



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

MONDAY, 27 FEBRUARY 2006

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT

INTERNET

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

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

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

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

Monday, 27 February 2006

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

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

WITNESSES

ANDERSCH, Mrs Lyn, Manager, Multicultural Tasmania, Department of Premier and Cabinet.....	1
COLE, Ms Natasha Jane, Director, Education and Recognition Section, Overseas Trained Doctors Task Force, Department of Health and Ageing.....	9
GILLESPIE, Mr Paul, Associate Director, Overseas Qualifications Assessment, Engineers Australia.....	18
GRANT, Ms Margaret Jane, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Council of Physiotherapy Regulating Authorities.....	26
HUNT, Ms Susan Mary, Executive Officer, Overseas Qualifications, Tasmanian Qualifications Authority.....	1
HURFORD, Ms Kathryn Louise, Associate Director, Public Policy, Engineers Australia.....	18
KASPURA, Mr Andre, Policy Analyst, International and National Policy Directorate, Engineers Australia.....	18
LARKINS, Ms Alison, Assistant Secretary, Health Work Force Branch, Health Services Improvement Division, Department of Health and Ageing.....	9
LYONS, Ms Margaret, First Assistant Secretary, Health Services Improvement Division, Department of Health and Ageing.....	9
McCULLOUGH, Ms Patricia, Manager, Industry, Development and Innovation, Office of Post- Compulsory Education and Training, Department of Education.....	1
McHUGH, Mr Anthony, Project Manager, Business and Skilled Migration, Tasmanian Department of Economic Development.....	1
NALL, Ms Catherine Marjorie, National President, Australian Physiotherapy Association, and Director, Australian Council of Physiotherapy Regulating Authorities.....	26
SONNERS, Ms Miranda Dawn, Acting Manager, Equity and Youth Strategies, Office of Post- Compulsory Education and Training, Department of Education.....	1
TABER, Ms Kelly, Acting Director, Overseas Trained Doctors Task Force, Department of Health and Ageing.....	9
TAYLOR, Mr Peter, Chief Executive, Engineers Australia.....	18

Committee met at 10.18 am

ANDERSCH, Mrs Lyn, Manager, Multicultural Tasmania, Department of Premier and Cabinet

HUNT, Ms Susan Mary, Executive Officer, Overseas Qualifications, Tasmanian Qualifications Authority

McCULLOUGH, Ms Patricia, Manager, Industry, Development and Innovation, Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training, Department of Education

McHUGH, Mr Anthony, Project Manager, Business and Skilled Migration, Tasmanian Department of Economic Development

SONNERS, Ms Miranda Dawn, Acting Manager, Equity and Youth Strategies, Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training, Department of Education

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

Evidence was taken via video link—

Mrs Andersch—Multicultural Tasmania is an office that has responsibility for all migration into Tasmania across the skills and humanitarian entrants. I will give you a very quick summary of what the submission is about. While we support the mutual recognition of skills that is happening at the moment and COAG's resolution to have more agreed recognition nationally, we do have some concerns in some areas where people are not able to access Job Network services, especially those on the skilled independent regional visas and spouses of those people who come in who may also have skills.

Competency based versus time served is another concern. TRA could be a little bit more flexible and have an improved information delivery service. We are finding that skilled migrants who are assessed offshore do not always understand that they have another assessment process to go through when they come to this country. Duplication of information requested is also of concern as well as the time it takes. We need to understand that humanitarian entrants do not have the funding to pay for the costs required in terms of getting their skills recognised. Maybe we should also be looking at fee-free translation services. They are not culturally adequate at the moment. That is about it in a nutshell.

CHAIR—Does anybody else from your department wish to make any other statement before we go to questions?

Mr McHugh—I just really want to stress the very significant gap at the moment with key trades between the offshore skills assessment and the capacity to work once licensed when

migrants arrive in Australia. The move by COAG to introduce a more robust and maybe even a once-and-for-all offshore skills assessment would be a huge benefit for us because we are finding that electricians, plumbers, gas fitters and refrigeration and airconditioning mechanics are arriving in the state and are not able to work. In many cases the pathway to work is not always very clear for them.

CHAIR—The committee is probably sick of hearing me say this, but you have made a point again about overseas assessments. You feel that it is somewhat inadequate and, again, you identify Trades Recognition Australia as being inadequate. Is this because you do not think they are doing the job when they get to Australia or because there are no proper assessment opportunities for TRA overseas before they come here?

Ms Hunt—Trades Recognition Australia look at some specific qualifications and licensing for the trades but not all trades offshore. They are looking for mainly paper based qualifications rather than assessments—actual demonstration and observation of assessments. The problem when people get here is exactly what Anthony was saying: there are other licensing regulations in each state and territory. I know COAG is working to reduce that and probably eradicate it so there is a national system. TRA have been given extra funding to make sure that that happens under COAG. That is one of the strategies to overcome that problem. They probably need more funding to be able to offer a wider range of assessment services offshore.

CHAIR—I am not aware that they have received extra funding but, if they have, that is interesting. I still want to pursue the matter of TRA's ability to assess offshore rather than onshore when they get here because they used to have a far greater network overseas than they do now. Do you see it as a problem that they cannot do—you talk about paper based assessments—competency based assessments live overseas before potential skilled migrants come to Australia?

Ms Hunt—Yes, I think that would be an improvement. You are right: about 15 to 20 years ago they used to be able to do those assessments offshore. That has not been as widely used as was previously done. I would support that they provide that service in a more robust manner.

CHAIR—Is there an office of Trades Recognition Australia in Tasmania?

Ms Hunt—No, there is not. We have to go through Melbourne. It was about six years ago that the office closed in Tasmania, and we refer our clients to the office in Melbourne.

CHAIR—Does that provide any difficulties for people wishing to be assessed in Tasmania by having your office located in Melbourne?

Ms Hunt—Not really because TRA then contracts either TAFE, another organisation or licensing authority to undertake the competency based assessment live.

CHAIR—Do you know that for sure?

Ms Hunt—Yes, I know that for sure.

CHAIR—To local TAFEs?

Ms Hunt—Yes. It can be a local TAFE or other licensing or registration boards.

CHAIR—That is interesting. Can you provide the committee with some evidence and some instances of the locally based assessment done by other authorities, agencies, TAFEs et cetera?

Ms Hunt—Mostly electricians go to TAFE—and plumbers.

CHAIR—Can you provide us with some hard copy examples, please.

Ms Hunt—I have not got anything right here but I can follow that up for you.

CHAIR—If you could follow that up, it would be appreciated. I will move to other members, but it may well come back to me later in the discussion.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, for your submission. At a broad level, is the availability of skilled labour an issue in Tasmania? If so, in which sectors of the economy are you finding that there is a shortage?

Mrs Andersch—I will answer in a very broad way and I will get my colleague Anthony McHugh to add to this information. My office is the regional certifying body for the whole of Tasmania to bring in skilled migrants to positions in this state where skills seem to be in short supply. Our programs that Immigration have created, if you like, bring in people to regions, so regions have an opportunity to compete better with the larger metropolitan areas in attracting skilled migrants. We do have a short supply in a number of trades areas, and we use or refer employers to Immigration's database quite extensively to try and attract skilled migrants from overseas. I guess having better or more flexible and streamlined skills recognition would make life a lot easier. Anthony McHugh's Department of Economic Development is the state sponsor for people who come into the regions with skills that we can attract to this state. But the skilled independent regional visa does not give permanent residency straightaway, so they cannot access the Job Network in the same way as a permanent resident can. That is of concern to us.

Mr McHugh—I will be a little more specific about the type of trades and skills that we are after. Our shortages are broadly similar to those of the country as a whole. We need people in the construction related trades in particular—plumbers, bricklayers, carpenters, joiners and electricians, and the list goes on. Related to that we certainly need civil engineers and people in the metal trades, automotive trades and mechanical trades. We need medical personnel of all persuasions, chefs, some hospitality workers and some teachers in specialised areas, particularly science and mathematics.

Mrs IRWIN—I want to follow on from the answer that you have given. You have named a number of areas where you have skills shortages. In what parts of Tasmania have you got the greatest shortages? Can you name any of the particular areas?

Mr McHugh—Broadly I would say these shortages exist across the state. Probably industry and certainly the population of Tasmania are a little more dispersed than they are in other states, so it is safe to say that these shortages exist state-wide.

