

Original article

## Encouraging Young People to Study Maritime Science and Identifying Factors That Will Keep Them Happy<sup>☆</sup>

Mehrdad BEHFOROUI<sup>a\*</sup>, Noorul Shaiful Fitri ABDUL RAHMAN<sup>b</sup>, Kambiz MOKHTARI<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Dept. of Maritime Studies, International Maritime College Oman, Oman, [mehrdad@imco.edu.om](mailto:mehrdad@imco.edu.om) (Corresponding Author)

<sup>b</sup>Dept. of Logistics Management, International Maritime College Oman, Oman, [noorul@imco.edu.om](mailto:noorul@imco.edu.om)

<sup>c</sup>Dept. of Maritime Studies, International Maritime College Oman, Oman, [kambiz@imco.edu.om](mailto:kambiz@imco.edu.om)

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify methods for attracting more students into maritime colleges, for making sure they remain happy, satisfied with their decision and finally for enabling them to have job security. At International Maritime College Oman (IMCO), the Deck Officer program is a field of study that incorporates the ancient knowledge and techniques in navigation with the latest information and technology in the maritime industry. The industry requires officers who are well trained and capable of working as professionals on board vessels. The goal is to attract more students into the maritime industry, to ensure their achievement in future and to make sure they are happy with their choice to join the maritime industry. For the purposes of this research, a questionnaire about deck cadets' experiences of work and life at sea, with thirty-one questions, was prepared, based on the authors' experiences, and distributed to deck cadets studying in International Maritime College of Oman (IMCO). It was answered by sixty deck students in years two, three and four. The students were of both genders and from various countries including Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and Egypt. The age ranges varied between eighteen to twenty-five. The main problems adversely affecting the students' happiness and satisfaction were found to be related to loneliness and emotional insecurity at sea, resulting from inadequate opportunities for communication with family and friends, as well as uncertainty about employment prospects. Colleges need to focus more on supporting cadets' emotional well-being. Shipping companies also need to play a greater role in reducing cadets' uncertainty by sponsoring them, by providing guarantees of employment and by looking after them well at sea, especially by ensuring availability of cheap internet.

*Keywords: Maritime Studies, Qualitative Research, Seafarers, IMCO, Shipping.*

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## 1. Introduction

Every year, a percentage of high school graduate students enroll in maritime programs (Deck and Engine) as Cadets in maritime colleges all over the world. A Cadet is a maritime student who is training to be a Navigation Officer and Captain, or an Engineer and Chief Engineer, in the future. Cadets play an important role in the maritime industry (Yildiz *et al.* 2016).

Many of the modules are taught both in theoretical and practical classes and because of that maritime colleges and universities are equipped with equipment and instruments that are used daily on board the ship and also in distress situations. The bridge simulator is the most sophisticated equipment that enables students to actually experience maritime circumstances and take proper action to avoid collision in time. These instruments are constructed with up-to-date technology and are very expensive. Such technology should attract many new students to join maritime institutions. A deck officer is required to acquire knowledge, be familiar with the operation of various kinds of equipment and instruments, to have undergone proper on-board training and in addition he/ she must have patience, discipline and be able to think critically. The industry is also moving rapidly towards digitalization and autonomous shipping. That is why we need to recruit young people who are interested in a seafaring career and are fit enough, both mentally and physically, to pass the required training. In future, they will be controlling vessels either in the ocean or from an office on land.

However, it seems that currently only a small proportion of young people are attracted to join maritime colleges, possibly because they are unfamiliar with the maritime industry and specially with a seafarer's life. This is significant because the world is facing a big shortage of seafarers in the next decade. According to the BIMCO/ ICS manpower report (Seaman Republic, 2016), the shortage of merchant marine officers (Deck and Engine) is expected to be nearly 150,000 officers by 2025.

It is therefore appropriate to investigate how we can encourage more students to join the maritime industry and how we can look after them carefully as we assist them to become fulfilled professional

officers in the future. Equally we have to help young people to learn to think independently and to think outside the box, since the market demands people who are able to solve problems (Barnaby, J. 2016). It is therefore very important that they are happy with their studies and can look forward to a career offering real job security.

## 2. Literature Review

There are many reasons that contribute to the low number of students who apply to become merchant marine officers or engineers. Many young people are not only unfamiliar with the professions in the maritime industry but also some of them may be afraid of being alone at sea away from their loved ones. Working at sea, apart from the loneliness, is a very difficult and sometimes dangerous job. Moreover, some young people are even unaware of the existence of a nautical college in their country or in their neighborhood. Some may choose to become seafarers as there are not enough well-paid jobs on shore. Becoming a seafarer may therefore be a choice based on economic necessity. Barista Uno (2015) therefore recommends introducing a more honest version of life at sea to cadets to enable them to more fully embrace whatever the job brings, including the joys and the sorrows, the triumphs and the hardships.

