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While the Strategic Fleet Taskforce considers a range of options to secure sovereign shipping capability, this paper focusses on seafarer training pathways necessary to support all Australian industry.

Australian manned vessels need qualified Australian seafarers which, despite recent Productivity Commission assertions, are in critically short supply.

Fundamentally, this is because there has been less and less investment in seafarer training in Australia over the last 20 years.

Traditionally, shipowners employed new entrant trainees in the form of deck and engineering cadets, but the demise of Australian flag shipping has resulted in precious few shipping companies having the capacity or inclination to invest in seafarer training of any description. The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) may have seen this coming and took the initiative to form Maritime Employees Training Limited (METL), which gave many young integrated ratings a start, but even that has dropped off in recent years, in part due to the lack of Australian ships that can provide training berths, let alone future employment.

The shortage of training berths has been a catch cry of the Australian maritime sector for many years, but in the author's experience, it is not the core issue.

At the heart of the matter is that the maritime industry cannot continue to rely upon shipping companies, domestic or international, to shoulder the training burden on their own. Good shipping companies will always employ cadets, trouble is there are too few shipping companies, let alone good ones and hardly any that draw their seafarers from Australia.

What is required is a paradigm shift such that the entire Australian maritime sector appreciates it has to play its part in developing the future skills they also need for their businesses to survive and flourish.

Oil and gas majors, iron ore and coal exporters, state government port authorities, private port lessees, pilot companies, tug operators, stevedores, marine surveyors, classification societies and safety regulators all draw on experienced professional seafarers, often in the prime of their career. Little wonder the shipping companies are left frustrated and disinclined to invest in training, seeing their best and brightest walk down the gangway into plum shore jobs.

These end users of maritime skills may say they don't have access to ships or training berths necessary to provide qualifying sea service. That could well be the case, but they certainly have access to clients who do, clients in the form of shipping companies, many of whom are open to discussion about providing training berths, if not employing the trainees themselves.

Recent experience has shown a number of international shipping companies are prepared to take Australian cadets onboard, which is positive, but begs the question, should we as an Australian industry be reliant upon foreign vessels to facilitate the training of Australian seafarers? Hardly sounds strategic.

What if these supposedly elusive blue water training berths on Australian vessels were not so hard to find?

What if, for example, federal government policy required all government controlled vessels, such as *Nuyina*, *Investigator*, *Sycamore*, *Coral Knight*, *Ocean Protector*, *Ocean Shield* and other suitable Border Force vessels to have cabin space for Australian deck officer, engineer and rating trainees? These berths could be available to host trainees funded by other industry stakeholders under a coordinated program that affords the broadest possible sea

going experience. That program could be integrated with the mainstream Australian merchant fleet, encouraging shipowners to participate by providing training berths for 3<sup>rd</sup> party sponsored trainees while rotating their own trainees through an industry wide scheme.

The scheme might also include an exchange program with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), whereby merchant trainees go to sea on suitable RAN ships and naval personnel get experience on merchant vessels, naval supernumeraries being common place not so long ago. This would unlock substantially more training capacity with the added benefit of increasing potential access to future shore-based maritime skills by breaking down the perception of long-standing barriers between merchant and regular navy skillsets.

A number of Australian ports have already taken the initiative to employ a handful of officer cadets under standalone schemes. If the difficulty of finding seetime can be sorted as part of a national program, it is hard to imagine Australian ports, resource majors or shipping interests of any real scale not wanting to sponsor local trainees in such a system.

Further, state and federal government marine services supply contracts, for example port pilotage, towage, dredging and marine construction contracts could require proponents to include maritime industry training commitments in tender responses, just as they do for local content, indigenous participation and regional procurement, systematically shifting the responsibility for training away from the ships to the shore based users of maritime skills.

How could this be pulled together?

Peak industry bodies, including Maritime Industry Australia Limited (MIAL), Ports Australia and the Australian Resources & Energy Employers Association (AREEA) could come together with the Maritime Unions to form a Group Training Organisation (GTO) that would employ the trainees. The GTO would ensure the appropriate contractual arrangements with vessel operators are in place, along with the requisite insurances and safeguard compliance with minimum terms and conditions under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), all subject to AMSA approval.

The GTO would organise training berths with participating vessel operators and arrange trainee travel, while encouraging their respective membership and other industry stakeholders to sponsor trainees. Shipping Australia Limited (SAL), primarily representing international ship owners might also participate, offering berths on some of their membership's foreign flag vessels, which is happening in a sporadic fashion already, to bolster domestic training berth capacity. Time on an international trading foreign vessel only adds to the learning experience.

Maritime Unions can also play an important part independent of the GTO, by championing the opportunity for quality Australian seafarers, providing mentors for trainees, working with industry to attract new entrants and ensuring the viability of the program by not seeking excessive terms and conditions. There would also be renewed opportunity for current integrated ratings to pursue deck officer or engineering qualifications.

Not all seetime has to be completed on blue water commercial trading vessels. Valuable seamanship skills are acquired on tugs and barges, pilot boats, dredges, workboats, ferries, tallships, charter vessels, superyachts and the likes. Historically, AMSA approval of qualifying sea service has at times appeared ad hoc, complicated perhaps by the avalanche of Domestic Commercial Vessels (DCV's) under transition to a single national law. AMSA could now take the opportunity to clarify what constitutes alternative qualifying sea service, such that these, often more readily available inshore training opportunities can be incorporated in a new system with significantly enhanced capacity and flexibility.

Once established, a coordinated national training system, largely self-funded by the industry would also support Australian maritime training institutions, including the Australian Maritime College, regional TAFE colleges and sail training vessels with a steady stream of students moving through the system, including streamlined pathways from DCV to blue water qualifications.

Having endorsed a new, industry wide national training scheme, AMSA could also demonstrate their commitment to the program by sponsoring trainees from the outset, affording the new system significant international credibility, with the effect of encouraging more industry players to provide training berths and/or sponsor trainee positions. Any new Australian flag tonnage brought about by the broader strategic fleet deliberations will only bolster national training capability.

In summary, the old system is broken and what is required is a very different approach, whereby the maritime industry does not rely on shipping companies alone to train seafarers. The end users of maritime skills in Australia, of which there are plenty, should take up the reins by sponsoring trainees through a sustainable GTO formed by peak industry bodies that employs trainees and coordinates the availability of training berths with participating ship owners.

State and federal governments and the national safety regulator can show leadership by mandating training berths on government controlled vessels, and requiring respondents to government and Port Authority marine tenders to commit to industry training investment. By provided a structured industry wide training solution, with a clear

pathway for deck, engineer and rating trainees in collaboration with the national maritime sector, Australia can attract and retain the sovereign maritime skills that will enable Australia to continue to prosper as a proud maritime nation.

**About the Author:**

*Tony Cousins (GAICD) is an Australian Master Mariner with over 40 years experience in the international ports and shipping industry, including stevedoring and towage sectors. He is currently the principal of the marine consultancy Antares Marine, a Non-Executive Director of the Victorian International Container Terminal (VICT), a Councilor of the Australian Mariner's Welfare Society (AMWS) and is a former member of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) Advisory Committee.*