Mrs IRWIN—I want to go to page 4 of your submission. Thank you for a very good submission to this inquiry. You have stated:

For a humanitarian entrant that is a recipient of Centrelink benefits, the costs for skills recognition may be considered excessive and the client may not follow through with the process.

How many people are you finding are experiencing this in Tasmania? Would you have a number?

Mrs Andersch—No, we do not have an number. We do not get the information about their skills until some time after they arrive here. We are picking this up through the state government's work placement program in particular, which provides placement for those humanitarian entrants who may be going to a TAFE course or can identify to us that they are able to do clerical work, some of them at university.

For instance, we picked up a carpenter who arrived last May. He is in his mid-30s and he has started an apprenticeship. The company feels that he really should not be going through the full apprenticeship but he is apparently having to go through most of that apprenticeship. His wife is highly qualified in office work as a bilingual secretary in French and English. That would not have been picked up had we not anecdotally heard about them. That is virtually how we get to know these things. There is a paediatrician who is in the hospital system now who is going through medical school and is employed by the hospital to get his qualifications recognised, but he has to go through the whole process.

Mrs IRWIN—It sounds as if you are only hearing these things by word of mouth. What do you think the Commonwealth should be looking at to address this problem?

Mrs Andersch—What we would like to see is that for people who are skilled there should be some process by which we can pick the skills up as soon as they arrive without them having to find us. We can then assess them or provide them with opportunities to be assessed. The Centrelink payments do not afford them the wherewithal to actually pay for all the assessments. Those are the other things that we have to look at. We have to depend on volunteer groups who look after them in their first six months after arrival and the migrant resource centres to hear about the qualifications that they have. There is a constitutional lawyer from the Sudan here who is extremely well qualified. Trying to get employment for him within the legal system, may be not as a lawyer, is problematic because he has no paperwork. We have to think more broadly as to how we try and assess people when they come through, especially looking at their background and how they have got here. After a number of years in a refugee camp, when you have left everything behind and you have arrived at the camp with nothing, it is very difficult to get any paperwork to prove your qualifications. We have social workers who are working in Launceston who have the skills but they are more immediately interested in earning some money rather than trying to get their skills recognised because they have family to look after. We have to take all that into account especially with our humanitarian entrants.

Senator PARRY—Anthony, you mentioned the licensing and regulation issues earlier and that there are a number of people who have qualifications but are having issues with processing of licensing and regulation. Can you give us any indication of numbers and even a breakdown of particular trades?

Mr McHugh—I could not give you any detailed information on numbers and trades now but I could provide that information later. In terms of the trades, it would be four main ones, electricians, plumbers, refrigeration and airconditioning mechanics and gas fitters or gas plumbers. For a lot of other trades, such as bricklayers and carpenters, local licensing is not an issue but for those four key trades it is. We find that local licensing authorities here are not used to dealing with large numbers of immigrants and it is an area they are not terribly familiar with and therefore we have found it difficult to get clear and concise pathways developed for these occupations when they do come into the state.

Senator PARRY—Does the Tasmanian government work well with industry in addressing some of these problems? For example, is there any direct liaison with the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry?

Mr McHugh—There is certainly direct liaison. We have an officer for our department who is currently based there. The government and certainly our department have had a lot of direct contact and are in the process of communicating directly with these licensing authorities in an attempt to try and streamline this process and make the pathways clearer for the new arrivals when they do come.

Senator PARRY—What about any direct education of employers by your department or any other departments?

Mr McHugh—I will hand over to Lyn Andersch because she wants to answer that question. Suffice to say, we are in contact with employers who are picking up migrants and we are attempting to educate the industry as a whole about how to get people through and the fact that it is not necessarily very difficult.

Senator PARRY—Are they using the outreach officer program?

Mrs Andersch—Yes. The industry outreach officer of Immigration is based in the TCCI one day a week. We work very closely with Immigration on issues such as dealing with employers and their employment of migrants, regardless of whether they are humanitarian entrants or skilled migrants. My office provides cultural sensitivity sessions to people who request them outside of the state government. Increasingly, we are being invited to go to employing bodies to speak to them about different cultures, what to expect and how to cope with difference, if you like. We are also being asked to speak to people from the Job Network agencies such as Employment Plus, and those requests are increasing across the state through the three regions of the north-west, the north and the south.

Senator PARRY—Finally, there are two things with mining on the west coast: is there a large shortage of skilled labour on the west coast; and, secondly, does the decentralised nature of the state, which Anthony touched upon, hinder the whole process with possibly a lot of effort in Hobart? I know the Department of Economic Development is active in Burnie and Launceston, but what about other areas and the decentralised nature?

Mr McHugh—I understand there is a very strong skill shortage in mining within the state. I guess there are similar factors at work as there would be in, say, Western Australia, where the mining communities and the business sites are remote and in inhospitable territory, although in a

different way. There is a general reluctance for tradespeople, particularly those with families, to go and live in places like Queenstown, Rosebery or Zeehan, despite the fact that they may be being paid more. I am not sure what I can say in terms of the decentralised nature of the state as the licensing is normally centralised in Hobart. I suppose the idea is that once somebody arrives they get their licensing sorted out as quickly as possible before moving onto a place of work. With many of the trades, the licensing process, from what I understand, normally involves a period of supervised work with an employer, so if that employer happens to be in the north-west or somewhere outside of Hobart, I do not think that is necessarily an issue.

Dr LAWRENCE—That links, in a way, with a question I wanted to ask you which is somewhat more speculative. You would be aware that there is a lot of pressure to increase the number of people who come here, mainly as skilled workers, on reasonably short-term visas to fill some of those gaps. What sorts of problems do you anticipate in processing workers of that kind very quickly and ensuring that their qualifications are fully assessed in the short time frame that would obviously be necessary were such a program to become more prevalent?

Mr McHugh—I think if employers are willing to take up the baton with this and they want these people on short-term visas, they would in many cases be willing to drive the licensing and onshore assessment process, where necessary.

Mrs Andersch—My office as the regional certifying body looks after the 457 temporary visa for those people who are being paid under \$39,100 per annum. Of those that come to my office at that level, they are mainly chefs with particular expertise. Their qualifications do not have to be recognised here. Other than that, there are very few in terms of trade skills. You also asked a question about whether there is a state-wide trades shortage and whether employers are getting a similar sort of service. We have to go around the state to see employers. They are very welcome to come in and speak to us if they are in Hobart, but we make a big effort to get out to see them. We also do a number of skilled sponsorships, if you like, for employers through the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. Through that program, we bring into Tasmania probably about 100 people a year.

Dr LAWRENCE—Just to give me a picture, what areas of work?

Mrs Andersch—What skills?

Dr LAWRENCE—Which areas of work? What trades?

Mrs Andersch—University lecturers, doctors, dentists and engineers—the areas are across the board but more so in the professions than the trades. They come in under a two-year contract with an employer. Our information is that about 98 per cent remain beyond the two years. It is across the board, but it is mainly in the medical area—nurses, technologists and people like that.

Dr LAWRENCE—Just to be clear, are their qualifications assessed in exactly the same way as those for someone coming in under a skilled migrant program?

Mrs Andersch—As far as I understand it, yes. The doctors, for instance, can work under supervision but they cannot remain here as permanent residents until they have full registration. Certification is given to them, subject to full registration.

Dr LAWRENCE—I understand the category. Finally, a lot of these people—the chefs whom you have talked about—have been the subject of recent publicity here in Canberra in particular, where their working conditions and rates of pay have been well below the industry standard. Do you see some of that exploitation going on?

Mrs Andersch—Very little. I guess Tasmania is so small that we use a rather wide network. As far as the regional certifying body responsibilities are concerned, we have a panel that consists of an officer who is ultimately going to approve the visa from Immigration, an officer from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and an officer from Workplace Standards Tasmania. If a person comes in under a trade, they must be paid according to the award rate and, ultimately, they will be checked and monitored.

Ms Sonners—Can I add something to that?

Dr LAWRENCE—Please go ahead.

Ms Sonners—In 2003 and 2004, the Office of Youth Affairs held a series of consultations with young people—probably 80 per cent of them were humanitarian entrants—aged between 12 and 25. A common theme or flavour that emerged when these young people—who were engaged in some employment, usually casual based employment—were asked about employment was that they were employed by cash-in-hand means and that, as soon as they turned 18 years of age, many of them felt that, because of their age, they were being told to move on from that position. This is documented in a *State of our youth* report, which is available. I can forward it on, if you like.

Dr LAWRENCE—Thank you. That would be useful.

