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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

Reference: Skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

Thursday, 9 March 2006

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

Members in attendance: Senators Bartlett, Kirk and Parry and Mr Laurie Ferguson, Mr Randall and Dr Southcott

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

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

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Committee met at 9.28 am

CHAIR (Mr Randall)—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing. I welcome you all here today. The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has asked the committee to examine if the current processes by which migrants are assessed for entry into Australia under the skilled migration system are functioning efficiently or need to be improved. The committee is looking at skills recognition not only for migrants but also for those who come to Australia outside the skills migration system, such as temporary residents needing skills assessment and Australian citizens returning to Australia with overseas qualifications. In addition, the committee is comparing Australia's overseas skills recognition arrangements with those of the other major immigration countries and looking at whether greater consistency in the recognition of qualifications might be achieved among Australian states and territories.

[9.29 am]

BATTY, Ms Robyn, Chairperson, Global Recognition Agency Pty Ltd

MORRIS, Mr Thomas Ian, Executive Director, Global Recognition Agency Pty Ltd

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from Global Recognition Agency to this public hearing. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. Do you have an opening statement?

Ms Batty—Yes, we do. Thank you very much for the opportunity to come today to speak to you about what the Global Recognition Agency can input to your inquiry. For our opening statement I would like to hand over to Ian Morris, our executive director, who will lead you through what we see as some of the issues.

Mr Morris—Thank you. I would like to give a brief introduction. Global Recognition Agency, known as GRA, is the membership body for agencies in Australia and our region which are involved with certification and the recognition of individual competence. Members can include certification agencies, which are often professional bodies or institutions; licensing and regulatory bodies, whether they are state or federally based; suppliers to the certification environment; and others who are interested and involved in certification generally.

To assist in the development of international networks we have also established mutual membership with the National Organisation for Competency Assurance, which is based in Washington. Even though GRA is still a young endeavour, we have certification member organisations ranging across areas which include creative industries, plastics manufacture, footwear repair, construction training, canvas and synthetic products, finance brokers and the theatre and performing arts. In addition, GRA support members include registered training organisations, a university private consulting firm and a professional testing supplier.

In our submission we have outlined the areas where we believe that certification may assist to improve and maintain competency recognition, including that associated with skilled migration. I should point out that skilled migration is one slice of the area in which we are involved and interested. It is important to note that we believe that recognition of individual competence often provides a more secure outcome than does the recognition of specific qualifications. In many cases, particularly with more established workers—older workers in many cases—primary qualifications are quite dated and they are often in an area no longer practised by the individual. On the other hand, industry driven certifications must be kept current in order to be maintained and always reflect industry requirements, directions and change.

GRA sees benefit from the linkage of Australian professional bodies with their international counterparts where appropriate to generate a consistency of approach and outcome from professional certification processes across borders. Those borders may be international or even within Australia. Certification outcomes agreed by cross-border industry based professional

associations should support the processes associated with skilled migration. Close alignment of industry driven professional certification processes with related legislation based licensing structures should also assist in easing barriers to work by facilitating effective assessment of the applied skills, knowledge and attributes held by individuals, including skilled migrants, seeking to enter these protected areas of work.

We have read through all the transcripts and submissions associated with the committee, and I congratulate you on reading through them as well, because it seems to be a massive amount of stuff. The following are some attributes and points associated with high-quality industry driven certifications that appear to us to meet many of the issues and the expectations raised in those submissions and those discussions within your meetings.

Certainly certification should be industry driven and based on competence rather than on qualifications, training completed, age or time on the job. Assessment criteria are based on real job roles. Assessment and the criteria for skilled migrants would be the same as for locally based Australian workers in the same categories, which gives consistency and currency without disadvantaging any group. It directly includes employers in the process as well, allowing for professional networking to be established.

Certification is quality managed and consistent. That is a hallmark of high-quality certification—it is built into the process. It is possible for certification agencies to provide additional online evaluations for applicants to do pretesting to see whether they are able to meet a particular level of certification recognition. Certification requires currently industry skilled and experienced assessors, with appropriate support and quality management mechanisms in place. To be effective, certification must be closely linked to the required stakeholders, including the licensing bodies, the industry skills councils, the relevant government bodies and authorities, the industry networks, the successful certificants in the network already, mentor teams, RTOs—registered training organisations—unions and the community.

Australian based certification agencies have the potential to link with their equivalent overseas professional bodies and apply an understanding of the country differences between assessment coverage and the outcomes. I should point out that there are country differences between what we do in Australia and what happens in many other countries. There are some which are quite similar, but not many. Communications and information transfer is possible prior, during and after assessment.

The introduction of certification supports industry development and professionalism. It supports the growth of industry in Australia. Certification supports international portability, consistency and mutual recognition across borders, including Australian borders. But this is two way; it is not just into Australia. Australia is part of an international network and market. The more portability and consistency we have across borders, the more possibility there is for people to move.

Certifications implemented here are normally fully recognised across Australia to start with. They are nationally based processes rather than state-by-state processes. Certification allows for the recognition of competence across all levels and all specialties within an industry and is driven by the industry requirements, thus providing for career paths and for direct linkage to specific job descriptions.

There are some issues which I would like to raise with you. Certification is not a lay-down misere; it is not simple and it is not straightforward in all cases—there are some issues. One is that industries themselves may lack the skills and knowledge to actually design, develop and run the certifications without assistance or guidance. They may also lack the resources and sufficient funding to do so. Many certifications which may currently be offered by Australian professional bodies may not be at the highest level of quality possible.

Certification is definitely not an overnight thing. It takes time, effort and resources to do properly. Different countries run certification in different ways, as I mentioned before, and to varying quality levels. Certification was officially started in America about 29 years ago. They initiated the first international standards for certification programs approximately 20 years ago. There has been another set of standards run by ISO which have developed in the last four years. The two standards, though, do not always adequately cover three-dimensional certification programs, which are beginning to be developed in Australia. They are generally based on input competencies, particularly in America. This leads to differences between countries. Until they understand the benefits of high-quality certification, some stakeholders, such as educators and trainers as well as licensing bodies, may feel threatened. The number of certification agencies in Australia is still low and many are new, as is the concept of certification to many people. This is an education process for us in many cases.

This is a quick summary of five points. Certification can avoid issues with qualification recognition, including currency, relevance, forgery and educational institution recognition. It would not be fair or appropriate to transfer the responsibility for skilled migration approval, for example, solely onto a certification agency. We must have all stakeholders involved and taking responsibility in the areas where they are of most use and benefit to the process and to the applicants. Certification does not just focus on the entry level, as can often be the case with qualifications, and certification is relevant to people of all working ages and status. Governments have a key role to play in the certification process at a number of levels, but we do not believe that government should be the drivers of certification; that should be the industry bodies.

Qualifications do not exactly fit the requirements for specific jobs in many cases. I would like to raise a personal profile with regard to qualifications and their relevance to current skills and the current application of those skills. My primary qualification is in science. I gained it from Melbourne university in November 1972 in earth sciences, and that was a wonderful time for me. I last practised that particular skill in February 1973, before I moved into other areas; however, I still have the qualification. It sits not on my wall but in a drawer, fully framed and ready to use if I ever need it. It is not current, as you can imagine, having been obtained over 30 years ago; it lacks some sort of currency level. It is not relevant to what happens today. There is still weather out there, which is what I majored in—that is, meteorology—but how you measure it, what you do with it, how you forecast it, the tools that you use and the technology that you use are all totally different. I have not practised in that area for a long time and therefore my skills are not current. That happens to a lot of people. With certification that cannot happen because, for a certification to be maintained on a regular basis, it must be current. It must be maintained as a current level of skill applied to a particular job environment.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Morris. Ms Batty, do you have any further comment?

Ms Batty—Perhaps just one at this stage. We talk about competence a lot. One of the tenets of what we are about in terms of certification is that we are not just talking about qualifications but about the whole span. I think that is particularly relevant when we are talking about skills migration, because you are looking from a qualification standpoint, as Ian just mentioned. It is not just the ability of the qualification to potentially do the job; it is also about results. It is about the potential, the skill and the relevance to a particular industry to do what that industry requires, no matter what the industry is. I think that is one of the main things that we see as relevant to your inquiry into skills migration.

CHAIR—You indicated that you do not believe that it is government's role to be the sole arbiter in this area, but would you agree that government needs to show leadership on uniform standards and a national approach?

Mr Morris—It is absolutely true that the government needs to show and to practise leadership in this area. The reasons we believe that government should not drive the process but be a major stakeholder in it are that government does not practise in the industries within which people will be certified. The industry itself has people practising in that industry all the time, and they are involved with that process. With the linkage to licensing organisations, for example, we have found that agencies in state or federal environments which are licensing people to work in a particular industry or job role are finding that to be an expensive and difficult exercise in some cases because they need to retain currency of skill and understanding of what is going on in their particular industry. They are not practising that. They are actually running the licensing process, which means that they are arms length more than they perhaps should be in that circumstance. But government has a major role to play as a senior stakeholder in the process. It must be involved in that way and must show leadership. You are absolutely correct.

CHAIR—One of the main focuses of this inquiry is on migrants coming to Australia, and one of the many issues raised in previous hearings is that there appears to be little in the way of resources in the overseas arena to assess the skills of migrants before they come to Australia. There is an argument that has been outlined quite steadily in all the submissions that migrants really should know what they are entitled to and what they are required to do when they get to Australia in terms of professional or trade expertise. Yet we seem to have little in the way of resources to assess people overseas. There have been suggestions that people could come initially on temporary visitor visas, for example, to be assessed. Do you have any comments about the overseas assessments and the cost of someone coming to Australia to have a look to find out if they qualify? How does your business view this?

Mr Morris—Ultimately, we believe that this can be assisted greatly by having links between professional bodies which run compatible, consistent processes of certification across borders—between countries. At this stage it is very early and that does not happen very often. I notice in the transcripts some organisations appear to be taking some lead in this area—for example, the Institution of Engineers, the CPA and some of the medical groups, particularly the vets and the osteopaths are getting involved. It should be recognised that other organisations and other areas have considered this too. The different ways in which they handle this could be of interest. For instance, the American Safety Association do not bother going to other countries to assess people who want to meet their requirements to work in America or to meet the American certification requirements. They have examinations in this area in Los Angeles. If anyone is interested, they

can book for it, pay for their flights and accommodation and pay for the cost of the certification. They can go there, do the exam and pass or fail.

The Society for Human Resource Management internationally has a linked process run from America where they have over 150,000 people through their organisation potentially going through certification. I think they have about 100,000 people who have gone through one of their levels of certification—I believe there are three at the moment, though they have others in development. They have a mixture of processes, some of which are online. They offer a testing process online which you can do wherever you are. That is often run through international testing organisations such as Pearson or others. They also have examinations which are run specifically in countries—they actually go to the country and run examination processes. Notice I say ‘examination processes’, again because it is only partial competence in our terms. It is not looking at performance; it is only looking at the input competencies. They will run those here and people gain their pass or fail mark and either gain or not gain the certification at that time.

I believe that a number of possibilities were raised in other transcripts. A couple of the union delegates specifically spoke about the ways in which processes used to be run in the old days, so to speak, where delegates of evaluation organisations went to specific countries and ran assessments in those places, where they perhaps had linkages with the organisations in those countries to do some of that work for them or with them at that time. I do believe that there are opportunities to do that similar process. CPAs of course have linkage with some of the Asian CPA-equivalent bodies and they do work in a cohesive and collaborative way with those bodies.

CHAIR—The ideal would be to have these linkages with another country’s professional body as a practice rather than in some ad hoc way. If we could establish that across the professions, would that be the ideal?

Mr Morris—That is the ideal. There are a number of steps that you can take to prepare for that, one of which of course is encouraging the professional bodies in Australia to develop high-quality certification levels. Not all professions in Australia, in fact not many at this stage, actually offer certifications. But those who are developing it are quite diverse and quite interesting in range at the present time. The opportunity is there for those bodies to create those and to offer them internationally by way of doing part of the assessment online, having agents within other countries to partially evaluate before the people arrive or before they actually apply for full certification within Australia, or to actually go there and run their assessment processes in those countries in conjunction with perhaps local agents or even by themselves.

CHAIR—So I could paraphrase you by saying that you would like to see professional bodies in particular forming relationships with other countries so that this would be sorted out before anyone comes to Australia.

Senator KIRK—I notice that on page 1 of your submission you make reference to a ‘national project you are managing to link certification, licensing and training package functions and processes, using the emerging finance broking certification structure as the core pilot group’. Could you expand on that for us?

Mr Morris—Of course. That project was initially supported by ANTA before their demise at the end of June last year. They and we saw it as a necessary step to link licensing bodies around

Australia to more effectively use what exists as a skill support structure within the industries and what exists as a national database of standards and the enormous amount that has already been done through the training package structure, which is obviously managed and run through the industries skills councils around Australia.

That program has gone through its first phase. We were able to use the pilot of the Finance and Mortgage Industries Certification Agency, which manages financial brokers, to develop a model for the training package functions plus the certification agency itself and the licensing body, plus some level of training organisations involved directly with that industry. In fact that project is continuing even though ANTA is no longer involved with it. DEST has taken some interest but it is not supporting the process. ANTA tried to extend the process of support through DEST but that was not possible. So we are keeping them informed and have provided updates of what is going on to a particular group in Canberra.

We have found that it is very possible to link emerging certification structures and licensing structures to training packages. It is a very useful triumvirate to have. We have been careful in our choice of finance brokers, because it is not only an emerging certification but an emerging licensing function as well. The number of units or structures of competence within the National Training Information Service is relatively small, and it is young in its development stage. But we are already seeing that that linkage has potential for an extraordinary benefit across the industry.

Senator KIRK—You said that DEST was not terribly interested in this process; is that correct?

Mr Morris—Not exactly, no. We found that they were not able to take up the extension of support that ANTA had provided. I think DEST is interested. We have had discussions with the minister, Gary Hardgrave, about this process, and he links back into the DEST bureaucracy, as you would understand. They are very interested in the outcome, but they are not quite sure how to be involved, I think, at this stage.

Senator KIRK—Once you do have an outcome is it your intention to again take up discussions with DEST?

Mr Morris—Yes, certainly. We have already made that commitment to Minister Hardgrave.

Senator PARRY—In your opening comments, Mr Morris, you mentioned that certification should be industry driven and competency based, which I think is great. You then highlighted that a complication or basic inhibitor is the industry itself having the financial and physical resources to undertake that process. I can see a complication in assessing competencies in a variety of different skill sets, if you look at medicine at one end of the scale and electrical contractors at the other. How do you see the competency based assessment taking place? What about the cost involved and the length of time? Once it is competency based, which I think it must be, it will be a lengthy process; who is going to fund that?

