Accessing the Global Seafaring Labour Market
Principles and Application of the SIRC Seafarers Database in the Cruise Sector

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Abstract
As a global labour market exists for international shipping, a challenging issue facing this industry is to get access to reliable, accurate and timely information of seafarers’ supply and demand. Related to the deregulation environment and great variety in the availability and quality of relevant information, an enquiry into the global seafaring labour market is more complex than a national labour force survey. To cope with the challenge, a novel approach has been developed by the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) at Cardiff University. Viewing capital (ship), labour (seafarers) and services (cargo or passengers) as interconnected and interwoven to each other, it collects and analyses crew lists from main ports world-wide, resulting in the creation of the first global seafarers database. The purpose of this paper is explain its methodological principles, and to illustrate its application potential. Taking the cruise sector as an example, research findings and methodological implications are highlighted.

1 Challenges in Accessing Global Seafarers Information:
An Introduction
Having witnessed the emergence of the global labour market in the last two decades, the accessibility of reliable, accurate and timely information of seafarers’ supply and demand has been a common concern for all participants (e.g. ship owners and managers, seafarers’ training and recruitment agencies, national and international bodies). Different from national labour markets in the past, the global seafaring labour market is more complex due to many factors such as: the great variety of participants (wide range of sources of seafarers’ supply), the deregulated environment (related to the “flags of convenience” system instead of the national flag system), the heterogeneity of international fleet managers (in terms of recruitment policy and crew management), and so on.

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The difficulty of getting access to information on the global labour market can be illustrated by both supply and demand aspects. From the supply side, in theory, the total number and distribution of global seafaring labour forces could be achieved by assembling and verifying seafarers data from all supply countries in the world (e.g. national censuses, seamen’s book registers or other national record surveys). The feasibility of this approach, however, is largely dependent upon a unified standard and procedure which could be strictly followed by all seafarers supply countries. In practice unfortunately, no world-wide standard regulation exists to guide information collection and provision, and the quality and comparability of the available information is poor. In this regard, for instance, a newly published report from METNET (2001), an EU funded project indicates that on the one hand, there is no common format available for EU members to collect and share seafarers information; on the other hand, available data of seafarers registration is not able to reflect the up-to-date figure of seafarers’ demand and supply.

In addition, a methodological issue facing the assembly and verification of national data is the definition of global seafarers due to the ambiguities between national and international fleets, and between the export and import of seafarers. For instance, although European Union countries suffer from shortages of their own seafarers, recent research shows that only one quarter of EU seafarers serviced for the EU flag fleet and just over half of them worked the EU fleet manager vessels⁴. This example seems to suggest that in the global labour market, the supply of seafarers from one country or region may be difficult to establish without specific information on demand and employment.

Turning to the demand side, the global labour market is more complex than the national labour market not only because a different fleet manager or shipping company registered in the same country may prefer different regional or national seafarers, but also their preference may change with trading patterns. In theory, the demand information of the global seafaring labour market can be gained by a world-wide ship company survey, which should cover all information from employees’ profiles, crewing patterns, company employment policies to trading patterns. In practice, however, the quality of a company survey depends on: a) sampling methods and accessing the world shipping companies; b) the representativeness of samples to world fleet and response rate, and c) verification of raw data and imputation of missing values. Taking into account the complexity of the international shipping industry and the deregulated environment however, the implementation of such an approach would be difficult and expensive to achieve.

Due to the difficulties of collecting information that exists on both the demand and supply sides, unsurprisingly, it is difficult to draw a reliable and accurate picture of