

Inquiry into Australia's overseas development programs in Afghanistan

Supplementary Submission

William Maley

1. In my testimony before the Committee on 4 December 2013, I outlined concerns about the handling of an Australian Leadership Award (ALA) Scholarship application lodged by Mr Niamatullah Ibrahim. I am in a position to update the information I shared with the committee on that occasion.

2. On 18 December 2012, Mr Ibrahim received an email advising him that he had been selected to receive a 2013 Endeavour Postgraduate Award (PhD) to undertake doctoral studies in Australia. The ANU expects that he will arrive in February 2013 to commence his program of research. As Senators will be aware, the Endeavour Scholarships Program is administered by the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, which describes it as 'the Australian Government's internationally competitive, merit-based scholarship program providing opportunities for citizens of the Asia Pacific, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas to undertake study, research and professional development in Australia'. Mr Ibrahim was the *only* applicant from Afghanistan to receive a 2013 Endeavour Postgraduate Award.

3. With respect to Mr Ibrahim's ALA Scholarship application in an email to me of 23 November 2012 which I tabled at the hearing on 4 December, AusAID had written that 'Our managing contractor has confirmed the names of those who were advised by letter in September that their applications had been unsuccessful. Although Mr Ibrahim should have been advised, he was not. We will rectify this ourselves immediately by contacting Mr Ibrahim directly to explain the situation'.

4. Finally, on 21 December 2012, Mr Ibrahim received the following email from AusAID:

I am contacting you to inform you that on this occasion your application for an Australian Leadership Award was unsuccessful. As you know, the selection process is very competitive, with a high number of applications.

AusAID are contacting you directly because a review of the records indicated that you had not been previously contacted with this advice. This was an oversight, and we would like to offer our apologies.

5. One reading of this email would seem to suggest that Mr Ibrahim's application was properly assessed but found not to be competitive. I very much doubt that this was the case; my guess is that he was simply caught up in a blanket suspension of the Afghanistan program. If, however, the application *was* individually assessed but viewed as uncompetitive, then I would have the gravest doubts about the quality of AusAID's assessment process – given that Mr

Ibrahimi's ability to secure an even more exclusive *Endeavour* Scholarship affirms his outstanding capabilities, to which Gareth Evans had attested in the reference which I tabled before the Committee on 4 December 2012.

6. Finally, I would query the advisability of suspending scholarship processes in the middle of a scholarship round rather than between rounds. It is poor public diplomacy to invite people to spend their time filing applications, only then to leave them with the impression that those applications have not been taken seriously.