Mr Morris—I will use the finance brokers, because we are currently talking about them, as an example to talk through. Their model includes the three dimensions of competency: the knowledge and skills which are brought to the person's workplace, the application of those and the performance as a result of that and also the personal attributes and, if you like, employability

competencies that are appropriate to the particular person. The assessment of the person going for the certification in finance broking is a three-part assessment. The first part is where they evaluate their own knowledge to the requirements of the criteria that are set down for the particular job role that they are trying to meet, such as mortgage finance broker, for example. That can be done on paper by them in their own time away from the workplace and not in front of anyone. It is behind the scenes. The second part is where there are referees provided in the process through the workplace for each of the individuals, where those referees refer to specific attributes that need to be attested to. The third is an interview and evaluation process where the people actually put through a portfolio of the performance outcomes—the evidence outcomes—that they are able to provide from their workplace. This is in a secure, confidential environment.

The assessors who look at that are actually contracted to the FAMICA organisation, which is the certification agency, and under an agreement are very heavily restricted in the privacy and confidentiality areas. There are also people who are particularly skilled in the finance-broking industry and are currently active in that industry as well as being assessors in their own right. They go away and do the review behind the scenes and then they provide feedback to the candidate where there may be gaps in the evidence that is being provided, and the candidate then can fill those gaps. At the time when that process is at maturity, they then meet the assessor and candidate to discuss and have an interview through the process. A view is formed on the attributes and on the ability of that person to meet the requirements of being able to discuss clients' needs et cetera, to use technology perhaps and also to detail any issues that may have arisen from the other aspects of the assessment. At the end of that time and during the whole process there is an overlay of quality management, which is managed by FAMICA. It includes other people who are differently skilled at a higher level of quality and assessment to the people who are doing the actual assessment. Those people review, assess and moderate the process of assessment that goes on with the candidates.

Senator PARRY—Who pays for that process? Is it the industry based organisation?

Mr Morris—To some extent that is true, but it is a user-pays process as well. The applicants for the certification actually pay for the certification and the assessment. It is a process which uses what we see as perhaps the minimum level of face-to-face assessment. As you would understand, that is quite an expensive exercise, so we are trying to minimise that process and make it streamlined and more effective for the individuals involved. But you still have to have an element of that if you are looking for a review of that person's skills and if you are looking for coverage of the performance that they are creating within their environment.

Senator PARRY—Is GRA's role within this process to maintain the records?

Mr Morris—GRA in fact is simply the membership body for organisations such as FAMICA. We support the development of quality based certification within Australia. We try and support each of our members and each body in Australia which is looking at developing certification based on competence. We in fact use the two sets of international standards as guides for how those things can happen—the ISO set and the set from America through NCCA.

Senator PARRY—Finally on this issue, do you have clear evidence that the competency based assessment process with the brokers that you have just outlined works and is accepted by industry?

Mr Morris—I think that the evidence we have will never be sufficient to write down and have in a statistical base. It will always be to some extent the feelings of the people in specific industries. But if I could give you an indication of an industry where this particular aspect has really borne fruit for the industry over the years, we could look at project management in Australia. The Australian Institute of Project Management in 1993 embarked on a process of developing certification for, initially, its members but for anyone in the industry who is a project manager. They estimated at that time that there were over 20,000 people in Australia who could be designated as project managers. In Australia at that time the institute had approximately 550 members—so not a very high proportion of the number of people who they could have accessed.

At this stage, the process of assessment and certification has been going on for the registered project manager award through the AIPM since 1995-96, when it was launched with the Australian standards. At this time, there are over 10,000 members of the institute. The institute is seen as a professional level of support for project managers across Australia and is a member of the international project management community, which until then had been driven through the United States and Europe. Whereas those bodies have still maintained their involvement in project management around the world, Australia has stepped up there to be a part of the process.

The people who employ project managers in Australia are now starting to seek people who are registered project managers, because they are aware that those people have been through an assessment of their skills and knowledge and an assessment of the application of those within the workplace. So it is not just about people who understand what the job is; it is about what to do, how to do it and whether they can do the job. That has been progressing over the last 10 years.

CHAIR—Before I go to Dr Southcott, could you think about this: at the end of this evidence, could you offer one recommendation to this committee which you think would be the most significant piece of information that you could leave us with.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—I notice that you have a collaboration with a North American national organisation for competency assurance. In the free trade agreement with the United States there were a number of ways to facilitate mutual recognition of professional qualifications—more like bringing the professional organisations together and that sort of thing. Have you been able to take advantage of any of those provisions in the free trade agreement? Do you see any opportunity to do so in the future?

Mr Morris—As to whether we have been able to take advantage: to this stage, no. I think perhaps the free trade agreement protagonists have had more on their plate than what we may be considering. However, we have had discussions with our counterparts at NOCA, which is the North American body and also with their commission that looks after the standards, NCCA. They are very interested in any opportunities. They are very close to Capitol Hill. They are based in Washington and work with the Senate in Washington to develop opportunities to use free trade agreements. We attend all of the NOCA conferences and have done for the last four years since we started. At the conference before last in Miami, there was a specific speaker from federal government within the United States—sorry, I cannot recall who she was precisely. She was very much involved with free trade agreements, not only the one with Australia; they have a number of other free trade agreements as well. She pointed out that unless the United States bodies that look after certification begin to be more involved, and proactively involved, with linkage

internationally, then they will be left behind. In fact, our view is that they may have already to some extent been left behind.

Our view also is that Americans in certification environments have tremendous numbers of people involved. The Society for HR Management has over 150,000 people and the Project Management Institute has 200,000 members. They are not unusual figures at all. You have the most esoteric areas being involved with certification in America and they have thousands upon thousands of members and people going through certification. But they tend to be interested in America and Canada particularly with perhaps some other linkages with Europe. They are always amazed when we arrive at their standards based certification conferences to discuss these issues and they ask what Australia is doing. They have no idea what happens this side of the Pacific and we have worked to a major extent to raise that awareness. But I do see that as a very long road. I would like to see a lot more awareness by our people involved with the free trade agreements, not just with the US but with Thailand and with other places with which we are already involved—

Dr SOUTHCOTT—With New Zealand, for instance.

Mr Morris—Exactly. We are very closely involved with New Zealand anyway with a lot of the certifications that happen because of the close linkages and the parallel activities that we have been going through with certification development within NZ and Australia.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—I have a second question. It is an unrelated question, but could you explain to us the benefits of having a global recognition agency as opposed to a number of professional associations, such as Engineers Australia or the Australian Medical Council, and a number of industry training boards that are all looking specifically at their industry? Why do we need a more general organisation offering certification?

Mr Morris—That is a good point. One of the major roles that GRA performs is to bring together people who are involved in some way with certification. Each of the bodies we speak to has been thinking about or developing part of or creating certifications or running established certifications for some period of time. Maybe they have just heard of the stuff and think that it might be useful for them. Whatever the case, they all had to go through the same process. They all know that other people have been down that same road and they had to know how to go there and what issues there might be.

The ACCC, for instance, has an axe to grind in this particular area. If you run qualifications as well as certifications through a particular certification agency—and some do—the ACCC is very interested in that because that may suggest that you need to do a particular course and, if you do, you will gain a particular certification. The ACCC does not like that. In fact, in the international standards—both NCCA and ISO—there is a specific ruling against that happening. How to stop that happening is to nip it in the bud, if you can, before it actually emerges.

We have several levels of support which we offer to certification agencies and people involved, one of which is simply to get them together and let them talk to each other and find out that they are not new and they are not alone in the industry. Another one is to allow them to have guidance and support, which is free through our own association, regarding how they stand at

the moment in terms of international standards. A third level is where we can actually introduce them to a user-pays network of people who can support them in building certifications.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—On the way through you mentioned the user-pays concept and I note that your submission speaks about professional associations being members in industry groups. Could you give us a broad outline of the financial structure and how you survive financially.

Mr Morris—We survive on—I think traditionally the term is ‘the smell of an oily rag’. We have memberships determined by the type of organisation that is joining. For example, an association which joins will pay \$750 plus GST per annum. This is on our website, by the way. A support body—such as the University of Queensland, for example, which is a member—will pay \$1,500 plus GST. There are two other active membership categories where there is less involvement. It is not easy for an organisation of our type because we are not providing direct support. We can provide project support in certain circumstances, either to agencies such as certification bodies or to government bodies looking to evaluate this in other ways. In fact that was the basis with the ANTA project where we gave some assistance.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You said that the government should not be drivers of certification. Why shouldn't there be equal concern perhaps that industry groups and professional organisations have self-interest at stake here and that they are sometimes driven by cultures of exclusion or, alternatively, by cultures of loose rules, to avoid training in this country? Why shouldn't we have a concern about this agenda?

Mr Morris—It has to be a very balanced situation. I totally agree with you that there should be involvement by government. I am trying to say that industry bodies are the groups which have direct knowledge of what they do and how they do it and how that can be measured in a certification sense. I am not saying that they should act alone and I really do not like exclusionist processes and I do not believe that they have a part in what we are talking about. I believe that it is possible to have the stakeholders involved from all facets and sectors of the community and I particularly would want to see unions, because of their specific structures and thinking, involved with this as well as the training organisations—not only government.

Senator BARTLETT—In the broader context of our whole approach to skilled migration and leaving aside differing views about that policy goal but given the fact that we do have a goal of seeking to have a very large skilled migration intake even by our standards, what do you see as the barriers to making it work properly in the sorts of areas that you are engaged with?

Mr Morris—I think that a major barrier is the time resource. As I said before, developing certification programs to a high level of quality does not happen overnight. You cannot wake up one morning and decide to do it and have it done by the end of the day. It really is a long-term process. The finance brokers, for example, have been working on their process for two years and have only just launched theirs in the last November-December period. You have to have resources that can support that. They were fortunate in being able to access resources from other stakeholders within the industry, such as lenders, for example—the banks and other people. That is not always the case. The Footwear Repair Association in Australia is developing a certification at the moment, but without money and without skills and without understanding of how this can work and be effective. But they really believe that they need to make a difference to the industry

and to the people within the industry and therefore they are launching this process. They are going to do it but they will take a while. I think that is a major barrier to what you are trying to achieve through your standing committee.

However, notwithstanding that, I do believe that there should be a start made to link these bodies and to support what they are trying to do and to support them in being a core resource and a core mechanism within this process. As Mr Ferguson said before, the situation is that you need to include the stakeholders. Perhaps having the drive from the industry point of view is a major part of it, but having the drive from the government point of view in understanding why you are trying to achieve these particular issues or end points with regard to skilled migration is another point. Having the unions there to discuss what Australian working conditions should be like and having that awareness being transferred internationally is just as important. So you need to have a balance.

Senator BARTLETT—You have mentioned a little bit about your experience of the situation in the US, for example. I am wondering whether different sorts of lessons can be learned from the EU, where people can move across a whole lot of different countries with different languages and different histories but where, as I understand it anyway, the laws are such that people can do that. How do they manage to tackle this accreditation issue?

Mr Morris—Leaders in Europe have been really from the UK and from Germany, we have found. Those two countries have led the process in Europe for transfer of skills across borders and they have been very effective, although I found that the Germans tend to be a little too Teutonic for our needs. Perhaps the British have not taken the same directions as we have in some cases. City and Guilds has been left out to dry in some cases in terms of leading the process when other groups should have been involved more. We could go into that in a lot more detail but I do not wish to today.

There are a lot of lessons that can be learned across a lot of environments—for example, from South Africa, New Zealand, Canada, Europe and the US. Many of them have things that we can take very much to heart and make use of in our certification structures and in our comparison to how people work within different places. But none of them work precisely the same way as we do. Industry may be different in each place and have its own rules and licensing requirements, for example, which have to be taken into account.

CHAIR—There are many other questions we could ask you, but we have run out of time. Thank you very much for your quality submission. I did ask you that question about the silver bullet or single recommendation. Do you have one?

Ms Batty—Yes, although I am thinking on my feet. I think that we have been talking about it here. I think it was the first question you asked. The big issue is how we support a process happening to make the skilled migration issue able to be dealt with in terms of the certification processes so that we do have the ability to find or understand the competence of people who are in this situation. I think what we have been talking about in the last few minutes and from your first question is how we put it all together. I think there is certainly a role for government leadership in this.

But I think the biggest recommendation we would make would be that there should be government support for getting the certification processes endemic within all of the industries in Australia. In terms of the GRA, we have perhaps 20 or so key members who are doing this. They are being supported to do it. There are many areas that do not have the resources or the dollars to do it—for example, the footwear industry et cetera. But it requires that support from government and then government can perhaps expect that each industry will have its own certification body and come up with its own standards and measures of competency which do comply with accepted practice in Australia and overseas. For instance, with GRA, what we are about is seeing that we can support member organisations and industry organisations to do the things that perhaps they do not have the ability to do. They know their industry, but perhaps we know more about how to support them. We can come together to create a certification process that will meet industry needs for the competence they need for people doing the jobs.

So I guess my recommendation would be that there should be overt government support and, if you like, government direction. In areas of migration you would work through the various industries to see that those industries do have the appropriate certification systems which help that selection process, give the ability to determine success and select a successful person or people for particular areas. You need to have that predictor. At the moment I do not think there is a common predictor because of the differences in standards between overseas and Australia. Even within Australia, there is not the understanding of exactly what the certification standards are across Australia for particular roles.

Mr Morris—I have one very brief comment. We are suggesting that there is a difference between qualifications recognition and certification recognition. That sounds like a small change, but it is not. I think the awareness of that would be a very major start towards solving the issue.

CHAIR—That is a good, concise point. Thank you very much, Mr Morris. I thank you both for attending today's hearing. The secretary will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made. I would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide us with as soon as possible. Thank you.

[10.21 am]

RAMSAY, Mrs Debby, Executive Officer, Council on Chiropractic Education Australasia

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

Mrs Ramsay—Thank you for inviting me. The CCEA is relatively new when it comes to all of the migration requirements. The CCEA was formed as a body in 2002. All of the registration boards within Australia devolved their responsibility for migration assessment to NOOSR in 1999. They did not have the capacity, or did not feel they had the capacity, to undertake that process properly. That was one of the main reasons behind CCEA being formed.

The other reason was that there were two entities in Australia at that time that were accrediting chiropractic programs in Australasia, which was costing the profession and the universities a lot of money, so they were combined into one entity. So far, we have been assessing for just over 18 months. During those 18 months, 51 applicants have been assessed. Of those applicants, 95 per cent were from America; some were from South Africa. Of the ones who have come through at present we have found roughly a 15 per cent failure rate on their first competency assessment. Of those, we have had some who have also failed at a second attempt.

One of the main issues, particularly when it comes to the registration boards, is the protection of the public. They need to ensure that practitioners who are coming into Australia to work or to migrate are competent and safe and will not put the public at risk. They have realised that, by going through the assessment process, there is a risk. There are people who are not coming up to the current Australian standards. It is an evolutionary process. They are working on refining and standardising the assessments all the time. The assessments are undertaken by two of the accredited programs in Australia—one in Melbourne and one in Sydney—and it is a long process.

