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Working with Multinational and Multicultural Crews: a Croatian Seafarers' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays most of the vessels in the global merchant fleet are manned by multinational and multicultural crews. Working together with mixed crews on board ships can lead to potential misunderstandings and miscommunication, thus causing a potential threat to safety. Since Croatian seafarers frequently sail in mixed crews, a brief research was conducted using the method of questionnaire to elicit their views and opinions regarding the work within multinational and multicultural crews on board merchant vessels, the impact such crews have on the operation of the vessel and challenges they may pose. The questionnaire also elicited Croatian seafarers' views on the importance of cross-cultural training.

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1 Introduction

Although shipping industry is constantly growing, with over 90% of global trade being carried by sea (IMO, 2015), there are not enough seafarers available to meet the requirements of the industry. "The declining number of seafarers from major ship owner countries (EU, USA, Japan, etc.) has been one of the reasons which pushed the ship owners and employers to man their ships with crews from various nationalities" (Alfiani 2010: iv). There is "an apparent reluctance on the part of young people to choose seafaring as a profession. And even for those young people who do make that choice, their careers at sea are often short as they are either unwilling or unable to take on higher duties or, even more importantly, they actively choose not to remain at sea" (Sasirekha & Ramani 2014: 1). As a result, around 70-80% of the world's merchant fleet has multicultural crews (Hanzu-Pazara and Arsenie 2010) with the burden of maintaining a sustainable supply of seafarers to the world mainly placed on Asia, where Asian markets accounted for 42% share of seafarers in 2005 (Sasirekha & Ramani 2014). Since Croatian seafarers frequently sail as members of such mixed crews, the following paper presents the results of a brief survey con-

ducted among seagoing Croatian seafarers exploring their views on work in multinational crews, challenges they face and the need for cross-cultural training prior to joining service.

2 Objectives and Methodology

This survey followed a descriptive research design, whereby data was collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed and distributed to Croatian seafarers with seagoing experience during various courses held at the Faculty of Maritime Studies at the University of Rijeka and at the Maritime School in Bakar. Altogether, 44 Croatian seafarers returned the questionnaire. The seafarers were aged 20 to 56 with various lengths of seagoing experience, ranging from 6 months to 36 years. Out of all the Croatian seafarers participating in the survey, there were 7 Masters, 2 Chief Engineering Officers, 8 Chief Officers, 4 2nd Engineering Officers, 4 2nd Officers, 2 3rd Engineering Officers, 2 3rd Officers, 1 4th Engineering Officer, 4 Navigating Cadets, 8 Engineering Cadets, one electrician and one mechanic. Six of the Croatian seafarers said they completed the undergradu-

ate studies, 8 of them completed the graduate studies, 14 graduated from high school, while 16 participants provided no response to this question. All 44 seafarers participating in the survey have been members of multinational crews during their seagoing services.

The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions. The questions were designed to elicit seafarers' views and experiences on sailing with multinational and multicultural crews and opinions regarding the need for and usefulness of education in socio-cultural matters. Thus, the Results and discussion part focuses on different nationalities Croatian seafarers have worked with, i.e. it discusses Croatian seafarers' experiences, challenges they have encountered and differences they have observed while working with mixed crews. This section also brings the seafarers' more general thoughts on culture, the impact of human element on ship's safety, education prior to working with multinational and multicultural crews and the current situation regarding cross-cultural awareness training. The concluding section of the paper offers final remarks and suggestions.

3 Results and discussion

The nationalities the Croatian seafarers have worked with during their seagoing experiences are shown in Chart 1. Thus, it can be seen that 95% of the respondents have worked with the Filipino crewmembers. Another notable feature is the overall high presence of Asian seafarers, which reinforces the statistics that show global shipping industry's constantly increasing reliance on the Asian labour market. Apart from the nationalities coming from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, China, etc., there is also an increasing number of seafarers coming from the Baltic states, Poland and the former Soviet Union coun-

tries (Horck 2006). Thus, the present multicultural environment on board is a direct consequence of two factors – decreasing number of seafarers from the EU and the non-EU countries belonging to the OECD (Organization for Economic Countries and Development) and the large supply of seafarers from Asia.

