



Article Name: Cleared for Takeoff??

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Cleared for Takeoff??

For many young Africans, the dream of becoming a pilot is seeded early. Whether it's the sight of an airplane carving the sky or the stories told by the few who wear the uniform, aviation represents ambition, prestige, and a path to a better life. But between the dream and the cockpit lies a reality few discuss openly — a journey marred by financial strain, systemic barriers, and an aviation training industry that often prioritizes profit over purpose.

In theory, Africa is ripe for aviation growth. With a youthful population, expanding middle class, and increased demand for regional connectivity, the continent is expected to see exponential growth in air travel over the next two decades. Yet, ironically, the very people expected to fly these future routes face some of the harshest barriers when it comes to training.

The first and most glaring obstacle is Cost. Flight training across Africa, particularly for a Private Pilot License (PPL), can range from USD 12,000 to USD 20,000. For a Commercial Pilot License (CPL), the cost often exceeds USD 50,000. In economies where the average monthly income barely crosses a few hundred dollars, these figures are insurmountable for most families. Unlike Europe or North America, where aviation scholarships, student loans, and cadet programs offer alternatives, African aspiring aviators often depend entirely on family support, savings, or sponsorship, which are increasingly rare.



And yet, even those who manage to raise the funds enter a system that is often flawed. Many flight schools across the continent operate with little regard for the student's actual progress. Some schools are structured more as businesses than institutions of learning, where the priority is revenue from new enrollments, not ensuring the success of those already on board. Instructors are sometimes overworked, aircraft maintenance is inconsistent, and training schedules are regularly delayed due to poor planning or lack of resources. The result? What should be a one-year journey to a PPL stretches to two or three, draining not only finances but motivation.

This is where many dreams begin to crash. A large number of students drop out midway due to financial exhaustion, delayed progression, or personal discouragement. In fact, according to informal estimates from regional aviation communities, only 1 or 2 out of every 10 student pilots in Africa complete their full training journey to CPL and job readiness. This statistic, though unofficial, reflects a grim reality that flight schools themselves rarely acknowledge.

Beyond the operational shortcomings, there is a deeper ethical issue — the responsibility flight schools hold over the careers and futures they shape. In many cases, there is little mentorship, no career guidance, and almost no structured path beyond licensing. Students are left to navigate an industry full of obstacles: expensive hour building, lack of instructor positions, scarcity of job placements, and bureaucratic licensing hurdles. For a continent that needs pilots more than ever, it is disheartening to see the institutions tasked with building them failing in their core mission.

Moreover, the mental and emotional toll on trainees is rarely discussed. Many aspiring pilots battle depression, feelings of isolation, and self-doubt. They work part-time jobs, skip meals, and make countless sacrifices just to pay for one more hour in the cockpit. Some have flown for over 200 hours unofficially without a single logged flight to show for it, simply because their hours were done outside the regulatory system or under unlicensed conditions due to financial desperation.

There are bright spots, of course. Schools like Ethiopian Aviation Academy, 43 Air School in South Africa, or select emerging academies in Kenya have made efforts to modernize training, bring in simulation technology, and work with local carriers. But access remains limited, and costs remain high.



What Africa's aviation industry desperately needs is a shift in mindset. Flight schools must go beyond being service providers and embrace the responsibility of being career builders. Airlines and governments need to partner with credible schools to offer cadetship pathways, scholarships, and structured mentorship programs. Civil aviation authorities must ensure oversight, not only of airworthiness and facilities, but also of student progression and post-graduation support.

Becoming a pilot in Africa is not just about learning to fly — it is a test of character, resilience, and unwavering faith. The sky is not the limit; often, the system is. But with strategic reform, ethical leadership, and targeted investment, we can pave a smoother runway for the next generation of African aviators.

Because every pilot who makes it isn't just a success story — they are a beacon of hope for an entire continent dreaming of flying.

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Afema Ronnie is a dedicated aviation sustainability leader and business development strategist with a robust background in sustainable air transport management. Holding both a Master's degree in Sustainable Air Transport Management and a Bachelor's in Business Analytics, he is also a licensed pilot with extensive experience in the aviation industry. As an award-winning sustainability advocate and recipient of the African Aviation Sustainability Award 2023, Afema has driven transformative climate action within the sector.



His expertise spans strategic business development, project management, and the implementation of pioneering sustainable aviation practices. Through his work as an aviation journalist and AviaDev Ambassador (2022), Afema continues to influence industry advancements and champion innovative solutions for a greener future.