CHAIR—Is there anything further?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes, although I do not know what else you are looking for at this point in time.

CHAIR—We will take the opportunity then to ask you some questions, if that is okay.

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you read much of the evidence given so far by chiropractors and associated health professionals?

Mrs Ramsay—I have read some of it.

CHAIR—Are you aware of the young Australian citizen who returned to Australia from America?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes, from WA.

CHAIR—Yes, it was in the WA evidence. How do you respond to her evidence? She is an Australian citizen who went to arguably the best chiropractic teaching university in the US and then her qualifications were not recognised.

Mrs Ramsay—Overseas qualifications are not recognised by any of the registration boards in Australia or New Zealand. The only qualifications that are recognised are currently from Australian or New Zealand accredited programs. That was a decision by all of the state health ministers. It is in all of the state legislation. As for the witness that you are referring to, a lot of the statements that were in her original submission are incorrect.

CHAIR—How can you say that, if you do not mind my asking?

Mrs Ramsay—With a lot of the information that was in her original submission, she had not received responses from us in relation to the queries that she had put in. A lot of it was based on her misinformation. I do not know where she received the misinformation from.

CHAIR—On that—I am not running an argument; I am just responding to your statements—I think there was some suggestion that you had not responded in a timely way to her so that she could be better informed. How do you respond to that?

Mrs Ramsay—I am not sure what she means by that. The council is operated on a part-time basis. There is an answering machine, which I answer every night. There is also email.

CHAIR—So you are not a full-time employee?

Mrs Ramsay—I am not. Email is answered—except at weekends—normally within 24 to 48 hours. As far as results go, results are emailed to candidates as soon as they have been advised to us by the universities. We give the universities a seven-day time frame to meet the results schedule. In the majority of cases we get the results through within two to three days and sometimes within 24 hours. The longest that we have waited for results from the universities is seven days, and candidates are advised the moment that we have got those results. I am unsure as to what she was actually meaning.

CHAIR—It seems pretty logical to me. If, as you say, 95 per cent of the people seeking recognition are those qualified in the US—

Mrs Ramsay—That is correct.

CHAIR—have you made any approaches to American bodies or universities to have some mutual recognition so that this does not occur?

Mrs Ramsay—We are in the process of actually starting up some dialogue with the National Board of Chiropractic Examiners in America. The issue with America at the moment is that all

of the graduates that come out of American colleges are required to sit the NBCE assessments over there and they are also required by each state to sit a board exam as well, so the states do not reciprocally recognise the NBCE assessments either. Each state also requires its own assessment. As I said before, we are actually in the process of starting a dialogue with the national board in America. We have not opened a dialogue yet with the Canadian board. The NBCE appears to be the major one.

CHAIR—Are you saying you are in the business of making approaches?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

CHAIR—Can you give us some time line as to when you think you will bring this together?

Mrs Ramsay—We have asked to meet with the NBCE. We have not had a response back from them yet, but that request was made only in the last couple of weeks. The chairperson of the council is going over to an education meeting in June this year. We are hoping at this point in time that we can arrange for him to meet with some of the NBCE practitioners while he is over there and start working out some processes.

CHAIR—Forgive me if I sound a bit forward, but it appears that the approach by the body you represent is rather casual.

Mrs Ramsay—At this point in time it is informal, yes.

CHAIR—This may be leading to many of the problems that chiropractors seeking recognition in Australia are facing—what appears to be a lack of will to resolve this matter. How do you respond to that?

Mrs Ramsay—I am not entirely sure what you mean. There is not a lack of will to resolve any issue. The processes that are applied in Australia are the same as those applied overseas, albeit in a different format and under different regulation. It is the same process: chiropractors have to go through a competency assessment before they can gain registration to practice.

CHAIR—I anticipate that others will ask about visas and costs. For the record, do you believe there is a shortage of chiropractic professionals in Australia?

Mrs Ramsay—From a profession point of view, yes. We receive quite a lot of inquiries from practitioners looking for locums, saying that they cannot find associates. Although there are three chiropractic programs in Australia, two of which are accredited and the third is going through its accreditation process at the moment, the profession still seems to be saying that there is a shortage of skilled chiropractors in Australia.

Senator KIRK—Mrs Ramsay, as the chair has indicated, we have had a number of criticisms about the assessing processes. I would like to list a few of them and ask you to respond to them if you can.

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

Senator KIRK—It has been said that it is extremely difficult to contact anyone involved with the process, and harder to get a reply. There is no written confirmation of testing sites, times or results available. There is no identification required at a test site. All exams are written, reviewed, supervised and graded by university staff at Macquarie University, with no outside or independent body being involved, and there are no grading or testing criteria available. Can you respond to each of those points?

Mrs Ramsay—As I said before, I am not sure what is meant by ‘hard to communicate’. There is an answering machine, and all phone calls are answered within 24 to 48 hours. That is the same for email, barring any network problems.

Senator KIRK—What about the actual testing? For example, there is no outside or independent body involved and also there are no guidelines or testing criteria available for potential applicants.

Mrs Ramsay—Again, on our website and in our candidate guide there is a full explanation of the format of the assessment, and there are sample questions. So I am unsure as to what the issue is there. In relation to having independent scrutiny of an assessment process, as I said before, all the assessments are done at two universities, both accredited chiropractic teaching institutions.

CHAIR—Can you tell us who they are?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes. In Melbourne it is the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology chiropractic department, and in Sydney it is Macquarie University chiropractic department. Both of those institutions have a CCEA representative who either sits in on the assessment and does not take part but observes or actually undertakes certain parts of the assessments. So it does not come from a purely university point of view. Council does have people there. We have just been in discussions with both of those universities in the last couple of weeks about the identification issue. We did not realise that they were not asking candidates for identification, which is one of our criteria. That will now be enforced.

As I said before, the results are provided to us within seven days, and candidates are emailed to let them know whether they have been successful. If they have been unsuccessful, we let them know in what components of the exam they were unsuccessful and try to provide them with some guidance as to how they can upskill for a re-sit.

Senator KIRK—On page 3 of your submission you make the comment that marketing by DIMA is somewhat limited with respect to chiropractic and that you have received some feedback from applicants that they have had difficulties accessing the DIMA website to find out information.

Mrs Ramsay—Yes, and I have actually had two emails from potential candidates in the last three days along the same lines. One of them is here in Australia on a work visa. He now wants to migrate. Council was gazetted by DIMA on 15 December as the assessing authority for chiropractic. However, the website still says that it is for registration boards. So there is still confusion out there, particularly when it comes to the DIMA website, as to where potential candidates or potential entries need to go. Which organisation do they go to? Do they go to a registration board or do they come to council? There is still that little bit of confusion out there.

Senator KIRK—It is just a matter of having it up to date and also having clear directions as to where people ought to go.

CHAIR—When will that be addressed?

Mrs Ramsay—I emailed DIMA when I received the second inquiry yesterday and asked them if they could update their website to reflect the gazettal.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You seem concerned about people entering Australia under visitors visas as opposed to education visas. What is the problem that you see?

Mrs Ramsay—I do not understand what you mean.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You have ‘received feedback that most applicants are required to enter Australia on a visitors visa’?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—They feel they should come in on an education visa. What is the gist of what they are complaining about?

Mrs Ramsay—I have had a couple of inquiries from candidates who have asked—and, again, this comes back to conflicting information that is being provided—‘Do we come across on a working visa or do we come across on an educational visa?’ In those circumstances, I usually advise them to ring DIMA and ask DIMA which is the best visa for them to come into the country on.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—On another point, the practical exam can only be done within Australia?

Mrs Ramsay—At this point in time, that is correct.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—What proportion of people fail these practical exams?

Mrs Ramsay—At the moment, on average it is around 15 per cent and of those 15 per cent we have had about five per cent fail a second time.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—A third of them, in other words?

Mrs Ramsay—They have not sat a third time yet, so I am not sure.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—When you say 15 per cent and five per cent, you mean a third of them fail a second time?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Do you see any impediments to the exam being done overseas? As you are probably aware, we have doctors panels examining people for medical issues. I have concerns that we let a lot of people into Australia who fail and we find it very difficult to remove them afterwards. Is that being looked at?

Mrs Ramsay—One of the issues that we want to discuss with the NBCE is coming to some sort of arrangement whereby they can actually provide our assessment on our behalf, which would also assist the candidates in not having to fly to Australia and find accommodation while they are undertaking the assessment.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Are there any state based requirements over and above your practical test et cetera?

Mrs Ramsay—Not in Australia. Once the states and territories in Australia, and New Zealand, have received our certificate of attainment they are eligible for registration. There is no further requirement. They do have to apply to the state for registration, but there are no extra requirements.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Fair enough. What are the exemptions with regard to assessment?

Mrs Ramsay—If applicants are from an accredited chiropractic college overseas they are—

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—That nature of exemption is the only one?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

Senator PARRY—How does your association compare benchmarking around the world for criteria for entry?

Mrs Ramsay—The assessments that are run by council are based on the competency assessments for entry level graduates, which are available on our website and from another—

Senator PARRY—Have you benchmarked, though, with other countries?

Mrs Ramsay—They were originally benchmarked with America. There was some benchmarking with Canada. They will be reviewed within the next 12 months after we have discussions with NBCE to try and align those as well.

Senator PARRY—When you say America, do you mean individual states or a national organisation?

Mrs Ramsay—No, with NBCE.

Senator PARRY—With respect to the reciprocal arrangements with other colleges, have you benchmarked intensively with them to ensure that they have similar—

Mrs Ramsay—There are no reciprocal agreements with other colleges.

Senator PARRY—You just waive entry requirements?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

Senator PARRY—They do not do the same for Australia?

Mrs Ramsay—No, there are no reciprocal agreements with Australia.

Senator PARRY—Why do you do that with other countries that do not reciprocate?

Mrs Ramsay—You mean why do we exempt?

Senator PARRY—Yes. Why do you exempt when they do not do that for us?

Mrs Ramsay—Australia is of the opinion that the overseas colleges, if they have been accredited by the CCEI, have training equivalent to our written basic competencies over here. We do not feel the necessity to actually make candidates go through that, particularly candidates who have been graduated for 10, 15 or 20 years.

Senator PARRY—So there is no written assessment or practical assessment?

Mrs Ramsay—There is part 1 written assessment, which is a basic sciences assessment. They still have one written assessment and one practical assessment.

CHAIR—I have a few other issues. The costs of the courses—the written basic, written clinical, practical clinical—are rather expensive when put together. You have a person who, No. 1, has to come to Australia on whatever visa they get here on, and then they sit these exams. They obviously cannot work in the meantime. It has been claimed it takes six months, which you seem to dispute, to get recognition and a licence to practise. As a result, it is a pretty expensive exercise. Do you think your fees are at the top end of the market?

Mrs Ramsay—No. I do know the fees of some other councils, and ours are fairly middle of the road. There are a lot that are cheaper. There are a lot that are more expensive, as well. Compared with the fees of NBCE and CCEB—and we are aware that NBCE have just dropped theirs slightly—ours are still on a dollar-for-dollar comparison a little cheaper than for those national boards in America. The six months may be a registration board issue; I am unsure. Once a candidate receives their certificate of attainment from us, they need to apply to a registration board to get registration to actually be able to practise. Time frames in relation to registration boards, unfortunately, I cannot answer for.

CHAIR—You commented that you are currently undertaking discussions with chiropractic institutions in Australia regarding the formation of chiropractic specific bridging courses.

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

CHAIR—How are these discussions progressing?

Mrs Ramsay—Slowly. We met with the three institutions at the beginning of February. We really do see a necessity for the institutions to provide bridging programs for overseas candidates. We are still enticing the universities with that idea at this point in time.

CHAIR—That in itself leads to the next question. Enticing is one thing, but surely there has to be some more proactive measure to see this occurs. So what do you intend to do?

Mrs Ramsay—That is something that will be decided by the council at its next meeting, which is scheduled for the beginning of April. It is to be raised as an issue with the full council.

CHAIR—This committee's terms of reference talk about impediments to skills recognition. I would see this as somewhat of an impediment that is not being addressed very proactively.

Mrs Ramsay—It is not the only profession that does not have bridging programs. I know there are a number of other professions that do not provide them, and they state they do not provide them. We are in the process. We realise that it is something that needs to be done. We have initiated those discussions with the universities. At this point in time the universities are prepared to provide candidates with entry into a particular component of a course. Council itself does not feel that that is sufficient. It would much prefer to have tailored bridging programs, which is what is going to be up for discussion in April.

CHAIR—That was going to be the next question, about the tailored programs: so that is happening in April, is it?

Mrs Ramsay—Yes.

CHAIR—This committee will not be reporting before April. Can you give us some feedback from that program after April, through the secretary?

Mrs Ramsay—Absolutely; not a problem.

CHAIR—With regard to Australians in particular who go away—this gets back to my original question—if they make some arrangement with you before they go in terms of the courses they are undertaking, isn't that a possible way through this?

Mrs Ramsay—Unfortunately that is not an issue that the council can address directly; that is a registration board issue. It is the registration boards that actually have the prescribed programs. As it stands at the moment, all of the Australian and territory registration boards require anybody who has trained outside of Australia or New Zealand to seek a competency assessment, which they have devolved to the council. That may be an issue that needs to be taken up with state and territory governments.

CHAIR—I do not wish to be offensive in saying this, but are you sure that the lack of endeavour in this area, of which you have had some criticism, could not suggest there may be a closed-shop mentality in your profession?

Mrs Ramsay—There definitely is not a closed-shop mentality. They would like to have as many competent chiropractors practising in Australia as they can. The major issue is the public

protection. They need to be assured that practitioners that are coming into Australia, from whatever institution they have trained at, are going to be able to provide safe and competent practice and not injure any of the Australian public.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mrs Ramsay, for attending today's hearing. We would be grateful if you could also send the secretariat the additional material that you have undertaken to provide as soon as possible.

Mrs Ramsay—The meeting is on 8 and 9 April, so that should come through in a two- to three-week time frame.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Committee suspended from 10.46 am to 11.14 am

MUIL, Mr Ian Lester, Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland

BAGDAS, Ms Behice, Employment and Training Coordinator, Multicultural Development Association Inc.

ELLISON, Ms Linda (Lyn), Assistant Director, Organisational Development, Multicultural Development Association Inc.

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

Before we proceed, and with the committee's indulgence, the Multicultural Development Association have given us a supplementary table of information that is relevant to today's hearing. I would ask the committee to formally consider accepting the document from the Multicultural Development Association as a supplementary submission to the inquiry and authorising its publication. There being no objection, that is so ordered. Copies of that document have been circulated to the committee.