All of the Croatian seafarers participating in the survey noted that the biggest differences they observed were those between eastern and western cultures. More precisely, 98% of the seafarers said the biggest differences were evident in culture, 86% of the seafarers noted differences in behaviour, 66% noticed religious differences, while 32% of the seafarers noted differences other than those offered in the questionnaire.

One of the statements in the questionnaire based on the Likert scale was *Experience of working with the crewmembers of the following nationalities was positive*, followed by a scale from 1 to 5, inviting seafarers to respond to the statement based on how strongly they felt about it, where 1 stood for *Strongly Disagree*, 2 for *Disagree*, 3 for *Undecided*, 4 for *Agree* and 5 for *Strongly Agree*. Chart 3 shows the average result for each nationality included in the questionnaire. The number of responses in Chart 2 matches the number of responses in Chart 1. However, Chart 2 also includes information on crew members that were of Croatian nationality.

It is interesting to note that the Filipino seafarers have been awarded the highest points (4.00 out of five) by the Croatian seafarers, while Croatian seafarers scored second place (3.97 out of five), followed by the Germans (3.92 out of 5). Filipino seafarers were evaluated by 42 Croatian seafarers, while Croatian seafarers were evaluated by all the participants in the survey. Both Filipinos and Croats have scored the highest number (6 each) of 5 *Strongly Agree* responses. Neither of the two nationalities have received any

