

Fast track to the skies

An intensive new aviation course is rocketing the Toowoomba Wellcamp Airport precinct to prominence as an educational campus.

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An airline pilot is a dream occupation for many young people. And the ultimate job is to captain a Qantas 787 Dreamliner. This dream has now become more accessible, with the opening, in January, of the Qantas Group Pilot Academy in Toowoomba, Qld.

For the first time, future Qantas captains can undertake comprehensive pilot training to the exacting standards required by the national carrier. The new course, which is being operated by FTA Queensland, runs over 52 weeks and incorporates a Diploma of Aviation (Commercial Pilots), a Diploma of Aviation (Instrument Rating) and an Advanced Diploma of Aviation (Piloting Command).

According to chief operating officer Pierre Steyn, the advantage of this course is its integrated design. "In this course the theory flows into the practical," he says.

Daniel Dilger, of Kairi, on the Atherton Tableland, Qld, initially hoped to join the air force after leaving high school in

Cairns in 2018. But when he heard about the new Qantas-sponsored course, he changed his mind.

Daniel is one of 24 students from across Australia who began their studies in January at the academy's Wellcamp campus, adjacent to Toowoomba Wellcamp Airport. Students, mostly aged between 18 and 25, are kept busy with lessons five days a week for the first five-week theory module. "The facilities were designed with the student in mind and, combined with the location, provide a focused learning environment," Pierre says. "There are no distractions here."

Although students take to the skies on solo flights of 5–10 minutes during the first module, it is during the second module that daily flying commences. Flights and navigation sessions take off every morning at 7am in the school's aircraft, a single-engine Diamond DA40 and a multi-engine DA42. "The academy has the advantage of being in an airport precinct without the congestion of city-based airspace," Pierre says.

The academy has come a long way since Pierre landed his role with FTA Queensland in August 2019. "The campus was just barren earth back then," he says. Now it boasts a 2000sq m training facility, incorporating a 1500sq m hangar, four flight training simulators, six classrooms and a purpose-built preflight briefing and flight-scheduling area.

Adjacent to the training facility is another building incorporating a 150-seat dining area serving three meals a day, a gym and snack room. A short walk away, past a multi-purpose sports court, are the first two of 23 accommodation blocks.

Each block has two 6-bedroom, 2-bathroom residences for students. Over the next two years, accommodation will be added for another 250 students. "We're expecting 250 students when we're at full capacity and we'll have accommodation for 276," Pierre says.

FTA has almost 40 years' experience in pilot training as the operator of an Adelaide flight school with links to several domestic and overseas airlines.

Daniel Dilger, 18, and William Spencer, 19, both from north Qld, are students at the Qantas Group Pilot Academy; Holly Wheaton, 19, of Adelaide, prepares to take off.



One of the differences between the academy in Toowoomba and the Adelaide school – apart from its squeaky-new facilities – is its affiliation with Qantas.

According to Qantas Group CEO Alan Joyce, the launch of the pilot academy is a historic moment for the company, aviation in Australia and thousands of future pilots. “Qantas Group pilots have a long-held reputation for being among the best in the world because of their high standards of training, and that tradition continues with the launch of our own pilot academy,” he says.

The new facility, due to be completed in 2022, is also a boon for Toowoomba. At its official opening in January, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk described the academy as a world-class asset for the region that will eventually create up to 160 new jobs.

Pierre says that graduating students will be fully qualified to work as airline and charter pilots, with approximately >





Students enjoy brand-new facilities at the Wellcamp Toowoomba campus of the Qantas Group Pilot Academy.

200 hours of flight experience. Although major airlines prefer 1500 hours' experience, graduates will be in high demand for smaller flight operators across Australia.

One of the aspirations for the Qantas Group Pilot Academy is to attract more females and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to flying careers. To that end, Qantas will provide three scholarships for Indigenous students, with future scholarships available to female students and candidates from regional and remote areas.

"We're encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, women and regional students to pursue a career in

aviation to ensure the pilots in the cockpit better reflect the diversity of those sitting in the cabin," Alan Joyce says.

FTA is reaching out to school career advisors and career expos to let prospective students know about this new opportunity. Pierre recommends science-oriented courses as a good preparation for the course. "Flying is all about physics – vectors, momentum, inertia," he says. "Physics is not a prerequisite, but it's a preference."

While many students enter direct from high school, some have transferred from university courses as they consider the academy to be a faster route to achieving their aviation aspirations.

William Spencer, of Cairns, had begun an aeronautical engineering course at university when he heard about the Qantas-sponsored course. "I had tried to get into the air force and I was trying to get a pilot cadetship when this popped up," he says.

The 19-year-old believes that the course entry interview is just as important as academic marks for admission. "They want to see that you are dedicated enough to get through training," he says. "And that you have the qualities of a future captain."

Qantas Group Pilot Academy
www.qantas.com/au/en/about-us/our-company/pilot-academy.html