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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

Thursday, 20 April 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 Mr Keenan, Dr Lawrence and Mr Randall

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

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

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Committee met at 9.49 am

CHAIR (Mr Randall)—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry into overseas skills recognition, upgrading and licensing and welcome all here today. 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.

[9.50 am]

CANINI, Ms Emanuela, Private capacity

DANIELE, Mr Angelo, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Ms Canini—I came here from Italy two years and four months ago and I still do not have permission to work as a physiotherapist.

CHAIR—We can deal with that shortly. We just want to know the capacity in which you are appearing here. Are you appearing as a private individual?

Ms Canini—Which means?

CHAIR—You are appearing on behalf of yourself. Is that correct?

Ms Canini—I am sorry; I do not understand.

CHAIR—You are coming before this committee as an individual with some concerns. Is that right?

Ms Canini—Yes.

CHAIR—Mr Daniele?

Mr Daniele—I am just a friend. I own a business and I am here because I write good letters. I have followed this through since meeting Ms Canini.

CHAIR—You are here to support Ms Canini's presentation?

Mr Daniele—Yes.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. The committee has received your submission. Is it the wish of the committee that the document submitted by Ms Canini be accepted as a submission to the inquiry and authorised for publication? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

CHAIR—Your submission also has a number of appendices. The committee will consider this material at its next meeting and resolve its formal status. I would appreciate that being supported as well.

Senator KIRK—I support that course of action.

Senator PARRY—I also support it.

Dr LAWRENCE—Does Ms Canini understand what we are doing?

CHAIR—Thank you, Dr Lawrence. I will just explain. You have given us a submission.

Ms Canini—Yes.

CHAIR—There is a lot of extra detail in terms of appendices. Because many individuals are named in that material and we have not had a chance to look at it yet to see how appropriate it is to this hearing, we would like to consider it in committee when we return to Canberra. Are you happy with us doing that?

Ms Canini—Yes, that is okay.

CHAIR—I now invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed with questions. We have your submission. Do you want to talk to it and tell us a little about why you made it?

Ms Canini—Yes. If you have read it, you probably know everything already.

CHAIR—We have read about you in the paper as well.

Ms Canini—Yes. As I said before, I came here more than two years ago to work as a physiotherapist and I still do not have permission to do so. At the moment, I represent all overseas physiotherapists that last year and this year tried to get their qualifications recognised but did not succeed. The government is making many efforts to motivate people to come here and work, but apparently something is wrong because that is not happening. I do not think this occurs just with physiotherapists; for many professions it is the same, especially in the health system. I am here to answer all your questions, because you probably want to know why this is not happening. I want to tell you of the difficulties that people like me are encountering in trying to get their qualifications recognised. In addition, at the conclusion of my remarks, I have some questions that I would like you to answer for me.

CHAIR—In terms of your opening statement though, can you tell us why you came to Australia, what qualifications you had—just to refresh us, because I know that detail is in the material you have submitted—what you have done so far and where you are at now?

Ms Canini—I came to Australia to improve my quality of life. I qualified as a physiotherapist in 1995 in Italy; it was a three-year full-time course. After that, I did some professional courses, especially in Australian techniques. I then came here as a student and completed a master of sports physiotherapy here in Perth at the Curtin University. My Italian qualification was accepted

by the university, which enabled me to undertake a postgraduate course, but it was not accepted for registration to work. I was told that there was a procedure to follow to get such recognition, so I started to follow it as soon as I finished my studies in 2004. There are two exams to do: one is written and the other is clinical. I was recognised as eligible to do the first exam.

I have heard rumours that this written exam is very difficult and, on average, it must be attempted at least two or three times in order to pass. So I studied, but I did not have enough support from the organisation that holds these exams. I tried to find colleagues that could give me some hints about what to study. I am pretty skilled in my field of the physiotherapy profession. I have been working for eight years in musculoskeletal. That means that probably in cardio, respiratory and neurology I am not very skilled, but I am not interested in them because I am not going to work on those types of patients. However, I had to study many other things that were not really related to my field.

I did the first exam and I failed four questions. I then had to wait for six months to do another exam, because they are held only twice a year. Of course, I had to pay the fee each time, which is \$1,100. I sat the second exam last September, which I failed also, along with 86 per cent of the candidates. It was crazy and impossible to pass. The questions were not related to physiotherapy. They were tricky. Even for people whose mother tongue is English, they were difficult. There were Australian citizens taking the exam who also failed.

My third attempt to pass the exam was in last March, the results of which I am supposed to get today. I am pretty confident that I passed this time but, because of a protest I organised, they tried to help us a little; they organised a workshop. But, again, the workshop, which I attended in Melbourne, for example, was all about how to answer the questions and to understand what the tricks are. If I have passed the exam, it is not because I am a very good physiotherapist; it is just because I am very good at solving puzzles.

Mr Daniele—I must admit that I have seen the exam questions. I am not a physio, but there were questions there that I could answer only because I understand English. It really was ridiculous.

Ms Canini—I have the papers of the September exams here, but they are copyright. To get them returned, I had to ask several times. They said, 'No, this is intellectual property, so we cannot give it to you.' But how can I see what my mistakes were? How can I prepare for the next exam? The only feedback they gave me was, 'In this case, you got three out of six; here you got one out of six.' You cannot really use it. It is not helpful for study.

CHAIR—The debrief was not very helpful.

Ms Canini—No, not at all.

CHAIR—That is where you are at now.

Ms Canini—Yes.

CHAIR—You are waiting for your marks today.

Ms Canini—I am waiting for my results.

CHAIR—Will you tell us your results when you get them today?

Ms Canini—Yes, sure.

CHAIR—The secretariat will give you a phone number so that you can contact us.

Ms Canini—They were not online this morning, but they probably will be in a few minutes.

Mr Daniele—I think something else is important also. There are two issues here. It is not only the status of the exam but also the visa requirements and the immigration requirements. They are very important.

CHAIR—Can you tell us of what you have gone through in being allowed to stay in Australia—your visas et cetera?

Ms Canini—Yes. At first I had a student visa, which is valid for one year. When that expired, I tried to find a sponsor. I found an employer who agreed to employ me as a massage therapist. As soon as that visa had been approved and I had received it, the employer changed his mind—I do not know why—and my visa went to be cancelled.

CHAIR—So you could not find another sponsor.

Ms Canini—No. It is just impossible to find a sponsor because their requirements are very strict. I am required to have a contract for 35 hours minimum per week and \$39,000 a year—with what qualification? If I am not a physio, you cannot expect me to have other big qualifications. So the only one I could use was as a massage therapist or phys assistant. A massage therapist job is quite difficult to find because it is more occasional work, and it is very tiring, so even if you want to work for 35 hours per week the same employers tell you, ‘No, that’s not possible.’

Mr Daniele—You are certainly not going to get \$39,000 a year and a three-year contract as a massage therapist.

Ms Canini—Yes, and it is usually paid on percentage, so you cannot have a fixed rate. The other profession was phys assistant but, because phys assistant is not on the list of the department of immigration, even if a hospital requires you, you cannot work because it is not approved.

CHAIR—I understand that a physio assistant can practise in rural areas and obtain a visa that way.

Ms Canini—Yes, I knew that. I have just done that. It is not written anywhere that you can work as a phys assistant in a country area.

CHAIR—But you have been informed of that now, haven’t you?

Ms Canini—Yes, I know that now, but whoever wants to apply in a country area does not know that because it is not on the DIMA website, it is not in the booklets—it is not anywhere. You read that list and you think, ‘If I have those qualifications, I can work; if I don’t have one, I can’t.’ So you do not even think to apply in a country area.

CHAIR—Tell us more about how you got to stay in Australia through your visas.

Ms Canini—After my employer withdrew the sponsorship, I tried to find another sponsorship, and I did not succeed. At the end, maybe it was because I was lucky—I do not know. In the office they lost my papers, or anyway they did not look for me anymore and I had four months to stay, and in the meantime I got another sponsorship with an Italian nursing home as a phys assistant. I applied for an occupational training visa. Because I speak Italian and all their patients are Italians, they really wanted me to work there, but because the nursing home does not have a hospital connected to a university, for example, and it does not have a plan of training for physio students, they could not provide this training program to the migration office. So DIMA called me saying, ‘You’d better withdraw the application because it would be refused anyway.’

But this lasted probably four months, and my contract was to finish at the end of September. In October the application was still going, so even if they approved it my contract was over. After that, my visa was still undergoing cancellation and I got another contract with Royal Perth Hospital as a phys assistant. All the parameters were respected—minimal salary, minimum hours per week. I did all the procedures—the medical examinations and chest X-rays. I do not know why, because the other ones were still valid. The hospital were pushing because they needed someone to fill the vacant position because it was creating inconvenience to them.

I did the application through the Department of Health, which was helping me. The Department of Health told me that the application was going well and it was just a question of days for it to be approved. So I was sure to pass this time. I even did the induction course with the hospital. I got all my stuff—the uniforms and everything. The day before I was to start work someone from the migration office called the department. They had called before saying, ‘Okay, she has the visa till 2009.’ After five minutes someone else called and said, ‘No, she cannot work; this assistant is not on the list.’ But they should have told me that before. Of course, for the application I had done there was no refund. I have been spending a lot of money. After that, I met Don Randall and I got two tourist visas.

CHAIR—Emanuela was referred to me—she is not a constituent of mine—because the Ombudsman, who she had been to, suggested that she come and talk to me, as chair of this committee. That is why I brought her attention to the committee.

Ms Canini—Yes. I did not know there was a committee on this mess.

Dr LAWRENCE—What was the solution with the visa in the end?

CHAIR—In the end, you got two tourist visas—is that correct?

Ms Canini—Yes. The idea is to pass these exams and get an occupational training visa and prepare for the second exam, which is a practical, so I can have some training in the hospital.

And then maybe in the future I can be employed by the hospital. Every time I ask for training they ask me, 'Would you be interested at the end to work with us?' Yes, of course I would, but there is no way that I can even have training without passing these exams. I tried before with the second tourist visa; I tried again with the Royal Perth Hospital. But it is compulsory to have insurance to work and I cannot have the insurance if I do not have temporary registration with the board. And I cannot have temporary registration with the board if I do not know officially the result of the exam. To know the result of the exam takes six weeks—to put a sheet in a computer.

Mr Daniele—Look at it like this: you rock off the plane from Rome. You are a physiotherapist. You want to do an exam. So you either get here at the right time or you wait six months. But to do the exam you cannot come in under a tourist visa, because you are not supposed to study. You cannot come in under a student visa, because you are a qualified physiotherapist—what are you going to study? So you have to have the money to stay here for the next six months to do the exam. And even once you have done the exam you have to wait — how long is the wait to do clinical placement?

Ms Canini—Six weeks to know the results, two months to have the clinical placement organised and then six weeks clinical placement. Then for the other exam it is another two weeks to know the results. Again, it is one year if you pass all the exams.

Mr Daniele—You cannot work, so how many tourist visas do you get? Unless you know the right people—and fortunately I knew the right people in the hospital system—you have no chance. As I said, I am talking just as a citizen and a person that employs 110 people. I can get bricklayers from Ethiopia without a problem. They get off here and they can work. I can get taxi drivers. I can get anyone I want. But if you are a qualified medical professional you have no chance. You really do not.

CHAIR—For the record, Mr Daniele, you better tell us what your business is.

Mr Daniele—I own call centres. We employ people both casual and full time. I have had the business since 1992. I came from working in a Dutch bank in a corporate environment and seeing what went on there. I was a training manager for some years. Being a businessperson I am involved in the business community and the different people that I deal with every day in lots of different companies. My company has consulted to Main Roads and to private organisations. We talk about these sorts of things. We talk about the labour shortage. We talk about what is going on around the place. I remember writing for Emmie a letter saying that it would be much easier if you were a bricklayer. It would be so easy to get into this place and stay here if you were a bricklayer, but not if you were a doctor, a professional person, a lawyer or an accountant. I think there is no way, for anyone going through a private organisation to do an exam that costs \$1,100 to \$5,000 to sit, that that organisation is going to let them pass the first time.

CHAIR—Emanuela, should you not pass that exam today—and we hope you do—what are your alternatives? Can you also tell us about the expenses and how you have sustained yourself over the 2½ years.

Ms Canini—If I do not pass the exam, I do not know what I will do. I might replan everything. It is quite difficult, because I have made such an effort here and spent so much money, probably \$80,000, in the two years that I have been here.

CHAIR—Is that your own money? Have you earned any money?

Ms Canini—That is money that my parents sent. I still have some, but I would rather not spend it here. If I do not pass, I might replan everything. I might go back to Italy. I do not know.

CHAIR—It would be difficult for you to get another visa to stay, wouldn't it, under the categories?

Ms Canini—I do not see any visa for me at the moment, unless I find a place in the country as a phys assistant. That would probably be the only chance. There is a reason Australians do not want to work in regional areas. I come from a big city and for me Perth is already a small village.

CHAIR—You are from Rome, aren't you?

Ms Canini—I am from Rome. I do not know if I can make it.

Senator KIRK—I am very sorry to hear of your experience. I am in a bit of shock at the moment. I suppose that the \$80,000 you have spent has been mainly on living expenses.

Ms Canini—Yes, and university fees.

Senator KIRK—Did you have to pay full fees for the masters degree that you did?

Ms Canini—Full fees and 30 per cent more as an international student. Ninety per cent of the students attending the masters are from overseas and they pay much more than the Australians. The universities have to accept overseas qualifications; otherwise they would have to cancel the courses. It is normal. Even if the head of the school or university sits on the board and accepts me to do a postgrad course, that does not give me a registration.

Senator KIRK—Was the reason you did the masters degree that you came here on a student visa? Which one came first—the student visa or the course?

Ms Canini—I saw on the Physiotherapists Registration Board website that the qualification was accepted for full registration. It is written as 'Master of Physiotherapy'. I thought that meant any type of masters related to physiotherapy, but it is not like that. I found that out too late. It is a two-year course that anyone with a bachelor related to health can do and become a physio. So after a two-year course they can be more likely to become a physio than me.

Senator KIRK—Would an Australian citizen with this masters degree in sports physiotherapy get automatic registration?

Ms Canini—No. If they qualify they still have to go through all of this. They are also permanent residents. It is not a question of nationality; it is just the profession.

Dr LAWRENCE—We want to see what went wrong here and what we might do to improve the processes. Where did you get the information in the first place about what you needed to do to qualify for registration here? Did you get that information in Italy?

Ms Canini—Mainly on the internet, on their website.

Dr LAWRENCE—Did you have any communication directly with officials through that process here in Australia?

Ms Canini—When I was doing the masters and I found out that it was not good to be unregistered, I contacted the registration board and made a formal inquiry about this. They discussed the matter in a meeting. I requested the minutes of the meeting but it seems they did not want to give them to me. I just got a letter saying that the masters in sports physiotherapy is not recognised for registration. After that I contacted ACOPRA, which is the organisation that does the exam. They explained more or less how the process works and I went through that.

Dr LAWRENCE—Taking a step back, when you were in Rome and decided you wanted to come to Australia you made some inquiries via the website initially?

Ms Canini—By email.

Dr LAWRENCE—Did you talk to the embassy at all?

Ms Canini—No.

Dr LAWRENCE—So via the website and via mail.

Ms Canini—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—What did they advise you at that point about the status of your qualifications and what you would need to do? Did they tell you clearly where you stood?

Ms Canini—No. I was sure that the masters degree way was good, so I did not ask for any more information about this.

Mr Daniele—There really is no magical creature over there that tells you what to do. You just really have to find out for yourself.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is part of the problem, I think.

Mr Daniele—It is part of the problem. I really want to add that this is not sour grapes about someone failing the exam twice. I have spoken to the other candidates and I have seen the letters that have come from these people. It is a big problem. Nobody really knows what to do. There is not one hurdle; there are several million of them. As I said, if you live in Rome and you want to get on a plane and come here and work as a physiotherapist, you would really have to ask around or know someone here.

CHAIR—I take Dr Lawrence's point, though. I would have thought that the Australian embassy would have been a good contact point.