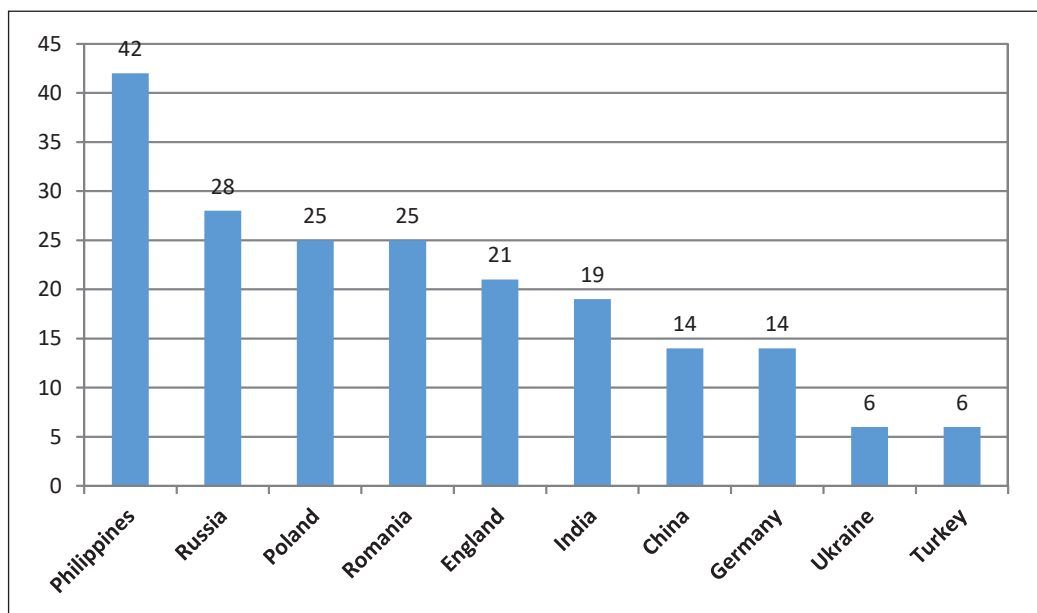


Chart 1 Nationalities Croatian seafarers have sailed with. Source: Authors

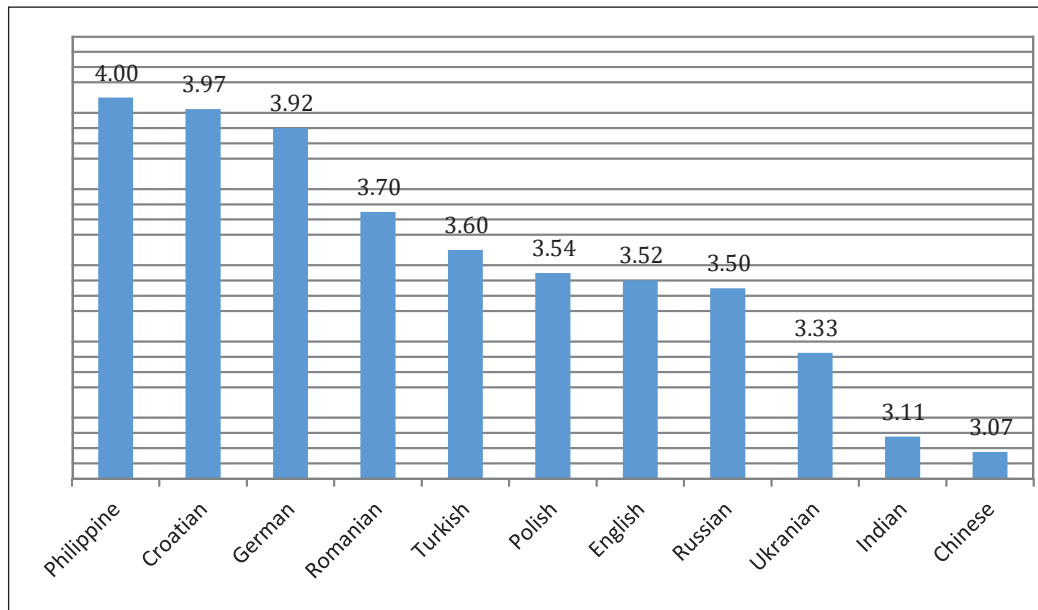


Chart 2 Croatian seafarers' evaluation of working experiences in multinational crews. Source: Authors

of the less favourable responses, i.e. *1 Strongly Disagree* or *2 Disagree*. The average number of responses both of these two nationalities received was *4 Agree*, with both of the nationalities receiving almost the same number of these responses. The response which made the final difference was *3 Undecided*, where Croatian seafarers received 7 of these responses as compared to 6 awarded to Filipino seafarers.

If we consider that responses *4 Agree* and *5 Strongly Agree* are positive, the highest number of positive responses were given to Germans (93%), followed by the Filipinos (85%), Croats (83%) and Romanians (75%). The lowest number of positive responses were drawn by the Chinese (21%), Ukrainians (33%), and Indian seafarers (44%). Indian seafarers also received the highest number of negative responses (3) *1 Strongly Disagree*. English seafarers also received 2 *Strongly Disagree* responses, although they also received 61% of positive responses. Responses *5 Strongly Agree*, apart from the Filipinos and Croats, were also given two times to the English and the Russian nationalities and once to Germans, Romanians and Indian seafarers. It is also interesting to note that the Indian seafarers are the only nationality that received all of the responses on the scale.

These results show that the way certain nationalities are perceived can vary even when they are being evaluated by the seemingly homogenous group consisting of seafarers belonging to the same nationality, such as Croats in this survey. For instance, the Croatian seafarers' view of Indian seafarers is quite varied, ranging from strong agreement to strong disagreement, which obviously points to the fact that certain number of Croatian seafarers have had different experiences. Examples like these teach us that generalisations or stereotypes about any culture may simply not always apply and that each crewmember should be approached individually. However, having some background knowledge about individual's culture might

help to avoid or at least mitigate some of the risks involved in working with mixed crews by creating a sound working environment and improving communication. On a positive note, 89% of Croatian seafarers in the survey reported that they socialized with other crew member nationalities when they were not on duty. Although human relationships and social interactions cannot be separated socially and professionally especially in an on-board environment, a certain small number of seafarers preferred to keep to themselves. This might be due to the seeming complexity of interaction with crews from different cultures, but this probably depends on each individual personality.

