Measuring and Sustaining the UK Maritime Skills Base: A Review

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Abstract
Numerous factors over the past three decades have contributed to a major decline in the number of seagoing staff in the United Kingdom. These include shipping companies opting for other flags, as well as the profession itself becoming less and less attractive for school leavers. This decrease in numbers is not only significant for shipping companies, but also for the allied services which used to get supported from seafarers coming ashore in search of a new career. It is now recognised that changes in the maritime skills base will affect both the seagoing as well as the shore side of the industry.

This paper examines the decline in number of the UK Merchant Navy officers and cadet from glory of the past. Also the idea of a massive shore industry habitually employing former officers: therefore these can be seen as a core resource in the maritime labour market.

1 Introduction
Since the early 1980’s the UK has seen a decline in the numbers of young people training to become ships’ officers for the merchant navy. Up until the 1970s, some 2000 new cadets were registered annually in the UK; this figure fell to 150 by the late 1980’s and have not exceeded 600 since. There is close correlation between these numbers and the drop in UK ship registrations. This drop in numbers is not only significant for shipping itself, but also for the shore-based maritime industry in general. It is widely recognised that most officers leave the sea at a certain point in their lives to take up employment ashore in a marine related job.

The United Kingdom is still seen as a major world centre for shipping commerce, especially for those services associated with the City of London. Moreover, as an island, (apart from the Channel Tunnel) the UK relies heavily on its ports that provide the infrastructure necessary for the import and export of 95% of goods. Apart from practical reasons these industries are vital to the economy of the UK, because not only are they major employers but they produce a “hidden” income for the country.

“Maritime London” and its associated services is in part a legacy of the country’s position as a major ship owning nation. There have also always been a large number of experienced and skilled officers available to work ashore in various roles. Although
now challenged by competition from the Far East, the City of London still remains a world centre for marine insurance, chartering and cargo broking, finance, arbitration, and shipping sales. It is home for the Lloyd’s Register of Shipping, and is the centre of shipping law and consultancy. It has been estimated that these invisible earnings generate in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) £956.15m1.

Other shore-side industries, which are reliant upon seafaring skills, such as ports, maritime training and education, oil and gas, ship building and repair, as well as marine equipment manufacturing and repair are estimated to provide in terms of value some £16.7b2 to the economy.

Employers in some of these sectors feel that their future is threatened by a skills shortage. Although activities in the City and in oil and gas production are not always dependent upon these skills as such, many of the activities are underpinned by more direct operations. Concern about the numbers of available former officers have sparked a strain of research in the UK, which has so far culminated into governmental action and industrial led initiatives aimed at buoying up the numbers working in the industry.

Measures to support the skills base have been inextricably linked to research into the state of the labour market for marine skills. This market is chiefly composed of former deck and engineering officers, predominantly from the merchant marine.

2  Review of Labour Market Studies
All research work, which attempted to measure marine labour markets have been hampered by the poor quality of official and accurate data on seafarers’ numbers. Although records are kept in the UK by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), information concerning their status is missing: the result is that researchers cannot define whether a registered officer is working at sea, in a marine related position or has left the industry altogether. Most research therefore, has had to depend upon new data raised through questionnaires, surveys, and records of UK nautical collages and only to a limited extent the database held by the MCA, where numbers of certificate revalidations and up ratings have been recorded.

Alarm concerning a shortage of experienced ships’ officers can be seen as starting with the first empirical research into the problem. This first publication that forecast a shortage of merchant ship officers, was by Moreby and Springett’s (1990) “Critical Levels study”3. The authors gave consideration to the numbers of UK ships and those employed on them, and discussed the critical levels that these could fall to without hope of recovery.

2  Ibid.