

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT — STATE-NOMINATED MIGRATION PROGRAM

Grievance

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [9.14 am]: My grievance today is addressed to the Minister for Training and Workforce Development. I thank the minister for taking the grievance. I ask that the minister advocate for an increase in the number of WA applications limited under the state-nominated migration program and provide support and training to those migrants who have travelled to Western Australia under the mixed message from the state that they were needed to fill the skilled worker shortage.

International employees and travellers are being lured by the state government to fill WA labour shortages. Although programs and incentives to ease the skilled labour shortage in WA are welcome, many who have taken up the offer to travel to WA have been left high and dry by the state. Shortfalls in skilled migrant assessment and training programs as well as reduced limits to sponsored employee visas are forcing people to second-guess their decision to move to WA and to doubt the open invitation by the state to help with the widespread worker shortage.

Many skilled migrants came to WA with a trade, experience, qualifications and skills and took up the state's offer to live and work in WA, helping with the critical labour shortage across many sectors. They had confidence in securing work and visas due to targeted messaging from the state through the Build a Life in WA website and the number of widespread job vacancies. Eligible skilled migrants were offered incentives of up to \$10 000 and were made promises of a strong resilient economy offering "secure, quality job opportunities". The government website also lured workers with the promise of "warm weather, world-class surf and renowned craft beer". Although the weather, surf and beer may be definitely worth the visit, these people are relocating their life and leaving their families and countries behind ready to take up work in WA. But they are now feeling let down by this state government as the cracks start to show in the facade of an expensive publicity campaign.

With the skills these people bring to the table when they come to WA, there is still a requirement to undergo skills assessment and training if their existing international licences and qualifications to work are not recognised. In one example, a fully qualified plumber invited to Western Australia from Ireland found it difficult to obtain work as a plumber with his current licence. The skills assessment cost was around \$6 000. Their situation was further compounded when they decided to pay the thousands for the skills assessment and were soon told the assessment was only offered in Queensland! Not only was this tradie misled in coming to WA for work he cannot access because his licence is not recognised, he was then told that he would have to pay to travel and stay in Queensland because WA could not assess the skilled workers encouraged to come here through this advertising. Sadly, nowhere on the Build a Life in WA website is there reference to the difficulty or the time and cost involved in skilled migrant tradesmen getting their qualifications recognised.

This state government is failing to address the labour shortages across WA by tying up access to these jobs for skilled migrants in red tape and bureaucracy, high costs, failure to support skilled workers who have moved to WA from overseas, and failure to provide adequate training and assessment programs. Another example is an educator from overseas who was attracted to Western Australia by the same government campaign and completed their skills assessment for the \$6 000 price tag. They were employed by the Department of Education, but were told that the state-nominated migration program had closed. Given no prior notice, and without the opportunity to submit an application to the program, the situation in WA is now forcing that employee to return home.

Primary school teachers are not on the 189 skilled visa list, and government departments cannot sponsor migrants unless they have the full two years needed to qualify for a 482 visa. Therefore, the state-nominated migration program is the only pathway, and its allocation is exhausted! To be granted certain skilled migration visas to live and work in Western Australia, you must be nominated through the state-nominated migration program. Migration WA, on behalf of the WA state government, provides WA state nomination to eligible applicants for two visa subclasses—the skilled nominated visa, subclass 190, and the skilled work regional (provisional) visa, subclass 491—which gives extra points on the Department of Home Affairs points test.

Announced in early February, the 2023–24 state-nominated migration program allocation has already been exhausted and those with expiring visas have been told to seek legal advice. The Department of Training and Workforce Development said —

The State Government continues to advocate for nomination allocation numbers that meet the needs of the State.

But is it? That is exactly what we are calling on the government to do—that is, advocate for numbers that meet the state's needs. Clearly, the state government has failed to advocate for those numbers in the 2023–24 round. Under the state-nominated migration program, WA received 8 140 places for 2022–23, 4 950 more places than the previous year in 2023–24. WA places have been reduced by around 2 300. WA's allocation has been slashed by 70 per cent

under this government's watch. If the state government does not advocate for our skilled workers, the end result will be doors closed to the program with no prior notice and no avenue to apply until after July 2024.

