

15 December 2023

By Electronic Submission

Australian Government
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Domestic Policy
PO Box 6500
CANBERRA ACT 2600

To Whom It May Concern,

SUBMISSION TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE INQUIRY

Introduction

The Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) represents over 2,300 professional airline transport category flight crew, specifically within the Qantas group of pilots. AIPA is a key member of the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA), which represents over 110,000 pilots in over 70 countries globally. AIPA maintains a dedicated Safety and Technical organisation committed to safeguarding and advancing Australia's aviation safety standards and operations.

Direct Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

- The aviation industry bore one of the most significant impacts from COVID-19 shutdowns and restrictions. While acknowledging that the Terms of Reference (TOR) exclude the effects of unilateral actions by states and territories, these actions profoundly affected our members.
- Poor coordination of COVID safety requirements and border closures imposed an unnecessary burden on aircrew.
- International ports, particularly in China, implemented draconian regulations on aircrew.
- Lack of coordination between the Commonwealth, states, and territory governments made it challenging to operate aircraft interstate and overseas, dealing with varying health and quarantine requirements.
- Due to travel restrictions, lockdowns, and declining air travel demand, Qantas, Jetstar, QantasLink, National Jet Systems, Network Aviation, and other airlines faced financial challenges, resulting in reduced flight schedules, redundancies, layoffs, and furloughs.
- Many experienced job uncertainty or loss as airlines scaled back operations in response to decreased passenger numbers when borders closed both nationally and internationally.
- Pilots called to fly did not know if flights would materialise but had to risk their secondary employment to meet the company's inconsistent needs and demands for servicing the Australian traveling public.

- Those who did fly found themselves having to quarantine in hotels that were not fit-for-purpose, both in outports and domestic settings. One Melbourne-based Second Officer reported having only three days in six months when he was not required to be in some form of “lockdown”.
- Many returning pilots felt their flying and cognitive skills had eroded.
- Other pilots decided to leave the industry and pursue new careers.

Pilot Skill Shortages

- Qantas’ decision to offer or assign early retirement led to the departure of many experienced training personnel, hampering the subsequent rapid return to flying.
- Shortages of skilled labor persist for various reasons, particularly in the pilot sector, where the impact is significant. Major US airlines have hired 10,000 new pilots this year, resulting in pay increases of 30 to 40 per cent over the next three years. The US median pay rate in 2022 was USD212,000. Today, Canadian pilots are crossing the border in search of opportunities arising from these developments.
- More fundamentally, there is a shortage of experienced pilots that cannot be resolved in the short term.
- The industry, across the board, is losing its appeal, making employee attraction more challenging. The only short-term solution involves higher costs.

Supply Chains

- Supply chain disruption persists, with airlines grappling with a lack of spare parts, leading to unnecessary downtime and disruptions for the traveling public. Additionally, there is a prolonged lead time for new aircraft. Indian airlines alone have ordered almost 1,000 new aircraft, while both Boeing and Airbus struggle to meet demand due to supply chain delays.

Individual Health and Safety

The impacts of COVID-19 will take years to recover from for many pilots.

- During the pandemic, many members were stood down and resorted to secondary employment. While JobKeeper was appreciated, pilot skills were diminished.
- The psychological impact of prolonged isolation has not been adequately addressed by employers or the government, resulting in long-term consequences such as relationship breakdowns, substance abuse, anxiety, and depression within the pilot profession.
- Some members still suffer trauma arising from physical and mental health issues, financial distress, job uncertainty, and social dislocation.
- The disinformation on vaccines was not effectively countered by the Commonwealth Government.
- Vaccine promotion and precautionary mask-wearing were abandoned too early by most jurisdictions.

Recovery and Future Sustainability Impacts

Understanding how the world and Australia dealt with the COVID-19 crisis is crucial. The slow recovery of the aviation sector poses challenges for pilots in terms of re-employment, and the training pipelines for new pilots have been affected.

Recommendations and Next Steps

- Establish global protocols for agreement on national border closures.

- Domestic states and territories in Australia need to establish fully coordinated systems for common data monitoring, and health and medical services need to be enhanced to be fully prepared for another pandemic.
- Consider the industrial relations implications of workforce standdown in IR policy and address unforeseen superannuation insurance denials for illness in future financial regulation.
- Improved collaboration and outputs from the Commonwealth Government regarding mask-wearing are key.
- Incorporate the importance of fresh air and exercise into future isolation facilities.

Being prepared for potential future pandemics in the aviation industry involves implementing robust contingency plans and strategies such as:

- Civil Aviation Safety Authority and employer understanding and acceptance of a compassionate approach to mental health issues
- Flexible operations planning
- Financial resilience
- Remote work and technology integration
- Health and safety protocols for airlines
- Supply chain diversification for critical components
- Cross training and workforce flexibility
- Collaboration and information sharing with other stakeholders (Flight Centre)
- Scenario planning and simulation
- Federal, state and international government cooperation and standardisation
- Public communication strategies
- Retention of experienced aviation personnel

It is critical to enhance our resilience and preparedness for potential future pandemics to avoid the discordance and incoherence of international flying that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Failure to adequately prepare may subject the aviation industry and our pilots to uncertainty and unscalable impacts, both personally and professionally.

Conclusion

The aviation industry faced substantial challenges due to COVID-19 shutdowns and restrictions, with a notable impact on AIPA's members. Despite the TOR excluding the effects of unilateral state actions, such actions significantly affected the industry. Poor coordination of COVID safety requirements and border closures added an avoidable burden on the industry and aircrew, often with severe and lasting impacts, including challenges in coordination, skill shortages, supply chain disruptions, and individual well-being. AIPA's recommendations stress the importance of global protocols, domestic coordination, mental health support, and strategic planning for future pandemics. The Association urges government action to ensure a more resilient and coordinated response in the face of future challenges.

Yours sincerely,



Captain Tony Lucas
President

Tel: 61 – 2 – 8307 7777
Email: office@aipa.org.au