

A Report on UniMET Conference in London

By Mike Gerber - Nautilus Telegraph

A major project is under way to look into ways of improving the 'employability' of European seafarers by harmonising maritime education and training within the EU. MIKE GERBER reports on the progress made in the first year of the project.

One year into the EU-funded UniMET (Unification of Maritime Education and Training) project to drive up and harmonise standards of maritime education and training in European colleges, the consortium behind it recently staged its first conference to review progress.

Key aims of the UNIMET initiative include improving the 'employability' of EU seafarers and bolstering shipping safety by elevating maritime education and training standards above STCW 2010 minimum requirements.

By aiming for greater European compatibility of seafarer qualifications, it is also hoped the project will ultimately help to attract more young people to industry.

The conference, in London, was jointly organised by the Centre for Factories of the Future (C4FF) – which is based at the University of Warwick Science Park – and the Polytecnic University of Catalonia. Other UniMET partners include: The Netherlands based Maritime Institute Willem Barentsz; The TUDEV Institute of Maritime Studies in Turkey; Satakunta University of Applied Sciences (SAMK) in Finland; the Lithuanian Maritime Academy; the Italian ship owners' research consortium. Consar; the Centre for development works in Poland; and Spinaker, Slovenia's largest maritime education company.

Ultimately, the consortium hopes that what it is trying to achieve will go global, and to that end it is collaborating with such bodies as the International Maritime Organisation, the International Maritime Employers' Committee, the International Association of Maritime Universities, and the European Maritime Safety Agency. Keynote speaker Professor Reza Ziarati said the need for international collaboration in training was demonstrated by safety research, including a 2004 report showing that 25% of the world fleet was responsible for more than 50% of shipping accidents, while the top 25% of the safest ships caused just 7% of all accidents.

Another study had shown that improving the quality of the world fleet to the same level as those of the safest 25% could lead to a 72% reduction in accidents.

'If some flags are found to be safe, there must be a reason, and if some are having problems with more accidents, then there must be a reason,' said Professor Dr Ziarati. 'So we started looking at problems in various countries, we reviewed some of the reports, and we found out that some changes have to happen as far as the Standards of Training Certification and Watch keeping (STCW) convention are concerned this is 'despite the significant STCW amendments agreed by the IMO in 2010. Professor Ziarati argued that many deficiencies remain. He highlighted a number of UniMET promoted programmes that address perceived shortcomings in training standards. One is MarTEL, developed by UniMET partners together with institutions such as Glasgow College of Nautical studies and the University of Strathclyde to overcome the problem of seafarers deficient in international or European standards of maritime English.

The MarTEL programme culminates in online tests that assess seafarers' maritime English competence. These tests are geared to rank – phase 1 for cadets, phase 2 for officers and phase 3 for senior officers, and with phases 2 and 3 split along deck and engineer discipline. A new enhanced oral test will be conducted by face-to-face examiners. Tests are also planned for ratings.

A complementary development will be Project CAPTAINS – online courses based on real-life situations that focus on functional communication in maritime English.

Another UniMET-backed programme, SURPASS, offers training on ship automation. It was developed by consortium partners along with Plymouth University and the Maritime University of Szczecin, to overcome two problems; crew rarely understand the characteristics of automated systems and their limitations and, when automation fails, crews are often not trained to use alternative systems. SURPASS is designed to tackle these issues and is expected to be available online soon.

Other programmes include M'AIDER (Mayday) – which, via simulators and e-learning provides training in responding to maritime accidents based on real past case scenarios in bridge, engine room, propulsion areas, and integrated full-mission situations.

There are also two GMDSS e-learning services, accessible via internet in all EU languages.

But Captain Esteban Pacha, director general of the International Mobile Satellite Organisation, warned that there is a big challenge in adapting IMO model courses to e-learning methods. There are now more than 60 such courses, which have been developed since the original STCW convention came into effect to assist maritime training institutes in introducing mandatory or recommended classroom training requirements.

Capt. Pacha suggested that UniMET partners, having developed e-GMDSS courses, 'could explore further and recommend how to adapt existing model courses to these new methods and technologies, thus facilitating a constant, updated and easily accessible training for seafarers both onboard ships and ashore'.

Effective at-sea e-learning will need ships to be suitably equipped. Capt Pacha argued. 'It is my strong belief that, in a future based on broadband, mobile satellite communications at sea are fundamental in particular, to providing universal broadband services to all vessels and offshore platforms, ensuring enhanced maritime safety, security and efficiency, but also facilitating e-learning and social communications to more than three million seafarers or passengers on board ships at sea', he added.

The important point for the IMO to consider, he said, would be whether distress signals sent using broadband mobile satellites were quicker and safer than standard radio communications and more efficient for shipping business. 'And if the answer to these two questions is yes, then other aspects could be benefiting from that e-learning, e-health, e-banking, Facebook and social communications. Because when I went to sea, we had not even mobile phones, we just went from port to port and calling families, but today young people will never survive without Facebook or social networks. So I think that this would also facilitate more people to join the profession' C4FF project officer Ugurcan Acar told how he had progressed from training as a Turkish cadet at TUDEV to qualifying as a UK Merchant Navy officer via the UniMET promoted SOS (Safety on Sea) programmes. These are designed to improve maritime safety through education and training based on the syllabuses

developed by northern European countries. They satisfy the requirements of international awarding body Edexcel for the award of a HND higher national diploma, enabling successful students to enroll on the final year of maritime degrees.

As a cadet, Mr. Acar attained his HND at TUDEV. He also benefited from MarTEL and EGMDS programmes. After attending the Turkish certificate of competency, he worked as a deck officer on Turkish ships. His next move was facilitated by the UNIMET supported TRAIN 4Cs mobility programme that open the way for cadets from SOS projects to acquire sea training qualifications recognised throughout the EU and worldwide.

The programme transfers you from one country to another, which in my case it was from Turkey to England, 'Mr Acar explained. He completed the final year of a maritime degree at Plymouth University. 'Upon completing the sea training portfolio, I took some additional course satisfying the British national requirements and sat for the MCA exam to secure my British certificate of competency.' Further UniMET conferences are lined up this year, culminating at International Maritime Lecturers 20 Conference in Holland in September. In November, EU funding runs out – but the consortium expects that an extension will be granted. At the London conference, Prof. Ziarati confidently asserted that UniMET would achieve 'gold standards' in maritime education and training. 'We have been arguing about good practice.' he added 'We looked at all the countries in Europe; what are the practices? There are numerous examples – no two MET programmes are the same'.

An example Professor Ziarati cited at the Dutch dual officer training programme regime, in which trainee graduate with competency both as deck and engineer officers. 'Is it working? If it's working, let's explore it more...' – The second part of article will appear in March edition of this journal.