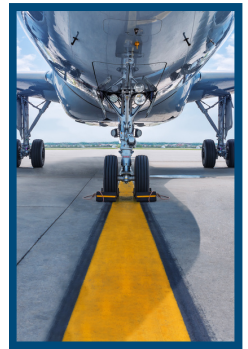
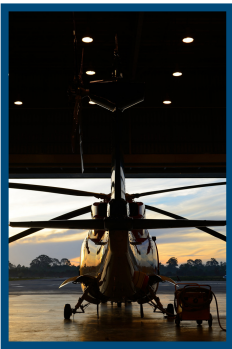




Becoming a pilot

► The Inside Track

Medicals, training, lifestyle and more... the comprehensive guide to becoming a pilot.





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Welcome to The Inside Track!

We advise you to read the whole of this comprehensive guide, however you can also tap or click each heading in the contents for easy navigation to specific sections.



"If you dream of becoming a professional pilot, it's worth reflecting on what it will take to achieve your goal before committing significant amounts of time and money."



The inside story

The average member of the public has an outdated perception of what it is to be a commercial pilot. Most assume that pilots enjoy a well-rewarded jet-setter lifestyle, flying with glamorous cabin crew to exotic locations. Today, unfortunately, the reality does not always live up to the image.

Historically, airlines paid for an individual's training, but now the expectation is that the aspiring pilot must bear the burden of cost, while being rewarded with ever-diminishing salaries in real terms, yet with the same enormous responsibility.

This booklet has been updated because of the increasing challenges BALPA has witnessed within the pilot community. We believe there is a lack of impartial advice available for hopeful pilots. Every flight training organisation has its glossy brochure which perpetuates the public perception and makes enticing promises. However, these promises are not always delivered in a way that may live up to the would-be pilots' expectations.

There are many publications outlining the training path and qualifications required to become a pilot; what we felt was missing was the inside story – what does it really take, what are the problems and challenges, and what are the pitfalls to avoid along the way?

We have solicited assistance from a large number of graduates who have shared their experiences with us, and we hope this booklet will provide every aspiring pilot and their families with additional guidance and a more complete understanding of what they are embarking on before they commit huge amounts of time, energy and money.

We at BALPA want to ensure that you make an informed choice about your career. Read between the lines of the marketing brochures carefully, network, speak to as many people as you can and take time to make the right decision for you personally, otherwise it could prove very costly – and not just financially.

Remember that the training path takes approximately two years, and as aviation is extremely volatile the job market can change drastically between commencing and completing your training. It is vital to research what opportunities there are likely to be when you graduate, and whether you are prepared to go anywhere in the world to secure employment. The more flexible you are, the more likely you will be to succeed.

Please take time to read this booklet and make an informed choice about your future career.

Wendy Pursey
Head of Membership and Career Services

Qualifications and skills required

If you dream of becoming a professional pilot it's worth spending some time reflecting on what it takes, academically and personally, to achieve your goal before committing significant amounts of time and money. A surprisingly broad range of skills are needed, and it's vitally important not to concentrate solely on the academic and technical side but to consider the personal attributes that are required in the flight deck environment. Many people have failed to achieve their dreams because they have overlooked this.

The hardest part of the process is usually securing your first commercial pilot position. Many believe that getting a commercial licence earns them the right to permanent employment, but this is far from the truth. Pilots can take several years to land their first position, while some never reach the flight deck at all, even after spending significant sums of money and devoting years of their life to training. Only the most determined and resilient will succeed.

A few of the key personal attributes are outlined below...

Resilience and determination to succeed

From initial flight training to retirement, a flying career will be punctuated by significant highs and lows. Passing flying tests, securing your first job and promotion, failing flying or ground tests, potential redundancies, personal financial difficulties, sometimes company bankruptcies, fleet changes, relocation – the unfortunate reality is that most pilots may experience some of these difficulties during their careers. You must be prepared and able to deal with such challenges if your ambitions are not to be derailed.

Securing your first professional position will probably be the most challenging part of your career and will require considerable tenacity and determination. Your licence is not a guarantee of a job – far from it. Rejection is all too common in this very competitive environment, so be prepared.

Academic qualifications

There are plenty of documents in the public domain detailing the academic or technical requirements you need before embarking on flight training. It helps to have an idea of how things work mechanically and to have a sense of what engineering and physics actually are, but it is not essential and you can succeed as a pilot without achieving top class honours in these fields. We recommend good GCSE passes in mathematics, English, science and preferably a second language. Even though English is the language of aviation it would be advisable to gain a

working knowledge of a second language, preferably that of the country in which the airline you would like to work for is based. While this is not essential, it would be a distinct advantage and would set you above the many expatriate pilots seeking work outside the UK, and make you eligible for jobs that would be closed to English-only speakers.

Additionally, good A-Level qualifications are normally required, but a solid grounding in the 'university of life' is equally valuable as it usually adds commercial awareness and transferable skills to the CV. Always keep in mind that professional qualifications can be an insurance policy in the event of a redundancy or loss of licence for medical reasons. We wholeheartedly recommend that individuals gain qualifications that will provide fall-back employment opportunities. Aviation is historically volatile, and there is much peace of mind in having alternative options, especially when significant debts may have been incurred during training.

In terms of degree qualifications, there are some positive arguments for going into higher education. However, if you add the cost of a degree to the cost of pilot training, the undertaking is even more daunting. We recommend that you should be cautious about doing a training programme that offers degrees and flying training in one. Focus on one at a time, our experience is that it will serve you better in the long run.

Academically, pilot training is not as demanding technically as is generally perceived. However, what poses the biggest challenge is the volume and breadth of material to be assimilated in a short time. This is often where people fall down, particularly those who have been out of education for a while. It is especially true during type rating training, where the intensity and pace of the course can be overwhelming.

Personal attributes

Certain personality types are better suited to the role of pilot. People skills are a key requirement, and a lot rests on how you interact with others socially or deal with people in a working environment. On the flight deck you will be working closely with one person for long periods of time, and if you find it hard to interact it will make for an uncomfortable experience. You should therefore feel at ease working with a range of people from diverse backgrounds. Respect for others and a commitment to equality is key. The aviation sector is a rule-based environment where adherence to procedures and routines are vital.

Security and vetting

You will also need to pass the Department of Transport's security vetting process in order to obtain an identity card which enables you to enter the security restricted or critical areas of an airport. To do this you will need to pass a five-year background check and will have to provide details of your previous employment history. You will also need a clean criminal record however not all crimes will prevent you from clearing this hurdle.

Flexibility

A flexible approach is imperative in the modern airline industry. Throughout your career you will face the unpredictable, whether it be multiple roster changes, air traffic delays or changes in financial circumstances. Your ability to deal with constant changes to your routine and lifestyle will be tested.

Depending on the industry landscape, you may find that there are more job opportunities overseas. You may have to consider relocating with the possibility of spending several years in a another country.

Decision making and management skills

While it pays to have good basic flying skills, on the modern flight deck you need so much more. It is essential to have sound and mature decision-making, communication and management skills, and common sense is vital. You must be able to make the correct decision quickly and accurately, to communicate effectively and to follow a plan logically. This is the key to an efficient and safe flight deck.

The management of systems, tasks, and checklists is a major part of the pilot's job. Monitoring yourself, the other pilot and the aircraft, it could be argued, is perhaps even more important than the stick and rudder skills you may have considered to be all that was required.



Back up qualifications and skills

The skills highlighted above are only likely to be developed over time and with experience of life, both socially and at work. If you are entering this career later in life, it would be safe to assume you have back-up skills and life experience.

But if you are a school or sixth form college leaver, it may be prudent to think twice about entering flight training straight away. Do not rush into it, or make 'pilot' your only career choice. It is a big commitment that may affect those around you emotionally and financially.

Before making that decision, consider a long-term plan that gives you some options along the way. If aviation is your only career choice, try to think beyond just being a pilot – gain extra qualifications in related areas that will not only bolster your chances of getting your first job but will give you a plan B if things don't quite go according to plan. Thinking like this demonstrates a proactive nature and shows that you have structured an overall plan with options which will stand you in good stead if things don't pan out as you had planned.

Consider undertaking a period of on-the-job vocational training, maybe gaining a trade, before embarking on your flying career. This will give you the opportunity to understand the working environment and the commercial pressures that exist in most jobs today.

Having another option or trade is highly useful and adds to your personal development of life and work skills. Keep in mind that the aviation industry is volatile and job security isn't guaranteed any more, so you must have a plan B. Starting off with a strong platform will allow you to build a secure future, so be considered in your decision making, have a plan and don't be hasty; you may not think it but you have plenty of time.

During the Covid-19 crisis, we supported 2,000 members who were made redundant and thousands more who had to take part-time contracts. It was a difficult period for all, but those who had an existing skill set in another industry were able to adapt and find alternative income streams much more quickly than those who had only ever worked in aviation.



“There are a number of medical conditions that could prohibit you from making a career in flying, so obtain your Class 1 medical...”