Dr LAWRENCE—Still, the important thing is if you go online you should be sent in that direction—that you need to go and talk to officials who will take you through the process or something.

Ms Canini—If you go on the DIMA website there are all these booklets but they do not give you all the information. There are some things hidden here and there that you have to find out through people. If you go to the migration office, they do not tell you. They are very distant. Mainly the only information you can get is, 'Read booklet No. 7'. Or you have to find out for yourself. I was told, 'We're not here to give information like this.'

Mr Daniele—I think we have been incredibly lucky. We met with Don and we happened to be at his office at the same time someone else was. You can see that it is almost a miracle that she is actually still here.

CHAIR—For the record, Mr Daniele is talking about how Emanuela came in on the recommendation of the Ombudsman, as I said. It just so happened that the head of DIMA in WA and his staff were my next appointment, so I was able to put them together. That is why she got her visa considered very expeditiously.

Dr LAWRENCE—On whose advice did you apply for a student visa, for instance, rather than simply applying directly to migrate, to apply to be a permanent resident in Australia?

Ms Canini—I could not apply for a skilled independent regional visa because I knew that my qualification was not recognised. By doing the masters I thought that I would get my qualification recognised and then I could apply as an independent. But I could not from Rome. It was impossible. I did not have any visa. If you do not have a sponsorship your qualification is not recognised. How can you apply from overseas?

Dr LAWRENCE—You can. That is why I asked the question. What you have done is a very complicated way of getting to Australia. I just wondered who did not give you the options clearly. They are the ones who should be held responsible.

CHAIR—That is a good point.

Dr LAWRENCE—I think you were ill served by the Australian system at the point of entry.

Ms Canini—When I was in Rome I contacted the migration agent in Perth just to get an idea. What she proposed to me was even more complicated so I just did it by myself. I could not see any other type of visa.

Dr LAWRENCE—I understand that. It is not your fault. It is just that there are other possibilities which clearly were not made clear to you.

Senator PARRY—I really like page 28 of your submission—it actually starts on page 26—because it is not very often we get a possible solution added to lists of problems and complications. Have you tested that with anyone? Have you discussed those solutions with anyone who might have knowledge of the industry and the processes involved?

Ms Canini—No. I discussed it with all the other overseas physiotherapists I am in touch with. It was a solution that came from joining all the different ideas.

Senator PARRY—I cannot find it now, but I read in your submission somewhere that you believe that the skills and qualifications of some overseas trained physiotherapists are the same if not better in some circumstances as those of Australians. In what way have you measured your skills against skill sets of others?

Mr Daniele—Emmie was talking about a technique in Italy. Kids there do not have braces, because a physiotherapist over there has a technique which apparently straightens the teeth over a period of time. They do not have braces. There is a technique that in Australia is not even heard of among the physios that I know. They have no idea it is available. It is available and being practised in other countries but it is not recognised or known here. So there are some things that these physios from overseas do that they do not do here. The other thing that it is important to mention is that in Italy a physio is not recognised by the same professional standards as they are recognised here. Doctors do not refer patients to physios in Italy. Am I correct that doctors will not refer a patient to a physio in most cases?

Ms Canini—Yes—not normally.

Mr Daniele—Whereas here it is just par for the course that if you have a sore back or whatever it is recommended you go and see a physio. Over there it is very different. There are techniques from over there that I have heard of that are not practised here that could be used here.

Senator PARRY—Ms Canini, have you worked alongside Australian physiotherapists in places where you could compare your skill sets?

Ms Canini—I worked with an Australian physio in Rome. He was from Melbourne. Because his wife was from Rome he decided to move over there. Actually, he came in and he could work; he did not have to go through all of this. I knew how they work here, so I could compare—I found that out because I did a lot of or several different courses post qualification. Most of them were related to Australian techniques because at the moment they are a bit in fashion in Italy. There was not really a lot of difference between us and I was able to teach him some European techniques, especially French—France is very good at physio—which he did not know. When I came here I had the experience with the Masters, so I could work with teachers, of course, and some other Australian physios. Once here I went to visit clinics. I know some of the physios so I know the system, at this stage. I can say that when I or anyone finishes the primary course they are probably inexperienced. That is normal. It is when you finish and then decide to have more skill—to do courses and to be up to date—that you can create your real knowledge. Do you know what I mean?

Senator PARRY—Yes.

Ms Canini—I think any Australian students coming up from university now do not know how to put their hands on the patients. That is normal. Even the Australian physio association says that. They want an intern year to practise more with the students because they have the same problems—they do not know the procedure. So the only difference to Italy that I can find here is

with, let us say, the bureaucracy of how to approach a patient and how to write things. But that is something you can learn quickly.

Mr KEENAN—When you were discussing the exam you seemed to assert that a lot of the questions were really about testing English as opposed to testing your skills as a physiotherapist. Can you give us some sort of example about what you really mean.

Ms Canini—They give you cases and then there are questions related to the cases. Sometimes the questions are not related to physio. For example, this was in the last exam: a man comes out of his house into his garden in the dark and stumbles on a bike; he has a fracture of the femur. I was thinking, ‘I know everything about a fracture of the femur.’ And the question was: what is the difference between the eye of a young person and an old person in adjusting focus in the dark? I don’t bloody know!

Mr Daniele—Why did the guy fall over? That was the question.

Ms Canini—What do you want me to answer? I just ticked one and had a guess. Even if I wanted to do some reasoning, there are things that you either know or you do not.

Mr Daniele—I saw one response to an email from ACOPRA that just said: basically it is the answer that is ‘most right’. I have done a lot of exams and it is either right or wrong. I do not think there is such a thing as ‘most right’.

Ms Canini—Yes, we were supposed to guess the most correct answer. Who decided that one was the ‘most correct’?

Mr KEENAN—And were they never able to tell you what a passing grade or mark would be?

Ms Canini—No. They said it was from 50 to 55, but it changes every time according to how many do well or badly. They adjust it.

Mr KEENAN—So really they are just interested in a number of physios entering the system in any given year and they make the pass mark in relation to that, which seems extraordinary.

Ms Canini—Yes, I suppose.

Senator EGGLESTON—I am interested in your requests at the end of your submission. Obviously we do have a shortage of physios in Australia. It seems quite ridiculous to me that we are making it difficult—or not in the public interest anyway. Have you gone through your proposal for the committee about assessment through training in hospitals and whether or not you feel that would prove difficult to implement? You must have some knowledge of the public hospital system here. How difficult would it be to set up this assessment through a training in hospitals scheme?

CHAIR—Competency based assessment—that is what you are talking about, isn’t it?

Senator EGGLESTON—Yes.

Ms Canini—I tried to get training. There were always some supervisors ready to give me training if they could. The only organisation that it would require is probably just to set a program where maybe universities, the board or someone else decides what the best program to train an overseas physio is. Physios could do, say, one month in cardiorespiratory, one month in orthopaedy and the other month in neurology, for example. You could give a supervisor, for example, four or five students. They could get training and actually work at the same time with working physiotherapists; it would not be just students learning. I suppose that one supervisor for four or five students is okay. So you would give them that three months and at the end you would give the students an exam to pass—a practical exam without the multiple choice questions—and if they passed they would be fully registered. If they did not pass then the same supervisor could say, ‘You need more skill in this area,’ and you could have, maybe, another month training in that area and then repeat the exam. Something like that.

CHAIR—Senator Eggleston, before you came in Ms Canini was talking about the difficulty in going straight to the hospital because of things like insurance. If it was set up through a university—

Senator EGGLESTON—Or through a health department.

CHAIR—Or the Department of Health; we can ask the department when they come in next. That may be an option but at this stage it appears to be a problem.

Ms Canini—When I was doing the masters, they required me to have temporary registration and it was granted because it was through the university. So I did not have any problem with insurance, but I was still treating patients.

CHAIR—Can I ask you about the peak body ACOPRA. Representatives of ACOPRA have appeared before this committee. I do not believe I am misrepresenting the facts by saying they indicated that they have had some problems previously in addressing the issues you have raised but they believe they are now far more focused and delivery oriented. You have mentioned some of your experience with ACOPRA, but where do you think they are now in terms of serving as a peak body? Have you found any difference in the relationship with ACOPRA?

Ms Canini—They are talking to me a bit more. Because I organised the protest, they gave me the papers for the last exam.

CHAIR—So they are being far more helpful?

Ms Canini—Yes, but it is just a way to please us, I suppose. Again, the last exam was pretty similar, so I do not think they really want to change the system now.

CHAIR—Do you believe—maybe this is an unfair question—that they are trying to inhibit people from passing this exam or is it just that they are not being helpful as a cultural way of behaving?

Ms Canini—I think they are doing it to prevent us from working here. As I said before, it is not because we are from different countries—Australian citizens are in the same situation—but

because there are few physios here, as ACOPRA said, and they want there to be few because they can take advantage of the shortage.

CHAIR—Even though there is a shortage?

Ms Canini—Yes, of course.

Mr Daniele—You have to have an unbelievable command of the English language to pass these exams. If you come from Bulgaria, Argentina or wherever, you would have to study English for 10 years just to understand some of the questions. That is the first thing. The questions are not only unsuitable for physiotherapy; they are unsuitable for the people who are trying to take the exam. You have to understand that Emanuela sometimes has no concept or understanding of what I am saying because there is no word in Italy for that word. So imagine sitting an exam and trying to pass it when you know X amount of English. Imagine being a 20-year veteran of physiotherapy and running a major hospital in Italy or wherever and coming here and not be able to get a job.

I can see a greater problem in that, if people gain a bit of knowledge—as I think Emanuela has—in immigration and what is going on with ACOPRA and all these people, they are going to start getting smart over there and, instead of saying they are physios, they will say they are brick layers. They will come here, get a visa and eventually, through some means, end up in the profession in which they are supposed to be working. That is what I can see happening. There are people leaving the country who are getting smarter about the way the system works, and they have got to find a loophole because otherwise they will never be able to practise the way they want to practise.

CHAIR—In relation to DIMA, you explained why there is no refund on withdrawal as opposed to a refused visa application. Are you aware of this as a standard approach?

Ms Canini—I know that there is a little box you have to tick to say whether you want a refund on not. I do not know why they asked me, because of course I want a refund. I do not remember what I ticked actually.

CHAIR—We appreciate your appearance here today. It has been very helpful. I am sure that you are not an isolated case. In fact, you told us that you have been networking with a number of other students in the same situation as you. So your view is that it is quite widespread?

Ms Canini—Yes, there are probably over a hundred.

CHAIR—Have these people sat their exams again?

Ms Canini—Yes, most of them. We are waiting for the results today.

CHAIR—We will be interested to know what the pass mark generally was for this exam that you are getting the results of today, to see if ACOPRA's work in helping students prepare for this exam has been successful and how it compares to previous pass marks. We will endeavour to find that out.

Ms Canini—I already had some feedback from them, and they think all the people who did the exam for the first time have not passed. I think I have passed because this is my third attempt, so I know all the tricks. That is the only way.

CHAIR—We hope there are no tricks. We hope it is all academically based. Thank you very much for attending today's hearing. I would be grateful if you could send the secretary any additional material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible, such as your pass mark. Thank you very much.

Proceedings suspended from 10.35 am to 10.46 am

MANTELL, Ms Diane Christine, Principal Nursing Adviser, Workforce, Department of Health, Western Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as 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. Is it the wish of the committee that the document submitted by the Department of Health be accepted as a submission to the inquiry and authorised for publication? There being no objection, it is so ordered. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Ms Mantell—Thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning. The main concern for Western Australian Health is that we have now gone to a centralised process for overseas recruitment to assist people in having one point of contact to come into the system. In the area of nursing workforce we are responsible for the nursing, medical, allied health and health science professions. It was apparent that there were several people trying to get into the system to work in WA who were not able to do that. We have now got a mechanism for that to be facilitated.

Our concern relates to the fact that there are requirements for each of the different occupational groups for people to be registered within their own area of occupation. The concern about it is that if you then choose to go and work in another area, you have to get registered, so the duplicate process is magnified. For example, in Western Australia, some nurses do not meet the Nurses Board requirements for Western Australia. However, you can register in Queensland or in Victoria or in the Northern Territory and then come and get mutual recognition and registration in Western Australia.

Dr LAWRENCE—That was supposed to be fixed a decade ago!

Ms Mantell—I think Western Australia is a pretty flash place to live; however, I think an expectation that people have to pay their registration two or three times before they can actually come and work here is an unreasonable expectation. One of the risks for WA as a state is that obviously some of those people will go and work in the state which they have been able to be registered in. Nursing is not unique in that. There are certainly other states that do the same sorts of things. As was expressed in our paper, we are keen to have a national system which recognises competence and legitimately professional people who are able to practise to a standard that you would expect in Australia. Obviously the intent of the processes currently in place are not there to restrict trade, but they are bordering very closely on that process. Our concern is that it does put barriers in the way of people from overseas who are legitimately qualified and trained to work and practise in Western Australia.

CHAIR—We have had evidence before this committee not only of physiotherapists, which your paper talks about, but of a Western Australian citizen studying chiropractic in the US and then coming back here and not being able to practise for similar reasons. It is probably more widespread than we believe. Have you concluded your opening statement?

Ms Mantell—Yes.

CHAIR—I will ask Dr Lawrence if she has any questions, because I think some of the things you were talking about relate to her expertise. Dr Lawrence, you commented that that problem should have been fixed some years ago.

Dr LAWRENCE—The mutual recognition process is 15 years old now. The idea was, as you know, that the states would recognise qualifications that were originally undertaken in other parts of the country. The view was that everyone would have the same, in a sense, approach to those qualifications in terms of exams and registration and so on. Clearly, that has not happened, so you now have the bizarre situation whereby the Nurses Board of Western Australia does not recognise certain skills which are recognised in other states—but registration is recognised there.

Ms Mantell—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—I have seen that happen with psychologists as well. Could you just tell me whether there are any moves to fix that, because talking about a national system for purposes of migrants becomes a bit problematic if we do not even have it fixed for Australian graduates?

Ms Mantell—I met with the Nurses Board of Western Australia and Margaret Watson, who is the chief executive of the board, earlier this year and raised that issue. I said, ‘This is what we have heard; is it correct?’ She said, ‘That is true.’ Margaret was very helpful in the discussion we had and said that there were some limitations in the individual nurses acts that each of the boards function under and that that is what somewhat restricts some of those people from being able to come straight into this state versus other states. But, yes, once they are registered in other states then, through mutual recognition, they can come across. But, again, you still have to complete all the paperwork and—

Dr LAWRENCE—You have to pay the cost et cetera.

Ms Mantell—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—One of the things that is obviously important if a central registration such as the one you describe is going to work is that you need to have strong connections with immigration for starters and, secondly, with the professional groups themselves. In the case of DIMA, do they recognise what you are doing and are they helpfully referring people who have inquiries about practising in the professional fields you cover?

Ms Mantell—Yes. They have been extraordinarily helpful. Since we went to a coordinated process, the WA branch now has a health unit within their own offices here. They facilitate anything that we put forward. We have a contact to deal with now so we can resolve any issues. We participated in their expos in London, Berlin and Amsterdam last year, which was the first time they had done that, and we currently have a proposal up to participate in their expos this year.

They are very helpful and they have been supportive about recognising the areas that we want. For instance, currently the requirement under a temporary visa 457 is that you do not need a criminal record screening other than getting screened once you get here and to be of good

character. WA Health insists that you have the same requirements for criminal record screening as if you were applying for a permanent visa, so the penal certificate that they get is a 10-year clearance. That requires that you show that you have a clear police record for wherever you have been for the last 10 years. They have been really accommodating and the relationship has advanced a lot. When I first came to WA—I came from New South Wales and had to go through the mutual recognition process—DIMA were not as amicable about it, but they have now recognised that there is a skills need, that there is a definitive shortage and they are going out of their way to be helpful.

Dr LAWRENCE—You mentioned in your introduction that the professional registration requirements border on restriction of trade. I have just been asking that question of a Productivity Commission report which I think has examined that question, and we need to visit that as a committee. Are there particular professional bodies that you think—you have mentioned physiotherapy—are using the process of registration as a way of limiting the number of practitioners to the advantage of the existing practitioners?

