Overcoming Endorsement Barriers and VET Misalignment for Enhanced Seafarer Mobility in the European Maritime Sector

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Abstract

The European maritime sector relies heavily on a highly skilled and mobile workforce. However, persistent and interconnected challenges continue to limit labor mobility, employability, and the overall effectiveness of Vocational Education and Training (VET) across the region. This paper identifies and analyzes two primary barriers to the seamless cross-border employment of seafarers. The first is the critical gap between theoretical certificate recognition and the practical realities of Flag State Endorsement (FSE), where opaque administrative requirements frequently lead to delays and lost employment opportunities. The second barrier is the profound misalignment between VET provision and actual labor market requirements, particularly concerning the lack of "endorsement readiness" among graduates. By synthesizing current regulatory frameworks, including the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) Convention and European Union directives, alongside contemporary literature on maritime certification practices, this paper proposes strategic pathways to harmonize endorsement procedures and adapt VET curricula, thereby ensuring a truly mobile and resilient European maritime workforce.

1. Introduction

The maritime industry operates as the backbone of global and European trade, necessitating a workforce that is not only technically proficient but also highly mobile. In theory, international conventions and regional directives have established a framework designed to facilitate the free movement of maritime professionals. In practice, however, the European maritime sector faces persistent challenges that hinder labor mobility and limit the long-term employability of seafarers.

Recent analyses of maritime certification and competence practices reveal a fragmented landscape where the mutual recognition of qualifications is frequently undermined by bureaucratic bottlenecks. Furthermore, while Maritime Education and Training (MET) and VET

institutions rigorously prepare seafarers for the technical demands of their roles, they often fall short in preparing them for the administrative realities of the international labor market. This paper explores these interconnected needs, focusing on the gap between formal certificate recognition and practical endorsement, and the urgent need to align VET provision with cross-border employment realities.

2. The Gap Between Certificate Recognition and Practical Endorsement

A primary hurdle in the maritime labor market is the persistent gap between the overarching frameworks for certificate recognition and the practical, day-to-step procedures required for endorsement.

2.1. The Regulatory Framework

At the international level, the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) STCW Convention establishes the baseline standards for training, certification, and watchkeeping. Within the European Union, mechanisms such as Directive 2005/45/EC and its subsequent amendment, Directive (EU) 2019/1159, aim to foster the mutual recognition of seafarers' certificates issued by Member States. The goal of these directives is to ensure that a seafarer holding a Certificate of Competency (CoC) from one Member State can seamlessly operate on a vessel flagged by another.

Furthermore, national maritime authorities frequently establish bilateral STCW protocols (such as those managed by the Republic of Türkiye's Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure) to facilitate the recognition of certificates from foreign administrations.

2.2. Administrative and Documentation Hurdles

Despite these robust legislative frameworks, seafarers frequently encounter severe administrative and documentation hurdles when applying for Flag State Endorsements (FSE) or Certificates of Equivalent Competency (CEC). As highlighted by Winchester (2005) and further examined in recent reviews of European maritime certification practices (Acar, De Melo, & Curran, 2024), the process of verifying a CoC and associated Certificates of Proficiency (CoP) is often plagued by fragmentation.

While a CoC may be mutually recognized on paper, individual flag states often impose additional, unclear, and fragmented requirements. For instance, specific national legislations may demand additional proof of maritime law knowledge, unique medical fitness formats, or distinct language proficiencies before issuing an endorsement. Furthermore, disparities in the recognition of training centers ("whitelists") mean that while a CoC might be accepted, ancillary safety certificates (CoPs) might be rejected if the training provider is not directly recognized by the host flag state. These misaligned administrative expectations result in severe processing delays, application rejections, and the ultimate loss of immediate employment opportunities for

seafarers.

3. Misalignment Between VET Provision and Labor Market Realities

The second major challenge limiting seafarer mobility stems from the structural focus of current maritime VET and training programs.

3.1. The Focus on Formal Certification over "Endorsement Readiness"

Maritime VET is traditionally and necessarily focused on the strict acquisition of technical skills and formal certification required to pass national examinations and obtain an initial CoC. However, real-world labor market requirements dictate that a seafarer must also possess "endorsement readiness."

Endorsement readiness encompasses a comprehensive understanding of flag-state procedures, documentation standards, cross-border administrative expectations, and the specific pathways required to validate qualifications internationally. Currently, VET providers dedicate minimal curriculum time to these critical administrative competencies. As a result, freshly graduated cadets and even experienced officers are often left to navigate a complex labyrinth of international maritime bureaucracy without structured tools, guidance, or institutional support.

3.2. The Impact on Cross-Border Employment

This educational misalignment severely impacts cross-border employability. As noted in studies regarding the barriers to seafarer mobility (Ziarati et al., 2013), protectionism, misinformation, and complex bureaucratic procedures effectively lock qualified professionals out of the broader European market. When VET institutions fail to bridge the gap between technical graduation and administrative mobilization, seafarers are inherently disadvantaged. The lack of structured guidance tools means that seafarers rely on ad-hoc advice from crewing agencies, which can be inconsistent or incomplete, further exacerbating delays in deployment.

4. Pathways to Harmonization and Improved Mobility

To address these interconnected needs, the European maritime sector must adopt a holistic approach that bridges both the administrative and educational divides.

1. **Digitalization and Centralized Information Tools:** There is a pressing need for unified, digital platforms that transparently map the endorsement requirements of different EU flag states. By providing seafarers and VET institutions with a centralized database of cross-border documentation standards and step-by-step flag-state procedures, the uncertainty and fragmentation of the endorsement process can be significantly mitigated.
2. **Curriculum Evolution in Maritime VET:** VET providers must expand their scope beyond technical STCW compliance to include modules on maritime labor market navigation. Integrating "endorsement readiness" into the core curriculum will empower graduates to proactively manage their certification portfolios, anticipate flag-state requirements, and

transition smoothly into multinational fleets.

3. **Enhanced Inter-Administration Communication:** Flag states and maritime administrations must prioritize the standardization of FSE application procedures. Aligning additional national requirements and accelerating the verification processes between issuing and endorsing states will directly reduce the bureaucratic friction that currently hampers labor mobility.

5. Conclusion

The strategic importance of the European maritime sector requires a workforce that is both highly skilled and genuinely mobile. However, the illusion of seamless mobility is frequently shattered by opaque endorsement procedures and a VET system that does not adequately prepare seafarers for the administrative realities of cross-border employment. By addressing the gap between theoretical certificate recognition and practical flag-state endorsement, and by evolving VET provisions to include structured guidance on international labor market requirements, the maritime industry can unlock the full potential of its workforce. Fostering "endorsement readiness" and standardizing administrative processes are not merely bureaucratic improvements; they are essential steps toward ensuring the long-term sustainability, employability, and resilience of European seafarers.

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