which I attended. You could not have been impressed by the fact that the mining, resource and construction companies are saying they need this support now, rather than saying, ‘You’ve got a nice little time line that you want to meet because you’ve been told that’s the time line.’ What I am saying is that you could be a facilitator to driving this earlier if you had demonstrated that you could do things in a timelier manner. Do you take my point?

Mr Fox—We certainly take your point.

CHAIR—You do not need to answer it. Do you want to add something else?

Mr Fox—We will be looking to do as much as we can but in terms of the consultation process that we both attended in Perth in February, I think, I have since had a number of follow-up meetings, particularly with representatives of the mining industry there, from the Chamber of Minerals and Energy. They have been working with us and we have been providing as quick a turnaround on their labour as we can. Indeed, the feedback from them has been that they are very pleased with the quality of service they are getting from our department.

CHAIR—Can I also give you some feedback. The outreach officer program is highly successful, and I commend you on that.

Senator KIRK—At the last hearing you indicated that you are about to launch the largest migration program for 40 years. How is the campaign progressing both in numbers and in the actual recruitment of skilled migrants? I am particularly interested in whether or not you have had any feedback about how effective DIMA’s campaign is in terms of communicating to people overseas just what Australia’s skills shortages are and the processes for skills recognition and licensing arrangements.

Mr Fox—I will take the first part of your question first. In terms of the program for this year—and Greg can expand if need be—we are certainly very much on track to deliver the 140,000 estimated places we are looking at, and we are also on track to deliver within that 140,000 places 97,500 from within the skilled stream. We are tracking towards the end of this financial year having that program delivered, which is great news; that is really good. In terms of how our campaign activity is going, we have been having ongoing skill expos, both offshore and onshore, which have been very successful. We ran one in Calcutta, India a fortnight ago which specifically targeted the resources sector—following up on the conversation I just had with the chair. The feedback from employers there was that that was very successful, and they think they have some very good candidates for jobs whom we would hope to have here in the next couple of months, which is really good.

CHAIR—On the Calcutta expo, can you give us an update on the number of screened people who attended?

Mr Fox—I do not have that with me, but I can certainly provide it.

Senator KIRK—Do you have any further expos planned for this financial year?

Mr Fox—Yes, we do. Offshore, we are looking at South-East Asia, Manila, Shanghai and Hong Kong in May. We are looking at North and South America—Detroit and Houston in the USA, and Sao Paulo, Brazil and Lima, Peru—in about August-September. Then we are looking at the UK, Ireland and Dubai in late September or early October. We are also looking at a number of onshore expos around the country and linking in with other targeted expos through particular industries, both onshore and offshore.

CHAIR—We heard evidence from the previous two people that the priority list included Sri Lanka. How come you are not doing an expo in Sri Lanka, given this synergy with Australia? I declare an interest. I am the Chair of the Sri Lanka-Australia Parliamentary Friendship Group. I would have thought that it was timely that Sri Lanka was on the radar as it is on the list of the five most prioritised countries.

Mr Fox—In setting our program for this year we have mainly consulted with employer groups, because the main focus of the expos is to facilitate employers getting in touch with potential employees. The feedback we had was that their priority for this year was in India and then those other countries that I mentioned. But Sri Lanka is certainly not off the radar; indeed, I suspect we might end up with one in Sri Lanka, perhaps next year. It is not set in concrete, but that would not surprise me at all.

CHAIR—I would like to find out when you do, if you would not mind letting us know.

Mr Fox—Indeed.

Senator KIRK—Is the choice of where you go decided upon in consultation with employers?

Mr Fox—Yes, it is. We work with employers. We go out to employer groups through our industry outreach officer network and through our own contacts. We gauge their views on priorities and then we work with our minister's office to determine where they are. We also talk to our posts about demand in the various places.

Senator KIRK—You said at the last hearing that overseas posts were encouraging potential skilled migrants to enlist on a skill-matching database. How is that progressing?

Mr Fox—Pretty well. I might get Greg to speak on that one.

Mr Mills—The skill-matching database has been in place for about a decade now. It is a mechanism to bridge employers with potential skilled migrants offshore. The major change occurred last November when we made registration on the database effectively an automatic part of the application process for skilled migration. That has started to increase the numbers; they have just gone over 7,000. I would not like to predict how high they will go, because it is a fluid mechanism. People drop off as they arrive in Australia and people add on, but it is a useful mechanism. It is used not just by employers but also by state and territory governments for their nomination processes.

Another project, just for your information, is to try to get people who have not yet applied for skilled migration to enlist on the database. In order to do that, we think we would need a web based capacity to make it easy for people to apply. That is something that we are looking at in the medium term, subject to our IT platform being capable of delivering that.

