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TAKING OFF: (from left) Regional Express deputy chairman John Sharp, Regional Express executive chairman Lim Kim Hai and federal member for Riverina Kay Hull celebrate the official opening of the Wagga aviation and education hub. Picture: Oscar Colman

Wagga's reputation in aviation industry climbs higher as Regional Express professional pilot training school opens

REACHING FOR THE SKY

By PATRICK WOOD

WAGGA'S reputation as Australia's foremost regional aviation hub was cemented yesterday after a raft of official openings and announcements at Wagga Airport.

Federal, state and local members of parliament attended the official opening of the Wagga Aviation

and Education Hub, a \$25 million Regional Express Airlines (Rex) funded project which will become a leading centre for cadet pilot training in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Australian Airline Pilot Academy (AAPA) will train about 200 cadet pilots a year for national and international airlines at the new campus.

The project has been in development for less than

two years and is a joint venture between Wagga City Council, Rex and the NSW government.

It is expected that this will secure pilots for Rex and other Australian airlines into the future and safeguard against industry-wide shortages which crippled smaller airlines only three years ago.

Federal Minister for Infrastructure and Regional

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Wagga's aviation industry booms with new pilot school

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Development Anthony Albanese officially opened the campus and said it was great to see private enterprise tackle the issue.

"The industry has, of course, in recent times suffered from pilot shortages and Rex has shown a great deal of vision," he said.

Rex deputy chairman John Sharp yesterday said the airline had an unwavering commitment to regional Australia.

"Rex is proud to be a regional citizen with its heart in the country," he said.

This sentiment was echoed by federal member for Riverina Kay Hull, who has been instrumental in bringing Rex to Wagga and supporting its growth in the region.

"It's so important to have a strong, visible and committed airline," she said.

"What this means for Wagga is this fantastic opportunity to expose ourselves internationally.

"This will make us very strong, very vibrant and give us a great future."

Of the 200 pilots expected to graduate each year from the campus, about 30 are expected to pilot Rex planes.

The remaining 170 cadets will be from other airlines, with their tuition fees going back to cover the initial \$25 million expenditure.

Rex executive chairman Lim Kim Hai said the direction the airline is taking is to secure

its future.

"We hope a big part of (the training) will be for international airlines, so we hope to see a lot of international students coming here," he said.

"Our heart has always been in Wagga."