AST December, Liza Harvey was sworn in as Western Australia’s training and workforce development minister – the fourth minister to hold the portfolio in as many years.

One month later, Jim Walker started as chairman of the State Training Board. He brought extensive experience to the role, as chairman of mining contractor Macmahon Holdings and former managing director of WesTrac, which traditionally has been one of the state’s biggest trainers.

Ms Harvey and Mr Walker have taken on their roles at a time when the number of people starting training and apprenticeship courses is falling sharply. They also have at their disposal a thought-provoking report completed last year by former University of Western Australia academic Margaret Seares, on reform of the vocational education and training sector (VET).

The business sector is crying out for reform, and both Ms Harvey and Mr Walker say they are up for the challenge. “The sector is probably a little bit change-weary; that said, there are a number of issues that still need to be addressed,” Ms Harvey told Business News.

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“Mr Walker also wants to remove duplication and overlap across apprenticeships and training courses, favouring simpler base courses. “What are the basics, how do we combine them, then add new modules as needed?” Mr Walker said.

“We’re always said: train for the need, not for the sake of it.” Having met recently with the Master Builders Association, he gave the example of bricklaying. All brickies need to be able to build a straight wall, but not all of them require training to build archways.

“If you don’t use, you will lose it,” he said.

Mr Walker is on the same page. “We’re wanting to look at how we can simplify the whole system,” he said.

“This includes creating simpler pathways from school to vocational training, and on to a job or further study at university.”

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More innovation and commercial flexibility for the state training providers was another theme. Another recommendation was that the government and industry training councils set their top few priorities each year.

That contrasts with the annual Skilling WA report, which identifies “25 areas of strategic focus and priority actions” state government agencies and industry stakeholders aim to deliver.

Speaking to Business News, Professor Seares believes the government needs to provide clarity around the design of the VET system and articulate an overall strategy for the sector.

“We’ve got this very large system but there isn’t a clear strategy to guide its development,” she said.

Professor Seares said the strategy should address the respective role of the state training providers and the hundreds of private training companies.

She believes the state training providers, particularly the regional ones, don’t have a sense of what government expects from them.

Professor Seares said it should be easier for students to move between Tafe colleges and universities.

Everyone knows the problem,” she said.

“It can be a very involved process when it should be fluent and much easier.”

She believes the government should convene a forum of vice-chancellors and managing directors to develop a statewide pathways and articulation framework.

Professor Seares also wants the VET sector’s profile lifted, with more promotion of its value.

Ms Harvey praised the report, saying it gave a good snapshot of the sector.

She has embraced some of the recommendations, including regular meetings with the chairs of the state training providers.

Speaking to Business News, Ms Harvey also highlighted positives in the sector, saying state training providers are lifting their game.

“They do have a lot of flexibility; some are moving ahead already,” she said.

Ms Harvey encouraged more specialisation, but acknowledged some are moving ahead already, “not that they haven’t.”

Mr Walker said the report, to be finalised in coming weeks, had identified aged care and health-care as big growth areas.

“Risk-based regulation

Ms Harvey expressed cautious support for risk-based regulation, which differentiates experienced operators with a good track record from new entrants to the sector.

There is a high regulatory burden on providers that is not necessarily linked to risk,” she said.

This approach accords with federal government moves announced last year by Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane.

The Australian Skills Quality Authority has been given the ability to crack down on serious breaches and to ensure high-quality training providers have the autonomy to spend more time skilling the workers of the future.

“ASQA should be a regulator, not a bookkeeper,” Mr Macfarlane said.

The federal push for reform has been handed to Assistant Education and Training Minister Simon Birmingham.

His focus has shifted recently to what he calls “tough new standards” to crack down on dodgy operators, after some training providers and their agents were found to have problems.

The regulatory light touch for compliant training providers has come in several ways.

The registration period for compliant organisations has been extended from five years to seven years, for instance.

“Highly compliant’ organisations are able to add and remove courses from their ‘scope of registration’ without application.

The automatic requirement to submit to a financial viability risk assessment for re-registration has been removed.

Other initiatives the federal government is rolling out include providing financial support to almost 80,000 employers this year to help with the costs of employing an apprentice through the

Continued on page 10
New team faces some familiar challenges in training take-up

From page 9

Australian Apprenticeship Incentives Program.

The federal government is assisting more than 24,000 apprentices through Trade Support Loans of up to $20,000, with the greatest support available in the early years when apprenticeship wages are lowest.

Most significantly, it is providing up to $200 million a year for the new Australian Apprenticeship Support Network, which kicks off at the start of July.

Senator Birmingham said the aim of the new network was to improve apprenticeship and traineeship completion rates.

To back that up, payments to the network providers will be based on outcomes.

The four contracted providers in WA are AMA Services, The BUSY Group, MEGT (Australia), and Apprenticeship Support Australia, which was established by the chambers of commerce in NSW, Victoria, SA and WA.

Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA chief executive Desilet Willmott believes apprenticeship and traineeship support services will be given a significant boost under the new national model.

The four network providers in WA will be a one-stop shop for anyone seeking advice about pathways to vocational employment with a focus on supporting apprentices and trainees from their start date all the way through to completion.

“Apprentices and trainees will receive more support, with career advice, job matching and mentoring, while employers will receive advice and assistance regarding their obligations and entitlements and how to navigate the system,” Ms Willmott said.

In WA, CCI will deliver the services on behalf of Apprenticeship Support Australia.

“CCI has been using the mentoring and support approach to serving apprentices and trainees and we have seen successful results,” Ms Willmott said.

National reforms needed to remain focused on reducing red tape for employers, improving the quality of training outcomes and providing appropriate incentives to encourage more employers to invest in nationally accredited training, she said.