Ms Mantell—I do not have any cold, hard evidence to put up here, but certainly people have referred instances to us where they believe that has occurred. I do not think it is anyone's actual intent to restrict trade—I feel quite strongly about that—but, on the processes that have been put in place, we received some ministerial correspondence this morning from a radiographer who is trying to go through that same process and has been restricted in being able to apply. I think there are a lot of organisations out there that do that.

One of the concerns we have is that, whilst there are some organisations that actually have a legislative basis for their reasons for doing it—such as organisations for physios, chiropractors, osteopaths and podiatrists—there are some organisations that do not have that legislative basis, so it has become a custom and a practice as to what is acceptable and why that is the case. I think some of those have become quite structured in what barriers are in place to getting people in—such as the time delays from when people can sit their exams to when they get their results, how far in advance you have to apply and that you cannot do practical sessions until after you have got that first part done. It can take 12 months in some professions, realistically, to get through that sort of process.

Dr LAWRENCE—If you pass.

Ms Mantell—If you are lucky.

Dr LAWRENCE—Is the department in a position in a sense to recommend changes to some of the colleges and registration bodies to, for instance, make it possible to do a written exam at any time? There is nothing to prevent that, surely.

Ms Mantell—As I understand it, the occupational therapy board have already moved to that process. They have got a competency based system, so they do not go through a similar process to that of the physio board. We have had some discussions with the Physiotherapists Registration Board and the new physiotherapy bill is to be gazetted in this sitting of parliament, which provides opportunity for things such as conditional registration. We have asked whether the board would be supportive of those things to enable people, who are waiting, to get Australian qualifications approved. As a department, we are very keen to progress some of those things. We

made a big submission to the Productivity Commission and we have had people continually involved with those. We feel very strongly that a duplication of process purely for each of the states to go through the paper trail and get the funding does not necessarily provide us with better trained or skilled practitioners.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is where mutual recognition was supposed to operate effectively so that everyone was operating on the same song sheet. I have one further question which is a little unrelated. It strikes me that, when we look at a lot of these skills shortages and where we are inviting people to come into the country and then making it difficult for them to register, we are to some extent overlooking a very large group of people who are in Australia right now, for instance, in nursing. What number of nurses would you say exists in the community with qualifications whether they are locally trained or with comparable overseas qualifications who are not working as nurses? Do you have a rough idea of that?

Ms Mantell—No, I do not. I am aware that in some of the media certain figures get thrown around. I would have to check. We keep the data for the public system and the nurses board keeps the data for the whole system. With the nursing labour survey forms that are completed each time people get registered, it is very hard to get an accurate picture because you are able to get a 12-month, two-year or three-year registration in nursing. In the Australian Institute of Health Workforce report that talked about nursing numbers, the return for the year of the data that they looked at was only 19 per cent, so it is very difficult to get a picture.

We have had some very good responses to the initiatives that are being put in place by the state government over the last few years where they have made refresher and reregistration programs for nurses and midwives free and funded, run and coordinated through my office. I know in the last 12 months, we have had approximately 100 people coming back into the profession and going through those programs, a large number of whom have then chosen to come back into the system. I think there are opportunities for local nurses and I am not aware—my position prior to this was as a director nursing in one of the health services—that there are people not able to get back into the industry if they have got the qualifications.

Dr LAWRENCE—Although they may resist some of the conditions and wages attached to the profession.

Ms Mantell—Yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—You said you were dealing with the need to correct deficits in health professionals across the board, which includes not only physiotherapists but doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, dentists and so on. We seem to be heavily dependent on overseas trained doctors, and I presume in other areas we need overseas trained professionals in the paramedical fields. It seems to me the whole process is fairly complicated in assessing these people and giving them registration. Would you say there is a case for setting up some sort of special unit within the West Australian Department of Health to assess and expedite the assessment of qualifications and registration of overseas trained health professionals—doctors, physios, OTs, nurses, specialist nurses and so on?

Ms Mantell—Do you mean prior to them going to registration boards?

Senator EGGLESTON—Yes, they would go onto the registration board from that assessment process and they would get some sort of certificate, if you like, which said that they met standards and requirements.

Ms Mantell—I think the direction in which WA Health has moved since October last year, when the office was established in my branch, has streamlined some of those processes. The WA Health website now has on its front page an international clinicians portal to go through. We have combined all the information through that. Whereas before you came in through the overseas trained doctor or nurse parts, we have now combined that to make it one point of entry. So all the professions have a site they can enter through that portal, and whether they are health professionals or in other health sciences does not matter.

We have said there: ‘These are the requirements you need to have for us to assist you to become employed in Western Australia.’ Obviously some of our more remote sites have bigger difficulties in attracting workers, and they are very enthusiastic about having overseas-trained staff. We have met a lot with doctors in the north-west in recent times. I guess it is an evolving beast, but we have tried to put on the website the requirements people need to have so that everyone is very clear about what they need to do. For nurses we are currently putting it up as, ‘These are steps that you need to go through,’ and step 1 is that you need to have things such as the IELTS English test.

We are trying to clarify it to make it as simple as possible. We also want the site to be somewhere that people can go back to. Obviously, if you are making a decision to move from the other part of the world somewhere to here you need to be able to refer to that information to be informed. I think our process has assisted in that, and certainly the feedback from people who have come into the system has been very positive. As a result of the international expos last year, we now have 36 people physically employed. That may not seem to be a lot in the scheme of things, but it has made a difference at the sites we have placed them.

CHAIR—How many?

Ms Mantell—There are 36. We have been able to start streamlining those processes, and the fact that we now have a relationship with DIMA in which they do the health screening and those sorts of things has allowed us to smooth some of the path for those people. Can it evolve further and improve? Absolutely.

CHAIR—Thank you very much; that was a very interesting answer.

Senator PARRY—I think my questions have already been asked, but getting this acceptance and the national system working is a big issue. Is it through MINCO or through COAG?

Ms Mantell—It is through COAG. The outcomes from the Productivity Commission in part went to COAG, and part of the recommendations are also being dealt with by AHMAC and AHWOC, the Australian health workforce groups.

Senator PARRY—Is the current proposed legislative reform, which is now with the state government, going to impact at all?

Ms Mantell—The current bill is the physiotherapy bill.

Senator PARRY—Will it be in concert with what you want to achieve?

Ms Mantell—There is potential in the bill to provide conditional registration. Some would say that provision was there before, but I think it is clearer than it was. The willingness of the organisations to utilise that to its full extent still remains with the physiotherapy board.

Senator PARRY—Thank you.

Senator KIRK—That was my question also: I wanted to better understand the operation of the proposed physiotherapy bill. I was also interested in the temporary registration. From what you were saying, there is nothing within the bill that will mandate that it be left in the hands of the board.

Ms Mantell—No. Certainly in the reporting responsibility and the lines to the minister—as I understand it, the minister can direct the board and say, ‘We believe you should move down this path.’ As far as I am aware that has not occurred a lot in the past, because the previous physiotherapy legislation has been there for some time and has just ticked along. But, if the department thinks that it is not being used to its full scope, I think there is provision for us to contribute feedback about that.

The occupational therapists have already moved on this; their bill was put up first and was one of the standards. As I understand it, areas such as chiropractic, osteopathic and that sort of path will be dealt with in coming bills. Again, it is a very small number of organisations in those occupations that have legislative bases such as that.

Senator KIRK—What is the purpose of the new bill? How does that change things from the existing legislation?

Ms Mantell—It is supposed to provide a broader structure to enable them to be more proactive and creative about how they can assist in bringing people in. I guess one of the limitations in Western Australia specifically is that there is a trans-Tasman mutual agreement that was put together quite some years ago and, as I understand it, Western Australia did not sign that agreement. Obviously that is past politics and I am not sure why that occurred, and I have not been able to find out. But that also places some limitations in conjunction with the bill because, while other states have that agreement, they can have a movement of workers between New Zealand and here. Currently the only foreign country training that the physiotherapy board accept is Canadian training, because they believe it reflects the same training practices that go on here. I am aware that some other states are not particularly pleased about that arrangement, but that is the only country that they currently recognise.

Senator KIRK—And that is automatic recognition for Canadians?

Ms Mantell—Yes, as I understand it. I am not aware yet of any Canadian physios who are working here to ask them.

Senator PARRY—What was the catalyst for the bill in the first place?

Ms Mantell—Apparently it was identified in parliament some time ago that legislation was becoming outdated in language and should all be updated; other than that I do not know.

Senator PARRY—So there was no contemporary issue involved?

Ms Mantell—Our legal office in the department was certainly heavily involved in it, but I am not aware that there was any single issue identified with the streamlining issues we have now with recruitment.

CHAIR—I would like to refer to a number of relevant questions that we need to ask you. In your role as workforce adviser you have already said that there is a shortage of physiotherapists. What are the other medical health professions in which there seems to be a large shortfall?

Ms Mantell—Certainly there is with nursing. The reasons for several of them you will already be very aware of—that is, the ageing workforce, the increase in our ageing population, people accessing more health services et cetera. One of the things that will provide increased opportunities for people to work here is that, because of the implementation of the clinical services framework and the expansion of facilities and services in Western Australia, the Fiona Stanley Hospital in the south and the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in the north and the proposed increase in the size of the Swan and the Rockingham hospitals will all require increased activity and resources to support them.

As far as I am aware, nursing is certainly an issue and physiotherapy is an issue. If you go to the north-west of the state, you will find that most professions have a shortage. Western Australia is not able to generate at this point in time enough medical staff to meet the needs of its own state. Despite all of the issues and barriers, it is a very transportable qualification. Once you get through all the paperwork, you really can go anywhere else to work. Even though we train large numbers of people they still have the opportunity to travel.

Certainly some of the more technical nuclear physiology roles are becoming a more streamlined type of service, and some of the speciality organisations. Obviously the specialist college of surgeons and the colleges of orthopaedics, plastics and those sorts of areas have limited numbers of people who come through, so that has an ongoing impact on Western Australia.

CHAIR—We had an anaesthetist appear before this committee who had had trouble with his registration. Are you aware of that case?

Ms Mantell—I think I may know the one you are talking about.

CHAIR—Is that sort of situation commonplace?

Ms Mantell—The colleges are the final sign-off before the boards in each of the states will recognise somebody's registration. The boards do have a certain number of criteria that people have to meet, but they basically make a final decision and then forward that to the medical board. So the colleges themselves have a large say in who is actually registered.

CHAIR—Are you suggesting that the colleges are more subjective than objective?

Ms Mantell—I think they have very defined criteria they have to meet, but they can look at other areas that are not scripted anywhere—

CHAIR—Beyond qualifications?

Ms Mantell—yes—in order to make their decisions.

CHAIR—You probably cannot say but I will ask you an unfair question anyway. Do you think there is a closed shop mentality in some professions?

Ms Mantell—I think it is possible. There is nothing documented that I can refer to but the reason I say it is that, because a large number of those organisations work in isolation and have not been accountable to other bodies and because they all tend to be state based organisations, they have been able to function within the realms of their own legislation or rules and bylaws. Therefore the terms of reference for how they function has been in a number of cases entirely up to them.

Senator EGGLESTON—That is a good answer.

Ms Mantell—Thank you.

Senator EGGLESTON—Accountability is very important.

Senator PARRY—You should go into politics.

Dr LAWRENCE—I would like to follow up on a question which continues to puzzle me a little—and it may be my ignorance. For various purposes, professionals, including doctors, are allowed to practise where there are severe shortages—as notoriously occurred in Queensland—without very thorough examination of their qualifications. Do you have much to do with the process of overseas trained doctors being placed in, for instance, remote areas, as opposed to the more rigorous program of getting qualifications recognised in order to practise anywhere?

Ms Mantell—Yes, we do now—since the decision that it would all move to my office. I am not quite sure how that occurred. There are certainly very strict criteria about area of unmet need. There is no doubt that people are very nervous since the issues that went on in Queensland. However, what we have said to all the agencies that we have dealt with is that the rules have always been there; that the rules are very clear about what qualifications people need to be able to practise in those areas; that it is very clear that you get referees who are actual clinical referees; and that, if you look at all of the documentation that is presented to you, those issues that occurred should not occur.

Dr LAWRENCE—But it is not as full an assessment as would occur when going through the exams and the registration with the board et cetera?

Ms Mantell—No. We certainly have criteria that all of our professions have to have IELTS—and generally it is a level of seven across the board. The area that we will get an exemption from—and we currently have two before the medical board at the moment—is where they have exceptional clinical skills and the doctor who would be the supervising doctor to whom they

report accepts, from having spoken to those people, that with time and support in the organisation they will actually get the seven. They are running at 6½ now. The criteria is quite strict but, on average, we probably get about 25 to 30 applications from overseas trained doctors through my office to look at each week. Some of them are very appropriately skilled and meet all the criteria and everything we have and then we can forward them on to someone to look at. Some are just testing the water and some just do not meet the criteria at all. We have said that we will assist anyone who has the right requirements and is deemed to be clinically competent—and that is justified and verified through the referee process—through whatever else needs to occur. The overseas trained doctor situation has certainly been highlighted lately but not necessarily for the right reasons.

Senator EGGLESTON—As a supplementary to that, has there ever been any discussion or do you have any plans with regard to introducing an overseas trained paramedic program so that people like physios et cetera could be put in designated areas of unmet need?

Ms Mantell—One of the things we suggested when I met with the Physiotherapists Registration Board last year was whether, if we were able to get people in under conditional registration, the physiotherapy board would consider them able to work under the supervision of a physiotherapist for 95 per cent of the time—which some other organisations have done—to assist those people to assimilate and get the skills needed. One of the concerns has been that the current process of assessing physiotherapists is focused at what you would know when you just come out of college or university and that you would have a very broad area of expertise. A lot of these people have gone on and specialised in whatever their area is and they do not know about the rest of it. We have suggested that, if those people are going to work in a very specialised area when they come out here, why are we not assessing them as specialist people as opposed to looking at the whole gamut of things. The Physiotherapists Registration Board said that they would take that under consideration. We will need to follow it up with them once the bill has been released.

CHAIR—When do you anticipate that bill coming into the parliament?

Ms Mantell—Our legal suggested that it would be done in April—in this sitting—and I have not heard as yet that it has gone through.

CHAIR—You referred earlier to the expos and that you have received 36 people so far. You obviously see the expos as having been successful and have said that you are going to attend others. Did you go to the one in Chennai recently?

Ms Mantell—No, we did not go. I met with representatives from the immigration department when they were here in Perth. We did not go because that was more focused on mining, and we did not believe that the people we would attract there would be appropriate people to come in at this point.

CHAIR—But you see that as a good source of getting prequalified professionals?

Ms Mantell—Yes. One of the reasons that we endorsed the proposal to go last year was because it is a very structured process. You have the framework of DIMA to work in when you go over there, and the follow up, the advertising and the promotion of it is all very coordinated.

The fact that they pre-screen them means that the people who come in are genuinely looking to progress and immigrate. We had in the vicinity of 800 people attend the stand when we were over there, and we have approximately 123 registered nurses and midwives currently on the books in various stages—because obviously they did not all want to come out straight away; some of them want to come in 12 months or whatever. We had approximately 79 doctors identified who came to the stand, and we had approximately 140 allied health and health science professionals put in an expression of interest that they were interested in coming out.

CHAIR—Getting back to physiotherapists and ACOPRA, there is some view, or possibly evidence, that they are becoming more user friendly and tailoring themselves to the needs of the overseas skilled migrant. Would you concur with that, or do you still see problems with this assessment through ACOPRA?

Ms Mantell—I read the transcript from when they spoke to the committee. I think they are very positive initiatives that they are putting in place. I think the fact that they are very focused on the eastern seaboard has some limitations, certainly for Western Australia, because if people have already spent a lot of money getting over here airfares going over there are not cheap when you are not working. That is the concern—that these people are being required to pay a lot of money and they cannot even work, except if they work as a massage therapist, which you can do under the occupations in demand list. These people are continually having to pay out money before they ever get a chance of being employed. I think they are very positive steps, but there is still going to be room to move further.