The value of skilled workers to a town or an economy is high, especially in regional communities. Their contribution is instant and the option for them to train others should be explored. Australia's federal migration system is slow and complex, making it hard for even the most highly skilled migrants to come to our country. I am trying to encourage this government not to follow its federal counterparts. It should reduce the wait times, help people who want to live and work in WA, and help solve the labour shortage by minimising red tape within the state incentive and assessment programs. Skilled migrant workers are living within our communities now, but they will not be here for much longer unless this government stands up to its federal counterparts and advocates for more places for skilled migrant workers in WA while improving delivery and reducing the costs of assessments and training.

MS S.F. McGURK (Fremantle — Minister for Training and Workforce Development) [9.21 am]: I am very pleased to respond to the member for Roe on the issue of skills shortages and what this government is doing to address the other side of the same coin when it comes to a healthy economy. We have low unemployment and a demand for skilled workers in our community and, as a government, we are very proud of our record in addressing those issues. I am pleased to address our record on this issue in this grievance. Most notable, particularly with attracting skilled migrants, is our \$195 million Reconnect WA initiative to attract skilled migrants. That package also includes attracting international students, working holiday makers and visitors to our state. We are doing a range of things, but it is important that we recognise first and foremost that although skilled migrants are an important part of the workforce mix, it will also always be the absolute priority of the Cook government to prioritise skilling local workers. We have invested significantly in fee-free and low-fee training so that more Western Australians can access quality training for the quality jobs that we have. This investment is working, with high enrolment numbers in TAFE and vocational training across priority areas such as construction, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, the care sector, hospitality and tourism. Of course, the new national skills agreement will inject \$1.3 billion into WA's TAFE system, enabling us to continue to expand opportunities for Western Australians to upskill and reskill for jobs. This investment is paying off, with historically high enrolments and apprentice and trainee numbers.

The member raised a number of issues in relation to the challenges in our state because of our healthy economy and healthy jobs market. He referred in particular to a number of issues that are the responsibility of our federal government. I can only take from the focus of his grievance that he thinks the state government is doing a good job. For instance, he spoke about the state-nominated migration program. It is a key mechanism used to directly attract and retain skilled workers into key areas of demand not being met through other streams of the visa system. It is a crucial program to attract skilled workers into Western Australia, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses. The key barriers for those small and medium-sized employers is finding a migrant in the first place and the overall complexity of costs and obligations imposed by the commonwealth as an employer sponsor. We have made a number of changes to our state-based program to position WA as the destination of choice for skilled migrants, including expanding occupation lists to ensure that priority industries are captured. We have also waived the \$200 application fee to offset the cost for migrants, and removed some of the employer contract requirements. After all this effort, it was disappointing to receive only 2 350 places for the 2023–24 program, well short of our original ask of 10 000 places and, as the member pointed out, 70 per cent less than the 8 140 places allocated the previous year. As the member well knows, the Premier and I have continued to raise with the commonwealth at every opportunity that this is not sustainable, and we want to send a clear message to the overseas markets that we are open for business.

I took the opportunity recently to meet with the federal Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, Andrew Giles when he was in Perth for the national cabinet. I am confident that the federal government is actually listening to our messages and better understands how we use that program to support Western Australian business. In fact, I am hopeful that the upcoming federal budget might provide another opportunity for the federal government to redress the number of SNMP places for WA for this program year. Although all our current year programs have now been exhausted, we are not passively waiting. I am actively exploring other migration options that we can leverage so that we can continue to meet the demand for skilled workers in Western Australia.

I want to outline some other things that we are doing as a state government. They include the skilled migrant employment register, the construction visa subsidy program and the skilled migrant job connect program, which provides support for skilled migrants to settle quickly and find employment opportunities according to their skills and experience. These programs are made available because of the money for skilled migrants, up to \$7 500 to meet the cost of skills recognition and occupational licensing fees, so that they can get a job that aligns with their formal overseas qualifications. That specifically goes to the question that the member raised about the cost of getting their skills recognised, up to \$6 000. We have a program that subsidises those costs.

Mr P.J. Rundle interjected.

Ms S.F. McGURK: No; I did not interject on the member.

We have received more than 300 requests for support from skilled migrants. We have a specific program to address the issue that the member raised. We also have the construction visa subsidy program, with \$10 000 available for migrants to meet the costs that might be needed, and the skilled migrant employment register, one of the key tools used by the Construction Migration Office to support employers and prospective migrants. Over 7 000 registered migrants and almost 200 employers are registered for this free service. For instance, it is not our choice that migrants coming over here to work in plumbing need to go to Queensland. The commonwealth government decides who is eligible to provide that sort of skills recognition. As I said, I can only assume that the member thinks that the state government is doing a good job when he focused his grievance on a federal government issue.