Pilot medical - Your first priority

To operate as a commercial pilot you must be 17 or over and will require a Class 1 medical certificate and have general medical fitness, good eyesight and hearing.

There are a number of medical conditions that could prohibit you from making a career in flying, so obtain your Class 1 medical before you take any other step. This will ensure that either you are fit to complete the training and pursue the career, or identify that you have underlying medical issues that could prevent you from achieving your goals.

If you suffer from a problem which prevents you becoming a commercial pilot, it's better to find out at the start rather than after you have spent thousands of pounds on flight training. There is no point in taking aptitude tests, visiting FTOs and signing up for courses if you cannot pass a Class 1 medical.

That said, if you do identify a medical issue that immediately prohibits you from getting a Class 1 medical – the most common reason for failure being eyesight – all is not lost with regard to becoming a commercial pilot.

Restrictions can occasionally be lifted if certain criteria have been met. This is obviously specific to the individual, and you should consult an aviation medical examiner (AME) for advice on specific medical conditions, if any are found.

Remember...

If you are embarking on the Integrated or MPL route you have to have the Class 1 medical in order to begin the course. With the Modular Route, as you start by completing a PPL, you do not require a Class 1 medical.

However, if you are starting your PPL with the intention of completing commercial training and becoming an airline pilot, we would recommend that you get a Class 1 medical before starting the PPL training. It would be heart breaking to be successful in your PPL and go through all the hours - only to find out you cannot be a commercial pilot for medical reasons.

Your first medical

The initial medical must be obtained from an Aeromedical Centre (AeMC), and once this has been done the yearly revalidations can be performed by a number of aviation medical examiners around the country. The initial medical is quite extensive and starts with your completion of their application form (available from the AeMC) and a medical consisting of an ophthalmology examination, ECG, audiogram, hemoglobin, lipid profile, lung function and cholesterol tests.

Medical Examination Class 1 (Professional pilot)



You should be fit, have good eyesight and hearing, and have no current or previous illness which might interfere with the safe exercise of a commercial or airline transport pilot's licence.

The initial medical examination must be done at an Aeromedical Centre (AeMC) such as the CAA at Gatwick. Some of the tests have to be reported by external consultants and the results are then gathered together. The medical officer doing your physical examination should be able to tell you whether all seems normal. Once the results are collated, and are satisfactory, your medical certificate will be issued. Often this is possible on the same day as your initial examination. Medicals usually take around four hours.

Can I fly with diabetes?

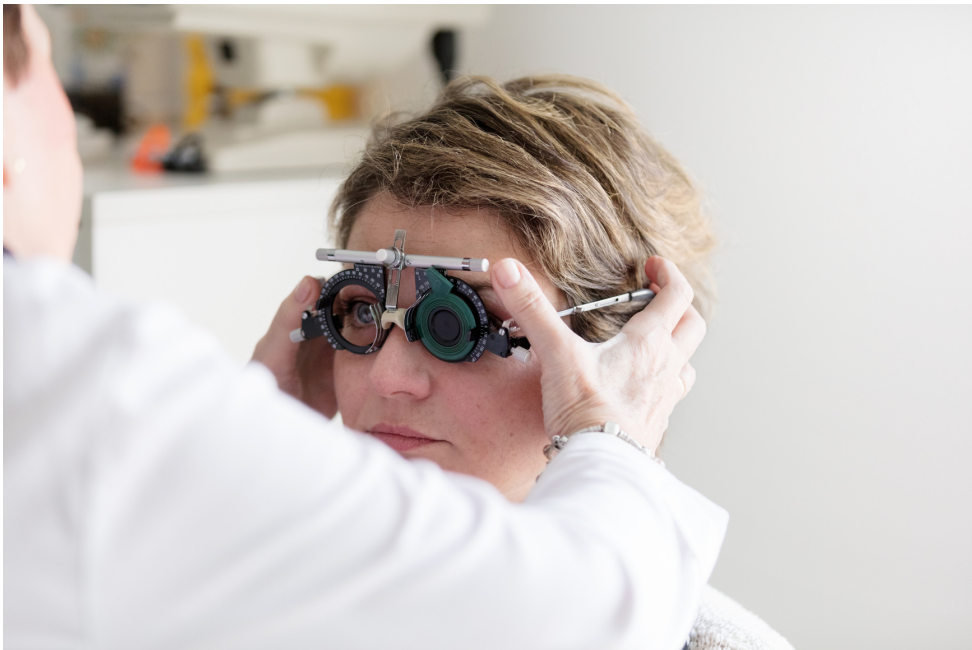
Pilots with diabetes treated with insulin (and other medications that significantly lower blood glucose), may now be considered for medical certificates by the CAA.

Until now, only a limited number of medications for the treatment of diabetes have been allowed for pilots applying for Class 1, 2 and 3 medical certificates.

However, over recent years there have been advances in the treatment and monitoring of the disease, allowing the control of the condition and any complications to be managed more effectively. The decision should allow more licenced pilots who have diabetes, to continue to undertake operational duties safely.

Individual diabetic applicants who are granted medical certificates under the this protocol will, however, be subject to a rigorous monitoring regime, including demonstrated stability of their condition, and regular blood sample self-testing during flight/duty. This is to ensure that an individual does not begin a flight or shift with too high, or too low, a sugar level, and that a safe level is maintained.

“Your visual acuity must be at least 6/9 in each eye separately, and 6/6 using both eyes together, with or without glasses or contact lenses”



The tests

Vision - Distance

This is the commonest cause of difficulty during the examination. The exact requirements are listed at JAR Class 1 Visual Standards/European Class 3 Visual standards. If you are in any doubt you should take a copy of the standards to an optician who will be able to interpret them. This will allow you to have an initial eye test before your examination. If there is any further doubt you should send the optician's report to the AeMC for assessment.

Your visual acuity (measured by your ability to see, in this case, lines of letters on a chart at 6 metres) must be at least 6/9 in each eye separately and 6/6 using both eyes together, with or without glasses or contact lenses (correction). If you need correction, the refractive error (the amount of correction) must not exceed +5.00 dioptres of long sight or -6.00 dioptres of short sight. This is in the most ametropic meridian (taking into account any astigmatism). Astigmatism must not exceed 2.00 dioptres. The difference in correction between each eye (anisometropia) must not be more than 2.00 dioptres. Your optometrist will be able to explain these terms.

Vision - Near

On the standard near vision eye chart you must be able to read the N5 print between 30 and 50 cm and the N14 print at 100 cm, with or without correction.

Hearing

The basic hearing test used throughout JAR-FCL 3 is the ability to hear conversational speech when tested with each ear at a distance of 2 metres. An audiogram is required and measures the ability to hear sounds at different frequencies (pitch).

If you have doubts about your hearing, the required hearing levels are listed in JAR Class 1 Hearing Requirements/European Class 3 Hearing Requirements. It may be possible for you to have a preliminary test at a local hospital.

TIP: If you can hear a normal voice in each ear separately at two metres, you should not have a problem.

Medical Examination

Medical History

These are questions about any previous illness declared on your application form. You will be asked about them by the examining doctor, and if there is any major illness in your past, it is important to bring reports about it from your family doctor or specialist. Simple appendicitis or a broken arm are not regarded as major illnesses.

Physical Examination

A general check that all is functioning correctly. It will cover lungs, heart, blood pressure, stomach, limbs and nervous system.

Electrocardiogram – (ECG)

This measures the electrical impulses passing through your heart. It can show disorders of the heart rhythm or of the conduction of the impulses, and sometimes it can show a lack of blood supplying the heart muscle.

In the unlikely event of these changes showing on your ECG, further tests with a report from a cardiologist will have to be sought (these can sometimes be carried out at the AeMC). Most changes turn out to be of no significance and if they appear again on your subsequent ECGs they can normally be discounted, as they have already been investigated.

Lung Function Test (spirometry)

This is a test to evaluate the efficiency of your airways. Having asthma does not disqualify you from holding a Class 1 medical, but it must be controlled by your medication and this is assessed by spirometry. If these results are outside the acceptable limits you will be required to undertake an exercise test.

Haemoglobin blood test

This is a finger prick blood test which measures the oxygen carrying capacity of the blood. A low haemoglobin is called anaemia and will need further investigation.

Cholesterol blood test

The same finger prick as above. There is no disqualifying level, but the possible health risks of a high cholesterol will be explained by the doctor at the time of your examination.

Urine test

Mainly looking for sugar (diabetes), protein or blood.

Estimated Medical Cost (2023):

£660



“If there is any major illness in your past, it is important to bring reports about it from your family doctor or specialist.”



Choosing a course

There are three accepted routes to obtaining a licence that will enable you to fly for an airline. They are commonly known as:

- Integrated
- Modular
- Multi-crew Pilot Licence (MPL)

The Integrated and Modular paths lead to exactly the same licence while the MPL gives you a Frozen ATPL, which has certain restrictions. Each route has its pros and cons and will suit some people more than others.

The individual circumstances and preferences of the student will usually dictate the choice of route. You must look at each option, and weigh up which will best suit you.