CHAIR—Do you see an opportunity for physiotherapists—and you heard the evidence of Ms Canini earlier that they are required to go to rural areas as physio assistants—to then have a mentoring period or a competency based assessment after that, with the view of getting permanent residency or recognition and then permanent residency after a certain period of time? Is that a pathway you can see?

Ms Mantell—I think the therapy assistant position is a really practical thing that could get people skilled and used to the Australian health system. Interestingly, therapy assistants are not on the occupations in demand list. Therefore, in coming in under those criteria to get temporary visas that option is not currently there, so the only option that you have, as I understand it, is in fact the massage therapist position. That enables people to do massage type treatments but they cannot do manipulation. The difficult part about that is that I have never, in all of my years of being in health, both on the eastern seaboard and here, known anyone to say that there is a shortage of massage therapist. So the current relevancy of the occupations in demand list is questionable.

Dr LAWRENCE—To your knowledge, how is that list compiled? There are some very odd elements in it. For instance, we have an influx of South African hairdressers, and I do not understand why that is happening.

Ms Mantell—I wrote to DIMA and asked them that after we had had the issue raised about the physiotherapist not getting through the exams last time. I said, ‘How do we go about getting at least an assistant role on there?’ They said that some people go out from the department—and I am happy to forward the emailed information that I got—survey certain organisations and find

out what their needs are, and then they go onto the list. It is apparently reviewed at regular intervals.

I have personally worked in health for something in excess of 20 years, both in critical care areas and in administration, in rural areas and in town, and I have never had a massage therapist employed. So I am not sure where the shortage lies. I am sure there are some areas where it is appropriate, but I am not sure where that would be. I asked whether it was possible to get things such as physiotherapy assistance or occupational therapy assistance onto the list and they said that would be possible, but at this point they did not rate enough points that we would be able to get them into the system to do that.

Dr LAWRENCE—It sounds pretty arbitrary though.

Ms Mantell—Yes.

CHAIR—In relation to information given to potential migrants overseas, are you aware of DIMA's new web portal?

Ms Mantell—Yes.

CHAIR—Can you give us a comment on that? And do you think that overseas trained health professionals are given enough information to start the process and fully understand the various stages to gain registration here? Do you have any suggestions if you do not think so?

Ms Mantell—I am aware of the portal. Have I personally been there? No. Some of my staff have. Once you know where you are going then it is okay to get through, but some have found it quite convoluted. What we have done to improve that is that WA Health have developed an overseas trained doctors manual, which we have on our website, which they can download or read on the screen. That goes through the entire process of what you need to do to immigrate to Australia. It goes through the principles for the registration process, things such as how to get your drivers licence and what banking things you need to do—all the processes that would enable you to transfer as a complete person. We are currently developing an overseas trained nurses and midwives manual. That is a similar style of document which goes through all the things that nurses and midwives would need to do. That will also include enrolled nurses, although there is not currently a shortage of enrolled nurses in this country and they are not on the skills shortage list, but sometimes we get—

CHAIR—Is that correct, from your experience?

Ms Mantell—Certainly in the metro it is not an issue. In the country sites it is to some extent. But they can come in and go to the country. What we sometimes find is that somebody is immigrating and their partner is an enrolled nurse, so we are putting all the information on there for those people. After we have this manual completed, which will hopefully be online by the end of this financial year—we are just in the final stages of proofreading—we will then develop an allied health and health sciences manual for the same, which will be fairly complex because all the different professions have different requirements, but we will deal with that.

CHAIR—Finally, in relation to people coming to upskill et cetera and on-site work so that they can be tested for competency et cetera, it has been suggested to the committee on previous occasions that possibly a similar arrangement to HECS could be arranged for people who want to study on the job as such. Do you see that as a possibility?

Ms Mantell—Yes. Anything that assists those processes is a good thing. This morning I learnt about a process through the Department of Education, Science and Training. There is apparently a program called Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained professionals which provides funding to meet the cost of exams and competency based assessments which are required for eligible overseas trained professionals to gain registration in their chosen profession in Australia.

Dr LAWRENCE—Is it a secret document?

Ms Mantell—Obviously. That has come in response to an issue we had where an overseas trained radiographer has been unable have his qualifications accepted here, and that response came from the office of the Hon. Julie Bishop, MP.

Dr LAWRENCE—What is the title of that thing again? I have never heard of it. Has anyone else heard of it?

Ms Mantell—It is the Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained professionals—ASDOT—a program which provides funding to meet the cost of exams and competency based assessments.

CHAIR—We will try and find out some more about that as well.

Dr LAWRENCE—I have a final question. Obviously, as people come in—nurses probably being the biggest single category for the Western Australian health department—it is important that they are retained in the profession, using skills that they have been recruited for. Do you have any idea of what happens to them? Is there any sort of post-migration follow-up to see whether they do in fact stay in the profession and what proportion of them do?

Ms Mantell—Prior to our office taking responsibility for it, each of the health services did their own programs and mechanisms. We used the labour agreement in a large number of cases to bring those people in. That was prior to DIMA being more supportive and progressive with the business sponsorships. At that point it was basically state-wide and individually managed by all the 22 health services that we previously had. Now that it is coordinated out of the Organisational Development Division we are following up with those people. And because WA Health is the sponsoring organisation but the health services are the employers we have required that each of the health services that have these people, if they move somewhere else or want to go back to wherever they came from, have to let us know. So we are going to track them now; I think we will get really valuable information by asking: did it work for you? If not why not? What sort of things work? And we will be able to support those people.

It is apparent that they are really comfortable having someone in our office to come back to if they have an issue because they do not feel that they have gone to wherever they are and then been lost. Some commented that the system that we have put in place is much more straightforward than those in some other states and countries they had worked in; so that was

good for us. All of those that we have so far brought in—some have been here since last November—are still out there working. Even though that is a very short period of time—

Dr LAWRENCE—It is encouraging.

Ms Mantell—Yes. Certainly, in New South Wales some years ago when they brought a lot of Irish nurses in some, after two months, were not able to be found. So this is an improved system, I think, on that point.

Senator PARRY—And Leone nurses go missing too, don't they?

CHAIR—Well, the Sierra Leone athletes, certainly. In relation to our terms of reference about impediments, do you have any final comments for this committee in terms of what we are trying to achieve? Do you have any suggestions about where you believe any further impediments are and what we could be recommending to make it easier and more timely for people to come here, not only from a visa point of view but also from a skills recognition point of view?

Ms Mantell—Yes. I think I have covered all the areas that relate to the duplication of services and the registration issues. One area that has come to light in the last few days is in relation to this radiographer that has come to or is attempting to work in Australia. Through DEST there was a concern raised that the assessment of the qualification is through the Australian Institute of Radiography, which is for overseas trained radiographers seeking employment in Australia. That group has been designated the responsibility. The standards set for registration of the professions are the responsibility of states and territories and the management of that registration process has been allocated from DEST to AIR.

What is concerning is that the minister is now stating that DEST has no authority to intervene in internal processes and decisions made by that processing authority. That is somewhat of concern because if we are saying that we have concerns about processes out there performed by individual agencies, if there is a delegated responsibility from a department to an organisation such as AIR, then it is of concern that that is it—that it is hands off. Our concern, in conjunction with the other issues that relate to the individual authorities, is that that is one area that government potentially have control of and it appears that they have stepped back from it.

CHAIR—Interesting. We might well try to find out if they do wish to be so hands off.

Ms Mantell—My director was not there this morning, but I am happy to ask if this document can be forward to you, either in-confidence or for general information, because it has been sent back to the individual person who applied, who still does not have their registration sorted. But it is of concern if that is what happens—if it is delegated out to some other organisation.

CHAIR—Particularly when we are trying to get a national approach through COAG and suddenly say, 'Sorry, we will give it back to you and not have any control.' Ms Mantell, we have really appreciated your evidence. Thank you for attending today's hearing. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also undertake to send the secretariat any additional material, which you have said you might, as soon as possible. Thank you very much.

Ms Mantell—My pleasure. Thank you.

[11.38 am]

THOMAS, Ms Claire, Executive Officer, Minerals Institute, Chamber of Minerals and Energy

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

Ms Thomas—I will certainly be happy to make a brief statement. Obviously the minerals and energy sectors are significant utilisers of skilled migration. Given the current economic environment and the number of projects which are both active at the moment and pending over the coming years, we anticipate that the need for skilled migration for the resources sector will be a continuation of a domination in looking at addressing skills issues. Obviously skilled migration is just a component of what the resources sector does to address skilling issues, but obviously today we are here talking about migration issues. The utilisation from the resources sector is significant.

CHAIR—Thank you. It is obvious that there are shortages, as you have just said, in various areas. In terms of the chamber, where are the main shortages of skills? Could you name them?

Ms Thomas—Certainly. We have just undertaken a piece of research with the National Institute for Labour Studies. It is an outlook for 2015, with an economic background to it. Whilst it only covers the five major commodities here in Western Australia, it indicates a significant shortfall, of around 50 per cent, for the resources sector over the coming 10 years. Those shortages are within both the trades and the technical engineering positions, covering all the components. In the trades positions we have shortages currently and anticipated into the future, particularly of electricians, diesel fitters and diesel mechanics, operators, process operators and the like. For unskilled labour, we have shortages of truck drivers and the like, as those positions are becoming more skilled. We also have significant shortages of mining engineers, metallurgists and geologists and in the technical roles which are utilised on the facilities.

CHAIR—It has been said to us and in the media that there are a number of mining operations in Western Australia that are unable to proceed due to lack of skilled personnel. Is that your experience and, if so, could you expand on it?

Ms Thomas—My understanding is that lack of skills is one component of the reason projects have not proceeded and that those projects are in the minority at this time. The lack of skills is a component which is adding expense, as are construction expenses and the like, which are also deemed to be an issue for new projects proceeding in certain areas. So I would say the lack of skills is one component but not the whole component for projects not proceeding.

CHAIR—It has even been suggested that this lack of skills is responsible for a drop in the state's economic growth. Even though the state is going gangbusters, the growth could be greater if we did not have the skills shortage. Would you concur with that?

Ms Thomas—There is certainly discussion and evidence around that further expansion could proceed in a far quicker manner if there were greater access to labour, yes.

CHAIR—I might have some more questions later.

Senator KIRK—Thank you for your submission, Ms Thomas. I wondered whether or not you have come across any particular barriers to the recognition of skills and qualifications gained overseas in your sector—barriers that are presented to those who are hoping to come here to work?

Ms Thomas—There are examples of electricians in particular having difficulty getting into the country and then, once they are in the country, having significant difficulties getting licensing to operate. There are examples of delays of up to nine months for individuals who are residing in Western Australia and are unable to get licensing. Whilst that is not directly a skilled migration component it is a packaging component, in relation to people's expectations. There is also significant evidence in terms of skills recognition for metallurgists and geologists. They currently travel through the VETASSESS process, which means they are a 50-point skill. For those who want to independently migrate on those qualifications it is near on impossible. We have significant requirements for mets and geos at the same time. The other component is that, when an organisation does want to deal with TRA, the TRA office is only open for public phone calls for a very short period of time and on certain days of the week. I think that prohibits the speeding through of the process of recognising skills.

Senator KIRK—We have had quite a lot of evidence in relation to TRA. The chair has a particular interest in TRA. He might want to follow that up.

CHAIR—I might give somebody else a chance to do that today.

Senator KIRK—No, that is your pet; I would not want to stamp on that ground. Ms Thomas, what are the major source countries for skills that are in demand by WA at the moment?

Ms Thomas—We have undertaken a piece of research on that as well through the ANU and Monash University, and that will be released in the next couple of months. That indicates that we as a resources sector are traditional recruiters. We are very conservative in our skilled migration, and we tend to go to traditional markets. The US, the UK and South Africa are the predominant high hit countries for skilled migration. We are obviously recognising that they are significant markets for many other countries and that they also have existing skills shortage requirements, so we are working with industry to expand their depth and breadth. We have been to India with DIMA twice. Industry is also planning on going to Manila, particularly to look at people with trade skills.

Senator KIRK—On that, I understand that you went along to some international expos organised by DIMA. Can you tell us what your organisation's experience has been with those? Do you find them valuable?

Ms Thomas—We as an organisation have only been to the two, one in Calcutta and the other in Chennai. Chennai last year was a very broad market. We were representing the resources sector and looking for technical people. There were a lot of accountants and IT people who were not high hit items for us, and there was nobody else there who was recruiting those skills, either, so some of the Indians who participated had disappointed expectations. I have to say, however, that this year's expo in Calcutta was a very successful event. The target market was obviously resource related. We gained significant benefits from that. Our companies have had significant spin-offs from the engineers and the like—and the tradies—who attended that expo. I would highly recommend specialisation of some kind and bringing industries together, so that the attraction of the like type skills that you are after is high and there is a high hit ration.

Senator KIRK—Matching supply with demand.

Ms Thomas—Yes. It was very well regarded.

Mr KEENAN—There is a good understanding in Western Australia that skills shortages are impacting heavily on new projects. Is there a general feeling within the chamber that things are at least moving forward and that the problem is getting solved as a result of that understanding, or are we not seeing any progress at all?

Ms Thomas—There is certainly progress. Getting mining engineers and the like on to the MODL has been significant progress for us. Obviously, our education and training programs are starting to give a return; our careers marketing programs and the like are starting to give return. But I do not believe it is easing up. It is probably going to get more challenging before it gets easier. All industries are now stating that the skills shortage is one of the critical issues that they need to deal with—in conjunction with other components. But it is the number one item at this point in time. When you have large enterprises stating that the skills shortage is a significant issue, the impact on smaller entities and SMEs below them is even greater. Attraction and retention and the mobility of the work force are significant issues for the sector and will continue to be for some time to come.

Mr KEENAN—So people are just increasing competition for existing workers?

Ms Thomas—There has been a significant increase in competition for workers. The competition in other industry sectors for what we would normally have classed as our traditional workers is also increasing. Traditionally, when a mining engineer graduated, 99 per cent of them would go from university into our industry sector. That is not the case today. A significant proportion—25 per cent of them—will go into the consulting businesses and a whole myriad of services around us. Our supply is being diluted by other competing enterprises.

Mr KEENAN—What sort of response have your members who have brought in overseas labour got from their existing workforce?

Ms Thomas—Most of the labour that comes in is on a 457 visa, particularly in the professions. They are significant users of 457s. Because the numbers have not traditionally been great and they are from like type countries, the assimilation of those people is generally quite good. Where the challenges sometimes tend to arise is in the regional centres. By 'regional', I do not necessarily mean Kalgoorlie and the like; I mean far more remote components. We need to

ensure that the facilities and the cultural awareness programs are in place before a person from a background where English is their second language lands on that site.

Senator PARRY—Following on from an answer you gave to Mr Keenan a moment ago about getting engineers on the MODL, what process did you follow and how much did your industry do to get that added to the list?

Ms Thomas—We have lobbied DEWR and DIMA for some time in terms of getting skills recognition.

Senator PARRY—What is ‘some time’? Are we talking about years or months?

Ms Thomas—For about 18 months. We have been seeking recognition that, whilst the resources sector is a relatively small employer compared to other industry sectors, our skill needs are significant, with economic significant return to both state and country. We had some initial challenges. There was not a belief that we had skills shortages, because we were chasing hundreds or thousands rather than \$50,000. We had some challenges with building awareness and understanding of what the skills needs of the resources sector were and the quantities of those we needed. It was more an advocacy and lobbying activity, raising awareness and education and to move through to an outcome. We applied for and received Karen Crockford, who is a regional outplacement person residing in our office. That has also helped it all come together, to build a greater realisation and understanding of the sector.

Senator PARRY—Is she a departmental employee?

Ms Thomas—She is. She is a DIMA employee who will reside with us for 18 months.

CHAIR—Can you tell us more about the success or otherwise of the industry outreach officers? That is whom you are talking about, isn’t it?

Ms Thomas—Yes, it is.

CHAIR—How successful has that program been for you?