Based on the authors' knowledge and that of other professionals, the factors that may lead to low interest in maritime careers include:

- a. Poor or inappropriate methods of advertising (false advertising) and marketing.
- b. Expensive tuition fees.
- c. Parents not allowing their child to choose this profession.
- d. Parents not giving permission to their daughters to become seafarers.
- e. Students being afraid of being alone and remote from their home (Sampson, 2019).
- f. Tough and burdensome job conditions on board the vessel.
- g. Being exposed to different dangers including rough seas and storms.
- h. Being far from families, friends and relatives for a long time.

- i. Low or not competitive salary.
- j. Working in an environment involving different races and nationalities, cultures and languages.
- k. Shipping companies not being keen to recruit young inexperienced officers.
- l. Piracy threats and maritime terrorism (Oldsailor, 2008)

Taking just one of these factors, a mariner is required to live and work with crew and officers who are of different nationalities and different cultures. Cultural differences are an important factor that may affect the safety and security of ship, crew and environment. If cultural differences are not dealt with sensitively, they may lead to serious conflicts between crew members who have different lifestyles, religions and languages. Astratinei (2016) argues that the seafarer has to adapt him or herself to live in a multicultural environment and that any failure to adapt may result in reduced productivity of the seafarer. On board a vessel there are likely to be multi-national crew members who have different lifestyles, eating and working habits. These may cause a range of scenarios for seafarers which may distract them at times, for example, regarding the quality of food, cleanliness, tastes and smells or variety of the meals served each day and also, the status of “Halal” food for Muslim mariners (Othman *et al.* 2017). Not a single day is similar to the previous day whilst on board the ship.

With regard to loneliness, it is true that the seafarer’s life is very demanding. Mariners are remote from home, family and friends but when they stay on board for a long time they begin to feel they are at home. Instead of being happy to return to home and family when signing off from their vessel after being on board for a period of five or six months, some may even feel quite sad, because the ship has become their second home.

We therefore need to encourage young people to join the merchant marine industry by providing them with a clear view of life at sea, not by mentioning only the good salary or the opportunity to explore the different countries.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research

method. According to Hancock (1998), qualitative research is a method that is concerned with the opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings of individuals, producing subjective data. For each set of data, the average mean value is determined. The average mean value (Othman *et al.* 2017) involves calculating the central tendency of the parameters based on the evaluation given by respondents that makes the outcomes easier to understand and interpret.

Adi Bhat (2020) recommends incorporating paper surveys in field research as they help to support the legitimacy of responses. To identify methods for attracting more students into maritime colleges, for making sure they remain happy, satisfied with their decision and finally for enabling them to have job security, it was decided to collect data from sixty cadets using a paper survey, mostly related to what they experienced during their sea training.

At International Maritime College of Oman (IMCO), the students in the deck program study six to eight semesters, depending on whether they are studying for a diploma or a degree. Initially they study two consecutive semesters in the college followed by one semester at sea. They come back to college for the fourth & fifth semesters and return to sea in semester six. Those in the diploma program will stop at this level but those who prefer to study for a bachelor’s degree will continue for another two semesters. For the purposes of the survey, sixty IMCO students were selected who were studying in the deck program of maritime studies in years two, three and four and who had completed their apprenticeship training. Thirty-one questions based on the first author’s knowledge and experience were prepared and distributed to the deck cadets. The survey papers were distributed to the respondents during teaching sessions. This had the advantage of keeping the students relaxed while answering the questions and gave them the opportunity and enough time to clearly understand each item before answering it. They were also allowed to seek additional clarification from the author.

The data were analyzed by calculating average mean values, bar charts and pie charts were prepared based on cadets’ responses, and findings and recommendations were developed to reach the research’s objective.

#### 4. Findings

Figure 1 indicates that friends and family members played the most important role in introducing the maritime sector to the young people. Oman is a country with ports and a long coastline, so most people are aware of the sea and Oman's shipping industry. However, the data implies that Open Day events in the college need to be conducted with more attention, transparency and delicacy in order to send a clear, honest message to students about the work of a seafarer and about life at sea, its advantages and disadvantages, including both benefits and difficulties that seafarers normally face. Furthermore, the data suggests that shipping companies should increase their visibility in advertising maritime professions, especially at maritime college Open Days, in order to attract students to join maritime programs by promoting the positive atmosphere on board their vessels and by advertising attractive offers. Shipping companies should demonstrate that students / cadets are valuable assets for them in the future. In fact, apart from the country, the parties that gets most benefit from the maritime studies graduates are the shipping companies.