The Integrated Route

The Integrated Programme provides intense, structured training over a relatively short period, maintaining a standard and continuity that is essential to the successful completion of any flying course. It provides a key element that any recruiter is said to be looking for – continuity of training.

Before being accepted onto the Integrated Programme you will have to pass a selection test. This will give you some idea of your aptitude and suitability for this career and will highlight any areas of weakness – vital information for you to have before you spend money.

The test attempts to emulate the process of airline selection and on the whole, depending on the school, it does the job. Once on the course as a trainee, you follow strict syllabus numbers during all elements of your training, which allows you to track your progress and keep an eye on what's coming up next.

The Integrated Course has four main elements:

- Flight Training (Basic and Advanced)
- Multi Crew Cooperation Course (MCC)
- Jet Orientation Course (JOC)
- Airline Preparation Course

Tip: Ask the school what would happen if any of your training was delayed.

Each of these elements follows a chronological order, and once it is completed you will be issued with an Air Transport Pilot Licence (ATPL).

The down-side to this type of training is that it can be expensive. The advantage is that you are at a single Flight Training Organisation (FTO) throughout your training, and they are contracted to get you through to completion.

Keep this in mind when choosing your FTO, as you will suffer significant penalties, both financially and from a training perspective, should you choose to withdraw before completion. Furthermore, if you are not on an airline integrated route (i.e. you have been pre-selected by an airline before or during your training) there could be a risk you will suffer training delays first if for example the training aircraft has technical issues.

This should be checked before you sign your training contract. Another key factor to remember is that basic training is largely carried out at an overseas base, with the student returning to the UK only to complete the advanced Instrument Rating part of the course.

The style of teaching of the Integrated Programme must also be considered as it may not suit everyone, particularly the more mature candidate. It can be regimented, and you have to wear a uniform with stripes earned for each flying milestone, although it must be said that those stripes go some way to making you feel part of the flying fraternity. If you have been out of education for a while this may not be the option for you. Don't count it out solely because of that – research it thoroughly.

Visit many FTOs before you commit, and speak to the people already there.

When you leave the Integrated Course you will have completed:

- **195 hours Flight Training (Actual and Simulator)**
- **750 hours Ground School**

Most Integrated Courses are classed as 'minimum hours', which means that any flying required above the prescribed minimum – for example, a failed test requiring some re-training – will have to be paid for in addition to the normal course fees.

Enter the training in the full realisation that you are probably going to go over minimum hours, and it is going to take longer and cost more than anticipated. It can be more if you need extra hours at the multi-engine aircraft stage. Make sure you investigate these extra hour fees before signing up.

The Modular Route

This alternative will furnish you with the same licence as the Integrated Programme but will give you an additional level of flexibility because it allows you to complete one section at a time, at a pace that suits you and your finances, and in a more convenient location for you.

You will complete the same sections as the Integrated Route, but the absence of a rigid completion programme may dovetail better with your lifestyle. This is not to say there is no focused structure to the Modular Route; while it covers the same sections as the Integrated Route they are completed in a slightly different way, and a careful structure is important if the course is to be completed in a timely manner.

The major difference is that you start the commercial training after gaining a PPL (A) and a minimum of 150 hours flight experience. The prospective commercial pilot needs to use these hours wisely. It is considered to be of little use to fly around the local area on sightseeing tours, or just have fun with friends on land-aways. Fly with your commercial goals in mind. You would be wise to look at the syllabus of the Integrated Course and fly similar exercises when building hours on the Modular Route.

You will take the same ground school exams and the same CAA flight exams as the Integrated Route cadet once the 150 hours and night rating have been completed. On the Modular Course, however, you avoid all the interim flight tests involved in the Integrated Course so you are examined less during training. The average Integrated Course involves five progress tests as well as the Instrument Rating test. An advantage of the Modular Route is that you can specify how and when you would like to take your tests.

As an example, on most Integrated Courses the cadet would be required to combine the CPL skills test with the multi-engine complex rating test. On the Modular Route you can take the CPL skills test in a complex single aircraft and complete the multi-engine rating at a later date. A candidate for the CPL (A) must have logged at least 200 hours before they can apply for the licence. Comparing this to the Integrated Programme shows that a modular student will have flown more hours and possibly spent a little less money than the Integrated student.

The key to success in pursuing the Modular Route is consistency and focus of training. Find a good school and stick with it. Structure your hours so that you are completing worthwhile training tasks similar to those in the Integrated training syllabus.

“Some may feel they would be isolated taking the Modular Route, however, the BALPA Portal provides a rich, knowledgeable community to engage with.”

The Multi-Crew Pilot Licence

The Multi-Crew Pilot Licence (MPL) is structured very differently to more traditional flight training. It should only be considered if you want to fly for a specific airline on a certain type of aircraft. It allows the holder to exercise the privileges of the Frozen ATPL but is limited to a specific type, certificated for multi pilot operation only. This is not the training path of choice if you are looking to become an instructor, or want to do anything other than fly for an airline.

One major difference is that it has significantly fewer flying hours during the course, but this is offset by the increased number of hours you have to fly in an advanced full-flight simulator. This licence is designed to get a cadet from zero hours to the right seat of a specified aircraft type. The preliminary type rating for your aircraft is included in the course, and it is specific to a single airline as their Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are included.

This ultimately means that the licence is issued with restrictions allowing the pilot to fly only with that airline on that specific type, and the licence is not fully valid until the type-rating course for that specific airline has been completed. If that airline goes bust before the restrictions are lifted, retraining may be required at extra cost.

So why go for this type of licence? If you are on this course, it should mean you have identified an airline and aircraft type you want to fly and are already employed by an airline, or part-sponsored and have a job at the end of your training. If you don't have a job offer, it is not recommended that you embark on this type of training.

MPL Misconception

Your MPL would be a frozen ATPL just like any other, except it is restricted to multi pilot aircraft only. Once you have met the requisite experience you can apply for the ATPL and thereafter you are entitled to operate as Pilot in Command on multi crew aircraft. If you want commercial single crew privileges then you must meet specific requirements. The MPL includes a type rating for initial issue. Once you have completed Line Training you can then convert to any other aircraft just as a frozen ATPL holder.

A typical course would consist of:

- Minimum 240 hours flying
- 70 hours of actual flying
- 170 hours on simulators
- 750 hours Ground School

Which course to choose?

There are many reasons why an aspiring pilot would choose one route over another. Ultimately, they all lead to an Air Transport Pilots Licence (ATPL).

Historically, the Integrated Route has been the industry-accepted way into the airlines or commercial flying. However, we have seen changes in recruitment practices more recently. The major downside to the Integrated Route is that it can be expensive and it is full-time so you are not able to learn and earn.

The Modular Route offers great flexibility and can often be completed part-time while working on another job. You could theoretically take breaks between training modules, but be mindful not to leave big gaps between sections. The downside to this route is that historically, the Modular Route pilot was required to have considerably more hours than the Integrated student, and had perhaps to have gone through a period of working as a flight instructor to build up those all-important hours. The overall cost of the course can be less if you structure it correctly, but it may take longer to achieve the licence.

The MPL should only be considered if you have been taken on by an airline offering that particular course as the preferred route of entry. If you are offered a place on such a programme, make sure you enter it informed, understand the possible pitfalls and have a contingency plan. You are relying on the airline to see you through, and if they go bankrupt or make redundancies you may not be able to complete your training and your job offer is likely to be removed.

Different training routes

Dale Mudie: Modular Route

Why did you choose the modular route?

"Cost and flexibility. Neither my family nor I are in a position to be able to fund my training via the integrated route."

This means I have had to establish myself in another full time career first, in order to fund my training."

What are the upsides and downsides for you in the modular route?

"The biggest positive is the flexibility. You can set your own pace and you have the ability to change training providers if you feel you are not getting the service you deserve. The biggest negative for me is that I am not totally immersed in the training environment. I learn best by surrounding myself in that environment 24/7, away from distractions."

How did you fund your training?

"I initially saved up enough money for my PPL by working in my current job. I realised to complete all of my commercial training within a realistic timescale and with consistency throughout training, I needed all of the money up front. I approached my parents and together we re-mortgaged their house, for which I am now liable."

What advice would you give to someone who is looking to become a pilot?

"You have to be 110% committed to wanting the lifestyle and have the passion and the resilience to keep moving forward. Do lots of research into the role of a professional pilot. Make your CV stand out because after training, everyone ends up with the same licence."



Holly Simms: Integrated Route

Why did you choose the integrated route?

"Having been out of education for a little while, I felt that going down the integrated route would give me the continuity that I would need to do well in the studies and come out with a good flying report at the end. I spoke to a couple of people in the industry and was advised that airlines were leaning towards integrated cadets at the time."



What are the upsides and downsides in the integrated route?

"The upside is the continuity of the teaching and the 'after care' that my training organisation provided once I had completed my course, such as CV workshops and interview preparation courses. Having to stop working was a downside for me, as I used all of my savings to live on for the 19 months of training, much like many of the other students on my course."

How have you funded your training?

"I was very lucky and used a family loan, of which I know many people do not have the luxury."

What advice would you give to someone who is looking to become a pilot?