Challenges, shown in Chart 3, were encountered by 28 out of 44 of the Croatian seafarers while working in multinational and multicultural crews, which amounts to 64%.

Out of 28 Croatian seafarers that encountered challenging situations on board, 18 of them (64%) stated they experienced language problems. This is a significant indicator since language or more precisely language problems have often been identified as an important factor that can have a profound impact on the safety on board. Since Maritime English is required to be used by seafarers on board, insufficient command of the English language, unclear pronunciation, and unusual accents can lead to misunderstandings and ambiguous interpretation. Problems with language competence may be the result of the widespread issues in the provision of Maritime English training at the MET institutions and "include the lack of: time allocated to English, up-to-date resources integrating Maritime English content with the Communicative approach to language learning, time to develop practical skills of listening and speaking (with priority given to terminology), exam systems evaluating spoken competence, a standardized qualification for Maritime English trainers and opportunities for Maritime English trainers to update their knowledge of both subject

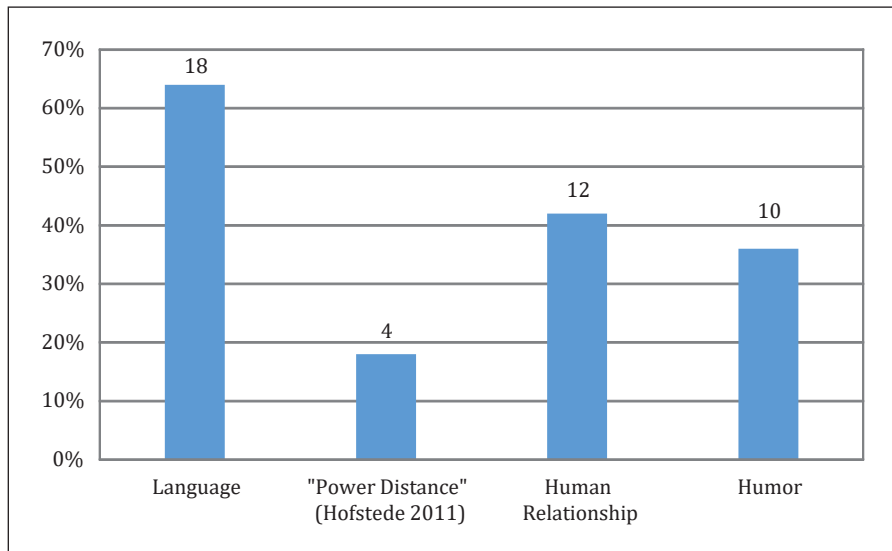


Chart 3 Challenges encountered by Croatian seafarers in working with multinational crews. Source: Authors