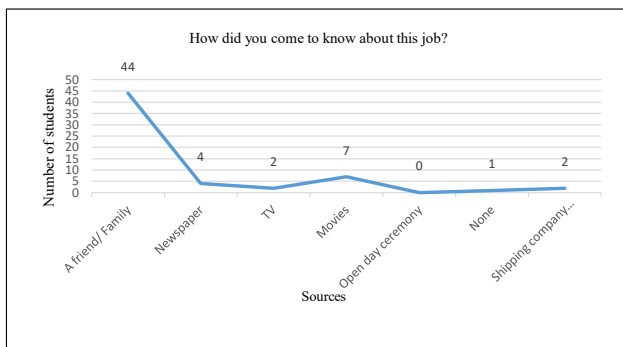


Figure 1: Enrolling

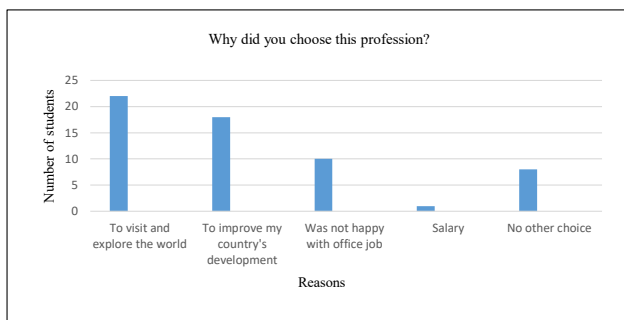


Figure 2: Attractions

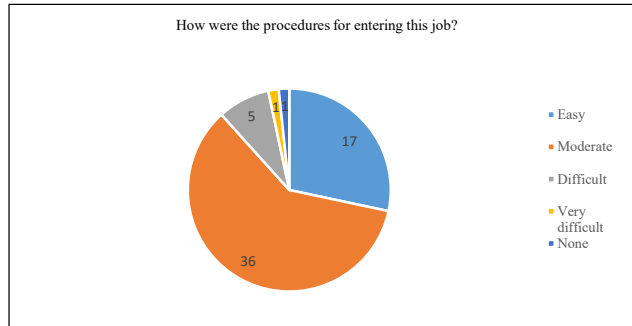


Figure 3: Entrance

According to the results plotted in Figure 2, most chose the profession “to visit and explore the world”. These advantages of sea jobs should always be mentioned in advertisements, speeches and conferences. In order to enable cadets to visit and explore different ports and countries, Masters of vessels should make sure to provide facilities for the cadets to disembark from the vessel for shore leave when arriving at a port. Another reason given by students for choosing to become deck officers was to improve the country's economic condition. Cadets are well aware that the shipping industry plays a great role in the development of a country. According to Figure 2, salary was not a strong factor for the students to choose the profession. It shows that Omani students have enough motivation and courage to become merchant mariners without considering the income. However, this may also indicate that there is not much difference between the salary of a seafarer and the one who works ashore. The prospect of an attractive salary can be a strong motivator in encouraging youths to choose the maritime sector and thereafter to keep them happy.

The initial procedures that applicants who choose this profession need to carry out are seen as a negative factor according to the survey results, as shown in Figure 3. Some students may refuse to enter this profession when they realise that they will have to spend a lot of time in applying and enrolling. One of the essential criteria for admission to the maritime industry is to be medically fit. Students wishing to join maritime programs are first required to obtain a medical fitness certificate. The procedure is quite long as it includes many different tests to make sure the students are healthy and fit for duty. It would certainly be helpful if these procedures could be expedited. Also, the medical tests can only be done by approved practitioners. Therefore, its

recommended that approved medical practitioners should be available in most of the cities, so that students do not have to travel long distances away from their own cities for tests.

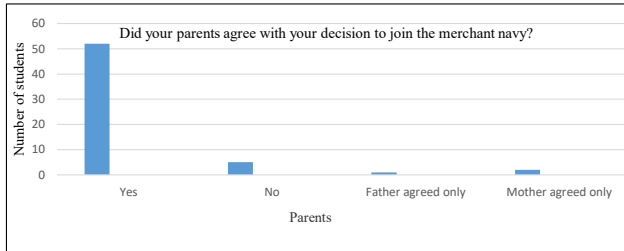


Figure 4: Parents

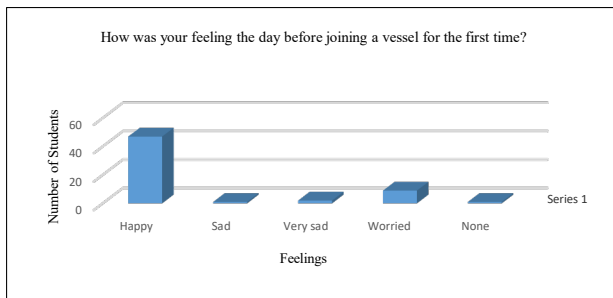


Figure 5: First impression

Figure 5 shows that many students were anxious, while others were happy to go on board for the first time. As young people they were interested to discover what life on board a vessel would be like. Shipping companies have a duty to assist students by providing a welcoming atmosphere on board and instructing their captains, officers and crew to take good care of their cadets, both professionally and personally.