"Go to as many open days as you can, and talk to the students there. They will give you honest feedback about the school (they usually aren't being paid to be there), so you can get a real feel for the provider. I spoke to a student when I visited Oxford Aviation Academy and his honest opinion helped me pick the school. His advice held true, and my experience with Oxford was exceptional."

Sophie Truran: Integrated Route

Why did you choose the MPL route?

I chose the MPL route because at that time it meant that I had a job offer with an airline waiting for me at the end of my training.

What were the upsides and downsides for you in the MPL route?

The main upside of the MPL route is that you already have a place at an airline for when you finish your training. However, this is also a downside insofar as you are tied to that specific airline until the time when you unfreeze your ATPL at 1500 hours. An MPL is company specific and often not transferrable, but an ATPL is.


How did you fund your training?

My parents had to remortgage their house to help me fund training; it is no easy task, particularly as generally the salaries of entry-level pilot positions at airlines make loan repayments nearly impossible. I would say that the financial aspect is one of the main problems of training for the industry. Arguably there are many talented pilots out there who deserve a place in training, but the financial barriers are just too great.

What advice would you give to someone who is looking to become a pilot?

Do something else first, get some life experience and have something to fall back on. Whilst it is a brilliant profession and many aspire from very young ages to become a pilot, I know that especially during the pandemic for example, those pilots that had another trade and other qualifications fared much better than those who had come straight from school.

Besides, frankly when you're sitting in a flight deck with someone for a five hour flight to Egypt and the same for the return, it is much more enjoyable to be able to chat about topics not just related to aviation!



"You are relying on the airline to see you through, and if they go bankrupt or make redundancies, you may not be able to complete your training"



Training to become a helicopter pilot

You may be considering getting a helicopter licence. If so, a UK CAA CPL (H) licence is the key to almost any of the helicopter pilot jobs in the world, be it instruction, pipeline patrols, long lining, crop spraying, oil and gas rig flying or HEMS.

The minimum age to get a CPL is 18 and you will need to hold a Part MED Class 1 Medical Certificate.

Training

ATP H integrated training course:

You can train for a CPL in a single course to the level required to fly helicopters commercially under visual flight rules. This course includes Multi Crew Co-operation (MCC) instruction.

Your theoretical knowledge and examinations will be of the level required for the issue of an ATPL (H) once you have completed the necessary flying experience and skills tests to upgrade your licence.

You will need to complete at least 650 hours of theoretical knowledge training, plus at least 20 hours for Multi-Crew Cooperation (MCC). You will need to pass an exam to demonstrate an appropriate level of theoretical knowledge.

Flying training:

The requirement of total flying training is at least 150 hours which include all progress tests.

If you hold an ICAO compliant PPL(H), 50% of the hours flown can be credited, up to a maximum of 40 hours, of which up to 20 hours can be dual instruction, or 50 hours, of which up to 25 hours may be dual instruction, if you have a helicopter night rating.

The total flying training requirement must include the following components:

- Dual instruction
 - Visual instruction
 - Instrument instruction
 - MCC
- PIC
- Cross-country flying
- Night flying
- Instrument time

Exact hour requirements for each of these components can be found on the CAA website [here](#)

CPL(H) integrated training:

Train for a CPL in a single course to the level required to fly commercially. This course does not include instrument rating training. There are no pre-requisites for this training.

Theoretical knowledge training:

You will need to complete at least 350 hours of theoretical knowledge training. This theoretical knowledge course will only be sufficient for attempting CPL (H) theoretical knowledge examinations. If you wish to take theoretical knowledge examinations at ATPL (H) level or for an IR (H), you will need to complete additional study.

You will need to pass the CPL (H) theoretical knowledge examinations.

If you hold a PPL, you need only complete at least 200 hours of theoretical knowledge training.

Flying:

The requirement of total flying training is at least 135 hours, including all progress tests, of which 5 hours may be instrument ground time.

If you hold an ICAO compliant PPL(H), 50% of the hours flown can be credited, up to a maximum of 40 hours, of which up to 20 hours can be dual instruction if you have a helicopter night rating, or 50 hours, of which up to 25 hours may be dual instruction.

The total flying training requirement must include the following components:

- Dual instruction
- PIC
- Cross-country flying
- Night flying
- Instrument time



CPL (H) modular:

Training for a CPL to the level required to fly commercially. This does not include instrument rating training.

Before you begin the course, you must have completed 155 hours flight time, including 50 hours as PIC, of which 10 hours must be cross-country. You must also hold a PPL (H) before commencing the groundschool element.

If you are taking your skill test on a multi-engine helicopter you must have completed the prerequisites for the issue of a type or class rating for a multi-engine helicopter. You must complete your flight training in one continuous course at an ATO.

Flying:

To apply for a CPL (H) you must complete at least 30 hours of dual flight instruction, including 10 hours of instrument instruction and 20 hours of visual flight instruction.

Use of simulators or aeroplanes for dual instruction

- Up to five hours of the instrument instruction requirement can be taken in a FFS, FTD2,3 or FNPT II, III
- Up to five hours of the visual instruction requirement can be taken in a FTD 1, FNPT I or in an aeroplane

You will also need to complete at least 5 hours of night flight instruction, comprising 3 hours of dual instruction, which will include at least 1 hour of cross country navigation and 5 solo night circuits, each including a take-off and landing.

If you hold a valid IR(H) you will be fully credited the 10 hours instrument instruction time requirement. If you hold an IR(A) you will be credited with 5 hours. The remaining 5 hours must be completed in a helicopter.

You will not need to complete the additional night flight instruction if you already hold a night rating (helicopter).

Experience requirements that must be met before CPL skill test:

You must have at least 185 hours of flight time before conducting the skills test.

This must include the following for Pilot in Command (PIC)

- 50 hours as PIC, of which 10 hours of cross-country flight as PIC, including a VFR cross-country flight of at least 185 km (100NM), in the course of which full stop landings at two aerodromes different from the aerodrome of departure must be made

You may be able to count some other Pilot in Command flying hours towards the 185 hours of flight time required.

These are detailed below:

- 20 hours in aeroplanes if you hold a PPL(A),
OR
- 50 hours in aeroplanes, if you hold a CPL(A)
OR
- 10 hours in TMGs or sailplanes
OR
- 20 hours in airships if you hold a PPL(As)
OR
- 50 hours in airships if you hold a CPL(As)

Cost

This can range from £70- 90k and can be completed full time in 12 months

Joining the Army, Royal Navy or RAF:

Another option if you want to become a helicopter pilot but don't want to work in the commercial sector and can't afford to train privately, is to join one of the armed forces as a trainee pilot.

There are a number of requirements to bear in mind, including having GCSEs in Maths, English and three other subjects, meeting health and fitness criteria and being able to swim. You also commit to being a part of the service for a certain amount of time, such as 12 years, if you join the RAF.

Although the armed forces train you to become a helicopter pilot, its also important to note that you may not end up flying a helicopter but a different aircraft. A role in the armed forces can be an incredibly rewarding career and is a great way to become a helicopter pilot if you cannot afford to learn privately.



Choosing a Flight School/ FTO

There are many factors to be considered, and ultimately your choice of school will be influenced by personal preference and your selected training route. You should take into account the type of course on offer, aircraft types used, location of school, whether all training can be accomplished in the UK, cost issues, and very importantly, the overall feeling of the school or Flight Training Organisation (FTO).

[Try not to be overwhelmed by excellent marketing](#), sparkling facilities or the promise of flying modern aircraft. There is no point in flying wonderful aircraft if the instructors are poor or the aircraft type is temperamental, resulting in excessive downtime with maintenance work leaving you on the ground unable to fly.

[Always visit a school before signing up to any course](#). When on the tour, don't be afraid to ask questions. Try to dig beneath the surface of the glossy marketing, and get an idea of how the other students are really feeling.

If you are lucky enough to secure some form of sponsored training, generally there will be no choice of FTO as the airline will probably have struck a deal with the approved training organisation they feel best meet their needs.

[The fleet of aircraft used by the FTO is very important](#); one thing to consider is the number of different types you will have to fly during training. If there are many, coping with the differences can put more pressure on you when you least need it.

At some point you will have to convert to a twin-engined aircraft, and some FTOs employ aircraft types that are almost identical inside to the single you will have been flying. The near-identical cockpit layouts will make the transition easier.

Note the age and state of the aircraft. Are they falling to pieces or in good repair?

Sit it in one, and look around the cockpit. Is everything working? Are they offering glass cockpit or standard instrument-based layouts? Don't be swayed simply because an FTO has an all-glass cockpit fleet. It might be nice to have, but it makes no difference to your chances of being recruited by an airline. Having a glass cockpit does ease the training process and allows for smoother conversion between types, but it should be only one of many factors bearing on your choice of school.

Try to get a feeling for how the instructors operate. Do they seem nice people?

Do they have a student-centred approach, do they understand different learning styles and invest in the students and their training? Flying training is hard and you will make mistakes. The way in which the instructors deal with your mistakes is important; some instructors shout, some are reassuring and comforting.

