

EXCLUSIVE

Foreign student crackdown clips wings of pilot training schools

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Pilot training schools have warned they are on the verge of collapse, as they suffer collateral damage from the federal government's cap on foreign student enrolments.

The Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia has told the government that “without steady and sustainable enrolment levels of overseas students, a significant number will be unable to survive the financial pressures”.

“The aviation training sector relies heavily on international student enrolments to maintain operational viability,” ITECA chief executive Troy Williams states in a letter to federal Transport Minister Catherine King.

“By capping international student numbers, Australia risks significantly reducing the supply of qualified pilots, leaving airlines unable to meet demand. The shortage of pilots is already a critical issue for airlines worldwide.”

[The federal government has slapped a limit of 270,000 new enrolments of foreign students](#) across all Australian universities, TAFE and private training colleges next year, citing concerns over housing shortages, immigration rorts and shoddy training.

The Education Department has stripped 22,000 students out of the Group of Eight research universities while giving higher quotas to regional universities.

Training colleges are being sent individual quotas for international student enrolments in 2025, in an ad hoc method that is [wreaking financial havoc and confusion across the sector.](#)

Regional Aviation Association of Australia chief executive Rob Walker said some of the 10 flight training schools he represented would only be permitted to train one or two foreign pilots next year. He said the trainee pilots were sent to Australia by major international airlines and did not enrol independently.

“I’m aware of a number of organisations that have been offered one or two positions when previously they have had 100 positions,” he said. “We could see a reduction in the number of flight instructors, as well as pilots graduating and available for airlines.”

One aviation training company, which trains pilots for some of the world’s biggest airlines but did not want to be identified, told The Weekend Australian its quota of international students had been slashed from 300 this year to 115 next year.

“That’s a 62 per cent reduction and a \$30m revenue hit,” the chief executive said.

“It makes it unviable – we can’t pay the bills. This decision will be terminal for us.”

The executive said trainee pilots were at little risk of overstaying their visas or failing to show up to lessons because “we sign a contract with the airline, and the airline sponsors the student”.

[The Albanese government’s legislation to cap student numbers is bogged in the Senate,](#) where the Coalition has extended the reporting date for a Senate inquiry until October 8, so training providers can air their grievances at an additional public hearing.

The opposition supports an overall cap on international student visas but its education spokeswoman, senator Sarah Henderson, said the government's method was "kneecapping vital industries such as pilot training".

"While caps on foreign students are critical to combating Labor's immigration chaos, (Education Minister) Jason Clare's scheme shows his utter contempt for the private higher education and skills training sector," she said. "So many small businesses, including flying schools, are now under threat of collapse."

Deputy Opposition Leader Sussan Ley – whose first qualifications after school were in air traffic control, commercial flying and aerial stock mustering – said she was "incredibly concerned" about the impact on Australian aviation training.

"Our safe skies, perfect climate and high-quality training organisations mean Australia is a destination for flying training for the whole world," she said.

"This all puts that at risk. The fact is we need more pilots today – this week we have seen the impact of pilot shortages on emergency services in Queensland."

A pilot shortage has grounded some of Queensland's rescue helicopters this month.

A spokesman for Skills and Training Minister Andrew Giles said the new limits would bring the number of new international student commencements across higher education and vocational education and training sectors back to pre-pandemic levels.

"The government will work with providers on the implementation of the new limits," he said.