Ms Thomas—It has been very successful for us. Our industry base has individual issues with skilled migration and some of the challenges associated with that. The beauty of having Karen on board is that she has given us a lot of policy advice: what the meaning of the policy is, how to utilise that policy for our industry base and how, if we wanted to change the policy, we would go about lobbying—what the items are to lobby for some of those policy changes. So, from our perspective and from industry’s perspective, it has been highly valuable from a policy aspect. For the small to medium organisations it has been particularly good for breaking down the barriers around skilled migration not necessarily being hard or rigorous—that you just need to understand the process for procuring skills from overseas.

CHAIR—Has this industry outreach officer helped to expedite overseas skilled migrants coming here?

Ms Thomas—She has, particularly for small to mediums. She has broken the barriers and helped to expedite people coming into the country, particularly in the trade area. We as an industry are looking for semi-skilled workers in significant numbers and Karen is working through that with us at the moment.

Senator PARRY—Can you give us examples of the semi-skilled workers you are looking for?

Ms Thomas—They would probably be cert II. They would probably be generic workers, such as truck drivers, welders—who are challenging to get into the country—and the like, so non-traditional trades. We are looking for people who have a skill base that is relevant and valid to our industry base.

Senator PARRY—So a more definitive skill which does not fit within a broad qualification.

Ms Thomas—That is right. It does not fit in ASCO and the like.

Senator PARRY—Do you think there is a great shortage around the country in the mining area?

Ms Thomas—From what I understand, there is in the construction phase. It is not something we are looking for on a permanent basis; it is something we are looking for on a temporary basis, in the construction phase in particular.

Senator PARRY—Just going back to the MODL, you said it took 18 months of intense lobbying and activity. Are there any other positions that you would like to see on the MODL?

Ms Thomas—Obviously we are pursuing metallurgists and geologists at the moment, but they are 50 pointers so they cannot go on the MODL. We are working with AusIMM to see if they can become the assessing body for those two skills. We can therefore get those skills elevated to a 60 pointer, which makes it easier for migration and then, obviously, as competition onto the MODL.

Dr LAWRENCE—I want to take a slightly different direction. One of the recent publications by the ABS on skills shortages in WA identified a number of reasons for shortages of people in the areas you are talking about, one of which was reduced participation in education and training. The committee received evidence from Engineers Australia that there were 1,800 eligible applicants for university places to study engineering who were denied places because there were no government funded places and that that was a significant problem, especially in light of the fact that two engineering schools in regional areas had closed down. Could you give me some indication of the industry's view of its responsibility for training, in this case, Australians who already live here, as far as urging governments to provide more training places and providing apprenticeships? That is a longstanding problem as well. It is a bit of a no-brainer in some of these areas of skills shortage. It has been coming down the track for a long time.

Ms Thomas—It certainly has been coming for a long time, and industry and governments need to put their hands up to that. CME has been involved in education and training for around 20 years. Our profile shifted in the last 18 months to two years from being more of an

information service, where it was good to spend time with primary school kids and give them broadbased information, to a far more targeted approach recognising that the return on the broadbased information share was not generating anything specific: today they are going to be a mining engineer; tomorrow they are going to be a fireman because they are at the fire station. Our program is multifaceted and five pronged. One component is very much marketing, careers and the like, and you will see an amount of careers advertising around Western Australia at the moment. There are a number of CDs directly targeting mining engineers, metallurgists and geologists in particular, which have just been released by the Minerals Institute into universities and secondary schools. Another component of our website and a generic DVD is careers, trades and a myriad of components.

We work closely with both the federal government and the state government in school based programs. To give you a quick snapshot, those school based programs create resources curriculum for building awareness within student interface that the resources sector is a significant player within Western Australia in particular and also utilising a professional development with teachers, ensuring that they have contemporary understanding of the resources sector, technology projects and a myriad of other components.

We then move into the TAFE and VET arena. Historically our training and apprenticeship numbers go with the economic flow of the industry. We are currently working with industry increasing and maintaining a base level of apprenticeships, regardless of economic turn, and we have seen significant increase in traineeships. Underground operators and a myriad of components have now been made into traineeships, so there is significant utilisation of traineeships. One of the components that industry also does—some do it particularly well; others do it perhaps not so well—is enable a broad number of apprenticeships to enter the arena and release a component of them into the broader market place at the end of their four years. We are trying to stimulate a greater flow in and then a component of release to ensure that there is a broad coverage across the component. There is obviously significant focus on Indigenous students as well, ensuring that Indigenous kids are going into traineeships and apprenticeships, and also looking at the recent creation of what we call WAIC, Western Australian Indigenous Cadetship, to stimulate students from years 9, 10 and 11 to consider university as an entrance pathway from the Indigenous kids' point of view.

Then we go into universities, which is a different ball game again. We are working with the federal government and the universities under the auspices of the Minerals Institute to see if we can create a centre of excellence around minerals related education. It is very fragmented here in WA—three unis compete, and that is detrimental to attraction, mass numbers, economic return and the like. Sure, they are all doing well today but, as soon as the industry has the next step, they will probably be the first courses on the chopping block due to student numbers. So we are working with the universities to see if we can build a collaborative model representing minerals ed and linking that into R&D for intellectual return, economic return and obviously critical mass.

Dr LAWRENCE—On the fact that these non-traditional trades are effectively slightly more skilled than labouring jobs, where there are presumably shortages in remote areas, what causes that shortage? These are jobs that should easily be filled.

Ms Thomas—In the regional areas, and I will talk in this instance about the Pilbara, where it was highlighted, there is a program called School Apprenticeship Link, or SAL, as it is known in

Western Australia. That program is really good but, when it came down to looking at kids' entry points in years 10, 11 and 12 to apprenticeships, it indicated that there were significant literacy and numeracy issues within the student base in some regional centres to leverage through the supply of education to enable these kids to make the leap from school into a traineeship or an apprenticeship. That is a significant issue within regional centres.

Dr LAWRENCE—Sure, but you should be able to recruit people from Perth to go and drive trucks and do all those sorts of things.

Ms Thomas—You can—

Dr LAWRENCE—I am not suggesting there is some obstacle that is up there and not in their heads—there may be those obstacles as well—I am just wondering if you have any view about that.

Ms Thomas—There are significant numbers of people that move and do FIFO: 52 per cent of the resources sector in Western Australia are FIFO workers. FIFO is not for everybody and it is for a certain period of time, and obviously there are regional applications and regional opportunities as well. Where industry is coming from is that they are looking to build and develop sustainable communities. Whilst FIFO is a component of that, it is about working on education and it is about working with local communities to bolster, and see if we can actually get, the workforce from the regional centres rather than—

Dr LAWRENCE—That is a big change in policy.

Ms Thomas—my word, it is a significant change—having them come in from other metropolitan centres. So, yes, we still recruit lots of people from metropolitan areas, but that is not necessarily a long-term answer for these operations in regional centres.

Dr LAWRENCE—This group of people that you mentioned would likely be recruited for the construction phase of some of the big projects: that is already happening, with welders and others coming in from various parts of the region on short-term visas—effectively, a guest worker program. Do you see any social problems emerging from that, quite apart from the question of skills recognition?

Ms Thomas—There are always social problems when you introduce large proportions of—

Dr LAWRENCE—Because they will be turfed out again once the construction phase is finished; there is no doubt about that.

Ms Thomas—I think it is about the way that the recruitment is handled at the first interface, to ensure that expectations are true and delivered against in relation to people moving or making a change. A lot of the workers that do come are mobile workers anyhow; they are chasing work and they do it around the globe. It is not just Western Australia in that regard. Yes, it does have social implications for regional towns: a greater influx of people means greater use of facilities and infrastructure—

Dr LAWRENCE—Their families come with them, don't they?

Ms Thomas—Yes, they do. So it certainly has a kick-on effect on the whole community in terms of its ability to support and maintain the bigger community that is there for the construction phase.

CHAIR—The member for Kalgoorlie, Barry Haase, would be very disappointed if I did not ask you a question, to follow up on Dr Lawrence's question, about zonal rebates attracting people to remote working areas. Do you have a view on that?

Ms Thomas—Do I have a view on zonal rebates?

CHAIR—Would they be helpful?

Ms Thomas—I do not work in the tax arena, so that is not my forte and I could probably not give you a clear answer. But zonal rebates have certainly been discussed and they would be a good way of providing some relief to regional centres, yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—Last May, I went to the Minerals Council seminar in Canberra where there was quite a lot of focus on involving Indigenous people in mining operations in regional areas. While you have said something about that already, is there anything more that you would like to add in terms of the mining industry's broad objectives for bringing more Indigenous people into their employment structure and training them for various positions?

Ms Thomas—It is a significant focus for the industry as a whole. They have set benchmarks, and the size of an Indigenous community within the wider community is their benchmark for the workforce. So in some areas it is 12 per cent and in other areas it is 20 per cent and the like. Argyle is a classic example of success with the Indigenous communities, having a workforce that is around 45 per cent Indigenous, which is second to none. Some of the other entities are working on that and building their Indigenous workforces. There are some challenges associated with it, because in the haste to hit benchmarks those benchmarks are moving around. So it is about growing the pool of skilled people, which is about looking at sustainable communities. Industry is putting in programs to look at Indigenous communities to see if we can go prior to birth, basically, in terms of looking at the long-term sustainability of training, education, nurturing and a myriad other programs to then get them into the workforce. That is not to say they have given up on today's Indigenous people; that is not it at all. But it is certainly about looking at longer term interfaces rather than just short-term solutions.

Senator EGGLESTON—So you mean taking an interest in secondary education, numeracy and literacy, bringing people through the school system—

Ms Thomas—Yes.

Senator EGGLESTON—to reach a higher level of basic education before going into training for apprenticeships and so on?

Ms Thomas—Yes, that is right. Most of the organisations, particularly in regional areas, offer top-up after-school components—where mentoring, education and training are top-up facilities—to encourage students to remain at the educational forefront and to get them into employment as soon as they are ready.

Senator EGGLESTON—That is still very much in its infancy, I guess?

Ms Thomas—Each organisation is quite developed. Some regions are far more developed than other regions. Rio, you would say, is not in its infancy. It is well down the pathway. The likes of other smaller organisations are in their infancy.

Senator EGGLESTON—What sort of percentage of Indigenous people does Rio employ?

Ms Thomas—I do not know across Rio. Obviously Argyle is a Rio organisation but I do not know the specific figure, I am sorry.

Senator EGGLESTON—Okay. Argyle is obviously the best example. What about Hamersley and BHP in the Pilbara?

Ms Thomas—BHP in the Pilbara are obviously chasing 12 per cent employment figures. My understanding is that they are not at 12 per cent at this time. I do not know the specific figures as to BHP and Rio for the Pilbara region but their aspiration is 12 per cent.

Dr LAWRENCE—Just recently a specific example has been drawn to my attention. I do not know whether you are aware of it or have any comment but I would just like to inform you of an oil rig where a previously Australian and, it has to be said, proudly unionised workforce is being replaced by an overseas non-unionised workforce. It would appear, I have not yet confirmed this and I will for the committee, under the banner of the skills shortage that you were referring to earlier, these are not highly trained but occupational health and safety trained, particularly in the management of the rig. There is a contract to one of the big majors who apparently appears to be using the skills shortage as a blind, if you like, for changing the nature of the workforce from Australian unionised to non-Australian, non-unionised, which concerns me, frankly, for a whole range of reasons.

Ms Thomas—I totally agree.

Dr LAWRENCE—I wonder, if I were to draw this to the attention of the Chamber of Minerals and Energy, whether they might be prepared to examine it.

Ms Thomas—I do not know of the circumstances but I would be certainly interested in finding out more about that because that has many ramifications associated with it.

Dr LAWRENCE—I will confirm the details.

CHAIR—I have some questions before we close. Senator Kirk is correct; I do have an interest in Trades Recognition Australia. You did mention that they have difficulty in telephone times. I understand they are open for a certain period of time from Mondays to Wednesdays and a different period of time on Thursdays to Fridays but there is a telephone service if they are not open. There is the fact that Western Australia does not actually have an office now of Trades Recognition Australia but you have to go to the eastern seaboard to deal with them, so you either have to go there personally or appear by video teleconference. They tell us in evidence before us that their performance has improved. Is that the experience that your industry has? Is there an improvement in their service? If there is, has it come from a very low base? What else could you

suggest in terms of Trades Recognition Australia? Are they now servicing the needs of overseas skilled migrants? Should there be an office in Western Australia? Could you expand further on it?

Ms Thomas—I can only expand from anecdotal evidence because we are not users of TRA ourselves. My understanding from industry is that TRA have reduced their time frames of processing and that they have more people available to them to churn through some of the work and the backlog that they have. My understanding from industry is that, whilst TRA has improved, you can pay a fee for fast processing of applications but there does not seem to be any faster process for that pathway versus the normal pathway. I do not have recent experience as to whether or not that is fact or fiction now. With daylight saving there is a three-hour time difference and with TRA being only open for a small period of time on each day for phone contact it is quite difficult for Western Australian industry but obviously we work through those issues with TRA. I think TRA has improved and I would like to see them continue to improve, particularly in relation to customer service. It is the customer service component—opening their hours up a little bit more, continuing to process applications in a timely manner and the like.

CHAIR—How about an office in Western Australia?

Ms Thomas—An office in Western Australia would be fantastic. I do not think anyone would say otherwise to that.

CHAIR—They also tell us that they have been subcontracting out the assessments on behalf of Trades Recognition Australia. Are you aware of that—who does it, how much they charge et cetera?

Ms Thomas—No, I was not aware that they had outsourced.

CHAIR—Neither were we. They say they do.

Ms Thomas—Maybe that is where the faster turnaround is occurring. I was not aware that that had occurred.

CHAIR—So you do not know which organisations they are subcontracting to?

Ms Thomas—No.

CHAIR—Legislation is before the parliament with respect to providing special visas in remote areas where it is difficult to find apprentices to fill apprenticeships. None have been issued yet, but there is a company in Queensland that is providing this service. Do you see that as a valuable service? There have been some concerns about taking the jobs of young Australians. The fact is that it contains conditions about that not being allowable. Do you have any comment to make on whether that is a good policy?

Ms Thomas—Our industry will probably be a very minor, if at all, user of apprenticeship visas. The industry does not have a problem with attracting candidates for their apprenticeship roles.

CHAIR—Really?

Ms Thomas—No, they don't, which is amazing. They vary in quality in regional centres and the like, but they don't actually have difficulty in attracting numbers to their apprenticeship programs. So I would anticipate, and industry has basically stated, that it will be an anomaly to take up one of those visas at this point. That is not to say it is not good to have them, because if you have non-Australians working in your industry and they have a child who wants to do an apprenticeship but they cannot do it due to visa restrictions, obviously there is a pathway there via that route. But actually attracting and going overseas to market for international apprentices, from my understanding, is not on the board.

CHAIR—People from the steel industry association in Western Australia visited me in my office and said that, because of the lack of skilled workers, rather than bring skilled workers to Australia, they are sending much of their structural and prefabrication work overseas to places such as the Philippines. Are you aware that, because there still appears to be a lack of skilled workers in Western Australia, work is actually going offshore?

Ms Thomas—There are pockets and packets of work which I understand are worked on 24/7 here in Western Australia and in other countries. So I am certainly aware of the global competition for work and the contractual strategies that sit, whereby some components or pockets of work are created, designed and constructed overseas.

CHAIR—There being no further questions, thank you very much for attending today's hearing. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript and, if necessary, corrections can be made. I would be grateful if you could also, as soon as possible, send the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide.

Ms Thomas—Certainly.

Proceedings suspended from 12.13 pm to 1.28 pm

BURGES, Ms Ricky, Chief Executive Officer, Western Australian Local Government Association

HIGHFIELD, Mrs Lydia, Recruitment and Selection Consultant, Western Australian Local Government Association

WHITE, Mr Simon, Employee Relations Service Manager, Western Australian Local Government Association

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

Ms Burges—I would like to make a short statement and also seek your indulgence to provide a written submission afterwards. We are currently compiling some data. I would have liked to have had it available today to put on the table, but it is not quite ready. If we can, we would very much like to provide something later.

