

## CULTURAL AWARENESS

# Make the most of diversity

**Alison Noble**, lecturer in maritime English at the Antwerp Maritime Academy, continues the Telegraph's series on cultural awareness training with a call for maritime lecturers to capitalise on existing cultural diversity in their own institutions and to recognise the benefits that it can bring...



Maritime English lecturer Alison Noble says mixed crewing can be good for seafarers

The Antwerp Maritime Academy nestles in a bend on the River Scheldt, just within the Port of Antwerp and only three kilometres from the city's mediaeval town centre. Due to its long tradition of trading via the port and its central position within Europe, the city of Antwerp has always attracted and welcomed people of different nationalities and backgrounds.

Each year Antwerp's varied and diverse population is aptly reflected in the intake of foreign students at its Maritime Academy, and this academic year is no exception. We currently have a total of 686 cadets, of which 347 are Dutch-speaking and 339 French-speaking. 40% of our students are foreign (ie, non-Belgian) and 23 different nationalities are represented in the Academy.

Students from a whole variety of countries attend classes. In addition to our Belgian (Flemish and Walloon) students, many cadets come from France and Northern Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria) with students from countries as varied as Madagascar, Portugal, Lebanon, Senegal, Cameroon, Congo and Benin also enrolled in recent years.

As you can imagine, with students coming from such a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds, our cadets present many challenges in terms of maritime education and training.

I was set thinking by a remark made in a previous edition of the Telegraph: 'Maritime educational institutions also frequently find themselves with a multi-cultural/multi-religious student body ... here it is easier to get to know one another and think ahead' (Jan Horck, February 2011 edition).

The Antwerp Maritime Academy certainly comes under Capt Horck's description — but it is the *getting to know one another and thinking ahead* which particularly caught my eye.

Over the last 18 months, Telegraph readers interested in the inter-cultural aspects of seafaring have been treated to a range of articles written by members of the International Maritime English Con-

ference (IMEC) — the English and cultural awareness teachers' professional forum. Previously the oft-touted argument was that, once a seafarer had been contracted to a certain company and crew they were duty-bound to abide by the hierarchy, procedures and regulations imposed. Intercultural 'interference' should not then deter or distract them during their onboard tasks. Looking at the Telegraph articles, however, it seems to me that maritime training professionals have come to a gradual consensus that culture-related issues can and do lead to problems onboard, whether communicative or procedural.

By the same token, the move towards providing training in intercultural competences in nautical colleges also appears to have been fast gaining momentum. Anyone who has recently attended an IMEC conference will know that discussions on this topic have become a popular feature at our annual gatherings.

Shipping companies are following suit. Browsing through some current websites from the sector, it is clear that shipping companies now focus their mission statements and policies not only on IMO standards for safety at sea and prevention of marine pollution but also on promoting harmonious diversity within crews. Websites are peppered with phrases such as 'we celebrate the diversity in our workforce', 'openness to the world', 'enriched with diversity', and 'diversity, a source of wealth for the company and its employees'. Suitably upbeat language for what is, I believe, a correspondingly upbeat asset: onboard diversity.

Antwerp Maritime Academy recently joined forces with the University of Antwerp to conduct a survey on linguistic and intercultural features influencing onboard communication. The data revealed similarly 'upbeat' results.

When asked about the advantages of a multinational crew our respondents (masters and deck



Students from the Antwerp Maritime Academy during mooring operations on board the Dar Młodzieży

ferences, to learn how each culture will behave; otherwise you will never be able to form a bridge team.'

Moreover, it is not only cultural obstacles to effective communication which must be considered but also linguistic ones. Often the two go hand in hand. So recently-broached views that the sector might move towards 'nationality-blind' crews where corporate culture creates a cohesive team are worthy, but are they realistic? Given the recruitment problems posed by the current lack of well-trained seafarers, such a goal may not, in my opinion, be entirely feasible.

The question thus remains. How do we tap this asset, and realise the full potential of diversity? And this is where we return to the idea of *thinking ahead* and *getting to know one another* within our own training institutions.

Some maritime lecturers, such as me, are lucky enough to find themselves in an environment which already mimics the 'melting pot' found onboard today's merchant marine ship. And this is where I would encourage those of us who, on a daily basis, face a range of nationalities, cultures and languages to *think ahead*. Don't pass up the opportunity. How can we make use of diversity in the classroom? How do we pre-empt onboard culture clashes with advance training?

As a relative newcomer to the community of maritime lecturers, I would urge colleagues always to take a close look at their range of students and to use any cultural diversity to good purpose.

I do not intend to list here the myriad ways in which lecturers might begin to engage their cadets and students in inter-cultural discussion. Previous contributions to the Telegraph have already provided some guidance and there are a great number of publications on the subject, but it is worth remembering that even the simplest activity can promote intercultural harmony.

First year students taking up places in the classroom or organising themselves into groups for project work are often slow. I find, to move out of their 'comfort zones', preferring to remain with peers of their own culture and background rather than having to deal with the stereotyped 'other'. We should encourage them to build on their intercultural and teamwork skills by prompting them, whenever possible, to engage with their 'other' peers.

At the Antwerp Maritime Academy, the curriculum includes onboard training for our first year students. Every year, just before Easter, they set off for a month's training on board the Polish three-master, the *Dar Młodzieży*. During their time at sea the students are divided into teams. Once more, as a result of our diverse student body, cadets find themselves working within a multilingual and multi-ethnic group. When they return, it is interesting and rewarding to witness how they have been transformed into a cohesive, much more harmonious group, and to acknowledge that they have taken a step nearer to adopting the openness and empathy required in a seafarer.

So let's think ahead to the values and policies held by today's shipping companies and right from the start encourage cadets from different cultures and backgrounds to mix and get to know one another. Dealing with diversity in all its forms is our key to success.

officers of the Belgian fleet) prove encouragingly positive. They consider that a multicultural team generates greater creativity and the opportunity to learn from each other's ideas. They strongly disagree with the suggestion that a multicultural team leads to greater levels of distrust or to a lack of team spirit and counterproductive behaviour.

**“Large swathes of the sector — maritime lecturers, shipping companies, captains and crew — regard the multicultural and multi-ethnic team as a positive asset”**

So far, so good. Large swathes of the sector — maritime lecturers, shipping companies, captains and crew — regard the multicultural and multi-ethnic team as a positive asset. Yet, at the same time, they recognise that diversity in culture can lead to problems, especially when it comes to onboard communication.

One of the respondents to our survey added: 'It's not a matter of how much these differences influence the communication; they always will. It's much more important to learn how to deal with these dif-