CHAIR—That would be good; we would like that. We are out of time, but I just want to finish with two brief questions—for brief answers, if possible. You mentioned that you have the outreach officer program for only one day a week. Where do you source that person from and—the obvious question—could you use that person's time more than one day a week? The second question, which someone may wish to take on notice while the first one is being answered, is: has the Tasmanian government made use of the overseas exhibitions, which have been held in London, Berlin and Chennai? There is to be another exhibition in Calcutta next month, March.

Mrs Andersch—I will answer the first question and Anthony McHugh will answer the second one. The industry outreach officer is an officer employed by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. That officer is based in that department but goes out one day a week and is seconded to the TCCI. So she is working very closely with employers while she is with the TCCI. Other than that, we work quite closely together and she does so also with Anthony McHugh's area in getting out to speak to employers from time to time. That happens quite regularly—about four times a year, from memory, there are employer forums organised where we all get in touch with employers and speak to them about skilled migration and what is required regarding bringing people into the country to work for them. Anthony will answer the other question.

CHAIR—Could you use that officer more than one day a week and how successful is the one-day-a-week system?

Mrs Andersch—From what I understand, the one day a week at TCCI is working extremely well. She is still on call in her office as part of her work as an industry outreach officer, anyway. Tasmania being so small, it does not seem to be an issue.

CHAIR—And the exhibitions?

Mr McHugh—I will just go back to that first point. We would probably need to consult with the TCCI about whether they would like to have the outreach officer for more than one day a week. As Lyn said, she is employed as an industry outreach officer on a full-time basis, so when she is not with the TCCI she is liaising with employers, anyway.

Regarding the skilled expos, an officer from our department attended the expos last year in Europe. We found that, despite the short notice when they were called, which made things a little difficult for us in a budgetary sense, they were very successful, very well run. The fact that the people attending were screened to begin with, so we were not wasting our time by sending people who would not qualify, was excellent, and we think we will get some excellent results out of that.

We do plan to attend some, but probably not all, of the expos being held from now into the next financial year. We are in the process now of working out which ones will deliver the best results for us. We are unable to attend Chennai because quite some months ago we prepared to attend a series of private expos which are to be held in the UK and Ireland, which we have been doing for quite some years with some success. But into the next financial year, when we make our budget submissions, we will possibly be requesting additional funds to attend more of DIMA's expos because we see the possibility that they may become the main game now and private expos will certainly become less important and possibly irrelevant.

CHAIR—I reiterate the fact that your submission was a quality submission and we thank you very much for that. In addition, we have several questions which we have not had time to ask. If the secretariat were to forward some of those questions to you, I hope you would be interested in answering them if you could. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript of your evidence so that you can check it for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible. So thank you very much; we appreciate the Tasmanian government being involved in this hearing today.

Mrs Andersch—Thank you.

[10.56 am]

COLE, Ms Natasha Jane, Director, Education and Recognition Section, Overseas Trained Doctors Task Force, Department of Health and Ageing

LARKINS, Ms Alison, Assistant Secretary, Health Work Force Branch, Health Services Improvement Division, Department of Health and Ageing

LYONS, Ms Margaret, First Assistant Secretary, Health Services Improvement Division, Department of Health and Ageing

TABER, Ms Kelly, Acting Director, Overseas Trained Doctors Task Force, Department of Health and Ageing

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

Ms Lyons—We were not going to make an opening statement, but I would like to comment that clearly health work force is very much a priority within our department at the moment having regard to the work that the Council of Australian Governments has asked be done between now and the middle of the year on health work force and following the Productivity Commission's report to it. So we within the department are very firmly focused on health work force.

CHAIR—If there are no further opening statements or comments, we will go straight into it. Can you give us an update on the current shortage of health professionals? In addition to shortages of general practitioners, are there shortages in particular specialist areas? Are there shortages in other health professions?

Ms Larkins—There are shortages. We have not brought that information with us. We could give you our latest picture of the shortfall in various specialties. We do not have a comprehensive set of shortages, but the Australian Medical Workforce Advisory Committee have done reports on specialties. We have a large report that they released on general practice shortages at the end of last year. So the best and most current information we have is on general practice. But we can forward you that information.

Senator PARRY—Does that break down into geographical locations and between city and rural or not?

Ms Larkins—I am not sure. It would give us some sense of city and rural—

Senator PARRY—That would be important.

Ms Larkins—but I am not sure whether it does it by state. I do not think it does it geographically. But it certainly would do it by RRMA classification, so you would have some sense of where the shortages were. I think we could characterise that fairly easily by saying that the shortages are greater in RRMA 4 to RRMA 7.

CHAIR—You indicated that the health professionals are not regulated at a national level, but, rather, by each state and territory. COAG has recently agreed to a national assessment process for overseas qualified doctors. How do you think this may work? How might this national assessment process impact on the work of the department and assessment bodies like the AMC, the specialist medical colleges and the state and territory medical boards?

Ms Larkins—What actually will come back as part of the COAG work that is under way in relation to national assessment is still being discussed with jurisdictions. But I think it is probably worth reflecting on two things. The Productivity Commission recommendation is for a national multiprofession registration body, and that is being actively considered both by the Australian government and by state and territory governments. That would basically encompass a nationally consistent approach to assessment of overseas trained doctors. It is envisaged that if we were to have a national registration body, it would have the task of registering overseas trained health professionals, broader than medicine.

The other thing, which I might get Natasha to comment on, is that there has been a range of work that the Commonwealth has been leading. As we said in our submission last year, we do not have direct responsibility for registration. We do not have a role under legislation in registration, but we have been leading some work with jurisdictions to improve the national consistency of approaches. Natasha could outline what we have done in that regard.

Ms Cole—Basically, we have been working with the states and territories and the state and territory medical boards to come to some agreements around standards and processes for the assessment of overseas trained doctors. There is already in place a national process agreed with the colleges and with the medical boards around specialists and that has been in place for some time now. But we have not had a similar nationally agreed process for doctors who are going into general practice. However, the boards have already agreed to national minimum English language standards and have implemented those in the last year. They are now looking at whether they can implement similar standards of assessment for those doctors who are going into GP type positions. That will be a fairly significant change. The other thing that we are about to commence work on is looking at junior doctors, in essence, who are going into the state hospital systems and whether such a similar model could be developed for them.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mrs IRWIN—How is the DoctorConnect website going? I think it started in May 2005. Can you give us an update on that? How many visits have you had to the site and how many inquiries have you had since that website started operation?

Ms Taber—We have had in excess of 200,000 visits to the website and we have had in excess of 1,500 emails inquiring about how to become a doctor in Australia. I have a member of staff who responds directly to those requests, advising people to go to different college websites, depending on the actual request.

CHAIR—Is that response largely from overseas or from foreign doctors within Australia who have not registered to work?

Ms Taber—They are largely from overseas. There are very few onshore. The percentage is quite small. I think around six per cent are onshore. We track that through a website that they use. The server is based in the United States, so it is not a true indication. The percentages are what come through that website through the United States. The types of questions that we are getting are largely from doctors in India wanting to come and work in Australia. Most of those asking the questions have specialist recognition requirements.

Mrs IRWIN—I know it has only been going since May 2005. You have received 1,500 emails from overseas doctors, especially from India, making inquiries. From that number, do you have any figures on how many people might have taken up an offer to come to Australia as doctors?

Ms Taber—No, we do not.

Mrs IRWIN—It would be interesting to find out to get that feedback. Your submission mainly deals with doctors. What has been done with regard to other health professionals, like nurses, people who want to work in our aged care industry?

Ms Cole—There have been some other initiatives under ‘Strengthening Medicare’ about increasing doctors, nurses and allied health professions and so forth, but there are no specific initiatives in the Department of Health and Ageing around migration of those professions. That is largely because nurses and so forth are primarily employed by states and territories in the hospital system.

CHAIR—Where would you get that data from—the states and territories?

Ms Cole—That would be the best place.

CHAIR—Is any of that information centrally collated?

Ms Cole—You might be able to get it through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. We can make inquiries for you, if you like.

CHAIR—If you would, that would good.

Dr LAWRENCE—I have a few questions. Some of them may be, in a sense, political. I do not expect you to answer the political bits of them, but for the record. As you know, there has been a very up and down argument about the nature of this problem of workforce shortages in the medical profession. From time to time it is said that there is not one—that per capita we have as many doctors as most other parts of the world at comparable levels of economic development and sophistication, if you like, when it comes to medical services and that it is really a problem of maldistribution. You might want to comment on that question. How much is it a real shortage, and how much is it a question of maldistribution?