CHAIR—That is fine.

Ms Burges—The association, in conjunction with Local Government Managers Australia, sits on a working party which looks at skills shortages in the sector and in the industry across Australia. In Western Australia our association works with the Local Government Managers Australia, the Department of Local Government and Regional Development and other professional bodies on a working party which is, again, focused on skills shortages. We have run information sessions with the departments of immigration and workplace relations. On a more anecdotal basis—I do not have the written submission with me—we have embarked on a process of going around to meet with our members over the last few months in particular.

Whilst we have been aware of the growing problem with skills shortages and the issues around immigration et cetera, last year we ran a forum at which we brought together a number of groups to caucus the issue and look at the problems for councils. On our visits in the last few months, the first thing on the agenda for every council is skills shortages and staff problems—what they are doing and how they can address that. So we are internally looking at a number of strategies, even to the point of running some TV commercials on career options to try to bring to people's awareness the wide variety of occupations and interests in careers in local government. To give you an example of the lengths to which some of our members have gone, a technical manager with one of our members in the northern country area—a planner, I think; but I am not sure—comes in from Singapore on a fly-in, fly-out basis. In Esperance they have imported somebody from the United Kingdom. In Augusta, Margaret River, they have imported somebody from South Africa and another person from India. In Broome, I understand they have imported somebody from the United Kingdom. That is in an effort to address those vacancies.

Talking to the ABC yesterday in Sydney, our president suggested there are more than 100 vacancies at the moment. That figure came from a presentation that the president of Local Government Managers Australia gave to a conference in Geraldton in March in which he indicated that, as far as he was aware, and according to a survey that he had been involved in, there were at least 100 vacancies at that time. I do not know what the number is. I am trying to find out so that I can have a more accurate understanding of it. But I do know anecdotally that every council we talk to is facing this issue. As I will say today in a radio interview, we need to start looking at other ways. Immigration is obviously one way of dealing with it, but it is an immediate and short-term solution and we need to look at other solutions. So some of our committees and workplaces are doing that. I do not know that we want to add to that. I think that, as an opening statement, that is perhaps enough to start a conversation.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing before the committee. We look forward to your further submission. One of the reasons I asked you to appear before the committee was that I am aware that local government authorities in my electorate have trouble in retaining engineers, accountants et cetera. When the committee sat in Perth, local government had not been invited. I went to a forum recently with the minister and, except for the health department, it was all mining. As a result, I thought that, obviously, if your local government associations and councils are losing staff to mining, you are going through the same pain as others. So I thought it would be interesting to see, firstly, the extent of that—to which you have alluded—and, secondly, any solutions or impediments. That is what the committee is inquiring into. I have mentioned two areas of skills that you are possibly short of. Can you give us an example of other areas and of how you believe they are being addressed at the local level and maybe even at the national level?

Ms Burges—Nationally, with the committee we are working with, I do not see that there are many differences, because the local group feeds into that. I am involved with what is happening locally and I also accompany the president to the national meeting, and I am aware of the conversations that are held there. For instance, planning and the planners is a very difficult and critical area. Building surveyors, engineers, accountants, environmental health and information technology are some of the areas that are finding it really difficult at the moment. I understand that it is not only white collar areas but horticultural, recreational and child-care areas. Again, as an anecdotal comment, when councils have problems trying to find people to work as gardeners or to work in swimming pools, we know we have a problem. They are the areas people will most readily respond to because they are jobs that are normally looked forward to, and we are having trouble focusing people in those areas.

In terms of what has been done to address it, I will make a few comments and perhaps hand over to Mr White and Mrs Highfield to comment. I think that a No. 1 area is for the recruitment process to be looked at, and we have been trying to focus our members on appropriate recruitment processes and on making sure that we get the right people in the right jobs. We are also focusing on trying to make sure that councils and our members understand about creating workplaces of choice so that the conditions of employment are such that people not only want to go there but, once they are there, want to stay there. We are doing everything possible to ensure that, on the ground, we have the right sort of environment. But the fact is that it is a very mobile and volatile work environment, and people are attracted to salaries in other places of work.

As we found when we had a forum, there are many factors. It is not just one thing; there are lots of factors. Salaries have a place. People of the generation coming through now do not have

the attitude that it is work for life—one job in their work experience. They feel very confident and comfortable about having an experience for a certain length of time and then moving on to travel or to new experiences and things like that. A situation people might have been satisfied with, say, 10 or 15 years ago will now have people saying, ‘No, that’s not good enough; we don’t like that and we won’t put up with it. If it’s not done in a certain way, we’ll move on, or if there aren’t conditions that suit me with my children, my family, my aspirations—or whatever it is—that become part of the agenda we are talking about.’ In my experience to date and my involvement in this, there are some short-term fixes that we can put in place and there are some longer term solutions that we need to work towards. At the moment councils that are finding themselves in situations where resourcing generally through every aspect of what they do is critical find that it is very difficult to justify increasing salaries and things like that, so that becomes an issue. At this point I will hand over to Mr White to make comments and then Mrs Highfield.

Mr White—As Ricky has alluded to, there is a variety of different reasons for skills shortages. Some, such as in the trades and manual work, are because of the resources boom. That is obviously cyclical. Local governments are not able to match the wages, but that is more of an external issue. I think the industry recognises that some of the reasons for the skills shortages are internal, such as the promotion of the industry not having been performed very well over the years. The perception that people have of local government is not of it being a vibrant industry. A lot of people do not understand the diversity of the organisations, so promotion is obviously one area where the industry is looking at improving itself through going to careers expos. Also when positions are being advertised there needs to be a focus on the lifestyle aspect of being able to live in country areas and communities, and on local government being the sphere of government that is closest to the community and having the ability to have an immediate impact on people and communities. There is the ability for local governments to promote themselves that way.

There is another industry issue in Western Australia specifically in having 144 local governments and a lot of them in areas where there is a low population. This means that there are difficulties in attracting people full stop to come and work and live in those areas. Quite a few local governments are looking on a regional basis, so if they do not have sufficient need for a planner or an engineer within their local government, they will employ someone combined with several areas. They are even looking outside core local government work such as employing doctors and nurses for the community, so they are becoming involved in that.

It is probably acknowledged that in some professions such as planning and engineering, which we are probably repeating ourselves on, there is a shortage across the country. We get together with the other associations, and it is acknowledged that there are not enough people in those professions wanting to work in local government. In the regional and remote areas of Western Australia we are finding that for other positions there is an absence of applications for vacancies, so there is the inability to get anyone to apply for roles.

Mrs Highfield—In my role we have been looking at environmental health planners and engineers in particular. They are bound by a lot of legislation and that determines what qualifications, for example, an environmental health officer is required to have. We are looking at how we can possibly work around that. When they need to inspect certain things, they need to have qualifications. Whether there are other ways of working around that so they can just take a sample and not necessarily be a qualified environment health officer is all bound by legislation.

We have been working with some of the universities on that. We have even started a training program for company directors and we might look at establishing that on a similar basis. We have talked to Curtin University and, I think, ECU and UWA.

With ALGA, the Australian Local Government Association, being on the working party, we have tried to get statistics. A lot of local governments do not have expensive HRM systems, so it is very difficult to get statistics on shortages or where the shortages are. A lot of local governments—not only WA but Australia wide—do not have HRM systems where you can press a button and it tells you how many positions have been advertised or where the shortages are, if we are looking for statistics as such. A lot of private companies have got those expensive HRM systems, but local governments cannot afford that sort of expensive equipment to get the data.

CHAIR—What is the relationship, if any, that you have with DIMA? Do you involve yourselves, have you involved yourselves or do you intend to involve yourselves in the overseas expos where you can source some of the skilled migrant streams such as engineers, accountants—there is one other that will come to me in a moment; so there are two?

Ms Burges—Going back about 12 months, I started discussions with DIMA because I saw that as a short-term solution. They were very responsive and helpful. Since then the national group, the Australian Local Government Association, agreed that it was an issue that needed to be dealt with, so the working party was set up. That group is dealing with it. The answer is: yes, they will and they are but it is being done through a working party out of Canberra. That has been a way of providing a short-term solution.

Mr White—DIMA also attended and presented at our local government week in August which was made open to local governments. Quite a few attended, and they have been helpful in letting us know what they have available.

CHAIR—Are they doing any expos?

Mrs Highfield—I met with Janelle and another gentleman at DIMA.

CHAIR—Are they the industry outreach officers?

Mrs Highfield—Yes. I have a copy of the ASCO codes as well. We had quite a long meeting before they attended our local government week to do a presentation. They have sought our involvement with the overseas expos, but we have not got a plan together.

Ms Burges—It is under consideration at the moment. It has been raised with me, but we have not resolved if we have the staff to do that. But that is certainly what we are looking at at the moment.

CHAIR—The feedback from other witnesses is that the expos have been very good in providing a good stream of skilled and qualified potential migrants, because they have been well screened beforehand.

Ms Burges—That is good information to receive. We are talking about that at the moment, so I am happy to continue to think about that.

Senator KIRK—You talked about the problems that local government has with databases and keeping a lot of information because of the expense. Are there any statistics or figures on the extent to which local government does employ people who have been trained overseas or who have come in as skilled migrants?

Ms Burges—I can probably get the information manually. We have a fairly good idea of what that would be, and we can get that manually, but we can also simply talk to the councils in situ and ask them what their current status is and then we will have an understanding of that. But the information is not quickly readily available.

Senator KIRK—Is there interest amongst the sector in employing skilled migrants?

Ms Burges—Yes, there is. My experience has been mixed. For instance, some people from country areas have expressed a concern that we are not finding ways to encourage local people for employment and that we are bringing in other people. That has been quite a parochial response. They are looking for ways for us, as a peak association, to assist them with demonstrating that local government is attractive and that this is the place to go. We are finding ways to help them retain their staff. We are looking at a number of areas that may cause people to see it as unattractive to work in some country areas—for instance, if there are no hospitals, if the accommodation is not right and things like that. They are looking for ways for us to assist them so that people can see that having people from other places is actually adding to the vibrancy and the diversity, and they like that. So it is mixed at the moment.

One thing that we did not mention is that in every place we have been to we have been talking about the idea of a graduate program. If every local government were willing to undertake supporting people coming in at a lower level and working with training on comparable levels, we could all be reassured that people would be learning about local government equitably across the board. We all need to understand that it is okay for these people to move around, to satisfy their desire to move and to get other experiences et cetera as they grow up. Again, we heard evidence from people who said, ‘I actually started as a gardener mowing lawns.’ When we talked to the CEO, we found out that that person had tracked through and was now doing a different job.

Although it has not been developed at any stage yet, the president and I have certainly been talking about it, and we can see that that is a potential for the future. We hear all sorts of local stories of people in particular professions going into the schools and giving students experience in being interviewed, of getting the person who owns that profession to be on the interview panel to give that child experience about what it is actually like.

We often find that people do not understand that there is more to local government than simply being the rubbish collector or the road maintenance person. When they discover that there are a variety of things—you can work in a library or in a swimming pool, be a lighting technician or do all sorts of things—it suddenly opens up new horizons. Our television campaign, which we will embark on shortly, is a generic campaign for local governments which is focused on careers. It is opening up doors and saying: ‘We make your world work, and these are all the different things that you can do,’ and demonstrating them. Hopefully that will start to open doors.

Senator KIRK—The question is: how do you attract people who are overseas through that kind of advertising?

Ms Burges—It is probably through sources like expos and in other ways. It is obviously not going to be in that way.

Senator KIRK—Do the councils have any work experience programs?

Ms Burges—Individually, they do. Do you have some knowledge of that, Mrs Highfield, or is it just an individual thing?

Mrs Highfield—With work experience, are you talking about schools and colleges?

Senator KIRK—I was thinking more along the lines of persons who come into the country and have overseas qualifications but do not have any Australian work experience, which is often what is critical. Is there any potential for that?

Ms Burges—There is not anything organised in that sense. People do it individually. I have done it in the past and different councils do it. I know that Ian Mickle, one of our past presidents, has done it down in Esperance. But it is ad hoc; it is not structured in any way. That is another opportunity.

Mr KEENAN—I am interested in some more details. When we talk about a skills shortage, in many ways there is actually a labour shortage in that we have run out of people. There are ways that we can wring more out of the domestic market, but without immigration it is difficult to see how we might fill some of those gaps. You were saying that there are some working parties exploring some other options. What might some of those other options be?

Ms Burges—I will start and then I will pass over to the others. Mrs Highfield talked about setting in place programs or courses in universities that will start educating people through different planning, for instance, or through some of the different professions so that we are starting to get graduates coming out. I am not aware of the exact number, but there is a very narrow field of them coming through our universities specifically for local government. We do have some in other areas that come through and then come through a side or back door into local government. But we are trying to get in place some very specific local government educational programs. I have just been invited to sit on a board for the development of some curriculum at UWA. I know Curtin and Murdoch are working on some of those areas as well. That is one area. Having a graduate program is another, as is having work experience. The committees and working parties are looking at any avenue that they can to create opportunities.

We are also working with our own members. Not all organisations have a focus on conditions of employment. For some organisations that may not be contemporary in their thinking or organised in the way that they do things, it is not something that has been on their agenda or horizon. We make sure that our members are aware that it is one thing to appoint somebody but that you need to be able to hang on to them, and that the conditions and the way that you work in your workplace are really important. We are looking at that. As Mrs Highfield said, we have a company directors program that we put our state councillors through. We have developed a module, in conjunction with our own training group, that we take out to local governments

which helps them with corporate governance and management practices et cetera. Those sorts of things will mean that there is an ongoing and evolving focus on management practices and workplace conditions, such that they can hang on to their staff. We often hear, and it is probably reasonably well known, that we still have a few people left who are stuck in past practices. As we are moving along and getting better at what we do, we find that the conditions change.

CHAIR—I must admit I encounter them in many local government planning departments. They are still operating in the ark. You are talking about looking at people and hanging on to them. This is entirely what the 457 visa does: you get to have a look at someone and they get to have a look at you—to see if there is something for them to stay for and for you to sponsor them. Are you in the business of sponsoring skilled migrants through local government authorities?

Ms Burges—We have not been, but I am quite sure that that would be an option.

CHAIR—Because you can, you know.

Mrs Highfield—Again, if I may respond to that, Ricky, when I met with DIMA they provided us with a website where applicants are lodging applications for engineers and what have you. We have access to that should local governments so desire. We are aware of the regional working groups that provide these sorts of visas. DIMA has given us an undertaking that should anyone in local government require that, they would get them out within seven days. We are aware of all that and we have access to those applications that are lodged on the website from overseas and we are in dialogue with DIMA should we need to get anybody for local government on that basis.

I will add to your question on responding to the changes—and Simon White may like to add to this. We have worked with a lot of local governments that have restructured positions because of the shortages. They have been in planning and building applications, where they have brought in a number of staff just to go through the applications and then eventually have a planner or a builder sign off on them or they have restructured the position so that other people who were not qualified or designated under the act can then complete the work, because there is a lot of development going on, as you know. There are a number of environmental health inspections that require these professions to sign off on them. A lot of local governments have restructured some of the positions to try to get around the skill and labour shortages.

Mr White—My feeling is that local governments have not really embraced migration as one of the main ways to resolve their skills shortages and that they have separated that from the labour shortage. They seem to be using labour hire to overcome the skills shortage, for a couple of reasons. In the areas that they have skills shortages in planning and building there is a requirement for people to fit in and to understand the Western Australian legislation and procedures. I think there is a bit of a hesitancy that if the person is not able to do that then they have uprooted someone from another country for no reason.

CHAIR—That is where an active mentoring program might work.

Mr White—I know that the option of ourselves becoming an agent assisting local governments is something we have considered and may in turn become something we have to

look at as we as an organisation become actively involved in trying to match local government vacancies to people who have been assessed.

Dr LAWRENCE—I have a couple of questions. In a way you have already answered them. This is to check. What is your experience to date through the information that you have from councils with the skills recognition process? Are you familiar with it either from people who are already here seeking to have their qualifications recognised or on the basis of people who have been specially brought in and have had to go through that process? Do you have any feedback?