Senator KIRK—Could that be incorporated into the web portal that is being developed?

Mr Mills—No, but the web portal would be a complementary mechanism which would sit very comfortably alongside that.

Senator PARRY—On pages 8 through to 12 of your submission you talk about comparisons of skills assessment arrangements between Australia and other countries. There are comments there such as Canada being more cumbersome than Australia. There is a comment that the US is the most comparable. Do you have an overall view of which country model—or bits of which country model—would be best implemented in Australia if we were to change the way we are doing things? It is a very broad question.

Mr Fox—We would like to think that other countries would copy us, and they do. There is no simple answer to that question—as you say, it is quite broad. We certainly like to learn from the experience of a number of other countries. I would not point to the UK model or the Canada model and say, ‘That’s the one for us; we will adopt it,’ but we certainly work closely with them. We share our experiences with those countries and we learn from them. The UK has just moved to a managed migration program. They have learned a lot of lessons from us. I am sure Mr Blair will mention that in his speech shortly!

Senator PARRY—I will wait with bated breath!

Mrs IRWIN—If he doesn’t, we can ask a question. He might take it on notice!

Mr Fox—There is no simple answer to that other than to say that we are always looking to improve our own system and learn from other countries’ experience.

Senator PARRY—Do you feel a system of mutual recognition of qualifications, correctly established, would be the way forward?

Mr Fox—There would be some merit in looking at whether there is scope for that. That is something we would facilitate, I guess, rather than drive. We would be looking for advice from our colleagues, whom I think you have already spoken to, on the mechanics of that operating in Australia. But certainly if the view of the government was that we ought to go down that path then we as the visa processing and entry control area would work with that. There would be some logic in going down that path.

Senator PARRY—Thank you.

Senator EGGLESTON—I would like to ask you some questions in relation to medical practitioners. At a previous hearing we heard about overseas trained medical practitioners having to travel to Australia twice within 12 months for assessment purposes, as there is no special category of visa to allow them to come and stay for 12 months to do the examinations and some

clinical work. I would like you to comment on that. Will the COAG initiative address this problem, because it is really enormously important. In Western Australia, for example, the public hospital system depends on about 450 overseas trained doctors to survive. Also, when you last appeared before the committee, you mentioned that the Department of Health and Ageing had a program which helped people with medical qualifications come to Australia to get their medical qualifications upgraded so that they could be recognised. You suggested that this type of thing was what was needed to be thought about more systematically. Have you done any further work on that?

Mr Fox—Taking the second part of the question first, we continue to work with the Department of Health and Ageing on ways in which we can facilitate the entry of doctors. Certainly it is an ongoing issue—we recognise that. As to whether Health has progressed further on that, I simply do not know, but I can take it on notice.

Senator EGGLESTON—Yes, if you would.

Mr Fox—On the first part of the question, most of our colleagues here are not familiar with the details of the doctors. David or Jenny?

Ms Donnelly—We are working towards it. As you say, there is no one visa to get them out here for the full 12 months. They can come down on a visitor visa. Most doctors tend to go through the temporary doctor visa—the 422—and then it is much easier to do the progression into a permanent visa. They tend not to come down through general skilled migration because of the difficulties of getting the registration and recognition of their qualifications. So the normal pathway is the temporary, where they can do all of the upgrading that is necessary for them to then get the permanent visa.

For those choosing to come directly through the general skilled migration program, we are working with the state and territory government licensing boards. One of the problems is that there does not seem to be a general standard of what is required for recognition, and that is causing confusion. We are working with them to sort that out so that we can then, as part of the web portal, tell them what documentation is required. At this stage there are different levels of registration, and it is confusing for everybody concerned. We are sorting that out. That is where we are with doctors.

Senator EGGLESTON—So you are aiming to standardise registration requirements?

Ms Donnelly—Not so much standardise, but make it clear to applicants, because there are different types of conditional registration, which is confusing for people applying to migrate. We are liaising with the registration boards in each state and territory to get a list which will then be available to clients so it is much easier for them to know whether or not they will get through. Some are automatically getting through; others will require some other documentation.

Senator EGGLESTON—Where does the Australian Medical Council's exam fit into that?

Ms Donnelly—It is the first step for those seeking to get registration.

Senator EGGLESTON—Yes, I would have thought so.

Ms Donnelly—If they do not have mutual recognition—so, UK trained doctors—they can bypass that. It is part of the process. You are asking if it can be done in one step. We have not progressed that any further.