The second question—and for me it is a fairly fundamental one—is: how much of the problem we confront is really the result of our failure to support local graduates through their professional careers? The number of hours that doctors are working has gone down. The average doctor is working fewer hours than in the past. Some people put this down to a sensible reassessment of getting a life. Others put it down to an increasing proportion of women in the profession who take more time out and are not so prepared to work all hours. How much is it a result of changed work patterns, failure to support our graduates, failure to provide in the workplace or in environments where they are likely to need extra time, backup support, that kind of thing?

Another question is: how much is the maldistribution—because that certainly exists—the result of the fact that doctors now incur a fairly heavy cost during their own training, and in order to, in a sense, make good the costs of that training they tend to migrate to areas where they can command higher salaries than, for instance, in rural general practice? Are we serving our local graduates well enough to be poaching doctors from countries that often need them more than we do?

Ms Lyons—There are a number of elements to that question. In terms of maldistribution, the AMWAC report on GPs, which is available, indicated that there is some sense of maldistribution between metropolitan, outer metropolitan, and rural and remote. So the issue of distribution is certainly one that between ourselves and the other jurisdictions we will be having a look at in the COAG context.

In terms of the lesser hours worked, you are right. The facts are indisputable that doctors are working fewer hours now than they used to, by a factor of about 2½ hours a week in about a 10-year period.

Dr LAWRENCE—Which adds up to quite a large number of doctors, doesn't it, when you make up the full-time equivalent.

Ms Cole—Yes, it does. But some other things have happened in the last couple of years to try and address that particular shortage. For example, the number of places available for medical students will go from something like 1,100 to 2,100 over the next six years. Those figures might not be absolutely accurate; I will take that on notice and give you the accurate figure. It is estimated that by 2010 there will be 2,100 medical graduates a year. Your comment about the cost of training is one that I confess we have not considered in the context of our responsibility in health. Perhaps that question might be directed to our colleagues in the department of education.

Ms Larkins—What we do know about cost is that it is not the only factor that is influencing people's decisions. We have put quite a lot of effort into various incentive programs, particularly in general practice, to compensate people for the various financial disincentives to working in rural areas, but there are a lot of other reasons why people choose not to go into a rural and remote area.

Dr LAWRENCE—Personal preferences.

Ms Larkins—And certainly a lot of the initiatives we have had have been about exposing people in their undergraduate years to rural and remote medicine, because the international

evidence suggests that that is a very effective way of getting people into rural and remote areas, and of course training people who come from those parts of the country.

Dr LAWRENCE—Earlier I referred to getting doctors from parts of the world that desperately need them. We have quite a few doctors coming from South Africa, for instance, and India. But what are the relative proportions? Where are we recruiting doctors from now? Is there a net drain or a net surplus of doctors from Anglophone countries?

Ms Larkins—We can give you our latest statistics on where people are coming from. I think the biggest group of doctors we import are from the UK, Canada and South Africa.

Dr LAWRENCE—Are we in front in net terms? Are more of our doctors going that way than doctors coming this way?

Ms Larkins—No, we are a net importer. The next biggest group is India and Pakistan. I will give you the breakdown by percentage. I should make it clear that we abide by the Commonwealth code of conduct for international recruitment. We do not seek to actively recruit in developing countries or countries where the workforce is critical.

Dr LAWRENCE—South Africa is an iffy case, isn't it? So are India and Pakistan.

Ms Larkins—We do not actively recruit, and our recruiting companies are not allowed to advertise in those places. But, under that Commonwealth code, we allow people freedom of movement and migration. We do not actively promote that, but neither do we stop people who have skills we need from freely coming to the country. That is consistent with the code of practice.

Dr LAWRENCE—We are obviously recruiting people from various sources and, in many cases, trying to encourage them by various incentives, including conditional registration to practise in the country or in remote areas where there is a shortage. One of the things that happens, especially with temporary visas, is that after a couple of years they say, 'That's enough, I'm going home,' and country areas are left with a high turnover and an inadequate medical service in any case. I want you to comment on the frequency with which we turnover doctors in those areas and on whether the barriers to them simply migrating to our major centres create more of the same problem.

Ms Cole—There are two parts to your question. The first part is about what sort of turnover we have among migrants. It is difficult to characterise because we are talking about such a diverse group of doctors. There is basically the 'backpacker doctor'—that is often a young UK doctor who is coming out for a short period of six months to 12 months. You find a lot of those in Queensland, in particular, in some of the remote and more exotic locations. They do have a high turnover and that is to be expected. We get the same thing with our own graduates going to the UK, Canada or other such places. Then there is a stream of doctors who are, in essence, aspirational, and they often work their way through a series of countries. It may be an Indian doctor, for example, who has done a further qualification in the UK and then come to Australia for a period and may eventually decide to settle permanently in the US, the UK or Canada. So we get a bit of that as well. But our feeling is that the majority of doctors, aside from the backpackers, are intending to stay permanently in Australia.

Dr LAWRENCE—And the barriers to movement?

Ms Larkins—There are two levels of barrier. The temporary resident doctors have to go to an area of workforce shortage and that has to be for as long as they are here as a temporary resident. For the permanent residents, there is a 10-year period.

Dr LAWRENCE—Yes, you referred to that in your submission. And that is the restraint. When people say, ‘Too bad, I’m moving on,’ do they lose the qualification? Is that barrier an incentive for them to go, once they have decided they are not finding country practice as rewarding as they might have been led to believe? I know of a few cases where they have upped stakes and left the country altogether.

Ms Cole—It is possible. There is a whole range of migrant experiences. Some people—and some families—migrate well, and others do not. If you look at any profession, I think you would find a similar story.

Dr LAWRENCE—I guess it is the relative frequency with which that happens. That is the question. You do not know that?

Ms Cole—No, we do not know at the moment.

Ms Larkins—Certainly our mechanisms for directing those people into the areas of greater shortage appear to be very effective at getting that outcome.

Ms Cole—We have a lovely program called the Five Year Program, for example, which puts highly skilled doctors into rural areas. It gives them a concession on the 10-year moratorium for achieving fellowship and permanent residence within a certain period. We find that those doctors, once they have been there for three, four or five years, tend to stay. They usually have bought into the practice by that stage and so one and so forth.

Dr LAWRENCE—Their family has settled et cetera.

Ms Cole—Yes. The ones that do not is a smaller group of people whose spouses are unable to relocate to a country location because of their profession or whatever.

Mrs IRWIN—We have received a number of submissions that have mentioned that, for example, taxi drivers who have got qualifications overseas, which are not recognised in Australia, are not in the financial position to go to university to upgrade their skills. The committee heard evidence in Adelaide about a scheme operating in 1998, I think, that allowed for overseas qualified doctors who had been in Australia for, say, two years or longer to apply to university and undertake that two-year course. Is that scheme still operating?

Ms Cole—No. That was the 100 places scheme. It took 100 doctors in that situation and put them into medical school. It is no longer running, but we have what we call a permanent resident overseas trained doctors scheme running at the moment which provides doctors in that circumstance with quite considerable assistance. It has been running in conjunction with the RACGP. Basically, doctors were invited to attend for an assessment of their skills and knowledge.

Mrs IRWIN—Is this the 1998 one?

Ms Cole—No, this is a new one. It is running at the moment.

Mrs IRWIN—Why did the 1998 one cease? Did you get the 100 doctors?

Ms Cole—No, not all of those doctors were successful.

Mrs IRWIN—I was listening to the chair.

CHAIR—I thought that is what you indicated, that it stopped because you got the 100.

Ms Cole—Yes. We filled 100 positions.

Mrs IRWIN—I am just curious as to when it ceased and why it ceased?

Ms Cole—It was a one-off program that was funded specifically as a trial. Not all of those doctors were successful—so some got through and some did not, basically.

CHAIR—How many, since we are teasing it out?

Ms Cole—I would have to find out for you.

CHAIR—Is this new program you are referring to successful?

