

Canada taking advantage of pilot shortages

International students flock to flight schools

By **Sharon Adams** - Business Edge

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The worldwide shortage of aviation professionals has sparked a boom in training international students at Canadian flight schools.

"Canada's got a good reputation because of our high standards," says Lyle Watts, part owner and chief flying instructor of Heli-College Canada Training in Langley, a half hour south of Vancouver. "Canadian licences are quite portable."

The queue is also shorter than in other countries, as it takes less time to train in Canada and it's a relative bargain to train here, students say.

The worldwide shortage came about from a training retrenchment in the West following the decrease in passenger loads after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, coupled with the economic boom in India and China that has increased demand and regional competition for aviation workers on the other side of the globe.

Both passenger and cargo business has boomed in China and India in the past five years, but neither country has the capacity to train enough pilots to meet the demand, especially as flight instructors are regularly poached by airlines desperate for pilots.

China trains about 600 pilots annually but needs more than twice that many to keep up with demand, according to the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (BUAA). India needs 450 pilots now and will need 4,500 more over the next five years, according to the Australia-based Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation.

While air travel has picked up in the West, the supply of pilots is lagging. Some western airlines were forced to cancel flights, change service schedules and increase pilot workloads to cope over the summer.

"We usually have 60 per cent Canadian students and 40 per cent international," says Watts, who expects to train 30 or more foreign pilots this year. "This year it's the other way around."

The Moncton Flight College in New Brunswick has signed a \$60-million agreement with the BUAA to train 100 students per year over a five-year period, starting this year, and has also been approached by Chinese airlines for staff training.

The college has built a new \$2.5-million training centre and residence to handle the students from China, which will double the annual number of student pilots.

Although BUAA can draw from its own aviation college in China, it has agreements with universities and colleges around the world to make up the shortfall.

Many international students don't wait for their governments or employers and arrange training themselves.

"There's been a big influx, particularly since the start of 2006," says John Davis, manager of flight operations for Toronto Airways Ltd., which has two flight centres (the second is the Canadian Flight Academy in Oshawa).

The proportion of international students at the school has leapt to 25 per cent of its 400 students, up from a traditional five to 10 per cent.

"We get requests daily" from international students, says Alanna Detz, the flying instructor in charge of international students for the National Flyers Academy in Ontario.

The academy opened at Kitchener-Waterloo Airport in 1997 and has expanded twice in the last four years, adding flight schools in Tillsonburg, about 70 km southwest of Kitchener, in 2002 and at the Barrie Springwater Airport, about 90 km north of Toronto.

In Manitoba, meanwhile, international students make up nearly one-third of the 250 students expected to train this year at Harv's Air, which owns its own airport at Steinbach, about 50 km southeast of Winnipeg. It also uses the St. Andrews airport, a community-owned airport a five-minute drive north of the city.

With 25 planes and 21 full-time instructors, Harv's is one of the largest pilot training operations in Canada, and attracts students from all over the world.

"I wasn't able to put in the necessary flying time" in flight school in India, says Janak Patel, a Winnipeg Aviation student. It takes two to three years to earn a pilot's licence in India, Patel adds, but only eight months to a year in Canada. (See sidebar story on Page 18.)

Although the National Flyers' Academy in Waterloo charges between \$152 and \$305 per hour flying time, "students have told me

they'd spent about two times that amount in England," notes flight instructor Detz.

International students can expect to pay between \$35,000 and \$50,000 to get their pilot's licence in Canada, depending on the type of aircraft and student ability - but European and Indian students report that is 30 to 40 per cent of training costs in their home countries.

Students pay at least \$48,000 for five to seven months of training at B.C.'s Heli-College, which like many Canadian flight schools reserves the right to add a surcharge if fuel prices increase.

Once they've earned their wings, some international students will apply for work visas and remain in Canada, hoping to hire on with a Canadian company to build up their air experience. Others will return to their home countries or seek employment in the hot international market.

"We have (international) students that arrive with their pilot's licence, but it's in no way comparable to a Canadian licence," says Davis of Toronto Airways, which has been training international students for more than 40 years.

"They wouldn't have passed a flight test here; they hadn't been taught how to handle stalls and spins."

One student from India was given a pilot's licence after only 50 hours of flying time spread out over 21/2 years, says Davis, who advises international students they'll need at least 200 hours of flight time to qualify for a licence in Canada.

If Canadian students are the bread and butter of the pilot-training business, international students are the gravy.

Watts says there isn't a large profit margin, perhaps three to five per cent. Rising fuel costs and skyrocketing insurance premiums take a chunk out of the \$800,000 to \$1 million in Heli-College's annual sales, making it tricky to set tuition fees.

International students also sometimes need longer to train than western students, says Watts, due to cultural differences and lack of skills in English, the international language of aviation. "Some things we take for granted, like knowing how to operate a car, but it's not always the case for people from other countries," says Watts.

Heli-College offers courses for foreign students to brush up on their English. Other schools are affiliated with college programs that offer courses in English as a second language. Toronto Airways, for instance, is tied with Seneca College and Durham College.

If an operator miscalculates how long it will take for these students to finish their training, it could eat into an already slim profit margin, adds Watts.

Industry experts say the market for training international students will remain strong as the pilot shortage persists. And while the aviation industry sprouts new wings in Asia and India, many Baby Boomer-age North American pilots are preparing to retire - meaning international students will likely continue to feather the nests of Canadian flight schools for some time to come.

- With files from Ashoke Dasgupta

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