Senator EGGLESTON—The other issue is that I get complaints brought to me about overseas trained doctors working in rural Western Australia who find they have to go to Kuala Lumpur, get a visa and come back, which seems to be a nonsense to me. Why can't we arrange for them to get extensions while they are on the job in Australia?

Ms Donnelly—It would depend on what visa they are seeking. If they have applied for one that requires them to be outside Australia, there is not much we can do about it.

Senator EGGLESTON—They have to apply from outside Australia; that seems to be the rule. Can you clarify that?

Mr Fox—Presumably there are some visa categories where the legislation does require that they be offshore to apply. I think the point Ms Donnelly is making is that there are some options within that and it depends what visa they apply for when they first wish to come to Australia. But we are certainly happy to look at that issue. Indeed, it is an area that we have started looking at within Ms Hickman's branch, not just with respect to doctors but with respect to a number of our visa categories.

Senator EGGLESTON—That is good to hear.

CHAIR—When you do, can you give us the feedback? Is that likely to be sooner rather than later?

Mr Fox—We would love it to be sooner rather than later, but we are working on it. Jacqueline, do you have a time frame for that?

Ms Hickman—I do not have a time frame because it is a very complex question. As Mr Fox says, we are going to be looking at it across the board and there are a number of different issues involved that cannot be resolved very quickly. The other thing is that, even if we can agree on a way forward, there will be a massive program of legislation to put it into place. We are at the beginning stages.

CHAIR—The terms of reference talk about impediments. Surely the fact that they have to go offshore and then pay for that is an impediment to keeping good doctors in rural Australia, let alone in rural Western Australia. So I would have thought it is relatively urgent. If the minister were made aware of that, I am sure she would facilitate you.

Ms Hickman—Yes, I think the issue you raise is a very valid one and I will certainly put it at the top of the list when we are considering this issue in the broad.

Mrs IRWIN—I want to talk about document fraud. Is there much of a problem with fraud of overseas skills assessments? Is the problem increasing? I have heard of some cases where there is document fraud. What has the department done about it?

Mr Stewart—Our part in the process is that we detect fraud at the visa application stage. We do work with all assessing bodies to try and mitigate fraud in their part of the process, but we do not actually conduct the investigations generally for those agencies. The exception to that is VETASSESS: DIMA and VETASSESS have an agreement whereby VETASSESS can refer documents to the immigration department. We will have them checked through our posts overseas or through our mechanisms and provide them with advice. Since that process has been in place, they have only made 92 referrals to us, which have resulted in one non-genuine document and five that could not be verified, while 62 have so far been found to be genuine.

CHAIR—It must have been the one in my electorate!

Mr Stewart—Possibly.

Mr Fox—We always try to look after your electorate, Chair!

Mr Stewart—We have an arrangement whereby Trades Recognition Australia advise us of cases of concern where they may well have still given the person a positive skills assessments but had some concerns which they could not get to the bottom of. We would then check that application very thoroughly. To date that has been reasonably successful, with over half the cases that we have conducted inquiries on coming up with non-genuine outcomes.

Mrs IRWIN—So you feel that there is no problem whatsoever?

Mr Stewart—No, I would not say that.

Mrs IRWIN—But it is not increasing?

Mr Stewart—The detection of fraud at our end of the process is increasing and we would put that down to better tools. We have a safeguard system as an assistant to decision makers to advise them as to the sorts of cases they should be conducting further inquiries into and we are better able to target those referrals, so our detection of fraud has increased. I could not really say whether the overall scale of fraud has increased.

Mrs IRWIN—There has been recent comment in the press that the government has completed a review of skilled migration, with the findings due to be considered by cabinet over the next few weeks. I understand that a press release suggested that the review recommends higher English language standards for skilled migrants. Can you tell us anything about that review?

Mr Fox—Perhaps I can fill you in there. The minister commissioned that review last year. The government requested us to have a look at that review. That was conducted by three academics—Bob Birrell, Leslyanne Hawthorne and Sue Richardson. Bob Birrell was the lead on that. We have recently received their report and it is being considered by government. I think the authors may have spoken to the press about some of their conclusions rather than making a press release.

The government is yet to consider that report, so I am a little bit constrained as to how much detail I can go into. But, certainly, going on the media reports, there is some suggestion that we

should be looking at tightening up the English language requirements for people transferring out of the student stream and into the permanent resident scheme through the general skilled migration program. The reason for that is that there is at least some evidence that there may be people graduating from Australian universities where they were supposed to enter with an IELTS—that is the International English Language Testing System; I do not know whether you are familiar with that—score of six.

So what the authors are recommending is that they be tested on the way out of university to see that they have that score of six as a minimum for entry into the permanent migration scheme, because the evidence is very strong that the higher the English language skills that people have, the better their employment outcomes are. There was some suggestion that people were able to enter an Australian university and receive a degree but come out without necessarily the English language skills we would expect.