I now invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Ms Ellison—I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before it and I would like to give a brief overview of our submission. As the committee would be aware, our submission made to the inquiry last June was based on our experience of working with migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. While much of our work is targeted at refugee entrants, MDA's employment and training program and its continuing settlement services program provide support to all migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds, including some who have entered Australia under the skilled migration stream. Due to the nature of our work and experience, we confined our comments to the areas of the inquiry's terms of reference that relate to communication and efficiency of processes, elimination of barriers, awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers, and alternative approaches to skilled assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications.

In terms of the main points of our submission, our work with migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds suggests that many remain unclear about how to access recognition processes and what is involved. For example, they may not be aware that more than one assessment body may be involved for some professions or that while one assessment body may determine the level of a qualification another may determine its equivalence—that is, by taking into account curriculum content. Moreover, even where qualifications and skills have been recognised, this is of little consequence if a person is not given any assistance in seeking employment. It would appear that little or no information is provided on the processes of seeking work in Australia. This can be very different to the processes in many other countries of the world. Skilled migrants with no experience of job seeking in the Australian labour market and

with few local contacts to provide information are currently disadvantaged by being unable to access the full services of the Job Network system during the two-year period that they are ineligible for Centrelink benefits.

We would also like to ensure that people entering Australia under migration streams other than the skilled migration stream receive information on and easier access to the procedures for recognition of overseas qualifications and skills assessment. MDA's experience suggests that many refugee entrants are highly skilled professional people, but this is often overlooked due to their refugee status. Most arrive in Australia with few, if any, financial resources and may not have access to documentation regarding their skills and qualifications due to the circumstances under which they left their country of origin. In addition, the experience of some MDA employment program clients suggests that, despite the current skills shortage, some Australian employers still appear reluctant to employ migrants and refugees. MDA clients who have attended job interviews frequently report being told that their main drawback is that they lack local work experience.

So we would like to see more opportunities to demonstrate skills and experience in a practical way or to enter bridging courses. This may benefit both employers and migrants in assessing current competency and identifying skill and/or knowledge gaps. MDA's experience of running several successful work placement schemes indicates that many non-English-speaking background migrants quickly gain sustainable employment once they have been given an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. These schemes also provide participants with local work experience and local referees, which are invaluable in gaining a foothold in the Australian labour market, regardless of qualification or skill level.

CHAIR—Mr Muil, do you have an opening statement?

Mr Muil—No, I do not, other than to say that we were provided with a copy of MDA's submission and we supported the submission. ECCQ is a peak body in Queensland. Our membership extends from some of the very early migrant communities—Greeks and Italians—right through to the African communities now, which are the latest arrivals. So in that sense we are representative and we get information, anecdotal stuff, as well. We are not doing any work in the way that MDA is, but at the same time we are actually a large employer of migrants through our aged care division, which is a 70-bed nursing home specifically for multicultural people, ethnic people, and our home and community care division, Diversicare, which employs something between 150 and 200 people, depending on which month it is, many of whom are migrants. There are some comments that I would make relating to some of the specifics that Lyn has brought up, but I do not think that falls into the context of an opening statement. Should I hold those over until later?

CHAIR—No, feel free to address them now.

Mr Muil—Picking up on some of the issues that Lyn spoke about and that are included in the MDA submission, we as an organisation are very supportive of the overseas skilled migration program.

CHAIR—Is there a need at the current time?

Mr Muil—There is a critical need at the current time, absolutely. That ranges, as we all know, from the professions—medical professionals—right through to the critical skills shortage in artisans, the trades, which is hitting Western Australia and Queensland and mining developments. They cannot get enough skilled tradespeople. So most definitely there is. However, our position is that not enough has been done over the past decade to train Australians to fill those gaps, so we are having to fill those gaps with skilled migrants. Migration suits our purposes. We think it is good for the nation. But at the same time we believe that TAFE colleges, for example, have not been geared up to take the sorts of numbers that we obviously need in the country.

CHAIR—I will just stop you there. Your criticism about the lack of training over the last 10 years—is it general, or are you being specific in your mention of TAFEs?

Mr Muil—I think it is more specifically TAFE. I am not involved in education, so what I am saying is what I get from people that I talk to. There is no HECS system in TAFE, for example. I have spoken to young African people who want to go and do a TAFE course. I was talking to a young fellow from Tonga the other day who wants to do a massage course. He has to come up with something like \$6,000 to start his course. Two years ago my son completed a master's in engineering at the University of Queensland. When he went into his course he did not have to lay down one cent—it was all HECS funded. But this kid, because he wants to do a TAFE course, has to come up with the cash. So there seems to be an imbalance. It is harder for some people to get into the TAFE courses. And many of those courses are going to be more attuned to the educational abilities of some of our newer migrants.

CHAIR—As a representative of the Ethnic Communities Council, do you see the family reunion visa stream as a dedicated source of skilled migrants?

Mr Muil—Do you mean when we have a skilled migrant who has been attracted here and then family reunion is a consequence of that?

CHAIR—Yes, and he brings out other members of his extended family if he qualifies on that visa.

Mr Muil—Absolutely.

CHAIR—Do you have much push for that through your established ethnic communities?

Mr Muil—Within the communities?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Muil—Most definitely. Family reunification is one of the big issues.

CHAIR—But more from using it as a jobs basis? I am not suggesting that the elderly are unskilled, but in this case do you see there is a definite push by those with the necessary skills to use the family reunion visa stream to come to Australia?

Mr Muil—I do not know that I follow you.

CHAIR—I will try to make it clearer. Some people use various visas such as 457s et cetera, but under the family reunion scheme they can use another visa approach to bring extended members of their family to Australia and at the same time secure a job. From your experience, is the family reunion program being used in that way? You said that you represent established ethnic communities.

Mr Muil—Yes, we represent a range of them. I cannot honestly say that I can answer that. I do not know to what extent it is being used or abused.

CHAIR—I just wondered if there was any anecdotal feedback.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission. I notice on page 4 of the MDA submission you mention that many migrants to Australia do not realise that Australian employers require job applicants to have some local work experience. You cite a quite interesting example of a person from the Philippines who had extensive experience but found when he or she got here that not having local work experience was a significant problem for them. Are there any particular employment sectors where this is a particular problem or is it general?

Ms Bagdas—It is across the board.

Senator KIRK—You also talk about work experience programs as being something that would contribute towards overcoming this problem. I understand that part of your employment and training program is the administration of the work experience program. Could you assist the committee by elaborating somewhat on what you do in that regard?

Ms Bagdas—Can I give you a brief background to our employment program and then come to the work placement program?

Senator KIRK—Yes.

Ms Bagdas—In 2002 we got funding from the state government, from the Department of Employment and Training, to assist migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to get work. From that program, we started helping people with their job applications—assisting them with their letter of application and selection criteria—and also preparing them for job interviews. They were the things that people were struggling with. From that program, we found out that the majority of the migrants and refugees were struggling with finding jobs due to the fact that employers were saying that they did not have local work experience or local references to check. Overseas references were not acceptable.

We approached the department and decided to apply for funding for a multicultural community jobs plan program so that people could gain local work experience in office administration. Under many other professions office administration is vital, so we thought that would be an entry-level position. People do one day of training in job search activities at our organisation and four days placement with host organisations. The initial program had 13 host organisations that we placed people with for them to get that local work experience. From that first program, 15 people started. In one month's time two of them got jobs, so we replaced them. Fifteen of them got jobs after the completion of the program.

We thought that was a very worthwhile program, so we continued and started our fourth intake on 27 February. One after the other has proven to be successful. The second program had 13 employment outcomes out of 16 people after the completion of the program. It is a 15-week program and for some people it is not enough time, but for others it was enough for them to gain some experience. It was proven that while they were working it was easier to get a job, because they gained confidence during that time. In applying for jobs for so long, people get depressed and have very low self-esteem. We worked with them and showed them how to apply for jobs, because the Australian labour market is very competitive. The unemployment rate is five or six per cent at the moment, but among migrants and refugees it is very high. We work very closely with them for them to be competitive in the job market. That was very effective.

Senator KIRK—It sounds like a really good program. There is Queensland state government funding?

Ms Bagdas—Yes.

Senator KIRK—To what extent and for what period of time is there funding?

Ms Bagdas—It is 15 weeks.

Ms Ellison—We run a program every six months. We receive funding for a worker, although we do not get full-time funding for the worker and it is not for the full year. The program runs for 15 weeks and we have a little bit of funding for the worker to set the program up and to provide a little post-placement support for people at the end of it. Seventy per cent of the funding is for the wages of the participants and 30 per cent is for our costs of running the program.

Just to supplement the information Behice has given you, the additional information that I tabled earlier was for the two programs that we ran in 2005. Of the 30 participants that we took in the program, you can see that 17 of them held tertiary qualifications from overseas institutions and/or had substantial overseas experience in related fields, yet they were applying to us for a 15-week work placement in basic office administration because they could not get work in their chosen fields. In a position of skills shortage, it seems to me to be a real waste of talent. I checked with Behice earlier, and interestingly 80 per cent of them are now working.

Senator KIRK—In their fields?

Ms Ellison—Some of them work in their chosen field; others do not. But we put it down to local work experience, local referees, being given some training in how to look for work in Australia and what is involved in that, increasing confidence and the plain and simple fact that it is easier to find work when you are in work.

Ms Bagdas—The other thing is that we work very closely with employers. Initially they might be reluctant to employ a person but, when we work with them and present the participant, they realise that these people are highly qualified, skilled and experienced and can do the job. I got a comment from one of the universities, saying, 'I cannot believe that a person of this calibre had to go through an entry-level position.' That was our point: to show the employers that people are out there looking for work and their talents are wasted.

Mr Muil—Could I make an observation there. Going through the history of the literature related to this sort of thing, you would all have seen the amount of stuff that has been produced over the past 15 years. There is no lack of intellectual capacity that has gone into this, and it seems to me that one of the critical ingredients that has been missing—not because people do not recognise it—is this local work experience. How do we put that in place? How does that come about? Maybe it is going to have to be some form of collaboration, some form of affirmative action between government and big business, between the BHPs of this world, where they are all prepared to say, ‘Hang on, there is something that we can actually do here.’

We have been privileged to participate in the program of putting a person in place for six months. We have had a Community Jobs Program person, a CJP person, for the last 16 weeks. So for the past 18 months we have had somebody in the office. We have had a Colombian, an Indonesian and a Japanese, and the woman we have at the moment is an Indonesian Muslim. Without a doubt, every single one of them has contributed to our organisation. There might be a week where they are a bit timid, they are not too sure how to handle things, their language is not that good, but they have all contributed to our organisation. Were they paid employees, we would have retained them. It seems to me that if you can duplicate that process in some more systematic way—and these people are getting the equivalent of the dole, I suppose or the minimum wage or whatever—

Ms Ellison—Training wages.

Mr Muil—It does not cost the economy anything. It has a huge benefit.

CHAIR—On that point, you have had 30 people. Could you have had a lot more?

Ms Ellison—Yes. We recently started a new program for which we have taken on 15 people. We had over 50 applications for 15 places, and that happens every six months and that is with incredibly limited advertising. We could run a program almost continuously, back to back, and still have people crying out for the experience. There are various reasons for that, but one that I would like to point out is that, for people who are coming in under the refugee and humanitarian program, access to employment is not part of their settlement services. Often people arrive who are ready to go out and look for work but who do not have the capacity to do that, and it is not part of the settlement service that is provided through DIMA. So we end up picking up people from the settlement services area as well as through the other migration streams. If we get the funding on a six-monthly basis, we are funded for 30 work placement participants and for 60 people on the employment assistance one-to-one job search skills. We could literally double, treble, quadruple that in the course of the year and still have that need.

Senator BARTLETT—Following on from that point, with humanitarian entrants, particularly people on temporary protection visas who have even fewer entitlements to assistance—and I think the point the chair was trying to get to earlier was about people who come on family visas but have skills—how critical is it to have early assistance to get into the workforce in areas where you have skills? It might take three years and people have to get a job driving taxis or doing whatever they can and they get on that treadmill.

Ms Ellison—It is absolutely vital. When people arrive, whatever stream they arrive under in this country, one of the first things they need to do is earn some money. If they are arriving under

the skilled migration scheme, the spouse streams—any of those—either they have undertaken to support themselves for two years or someone has given an undertaking to support them. So it is really very important to them that they actually find work. Finding work in your chosen field is obviously the preferred option, but you just have to find some work. So if you end up working as a taxidriver for two years you are losing skills. The skills and experience that you have come with are being degraded all that time.

Senator BARTLETT—The longer they are not able to go down the path of their chosen field, the less likely it is they will ever get there.

Ms Ellison—The less likely it is that they will end up in that field, which is a real loss to the individual, to the family and also to this country, frankly.

Senator BARTLETT—I was wondering about the recommendation, which I think is in both of your submissions, about the two-year waiting period for eligibility for Job Network services. This is not about Centrelink payments—leaving that to one side; I think we have had that debate—but about assistance to get jobs. When that assistance is not provided, it seems to me an obvious barrier to remove.

Ms Ellison—It is. When you arrive in this country without any contacts or networks, the automatic place to go would be to a Job Network agency for assistance in looking for work. They are only funded to assist people with the full service who are eligible for Centrelink benefits. If you have a two-year undertaking of assistance before you are eligible for Centrelink benefits and then you have to be on a Centrelink benefit for 12 months before you get Job Network assistance, some people can be here for three years before they can get that kind of professional assistance. Unfortunately, some people do make their way to Job Network agencies but find it rather difficult to get the assistance because the Job Network agency will not be paid for assisting them. That is really the difficulty. People do need that level of professional assistance in finding work.

Ms Bagdas—I will give an example. We also organise some employment workshops for migrants and refugees. At one of the workshops there was a refugee with a Bachelor of Business Administration degree. He had been in the country for two months and at that point I provided information about the migrant work experience program. That migrant work experience program is organised by the Department of Employment and Training. People gain local work experience with government departments and four weeks training at Southbank Institute of TAFE. The person started that 10-week program, and after that there was a traineeship position that he applied for, and he got that. But, if you would not give that information to that person at that time, I am sure he would still have been unemployed. It is very vital for people to get that information at the start.

Senator BARTLETT—I think one of you mentioned in your introductory remarks problems—in some areas of the community, anyway—with attitudes and suspicion about whether or not newly arrived migrants actually have the ability. I wonder about this paradox that comes up a lot where, as in the table you provided, people come here with all these skills and they cannot get work. Balance that with the obvious Queensland example of ‘Dr Death’ and people having this assumption about all these people coming here that they might have the bit of paper but, particularly at a time of labour market shortages, we are short-cutting and getting in

people who really are not up to scratch just to desperately try to fill holes. How do you overcome that paradox?