Ms Burges—No.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is the sort of core business that we are about at the moment.

Ms Burges—It has been spoken about. I think that you will probably find we can give you better information when we put a written submission in, because we are still collecting some of that and it is hard to get. We will try to have a focus on that with the written submission.

Dr LAWRENCE—What their experience is?

Ms Burges—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—My second question is related. Perhaps you could think about whether you are able to answer it or not in your written submission: to what extent are the migrants who are coming in specifically to fill skill vacancies satisfied and able to continue in that form of employment? I think we often overlook the extent to which people come, are unhappy and either return or move into another area of employment, so you lose them anyway.

Ms Burges—Sure. We will put a focus on that as well in the response. I would love to very quickly tell you one story from Augusta-Margaret River. When we went down there we found that, for the previous 12 months—or perhaps for a bit longer than that—they had had a terrible time. They had had difficulties with staff, with planners and with the community. It really was sort of a hotbed of problems. They imported a lady from South Africa who took over responsibility for that area, and the turnaround has been fantastic. I think one of the most exciting things about that is that she was able to transfer into her current job the different processes that she had used in her previous positions. It was new for these people. They had not experienced it before and they were delighted. It has been working very well.

In fact, we were so pleased and impressed with it that we have taken that story and we are going to showcase it in our journal that goes out to all local governments. I think there is a fear that if you bring people in from the outside they will not know what to do, it will not work and it will fall over and all the rest of it. So this is a success story that we can put in the journal about how it has worked. They have tried something different and they love it, so it has been very good.

CHAIR—It may be necessary to introduce some mechanisms to help skilled migrants who have already migrated to find employment in their areas of competence, such as through work experience programs. Are you aware of a Victorian Local Governance Association pilot project with Engineers Australia, sponsored by the state government, that is currently involved in

providing paid work experience for overseas qualified engineers through a placement program in local government? Is this program of interest to you?

The program provides overseas qualified engineers with a 15-week award wage placement. In addition to their work placement, the engineers receive language and business training from TAFE and 12 months support and mentoring to assist them to gain chartered status. As part of the program, Engineers Australia has provided a series of workshops on preparing for overseas qualifications assessment and chartered status. The project also provides assistance to councils that are finding difficulty in attracting engineering staff. The pilot may be applied further for use in other professions that experience skills shortages. Are you aware of that program? Do you see that pilot as being good for sponsoring these sorts of programs?

Ms Burges—Personally, I am not aware of the program. I know it probably has been on the agenda of the working party, but I have not been across that. I do not know if Simon has been.

Mr White—No, I have not been involved in the working party.

Mrs Highfield—A couple of weeks ago we had a teleconference with the Municipal Association of Victoria at which this was brought up, but no-one was sure who it was available through and so the decision was to go and find out some more and bring it back to the working party.

Ms Burges—Now that you have raised it, I will make it my business to find out about it and have a look at it, because it sounds very interesting.

CHAIR—I hope you do not mind me making an observation: local government appears to be suffering a talent or skills drain. It may be opportune to become more proactive in promoting yourselves as well as promoting yourselves as an opportunity for skilled migrants. I am not sure that the local government authorities in the electorate I represent are aware of the fact that they can sponsor overseas skilled migrants. I would speak to the industry outreach officers, which you have already done, to find out what else is available to you, because otherwise you could be finding a lot of your constituencies falling even further behind.

Ms Burges—Sure.

CHAIR—There are no more questions from the committee. Do you have any further comments to make?

Ms Burges—No, but thank you for the opportunity to talk about it because it is a big problem that we are all trying to grapple with. It is very important that we get opportunities like this. We appreciate it and we will be very pleased to provide something in writing later. Thank you.

CHAIR—We look forward to receiving your submission, and thank you for attending today's hearing. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript and, if necessary, corrections can be made. I would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat the additional material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible.

[2.09 pm]

JEFFERY, Mrs Norma Irene, Acting Executive Director; Policy, Planning and Accountability, Department of Education and Training, Western Australia

JONES, Mr Mike, Acting Manager, Overseas Qualifications Unit, Department of Education and Training, Western Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comment to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mrs Jeffery—I am the executive director responsible for policy, planning and accountability, so I am not a technical expert in this area. Mr Jones has that role. I am here to support him from a policy perspective.

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

Mrs Jeffery—The department welcomes the opportunity to re-present to this committee. As you will recall, in our previous submission we agreed with many of the positions that were put on skills shortages and skill recognition and expressed views similar to those that have been put by the committee. Today we want to present on the trial, the TRA state skills recognition pilot, that we have been undergoing with TRA.

The pilot is coming to a close. I think Mr Jones has some very interesting remarks to make about that pilot. There was a final meeting this morning that involved TRA, the department's overseas qualifications unit, DIMA, the Migration Institute of Australia, state based RTOs, the Training Accreditation Council, the Apprenticeship and Traineeship Support Network and a number of industry councils. As a result of this pilot I think everyone has learnt a lot, and we have come along with some interesting perspectives for you today.

Mike has also been overseas to the United Kingdom with the skilled migration unit. He visited Dublin, London, Esher and Glasgow. He attended with about 17,000 people who were interested in migrating. He also has some views about the way we deal with migrants who are coming to these expos to express their views.

CHAIR—You have got real-time news then.

Mrs Jeffery—That is right. In addition to that we have a couple of local initiatives. One is from the Training Accreditation Council. They are moving to change their policies to make recognition easier through RTOs. We are also setting up within the department a slightly different and more supportive process in order to recognise the skills of local people as well as migrants. Both of these programs can involve migrants offshore and onshore and some of our

local people as well. Mike has the detail of those projects, and I think you will find what he has to say extremely interesting in this context.

CHAIR—The last part of your statement was about migrants onshore et cetera. Does that include humanitarian migrants?

Mr Jones—Not in relation to the overseas visits. We were looking solely at skilled migration in that regard.

CHAIR—That is good. I am looking forward to hearing this news as early as today about your meeting this morning.

Mr Jones—You are aware of the TRA state pilot, as we described it to you previously. Essentially, we were looking at seven assessment pathways, six of which were state based and included industry training councils, including the Plumbers Licensing Board and a number of TAFE colleges. The key areas were plumbing, mechanics, hairdressing, cooking and I guess a number of designated skills shortage areas.

That project has been running now for about six months. We had originally intended to put about 25 people through. The purpose of the pilot was to look at ways that we could maximise the inherent skills of migrants and ensure that they were not lost to the system and ended up driving taxis and so on. We ended up putting 55 people through the pilot. Of them, a number had been driving taxis and a number were electricians who had been out of the trade for about three or four years. To date approximately 50 per cent of those assessed, about 28, have met requirements. About 15 are undergoing minimal skills gap training.

I forgot to mention that the other party was the apprenticeship and traineeship network. They have a fast-track process. Those that require more than approximately 100 to 150 hours are being referred into the fast-track apprenticeship, where they may only need to complete between six and 12 months of an apprenticeship to be productive again rather than being lost to the trade.

TRA's involvement was to look at what could be done offshore to improve the recognition systems, particularly with state involvement and states looking at what could be seen as good practice in that area. TRA have indicated this morning that they have taken on board the turnaround times. They are telling me that their turnaround times in many cases now are reduced to 10 days. One of the issues—

CHAIR—Did they give you any hard evidence such as cases?

Mr Jones—They did not table any specific cases.

CHAIR—Can you get that?

Mr Jones—Yes, we can get that.

CHAIR—That would be good.

Mr Jones—We are actually meeting with TRA this evening—with Andy Jamonts and Roy Phillips. Andy is the director of TRA, as you are probably aware.

CHAIR—I am sorry to question you as you are making your opening statement, but that was going to be my other question. Would the officers that you are talking about in TRA, given there is no-one based in WA, all be based either in Canberra or on the eastern seaboard somewhere?

Mr Jones—They are based in Canberra and Victoria. That is where they are operating from. That has been an issue in the past: the need for that kind of face-to-face support. I guess the strategy as part of the pilot was where the state based Overseas Qualifications Unit, as part of the department, becomes that interface or, if you like, that support organisation. OQU worked very closely with TRA.

It is probably important to recognise that in the past there were a number of telephone interviews taking place, and we certainly felt that was not an appropriate way to be able to make judgments about the ability of people from non-English speaking backgrounds to undertake specific occupational tasks within WA. But the practical assessments are actually taking place within the TAFE colleges here in Western Australia. And the local trades committee process, which ultimately makes the final decision, is also drawn—this is what we were told earlier today—from local industry, local union and local employer bases.

I guess what has been missing from the mix—and one option, of course, is to have a TRA rep within WA—is that personalised approach. So we are still using TAFE colleges, but we are interacting with those TAFE colleges about good practice. Swan TAFE, for example, have taken a very hands-on approach where they are bringing in groups of migrants and talking them through the process, using interpreters where necessary. They are showing them around the workshops, introducing them to the machinery, answering any questions they have about how to use particular machinery, telling them what the broad areas that they will be assessed against are and even providing books and so on if they want to go away and familiarise themselves with some of the terminologies.

CHAIR—What concerns us though is that TRA say they do this using local TAFEs for assessment. Do they have a formal set of steps or procedures that they go through to appoint the local assessors? They have told us, belatedly, that they use local assessors. Out of the fee that they charge—and sometimes there is a special fee for urgent cases—how much is retained by TRA and how much is passed on to the local TAFE or assessor as part of this process so that we know exactly who is doing what, who is getting paid what and who is responsible for what?

Mr Jones—The approximate charges for the TAFE college are around \$500 to \$600 to undertake the test. TRA actually charge the individual \$280 or \$300 for the practical. So TRA are, in a sense, subsidising the assessment through the TAFE college, who, as I say, charge TRA about \$550 or \$580.

CHAIR—TRA are meant to be involved in full recovery to run their operation and, if you are saying they are subsidising, that is interesting. But the fee you are talking about—\$600—is at the top end for urgent cases, and it appears that TRA then obviously do not get a fee if the TAFE college is getting the full \$600. That is interesting in itself.

Mr Jones—That is onshore assessments.

CHAIR—Unless the TAFE college is charging that over and above the base fee.

Mr Jones—Obviously, I do not have the depth of knowledge that Andy, for example, would have.

CHAIR—He could not tell us when we met with him.

Mr Jones—My conversations with Andy indicate that TRA charge \$300 or \$270 for the practical to the individual and that the TAFE college charges add \$550 to \$600. I cannot specifically answer your question, to be honest.

CHAIR—Up to about \$900 at least, so far, when they have told us that the fee is only \$300 or \$600.

Mr Jones—The most the full fee—if you count the initial application and the practicum; again, I am going on what Andy has told me—would ever be would be at that \$900 mark.

CHAIR—That is still \$300 more than they revealed to us previously. It is not an insurmountable bit of money for somebody who has just arrived.

Mr Jones—A number of participants went through the trial process. Obviously, some went through the local ITC and the AQTF processes and so on. In the TRA trades we had nine electricians, one fitter and turner, five mechanical fitters, six boilermakers, five welders, one motor mechanic and two refrigeration and air conditioner mechanics. In the non-TRA trades we had cabinet makers, three carpenters and joiners, four plumbers, a bricklayer, a chef, a pastry cook and three hairdressers. Approximately 20 applications will flow back through TRA as a result of the pilot. Don Sivyver, who was coordinating the assessments, is currently meeting with their assessor this afternoon to look at the outcomes, which we hope will lead to the issue of the ARTC.

Overall skills gap training is being provided for 15 participants and it is probably not surprising to this group that there are still issues with the timely delivery of skills gap training. I think we still have an issue with flexibility. In some cases that skills gap training has been provided fairly quickly; in other cases, there has been the old problem of having to wait until there is a class that is undertaking that particular area of skills gap. Again, I think anybody would think that we need to move beyond that. At the meeting this morning costs and fees in relation to that were talked about.

There is also a delivery mindset. Certainly from my experience in schools, there is a general process or pattern where you can bring people in at various levels and you can have things going on in a learning environment, rather than necessarily in a locked step way. Today we are going to learn how to cut this piece of metal. Somebody may be doing that. I think it is a mind shift. What came out of this morning's meeting is that we tend to get overly bound by a revisit to a training package rather than to focus on the skills—for want of a better word—of the individual assessor and lecturer and look at the delivery modes. There was certainly a recommendation that they be

looked at—but more so the delivery of the skills gap training—within the TRA assessment processes.

CHAIR—Would you say that your pilot program has been successful?

Mr Jones—Bearing in mind it is not over as yet.

CHAIR—So far.

Mr Jones—I think it has been successful. In raw figure terms—not that we are talking huge numbers that are going to set the skills shortages area to rest—50 per cent of 55 people, approximately 28 people, who were out of the system are now in the system. Instead of driving taxis they are working productively in industry. If that indicator carries through into larger numbers, I think that is a fairly reasonable outcome. Of those, another 15—that is, slightly more than the 50 per cent that are left; 25 or 30 people—are undertaking minimal skills gap training of between 100 and 150 hours and then they will be productive. The others are moving into at least the first year and in many cases the second and third year of a fast-track apprenticeship program. I think it has been successful.

But over and above that I think what the project has done is brought together a lot of the key players, as it did this morning, for a fairly robust discussion. Again, what came out this morning in line with some of the COAG recommendations and initiatives was that it brought together the key players. This came up when we were discussing the inconsistencies, I suppose, when you were talking about the trial offshore assessment, the AQTF assessment and the licensing regulatory body requirements. COAG are looking to bring those into line. I think what the project has done is brought together some of the players to have those debates. Indeed, it brought them together to even have the debate about how the AQTF and the assessment against the AQTF is being administered, what a tradesperson is, what a job at hand is for a particular employer and are we ticking all of these boxes? What came out of it was that there should probably be consideration given to having a two- or three-day national skills seminar, where you bring in the states, the licensing regulatory authorities, the key players from DIMA and so on and possibly present the findings of the JSC as well.

CHAIR—That is a possibility, yes.

Mr Jones—Let us have the debate. Let us have a drink afterwards. Let us be in the same hotel or the same space and thrash it out once and for all. Again, what has come out is that there are a lot of players and coordination is clearly an issue.

CHAIR—That is what you are saying, that it is uncoordinated. Before we go to the way forward and your views on the overseas expos, I will ask other members of the committee if they have any questions on your information so far.

Senator KIRK—The pilot sounds very interesting. I wonder where it will go to once it has finished. In other words, are you going to have another intake of 55-odd people? Is this going to be an ongoing project or is it that the nature of a pilot is such that you test it out first and it is too difficult to say at this stage?

Mr Jones—The evaluation started from day one and that very question was asked at the end of the meeting, as you would expect: ‘Where to from here? Has it been valuable?’ It will be written up, it will be used as a discussion point and it will be sent out to key players. I would imagine that the JSC would be interested in that particular report. There is certainly an interest from TRA in exploring the continuation of a very close partnership between WA and, indeed, all the states and territories regarding skills recognition issues, where we are recruiting both offshore and onshore to meet industry needs. There was a feeling that, yes, this needs to continue. I am not quite sure what the difference between a pilot and a trial is, but I guess it is time frame as much as anything. We should move into a trial phase of at least a 12- to 18-month time period. Suggestions were—and, again, it is not rocket science—that a closer involvement of industry and data and a better matching of industry needs, training, assessment and, particularly, offshore recruitment were needed so that a very good match occurs.

Mrs Jeffery—I know that the Director-General will be very keen to continue with a further trial or further work in this area. He was very supportive of it in the first place. With all the skills recognition work that we are doing through the Skills Formation Task Force and the COAG direction of more demand driven training, more flexibility, more of an outcomes focus, I think you will see a move to a more flexible training environment so that the training area is able to be more flexible than is obviously the case at the moment. People at the moment are having to wait until a class comes along before they can be engaged in training. We have the same issue in the north-west with industries up there, and with some of the work that we are trying to do with the Aboriginal population. I think the continuation of this is something that we will all support. Also, it needs to be seen in that wider COAG context of more flexibility and more demand driven outcomes.

Senator KIRK—Are there any proposals to expand it into other industry sectors? For example, you mentioned last time that there was some chance of a pilot in the child-care area. Has that progressed at all?