Ms Cole—It is running at the moment. What we are really talking about here are doctors who have migrated through other means, so doctors who have migrated as spouses of Australian citizens or who have migrated as a refugee or something similar. Consequently, they never had their skills assessed before they got here. Some of those doctors have problems. Some of them would never make the standards required because they may be, for example, really a Chinese herbalist or something like that, even though they think of themselves as a doctor. Nonetheless, we have a scheme that invites those doctors to attend assessment processes at the RACGP, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. They are then given a learning plan which assists them in identifying where their skills deficits are, including English language, cultural problems and clinical knowledge. Those doctors that are assessed as requiring moderate educational input are now eligible for specific funding of about \$10,000 per doctor to assist them in acquiring that knowledge in order to pass the AMC process, which is what they all have to go through.

Mrs IRWIN—Is there a cost involved during the assessment program?

Ms Cole—The cost is about \$1 million to do over 700 doctors.

Mrs IRWIN—So it does not cost those people who want to be assessed. It is free.

Ms Cole—It is completely free to the doctors concerned.

CHAIR—I have three brief questions—and if we could have three brief answers, because we are in a bit of trouble with the time. How effective has the priority processing of the visa applications for medical practitioners been by DIMIA? Can you give us an indication of the average time for processing visas before and after priority processing was introduced?

Ms Cole—You would be best off asking DIMIA about the processing times. They would be able to give you that more accurately. In our experience, the biggest issue around the processing of visas is the pre-work that has to be done; the assessment by medical boards and colleges is the time-consuming part.

CHAIR—Okay. We will check with DIMIA. Do you think the overseas-trained doctors are given enough information at the start of the process and fully understand the various stages to gaining registration here?

Ms Cole—That is the reason why we introduced DoctorConnect: we did feel that there was an information deficit. We are certainly working with those sites that we link to, which include the medical boards and the AMC, to make sure that their information is as understandable as possible.

CHAIR—Finally, this question needs to be asked because the issue has been in the media off and on. That is, there are suggestions that New Zealand has a far more sympathetic system of assessment and that many of these doctors go through New Zealand to get recognition of their skills and qualifications, and then end up in Australia because of our migration relationship with New Zealand. Is that something that you are aware of, disagree with, have any comment on? In other words, people are using New Zealand as a shortcut to Australia.

Ms Cole—It is called backdoor migration, yes. Personally, I would not categorise the New Zealand assessment process as being more sympathetic to doctors than our own. From what I have seen of their processes, in some ways they can actually be tougher. There used to be some migration of doctors from New Zealand to Australia, around 100 a year that we were aware of, but they still have to go through our assessment processes once they are here, so in a sense it is not necessarily an easier pathway.

CHAIR—So generally you disagree?

Ms Lyons—Can I just add, Chair, that some of the specialist colleges are actually colleges of Australia and New Zealand so that if you are a fellow of a particular college in New Zealand and you decide you want to come and live in Australia then you are automatically a member of the college.

Mrs IRWIN—I think you just stated that there were 100 doctors who have come from New Zealand to Australia. Out of curiosity, how many have left our shores to go to New Zealand?

Ms Cole—Sorry, I do not know. That was about 100 annually coming through at one stage, we thought. So it is not a big number.

Mrs IRWIN—Thanks for that.

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

[11.24 am]

GILLESPIE, Mr Paul, Associate Director, Overseas Qualifications Assessment, Engineers Australia

HURFORD, Ms Kathryn Louise, Associate Director, Public Policy, Engineers Australia

KASPURA, Mr Andre, Policy Analyst, International and National Policy Directorate, Engineers Australia

TAYLOR, Mr Peter, Chief Executive, Engineers Australia

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

Mr Taylor—You are probably aware that Engineers Australia is the peak body for engineering practitioners in Australia and represents all disciplines and branches of engineering. We have about 80,000 members around Australia and overseas, making us the largest and most diverse engineering association in Australia. All members of Engineers Australia are bound by a common commitment to promote engineering and facilitate its practice for the common good, all within a very strict code of ethics. Engineers Australia welcomes your invitation to comment on skills recognition, upgrading and licensing. It is a very important issue.

A skilled engineering workforce is essential if Australia is to achieve the quality and standard of living to which we aspire in an increasingly competitive world. At present Australia is importing a significant number of engineers every year to cover shortfalls in engineering skills, and that is also happening in other sectors. We recognise the significant contributions made by migrant engineers to Australia, particularly in the early years of the program, and their continuing contribution to Australia's economic, physical and social wellbeing. The Snowy hydro scheme is a classic example. Migrant engineers are a vital element in generating new ideas and approaches to engineering and in providing skills where there are shortages.

While supporting skilled migration generally, Engineers Australia has one particular area of concern. That is that the value of educating and developing the skills of Australians must not be overlooked when the option of taking on large numbers of skilled migrants to overcome skill shortages may be seen as an expedient alternative. While continuing to facilitate skilled migration, it is imperative that the Australian government also make an undertaking to increase the education and training opportunities for Australians and in particular to mobilise the education system to improve the science, engineering and technology literacy of students at schools.

In primary school technology related subjects are often not taught or are taught on an ad hoc basis. At the secondary level there is a disturbing trend for students to lose interest in science and mathematics. Despite showing potential, they may be lost to engineering and science courses. I think the most recent figures show that about 46 per cent of senior secondary school students are not studying any science or maths subjects at all. In the 18-year period to 1998 the number of students in year 12 in Australia doubled but the numbers studying chemistry, physics, the enabling sciences and advanced maths stagnated. This is inconsistent with the knowledge needs of an advanced technological society and it is severely limiting the pool of potential students able to continue study and training in engineering.

Since the early 1990s Australia has been supplementing an inadequate turnout of engineers from Australian universities with migrants. Around 5,000 domestic engineers have graduated from Australian universities each year for the past 10 years. That has not changed. While the number of Australian engineers trained has not increased, universities are now training and graduating almost 3,000 foreign students from engineering courses each year. Foreign student graduations as a percentage of all graduations have grown from 13 per cent in 1994 to about 34 per cent in 2003.

Increasingly, foreign engineers who have trained in Australia apply for migration, particularly since the 2001 changes allowing foreign graduates from Australian universities to apply for permanent migration on shore. In 2000-01, before the changes took place, a total of 1,300 engineers migrated to Australia under the skilled visa streams. Since then, this number has grown to 2,636 engineers in 2004-05, with 1,101 of these applying on shore at the completion of their degrees.

Studies have shown that migrants with Australian university qualifications compete more successfully in the Australian labour market than individuals from any other migrant stream. Engineers Australia has therefore been supportive of the onshore visa system. I must reiterate, however, that Australia should be looking not only to attract migrants to fill skills shortages but also to train more Australian engineers. Increased funding for engineering education is urgently needed. We believe that the number of Commonwealth funded undergraduate places should be large enough to provide access to all Australians with the capacity to participate in higher education. Currently, each year, about 1,800 eligible students are turned away from engineering courses due to a lack of Commonwealth funded places.

If current migration levels in engineering fields are not maintained or the number of engineers graduating from Australian universities is not increased, shortages of engineering professionals may become more widespread. Due to the stagnated number of Australian students graduating from engineering courses, maintaining the level of the skilled migration program has become crucially important to Australian industry. Simply from a risk management approach, this vulnerability needs to be addressed. Because employer nominated migrants and onshore applicant migrants have much higher success rates in gaining employment, we believe that these offer the best prospects of helping to resolve professional engineering skills shortages in the short term.

Engineers Australia is concerned that, if local training does not increase and global competition to attract skilled migrants continues to heat up, Australia will not be able to attract sufficient migrants to meet the skills needs of our industries. Given the increasing risk that

Australia's skilled migrant intake may not be sustainable, enhancing and expanding Australia's skills base through investment in education and training is the preferred course of action, which is guaranteed, we think, to achieve longer term benefits for Australia.

Finally, you are probably aware that Engineers Australia assesses the engineering skills and qualifications of applicants for skilled migration. Paul Gillespie, on my left, heads our qualifications assessment team. He is here today to answer any questions you might have on that. Kate and Andre are also here to help me answer some of your harder questions. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

CHAIR—Thank you. I would like to begin by referring to your last point about the cost of assessments. Mr Gillespie, as you involve yourself in checking the qualifications of overseas engineers, can you tell us a bit about that process and what it costs the applicant? Is there any involvement offshore before they come to Australia? Can you tell us how it is done and the costs involved?

Mr Gillespie—The majority of our applicants are offshore when they apply. The assessment process probably needs a little background information. We have recognised qualifications and qualifications which are not recognised—

CHAIR—Can I stop you there. Do you have understandings or relationships with overseas educational institutions that automatically give that?

Mr Taylor—Perhaps I will answer that first part.

Mr Gillespie—That is what I was about to say.