Mr Muil—We would not argue at all for any reduction in standards. We would not say that migrants need any sort of special treatment such as accepting a lower standard. We are very straightforward on that. With Patel, his English was good, for a start, so that was not an issue. It was not so much an overseas-training issue as a local administration issue. Insufficient work had been done in checking his credentials. This particular individual had not provided full information and the authorities charged with the task of checking through that did not do a full job. Fortunately, the crisis of the shortage of trained medical people has meant that we have not seen much of a consequence to that. I would suspect that, if there were a lot of excess doctors around, we might have seen a damaging response to that and a clamping down which would have left us back in a situation, which is how we got here, of having not enough trained doctors.

Ms Ellison—On the general point: to be honest, I think the paradox to some extent strengthens our argument. Any employer will tell you that there is often a difference between what somebody can do on a piece of paper and what they can do in reality. What we are saying is, ‘Give people an opportunity to show and to demonstrate their skills rather than simply relying on a recognition process for a piece of paper.’

Ms Bagdas—People can work under supervision. That is what is happening with the office administration work placement training that we are talking about under the multicultural community jobs plan. Under that, there are supervisors and they supervise those people’s work. They can supervise people for six months and then after that people can do their own work. It is very important. Instead of telling people, ‘You cannot have this job,’ maybe they can say, ‘For a short period of time I might spend some time with this person and help this person.’ That is how we need to work together in order to prove that those people are very capable, skilled and experienced and they have the knowledge; it is just a matter of allowing a small period of time for people to adjust to new environments.

Mr Muil—An element of that is the recruitment process in Australia, which has become very unfriendly. I saw a little while ago—and I made a clipping which I took in to work—that there was a local council in Queensland that was advertising for ditch diggers basically—labourers. They had key selection criteria that you had to meet—five key selection criteria—and key performance indicators. A lot of that is very foreign to people who have got the skills to do the job, who might have been digging ditches for the past 10 years, but who have never had to address ‘key selection criteria’. What does all that mean?

We recently had somebody address us who had worked with the Canadian authorities in the recruitment process that the Canadian police use. They had found that the number of non-English-speaking people getting through that recruitment process was very low, even though they were skilled. They established that it was the actual recruitment—the interview process—that was the big stumbling block. So they have now instituted within the Canadian police a two-pronged recruitment process, which takes into account the fact that this might be a very foreign process to people. I think there are cultural issues that we could address and, again, that would come down to a partnership between big business and government that would start making it easier for people with the right skills and experience to get through that process.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—I refer you to part of the submission:

An alternative approach to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications would be to provide skilled migrants with an opportunity to enter a short bridging course in the equivalent degree ...

What are you saying? Are you saying this is an alternative to the skills assessment and an alternative to recognition of overseas qualifications? Are you saying we should scrap the whole system? And also, could you specify who would go into this course—people at a certain level of qualifications or everyone who enters?

Ms Ellison—I think we were saying, firstly, that for some people, particularly people who do not actually have access to documentation or suchlike—for instance some of our refugee entrants, who turn up here but cannot access the current system because they do not have the documentation to do that—this might be an alternative way for them to be able to prove their qualifications and skills level.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—You are not saying that it is an alternative—

Ms Ellison—No, I am saying that it is an alternative for those who cannot go through the current system. Sorry if that was not clear.

CHAIR—You talk about bridging courses as being an opportunity to upskill and have better access to jobs, especially in the trade qualifications. Do you want to expand further on the difficulties, or have you got any case examples of success or otherwise?

Ms Bagdas—There were some examples. I know that there were some pilot programs in Logan and a few other areas where they organised training courses for people in, for example, welding. After those training courses, they would link those people with the employers, and that was very effective. I think it is the same with some of the programs here.

CHAIR—Who was that funded by?

Ms Bagdas—The state government Department of Employment and Training.

CHAIR—Not the local employer?

Ms Bagdas—The TAFE colleges got the funding, and they work very closely with the community organisations. There is another community organisation that runs a program similar to ours. It is not around office administration but around people's skills and experience—accounting, for example, dentistry and all other professions. They place the participants with the right employer—a dental clinic, for example, or other places—and that is very effective. It is not a completely structured course, but they provide all the training necessary for those people and they place them with the organisation so that they can get local work experience.

CHAIR—Mr Muil mentioned before that the students at TAFE do not receive HECS funding. Even in a limited, bridging, on-the-job training sort of way, do you see an opportunity for the extension of HECS into some of these courses or upskilling? Would that be viable? Would your people go for that, or would they not like to be encumbered with a HECS debt?

Ms Bagdas—They will go for that because initially, especially with the refugees, they do not have any income. That is the case with the skilled migrants too. They have to spend whatever they have. The ability to take a loan and then pay it back when they are working later on is good, because they are struggling.

CHAIR—That has been a strong theme.

Ms Bagdas—I can give you an example of an accountant who was struggling to find a job. He came with his family members. He had to support his two children and wife, and he could not find a job after 14 months. They decided that it was time for the family members to go back, because the wife was able to go back to her job overseas, and he stayed. I talked to him and I said, ‘Give yourself a few more months. We will work together and see. You might get an opportunity.’ He stayed and he got a job and the wife came back. They were struggling to pay the rent, the electricity bills and all the other bills, so that is a good example of that.

Mr Muil—There is another example. A few months ago we were contacted by a young Iraqi woman who is a qualified medical doctor. She had worked in paediatrics in Pakistan for two years and she came out here. I am not 100 per cent sure of this, but I think there are three elements which you have to complete in order to be able to practise as a doctor. She had completed two, and in one of them she got a pass of 98 per cent. She topped Australia in that. There was an article on it in the *Courier-Mail* a little while ago. In order to complete the third element, she needed to come up with something like \$10,000. She did not have access to \$10,000, and if she waited longer than eight months the first two that she had passed would lapse, so she is back to square one. We negotiated with Queensland Health. We tried to get them to somehow help her with some sort of bridging loan. They are some of the impediments that they can face. She goes out and gets a job as a taxidriver when she could be working as a doctor, but it is going to take her too long to get the \$10,000 to pass the next level. It is almost a no-win situation that she is in.

CHAIR—As I said, that is a strong theme that has come through these inquiries, which I would not have thought had so much universal support. Finally, you touch on the issue of English competency and job opportunities. Many of the refugees in particular are given 35 hours, I think. Is that sufficient? Is it helpful? Should it be more? Is English really such a problem? What is your response to that?

Ms Ellison—For some people it is a problem. I do not think it is universally a problem. When we look at some of the primary refugee communities at the moment—from Rwanda, Sierra Leone—there are very good English language skills. Many people from Iran and Iraq have very good English language skills. They do not need any additional language support but are still funded for 35 hours—or whatever it is—of English language support rather than assistance with finding a job. For some people that would not be enough. It would be better to redistribute some of that money for English language training.

Ms Bagdas—When you talk about 35 hours, are you talking about 510 hours? Which 35 hours is that?

Ms Ellison—The initial English language training.

Ms Bagdas—That is something that I think people are struggling with too. People who speak English fluently, and read and write English fluently, are asked to go to English classes, for example, and are put together with other people who are illiterate. That in a way creates problems for people too and that is something that people are struggling with a lot. They think after completion of that program that they have not benefited from it. English language classes maybe should be referred and people given the more practical placement that they need. I want to give some other examples, if I can, around people's accents. It is sometimes not the English language that is the problem. The employer's excuse is: 'You have an accent; we cannot put you on the front desk. You've got an accent and therefore we cannot hire you. We don't understand your language.' That is something that people are getting a lot.

CHAIR—That happens in call centres a fair bit, I understand.

Ms Bagdas—It is not call centres; it is everywhere.

CHAIR—But I am saying that that is one we get from call centres.

Ms Bagdas—But most of the jobs that people are applying for are not at the call centres. They know that at the call centres their English has to be a little bit different. It is to do with all other jobs. If you are at the reception area or if you are talking to one of your colleagues, all of a sudden they say, 'You've got an accent; I cannot understand.'

CHAIR—That is interesting.

Ms Bagdas—That is why highly educated people feel that they are put down, and their self-esteem goes down. When it comes to job applications especially, the moment they go for an interview they think, 'Oh, no, it's going to be my accent again.' Instead of worrying about the interview questions, they worry about that.

CHAIR—That is interesting. Some accents can be quite attractive.

Ms Bagdas—Yes.

Mr Muil—The School of International Business at Griffith University did a report a little while ago. I will read from one paragraph:

Additionally, even if English language capabilities are demonstrated and overseas skills recognition is achieved, the employability of NESB individuals is limited due to perceived professional/technical inadequacies and/or existing prejudices towards the English language ability/comprehension of NESB individuals held by potential employers.

I think that backs that up.

Ms Bagdas—Something else is the appearance, and from our experience that is something that we have observed too. If you send two people, one person with a scarf, you know that the other person is going to get the job. In a way that is sad but unfortunately that is the case. Racism is another issue that people are facing. It is very important that we educate employers with regard to racism and understanding about other cultures. People are coming out with excuses: 'I don't know that person. I cannot pronounce that person's name. Why should I work with that

person? I will find someone whose name I can pronounce.' Those are the excuses. They have told us. They openly tell us but they do not tell the client.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I really appreciate the fact that both the Multicultural Development Association and the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland have attended today. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript. I would be grateful if you could as soon as possible also send the secretariat any additional material that you have undertaken to provide. Thanks a lot.

Ms Ellison—Thank you.

[12.03 pm]

SKILBECK, Mr Graeme Stanley, Training and Placement Officer, Migrant Settlement Services, Cairns

CHAIR—I welcome the representative from the Migrant Settlement Services 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 before we proceed to questions.

Mr Skilbeck—Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission to the standing committee. Although I am relatively new to my current role I can share my first-hand experiences and submit on behalf of Centacare Cairns, Migrant Settlement Services and the Migrant Employment Service. The Migrant Employment Service has been developed to assist local migrants into employment and training. The program is funded by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training and is a non-profit community program.

Many migrants, particularly skilled visa holders in the Cairns area, are often unable to gain employment in their field of expertise. This is mainly due to the lack of industry support for their qualifications, resulting in many of them relocating or working in fields unrelated to their qualifications or skills. Often the cost of overseas qualifications assessment is prohibitive or the process is time consuming and results in people working in other fields, which are usually less skilled. For example, we have recently dealt with a client who was going through an overseas qualifications assessment process for dentistry and working as a room attendant. She eventually left Australia as the process was too expensive and time consuming and the work opportunities in the short term were very limited.

I see many more similar examples or experiences when working with migrants with overseas qualifications in the engineering trades, nursing, social and community work, psychiatry, psychology, counselling, et cetera. These people are working as cleaners and room attendants in the hospitality industry, often on limited casual hours, while sorting out their qualifications and skills recognition. In some cases they have been working in these jobs for in excess of a year. The time away from their professions adversely affects the currency of their skills and knowledge. This also impacts negatively on their confidence levels. One of our clients, with an engineering degree from India, now recognised in Australia, recently said, ‘I do not understand this country. I was encouraged to settle here because my skills were needed but instead I have worked as a room attendant for almost two years—a job more suited to and deserving of an unemployed or disadvantaged person. My friends whom I studied with and who later emigrated to America have not experienced the barriers and frustrations that I have here.’

There have been slightly more cases serviced with academic qualifications than trade qualifications. Probably because it is easier for trade qualified people to gain employment without recognition, and there is a comparatively high demand for most tradespeople in the local area.

I will discuss some of the key issues we have observed. The current methods of marketing and of processing of migrants do not adequately inform migrants of the possible barriers they will encounter when they settle in Australia. Migrants arrive with high expectations; these expectations are soon challenged when they become aware of the processes and the time involved in getting them prepared for accessing suitable employment commensurate with their skills and qualifications. Consideration should be given to having a disclosure statement of what migrants might encounter. This disclosure statement would need to be read and understood before migrants leave their country of origin. Migrants have a misunderstanding that qualifications assessed for migrant purposes do not require further assessment after arrival in Australia. They are confused as to what qualifications will be recognised and for what purpose. Is it legislative or industry? Is it state? Is it federal or is it an industrial peak body?

The DIMA website implies that translation of documents for migrants is free. This is not entirely true because in practice there are limitations on the number and the types of documents that can be translated. Migrants are frustrated by the time it takes for these documents to be processed. Migrants currently working in Australia do not have a clear understanding of the Australian culture and/or the Australian workplace culture. There is a need for migrants to gain work experience in their field of expertise so that they can be exposed to the Australian working culture and other relevant work practice laws, such as workplace occupational health and safety and equal opportunity.

Many employers will not support the concept of work experience even though there are agencies that specialise in setting up work experience and covering costs of insurance. Employers believe that even with set-up support the administrative and staffing requirements make work experience inconvenient and costly. Some employers prefer to accept volunteers on the job, even for lengthy periods of time. When migrants access these work programs they work hard for recognition in the hope that they will be offered employment. Unfortunately, this involvement does not always lead to employment and the participants can feel that they have been used as cheap labour.

We estimate that over 70 per cent of migrants seeking information from our service regarding recognition of overseas qualifications have not migrated as skilled migrants but have migrated under various family sponsorship or refugee visa categories. This group is particularly disadvantaged as language and financial constraints often prohibit access to appropriate skills recognition. There is anecdotal evidence which shows that newly arrived migrants from developing, non-English backgrounds find it difficult to access employment and often end up in jobs where their skills obtained overseas are not utilised.

Many of our clients become despondent after they have applied for numerous jobs advertised through the local paper and the internet. Some of them suspect that they are being discriminated against because they do not even get an interview. When they follow up for feedback, they are inevitably told that the applicant was more suited or had more experience. Regional skilled migrants on visa subclass 495 have found that the opportunities for working in their field of expertise can be very limited if not impossible in our region. In order to stay in the region as required by the visa requirements, some have reluctantly found work not requiring their skills. This could potentially lead to disqualification for permanent residency when they apply later.

There is a need for a centralised processing service or at least an information service including a web site for all skills qualification assessments. This would be useful not only to skilled migrants but also to other migrants, service providers, employers and industry peak bodies. In our experience, migrants come to Australia to access an opportunity to make a better life for themselves and their families. Once they are here they are motivated to become part of the Australian community. As a country we cannot afford to disenfranchise these people by denying them access to what Australians consider to be fair, equitable and a part of our culture. If we wish to minimise upset for new migrants because of unmet expectations, we need to have a clear and agreed communication between all stakeholders in the migration process. When this happens Australia will become a better place for all Australians to live and prosper.

CHAIR—Thank you. You would have heard the evidence given by the previous group of people because you were in the room. You would then concur with their proposition about work experience being a necessary element for some people seeking work. Would you like to expand on that at all?

Mr Skilbeck—I would agree that it is a necessary element. It bridges a gap and also creates opportunities for networking for the migrant and possible employee if their work experience works out well.

CHAIR—You seem to be saying that work experience is not all it is cut out to be because people tend to use it and then move on. Is that something that you have examples of?

Mr Skilbeck—There seems to be evidence that some do use it as a stopgap type measure to get people onto employment schemes.