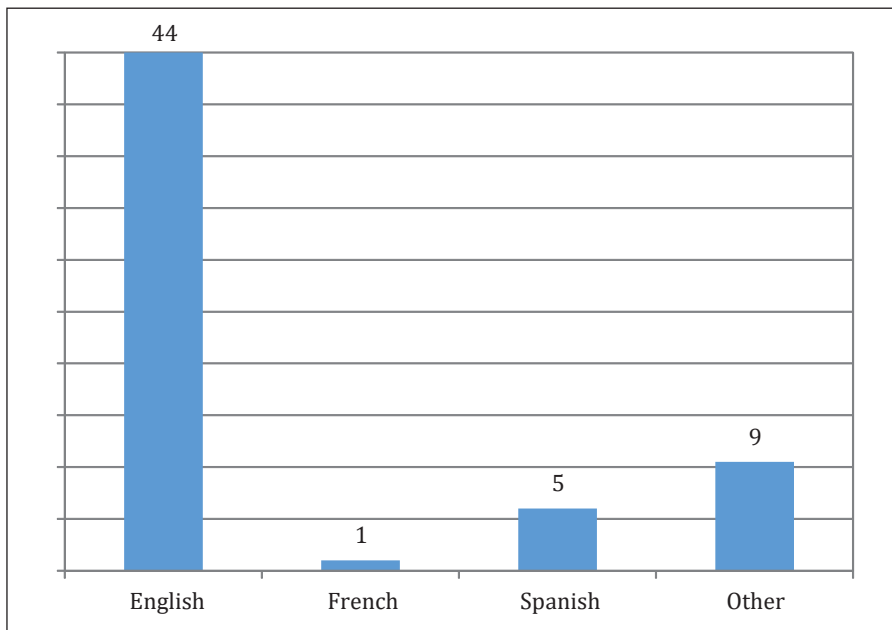


Chart 4 Languages reported to be used by the Croatian seafarers in communication on board. Source: Authors

content and methodology. Seafarers may therefore graduate with an excellent (passive) knowledge of Maritime English but without the practical (active) ability to use the language confidently and fluently in routine and emergency situations." (Logie 2007: 3) Also, "investigations into the human factor regarding disasters at sea, which focused on communication behaviour, revealed that one third of accidents happen primarily due to insufficient command of Maritime English." (Trenkner 2007: 3).

Chart 4 confirms that English language is used as the main working language in mixed crew communication. However, it is interesting to note that other national languages tend to be occasionally used. It would be interesting to investigate on what occasion languages other than English were used.

Another question concerning language was *Did your company require you to have sufficient level of English language knowledge both in speech and in writing?*

32% of seafarers reported that their companies did not require them to have sufficient knowledge of English language. The percentage is rather high considering the fact that English language is the official working language on board that should be used in multicultural and multilingual crews. The situation is even more worrying when it comes to deck cadets and engine room assistants, where 44% reported that their companies did not require them to have sufficient level of English, neither in spoken nor written form.

Several questions in the questionnaire referred to cross-cultural matters. One of the open-ended questions

in the questionnaire was *What does global culture mean to you?* Only 50% of participants answered the question. Those that did answer wrote about accepting and respecting cultural differences, for instance “Bridging the gap between different nations”, “Mutual respect for each other’s differences”, “Respecting other peoples’ customs and beliefs”, “Treating members of other nationalities as equals”, etc. Interestingly, the other 50% of seafarers had no idea how to answer that question or simply did not want to although they had all been part of multinational crews. Since multinational crews are everyday reality of seafaring life, cross-cultural awareness of seafarers should be raised in order to avoid misunderstandings and potentially dangerous situations that may threaten the safety on board vessels.

Prior to starting work with multinational crews, 61% of Croatian seafarers reported that they had not received any kind of cross-cultural training. More precisely, this was claimed by half of the seafarers that completed the undergraduate and graduate studies and by 55% of navigating and engineering cadets.

All of the participants agreed that human relations and interactions are important. Likewise, they all agreed that the socio-cultural approach can harmonize the working environment. Moreover, 98% of Croatian seafarers think that human element is an important factor in multinational and multicultural environment on board, while 2% (1 respondent) was undecided. The importance of cross-cultural awareness on board is further emphasized by the responses (shown in Chart 5) to the question *Do you think*