Mr Taylor—We are a member of the Washington Accord. Currently, nine countries are members of the Washington Accord.

CHAIR—Can you tell us who those nine are?

Mr Taylor—They are Hong Kong, the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, Japan and Canada. A few others are currently seeking full-time full membership, such as Singapore, Chinese Taiwan and Malaysia, and I think Korea is on the way. Any qualification from the countries in that list is automatically recognised by Paul.

CHAIR—And the costs?

Mr Gillespie—I will just elaborate a little further on that. Under the accord, we recognise not just professional engineers but also engineering technologists. We have a Washington Accord and a Sydney Accord for engineering technologists.

The fee for assessment of recognised qualifications from overseas is \$250—that is, if the qualification is lodged overseas. Obviously, the GST applies if it is lodged within Australia, which adds 10 per cent. Australian qualifications are recognised at a fee of \$100, because we are the accrediting body for Australian qualifications. Others who do not have recognised qualifications apply through a competency based assessment process known as our CDR or

competency demonstration report. The fee there is \$450 with 10 per cent GST added if they are applying from within Australia. They are the fees.

CHAIR—You mentioned incentives for young people to take up engineering as a future profession. Do you think that something like a waiver of HECS fees might help?

Mr Taylor—That would probably help, but I think the problem starts right back in the primary schools. My understanding is that there are virtually no primary school teachers with tertiary qualifications in mathematics anymore. I was at a meeting of the task force for skills shortages last year. A representative of the Science Teachers Association told me that the science content—I do not know whether it was New South Wales or nationally—in primary school was about two per cent. I asked what the curriculum required, and he said, ‘Nothing, as long as it is being covered.’ Therefore, it could be much lower than two per cent. I think that is the starting point. We need to run programs like EngQuest at the primary school level, which is now just about national following a grant from the minister last year, and also Science and Engineering Challenge in secondary schools, a program which originated in the University of New South Wales, to help people become more interested—not to teach them subjects that should be taught at school, but to excite that interest that you mentioned; to excite people into some sort of future career. If you just go and teach kids boring maths or boring science and they do not know why they are doing it then they are not going to have an interest in it. But if you can excite them about something and they want to be one of those things, then they have some motivation for doing science or maths and doing them in the harder subjects as they go on. I think we have a long way to go to sort those problems out.

The winner of the Prime Minister’s Prize for Excellence in Science Teaching in Primary Schools two years ago was from the Darling Heights school on the Darling Downs in Queensland, and he was brilliant. His approach with kids at year 1 at school was to build mechanical models out of cardboard. It might be a dog, but it could actually pick something up in its mouth. It was basically a very simple machine that was teaching these kids the fundamentals of technology. He was building hot air balloons and they would go out in the local park and fly these things. It was absolutely brilliant. Unfortunately he is one person and you really need one of those people at least in every primary school in Australia. That is the sort of problem I think we have.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission. It is very comprehensive. I was interested to read a number of points you have made in section 3. You refer to some research that indicates some of the barriers that migrants face in gaining employment in Australia. You say:

There are significant numbers of overseas qualified engineers (and other professionals) who have difficulty securing employment in Australian business despite their overseas qualifications being recognised. This is believed to be due to a range of factors including scepticism by employers about the strength and value of the person’s qualifications and a migrant’s lack of Australian work experience and unfamiliarity with Australian work culture.

I was interested in particular in any experience you could elaborate on that your members have had in this regard and also how you think this obvious perception employers have about overseas qualified individuals could be addressed or overcome.

Mr Taylor—It is a very good question. It is one of the reasons why some of these other forms of migration work better. This is a bit of anecdotal experience from when I was a person who employed some engineers. Prior to coming here I was chief executive of the Toowoomba City Council. We had quite a number of foreign qualified engineers there. After an initial period they became very useful people.

The problem was in recruiting those people. Quite often foreign qualified engineers were so desperate to get jobs that they would fire off photocopied applications to all and sundry that did not address the specific requirements of that position. A lot of employers will not even give them an interview on that basis because they have not taken the time to address the selection criteria. Part of the approach needs to be some assistance to these people in understanding how to apply for jobs in Australia. Secondly, I think the Victorian Local Government Association is working to provide work experience in local governments in Victoria. I think that is a good way because they can see how the place works and they can see how their experience and their qualifications suit them for jobs. I have been driven around by taxi drivers in Melbourne and I have found out that the taxi driver has double degrees in engineering, a master's degree and a bachelor's degree, and they are still driving a taxi. I would suggest that person has not mastered the knack of writing a good job application. There are obviously some inbuilt problems where if an employer sees a good job application and they understand the person then that applicant automatically may get some preference over somebody who looks a bit doubtful.

Senator KIRK—You speak of assistance, which I agree would be very useful, in the preparation of CVs, writing letters and the like. Can you envisage a way in which the Commonwealth could assist in that regard—some kind of scheme that could be established? Have you thought about that issue?

Mr Taylor—It could be done through a number of ways. Employment agencies are there if people were to use them to help them do that. We could possibly do that but we would need additional people skilled in those areas to do it. Have you had any experience, Paul?

Mr Gillespie—No, I am not dealing with the domestic issues.

Senator PARRY—In the second half of section 9 of your submission, you indicated some communication issues with DIMIA. You talked a bit about the pre-application skills assessment. Could you expand further about the communication avenue with DIMIA and some of the complications under that system?

Mr Taylor—I will let Kate speak about that but I think it has improved in recent times. I met with the minister in one of her fact-finding forays around the country early last year and I think there were some arrangements made to help us get the information sooner. I do not know whether that is working or not.

Ms Hurford—There have been significant improvements, since we lodged this submission, in the communication channels. Mostly DIMIA is proactive in providing information to the overseas qualification assessment team before announcing that there have been changes to, say, the migration occupations in demand list, which is the specific issue that we mentioned in the submission. There has been a significant improvement in those communication channels. We have been quite proactive in outlining to DIMIA where our problems lie and they have been

quite responsive to those in opening up the information chain that sort of fell apart when those changes to the migration processing arrangements took place.

Senator PARRY—Teething problems?

Ms Hurford—Yes.

Senator PARRY—That is good to hear; thank you.

Dr LAWRENCE—I want to follow up on your observations about the need for these programs in the first place and the failure in Australia to provide adequate science and maths education from primary school upward. I think you have outlined very well the problems there. Clearly, there is some serious work to be done in the education sector. You also mentioned that—was it last year—there were 1,800 people unable to take up places, presumably they have the qualifications, because of a lack of Commonwealth funded positions?

Mr Taylor—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—Was that across all universities or was there any particular one?

Mr Taylor—Do we have a breakdown of that?

Ms Hurford—I can provide you with a breakdown but that was an Australia wide number.

Dr LAWRENCE—So these are people who have got through the system, they have an interest in engineering, that is their first choice, and they cannot get a place?

Mr Taylor—Part of the problem is that people are located in areas where there may not be vacancies. With the closure of some of the engineering faculties around the country, for instance, if it is a rural faculty—

Dr LAWRENCE—Closure of some engineering faculties?

Mr Taylor—Some engineering faculties in Australia are closing down. The University of Canberra engineering faculty is one that is in the process of closing down. Ballarat, I think, has now been taken back into Monash University. If you are, say, a regional student, depending on your financial situation, you have a fairly difficult decision to make: do you take another course and stay in Ballarat, or do you move to the city, with all the attendant problems of being away from your family and your support base and still having to find the additional funds in order to do engineering if that is really what you want to do? It is pretty complex, but that is part of the problem.

Dr LAWRENCE—You mentioned that one of the more successful ways of getting migrants into the program is by having them study at Australian universities, obtain qualifications and then apply. Is there some sense that Australian students, because of the way universities are being funded at the moment, are being pushed out in favour of the full fee paying students? Are we cheating ourselves?

Mr Taylor—That is probably not the case. There are pressures on universities and on faculties within universities, as you would be aware, competing for available funds. If it is a matter of government funded places, I do not know that fee paying places would have a huge effect on that.

CHAIR—Does your industry have any comment on the immigration outreach officer program?

Mr Kaspura—There is an immigration outreach officer with the Association of Consulting Engineers, which is an organisation that represents firms, but there is not one operating within Engineers Australia. The process that Paul looks after precedes the actual submission of an application for a visa by a prospective migrant.

CHAIR—I mention this because I have been involved, through my office, in assisting a local business to bring a Swiss engineer to Australia, and there has been a mixed view of how it has been going. I thought you might have some comment on that.