CHAIR—You also referred to the fact that you believe that information to potential skilled migrants is not sufficient whilst overseas. Then they come to Australia and are quite disappointed with what the real situation is. Where do you lay blame there—with the people sponsoring them, the migrants themselves, the DIMA web sites or NOOSR?

Mr Skilbeck—I think it is all stakeholders. It is an absolute maze of information to go through. You would not even know where to start if you were a beginner. It takes a lot of time and energy to find out the right places to go in order to find the right questions so as to get the right answers.

CHAIR—In your role in Cairns, have you been associated with the stakeholders that have attended any of the exhibitions overseas—in London and Berlin et cetera?

Mr Skilbeck—I have not been there long enough to answer that question.

CHAIR—So you are not aware of the exhibitions that DIMA runs where they prequalify skilled migrants and professional people?

Mr Skilbeck—I am aware that it has taken place, but I am not aware of whether Cairns has had any connection to that.

CHAIR—Just as a little advertisement, I would say that this month there is to be another exhibition in Chennai which you may wish to have your employers take some notice of.

Senator KIRK—Thank you very much for your submission. I think a lot of the evidence you have given the committee is reflective of what others have said, so I thought I might focus in particular on Far North Queensland. Do you think there are any particular issues in your region that perhaps distinguish your region from, say, other areas of Queensland that the committee ought to take notice of? Are there any particular skills which are in shortage in your area? Do the people you come into contact with in your region face any particular or unique obstacles?

Mr Skilbeck—We are in an expanding area. There are opportunities for a lot of skilled people in the area of mining and infrastructure. We have had people come to us with engineering qualifications. They have not been able to access even interviews to get employment in those industries in which they want to be a part of. Some of those people have even volunteered with prospective employers.

CHAIR—Is that with employers, not assessment bodies?

Mr Skilbeck—The employers. Some of them have even volunteered their time and have worked as volunteers with some organisations, and some for long periods, and it has not always led to employment. There does appear to be a barrier for people who have, as suggested by the earlier witnesses, a strange sounding name or if they have in their resume that they come from a non-English-speaking background. Those people find it very difficult to get access to even the first step, which is an interview. The time that I spend with our clients going through applications, in particular regarding selection criteria, involves an enormous amount of effort, and it does not go anywhere in many instances, even with the support.

Senator KIRK—Some of the previous witnesses talked about a grant that they received from the Queensland government in order to establish a work experience type program. Has your organisation applied for such a grant? Would you be eligible for that kind of funding? Would that be of assistance to you, if you had the resources to establish that kind of scheme?

Mr Skilbeck—We work with another agency called the vocational partners group. They specialise in work experience. We actually pay them on successful work placements.

Senator KIRK—Are they funded by the Queensland government?

Mr Skilbeck—They are providing us with a service and as an agency we are paying them on a client basis.

Senator KIRK—I see.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—It seems the people who come in under the skilled pathway have been assessed that they have qualifications which match Australian qualifications. So that issue is not the problem—is that right?

Mr Skilbeck—Sometimes that is an issue for them when they get here in that there is time that they have to invest in getting that recognition.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—Okay. But they would not have come in under the skilled pathway unless their qualifications matched what we recognise as being suitable. Is that correct?

Mr Skilbeck—Yes.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—By definition, if they are coming in under the skilled stream, doesn't that mean that there is a shortage of these sorts of jobs? Is the problem that they cannot fill vacancies in Cairns, or is it a problem whereby if they were prepared to move to other areas they could find employment?

Mr Skilbeck—To answer the latter first, yes; they could find employment probably easier in other regions. What was the first question again?

Dr SOUTHCOTT—What is the unemployment level in Cairns?

CHAIR—Is it higher than the state average?

Mr Skilbeck—Possibly, though not by much. I cannot be precise about that.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—I am just trying to find out where the problem is—if it is people who have come in and their skills are not recognised, if it is the subsequent training or if it is the fact that they have what we consider to be quite adequate skills but they just cannot find employment. I think you are suggesting it is probably the last one. If they cannot find adequate employment, is it a problem of their not being prepared to move to find suitable jobs where there is a shortage of them?

Mr Skilbeck—There have been a number of people who have come in with nursing qualifications, and we are short of nurses.

Dr SOUTHCOTT—Very short.

Mr Skilbeck—They have come through the skilled migrant process. When they arrive here the first thing they encounter is that they need to be recognised by the nursing bodies. They then have to take certificates to be translated. That does not happen in Cairns; it happens in Melbourne or somewhere else, and it takes time. Of course, these people want to work straightaway. They want to create an income stream and will do almost anything to generate that. Inevitably, they find themselves in the hospitality and tourism industry because that is an industry that is receptive to them.

In the case of dentists, nurses and the like, in some instances their recognition has not been accepted, so they have been downgraded. In one instance, a dentist became a technician. When she went into the workforce to get work experience she ended up volunteering her time as an assistant to a nurse and did not get past that. She is now working in an aged care facility as a personal carer. I might point out that her husband was a qualified optometrist. He had a position where he was in the back rooms grinding lenses. He did not get to look into people's eyes and do the things that he was trained for. In frustration, he gave up. He is now an apprentice motor mechanic.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Obviously, one of the constants in this whole debate is the point you are making now in regard to people who are accepted for migration in a skills category. They come to Australia and then claim that they did not know that there were other things to go through. Isn't it a bit of an imponderable? Looking at, for instance, spouse migration where people have a big claim for entering Australia because they are married to an Australian, you can go to Beirut and it takes eight or nine months to come here. If we had a system which essentially guaranteed everyone who wanted to enter here under particular skills that they were totally qualified, given the kinds of resources the Australian public are prepared to put into these embassies, NOOSR et cetera, wouldn't they be waiting for possibly five years? Isn't it a very difficult area that is not simply solved?

Mr Skilbeck—You may be right about that, but I think we owe it to them to disclose the real situation so they cannot come to us and say, 'We didn't know that.' There are a lot of misunderstandings. It is not just about recognition; it is also about whether they have access to English courses and how much access they have. When they finally get the access it is not for five but two days a week. They are mixed up with other groups that might be refugees with trauma issues. There are a whole lot of things going on that just draw the whole process out over time and demoralise people in the process.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—It might be a very painful idea for people, but I think sometimes we should perhaps look at whether we allow people to enter in the skills category, quite frankly, if we are going to face these issues later on. There is no doubt that it is a fundamental problem in the system that people are in jobs below their skill levels, and they do fall through cracks in regard to recognition. As I said, the other part is that we either exclude people until we are definitely certain or take a lot longer to process them. It is a very difficult area.

Mr Skilbeck—It is, but I will not be drawn into the politics of that other than to say that all of the people I have come across are very highly motivated to become part of our community and good Australians eventually.

Senator BARTLETT—The brief submission we have from you mentions that your migrant employment services are funded by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training. I presume that your broader migrant settlement services get funding through DIMA at a federal level. I want clarify, firstly, whether the state government funding is reasonably secure. Do you need to reapply for it every year, or does it go up and down? Do you have a reasonably steady service that you are able to provide to people?

Mr Skilbeck—We do need to reapply from time to time. We have programs for a year, concurring. To answer your question correctly I would say that this program has been going for well in excess of five years.

Senator BARTLETT—I do not want to go too broadly outside the terms of reference of skilled migration specifically. One of the issues that comes to my mind occasionally is the range of settlement assistance provided to people who come here. If it is done right at the start to help people through those initial hurdles it can clear all the muck out of the way so that they can focus on some of these more technical and difficult bits, such as skills recognition or accreditation. Do you have any views on the adequacy overall of the broader settlement services

provided to either skilled migrants or other migrants who come here? Are they sometimes too caught up in getting through all the other red tape to be able to focus on these things?

Mr Skilbeck—Who is having difficulty with the red tape?

Senator BARTLETT—The newly arrived people. Do you think the wider settlement services you are able to provide are adequate to help them through all those things?

Mr Skilbeck—They certainly have a lot of bureaucracy to contend with. It might be completely foreign to them, given where they have come from. They do find that they get a bit of the run-around when they come here. It is the case when they go to Job Search that a lot of the Job Search agencies are not necessarily going to invest a lot of time and effort in looking for work for them. The local people are aware as a community and they bring migrants to our service, and the other Job Search agencies send people who are migrants to our service. So we have become a niche provider of services, whether they be in the area of training, skills recognition, skills auditing and/or helping applicants to access employment.

Senator BARTLETT—Have you had contact with people who come under the various temporary business and skilled streams as well? Or are you exclusively involved with people who come to Australia under permanent skilled visas?

Mr Skilbeck—We have a high-exposure area in the main street of town. We have tourists and migrants dropping in constantly, so we have every type of migrant accessing our services.

Senator BARTLETT—Are you aware of other situations, and I am thinking particularly of people who come under temporary business or skilled visas, perhaps with others sponsoring them, where similar sorts of issues arise, such as full skills not being adequately recognised or recompensed?

Mr Skilbeck—Our role in that case is to seek out and refer people to others who have the expertise and skills to help them with their business plans or in accessing finance or whatever it might be that they are looking for.

Senator PARRY—Mr Skilbeck, I want to take you back to your example about the optometrist and the nurse—the husband and wife partnership. What was the prime reason that the optometrist was not working as an optometrist?

Mr Skilbeck—He believed that his skills were being ignored, that they were not being utilised.

Senator PARRY—Did he go through an assessment process?

Mr Skilbeck—Yes.

Senator PARRY—Was it a peer assessment?

Mr Skilbeck—Yes. There was nothing wrong with his qualifications. He was recognised in Australia as having equivalent qualifications.

Senator PARRY—May I ask from which country he came?

Mr Skilbeck—He came from the Philippines.

Senator PARRY—How do we know that the qualifications were acceptable? I am just trying to work out the root cause of why people with skills are not working at their skill levels. Was that qualification recognised openly by the optometrist body in Australia?

Mr Skilbeck—Yes, but it was not recognised by local employers.

Senator PARRY—What about the nurse? What was her situation?

Mr Skilbeck—She was a dentist initially.

Senator PARRY—Why was she not working as a dentist? Was it the same issue?

Mr Skilbeck—She was downgraded to technician in her qualification recognition.

Senator PARRY—Did she go through a peer assessment or some form of assessment?

Mr Skilbeck—I am not sure.

Senator PARRY—It is possible that some of the qualifications that people enter the country with may be accepted elsewhere but not here. But you are saying that is not the case in the examples you cited earlier.

Mr Skilbeck—Again, I can only relate what people tell me. I have no documentary proof of what I am about to say, but a number of people from different backgrounds, particularly from the non-English, developing countries, have said to me that they have had family members or friends or know of people who have gone to America or even Canada with exactly the same experience and qualifications as them and have had access to work opportunities, but here those people found that there were subtle barriers placed in their way that prevented them from accessing employment in their field of expertise quickly.

Senator PARRY—It is important to have it on the record that it is not firm evidence; you basically have hearsay evidence that the qualifications were not recognised because of some other reason. They possibly would have been accepted in other countries, although that is not tested with the individuals you are talking about.

Mr Skilbeck—I am giving you anecdotal evidence that people have shared with me.

CHAIR—Going back for a moment, did the woman who was a dentist believe that her qualifications were acceptable before she came to Australia?

Mr Skilbeck—She did.

Senator PARRY—Were those qualifications indicated in writing or was there some indication prior to her arrival that those qualifications would be acceptable at the entry level to her profession?

Mr Skilbeck—No, she just went through the DIMA process of points and so on to find out if she could come here as a skilled migrant. She is only one of many examples I could give. There are numerous people who go through the process and believe that by going through that process their qualifications are accepted, but when they get here they find that their qualifications are not totally acceptable or recognised through organisations such as the nurses association, the engineers association and many others.

Senator PARRY—You are not the first person to say this to us, but it is important that we understand the reasoning. It is a shame we cannot get the evidence tested on each occasion rather than hearing about it many months or years later and trying to work out whether it is anecdotal or factual and the qualifications were acceptable but employment was not forthcoming. The Centacare and Migrant Settlement Services joint submission says, under ‘Key Issues’:

Confusion as to what qualifications should be recognised and for what purpose (legislative requirements, industry requirements?).

I do not understand that statement. Can you elaborate further?

Mr Skilbeck—That statement was made by someone else.

Senator PARRY—Yes, it was signed by Mr Martin Mettman. Is he a colleague? You obviously support the submission.

Mr Skilbeck—Yes, I do.

Senator PARRY—Do you know what he is saying in that statement?

Mr Skilbeck—Every case is different and you basically start from scratch. You really have to understand where they have come from and what they have with them. You need to have it translated and go through a process of finding out whom to access. Do you need to seek recognition of a certificate? Does it need to be recognised as a step to accessing membership of an organisation which in turn gives an employment opportunity? Is the step that is involved accessed through the state or federal system? It would vary depending on the skills that we are talking about.

Senator PARRY—Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you 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, and I will put a rider to that: I have asked the secretariat to follow up with you on the particular issue you have raised about the husband and wife.

Proceedings suspended from 12.35 pm to 1.28 pm

ARROLL, Ms Sandra Dorothy, Director, Community Employment Programs, Queensland Department of Employment and Training

ARTHUR, Mr Rodney Wayne, General Manager, Training, Quality and Regulation, Queensland Department of Employment and Training

ROGERS, Ms Barbara Vaughan, Manager, Skills Recognition, Training, Quality and Regulation, Queensland Department of Employment and Training

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

Mr Arthur—Yesterday the Queensland government launched its white paper on skilling in Queensland called *Queensland skills plan*. Like the rest of the country, Queensland is experiencing extreme skills shortages. It has some 1,500 people a week coming to Queensland to seek employment with, in a lot of cases, limited skills because they see this is a place for jobs even if they do not have skills. Employers are also increasingly looking overseas to address some of the skills shortage needs.

In our coming today I would like to highlight that Barbara Rogers has had significant input to the Queensland submission through her role in skills recognition, and Sandra has a significant role in employment programs which enhance opportunities for migrants. She has, in that process, had to look at different ways of obtaining skills recognition. In the content of our presentation, Barbara will be focusing on those recognition processes and Sandra will be looking more at the employment program aspects. We would like to start with Barbara making a few comments on some of the issues that we see there, if that is okay.

Ms Rogers—The issues that we experience would be the same as you have probably heard about from the other states and territories. We hosted the overseas qualification units conference, a national conference, last year. There was a lot of consistency in the issues that we are all dealing with. The issues can be divided into offshore and onshore. With the onshore we have skilled migrants and then the other groups of existing migrants—the humanitarian and the group that does not quite seem to fit into many programs, made up of TPVs, fiance and spouse, and people on temporary visas. The assessments that seem to happen offshore do not always fit the occupational and licensing criteria for onshore, so we have people arrive with great expectations, having gone to quite a lot of expense relocating their families here, only to find that they cannot get licensed or they cannot get employment because they do not have local work experience or they do not have a licence—for a whole range of reasons they do not quite fit the occupational needs.

