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Pilot shortage grounds Qantas

QANTASLINK has become the latest regional carrier to suspend services because of a shortage of pilots.

The Qantas Group subsidiary announced yesterday that it was making schedule changes on Queensland and NSW routes because of a pilot attrition rate higher than the normal level of about 10 to 15 per cent.

The QantasLink woes come after competitor Regional Express earlier this month warned of a "bloodbath" among the smaller airlines as they struggle to hire and retain pilots.

Rex, also forced to suspend some services and cancel others, said it faced an annual attrition rate of 60 per cent for its pilot workforce. The shortages affecting the regional carriers are part of a worldwide trend that has seen competition for pilots among airlines increasing as the industry experiences strong growth, particularly in the Middle East and Asia.

The growth of Australia's domestic aviation market - fuelled by the mining boom - has also been a factor.

QantasLink said it would suspend some services, reinstate others and upgrade to bigger aircraft on some routes.

Qantas Group general manager regional airlines Narendra Kumar said he expected the schedule changes to remain until at least July. "QantasLink has a number of measures in place to restore pilot numbers over the next few months, including a comprehensive pilot training program," he said.

"We have received over 500 applications for a new QantasLink pilot trainee program and the first graduates ... are expected to start flying for QantasLink by the end of June."

The shortage has forced the Qantas subsidiary to suspend six Sydney-Newcastle services a week, meaning the regional carrier has now dropped services from the NSW regional city to Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.