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Fuel costs, Government underinvestment squeezing Kiwis out of pilot training

Simon Wallace | The Post

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Pilot training is expensive, and outdated student loan settings are pushing domestic students out before they even get started.

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Simon Wallace is the chief executive of the Aviation Industry Association of New Zealand.

OPINION: Spiralling fuel costs and years of government underinvestment are squeezing aspiring New Zealand pilots out of an already tenuous domestic flight training system.

Flight training providers are absorbing tens of thousands of dollars in additional fuel costs, an average of \$91,000 between March and May alone, while being unable to pass those costs on to domestic students.

That is making an already fragile training system for New Zealand trainees increasingly unviable for providers and students alike. Pilot training is expensive, and outdated student loan settings are pushing domestic students out before they even get started.

For flight schools, it is now far more cost-effective to train overseas students than domestic ones. As a result, about 70% of pilots trained in New Zealand are international students who return home after graduating.

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Without Government action, domestic pilot training could cease to be a realistic option within the next few years with dire consequences for a nation facing growing pilot shortages, as documented in our Aviation Workforce Insights [research](#).

The Government has acknowledged aviation is vital to New Zealand's economic prosperity and way of life, supporting tourism, trade, agriculture, horticulture, emergency response and the regional connections that keep people, businesses and essential services moving.

It has also acknowledged the training system is not producing enough pilots to meet demand and has made workforce development a priority in the Aviation Action Plan, developed with the industry and released last year.

Yet the Government spends just \$15 million a year on training New Zealand's future pilots, a drop in the bucket. By comparison, it spends around \$20m a year on ministerial and MP travel and accommodation based on recent disclosures.

Plans to update pilot and engineer training and qualifications, and to promote aviation careers, are welcome.

But promotion will mean little if the current student loan cap of \$35,000 a year, unchanged since 2013, continues to leave aspiring pilots with a fee funding gap of at least \$50,000. It is a barrier to entry that makes commercial pilot training a career path for a privileged few with access to family money, or private finance.

We have repeatedly made the case to officials that student loan settings must be addressed, only to be met with concerns that pilot graduates take on large debts, head overseas and fail to repay them. Yet there is no clear evidence of the scale of that liability. It also raises an obvious question: why is it acceptable for medical or veterinary graduates to leave New Zealand with large student loans, but not pilots?



Simon Wallace is the chief executive of the Aviation Industry Association of New Zealand..

If the Government is serious about the Aviation Action Plan, it must treat pilot training as part of New Zealand's critical aviation infrastructure, not as a private problem for students and flight schools to solve alone.

The training pipeline needs a student support system that reflects the real cost of becoming a commercial pilot in 2026.

New Zealand is recognised as one of the best places in the world to learn to fly, thanks to its climate, terrain and high-quality training. Unless the Government matches its aviation ambitions with practical investment, New Zealanders may soon be the ones least able to take advantage of it.

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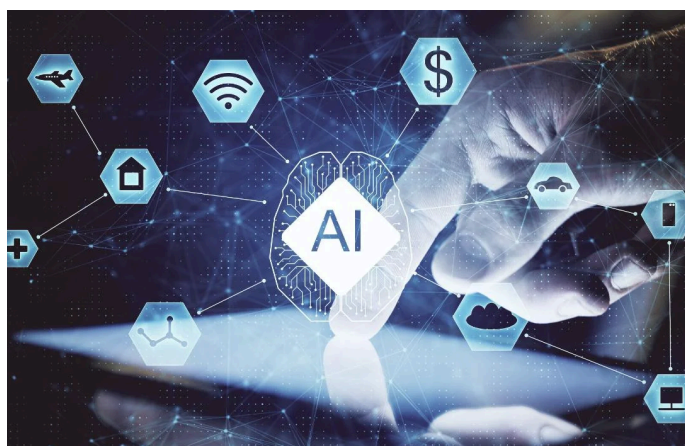


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