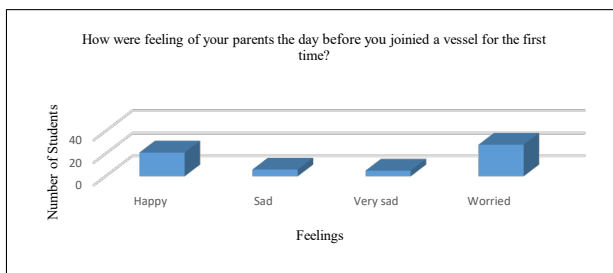


Figure 6: Effect on parents

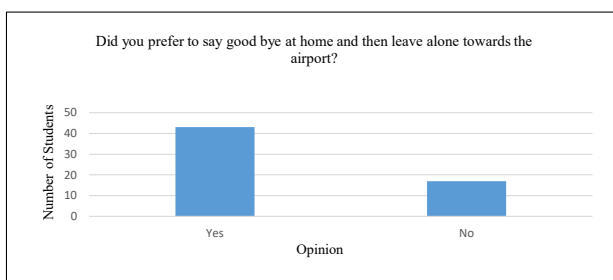


Figure 7: Leaving home

Most of the cadets said goodbye to their families and friends at home instead of having them come to the airport, as shown in Figures 7, 8 and 9. This demonstrates that leaving family members at home was considered much easier for cadets than having them at the airport and before going to the immigration check point. Eventually, parents and families must respect seafarers' decisions.

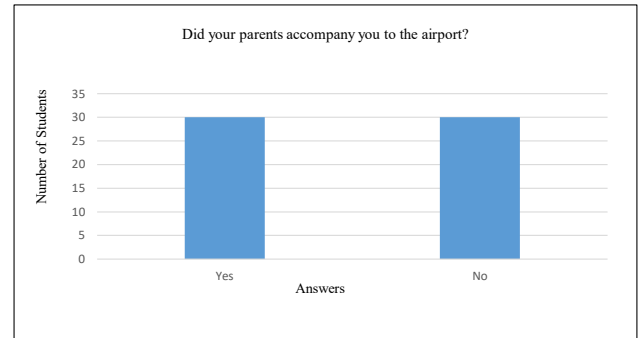


Figure 8: Parents accompanying cadets to departure area

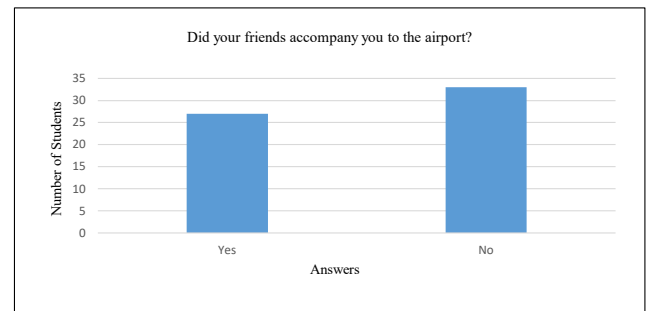


Figure 9: Friends accompanying cadets to departure area

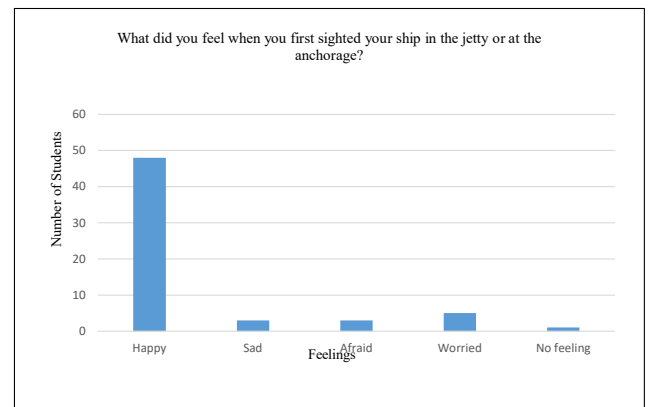


Figure 10: Joining

From Figure 10 we can see that a large number of students were happy and excited when they sighted the ship that they were going to work on for the next 3-4 months. Vessels, nowadays, are very

modern and attractive. Their accommodation is constructed beautifully and of course the vessels are huge. It makes cadets feel proud to be a future officer navigating and controlling one of them. It also indicates that cadets were happy with their decision to join the merchant navy.

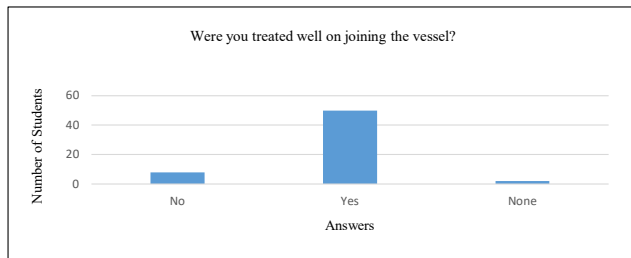


Figure 11: Welcoming

Most of the cadets were well treated at the time of joining, as Figure 11 shows. However, there were some that felt they were not treated well. Arrangements should be in place to make sure all cadets are welcomed and treated properly when joining. Proper instruction should be given to Masters of vessels carrying cadets to ensure they treat students sensitively, training and monitoring their progress carefully throughout their stay on board.

