

Flying Arts Alliance teacher Lee Fullarton with New Farm State School year 6 students Joni Lehn and Avalon Walton Santos. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen

Soaring costs as demand crashes

Airlines defend route cuts

Robyn Ironside

Australia's major domestic airlines have defended cuts to regional routes, saying they can't afford to operate flights that lose money due to weak demand and high costs.

Since the Middle East conflict sent jet fuel prices soaring as much as 140 per cent, Qantas, Virgin Australia and Jetstar have suspended several routes because they were financially unsustainable.

These include Gold Coast-Darwin, Adelaide-Cairns, Adelaide-Mt Gambier and Launceston-Perth.

Rex has also axed Melbourne-Devonport, King Island-Burnie, Sydney-Orange and Sydney-Port Macquarie.

Executives of the two big airline groups fronted a Senate Committee in recent days to discuss the state of aviation and its ability to deliver reliable and affordable services to rural, regional and remote communities.

Virgin chief customer officer Andrew Cleary said "airline inflation" was running at twice the actual inflation rate, excluding the doubling of the fuel price. He said, in that environment, cost discipline was critical and routes where demand was insufficient to counter the fuel bill had to go.

"We would've looked forward and stuck it out but jet fuel made it completely unsustainable and this is not a two-to-three-month spike in jet fuel," Mr Cleary said.

"There are very few people in the industry who believe this will be a short run impact."

Qantas Domestic chief executive Markus Svensson echoed those sentiments, saying the airline preferred to launch routes, not cut them.

He said the cost of flying to regional centres was typically higher than operating trunk routes, because of a range of factors including the aircraft type and airport fees.

"A heavy maintenance check on a Q400 costs double that of a Boeing 737," Mr Svensson said.

"On a typical $197 fare, around $93 is made up by government, airport and security fees and charges, and that's before the airline pays for aircraft crew or fuel or maintenance."

Qantas also came under fire over the closure of three regional bases in April. QantasLink chief executive Mark Dal Pra said 31 of the 71 pilots and cabin crew affected had chosen to remain in either Hobart, Mildura or Canberra and commute to Sydney or Melbourne.

Another 33 had relocated to the larger cities, and seven had chosen to leave the airline.

Both Mr Cleary and Mr Svensson stressed that route networks were the subject of extensive research and came under close scrutiny.

Mr Cleary said routes were determined by demand, or a "reasonable expectation of stimulating demand".

"We are certainly not looking to build a network that's based on hopes and dreams; we're looking to build a network that is sustainable."

Both airline groups said the government could help ensure the viability of regional routes by limiting taxes and charges in that area, and introducing a dispute resolution scheme for airport negotiations.

Creative solution to rural divide

Rose Innes

A groundbreaking digital initiative is bridging the creative divide, offering students in rural and remote Queensland the same vibrant arts education as their city counterparts.

Launched by the Flying Arts Alliance, the For Schools program delivers specialised visual arts lessons directly to regional classrooms. At the heart of the digital platform is a cartoon version of Flying Arts founder Mervyn Moriarty, who takes to the skies in animated form to teach and inspire a new generation.

Isolated Children's Parents Association Queensland president Wendy Henning said it was a "step in the right direction" for kids who often missed out on specialist subjects.

"The whole broad range of the arts has always been something that ICPA Queensland's advocated for," she said.

Flying Arts Alliance teacher Lee Fullarton said it was exciting children in regional Queensland would be able to connect with exceptional artists: "For Schools has the potential to transform education, inspiring not only children but also the teachers who guide them."

Minister for Education and the Arts John-Paul Langbroek said participation was a key contributor to children's development and wellbeing.

"I encourage Queenslanders who share a passion for arts education and regional communities to join these donors in helping bring For Schools to even more students," he said.

Rail bid not yet on track

Transport Minister Brent Mickelberg says rail services will not be extended to Gold Coast Airport until after the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

McPherson MP Leon Rebello launched a campaign in August this year calling on the federal government to fund a detailed business case on the extension.

But in response to an e-petition urging the state government to consider extending heavy rail further south to Tweed Heads, Mr Mickelberg stated that the line from Varsity Lakes to Coolangatta would not be delivered before 2032.

"While investigations into the extension to Gold Coast Airport are under way, delivery of the project is not funded, and isn't anticipated prior to 2032," he said.

Hospital manager loses flexi-time battle

Judith Kerr

A Logan Hospital senior manager responsible for 32 full-time-equivalent administration staff has lost her fight to finish work as early as 2.36pm after taking Queensland Health to the state's industrial umpire.

Kelly Meakin, administration manager of the hospital's busy Women's and Children's Services unit, challenged a decision to only partly approve her request. She wanted flexibility to work between 6am and 5pm, including opportunities to start at 6.30am and finish at 2.36pm, while accumulating extra hours to take time off by agreement.

But Metro South Health argued her senior responsibilities required her presence during core business hours of 8am to 4pm.

Her duties included supervising staff, managing unexpected absences, overseeing workloads and resolving staffing problems. Ms Meakin suggested an executive support officer could cover her telephone during absences, but the commission accepted that officer lacked authority to make staffing decisions.

She also argued colleagues enjoyed similar flexibility, raising allegations of discrimination and bullying during the internal complaints process.

Industrial Commissioner Daniel Pratt rejected those comparisons, finding the employees had different responsibilities or temporary arrangements.

Ms Meakin also cited a GP's recommendation for flexible hours, but the commission found that advice had not been provided to the original decision-makers.

The appeal was dismissed on Thursday.