

## A RE-THINK ON MARITIME TRAINING NEEDED



**Left:** Sizwe Mavundla and Viwe Mosia (former students at Simon's Town School's Maritime Studies Department) at the Maritime Studies Department, Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

**Bottom left:** Former students at Simon's Town School's Maritime Studies Department, Robyn George, Yonda Ndiki and Valoshini Pillay are trainees at JF Hillebrand, a prestigious forwarding and clearing company, based in Stellenbosch.

**Bottom:** Zuko Saule, another former Simon's Town student, has embarked on a career in marine insurance.



Government should be proactive in supporting the Maritime Industry

I wonder whether the Fidentia bosses reflect on the whereabouts of R200 million that the Transport Education and Training Authority (TETA) invested in their company.

Although initial returns on that investment were good, TETA now risks losing some of that cash - if not all.

While steps by the Minister of Labour to restrict investment by the training authorities are to be welcomed, it appears in this instance that the ship has sailed with the treasure, rather than come in for maritime training providers who had hoped for better use of their money.

Some involved in maritime training have questioned TETA's wisdom of investing so much, alleging that most of the cash should have been returned to the industry via training subsidies. Hopefully, the logic behind the investment will emerge during the on-going inquiry into Fidentia's operation.

Perhaps the time is ripe for a re-think on South African maritime training - including its funding - so that a clear continuum can be mapped out from secondary school level right up the respective ladders within the various sectors of the maritime industry.

The first step is for the government to acknowledge the importance of shipping to the country's economy. That transport minister Jeff Radebe should have to shoulder the ailing health ministry as well as his own vital portfolio that includes shipping beggars belief, and diminishes his ability to address many pressing maritime issues. This is hardly the way to convince shipping folks that their industry is taken seriously.

Such is the importance of shipping to the country - despite general apathy towards maritime matters - that a separate ministry, headed by an experienced and dynamic shipping boffin, should oversee a progressive maritime policy for the country. I have mentioned this before - but perhaps politicians prefer reading the tabloids.

The hi-tech Fabrication Plant at Saldanha Bay, now under construction, and the installation of a large synchrolift - long delayed by indecision - or the proposed new large drydock in Cape Town could have a mega-impact on the local marine engineering sector and bring millions of dollars to the economy, partly through the creation of hundreds of jobs.

Yet that pot of gold could become an illusion. A front-page article and comments made by Dr Mamphela Ramphele published by this newspaper on Monday highlight the frustrations of various sectors of the shipping industry - notably shiprepairers - who face critical skills shortages that prevent the country from reaping the full benefit from these projects. Ships are being turned away as repairers cannot find enough qualified artisans for the volume of work.

Open-licence harbour pilots - the products of years of experience - are in short supply, as are experienced surveyors for essential ship inspections.

Since 90 percent of our trade is seaborne, shipping is a vital industry. Shipping lines, harbours, the fishing sector and extensive ancillary maritime services employ thousands, and the potential for additional sea-going employment is great.

For that potential to be realised, various government ministries need to hasten legislation that will attract shipowners to the South African register. A tonnage tax system - once mooted enthusiastically, but mired by numerous issues, including unhelpful labour laws - escaped attention in this year's budget. Indeed, legal beagles tell me that a basket of legislation needs to be amended or introduced to pave the way for a return to the heyday of South African ship registration when dozens of large commercial ships flew the local flag. Now, the flag flutters from only one containership!

Pointing to the potential of crewing ships to create jobs for South Africans, optimists offer the model of Filipino seafarers who collectively earn millions of dollars, a huge chunk of their homeland's revenue. Some believe that South Africans can be rustled up at the drop of a hat to crew foreign ships.

Others emphasise the strategic value of training more cadets. From those trained by the major shipping lines comes the next generation of their own senior officers, as well as harbour pilots, surveyors, training officers and other essential maritime personnel. Indeed, without the shipping companies' input over the years, the local industry would be at a standstill.

Thus, a pragmatic step might be to increase the intake of cadets at the country's two technical universities, provided funding became available to extend their facilities, and to appoint more training staff. Importantly, more cadet berths at sea are essential.

Now there's the rub! When Safmarine's four Big Whites are withdrawn, numerous cadet berths will disappear as the replacement vessels do not have a similar capacity for cadets.

Here is a suggestion. Approach a shipping company that is about to build vessels for the South African trade. Offer them enough cash to include in each ship's design 20 cadet berths, accommodation for a training officer and a training room, as well as funds to pay them.

This is not new rocket science. Many companies operated training ships, especially after the carnage at sea during World War 2 that caused a dire shortage of merchant navy officers. In the early 1970s, Safmarine fitted out **SA Vergelegen** to carry a large contingent of cadets. Other companies - including the Japanese - still operate training ships that feed well-trained cadets into the officer ranks.

And the source of that cash for the training institutions and our hypothetical shipping line? Is this not an opportunity for the government to become proactive by funding the training of essential maritime personnel for the future?

TETA's lost millions - if recovered - will help.