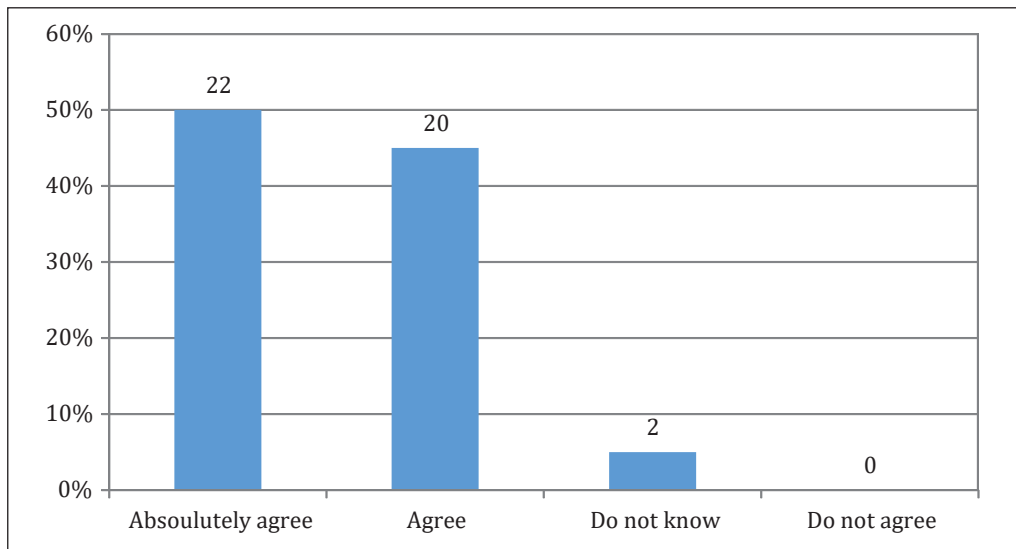


Chart 5 Increased safety of ship’s operation as a result of improved intercultural relations. Source: Authors

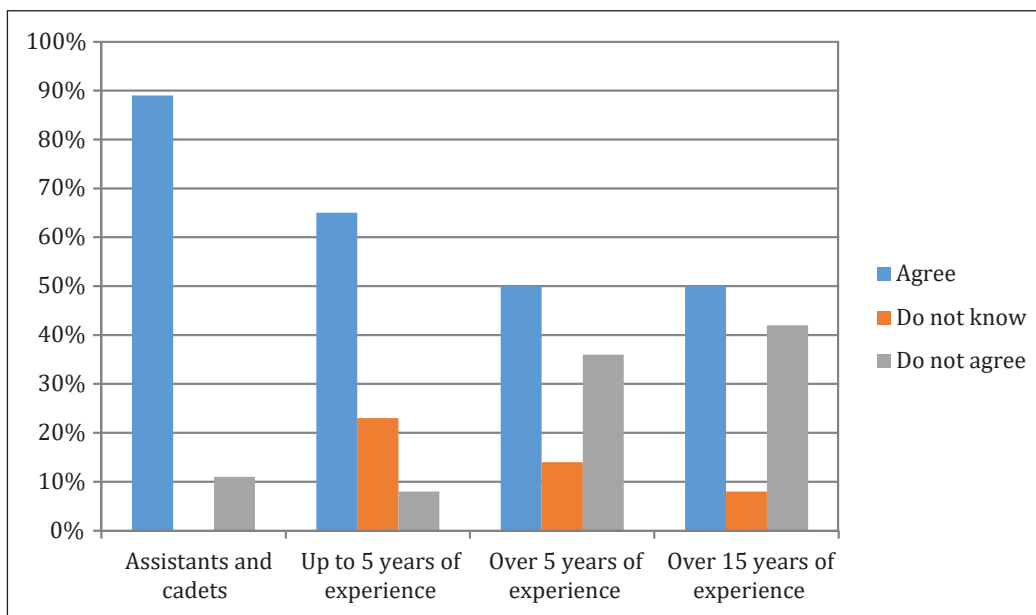


Chart 6 Croatian seafarers’ attitudes towards necessity of cross-cultural training according to the years of seafaring experience. Source: Authors

that improving intercultural relations in mixed crews would increase the safety of ship's operation?

Out of 44 Croatian seafarers, 42 of them (95%) think that improving intercultural relations within multinational and multicultural crews would imply greater safety of ship's operation. Only 2 respondents (around 5%) were undecided.

The questionnaire also included the following question: *Should cross-cultural training be conducted at MET institutions?*, where 64% of seafarers answered positively, 14% did not answer and 22% answered negatively.