Onshore we have issues with inconsistency in the licensing and the transportability of that. Skills gaps are identified, but they may not have the money to, or the expectation that they would have to, upskill and go through training, which leads to underemployment or

unemployment. Sandra's programs assist in a lot of those. We have got eligibility issues. There are programs like ASDOT and FEE-HELP to get professional people in, but they do not cater for the tradespeople. There is a significant group that is not eligible for those programs. Then the programs that do exist here do not quite meet all the needs.

We know that local work experience is a great assistance into employment, but there are limited programs that offer that. Bridging programs do not always fit the employment needs for professionals, and there are no trade bridging programs. With bridging programs and local work experience there is no English component that supports that, and that is occupational English. Training employment programs vary from state to state and occupation to occupation. We have some wonderful employment programs that Sandra will outline. Within the department we have a trade recognition process that covers the trades that TRA do not cover. We base that on the AQF or national competency standards.

That is another issue with the TRA pre-migration process: it does not align with the occupations and the qualifications. If a trade recognition process used national competency standards with an AQF outcome then it would satisfy licensing needs across most states and territories. I understand COAG is looking at and dealing with the licensing issue, and I think that is a great move, because that will really ease a lot of the tension and the problems. I will hand over to Sandra now to briefly go through some of the great programs that are operating there.

Ms Arrol—In the Queensland Department of Employment and Training we run a Breaking the Unemployment Cycle initiative. That has been in place since 1998. It is under that banner or that initiative that a number of different types of employment and training programs are run. Of most interest today would be the sorts of work placement projects that we are running through community organisations for skilled unemployed migrants. These are both professional and perhaps in trades—unemployed migrants as well. We place them into 13 weeks paid work experience with public sector agencies, and also community organisations, to work in their field or industry of interest.

This gives them the benefit of current work experience. They get an opportunity to develop networks with the people they work with, and the employers get to see first hand the skills that the individuals bring. For example, we placed an accountant—I cannot remember the country of origin—in the Australian Taxation Office, and they do special projects and build current work based skills. Those programs run in Brisbane and Townsville. We have a range of other programs where we provide various levels of employment assistance—everything from literacy, numeracy and language help through to vocational training, post-placement support, living skills support and some work experience as well.

Those are the programs within the Breaking the Unemployment Cycle initiative. Also, Corporate Solutions Queensland, on behalf of DET, manages the Migrant Work Experience Program, and that has been operating since 2001. There are two intakes a year of 18 participants. While the program is not for skilled migrants, it does give four weeks training in administration through Southbank TAFE and six weeks unpaid work experience in the administration field in government sector agencies. Most significantly, to date there has been an 80 per cent employment outcome with that program. For the work placement project in Brisbane there is a 60 per cent job outcome rate. I note that other jurisdictions say that, with work experience, it is about six months, so it is interesting to see what can be achieved with four weeks training and

six weeks work experience. That is another perspective. Those are the main comments at the moment.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your quality submission. We appreciate your attendance today. Could we have a copy of your white paper?

Mr Arthur—Yes.

CHAIR—Queensland, I would imagine, is much like my state of Western Australia. You have a huge demand for skilled and professional workers and you are satisfying that demand from the migrant program. Our inquiry is obviously about the impediments to that, and you have mentioned quite a few. It seems as if you have taken some proactive steps to address what you see as the impediments yourself. That is fantastic and I am sure that we can all learn from you.

Previous evidence given to the committee suggests that TAFE is an area in which skilled workers have a bit of a problem. There seems to be little funding through TAFE for upskilling or bridging courses. There are obviously no opportunities to get HECS fees paid through TAFE. This has been a universal comment at our hearings. Do you have any comments on TAFE and the opportunities there?

Ms Rogers—We have some really good programs operating through TAFE now. We have signed some agreements to focus on our trade skills shortages and they are doing some work with us in RPL. We are targeting the trade level, and TAFE, in the different units throughout Queensland that focus on different occupations or trades, is doing assessments for us. We have set some clear guidelines and we have assessment tools. We are starting to make some good progress with those areas in getting fast-tracked RPL assessments through so that the tradespeople are coming out with a qualification that leads to a licence or employment.

There is no Commonwealth funding, HECS, FEE-HELP or ASDOT for the trade levels. As far as I am aware, professional people were supposed to be referred by their professional body to a university for their upskilling. But with the TAFE colleges now going into associate degree levels, there are opportunities there. With our white paper we are looking at many opportunities, so that is something that we could consider.

CHAIR—So you do not think your government would have an objection to that sort of funding arrangement, a HECS type arrangement, into TAFEs?

Ms Rogers—That is a question that Rod would answer.

Mr Arthur—There is a constant debate about how students access the services. We have not gone down the HECS path yet.

CHAIR—We heard this morning, for example, that some people need to pay up to \$10,000 to get themselves in line so that their qualifications can be accepted. That is a lot of money for a person who is not earning any money. Short-term bridging courses were seen as one solution.

Mr Arthur—We would obviously look at it. I do not think there is a negative feeling towards it—just how it operates.

CHAIR—I have one more question, which the committee has heard me ask a few times. In your submission you come out rather strongly about the inadequacies and problems that you have with Trades Recognition Australia. I understand that the Queensland office of TRA has closed, so you now have to deal through Melbourne—is that right?

Ms Rogers—Yes.

CHAIR—I am sure you will have some views on that. In terms of the work that they do and that they have overseas offices that have closed, do you have any comments on the need for face-to-face inquiries et cetera? We are very interested in the TRA question because it has been brought up so often.

Ms Rogers—It is difficult for people from non-English-speaking backgrounds or from overseas to deal with a government office that has such importance to their career path over the phone. We have difficulty ourselves in our skills recognition office when calling TRA and only receiving an answering machine. Whilst they do call back, our initial contact is always an answering machine. There are the trades that TRA do, and we cover all the other trades. We are now looking at opportunities for working with industry and for our TAFE colleges doing RPL assessments in some of the TRA trades.

CHAIR—Can you give us some examples of the trades that you cover that TRA do not?

Ms Rogers—We do construction, hospitality, automotive, personal services, furnishing, boat building—a lot of the trades that are in the skills shortages area—but we do not do the electrical, metals and engineering trades.

CHAIR—Could you give us your point of view on what TRA should be doing and what would make them more efficient, more user friendly and more helpful in this whole exercise?

Ms Rogers—I think it is time that we moved to a consistent assessment, whether it be onshore or offshore. We have national competency standards and a national training framework which would provide a benchmark that everybody could be measured against for the competencies required of a tradesperson. We have a really good sifting process in that there is a time criterion which supports what a tradesperson has in skills gained. To be consistent with what is happening onshore, they should be using those standards offshore. When a person goes through the trade process, they do not know whether they have skills gaps. They just know that they look like a tradesperson for the purpose of entry into Australia. When they get here, there may be significant skills gaps. They may be classified in some vague term such as ‘engineering tradesperson, elsewhere not classified’. And then the states are left trying to fit that person into a trade slot, upskilling, perhaps licensing and, hopefully, employment. That takes a long period of time, during which time the tradesperson is deskilling.

To answer your question: national consistency and national competency standards are needed as a benchmark. Skills gaps should perhaps be identified offshore. That way, the client or the migrant has the option to decide whether they want to go through the expensive relocation process involved in coming here and having to upskill or do a bridging course to meet the licensing or skills requirements for that occupation before they even get to employment.

CHAIR—Let us not put too fine a point on it: you would like to see an office back in Queensland?

Mr Arthur—An office or an agency. How many inquiries are we receiving—one a week or one a fortnight?

Ms Rogers—We do one or two a week, because the client has not been able to get through to the TRA or has got through to the answering machine at the TRA. They then call us for assistance, for more information and for support.

CHAIR—So you would say that the TRA are not doing their job?

Ms Rogers—I do not know that they are not doing the job but their service is very difficult.

CHAIR—Very ordinary.

Ms Rogers—They are not very helpful for someone trying to get information and get through their process.

Senator KIRK—Thank you for your submission. You make the point that DIMA needs to place greater emphasis on clearly advising potential migrants what it is that they are going to have to do when they come to this country with regard to additional registration. I understand that the Commonwealth is setting up a web portal—a sort of central information service. I would like to hear your comments in relation to what you know about that. But you also made the point that it is important that the Commonwealth recognises the value of face-to-face communication, particularly when you are dealing with migrants and especially refugees who are coming from countries who do not have access to the internet. I wonder if you can comment on the web portal and on how that might be made more effective.

Ms Rogers—I am one of the state people who has been involved in setting up that web portal, or providing information for that. It is something that the overseas qualification units have been asking for for a long time. It will be great. We hope that it will be linked to the sources of information and will provide a clear step-by-step process to someone offshore, so that they know what is going to happen, what the next step is, what expenses they might have and how to help themselves. That is very important. Our concern is who is going to maintain that. There is an enormous wealth of information. We hope that there will be funding and an organisation dedicated to its maintenance.

For offshore people who are going to use this who may not have access to the internet, we have our consulates and embassies offshore. It would be very useful if those points of contact could take people through the information if those people do not have their own source.

The web portal will give scenarios. For example, it will say: 'You're an overseas trained electrician. What's going to happen to you? Here's the pathway and here's an example.' We know from our own skills recognition website that scenario situations and frequently asked questions—those types of things—get a lot of hits and are successful ways of providing information. Once you read the information, you want to know how it fits you and what it means.

Senator KIRK—You said that you had been involved in the process. Where is that web portal at?

Ms Rogers—From the calendar of events, I expect that they are up to the testing phase right now. We have seen the CD draft, which looked very good, although we had comments about its English level requirements. We recommended that they have someone test it for its English level and its user friendliness, so that people from non-English-speaking backgrounds can use it. From the calendar that we were given, I believe that at the moment it might be in that testing phase. We will be contacted, perhaps this month or next month, to talk more about the final stages.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Could you develop appendix 8, point v, and this 1946 legislation a bit more? What exactly is the area of these two concepts not meeting?

Ms Rogers—The 1946 legislation is a very set, prescriptive list of trades. We have moved on since then. We have a wide range of trades—more than those trades. As I said before, when you get ‘engineering tradesperson, nowhere else classified’ or something like that, that means it does not quite fit into those trade titles that are there. Whilst we know that the assessments that TRA have done in the past were consistent and valid and that the industry and everybody recognised it, we have noticed some inconsistencies recently. We have also noted that there are people coming in who do not fit occupations. Unless TRA widen the scope of their occupations or use different criteria for assessment, there is always going to be that inequity when people arrive here. So not assessing against national training packages does not align with the occupational outcomes, and that really is quite a problem when your licences are now all based on an AQF qualification.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—The report laments the fact that there are not subsidies for some temporary entrants. Should the taxpayer essentially subsidise people who are visiting and might not be staying here permanently?

Ms Rogers—That is a good question. The group that comes to mind is the spouses and fiances of the skilled migrants, for which we have experienced a very high retention rate in Queensland. Those people are very likely to stay. Multicultural Affairs Queensland, which you may have spoken to, from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, have actually looked at some of the statistics on those people staying. In Queensland, we try and assist them into training and employment opportunities that we afford our other residents, so that they can make a contribution, because they are more likely to stay. They are settled in our regional areas, and they can contribute to fill our skills shortages and make a worthy contribution to the Australian and Queensland economies. These people are here on three- or four-year visas, so they are here for a significant amount of time.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON—Some of them are. Some of them are here for much shorter periods of time.

Ms Rogers—Then they are possibly not on one of the visas that we allow into our programs. We have a set number, and usually they are the skilled migrants who have come in on a SIR visa or are employment nominated, or there is the spouse or the fiance visa or the temporary protection visas. We do a lot to assist them. Sandra has a very good program operating in

employment and training assistance for the African people as well and also for the temporary protection visa holders. We see a significant role that they can play.

Ms Arroll—There is also the issue about social cohesion for the time that they are here, so they can make a worthwhile contribution to their community as well. Having them gainfully employed and improving their English, literacy and numeracy issues also help with their settlement, even if it is a temporary one, into their community or into their area of residence.

Senator BARTLETT—With such a significant skills shortage around the country, I presume there is at least some degree of competition between the states and there is an attempt to try and attract people to Queensland as opposed to elsewhere. The sorts of problems you identify about the lack of precision in recognition of skills, trades et cetera, broadly speaking, apply around the rest of the country. I acknowledge that the best approach is a national approach, but are there specific things that Queensland is doing to at least ensure that the barriers are overcome for people who come to this part of the country? Are they the sorts of things that are in the white paper you have just released?

Mr Arthur—Not specifically around this group, because the particular area in the white paper that we would be covering off is the notion of skills first, where we are going to focus on recognising skills that people have up front. We are rolling out a very much enhanced recognition of prior learning process to try and fast-track the recognition of people's skills as much as possible, but this is not necessarily particularly associated with this group. Is that where you are going?

Senator BARTLETT—There are problems that, broadly speaking, apply across the country, but we are still trying to get migrants to come here, as opposed to elsewhere. The Queensland government is putting in place state-specific programs to try and overcome some of these barriers. Those are the sorts of things you are working on, regardless of how well we go at uniform approaches nationally?

Mr Arthur—It has not been around attraction, has it?

Ms Arroll—It is about attraction, isn't it? It is about a person coming to Queensland rather than going to, say, New South Wales or Victoria.

Senator BARTLETT—Perhaps even with people who initially settle in or migrate to Sydney, for example—leaving aside all the other things wrong with Sydney—you might want to target them and get them up here as well.

Ms Rogers—We are participating in the immigration expos that are targeting skilled migrants and skills shortages, and there is one coming up in May. The department will have quite a presence there, and there are other programs that the department has been helping with in the mining area. In the trade recognition process that we have here in Queensland, which is part of my unit, we have a wonderful program working in the construction industry. About 30 per cent—it varies: 30 to 33 per cent—of the people who go through and get trade qualifications in construction are from overseas. They are either overseas skilled, overseas born or overseas qualified. The process has really fast-tracked those people into the industry. The department and

the Building and Construction Industry Training Fund subsidise it, so it is cost-effective and efficient. We have had some very good success.

Senator BARTLETT—What I am driving at is that there are clearly some efforts at least to try and get more consistency nationally and overcome these problems with skills recognition, but how much of your effort is being put into trying to cooperate with other state and federal governments to fix things up nationally and how much of it goes into making it more attractive here by overcoming those barriers in the trades or other areas, at least in Queensland?

Ms Rogers—The overseas qualification units work quite closely together. They are part of the web portal—a whole collaborative approach. We work quite closely where we can with Immigration, and the Department of State Development, Trade and Innovation does a lot of work with Immigration on the skilled migration and the business migration work. So in different areas we are working together, but there could be more and we would like the opportunity to do more. Sandra has some opportunities.