Mr Gillespie—We have very comprehensive information on our website, which is accessed by lots of overseas applicants. We get around 40 email questions a day from overseas. We have very good information supplied back and forth to intending applicants. At this stage, we probably would not need an immigration person on our site because of the comprehensive nature of the information we have. They may later, after they apply for immigration, need some information, but that is not our area after they have been assessed by us.

CHAIR—So what you are essentially telling us is that, once you assess them as being qualified and competent to come to Australia, the migration visa side of it is not much of a problem.

Mr Gillespie—We do not get involved in that.

CHAIR—You might not get involved in it, but are you aware of whether it is working well?

Mr Gillespie—I think our process is working extremely well.

CHAIR—I mean after that.

Mr Gillespie—The figures from Immigration, as I understand them, are that we assess about 4½ thousand a year, more than two-thirds of them apply for immigration and more than half of those are successful. But you would have to get the figures from Immigration.

CHAIR—So, on those figures—half of two-thirds of 4½ thousand—we are looking at around 1,800 coming to Australia annually?

Mr Gillespie—Yes, it is something like that. I think that fits with the figure Peter gave you earlier.

CHAIR—Interesting. I was at a seminar in Perth recently with largely mining companies and they are desperate to have engineers in Australia as soon as possible, and Tasmania needs

engineers down there. But, when you are competing with salaries of the size offered in the Pilbara, compared to salaries in, say, Strahan or somewhere—

Senator PARRY—Queenstown!

CHAIR—or Queenstown, that might be an issue. One of the things that I am aware of locally, in my electorate, is that local government is suffering because their engineers now have suddenly realised that there is a lot more money to be made outside of local government and they are taking the opportunity to race off and get bigger salaries et cetera. Do you get many inquiries from local government about overseas trained engineers?

Mr Taylor—Just from my own experience, I have not heard anything in recent times. But there is a reasonable percentage of overseas trained engineers working for local government. I think that would also be part of the reason the Victorian Local Government Association has set up that scheme to place engineers in work experience with local government in Victoria—to help them fill the gap—because obviously, like any employer, once they get a good person in for work experience they will offer them a job if they are worth keeping.

CHAIR—On a bit more of a personal note, I am the chair of the Sri Lankan parliamentary friendship group and in about 40 minutes I am having lunch with a significant number of their members and ministers. Everyone talks about Chennai and Amsterdam et cetera, but with Sri Lanka we had the days of the Colombo plan, they speak English and there is a similar education system. Do you consider Sri Lanka to be a good place of opportunity for engineers? I know there are a number of them who work on the main roads in Western Australia, for example. We do not seem to pursue them the way we did from that country.

Mr Taylor—I am not quite sure about that, because there is a person I classify as a good friend but also as one of the best foreign qualified engineers I have had anything to do with who worked with us in Toowoomba for quite a number of years who was a Sri Lankan engineer, and there are Sri Lankan engineers there on the staff in Toowoomba right now. I guess it varies a bit. There are even just little things. During the tsunami, we were helping people in various places and I had dealings with our opposite numbers in Sri Lanka. They wanted some information on the cyclone proofing of buildings and so on, and I put them onto somebody from the research station in James Cook University in Townsville and it turned out that they had both trained in the same university in Sri Lanka.

CHAIR—There you go. Thank you very much and thank you for attending this hearing today. I would be grateful if you could send the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide, as soon as possible. Thank you very much.

[11.54 am]

GRANT, Ms Margaret Jane, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Council of Physiotherapy Regulating Authorities

NALL, Ms Catherine Marjorie, National President, Australian Physiotherapy Association, and Director, Australian Council of Physiotherapy Regulating Authorities

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

Ms Grant—Thank you for this opportunity to provide information and respond to questions in relation to the inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing. The Australian Council of Physiotherapy Regulating Authorities, ACOPRA, was initially established by the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council, AHMAC, around the time when the act for mutual recognition between the states was coming into place. In terms of the matter here today, assessing overseas qualified physiotherapists, ACOPRA has been performing that duty since January 2000, which was when the government devolved that responsibility to the professions.

ACOPRA undertakes this assessment process within an overall organisational environment of continual review and improvement. A review of the assessment process in 2002 resulted in some change to the process and the written examination format in 2003. A review to be published which is concurrent with new physiotherapy competency standards will be undertaken on 30 and 31 March this year. In between each of the major reviews, there is, as I said, a continuous cycle of improvement. I look forward to providing further information about that to you today.

To give you some idea of the scope of ACOPRA's business with regard to assessment, in 2005 ACOPRA assessed 220 applications from overseas trained physiotherapists from 44 countries. Of those, only 13 were found ineligible to proceed to the examination process and 67 were what we classify as immediately acceptable—that is, they had either gained their qualification in Australia, had come via New Zealand or had current practising certificates within Australia, which they may have previously gained through one of those streams. One hundred and forty from last year proceeded to the examinations. Also in 2005—this is not the 140; some of those are still progressing through the system—59 physiotherapists completed the process. This compares with only 24 in 2003 and is thought to be an indication that the review processes that were carried out in 2003 and some of the changes that have occurred since that time have been successful in increasing the rate of completion or decreasing the length of time that it takes people to complete.

ACOPRA is very mindful of workforce shortages within the physiotherapy profession in Australia, but it is also mindful that its responsibility is to balance its duty to provide safe and effective physiotherapists to the Australian community with that of ensuring that some of these

workforce shortages can be filled. To that end, over the last couple of years ACOPRA has worked with the registration boards and the professional body to introduce a form of limited registration which allows physiotherapists from overseas to register and practise for up to 12 months in most states. This allows people to come to Australia and join the workforce immediately under supervision whilst they are completing the assessment process. It also provides an opportunity for working holiday-makers to gain experience in Australia. We have it on anecdotal record that several of them then decide that they like the place and come back. We are mindful of that dual balancing responsibility. I look forward to responding to your questions today.

CHAIR—At the outset I would like to say that you have painted a rather congenial picture of your profession and how easy it is to come from overseas and be registered. However, coming through in both my electorate office and the media in Western Australia, there seems to be a completely different perception of what it takes to become qualified as a physiotherapist in Australia if you are an overseas trained person. You may well have seen some of the articles. It appears that there are even some veiled allegations of a closed shop mentality in your profession towards those from overseas that makes it difficult for anybody who is serious about being assessed. It was revealed to me that the examinations, for example, that you provide to them are so difficult that the senior lecturer at the University of Western Australia, on looking at the examination papers, said that there was no way in the world he could pass that exam himself. How do you respond to that?

Ms Grant—You are referring to the September 2005 written examination. The pass rate on the new written examination format, which was introduced in 2003, gradually increased from around 43 per cent to 60 per cent in March last year. That was a combination of providing guidelines, and we are continuing to do that for candidates.

The September 2005 result was certainly out of character. You are probably aware that 11 out of 76 candidates passed that examination. There was a high failure rate. I will just talk about that process for a moment. The written examination is a case based examination. It is a four-hour paper done over two two-hour sessions—one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There are 10 cases on each paper and each case has six multiple-choice questions. Those questions come from a bank of well over 100 cases, and some of them have been used previously.

On reviewing the results of that examination, the committee could not find a reason to lower the pass mark, which had been the same since September 2003, based on validation of those questions and set at 55 per cent, and then there is a conceded pass mark below that. The committee deliberated for two weeks, which is longer than normal, and they could not find a reason to lower that pass rate. In fact, the ACOPRA lawyer suggested that, if the reason the pass rate was going to be lowered was the high failure rate and that was the only reason for lowering the pass rate and not something else within the analysis of results, that could be potentially problematic should some mishap occur down the track with one of those people.

It was also considered how the pass rate could be set in the future when the pass rate, as I say, has been held at the same level and the question bank that was used for that exam is the same question bank that was used for previous examinations. It was a big decision to make; but, in the end, the committee felt that they were making the decision that fulfilled their duty to the Australian community and, to some extent, the candidates themselves. People who pass the

written examination then proceed to the clinical stage. If they have not demonstrated that they have the required knowledge and can apply it—which is essentially what the exam suggested—there is a potential for them to have problems at the clinical stage as well. It was a difficult decision; it was out of character. The picture I painted earlier was the general trend.

