

A GOVERNMENT BACKED FUNDING PROGRAM FOR PILOT TRAINING

The aviation industry is slowly recovering from the pandemic, parked aircraft are back online to meet the pent-up travel demand, furloughed personnel have returned, and passenger loads are approaching pre-pandemic levels. In addition, we are seeing the emergence of new low-cost carriers entering the market, and new routes being offered by the major airlines servicing hubs for airlines flying to regional markets, including northern and remote communities.

Operators are adding new aircraft to service these new routes. Unfortunately, resourcing of pilots and maintenance personnel is problematic and further challenged by new rules around federal regulations (flight and duty times) which now require 30% more crews per aircraft than previously needed.

When talking about pilot shortages, one needs to describe the trickledown effect of pilot demand on the flight training industry. Flight schools are the grass roots of aviation and depend on well trained competent teams of flight instructors to train and educate the next generation of student pilots. As the airline community searches for experienced pilots the primary target for potential qualified pilots has now focused on the most experienced flight instructors. The progression of instructors to the airline industry, common in Canadian aviation, had been delayed due to the slowdown of commercial aviation flights during the COVID pandemic. The practice of airlines hiring experienced instructors, however, has been amplified post COVID with some ATAC flight schools reporting 50% of their flight instruction staff will be moving on as new hires to the airlines in the next 6 months. Fortunately, Canada enjoys great success in producing competent flight instructors from commercial pilot graduates.

Labour market outlooks forecast major shortages for pilots and maintenance engineers over the next 10 years, as well as competition with other sectors that demand high-cost training, where there is and will continue to be high labour market demand.

The solution to alleviate this human resource situation is to ramp up the intake of new pilot candidates for ab initio training at flight schools Canada wide. The lag between initial flight training and employability can be several years before skills and ratings are achieved to fly large commercial aircraft.

The message that is repeatedly brought forward by potential Canadian students regarding barriers to entry for commercial pilot training is the challenge in obtaining funds in the form of loans and grants. Government support is necessary to offer our most bright and talented youth the opportunity to pursue this important career if we are to avoid a severe shortage of pilots in this country.

ATAC has rallied the support of the Transport Minister in our proposal to the Federal Finance Minister to provide a back stop guarantee for student loans which should open the door for risk averse lending institutions to offer loans for pilot and maintenance training.

Pilot and Aviation Maintenance Engineer training are professional programs with a high rate of employability and require an appropriate level of funding to allow candidates to pursue these high demand careers. Another significant consideration is that greater availability of funding would greatly enhance the ability for the aviation sector to attract a hugely untapped market of female and indigenous pilot candidates which would help overcome shortages. Currently, only 5-7% of commercial pilots are female in Canada.

These are high demand occupations and flight schools in Canada have the capacity to train the pilots needed by Canadian airlines to fill the gap for commercial pilots with the skills and competency to meet the demand for the travelling public.

ATAC's proposal would control access to guaranteed loans to pre-qualified candidates and would establish gradual access to the funds as the student pilot reaches pre-determined milestones in his or her training.

Pre-selection of approved candidates, gradual access to guaranteed funds, and near full employment all but eliminates the exposure of the endorsing federal government. This is a near-zero-cost solution to government that industry and the Federal Government should implement as quickly as possible.

The financial barriers are real and must be addressed if we are to develop the next generation of Canadian pilots. If we cannot overcome the funding challenge affecting supply of pilots, airlines will have no choice but to cut back or remove service to communities and regional markets that depend on air travel as a lifeline.