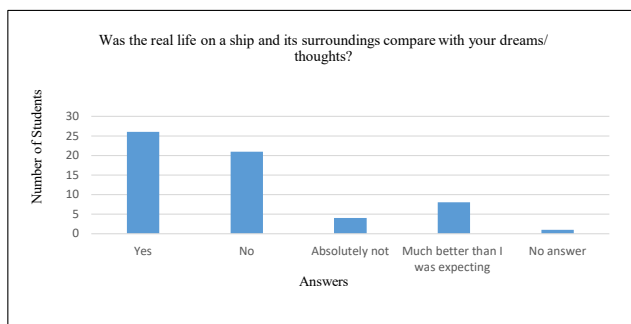


Figure 12: Expectations

Figure 12 indicates that nearly 35% of cadets had a different expectation of actual life on board a vessel from what they experienced. This suggests that they should be better informed of the realities of life on board and they should be given advice on how to deal with a seafarer's life, which of course is very different from a normal life on land. In college, proper familiarization of cadets with a seafarer's life is essential. Arranging one-day ship visits during the first and second semesters, for example, will be a great assistance to students.

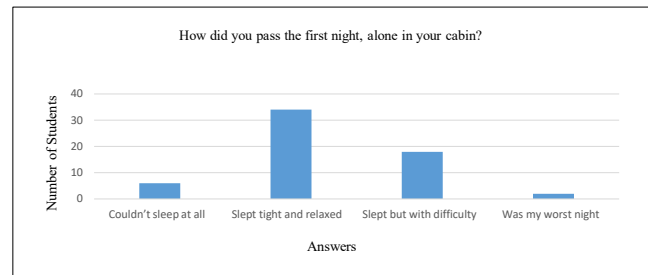


Figure 13: Remoteness

It is pleasing to see from Figure 13 that most of the cadets adjusted well to spending the first night alone, although one might have expected the opposite. Normally the first night on board is very tough because the seafarers have just left their families and friends and have joined an unfamiliar environment far away from their home.

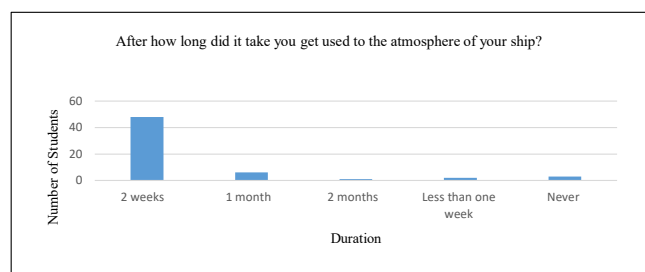


Figure 14: Adaptation

The vast majority of students felt that they got used to the vessel environment in two weeks, as shown in Figure 14.

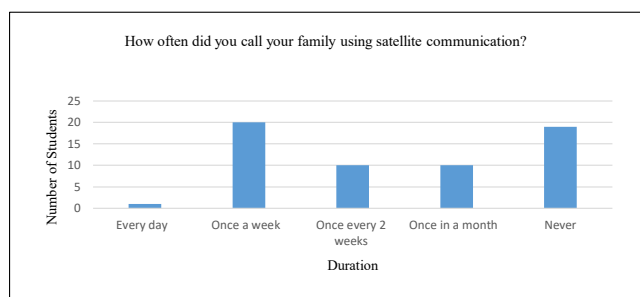


Figure 15: Contacting family

According to the data in Figure 15, one third of respondents kept in normal contact with their family. On the other hand, quite a number of students never used to call their parents. The reasons could be many, including high communication charges. However, cadets must be under constant mentoring by a responsible officer on board to make sure they keep in contact with

family members. Means should be provided for all seafarers, especially cadets, to maintain contact with their families in a normal way. Many seafarers feel deserted when on board as communication and internet facilities are very expensive (as shown in Figure 16). Availability of cheap and high speed internet is essential for those who work a large part of their life on board ships.

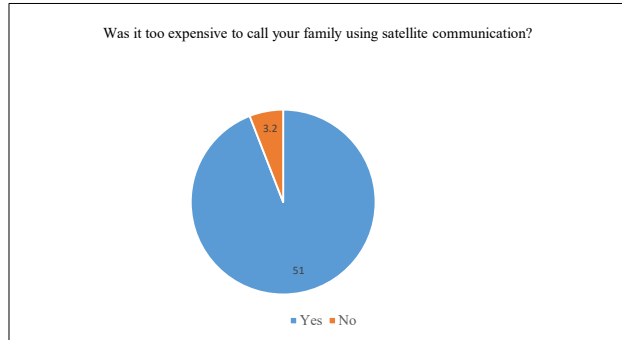


Figure 16: Satellite Communication Costs

Figure 17 shows many vessels are still not equipped with internet on board. All ship owners should be required to install internet on board their vessels, especially ocean-going vessels engaged on long voyages.

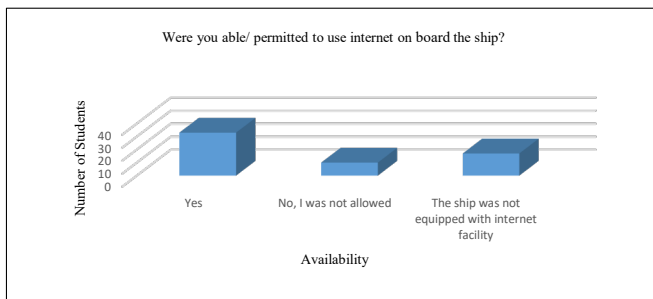


Figure 17: Internet facilities

Figure 18 indicates that most students were calm on-board in spite of all the difficulties they experienced, especially encountering rough weather. This suggests that appropriate training and support may have helped them to feel safe and secure on board.