I also want to note the comments of Matt Tribble, who is one of the people in the Western Australian newspaper article. We have now run a couple of workshops for people who are doing the March exam, and Mr Tribble has said that he realises that, since the exam, his knowledge was deficient and that is why he failed the exam. In saying earlier that we had only 13 people who were ineligible, our organisation has adopted an inclusive rather than exclusive assessment of qualifications.

There are a variety of standards of education across the world in physiotherapy. What is assessed is whether the main areas in physiotherapy, as practised in Australia, are covered within that program, whether the on-paper content suggests that they have covered the main things. We do provide people who are, I guess, borderline with information to suggest that they need to ensure that they are familiar with the Australian standards and that they ensure that their knowledge is adequate before they do the written exam. Because to be more inclusive than exclusive has been a change within probably the last 18 months we are wondering whether part of the September result reflects the fact that there were people sitting that exam who probably, three years previously, would not have been allowed to do that exam.

CHAIR—What is the state of the supply of physiotherapists as health professionals in Australia at the moment—do we have a shortage?

Ms Grant—Yes, there is a shortage. Cathy, as the president of the professional association, may wish to comment.

Ms Nall—There is a shortage. Although we have limited data on the actual supply and demand issues, certainly the state and territory jurisdictions that have undertaken workforce surveys have identified a shortage.

CHAIR—One of the other problems that has been relayed back to me is that when people take this exam—and there seems to be a very high failure rate—they are required to pay this \$1,100 sitting fee every time. If they cannot work in the interim, how do they get to stay here? I understand, in one particular case, we have been able to assist somebody to go into the regions and work as a physio assistant as a way of keeping herself fed while she prepares to retake the exam. She is never going to pass if you have set the bar so high. What you seemed to indicate to me is that you seemed to have a bad batch with that big failure rate and that everything else on either side of it has been all right.

Ms Grant—With these workshops, some of the candidates in the Brisbane workshop came up to me and said, ‘Did we just not prepare properly?’ I said, ‘I can’t say.’ As I said, the committee could not find anything within the analysis of the results to suggest that they needed to lower the pass mark. It would appear that that group, for whatever reason—

CHAIR—The last thing I was saying before I passed to Senator Kirk is that there seems to be a fair bit of negativity towards your assessment process throughout Australia. You might not agree with that, but that is the feedback I get.

Ms Grant—I can assure you that, sitting in my office, I am well aware. We have recently conducted workshops in Brisbane and Melbourne for people who are doing the March 2006 exam. My own background is in physiotherapy and education. I have a Master of Education degree. I have tried to look at what might have been factors in this failure. The questions are posed such that it does not require someone simply knowing something. They need to read the facts of a patient case, understand those facts and then apply their knowledge, in the context of a question, to that particular patient. There are fairly high-level cognitive processes required. It is not straight A, B, C, D, E—which of these is correct? There are other things involved.

We ran two workshops to assist candidates in developing strategies to answer that type of question. Following those workshops, I think that there perhaps is not so much negativity now that people have a better insight. The feedback evaluation on it was largely positive. Each workshop had one very negative feedback, but the others were largely positive and several candidates said that they now realised that they failed the exam because they did not read the question or they did not read the case. Hopefully those workshops will have been of assistance. I can assure you that it is of concern to ACOPRA that that many people failed. We have tried to put in place a number of strategies to assist candidates because it highlighted areas for further improvement.

Senator KIRK—Were the workshops you referred to only introduced in September of last year?

Ms Grant—Yes. I started working with the organisation just over 18 months ago. With my background, we have been trying to provide resources for candidates doing the exams because that was something that was identified that could be improved. The workshop concept had been discussed in February last year at a meeting. After September a number of things that were on the table to be looked at have been brought forward and accelerated. They were held in response to feedback from September candidates but it was something that was already pencilled in for doing.

Senator KIRK—So you hold these workshops in all of the major capital cities?

Ms Grant—No. Because it was the first occasion that we had conducted them, they were conducted free of charge to the candidates and we conducted one in Brisbane and one in Melbourne. The reason for doing that was that, based on the numbers from the last three years, they had the highest number of candidates. They were held at Melbourne airport at the Holiday Inn and at the Roma Street Holiday Inn so that candidates could fly in from interstate and easily get to the venue from the airports. Given the success of them, we envisage running them in all of the major cities the next time around. All of you have probably been involved in piloting something. I think it is better to do a small amount well than to try to do too much. And, given that the decision to run them was made in November last year, there were a lot of risks involved in getting something like that up and running in more than two cities in February the following year.

Senator KIRK—So you ran one in February this year?

Ms Grant—We ran one in Brisbane and one in Melbourne on the 11th and the 18th.

Senator KIRK—Is it proposed to hold them later on in the year in other capital cities?

Ms Grant—Yes. The audio recording and PowerPoint from those presentations has been synchronised and is now available via the website and on CD or DVD to candidates as well.

Senator KIRK—You referred to the committee that reviewed the examinations. Who makes up that committee? Are they persons who actually write the exam?

Ms Grant—The committee is made up of a chairperson, a chief examiner, an eligibility assessor, who looks at the qualifications—in fact, there are two of them—and a representative from the ACOPRA board of directors. So it is a five-member committee. The chief examiner works with an expert examining panel to write the questions. The expert examining panel comprises people who teach third- and fourth-year physiotherapy students within Australian universities, so they are aware of the expected knowledge and standard of those people.

Dr LAWRENCE—You understand our terms of reference includes looking at skilled migration, the assessment, et cetera, but it is in the context of increasing pressure, obviously, to facilitate in many cases the recognition of those qualifications. I appreciate your understanding of the tension that exists in some respects between needing to protect the Australian community by maintaining those high standards and, from the point of view of the individuals, as well as the organisations seeking to employ them, making sure they get a fair hearing in a reasonable time frame. I want to step back a little bit and ask you a background question to that, which you have touched on, about the adequacy of the number of places that are available to Australians who are here in our universities to undertake training in physiotherapy. My understanding is that it has become a highly restricted area, that there are not as many fully funded Commonwealth places as there are people clamouring at the door to get in. So we have a cohort of people, if you like, that would like to be studying physiotherapy but just cannot get places. Do you have an estimate of how many that might be?

Ms Grant—I am not aware of numbers. What I can say is that in 1997, when ACOPRA began accrediting programs, there were six programs. There are now 18, and as recently as last week I have been made aware that there is a 19th program coming online. There are potentially two other programs. The constraining factor within that environment—it is actually relevant to some of the overseas trained as well—is clinical education opportunities. A 300 per cent increase in the number of programs does not translate directly to a 300 per cent increase in the number of students. The constraining factor in the end is clinical education. There is work being done in a couple of states at the moment to look at alternatives to hands-on clinical education with patients to address that. I am not sure of numbers per se. Cath may have some information.

Ms Nall—No, not on numbers. I would like to add to the issue of the constraints imposed by clinical education. Part of the difficulty is that at the moment for Commonwealth supported places the universities receive less than half the amount of money per student per year that a university receives for medicine. That means that the sort of support that is required in the clinics

for clinical education cannot be provided by the universities. That is a real problem now that the numbers are getting so large.

One of my day-to-day roles is the provision of clinical education in a major teaching hospital in Melbourne for the University of Melbourne. I am faced with that very real issue every day. The university would like to have more students and we have to say we cannot deal with any more students. But there is certainly no lack of demand either for full-fee-paying places or for CSP places. That is, of course, why physiotherapy is relatively difficult to get into, with enter scores of 98.5.

Ms Grant—The relevance of that to the overseas trained people is that we do strongly recommend that they gain some clinical experience before they do their clinical exam. One of the complaints you may have heard is that, given the saturation within the hospitals that Cath has described from domestic students, some facilities now charge these overseas-trained people for their clinical experience. The reason for that is that they actually have to employ extra staff to undertake that role, because their clinical program is so saturated with domestic students. So there is a relationship there.

Ms Nall—We are in fact one of those organisations that do that. I have a lot of experience in the provision of clinical education to overseas physiotherapists.

CHAIR—We thank you very much for your evidence today. It has been very helpful. One thing I am pleased to find out is that you have already undertaken these workshops to educate those going into exams. I do hope you will get to cities like Adelaide and Perth, because we have a great demand there. You may need to educate some of the health departments. Di Mantell in Western Australia has asked me to give her feedback from today's meeting, because they are so desperate to get overseas-trained physios working as soon as possible. I will be doing that, but I would encourage you to liaise directly with them.

Ms Grant—Okay. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you for today. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Parry**):

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

Committee adjourned at 12.19 pm