“CCI supports a harmonised national VET system as this will reduce confusion that exists currently around qualification recognition between states,” Ms Willmott told Business News.

“A harmonised VET system will enable national recognition of all agreed qualification and facilitate labour market mobility.”

The challenge for reformers is that harmonised occupational standards have been on the agenda for many years, but progress has been very limited.

Another perennial goal Ms Harvey is pursuing with gusto is to encourage more women into traditional female occupations.

Her feedback from women who had begun apprenticeships was that they gained good support in the workplace, the problem lay with parents, teachers and peers who had failed to coax them into traditional female occupations.

“Apprentices and trainees in their start date all the way through to completion,” he said.

“A very different skill set is needed as they move from construction to production.

“The level of demand for skilled operators far exceeds the supply, the training is way behind.”

Blue Tongue recently ran a pilot program for electricians to be dual traded in electrical and instrumentation work, and is looking to roll that out nationally.

The pilot program was run in Queensland, where three big liquefied natural gas projects are approaching start-up or ramping up production.

“Adding to that will be the Gorgon, Wheatstone, Prelude and Ichthys LNG plants over the next few years.

The industry and the Western Australian government have been focused for some time on this issue, with the Australian Centre for Energy and Process Training at Henderson expanding its operations.

Blue Tongue’s business is based on working with clients with specific needs for skilled labour, and finding the right candidates and the best trainer to fill that need.

“We employ people before they even start the program,” Mr Young said.

“It’s a whole life cycle approach, and training is just part of that.

“There is a lot of risk partnering that goes into making this achievable.

The company has sourced, hired and upskilled more than 300 tradespeople, with each of them having a job lined up before they start.
With apprenticeship completion rates below 30 per cent in some industries, the business sector is continuing to push for reforms to vocational education and training.

Mark Beyer & Saskia Pickles
mark.beyer@businessnews.com.au

FOR a telling insight into the best and worst of Western Australia’s vocational training system, look no further than bricklaying. Around the middle of last year, builders were struggling to find enough brickies to handle the rapid jump in construction activity. Now they are over the worst of it, after the number of people starting a bricklaying apprenticeship in WA jumped by 98 per cent in the year to February 2015.

The Construction Training Fund’s latest industry snapshot shows solid growth in nearly all building construction trades last year; the industry currently has 8,266 apprentices in training, the highest number ever recorded. But only about half those people will complete their apprenticeship.

Only 44 per cent of construction trades workers complete their apprenticeship contract, according to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

After adjusting for individuals who move employers, the completion rate jumps to a more respectable 57 per cent.

Master Builders Association WA director Michael McLean said many of those people would continue working as brickies without ever completing their formal qualification.

“That doesn’t mean they’re not capable bricklayers, because they’re learning on the job, but what it highlights is that the apprenticeship system hasn’t kept up with modern practices,” he said.

Mr McLean believes the system has served the industry well over many years, but needs to be modernised.

“There is no doubt we need to bring training into the 21st century,” Mr McLean told Business News.

“Mr McLean also believes the school system is already dying system and it needs to be modernised.

“We need to push for reforms to vocational education and training,” he said.

The alternative is employers just stop employing apprentice chefs, their only choice will be temporary 457 visas, which are part of the solution, they’re not the whole solution.”

The automotive sector is another feeling the squeeze, particularly when employers seek workers at the upper end of the skills spectrum.

“There is a number shortage but there is a skill level shortage as well,” Automotive Holdings Group apprentice master Ian Bodger said.

“We can have ads running for a month or six weeks for a diagnostic technician; they are the ones that are really hard to find.”

He said automotive workers needed regular training to stay abreast of new technology.

“If somebody went to the mines for three years and came back, they could find themselves behind the times because the technology has just gone screaming ahead,” Mr Bodger said.

AHG has tackled the problem by engaging AHG’s latest initiative has been to partner with training group OnSite, which runs pre-apprenticeship programs for year 11 and 12 students at seven private schools.

AHG interviewed 40 students before selecting 16 who started the automotive program this year.

“The program is designed to give the students a pre-apprenticeship certificate 2, with a taste of light automotive as well as heavy vehicle units,” Mr Bodger said.

The students will attend a Tafe college each Friday and then be placed with an AHG dealership during their school holidays.

Mr Bodger said AHG typically employed up to 60 apprentices each year in WA but was planning a significant increase, based on the expectation it would secure a larger share of the automotive servicing market.

Completion rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTRACT</th>
<th>28% Food trade apprentices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>47% All trade apprentices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56% Non-trade apprentices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74% Automotive Holdings Group</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| INDIVIDUAL | 51% Victoria |
| 55% NSW |
| 55% Australia |
| 62% Western Australia |

Source: NCVER, AHG

Business wants closer training ties

The changes in government policy at both federal and state level are working against an already dying system – Iain McDougall

“The availability of chefs across the whole of Australia, and particularly Western Australia, is still very, very short,” Mr McDougall said.

“What’s made it worse again is that last year there was another 25 per cent reduction in the commencement of apprentice chefs in WA.”

Based on past experience, less than 30 per cent will complete their training.

“The changes in government policy at both federal and state level are working against an already dying system and it needs some form of kick start from governments to keep this afloat,” Mr McDougall said.

“The alternative is employers just stop employing apprentice chefs, their only choice will be temporary 457 visas, which are part of the solution, they’re not the whole solution.”

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AHG has tackled the problem by expanding its own apprenticeship program.

It has 182 apprentices in training in WA, and a further 200 at its east coast operations.

Mr Bodger said completion rates were about 45 per cent across the industry, whereas AHG in WA had a 74 per cent completion rate.

One of the keys to that outcome was to get the right people from the start, he said.

This included seeking out candidates who were looking for a career and willing to stay for the long haul.

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