



Wings Over Westminster



“When is a student not a student? When they’re a student pilot!”

Resident flying parliamentarian Lembit Öpik takes a look at the contradictions in funding and status for student pilots, and makes a plea for common sense in Whitehall.

When I learned to fly I had no intention of becoming a professional pilot. For me, it was simply about two wings, three dimensions and the freedom of the skies, and I accepted that my choice of escape would be costly. And I paid without complaint, knowing that, for me, converting money into flying hours was a worthwhile alchemy.

But others devoted to earning a living from the wild blue yonder can legitimately claim that the costs expended are to buy a professional – and important – career in the skies. In effect, becoming a commercial pilot is no different to becoming a doctor or surgeon. Except that there is State funding for the latter two and almost none for the former.

Yet, the Government’s own attitude suggests they agree that student pilots are like other students! Official bodies demand the same level of proof of legitimate study from foreign rookie pilots as the authorities do from, say English language students – and from every other student who comes to the UK. I find these barriers to entry ludicrously self-harming to this country. But the fact they’re trying to enforce them on aviation and non-aviation scholars alike, shows no differentiation in the status of these would-be students in the State’s eyes.

And now we uncover a dreadful contradiction. While they’re happy to impose the same ridiculous entry sanctions on student pilots as for the rest of the education sector, they then demonstrate total hypocrisy, for example by charging VAT on these flight training courses as if they were NOT educational courses!

It’s pathetic really: Flight training students have to jump through all the educational hoops of proof as students, and then they have to pay VAT as if they were NOT students at all. They only get away with it because we, the flying community, haven’t made enough noise about it. In terms of logic and natural justice, either the Government ought to take the VAT off flying training, or alternatively, they must stop treating pilots like other students.

They can’t have it both ways. The fact they try to reveals an opportunistic stupidity that erodes the viability of our once unsurpassed flight training sector – a sector progressively stifled by regulation and spiralling costs imposed over the last two decades. Little wonder then that so much training has flown the nest and settled abroad. It’s as if the Government doesn’t really care about the millions of pounds this sector is worth.

And yet, despite all this, some still fly the British flag for training. To their great credit, one or two airlines do their best to use UK-sourced training – such as UK airline Flybe. They currently have six students training at the hugely professional outfit in Oxford Airport. But even they have resorted to sending some pilots abroad – Spain, in fact, where the financial arrangements are more attractive.

Flybe’s British based students are in part financially supported by the airline itself, with repayment terms once they’ve qualified and are delivering the goods at the pointy end of Flybe’s aircraft. That’s good, and I’d like to see more of it. But rather than expecting the airlines to fix the whole problem, wouldn’t it be a refreshing change to see the Government being pro-active here and making the system transparent and more attractive for the sake of training, and for the economy? Instead, just as British Airways steadfastly continues to base its maintenance operations in the UK, despite all the incentives to move to, say, China, it’s also the ones who have made a conscious choice to remain on our isles that prevent the final collapse of corporate British pilot training.

Ordinary people are taking action. Jane Desforges has a son who wants a career in aviation. She is so incensed by the financial barriers that she’s teamed up with her MP David Laws, and the British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA) to meet a minister in the Skills and Innovation Department to face the issue head on.

Jane says, “There’s clearly discrimination against pilots and it keeps the industry elitist. We second-mortgaged our house to pay for our son’s training. But what about children from council houses? Either parents have to risk everything to pay for their children’s chance – or student pilots have to come from wealthy families. Why should less wealthy parents have to take such risks? If we want our aviation industry to grow and continue we have to allow access to potential pilots across the board. Just being rich doesn’t mean you’re a good pilot!”

In parallel with Jane’s initiative, student pilot Craig Baker raised a petition with Downing Street. It’s already got 1,300 names on it – and has received a response. Here’s that response in full:

“The student support system in this country is only designed to provide support for students pursuing courses of Higher Education (HE) at publicly funded institutions in the United Kingdom (UK), or where the course is provided by such an institution outside the UK.

“There are a number of institutions in the UK which offer degrees linked to the aviation industry and some include opportunities to undertake pilot training. In these cases the Student Support Regulations allow us to fund the academic elements of the course. The commercial pilot’s licence element of the course is vocational and extremely expensive and, as has always been the case, must be self-funded.

“One possible solution may be for students to finance their studies through a Professional and Career Development Loan (PCDL). PCDLs represent a step change in the highly successful

Career Development Loan (CDL) programme. They are deferred repayment bank loans run in partnership with two banks - Barclays, and the Co-operative Bank initially, although we expect more banks to join soon. PCDLs offer more competitive interest rates and an increased maximum loan of £10,000. In 2010-11 we will make available up to 45,000 loans.”

Jane is rightly indignant that professional pilot training isn’t seen as comparable to a Higher Education degree. “It’s very hard work – above degree level. It’s phenomenal.” Laconically, she adds: “When is student not a student? When they’re a student **pilot!**”

As for the claim about PCDLs, I myself wasn’t able to find anyone who’d received one of these for a flying career. So, either they’re all very shy, or it’s all very rare.

So what can be done? Well, how about no VAT on professional flight training? I’m not complaining about the likes of me paying the VAT because I never plan to sit in a cockpit for profit. But then again, I never spent tens of thousands of pounds learning to fly. By contrast, my mates in the commercial sector break their bank to qualify, and then spend years repaying the debt. A 15 or 17.5% helping hand is hardly unreasonable.

The other route is to incentivise the airlines themselves. What about a ‘Flight Training Tax Credit’ so airlines can get their people trained at competitive rates in the UK? Euro-accountants might claim this breaks competition rules, but it certainly doesn’t. I believe this can be done within the regulations.

One thing’s for sure. Unless we do SOMETHING, the appeal of learning elsewhere will only increase, till the only professionals who’ll learn in the UK are those with a fetish for rain and fog.

The industry CAN help. It would be great to re-establish more links between airlines and students. Pre-selection and the guarantee of work subject to a satisfactory pass would remove some randomness, and cement the status of professional flight training as a good bet. Airline backing would help students borrow against future earnings – a massive boon in these loan-averse times.

None of this is theoretical. New European convergence rules mean flight training anywhere in Europe will lead to the same standard qualifications, so there’s no ‘de facto’ reason the UK has to train a single pilot. But have we really reached the stage where the authorities don’t support an industry which created some of the greatest aircraft and pilots ever to grace the skies? It will be a sad day indeed if the only time professional pilots take off into British Airspace is to leave it.

For more information about Jane Desforge’s campaign on financial support for professional pilot training, visit www.fairplane.org.uk