Generally the latter type is preferred by most students, though some respond well to the shouting approach. You will not generally be invited to fly with an instructor when visiting an FTO, so ask the students how the instructors behave in the air and decide whether that's the way you wish to be taught.

Overall, when visiting the FTO trust your gut feeling; if it doesn't feel right for whatever reason, do not sign up. There are plenty of FTOs to choose from; finding the one that best suits your needs and personality calls for a methodical and meticulous approach.

Some key questions to ask when choosing a training school are:

1. Does the school require payment for all training up front?

Try to avoid this, but if it is unavoidable, be very careful about the refund policy and ensure that you pay by credit card so if the company goes into liquidation you are protected.

2. Are they a financially sound business?

Thoroughly research the school including checking their financial accounts on Companies House. We have sadly seen the collapse of several FTOs and this has left students displaced and out of pocket for large amounts of money.

3. Does the school give a breakdown of costs for each element?

If not, and you decide to leave or have problems with your training, getting an appropriate refund may be very difficult as it will be hard to ascertain the costs incurred. A school that is transparent with its scale of charges should be preferred.

4. Does the school quote minimum hours for training? (most do).

Realistically, many students do not complete each course on minimum hours; you can expect to fly approximately 10% over quoted hours, although it can be considerably more. This is often the case when completing modules during winter months in the UK due to weather delays. Lack of currency can cause significant progress delays and incur extra cost and delay. Find out the rates for overruns as they can be more than the rate offered in the course.

5. Find out exactly what costs are included in the course quotation or marketing material.

Most schools do not include costs for accommodation, travel to overseas training facilities, visas, examination entry fees, flight test fees, rating and type endorsements on licence, medical etc. These can add several thousand pounds to training costs so you must be clear about what is and isn't included.

Remember to include living costs for the duration of your training. Any delays, examination failures etc will add to accommodation and living costs.

6. Does the school have enough instructors to cater for the number of students?

You must ensure that there is capacity for you to fly every day, otherwise your costs will mount up.

7. Are the instructors full-time professionals or young students trying to build hours to join an airline?

The quality of instruction varies widely – wherever possible you should aim for the highest possible level of instruction.

8. Are there enough aircraft to cater for the number of students?

Again, if there is a shortfall or no standby aircraft (especially multi-engine) then training days can be lost, resulting in increased costs.

9. Does the school also have airline-sponsored students?

Whilst this is a good thing in terms of quality, airline students may have priority for flying and instructors, and many self-sponsored students can find themselves delayed while airline cadets are prioritised. Get written guarantees from the school about progression and resources.

10. Will your training be properly scheduled and managed by the school?

Make sure you will be under the care of a member of staff who will oversee your training or progress throughout.

11. What would happen in the event of a flight test or ground examination failure?

Find out how that might affect your training path, as some schools could require you to re-course – there may be a gap before you were able to resume training, and undertaking some unnecessary repetition of modules will cost time and money.

12. What assistance can a school give with employment?

Some schools may overstate their connections and airline programmes; do some thorough research and ask past and present students.

13. For courses that have an overseas element, find out if this is conducted on the same aircraft types.

Changing type will almost certainly increase training time and cost. Importantly, too, overseas instructors are often locally sourced and not of an equivalent UK standard, possibly unfamiliar with UK procedures and training standards. Ask questions of the school about this, so that you are confident of the quality of instruction you will be receiving.

14. Find out what the school's pass rate is for flight and ground examinations.

Also find out how many students find commercial pilot employment and in what time-frame (obviously this isn't necessarily direct reflection on the school because it will be considerably influenced by market conditions at the time, but may be an indicator of whether the school is viewed favourably by airlines).

15. Ask the school about its ethos.

Many schools seem to forget that you are the customer and are paying them thousands of pounds for your training. You should demand the same level of service as you would expect when buying a car, a house, or making any major purchase.



Post brexit licensing

Gaining a UK Pilots Licence from 1st January 2023

As of 1st January 2023, pilots operating G-Reg aircraft (UK registered aircraft) in the UK are required to hold a UK licence. This measure has been implemented as part of the UK's departure from the European Union and the subsequent changes to aviation regulations. The key aspects of obtaining a UK licence for pilots, including the ability to hold both a UK Part-FCL (Flight Crew licencing) and a Part-FCL issued by an EASA member state or any other ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organisation) licence concurrently are as follows:-

1. UK Part-FCL and Concurrent Licences:

Pilots who wish to fly G-Reg aircraft in the UK are mandated to possess a UK Part-FCL. However, this does not mean you are restricted from holding licences from other countries. According to the new regulations, pilots can maintain both a UK Part-FCL and another Part-FCL issued by an EASA member state or any other ICAO member country. This provision allows pilots to operate under both sets of regulations, offering flexibility in their international flying activities.

2. Third Country Licence conversion requirements:

For pilots who already hold a licence issued by a non-EASA member state (referred to as a "third country licence"), there are specific requirements for converting it to a UK Part-FCL licence. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has published detailed guidelines on its website, outlining the process and necessary documentation for third country licence holders seeking to obtain a UK licence. The conversion process ensures that pilots meet the UK's aviation standards and regulations, facilitating a smooth transition for international pilots operating in the UK.

3. Obtaining a UK Licence without claiming credits:

The CAA offers an alternative pathway for pilots who wish to obtain a UK licence without claiming any credits from their existing licences. This option is particularly relevant for pilots who may have varied flying experiences and qualifications from multiple countries. By following the procedures outlined on the CAA's webpages, these pilots can apply for a UK Part-FCL based solely on meeting the specific UK aviation requirements. This approach ensures that pilots are assessed on their compliance with UK regulations and standard procedures.

Conclusion:

Gaining a UK licence for pilots became a legal requirement from 1st January 2023 for operating G-Reg aircraft in the UK. Pilots are allowed to hold both a UK Part-FCL and a licence from an EASA member state or any other ICAO member country simultaneously, providing them with flexibility in their flying activities. For pilots holding third country licences, the CAA has outlined a clear conversion process to obtain a UK Part-FCL licence. Additionally, pilots with varying qualifications can apply for a UK licence without claiming credits based on meeting the specific UK aviation requirements. These measures have been put in place to ensure safety and compliance with UK aviation standards while accommodating the diverse backgrounds of international pilots operating within the country.



Financing your training

Once you have decided on a career as a professional pilot, the biggest initial challenge is financing your training. The final total cost should not be underestimated and a significant contingency budget should be allocated, as inevitably the training is going to cost more and take longer than originally anticipated.

Average training costs are currently between £80,000 - £120,000 but maybe more once ancillaries and extras are added.

Financing options will vary according to the type of course selected. Unless you are fortunate enough to have access to significant funds you will need to obtain some form of financing. In the current economic climate funding options are quite limited and generally security and/or guarantees are required. Here we outline the options available for each type of training option:

Financing the integrated and modular route

In the past HSBC, NatWest, and BBVA bank have offered professional development loans. However there are currently no banks offering loans for pilot training, necessitating the need for you to secure your own funding, unless you have managed to secure a place on one of the sponsored training courses.

However, modular training is generally cheaper and you can spread your training over a longer period of time, allowing you to work in between modules and keep debt to manageable levels. Depending on market conditions it may also be necessary to fund a type rating and or line training in order to get your first job. BALPA does not condone this trend or encourage anyone to follow this route.

Financing the MPL

The MPL is generally linked to a full or part sponsored programme with a specific airline and this sponsorship will generally cover at least half the cost of the course. Currently only a limited number of part sponsored opportunities are available and obviously competition for the positions is intense.

MPL training is always offered in conjunction with a partner airline, flying a specific type. Again, due to volatility in the market hiring requirements can change overnight and individuals can be at risk of not completing training, resulting in the need to re-train along a traditional path. In this circumstance a conversion to a standard ATPL (Frozen) licence can be completed, but will obviously incur further costs and delays.

Some training organisations may have relationships with banks or finance houses that could make access to funding easier; you should enquire when speaking to training organisations. When considering taking out a large loan, careful consideration should be given to your ability to repay the loan.

Repayments can be around £1,500 a month depending on the terms, and if employment is not secured immediately upon graduation a strategy needs to be in place to meet the obligation.

This is why back-up qualifications and skills are vital. Even if employment is secured, starting pay is often low and irregular, especially where an individual is offered only contract or 'pay by the flight hour' work. The increasing numbers of cadet contract pilots has already led to some bankruptcies, and we cannot stress highly enough how important careful financial planning is.

Ultimately a huge financial commitment is required. Salaries have been driven down in real terms over the years due to inflation. You must make a major decision as to whether the outlay and associated risks can be justified when measured against career potential and associated earnings.



“Full motion simulators recreate the aircraft’s performance and handling, allowing the trainee to experience its flight dynamics”



Airline training

Once you have completed your basic and advanced training to achieve your frozen ATPL the next logical step is to apply for a job with an airline willing to employ low-hours pilots. When you have secured a position, you will be trained at the airline to gain the type rating for the aircraft you will be flying, and you will be taught the company's policies and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). This will generally consist of Ground School, Simulator Training, Base Training and Line Training.