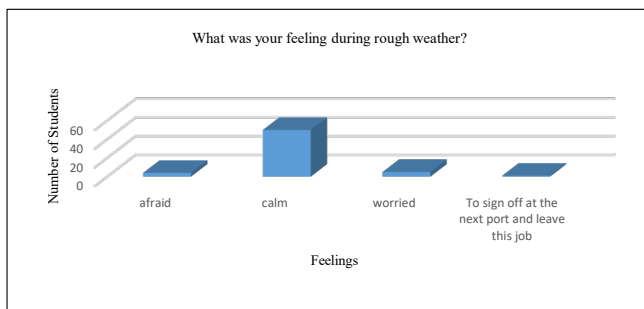


Figure 18: Weather

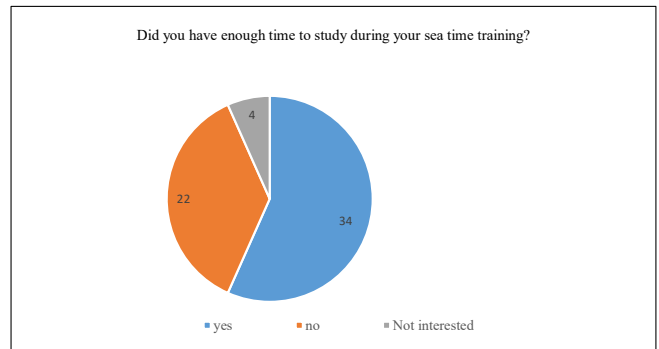


Figure 19: Time for study on board

One of the responsibilities of ship staff towards the cadets on board is to make sure cadets spend enough time studying and carrying out their academic assignments. Although adhering to operation and maintenance of equipment, watch keeping and practical seamanship are very important tasks for the cadets, as shown in Figure 19, it is still necessary to encourage them to study and allocate sufficient time for this.

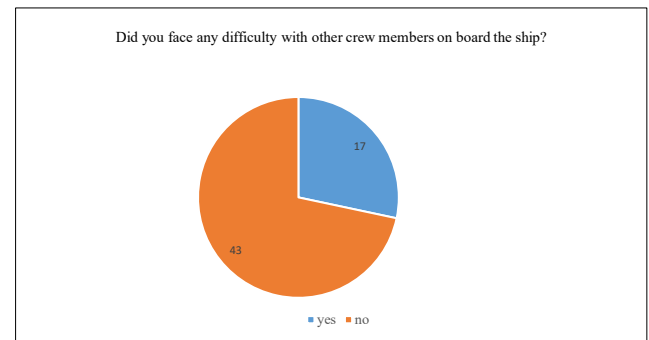


Figure 20: Socialization

Figure 20 shows that approximately one third of cadets considered they had faced difficulties with other crew members during their service on board. As different nationalities with their own cultures and languages are found working on board ships, it is crucial that the social atmosphere between crew members should be sufficiently comfortable for them to work without facing any problem or issue with each other. To prepare cadets for working alongside other nationalities, human resource training courses are essential in colleges. In addition, the shipping company is required to prepare appropriate procedures or guidelines and insert them in their code of conduct policy. (The Code of conduct is a disciplinary code that a



Master should refer to when dealing with any crew member who breaches discipline).

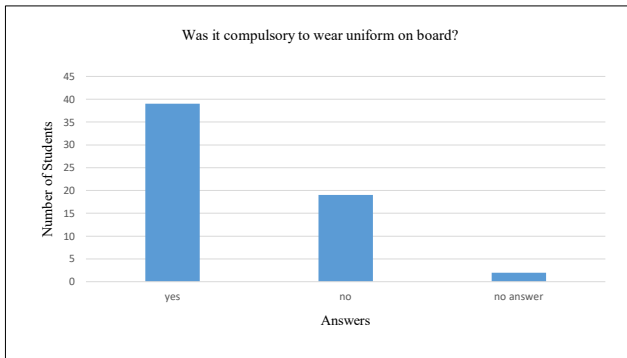


Figure 21: Uniform on Board

From Figure 21, we can see that wearing uniform was compulsory on board the vessel. It is standard procedure that cadets are required to wear uniform on-board the vessel, especially when they are present on the bridge or in the officers' saloon. Although some of the students may not like it, wearing uniform reminds them to be disciplined and to work as a team.