Chart 6 shows that the more seagoing experience Croatian seafarers acquire, the less they agree with the inclusion of cross-cultural courses at MET institutions. One of the reasons for such results may lie in the fact that the more experienced seafarers feel they have already developed their cross-cultural coping skills on their own through the sheer necessity of having to (co)exist in multicultural environment on board. Another reason could be that the seafaring career implies life-long learning, where seafarers often have to attend either new courses or refreshment courses in order to keep up with the industry's demands and advancements, and very frequently they have to bear the financial costs themselves. Thus, the thought of having to attend another course probably does not sound very appealing. Although, the question itself primarily implied the introduction of such courses in the curricula at the maritime colleges and universities prior to seafarers' experience with multinational and multicultural crews. Similar responses were received regarding the potential introduction of an IMO model course related to socio-cultural topics, where 58% of respondents agreed, 21% did not know and 21% did not agree. Similar to the previous question, the more experienced the seafarers were, the less they agreed with the proposition.

4 Conclusion

Currently, global merchant fleet is in large part manned by multicultural, multinational and multilingual crews and as a result of this global trend, the majority of Croatian seafarers sail in such multinational environments. The results gathered by the use of a specially designed questionnaire distributed to Croatian seafarers show that ship operation in such circumstances is not without challenges.

The most pronounced ones reported by the Croatian seafarers are language problems, cultural differences and insufficient training regarding cross-cultural skills prior to working with mixed crews. Thus, MET institutions should play an important role in the maritime industry by providing appropriate curricula according to the IMO STCW '95 Convention regulations and the state flag policies not only regarding the acquisition of appropriate technical skills for navigation and engineering but also regarding the acquisition of non-technical, i.e. soft skills, such as communication skills and intercultural competences and understanding of how culture can impact communication. Seafarers should be educated in cultural awareness prior to working with mixed crews instead of having to learn the more difficult way in order to prevent the mistakes that can become costly to the ship owners (Horck 2006).

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Age: _____

Seafaring experience: _____

Rank: _____

Education: _____

1. Have you sailed with multinational crews?
 Yes No
2. If your answer to the previous question is 'yes', tick the boxes next to the nationalities you have sailed with.
 Filipino Chinese Indian Turkish Russian Romanian Polish Croatian English other
3. Did your company require you to have sufficient English language knowledge both in speech and in writing?
 Yes No
4. What language(s) did you use to communicate on board?
 Arabic English French Spanish other
5. What does global culture mean to you?

6. Did you notice any differences between crew members from western and eastern cultures?
 Yes No
7. If your answer to the previous question is 'yes', state what source of differences did you find?
 Belief Culture Behaviour Other
8. Did you encounter any challenges in working with multinational crews?
 Yes No
9. If your answer to the previous question is 'yes', which challenges did you encounter?
 Language Power distance Interpersonal relations Humour
10. Did you socialize with crew members of other nationalities while off duty?
 Yes No
11. The experience of working with crewmembers of the following nationalities was positive, where 1 is strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 undecided, 4 agree and 5 strongly agree
 Filipino 1 2 3 4 5 Croatian 1 2 3 4 5 Chinese 1 2 3 4 5 Polish 1 2 3 4 5
 Indian 1 2 3 4 5 English 1 2 3 4 5 Turkish 1 2 3 4 5 Russian 1 2 3 4 5
 Romanian 1 2 3 4 5 German 1 2 3 4 5
12. Do you think human element is important in multinational and multicultural environment on board?
 Strongly agree Agree Do not know Disagree
13. In your opinion, are interpersonal relations and social interactions important?
 Yes No
14. Did you receive any cross-cultural training prior to sailing with multicultural crews?
 Yes No
15. Do you think that the socio-cultural approach can harmonize the working environment?
 Yes No
16. Do you think that improving intercultural relations in mixed crews would increase the safety of ship's operation?
 Strongly agree Agree Do not know Disagree
17. Should cross-cultural training be conducted at MET institutions?
 Strongly agree Agree Do not know Disagree
18. Do you think the IMO should issue a Model Course for cross-cultural training?
 Strongly agree Agree Do not know Disagree