Type rating

The type rating on your licence allows you to fly a particular aircraft type. For example, to fly the Airbus A320 you need to have the A319/320/321 rating on your licence. The type rating is completed in a Full Flight Simulator (FFS). These full motion simulators recreate the aircraft's performance and handling, allowing the trainee to experience its flight dynamics and flight deck surroundings without leaving the ground. This is a safe and cost-effective way to complete this stage of the training.

The course is normally completed over several weeks, encompassing the Ground School Phase, Simulator Phase and Flying Phase (Base Training).

Ground school

The syllabus covers the aircraft's systems and the airline's SOPs for both normal and non-normal/emergency flight operations. It usually comprises some computer-based self training and classroom sessions and will last about 10 days.

Simulator Phase

Once the ground school is complete and further exams have been passed, you will move on to the flight simulator phase of training, where you will be paired with another student to be taught how to operate the aircraft as a team. A strict syllabus will be covered and will culminate in a final flight test (Licence Skills Test) with an approved CAA examiner. This will normally comprise nine to 12 four-hour sessions, depending on type.

Base Training

You finally fly the aircraft you are completing the rating for! Base training will consist of a minimum of six take-offs and landings and will be your first experience of flying a commercial aircraft. A circuit pattern will be flown to allow you to complete the required number of take-offs and landings to a safe and satisfactory standard.

This completes the requirements of the type rating and the licence is now endorsed with the type by the CAA – for a fee, of course, hopefully (but not always) paid by the airline!

Line Training

Once the type rating has been completed, the next stage is Line Training, which consists of flying regular commercial sectors for your employing airline with passengers or freight. On each flight you will be with a qualified training captain who will supervise your flying for a defined number of sectors. This may be around 40 sectors or 100 hours depending on type, experience and qualifications. In addition to this, on the first few sectors there will be another qualified first officer on the jump seat to act as a safety pilot.

Line Training teaches the additional skills and knowledge required in the day-to-day operation of that aircraft type within that airline. When you have completed the required number of sectors to a satisfactory standard, you will be put forward for your Line Check.

This will consist of a sector as Pilot Flying (PF), where you actually fly the aircraft, followed by a sector as Pilot Non Flying (PNF), where you will carry out duties such as liaising with air traffic control, flight plan monitoring etc. Once you complete your Multi Crew Co-operation course you will have a good idea of the differing roles and how they complement each other on the flight deck, so an explanation at this point on the PF and PNF roles is not necessary.

Other considerations

Airlines fund the type ratings and line training in various ways. Some pay for the ratings themselves and bond the employee for a number of years on a reducing bond that the employee will usually be required to pay back if he or she leaves before it is discharged.

In effect, no money changes hands. Other airlines take the cost of training from the employee's wages for a set term. Once again if the employee leaves, he or she will usually have to repay the outstanding training costs. There are some airlines that require the pilot to pay for a type rating in full before commencing training, usually at a cost – about **£18,000 to £35,000** – but in this instance the pilot isn't bonded and can leave the airline at any point.

As a comparison, for example, a high street price for an A320 type rating would be approximately £24,000 but some airlines are charging up to £35,000, so it's vital that you fully understand the contract you sign up to and exactly what is or is not included in your training package.

You should clarify what happens in the unlikely event that you are not successful during any part of the training. For example, if you failed the final simulator check and your contract included base and line training would you get a refund for this? It is possible to complete the type rating and line training without having employment.

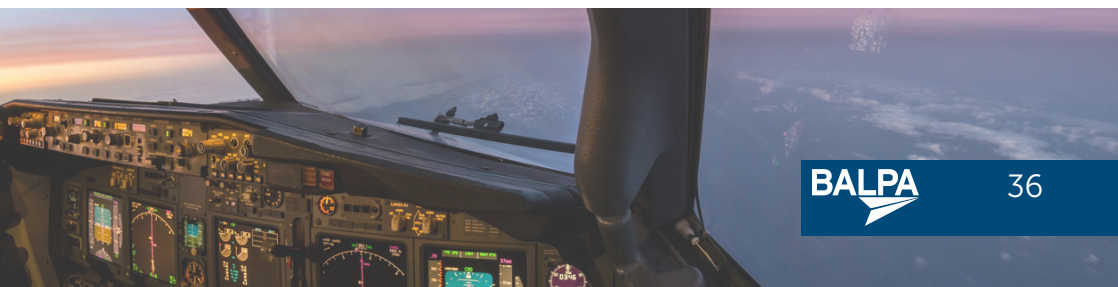
Some agencies and FTOs will charge you to put you through your type rating and place you with an airline to operate as a first officer until completion of your line training, in some cases flying with the participating airline for up to 500 hours. You would receive no salary during hours-building, so arguably you are paying the airline to work for them.

However, without experience on line it is difficult to find employment, and any decision to embark on such a course should be carefully considered. Some agencies or airlines offer a possible opportunity of permanent employment, but again you should research and question fully to ensure what will be delivered.

The cost of this varies depending upon the company, and often does not usually come with any guaranteed job offer at the end of the line training or hours-building. The risk to consider here is that you are rating yourself on one particular aircraft, and therefore in the event that you do not continue with that airline, it makes you more attractive only to other airlines operating that type, and can be a waste of money if you land a job with the operator of a different type. This airline may then require you to fund another type rating which might be beyond you financially once you've funded the first rating.

BALPA does not recommend self-funding type ratings unless absolutely necessary. There is a huge risk attached to doing so, and there are often no guarantees of employment at the end of training. If a type rating seems to be the only option, very careful consideration should be given to the type of aircraft chosen – go for one that will give the best employment opportunities upon graduation.

Considerable research should be undertaken to identify potential employers, aircraft types in use around the world, growth areas and the training organisation itself.





Getting a job

Arguably, securing your first commercial pilot position is the most difficult challenge of your career, and no flying training organisation offers absolute guarantees.

Bear in mind that the training path takes approximately two years, and as aviation is extremely volatile, the job market can change drastically between commencing and completing your training.

Before embarking on a costly and time-consuming training programme it is important to ask some key questions:

- **What is the likelihood of securing a commercial pilot position upon graduation from training?**
- **Where are the growth areas going to be in the future – if these are outside the UK, am prepared to move and live abroad for significant periods of time?**
- **Am I going to be able to secure a position that will service any training debts sufficiently?**
- **Will the financial commitment I need to make in my career be a worthwhile investment in the long term?**
- **Does the profession offer me the rewards and lifestyle I am looking for?**
- **Is the profession able to give me the security that I would need if I have a family to support?**

While it may seem odd that BALPA would highlight the lows of the profession, the degradation in terms and conditions, coupled with the increased flexibility required and lack of security in certain respects should be fully considered when making such a commitment. There is still a good career to be forged in commercial aviation, but unfortunately it now can be somewhat risky.

Our members ultimately love the job and still have a huge passion for the profession. However, we are keen to ensure that this passion does not lead them down the wrong career path and individuals are fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead before the commitment is made, rather than when the point of no return is reached.

Traditionally UK airlines will start hiring in the autumn so that the correct numbers of pilots are in place for the following peak summer season. Ideally, to prevent a possible break in currency (keeping your licences current) your training should be planned so that you will have completed by the end of the summer. This will give you time to write and send your CV and make the follow up calls and emails. Recruitment departments usually ring to schedule an interview, so it is imperative you are contactable during this time. Ensure you reply to any emails and complete any online application steps promptly.

Airlines can change their requirements at very short notice, so just because you didn't meet their requirements initially doesn't rule you out entirely, so you must keep in regular contact.

If you are unable to secure a position immediately upon graduation we recommend that you try to get temporary employment in an aviation-related environment. This will help you to keep informed of changes in the industry and make important connections.

Airlines receive large numbers of CVs from pilots, so you must ensure that you meet their expectations in terms of presentation. Time should be spent after graduation preparing for interviews and ensuring that you meet all the selection criteria – not just on technical flying skills. Your social skills play an important part, and often an airline recruitment officer will state that the ultimate deciding factor was whether they would like to spend 10 hours in a cockpit with that individual.

Perseverance is a key to getting a job. Individuals must be prepared to proactively market themselves. Some pilots have taken up to five years to secure their first opportunity, but one to two years is a more normal time-frame.

BALPA offers a careers guidance service, including techniques for interview preparation and job searching. This booklet is aimed at individuals who are about to start training, so more detailed advice and guidance is not appropriate at this point.

TIP: CV and interview advice is available via the careers section of the BALPA portal. You can access this with your nextGen membership.



“Contracts are changing and the big salaries associated with being a pilot are disappearing fast”



Salary and benefits

Salary

It is largely assumed that pilots are well paid and some are. Generally, only after several years experience and a several promotions will you finally enjoy a good income with associated benefits. That said, contracts are changing and the big salaries associated with being a pilot are fast disappearing. Certainly the benefits packages on the whole are being considerably stripped down, with expensive items such as final salary pensions, permanent health insurance and private healthcare becoming rare.

