

The UK Professional Pilot Higher Apprenticeship - an update

In July FTN announced that after more than thirty years of lobbying by the aviation industry for Government to grant proper student recognition to individuals undertaking commercial flight training courses, a new initiative was underway to develop the UK's first ever Professional Pilot Higher Apprenticeship scheme. Four months on and the project is progressing with a target date of 31 March 2013 for the first apprenticeship course to commence in the UK.

The project is being developed by representatives from the aviation industry, vocational education organisations, airlines and the Civil Aviation Authority and is being funded by a Government-led initiative for the development of Higher Apprenticeships.

Simon Witts, a former director of UK regional airline Flybe's training academy and ex director of City & Guilds for Business, and Frances Cambrook, past Associate Director of Foundation Degree Forward (FDf) have been instrumental in bringing the various parties together to develop the programme. When FTN spoke with Witts back in July the project was still in the early stages of development. Four months on and he confirms that steady progress is being made on a scheme that could ultimately revolutionize entry to the airline industry.

According to Witts, the overarching principle of the scheme is one of unrestricted entry. By this he means that it must be open to anyone and not just those who can afford to pay for expensive flight training courses, and it must be capable of being conducted at any UK CAA-approved flight training school and not just those licensed to provide integrated flight training courses.

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The apprenticeship scheme, says Witts, will equate to a Level 6 qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (SCQF Level 10 in Scotland), the same level as a university honours degree. A fundamental requirement for the scheme is that it contain transferable skills beyond those required for the flightdeck. This is to ensure that a student will be able to pursue an alternative career within the airline industry should circumstances prevent them becoming an airline pilot (such as developing a medical condition which would exclude them from gaining a commercial pilot licence) or if they simply decide to pursue a different career path part-way through their training. With this in mind, Witts says that some of the training will involve time studying at a university or an Ofqual-approved college gaining qualifications in aviation management or similar aviation-related disciplines. Additionally the mentoring airline may decide to employ their apprentices



in other departments for periods during their training, such as ground handling or ops, in order to develop their transferable skills.

In order to encourage interest in aviation careers as early as possible during an individual's education, Witts says that plans are being developed to provide recognition for knowledge and skills gained prior to commencing a pilot apprenticeship. This means that time spent gaining a glider pilot's licence, for example, could be recognised and credited towards meeting the pre-entry requirements for an apprenticeship.

Also, to encourage transferable skills and gaining credit for prior experience and learning, Witts has created The Aviation Skills Network, a not-for-profit offshoot of his company. The Aviation Skills Network (initially hosted on LinkedIn) is designed to promote the adoption of formalised competence standards in the aviation industry through accrediting skills and formal qualifications in multiple fields including air traffic control, flight crew, cabin crew, customer service, ground handling, airport management etc, meaning that skills learnt in one discipline may well be able to afford credits in another. The Aviation Skills Partnership* then supports the Network activity through experts, partners, providers etc.

Concerning benefits for a student enrolled on a pilot apprenticeship scheme, Witts says that advantages include a potential reduction

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in the cost of flight training, either through eligibility to apply for a Student loan, financial support from the sponsoring airline or possibly the removal of VAT on course fees. Perhaps most important however, says Witts, will be a vastly improved prospect of securing a job on graduation with the mentoring airline. Of course, unfortunate timing could lead to a situation where at the time of graduation the airline may be laying-off pilots rather than recruiting them, but with transferable skills learnt during their training, graduates could continue to work for the airline in alternative positions until such time that their employer is in a position to take on new pilots.

Fundamental to getting the project launched, says Witts, was getting UK airlines involved. Without their involvement from the outset it couldn't have progressed and Witts reports that every airline which was approached confirmed interest in the scheme. The lead airline for the project is Jet2.com which will be the first airline to take on apprentices when the scheme launches next March.

For those interested in joining an apprenticeship scheme, Witts advises caution. If or when apprenticeships come into being they will not replace current training programmes or become the de facto route for those wishing to become an airline pilot. They can't, says Witts. The reality is that unless there is a fundamental change in the industry, airlines won't be able to underwrite apprenticeships for all of their crew



requirements and so the self-sponsored route will likely remain the main source of low hours pilots for UK airlines.

It could be, says Witts, that once the apprenticeship scheme has been validated in the UK it could be rolled-out internationally. Meantime if the scheme is to grow beyond just a handful of apprenticeships each year then other UK airlines will need to follow Jet2.com's lead and commit to apprenticeship schemes of their own, which, Witts advises, even then may only amount to a small percentage of UK airline pilot demand. But for those who are unable to secure funding to self-sponsor their commercial flight training, the Professional Pilot Higher apprenticeship represents an entry route to an airline career which for the first time won't be based just on an ability to pay, but on an ability to do the job. As Business Secretary Vince Cable observed, the new initiative would "help us break down the doors of professions that are not representative of the society in which we live."

*You can join The Aviation Skills Network on LinkedIn and contact The Aviation Skills Partnership at simon.witts@aviationskillspartnership.com