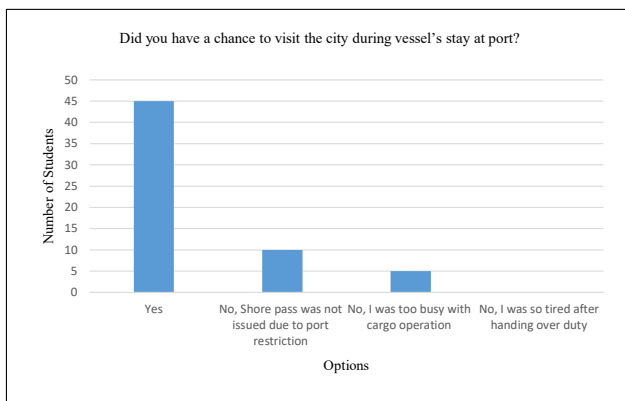


Figure 22: Shore leave

Figure 22 shows that most of the cadets had the chance to leave the vessel and visit the city during their stay in port. It is very important for cadets to have the opportunity to leave the ship when in port in order to be away, at least for a period of time, from the hustle and bustle of the vessel's atmosphere. It helps cadets to feel refreshed after staying a long period of time at sea.

A majority of the students were welcomed by their family at the airport on their arrival home (Figure 23). This is exactly what cadets need when going back home. They should be welcomed properly.

Figure 24 is self-explanatory. As stated earlier, providing easy and cheap means of

communication allows parents to be in contact with their loved ones more frequently and easily which therefore assists them to deal with the absence of their child. Assigning a person in the shipping company to be responsible for being in direct contact with the parents / friends of the cadets may be helpful.

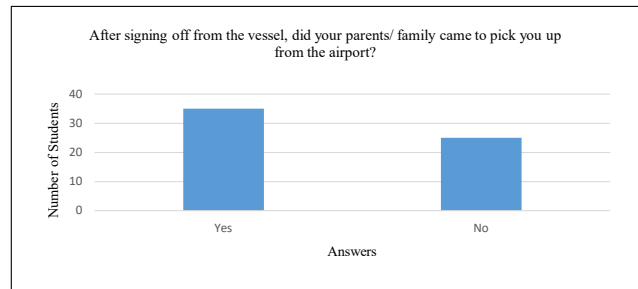


Figure 23: Returning home

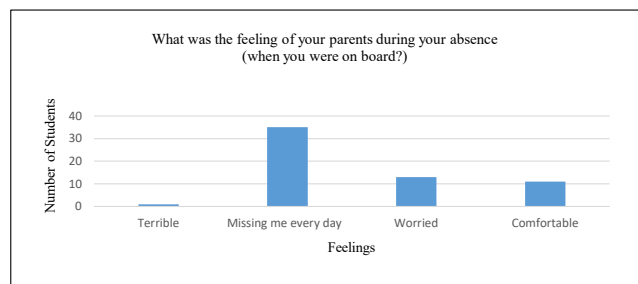


Figure 24: Parents missing their child

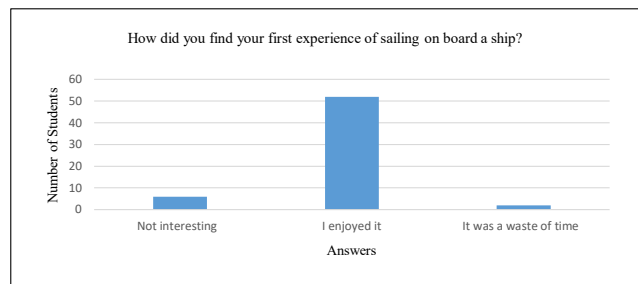


Figure 25: First time at sea



Figure 26: Safety

Both Figures 25 and 26 indicate that most of the cadets felt safe and enjoyed their experience on board. Figure 26 confirms that while sea life is adventurous, it is seen as a positive experience.



Vessels are safe as long as they are manned by well-trained crew members and maintained to a high level by following the rules and regulations set up by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), flag, and of course the classification societies.

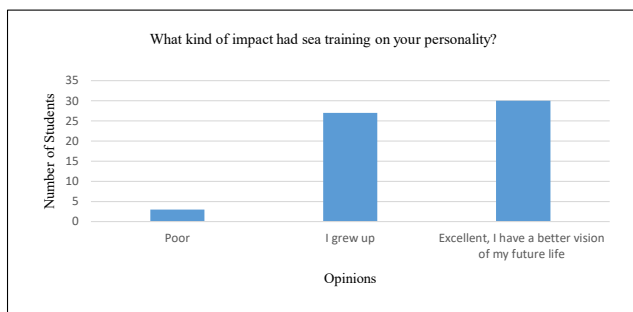


Figure 27: Self Confidence

Most of the cadets felt they had grown up and achieved a better idea of their future after experiencing the work and life at sea. Clearly, learning a unique profession, exploring the world along with facing different challenges during their service on board made these young people more mature, more self-confident and wiser (Figure 27). They were also satisfied with their decision to become a merchant navy officer and finally a Captain commanding a huge vessel (Figure 28).