On starting out in the current climate, please do not expect to earn a lot of money. There are some contracts out there for low-hours pilots which may barely pay you enough to live on, let alone cover the cost of your training. Equally, be aware that there are a number of carriers offering relatively low remuneration for your services.

If the airline requires you to pay for a type rating which appears to be an increasing trend, or bonds you for a period of years, you will earn a reduced monthly salary until the debt has been paid or the time period is up.

Even though things seems to be moving towards contract pilots being paid for flying hours only, most airlines will pay a monthly salary.

There are complex formulae by which a pilot will receive the advertised salary, and this depends on the airline. Different payments are totalled to produce a final payment at the end of the working month.

The individual payments may consist of:

Duty Pay

This can be an hourly rate paid per duty hour.

Flight Pay

An hourly rate that is paid from the moment the aircraft moves under its own power to the moment you stop on stand.

Sector Pay

A fixed amount paid per sector, sometimes dependent upon sector length. (A sector is defined as take-off to landing. Multiple sectors may be completed in a day, depending on length.)

Allowances

These vary according to the company, but in essence can be a fixed payment per day, dependent on destination and duration of stopover, or an hourly rate if you were to operate away from base – a Luton pilot sent to operate out of Manchester, for example. These allowances are there to cover the expenses incurred.

Most salaries are made up of a combination of the above and are added to your basic pay. The average current rate of basic starting pay, without allowances, could be:

- Flying instructor - £1,100 per month and usually £15-£25 per flying hour
- Turboprop - £17,000 - £35,000 per annum
- Small Business Jet - £17,000 - £35,000 per annum
- Short-haul A320/B737 - First Officer £35,000 - £60,000 per annum
- Long-haul A330/B787 - First Officer £55,000+ per annum

It is unlikely that most new graduate trainees would secure a long-haul position. A command position on a turboprop could be secured with around 2,500 total hours (if a significant proportion of those hours were on multi-crew turboprop aircraft).

Depending on the entry hours therefore, an individual could expect to be promoted in three to five years, leading to a salary of between £40-£50,000. However, an individual might choose to move airlines earlier to gain valuable jet experience prior to achieving turboprop command. This would lead to a longer command time, but improve overall career prospects and earnings potential. Minimum hours for medium jet command are at least 3,500, with significant proportion on multi-crew and type, and might take up to seven years from graduation with a starting salary of around £60-70,000 depending on type and airline.

Please note that the hours requirements are absolute minimums, and few individuals are promoted at this point. Command is generally based on seniority, and although you might meet the qualifications there may be few if any promotions each year, and individuals can wait 10 years or more to gain command.

Due to seniority, individuals who move airlines will increase their time to command and thus reduce their earnings potential and associated pension, as no matter how much experience is acquired, a new joiner (except in special circumstances such as when an airline needs to buy in 'Direct Entry' experience) will go to the bottom of a seniority list.

Benefits

If you are lucky enough to be offered a contract with a benefits package when starting out, they will vary from airline to airline depending upon the negotiated contracts for each company. The sort of benefits a pilot may find in the industry are:

Pension

Most companies have very competitive pensions that require contribution from the pilot, although most final salary schemes are being closed and replaced by money purchase schemes.

- Life insurance/Death in Service benefit
- Loss of Licence insurance
- Medical insurance
- Job security with seniority list
- Additional payments for overtime/day off payments
- Four to six weeks leave per annum
- Staff travel benefits
- Career progression
- Rostering agreements
- Profit Share or Performance Bonus schemes
- Share schemes
- Loyalty bonus
- Personal Accident insurance

Contract pilots

Some new graduates are being offered only contract work. In some circumstance, this may require an individual to set themselves up as a limited company and contract their services to a client airline, or be employed through an agency. The nature and content of these contracts vary considerably, with some offering pay only for flight hours.

This means that individuals may position around the network or undertake ground duties on an unpaid basis, which can severely compromise earnings.

Rates vary between £20-£100 per hour, and whilst earnings may be good during peak times there are no associated benefits, no sick pay, no pay when on leave and obviously no pay during quieter times. As pay is not guaranteed, individuals must plan very carefully and consider their ability to pay debts and financial commitments before entering into such an arrangement. An airline has no obligation, unless agreed, to commit to a level of work and may pick up and put down people on a random basis.



Careers

The airline industry is global and offers a varied range of flying opportunities. Even though you may have an underlying goal in your career, the volatility of the industry means it is very difficult to predict how your career will develop. Two pilots graduating from the same FTO on the same day can have dramatically differing careers.

Flying jobs

Focusing on airline flying, the overall career path of the commercial pilot has conformed to a certain structure for many years and generally follows the pattern detailed below:

- Flight Instructor (Usually the Modular Route)
- Turboprop First Officer- Command Turboprop
- 737/A320 First Officer- Command Jet
- Long Haul A330/787 First Officer, then final promotion to Captain

This is not set in stone, however, and depending on market conditions an entry may be made directly into a turboprop or even a jet position.

Flight instruction is a good starting point which does allow the low hours pilot to build a significant amount of hours and gain invaluable flying experience. Alternatively, some find opportunities banner towing, conducting aerial photography, flying skydivers or simply self-funding hours building.

However, the Integrated training programme can transition a cadet directly into the right hand seat of an airliner, though some believe the period of flight instruction to be an important part of flying that should not be side-stepped.

Turboprop flying has always been a good starting point for low hours pilots to gain multi engine, multi crew experience. The nature of these operations (short intense sectors with multiple take offs and landings) allows the low hours pilot to build hours quickly and to attain excellent flying experience to un-freeze their ATPL in a couple of years. This is the period in your career where you need to be most flexible.

Securing your first commercial position can prove the most challenging aspect of your career, and to ensure the greatest chance of success you should be prepared to go anywhere in the world to get onto the ladder. Depending on market conditions, securing a position can take a significant period of time and maintaining currency during this period can be quite a challenge, often due to lack of funds.

Once this initial experience has been gained you will have more control over your future and you will be a much more attractive proposition to prospective employers. From this point in your career you should be able to choose who you want to work for, and map out a more definitive career path. You can elect to progress to a command on the turboprop or move on to a jet such as a B737 or A320.

However, as previously mentioned this will normally require a move to a different base, or even to another country, and bonding considerations will need to be taken into account when considering the timing of this move. Some individuals choose to stay on turboprops for their whole careers as it suits their lifestyles and meets their aspirations. The choice of career path becomes quite personal once the initial experience has been gained.

If a transition to the short haul jet is undertaken, there are good career prospects with a number of carriers and many choose to stay, attaining a command and often progressing into training. Again, lifestyle and family commitments as well as the economics of the aviation market will play a large part in the choice of career path.

Alternatively a move can be made to the long-haul environment, flying wide bodied aircraft such as the B787, A350 or A330. This progression might be available with the existing employer, or it might involve a change of operator.

Again, basing, bonding and timing will be vital considerations in such a move. It is highly unlikely that a pilot could move from a command on a short-haul jet and change company to a direct entry command on a long-haul aircraft. A move to long-haul will often involve a demotion to First Officer for a considerable period of time, coupled with the probability of going back to the bottom of the seniority list.

In most airlines your joining rank will be First Officer (FO) but some carriers, such as Cathay Pacific and easyJet, employ Second Officers. This is a rank given to an inexperienced pilot until they have sufficient experience to be an First Officer with the company. Progression to the next rank is usually based on hours.

Once you gain enough hours or attain employment as an First Officer you will fly in the right-hand seat until your hours and experience build to a level at which you are eligible for a command. Promotion to command, however, is not guaranteed and is not solely dependent on experience and skill. A vacancy usually has to exist in order to progress to the left seat and that could result in a frustrating period of waiting (often for many years) while you work your way up the seniority list, which usually happens only when pilots above retire, leave or get promoted.

Seniority lists do provide excellent job security to those established within an airline. Negotiated policy often means that redundancies are made from the bottom of a

seniority list, and a number of other policies such as roster bidding, command and base transfer requests are all based on seniority – so it rewards loyalty and length of service, but obviously leaves you vulnerable as a new joiner. However, seniority lists can have a considerable impact on your career if you move employer, as any new joiner will usually automatically go to the bottom, regardless of previous experience.

Generally airlines promote from within, so for most First Officers' promotion to Captain will be in their current airline. In most major network carriers with several types and operations, promotion can mean moving between operations and aircraft types – long-haul First Officer to short-haul Captain, for instance – and again this will usually involve a change of base and more upheaval for families.

Once sufficient experience is gained as a Captain you may be eligible to apply for the position as Training Captain (TCapt). Initially the promotion is to Line Trainer, where an individual undertakes training on the aircraft for new joiners, new commands and annual check flights. Subsequently with further training and qualifications, a simulator training position can be attained, initially as an instructor, but examiner positions are a further progression. This involves training pilots for type ratings, biannual checks, command courses, recruitment checks etc.

Airline ranks in brief:

Second Officer (SO)

The rank a low-hour pilot gains when first joining the airline. This is an old rank and today is employed only by a couple of airlines. Promotion is usually received upon the pilot gaining enough hours experience.