Mr Jones—With child care, to be honest, the Fremantle area did not move forward, but we are moving into a trial or a pilot in the health areas, with a focus on nursing and aged care. That is a national project funded by MINCO. We were approached by the WA Office of Women’s Policy. It is a very interesting project which is looking at some of the systemic barriers and assessment processes used both offshore and onshore generally by the registration bodies, and it is seeking to identify particular assessment and then skills gap training processes and trial them in Western Australia and the other states that are involved. We will probably only trial it in one other state because of resource issues—in Queensland, Tasmania or New South Wales. I have some information on it that I can leave with you.

Senator KIRK—Thank you.

Dr LAWRENCE—With the 50 per cent that were effectively immediately able to use their qualifications and skills but had previously not been working in those areas, did you get a sense from that sample—I know it is a small one—as to why they had not previously had their skills recognised or were not working in the field for which they were properly qualified? What was the barrier that prevented them previously getting that opportunity?

Mr Jones—I think it was information and support. There was a gatekeeper mentality rather than a facilitative mentality—a recognition that they have got inherent skills. In a sense, even pre training packages, there was a tick-a-box mentality—if you can't tick all the boxes then you are not a nurse, you are not a plumber, you are not an electrician. Another thing that came out of here and out of the preliminary evaluation was that you are not going to get that perfect match. If you say, 'We haven't got a perfect match, therefore this person is not a plumber; they can go and do something else,' you are forever going to have skills wastage.

The other thing was, and the evaluator illustrated it by a study done on surgeons—again, this is not rocket science—that the more one practised surgery, the better one got. So if you have a brain operation, you want somebody who has done 1,000 rather than one, which is fairly obvious. But the better they became at brain surgery or the better they became at kitting out and refitting your bathroom tiles, the less likely they were, as time went by, to be able to pass the examination that gave them the ticket to be a brain surgeon or a plumber in the first place. I think we have to look at a different concept, a different model, about how we assess people.

Dr LAWRENCE—With those, and even the ones where the trial identified a skills gap, what was different about the way they were assessed or treated than had previously been the case? You mentioned less of a tick-a-box mentality. How did you, in a sense, reconcile the fact that they did not quite fit but nonetheless they had qualifications that were properly recognised?

Mr Jones—There was the support, there was the pre-information and—for want of a better word—pre-assessment, as I said, where people would be given some information that they could go and take a look at, but there was also much closer matching to the question: what does a tradesperson in this occupation have to do? Can they read a plan? Can they mix mortar? Can they lay a brick? Can they cut a brick? Can they build an arch? This was rather than asking, 'When was mortar first used by the Romans?' and then, if they were not sure, saying, 'I'm sorry—'

Dr LAWRENCE—You're out of here!

Mr Jones—Yes, that sort of thing.

Dr LAWRENCE—So in a sense you are talking about a more hands-on assessment of these people rather than a remote checking of qualifications.

CHAIR—Do competency assessments come into it at all?

Mr Jones—Yes, as in competent to do the job. I think there is a danger that, if you say 'competence', people automatically think, 'Where are all those boxes again?'

CHAIR—I mean more, as we have heard previously, about on-site competency based examination.

Mr Jones—Can they do the business?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Jones—Another example that was given by a student at Swan TAFE was about a guy that he met in a taxi who was in the electrical area and just by chance they got talking. They were in Port Hedland and he said, ‘When I get back to Perth, contact me.’ He came down and did a practical assessment. He was a highly specialised person and there was a screaming need in the industry for him and so they gave him the peak skills assessment which was linked to the tasks he would need to perform within that industry rather than assessing him as a generalist.

CHAIR—So he could rewire an electrical motor but he could not change a light switch?

Mr Jones—Yes. It was that mentality.

Dr LAWRENCE—Possibly!

Mr Jones—Yes, possibly. It was along those lines.

Senator EGGLESTON—You mentioned Indigenous training programs a little bit earlier. I just wondered what you were doing in that area.

Mr Jones—You mentioned that, didn’t you?

Mrs Jeffery—Yes. We are working very closely at the moment with the industries in the Pilbara, the east Kimberley and a couple of other areas with the regional partnership agreements and also local agreements, because some of the local industries in the north have set themselves targets. I think Argyle is at around 40 per cent. That might not be quite accurate. We are doing a very close analysis of the work that the training sector and the school sector is doing up in those areas to try to tailor a bit more the sorts of skills development that will be needed so that those Aboriginal people are able to take on the jobs. It is mostly literacy, numeracy, work readiness, driver’s licences—fairly obvious things.

I think the training sector and industry both realise that this is a really good time for skills migration where there is a shortage and for Aboriginal people not only to focus on and develop the skills that are needed in particular occupations but also to develop that broad base of literacy and numeracy. That probably would be part of the skills migration as well—making sure that people have the sorts of language development that they are going to need in the jobs and occupations they take up. I think the training area is becoming much more flexible as a result of that, because, up in the north-west, all of the TAFE college managing directors are involved in the negotiations, as are the school district directors. We are also working with some of the companies and they are putting quite a lot of resources into improving both the training and the skills area.

Senator EGGLESTON—Just out of interest, what age group of people are you dealing with? It interests me that Argyle has got such a high percentage.

Mrs Jeffery—That is their target. They have not got there yet!

CHAIR—I was told earlier today that they were up to 45 per cent.

Senator EGGLESTON—They are doing pretty well.

Mrs Jeffery—Are they?

Senator EGGLESTON—Yes. It is 42 per cent, or something like that. But then you come down to the Pilbara where the big miners are like Hamersley and BHP Billiton and, while they have Indigenous programs, the percentage of Indigenous people employed by them is quite low. I just wonder if the kinds of jobs that people are doing at Argyle are simpler ones compared to the requirements of the big miners in the Pilbara. The job at the diamond mine might be just a matter of filtering the sand to find the diamonds.

Mrs Jeffery—I would have to find that out.

Senator EGGLESTON—It seems that your focus is really on basic numeracy and literacy.

Mrs Jeffery—The information we have is that the mining companies can train people if they have basic literacy and numeracy, and some of the other skills. I know that in Kununurra, because I have been there several times, the schools area and the training area work very closely together. The older school students go over to the TAFE college for training and Argyle is there working with them.

Senator EGGLESTON—That is interesting.

Mrs Jeffery—It is a much more cohesive group and it has been for some time, whereas in the Pilbara I think they have just started thinking about doing this, so they probably have further to go in setting up a similar sort of arrangement.

Senator EGGLESTON—I think Hamersley has had a program for a very long time, but it does not seem to have produced too many graduates, if you like.

Dr LAWRENCE—I think it has been for bottom line in their annual report.

Mrs Jeffery—I think a lot more effort and thought is going into it at the moment and the regional partnership agreement for the Pilbara, for the Port Hedland area, is quite specific about the skills that need to be developed.

Senator EGGLESTON—Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Before we move to the overseas expos, could I say that you have made it quite clear that you also favour a local TRA presence. Is that correct?

Mr Jones—A TRA partnership?

CHAIR—No, a presence rather than an eastern states office, so that a TRA office is located in Western Australia.

Dr LAWRENCE—I think you are putting words in his mouth.

CHAIR—Sorry, if I am, correct me. I thought you had indicated that it would be ideal to have a TRA presence or office in Western Australia.

Mr Jones—I do not think I did today. Correct me if I am wrong.

CHAIR—You do not then?

Mr Jones—It is a catch 22 question because it depends on what sits behind it. If TRA are prepared to work cooperatively, let us say, with the Overseas Qualifications Unit and the Overseas Qualifications Unit becomes a supportive partner in the process, looking at Western Australian needs and the needs of Western Australian migrants, possibly with an assessor coming over every four to six weeks, personally that is actually preferable to a situation where you might have somebody working in isolation—I am not saying that they would—and where you would say, ‘Yes, we’ve got a TRA presence, but they’ve still got an adversarial view or there’s no liaison or consideration of a state need.’ If we can strengthen the partnership, work very closely with them, in a sense be part of an agency with TRA and talk about some co-funding—obviously that would need to go to the appropriate federal departments and so forth for approval—that would be my preference. You need to have dialogue and I would prefer that to a model for the sake of it, where you still have an isolated TRA presence. We did have a TRA presence for quite some time, as you know, and nothing much changed because of the attitudinal—

CHAIR—Having been overseas, TRA took the resources out of its overseas units, offices or whatever about 10 years ago, I understand.

Mr Jones—Yes.

CHAIR—I will not put words in your mouth this time. What do you think about that being re-established or is there again a more opportune model that you could suggest?

Mr Jones—TRA are certainly looking at partnerships with local training institutions and/or assessors offshore so that they can assess not just from a paper based perspective but also, if necessary, from a peak skills practical assessment perspective. That is something they are looking at very strongly. Again, I think it is the outcome that is important. That may require a TRA presence. I think it requires at least an agent of TRA’s presence to make that work. As long as they are operating in a good practice environment, whether it is the TRA person or an agent of TRA, I would support either of those.

CHAIR—You say, for example, that Swan TAFE has been given responsibility for some assessments of certain skills. Can you find out for us, if possible, which are the other institutions where the various skills that TRA assess are being assessed, how they go about this assessment and, as I said earlier, the fees charged?

Mr Jones—Yes.

CHAIR—Would you like to tell us your point of view about the overseas expos which you alluded to?

Mr Jones—The first point I would make—and again this came up this morning, and I think DIMA took it on board—is that there needs to be at least equal weight in terms of resources given to looking at people who are already here as well as looking offshore. As you probably

realise, I did not personally look at 17,000 people. I probably saw 300 or 400 people. I was over there in a partnership with the WA Skills Migration Unit. When people had a difficulty in understanding an assessment process or when they might be in the ballpark for meeting the assessment requirements of a particular area—in this case, the majority were trades—they were referred through to me, and I worked through their profile and so on and so forth. What struck me about that was that I think at least 20 per cent could have been immediately assessed because the evidence was so strong. Again, I have discussed this with TRA. TRA were certainly of the view that they need to make sure they have a presence at all the key expos. They were at the previous one. They were certainly not on this UK visit. Ideally, they need to put two or three people on deck. Again, they felt it came down to resources but, if they could be there with a laptop and could spend the time with individuals that were close to meeting requirements, they may be able to give an outcome at source.

CHAIR—It is preferable that people be told overseas, before they even come here, isn't it?

Mr Jones—I think that is preferable. The link was also made—which does not necessarily have to be at source, but it would be good—that obvious gaps that people could address should be identified in the country of origin. I even think there is a mechanism—and this happens to some extent anyway—which they can access online, or indeed they can come over to Australia, to do skills gap training and then be given the outcome for migration purposes.

The other thing that I did when I was there—and we can move back to that—is that I visited the National Recognition Information Centre in the UK. They are similar to our own National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition, but they undertake a lot of strategic research. One thing that they are doing in the trades and other key professions—teaching is one that they recently completed—is occupation and training profiling. They are not just focusing on the qualification but looking at what that qualification means in terms of being able to do a particular job, what the tasks involved in that particular occupation in that particular country are and how well that total package maps and matches the needs of UK industries. I thought that had some merit in relation to what we were talking about earlier, whereby you can get that complete picture and determine whether this matches the employer or industry need immediately rather than just focusing on the qualification.

Dr LAWRENCE—You mentioned the 20 per cent who meet the necessary criteria for Australian recognition of their qualifications. What about the remaining 80 per cent? Where there some people at that point to whom you would simply say, 'You may want to come to Australia but it won't be on the basis of that particular qualification; it is just not adequate for our recognition'?

Mr Jones—There were very few. I was not assessing, obviously, but I got a sense that probably 10 per cent of the people whom I saw would probably not meet the mark without undertaking some further training or acquiring some more relevant experience. That may be—and I have to be honest: I have only just thought of this, so I have not pursued it—because the skills migration unit were doing some filtering out before people saw me. So they were only sending people to me who they thought were in the band; anyone who was not, they had already sent them away.

Dr LAWRENCE—Were they all UK citizens at that assessment?

Mr Jones—They were all UK and Ireland citizens.

Dr LAWRENCE—Have you had any experience of other parts of the world, for instance, where English is not a first language and where the training background—

Mr Jones—This is the first time I have been overseas. There is some talk about Dubai and India. The skills migration unit and DIMA are in Hong Kong, India, Shanghai and Manila.

Dr LAWRENCE—Do you know of any research that checks the relative worth, if you like, of providing additional training for people already here, whether they are underemployed women—and there are more than a few of those around—or migrants who have been here for some time whose skills have lapsed or who have not had the opportunities that you have described or kids who have left school prematurely? Has anyone done any assessment of what happens when you put the same dollar to the training of people who are already resident as opposed to the recruitment assessment and relocation et cetera of somebody who, in a sense, comes ready-made but with a whole lot of ancillary costs associated with their relocation? Do you know of any work of that kind?

Mr Jones—I am not aware of that. I did some mental gymnastics and thought: ‘What’s the cost of this trip been? How many skills training programs could we run in WA with a similar amount of money?’ It is not an insignificant amount of money to put a dozen people overseas for 3½ weeks, particularly in the UK.

Dr LAWRENCE—Exactly.

Mrs Jeffery—That is a project that is just getting off the ground. We are going to look at recognition of the skills of people who are here or who have been here for some time. It is basically a skills recognition of people who might have been working in an area but who have never had any formal training. At the moment, we are just looking at the program, how we will go about it, what sorts of fees we will charge and what the process will be. The careers area has set up a fairly significant plan that will do exactly what you are suggesting—pick up underemployed people. Some of these people have skills that have developed over a lifetime through practical experience but they do not have qualifications. So it is a recognition of prior learning. The intention is to have it as supported as the programs that you have been talking about. You are supporting people by making sure that they understand clearly what it is that they have to do, what is involved in the training and what the skills gap is, so that they can end up with a qualification of some sort.

We are looking at this costing about \$1,000 per person, which is not huge when you think of what it would cost to start someone from the beginning of a qualification and put them through a number of years. This is mainly in the trades area where we have big skills shortages. That project is about to launch.

Dr LAWRENCE—That has been mentioned in some of the evidence we have had before us—at least it has been referred to in the questions prepared by the committee staff. The ABS did a survey of skills in Western Australia, and I think they said that there was a very significant decline in enrolments in some of these areas over the last seven or eight years amongst locals. I

do not know whether they are trooping off and getting well-paid jobs in the Pilbara or whether they are doing other things, but in general there seems to be a decline in enrolments.

Mrs Jeffery—I think students tend to enrol initially but often they are offered jobs before they have completed their qualifications. So the figures tend to show that people are enrolling but not completing; but they are getting jobs and that is why they are not completing.

CHAIR—They will have problems further down the track when things get tighter.

Mrs Jeffery—That is right.

CHAIR—I have a final question. DIMA has developed a national web portal on skills assessment et cetera. Are you aware of that and, if you are—and I am sure you are—do you think the web portal will sufficiently address the concerns about the lack of information provided to migrants on the skills recognition process?

Mr Jones—Yes, we are aware of it. The OQU has been involved in the development, I guess, and the feedback in Brisbane a couple of months ago. We think it is an excellent initiative. The need for information came out again this morning. In a sense it is embryonic, and that may be obvious. Conceptually, it is embryonic in relation to what it could do. It could actually link through to online training and certainly to information. Probably the first thing that I would say needs to be done with it—and you have probably looked at it yourselves—is that it is extremely bureaucratic, despite the feedback. It is a typical government website—and it is a government website, of course. It is very daunting. Even I thought—and anybody from a non-English-speaking background would think—‘I must be on the wrong site. This can’t be the one that we’ve talked about that’s getting easier to access.’ This was a draft, but I thought: ‘I must have opened the wrong thing here. This can’t be the one that we’re supposed to be looking at.’ It does need to be looked at from the point of view of ease of access and so forth and what information could be included. But, as an initiative, it is a great initiative and obviously needs to be publicised and people need to be made aware that they can access it all over the world, if they have access to computers, of course.

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

Mr Jones—Yes. Thank you.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 2.57 pm