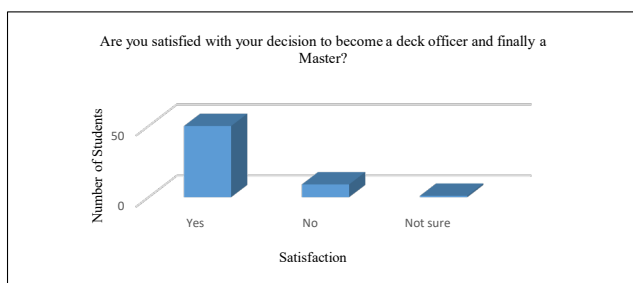


Figure 28: Career decision

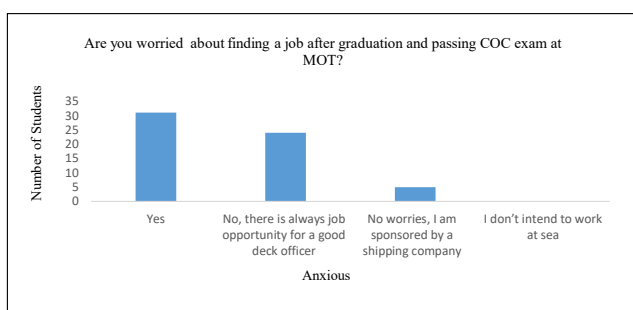


Figure 29: Employment Prospects

Referring to Figure 29, half of the cadets were worried about finding a job after graduation from the college. They needed more reassurance. As

stated earlier, the world is facing a shortage of mariners in near future. Shipping companies should increase their cooperation with maritime colleges by conducting seminars or campaigns to reassure students that they will not be left jobless after graduation as long as they are certified, well trained and hard working. It is highly recommended that shipping companies should sponsor students from the first semester or second semester.

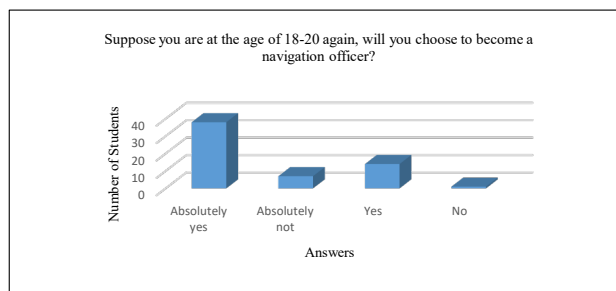


Figure 30: Back to Eighteen

Figure 30 clearly indicates our duties (college, industry and families) to keep mariners satisfied and happy.

Overall, the findings can be further discussed as follows:

Firstly, colleges must be in constant liaison with the shipping industry to find out from the industry what it needs and work backwards. Then, they will be able to determine what type of additional or new training program is required.

Secondly, colleges have a duty to maintain morale in students and keep them satisfied and happy. As was noticed, most of the students were happy once they sighted the vessel for the first time. These young people left their home knowing that they would be away from their loved ones for months, but still were happy to join the vessel. They were full of energy and courage and it is up to colleges to ensure their morale regarding their chosen profession is maintained or even raised to higher standards.

Thirdly, shipping companies need to play a greater role in attracting young people to become mariners. This can be achieved by sponsoring the cadets upon joining the college. It will help the students and their parents financially and will also make them feel more emotionally secure by knowing they have a job in the future. Ship owners need to be encouraged to employ freshly graduated

students. In the case of Oman, it is recommended that IMCO should strengthen cooperation with leading players such as Oman Shipping Company. Providing means of high quality on-board communication for cadets, both telephone and internet, will play a significant role in encouraging youths to join the merchant navy. Moreover, it is strongly recommended that ships should offer a confidential calling system, a twenty-four hours help line, enabling cadets / seafarers to contact staff who have appropriate skills to support them emotionally.

The findings of this paper and the above recommendations are only based on a case study made with sixty deck students who were or are currently studying at International Maritime College of Oman. Further research may be conducted by other maritime industries or training institutions. The outcomes of this research highlight issues that need to be addressed by colleges and shipping companies in order to encourage students to feel positive towards the seafarer's life, more secure about their future job and life and to make sure they remain happy. Shipping companies and even government should know that happy and satisfied seafarers play an important role in improving shipping operations, reducing accidents at sea and finally improving the economies of countries.

## 5. Conclusion

It is certainly possible to attract more young people towards studying maritime science and to encourage them to become merchant marine officers. Initially it requires effective marketing and advertising to show the true nature of a maritime life, both its advantages and disadvantages. This could be achieved by advertising on TV, in newspapers, on FM radio stations, on the cover pages of high school books, in sport complexes and on billboards. Later, campaigns and seminars should be conducted by inviting experienced merchant mariners (male and female) to address parents and youths to once again highlight the benefits and hardships of a seafarer's life.

Maritime colleges should conduct their Open Days in a very attractive and professional way. The

open day should be only for the maritime department, separate from the other departments. Private sector companies who are experts in the marketing of the maritime industry could be invited to make presentations at these open days. In addition, parents and students should be clearly briefed that cadets who have graduated from maritime colleges are not only capable of maneuvering and controlling the operation of a vessel, but they are also able to work in critical positions in ports, maritime colleges or institutes, private shipping agencies, private forwarding agencies, ministries and shipping companies.

Finally, we must encourage cadets not be worried about the implications of the change to autonomous shipping. Even when ships become fully automated, they will need to be controlled, taken care of and guided to and from the ports by operators who are or were officers and captains.

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