First Officer (FO)

This is the more common rank of pilots found in the right-hand seat.

Senior First Officer (SFO)

The most senior position in the right-hand seat, normally secured as individuals are approaching eligibility for command.

Captain (Capt)

When a place becomes available an SFO or FO with the right experience, skill and seniority will undergo a command course to be promoted to Capt and will command the aircraft from the left-hand seat (right-hand seat in helicopters).

Training Captain

Once qualified, the Training Captain provides simulator and line training to new and experienced pilots.

Ongoing training/testing

You might assume that once you have passed a type rating and line training you have reached the end of the hurdle race! However, as a pilot you will be required to complete ongoing training and checking. This is an onerous part of a pilot's life but ensures that safety and quality are maintained.

Annual requirements are usually as follows:

- Annual medical check – not as rigorous as the initial medical and can be completed by a local Aeromedical Examiner (AME).
- Annual line check – a normal passenger flight with a training captain who will audit for procedure compliance, knowledge and currency.
- Simulator check – normally every six months over two days where non-normal and emergency procedures are tested and trained.
- SEP training day (or days) – safety training comprising fire and door drills, crew resource management, technical refresher, security and dangerous goods training.

Non-Flying Jobs

The aviation industry offers more than just flying jobs. Non-flying positions are also available and can be a useful in building your career, but may be undertaken on a part-time basis alongside flying duties. These positions will present themselves as you progress through the industry but there is no obligation to apply. However, they provide excellent opportunities to gain additional qualifications and experience.

Examples include:

- Crew Resource Management (CRM) instructor
- Safety Equipment Protocols (SEP) instructor
- Flight Crew Liaison Officer (FCLO) – responsible for debriefing crews on safety related issues
- Safety Pilot – responsible for monitoring safety systems
- Technical Pilot – responsible for technical matters
- Project Pilots – responsible for specific project work such as fuel saving initiatives
- Air Traffic Officer – pilot representative responsible for liaison with various air traffic agencies

Management positions within the company are also available to pilots, such as Chief Pilot, Fleet Manager, Base Manager or Safety Manager. Pilot managers will normally still fly on the line from time to time, but primarily have other office/management duties.

Most additional posts attract pay supplements as well as extra qualifications which can be a useful addition to the CV. If you lose your medical or are unable to fly, they can ensure that you remain employed in the aviation industry.



Lifestyle

A historical preconception is that the lifestyle of a pilot is glamorous and exciting. Unfortunately this can be far from the truth; in reality, there is often little if any glamour in the life of today's pilot. On a whole a pilot can work long irregular, anti- social hours, often at very short notice periods and unless the crew is provided with a roster well in advance, it is often difficult to plan any form of social/private life around the duty roster.

The airline industry is a highly competitive market driven on the whole by finance and profit. As businesses, airlines are trying to push down costs to compete in the current market, and crews in general are being asked to work to deliver increased productivity every year for what appears to be relatively less reward.

The overall lifestyle does largely depend on the type of flying career but the number of permitted duty hours are strictly controlled by the Flight Time Limitations regulations.

A maximum number of hours a pilot can fly in a rolling year (from chocks off to chocks on each sector) is nine hundred and this in our opinion should be viewed as the safety limit, but a number of carriers now appear to see this as a target to hit to achieve maximum productivity. Those nine hundred flight hours are then often split into limits that can be flown in the day, week and month.

A pilot is only allowed to do a certain amount of hours' duty time in a twenty four hour period that varies depending upon certain factors. These are the pilot's start time, how many sectors the pilot has to fly and their relative acclimatisation to the time zone they find themselves in.

Generally you can break down the type of operations into four categories: [Long-Haul](#), [Short-Haul](#), [Regional](#) and [Charter](#) and all come with a differing lifestyle attached to them.

On [short-haul/regional operations](#), four or more consecutive sectors can be flown on one duty period, without leaving the aircraft. This will result in a busier working day with more take off and landings to be achieved than long-haul which is usually only one sector and many pilots only achieve one landing or so a month. The upside to short-haul is that you will mostly be at home by the end of the working day, home at night and it is good for building experience with short sectors to a range of airports. However, although you might be scheduled to fly to great cities such as Budapest or Barcelona which might sound glamorous and exciting the reality is that all you will see is the airport which you will have left within 30-40 minutes of arriving there.

[Charter](#) flying often involves many night sectors operating in and out of challenging airfields, and mid-range flights which can be very tiring during the summer months but usually quieter during the winter with opportunities to undertake contract work abroad (such as the Hajj in Indonesia for three months).

[Long-haul](#) operations can provide an attractive lifestyle if you do not mind being away from home and can cope with the numerous time zone changes that can be experienced as you traverse the planet. These types of operation will require the crew to be on duty for various lengths of time resulting in a limited number of flights per month. For example, the crew may be rostered on a four night trip to New York followed by three local rest nights at home before heading off for a nine day Sydney trip via Hong Kong or Bangkok. Increasingly though, long-haul may involve 'bullets' which involve flying out to a destination on day one, overnighting and then flying back overnight day two to three which can be gruelling. Due to the long sector lengths flight hours build up quickly so a long haul pilot could expect an average of four or five trips a month.

Larger network carriers usually have a bidding system for flights and unfortunately the lower down the seniority list you are the less choice you have to choose from. So expect to be flying the times and flights everyone else higher up the seniority list doesn't want for the first few years.

On [short-haul](#) operations a pilot will tend to complete blocks of flights. Generally you will be rostered on several early flights back to back that will start at around 0500 in the morning and finish around 12-1600 in the afternoon. Or on afternoon flights that will start at around 1100-1400 and usually finish around midnight, delays and weather permitting. Both these duty periods will generally consist of multiple sectors. If you are lucky, your company will have a stable roster and you could expect to have a six on three off or five on four off shift pattern for example.

If a fixed roster pattern is not in place then the flights can be completely random with minimum rest periods between duties. Theoretically there should always be enough time to rest before you go back to work the next day but managing fatigue can be a challenge for the modern pilot.

Most airlines also have standby periods. This is where you will be on call and be available to fly with approximately 90 minutes notice, if for some reason the airline is short of crews that duty period. When on standby you will be required to remain a commutable distance from your base and be contactable throughout this period.

With most carriers the peak of operations is during the summer holiday season so you need to be prepared to work hard around this time, especially if you are employed by a low cost carrier or charter airline. The rest of the year can still remain busy with business travellers, domestic routes and peaks can be expected around the Christmas/Easter and half-term periods.

Whilst rosters are usually published with at least two to four weeks notice, these are subject to change and many airlines have a great deal of disruption at times. Some of this is outside of their control such as volcanic ash events, ATC strikes, bad weather etc but some can be self-inflicted (such as crew shortages, etc). Whatever the reason, the knock on consequence is that this brings significant disruption to your lifestyle, family and social life. At times it requires very understanding relationships to deal with the resulting disappointments and multiple changes of plan.

The examples listed above are a broad overview of the current expected lifestyles and rostering of a pilot today. But as always, there are exceptions and when the recession in 2007 began, 'pay to fly' contracts were introduced by some carriers. These generally involved the pilot being on-call but being paid for flying time only. Pilots would be given little visibility of future flying requirements and can be picked up and put down at will.

This led to uncertainty and could be coupled with a very small unstable income. These contracts were designed to provide flexibility to the carrier and usually involve all the training costs being met by the applicant as detailed earlier in this booklet. At present (2023) these contracts cease to exist in the UK, however the industry is ever changing and it is important to keep an eye out for such contracts and to avoid them.

Once you have gained some good airline experience you will need to consider how your career might progress. Do you stay with your current employer or will you have to change employers to gain more experience on a different type in a different environment? Often any change of employer is likely to also lead to a need to relocate as there will be a change of base involved.


This is also likely if you wish to take up a command with an existing employer as it is likely that the command vacancy will not be at your current base. Whilst you might wish to wait until an opportunity arises at your base this could mean many years delay in your promotion and resulting financial implications. With many operators the need to relocate might also necessitate a move abroad which brings a plethora of additional complications – language, tax, finances, mortgages etc.

This can be hugely disruptive to your family life, especially if you have to take into account children, when such decisions are compounded by house sales and schooling arrangements. Many opt to commute back and forth until a command becomes available at their original base but again, this can take many years to materialise and can cause huge strain in the interim period whilst family units are dislocated.

The job of a professional pilot is still hugely rewarding and challenging, but unfortunately the days of 10 day trips to an exotic island are almost history.

Comment from Captain:

"I wish this booklet had been available before I started training."



"A historical preconception is that the lifestyle of a pilot is glamorous and exciting. Unfortunately, this is far from the truth..."

Conclusion

The decision to train to become a pilot is a huge one. It is likely to be a huge financial commitment and lifestyle change that will impact you and your family for years to come.

A career as a pilot can be amazing, but we want to ensure that all hopeful pilots have a clear understanding of the role and commitment required before making their decision.

We hope that this resource will help you weigh up the pros and cons and will leave you better placed to make your decision.

We may see you in the skies soon!



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