Ms Arroll—In talking about the sorts of barriers and working collaboratively with the Commonwealth, some of the things that the Department of Employment and Training does with, for example, DEWR are projects like the one we have in Toowoomba, where we have taken on mature age people. In Toowoomba, there is also a large component of Sudanese people, and we are working through their English issues, giving them vocational training in basic engineering and trying to recognise whatever competencies they have. We are also in partnership with AiG. The idea is to link those people through to the employers that are associated with AiG. That sort of collaborative model is something that we are always looking to work with the Commonwealth on so that we can address those sorts of barriers. It is not for skilled migrants in this instance, but working on the principles of English, getting current work experience and linking with employers addresses some of those barriers.

Senator BARTLETT—I get a bit of a sense that, if we are always trying to do better with recognising overseas qualifications, the continual changing nature of trades, qualifications and expertise, we are almost chasing our tails all the time. I wonder whether we need to shift more to assessing each person's skills and experience and matching them much more with what is around rather than always trying to fit people into boxes and categories. I do not know whether or not that makes sense. It sounds a bit like the sort of work you are doing with the community employment programs is as much about matching people to a need or a job rather than making sure that whatever bit of paper they have is recognised by whatever the body is here in Queensland. Is that a fair comment?

Ms Rogers—Yes.

Ms Arroll—Yes, we certainly tend to do that. The type of people who have come on to, say, the program in Brisbane are people who have attempted to get licensing in a profession and cannot get that or those who may not have tried yet but have experienced quite a deal of unemployment. We try to place them in those fields. It is not at the level that they may have worked at previously but it certainly gives them a start. It is very much about individual case management and looking at what those person's aspirations are and trying to match them up.

The other thing that we do not have in Queensland that perhaps would also help in this area is a migrant specific Job Network provider. As I understand it, it is felt by other state governments—and I am not sure which states have one—that a migrant specific Job Network provider would be able to assist in doing that better matching into employment and jobs.

Senator BARTLETT—Is there any component within the state programs here to try to encourage migrants or even interstate migrants away from the south-east corner and into regional areas?

Ms Rogers—Are you talking about the existing migrants or the skilled migrants who have been brought in? There is the skilled regional program that the department of state development is working with, where migrants are brought into regional areas outside the south-east Queensland area.

Senator BARTLETT—I know there are specific visas that have that regional aspect attached to them. I am wondering whether, within the work that the state government is doing here, it is more about bringing them into Queensland and letting them find their own place, or is there a particular program at the state level to get skilled people out into regional areas.

Ms Arrol—No.

Senator BARTLETT—You mentioned the tourism industry and the like and the specific skills needed in those areas. I know there are labour shortages even down into the lesser skilled or semiskilled areas—I do not know where you draw the lines these days—in tourism and agriculture, for example. Does the state government have a position about opening up temporary visas more for Pacific island workers et cetera to help meet some of that need?

Ms Rogers—I believe Multicultural Affairs Queensland or the Premier's department was talking about opportunities in that area, but I do not know the detail. That is probably a good question for them. Are you talking about Torres Strait Islanders or Pacific islanders?

Senator BARTLETT—Pacific islanders.

Ms Rogers—I am aware of some discussions that may have occurred and that that was on the agenda, but I do not know the details.

CHAIR—I think guest workers, if that is what you are referring to, Senator, were on the COAG agenda at one stage.

Senator BARTLETT—It floats around and has different labels, but I thought I would take the chance while you were here to see whether there was a state government position. I will keep exploring it elsewhere.

Senator PARRY—Following on from Senator Bartlett: COAG is looking at the state issues—I think the last meeting of COAG indicated that—to get some sort of consistency across the nation, particularly with some of the trades and medical fields. I think that is happening, and that leads me into my question. On page 5 of your submission, you talk about mutual recognition. I do not want to discuss the states nationally now. I think that is under way with COAG. But,

internationally, you suggest that the recognition process for overseas qualifications be on a reciprocal type basis with like-minded associations. What confidence do you have that the organisations themselves—the trade associations, industry associations or professional bodies—can come up with terms and conditions that would be acceptable to the Queensland government?

Ms Rogers—NOOSR look after overseas, for want of a better word, the professional assessment and recognition process. Also, VETASSESS is doing the paraprofessional. We have heard very good reports from the VETASSESS assessments, and we know NOOSR react when we provide information to them about something that may not be quite right with some of the professional assessments. It may be something we have heard or it may be anecdotal, but NOOSR do respond to our information.

Senator PARRY—Are you satisfied that the national framework will cover any fallout of generous reciprocation and rights through associations or industries that particularly want to make it easy for people to gain recognition in respective countries?

Ms Rogers—Are you talking about the trade level or the professional level?

Senator PARRY—Both. It does not matter which level.

Mr Arthur—I think your question around ‘generous’ is the issue in terms of what bounds you put around the notion of that recognition.

Senator PARRY—Exactly. How do you know that you are getting qualified people operating in Queensland?

Mr Arthur—You just have to apply the risk assessment to the organisation that you are doing it with.

Senator PARRY—Do you think the existing framework is adequate? Do you think there is enough there to safeguard against substandard professionals or tradespeople?

Mr Arthur—Clearly, that has to be monitored and not just allowed to happen. The mechanisms are there; we just need to make sure they are used effectively.

CHAIR—Are you happy with the information you are receiving from NOOSR in terms of its currency? We have had some evidence before the committee about the websites that NOOSR have in some countries. Can you give us your feelings on that?

Ms Rogers—Some of the CEPs online are very old, but in the last six months there has been a lot of work done in updating for some of the high-volume countries. There are still a few to go. We would love to see Yugoslavia, New Zealand and the UK updated, and I know they are working on that.

CHAIR—So you are saying that it is a mixed bag?

Ms Rogers—It is.

Senator PARRY—Page 12 of your submission states:

In some occupations and professions, there is a perceived culture of ‘exclusion’ and ‘limitation’ of access.

You then list some examples. I do not agree that all of them would necessarily fall into that category, but can you give any specific examples—more hard-core examples—of what is happening with what industry associations and what particular areas are excluding what occupations? Your submission states:

Nuclear Medicine Technologist—migrant must pass a written examination, offered in Australia only. The migrant must complete 12 months of supervised practise ...

I would imagine it is fairly important that we assess that. That to me sounds like a reasonable assessment process. There is nothing wrong with Australia having world’s best practice. Your submission further states:

Pharmacist—migrant must complete a period of practical experience in Australia, then pass an examination. The examination is offered two times per year in Australia only.

Yes, that could be perceived to be an impediment, but I think a period of practical experience and passing an exam is quite reasonable. Do you have any more detailed evidence of exclusion or limitation of access?

Ms Rogers—Senator Parry, I think that is probably a better question for the Multicultural Affairs Unit, which gathered a lot of that information. However, from the community education visits that we have done with the different migrant groups, we do find anecdotal evidence that says there are inconsistencies. They believe that they are treated differently to others. People will report different experiences in going through the process. Some industries have three examination hurdles before you get to the supervised practice.

Senator PARRY—By ‘some industries’, do you mean some—

Ms Rogers—Professions.

Senator PARRY—Within the same profession, or different professions?

Ms Rogers—Different professions.

Senator PARRY—I still do not see a problem with that, but keep going.

Ms Rogers—The expense is more the issue that we are told about, along with the delays, the timing of exams and the opportunities for supervised practice. I am not aware of some of the issues that have been raised here; this is not necessarily all our content.

CHAIR—I have a few brief questions I would like you to respond to briefly. DEWR’s demand register: how appropriate and responsive do you think that is?

Ms Rogers—The occupations in demand? It is updated every six months, but I believe that if there is a state or a region that has need in a skills shortage area they can negotiate that. There are differences. For example, the bakers in Queensland are not on the MODL list, but they are an identified skills shortage in some regions. So I think there is some flexibility there.

CHAIR—It has been put to us that to assist some of the people involved in bridging courses and competency examinations it might be better that they come not on visitors visas but on education visas. How do you respond to that?

Ms Rogers—I could not comment on that.

CHAIR—Would anybody else like to respond?

Mr Arthur—Was that around the length of time or—

CHAIR—Not only the length of time but the opportunity to receive some educational funding et cetera—to be part of a program rather than just duck in and out to try to do the exam. For example, if they fail they then have to stay a bit longer.

Mr Arthur—There is advantage in that they can get greater access through the visitor process than they can through the education process.

CHAIR—So better access—

Mr Arthur—It just depends what they are after. If they are after longevity of time, they are better to go the other way. If they are after being able to get access quickly, it is probably the visitor side of things.

CHAIR—I do not know if it is the same in Queensland, but certainly in my state some people are coming in on visas that give them permanent status for a couple of years but their children cannot attend government schools. Is that the same in Queensland?

Ms Rogers—It depends on the visa. Are you talking SIR visas and employer nominated, 457s?

CHAIR—A range of visas. Would it be seen as a better incentive to attract families on these skilled programs if schooling were made available to their children?

Ms Rogers—In Queensland, on the skilled visas, they can have access to state schools. Queensland had a whole-of-government strategy and worked quite closely with the different organisations to ensure that everything could be done to help them settle into the communities and have some support.

CHAIR—On other visas do you see this as an attraction to regional areas?

Ms Rogers—It would depend on the length of the visa. It is quite an investment. A holiday visa is a different kettle of fish. The term of the working holiday visa itself means that they are just passing through. There is provision for them to change their visa status if they decide to

change, but a family would hardly come through on a working holiday visa, a backpacker visa or those sorts of things.

CHAIR—It happens. Some families go on holidays together! Sorry—I am being facetious, aren't I?

Ms Rogers—Yes.

CHAIR—Can I ask if the Queensland government have been very involved in the overseas exhibitions in London et cetera and if you intend to visit the one in Chennai this month?

Ms Rogers—I believe the health department has been, and there are groups that have been put together. The engineering, mining, construction and electrical industries are working together. That would be a very good question for State Development because they are coordinating the Queensland government exhibition at each of these different expos.

CHAIR—Do you see them as valuable?

Ms Rogers—Health had some very good results. At the one we had here in Brisbane we were very surprised at the locations people were from. People were flying in from just about everywhere. Our construction industry people reported back that they had had good interest shown. It was obviously such a positive result that DIMA are now hosting another one in May.

CHAIR—So you have had good migration outcomes as a result?

Ms Rogers—I cannot report on that. I am just going on what I have been told by State Development and by Immigration.

CHAIR—One issue that is a little bit contentious—it was raised in the federal parliament last week—is with regard to the regional apprenticeship program based here in Queensland. It appears that the Queensland government was somewhat supportive, as long as it did not take away positions from young Australian citizens. The position obviously has not changed. Do you have any further comments?

Mr Arthur—When you say supportive, we will deal with the apprentices on a full fee-paying basis and treat them in that way.

CHAIR—So you are happy for overseas apprentices to come, as long as they are full fee paying and going to an area of need?

Mr Arthur—That is correct. You say 'happy'. Obviously we would prefer that there were Queenslanders or Australians seeking those places but, on the other side of that, if all of the criteria have been satisfied we do not see impediments.

Senator PARRY—What you are saying is that you will fill up on a first come, first served basis, based upon full fee paying for overseas students?

Mr Arthur—We do not fill it up.

Senator PARRY—It is the company that—

Mr Arthur—The employer goes through the criteria that must be satisfied through the requirement to obtain overseas apprentices, and we then simply treat them as apprentices but apprentices who are self-funding. The other issue will be that the self-funding will apply to their training as well. We are not not supporting them, but we are treating them as we treat other full fee-paying people in our system. I think there is a group at Roma being looked at. That is one example.

Ms Rogers—As yet they have not brought in anybody, because they have been able to fill their vacancies with local people. They have been recruiting locally with the department's assistance to ensure that the local students and Queensland's apprentice availability is explored fully before recruiting overseas. That is the department's role.

CHAIR—That is one of the criteria, yes.

Ms Rogers—Yes.

Mr Arthur—That is right.

CHAIR—You comment in your submission:

Skilled migrants can also be referred to registered training providers for recognition of prior learning (RPL) assessment. However, this is very costly for some occupations.

Can you give us some examples of the costs involved?

Mr Arthur—The reason I am hesitating is that we are moving to a different model of recognition of prior learning, and recognition of prior learning has been a major process of evidence gathering. People have had to bring in a truckload and then it has taken people almost an equivalent amount of time to work their way through—

Senator PARRY—They might as well have done a course!

Mr Arthur—Yes, that is right. Then to charge for that as a fee activity means that it could end up costing people quite a deal of money. In some cases people have quoted hundreds or thousands of dollars. It just depends on the qualification and the amount of evidence that they have had to have processed. We are going towards different recognition processes and we are aiming more generally for all to reduce that effort but to still have the quality. That is the notion of skills first.

CHAIR—The recent COAG indicated that there would be new measures that would allow for mutual recognition arrangements across the states and territories in a number of specific trades and eventually for all trades. COAG also announced that it had agreed to a national assessment process for overseas qualified doctors to ensure appropriate standards, qualifications and training as well as increasing the efficiency of the assessment process. How do you think this will work? Do you think the decision has implications for assessment processes for other sectors in relation to skilled migration, including in terms of occupations in demand in areas of need? You

comment in your submission that the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Agreement operates in some professional registration areas but not in the trade licensing areas. Could the agreement be usefully extended to the trades? It is a long question; I am sure you will be able to answer it briefly!

Ms Rogers—We would love to see the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Agreement operate at the trade level. I am quite amazed that our ITABs, the people who develop our national training packages, have not done more work with the ITOs, the equivalent in New Zealand. Although I did see on the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website that there is some work being done in mapping the Australian Qualifications Framework and Australian training packages with New Zealand or using a combination, but at the moment I think there is only one particular electrical licence that operates under a TTMRA in the trades. Yet there is a huge amount of traffic between the two countries. In some areas tradespeople with a New Zealand qualification are welcomed into an Australian workplace without any requirement, but as soon as there is a licence attached to it a lot of the time they have to go through a process.

CHAIR—How do you think the national assessment process for overseas qualified doctors will work?

Ms Rogers—I cannot comment on that, but I am sure it would be welcomed.

Mr Arthur—I am not sure where our responses to you go into the issues to do with health at this stage.

Ms Rogers—That would be a health debate.

CHAIR—Finally, is there something you would like to say or recommend to this committee that the Commonwealth could be or should be doing now?

Ms Rogers—Where to start?

Senator PARRY—Just one.

CHAIR—Do you want to send a list?

Ms Rogers—I do have a list: consistency—national consistency, consistency with offshore and onshore—so that it leads to portability and ease of moving between the states and meeting licensing requirements. There needs to be a consistent assessment for people coming into Australia so that they know what is expected, what they have, what they need and what more they need to do.

CHAIR—Consistency and compliance?

Ms Rogers—Yes.

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

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Parry**, seconded by **Senator Bartlett**):

The committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at today's public hearing.

Committee adjourned at 2.24 pm