

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

BY

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PAST STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Our rainbow nation has been blessed with many great strengths and one of these is our laudable standard of education especially at the higher levels.

Ask any foreign shipowner or professional mariner what their experience is of a South African trained officer or rating and they are very complimentary.

What were we doing correctly:

- a) We came from a commonwealth heritage where the British standard was set and invoked allowing our seafarers the privilege of sailing on flag ships beyond our own;
- b) We had good facilities with modern training aids and the budgets to maintain a high level of theoretical and practical skills training;
- c) We had excellent trainers who have their own fund of experience and knowledge to impart and the turn over of these tutors was negligible;
- d) We drew our students from good schools with a background of mathematics, science and English who were largely non unionized, healthy and willing to work hard. Additionally they were predominantly from the advantaged community in South Africa;
- e) Salaries were paid in rands and total cost of employment was very competitive;
- f) We had a growing dynamic merchant marine that was considered world class in their operation;
- g) And we are a proud people both of our people and of our country.

As the dynamics of change impacted on South and Southern Africa some weaknesses appeared that needed to be addressed:

- a) the system of training seafarers was fast becoming a vocational skills based training to one international standard [STCW_{78/95}];
- b) the high cost of modern bridge and engine room equipment with small groups under training had its impact;
- c) our trainers are rigidly of the “old school” and found changing a threat and were reluctant to adapt;
- d) our schools fed in students of questionable standards, poor general education and poor interpersonal skills making the role of the mentor a serious challenge;
- e) Going to sea was just another “job”, and well paid too, but trainees lacked eagerness to be working at sea as a “career”;

- f) salaries were now paid in US dollars and tax free making a South African seafarer on a par with his European colleagues;
- g) our national fleet was sadly sold offshore and our seafarers now felt betrayed and bereft;
- h) our “proudly South African” is now having to be sold as a sticker on a shop window! Engendered into our people - falsely.

Before we hit the doom and gloom level let me say that I am generally an optimist and I hope that the challenges that lie ahead will be warmly embraced and not discarded as we set course into the new millennium.

CHANGES TO THE PRESENT STRUCTURES

A cursory read of the local newspapers will bring to our attention that education and training under Mr Kadar Asmal's portfolio is in transition.

Both the Cape and Natal Technikons, for example, have and still are going through the process of amalgamation with other large higher education institutions within their geographic area. Staff, resources, budgets, etc are all under review with a high degree of uncertainty ahead.

Technical College courses should not be duplicated with what Technikons offer and the latter with what our Universities offer.

Course are being scrutinized to demonstrate that they are viable and that they meet national framework targets.

Staff, that are good teachers now also have to be good at marketing, financial management, personnel management, and good committee members.

Programmes are to be rewritten in modular outcomes based format, registered and have to meet international and national criteria.

Students are having to pay higher and higher educational fees, spend longer at these institutions and collect a range of certificates as evidence of competency in their area of expertise.

Funds are tight and formal institutions are having to seek benevolent donors to help equip the facility with modern equipment relevant to the task to be assessed.

The demand for seafarers is nearly as variable as our peninsular weather patterns. One day HOT next day COLD!

If the shore based education was our only challenge we could struggle on however we also have to take cognisance of our sea based or experiential training.

Our 1st world training officers onboard are few and far between being replaced with more cost effective Asian or East Europeans onboard with questionable standards in both the professional knowledge and the English language competence. The scant regard to good onboard training by senior officers is a problem to most shipowners and therefore the quality management of onboard training is of deep concern to the whole industry. What was a 2 to 3 year cadetship is now reduced to an accelerated 1 year onboard with no real

change to the system to warrant such a huge reduction in sea time. Those tasked with assessing the units of training onboard are required by law to be competent assessors but this is nearly impossible to implement and enforce.

No shipowner carries personnel surplus to requirements unless there is an incentive for him to do so. Some countries like the UK have introduced a "Tonnage Tax" which in brief is an inducement to open up training berths for young aspirant seafarers on their ships and thereby qualify for a reduction in tax. Our South African flag tonnage and local operators have been great at making training berths available to our trainees but the capacity, quality and management of this training is in question.

The authority overseeing the training is also experiencing its own internal dilemmas and it goes without saying that the government will not long support an expensive administration for a relatively small number of convention vessels. The trainee has a misty route ahead as he/she considers the difficulty of getting all the requisite training executed at minimal cost and inconvenience to the relevant parties.

An approximate cost of training a school leaver from start of cadetship to their first certificate of competence is ZAR 130 000 including formal, ancillary courses, residential costs, travel and incidental costs. The time taken for this will cover approximately 30 months.

As we have no international recruitment/placement agencies specialising in qualified seafarers we are not in a strong position here in South Africa.

THE WAY AHEAD

The great biblical writer Paul penned: "For now we see in a mirror dimly" 1 Cor 13:12. I too sense Paul's frustrations when looking ahead. What positive steps should be taken:

- a) a realistic analysis of what our objectives are in training seafarers ... the correct number to be viable, and this amount of quality seafarers to meet our broad customer requirements;
- b) quantify the number and quality of our training facilities to best optimize our resources of people and equipment in South Africa;
- c) manage the training and assessment ashore and at sea through one quality management system to secure best results;
- d) set the income of our training to the value of the qualification in a currency which would sustain high quality of training to an international standard;
- e) seek co-operative partners with either shipowners and/or foreign training providers to secure strong alliances to every body's best advantage;
- f) secure good loan funding to benefit the financially disadvantaged with the ability to succeed;
- g) keep trainers motivated and up to date with technology by encouraging sabbaticals within the work place;
- h) market the best and widest range of courses of a similar nature to optimize use of staff and facilities;

- i) set up a bureau to manage trainee placements and/or employment opportunities as a Section 21 company (not for profit);
- j) demonstrate to the student body that producing good quality officers secures long term employment.

SOUTH AFRICAN POTENTIAL IN AN INTERNATIONAL MARKET

Shipowners operate ships successfully to earn freight sufficient to please their shareholders. Training of seafarers is not their highest priority nor should it be. Educators and trainers teach the knowledge and skills required to demonstrate competence of seafarers. Knowing what the market demand can draw from South Africa for our own national needs and to fulfil international needs would position the providers appropriately. Previously the needs of Safmarine and Unicorn were the primary client. The future calls for a wider client base whose management has yet to savour the benefits of employing South African officers.

As the world's ship operators look to the Chinese for possible future crewing I believe ultimately that quality officers from traditionally sound training regimes will offer the operator his best investment.

As ships are categorized into special vessel types from gas carriers to cruise liners and ultimately even to the fishing vessels that harvest our fish resource comes the demand for officers and crews with reputable standards of training.

If we, at the training "coal face", can build bridges on which our trainees can gain access to the employment corridors of power in Europe and the Americas we will have achieved our best for our youth of tomorrow.

When my own younger daughter asked me for advice as to whether going to sea with a cruise company, was a career I would endorse I had to move away from a sentimental 1960's picture of life at sea to the reality of shipboard life in AD 2000!

I wonder what your response would be and why?

Our South African youth has the ability of staying at the leading edge of officer competence returning his employer value for money investment.

You and I, especially me, owe it to this dynamic industry to put every effort into giving quality education and training of our young seafarers to enjoy what many of us have benefited out of this career.

I hope and pray that we will not be found wanting when we return for the 9th National Maritime Conference to give each other than an update on what has been achieved.

I believe we can present to the world at large a trained seafarer of world class that would encourage future employers to sit up and take notice that we are a nation to be taken seriously.

Thank you all.