Mrs IRWIN—Do you think that the findings will be made publicly available once it has been considered by cabinet?

Mr Fox—That is a matter for the minister. I expect they will, but I cannot confirm that, I am sorry.

CHAIR—Just as an aside, I have said before that, although there is this push for greater English competency, you would not want to have put that test on people when you were trying to build the Snowy River scheme. You would never have built it. I make that point because in some of the cases in my electorate—for example, where families are trying to sponsor one of their relatives into their own businesses—there has been an impediment even though they might be learning in their home or family business environment in that the English component has knocked them off. That seems to be a bit unfair given the circumstances.

While we are talking about that, we understand that DIMA funds only one document translation for eligible visa holders who have been in Australia for less than two years. Witnesses have observed that often translations are needed for multiple documents for skills recognition purposes. They suggested that DIMA extend its fee-free document translating service, particularly for families of skilled migrants and humanitarian entrants. Could you comment on that?

Mr Fox—That would be a matter that, should the committee recommend it, the government would look at, I am sure. It is not something I can comment specifically on. It is a matter of government policy.

CHAIR—Finally, you have mentioned VETASSESS. It is contracted by DIMA. Are you aware that VETASSESS is sometimes commissioned by TRA—I think you already said that you are—to process a number of their applications? VETASSESS stated to the committee in regard to TRA:

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 us clear some of their backlog.

TRA have said today that they do not have a backlog, so there is a bit of a disagreement there. However, it has been our position that TRA do have a bit of a problem. That is the universal evidence that has come to this committee. I suggested earlier today that maybe VETASSESS might want to take more of TRA's role in any case. Are you aware of some of the concerns that have been expressed to this committee through evidence, which is in *Hansard*, in relation to TRA's timeliness and competence?

Mr Fox—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have any further comments?

Mr Fox—We are delighted to hear that they do not have any backlog anymore.

CHAIR—We are interested to hear it too. Whether or not it is accurate is a different story.

Mr Mills—Certainly in our ongoing dialogue with TRA they have advised us that their processing times have reduced very significantly in the last year. I obviously cannot speak for DEWR, but I accept—

CHAIR—Strange that, isn't it? Since the inquiry has been going for the last 12 months, their performance has improved. Ten years ago they took away their overseas offices, and I am not sure whether you are aware that today they are talking about placing five offices in selected countries, so they are putting them back in the overseas areas that they mentioned. Will they be working closely with their overseas post, do you believe? What relationship do you think will happen there?

Mr Mills—As part of the COAG arrangements—and DEWR will have primary carriage of putting those in place, as no doubt they have testified to you—we have separately bid for a component to support the integrity side of those offshore arrangements, so we will be working with them towards that end. We will be looking at issues like identity fraud and document fraud within that proposed offshore process. So, inevitably, yes, they will be interacting with our offshore network, and we think that that is a good thing.

CHAIR—Regarding relevant qualifications, one of the witnesses on 23 November last year commented that under the 457 visa class:

... not only was there no skills assessment but there was not even a verification process. It is totally an honour system, and we think there are enough 457 entrants to make it legitimate to at least have some mechanism for verifying, if not more formally assessing, the skills credentials that those people claim to have.

Could you comment on this observation and whether this would have raised any overseas skills assessment issues?

Mr Fox—Yes is the answer. It is not quite correct to say that there is no skills assessment or review of that, particularly in regional areas where we have a regional certifying body process and where those bodies are gazetted by our minister but nominated by state and territory governments. Those certifying bodies may be chambers of commerce; they may be state governments. For example, it is the Attorney-General's Department in South Australia. Where

the sponsor seeks to put people into regional areas at a salary lower than the minimum salary level or at a lower skill level, for example—I think we spoke last time about the ASCO classifications—when they are looking at ASCO 5, 6 or 7, then the regional certifying body has to certify that those people have the skills at that level and that those skills are needed. So there is a process of requiring those skills to be demonstrated. We have also tightened up our sponsorship approval process by seeking confirmation from potential sponsors that the skills are in fact to the level stated, and we have been doing a lot of work on that. We also think there is scope for improvement, and we are looking at whether there is any scope for requiring further skills assessment, particularly offshore for the 457 visa holders.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for attending today’s hearing. I would be grateful if you could send to the secretariat as soon as possible any additional material that you have undertaken to provide. As some members of the committee were not able to be present today, the secretariat may send you some additional questions in writing which we would appreciate your answering.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Irwin**):

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

Committee adjourned at 11.09 am