

Alternative Pathways to Pilotage – Response to the NMSC Draft Competencies from the Australian Maritime Officers Union North Queensland Port Pilots Council

The draft competencies for Trainee Marine Pilots has been released as a proposal to provide an alternative pathway to people wishing to have a career in pilotage that do not wish to pursue the traditional route of first obtaining a Master Unlimited Certificate of Competency. The draft competencies and outcomes for the course closely follow the current curriculum for a Master's Certificate (Diploma of Nautical Science and Advanced Diploma of Applied Science) with some additional subjects that take the course up to a degree level.

We believe there are a number of issues with this proposal:

1. Overall reduction in experience required to be a Marine Pilot and subsequent lowering of professional standards.
2. Age profile and maturity of candidates completing the course.
3. Lack of funding for successful completion of elements of the course.
4. The potential employment issues resulting from pilots being recruited in this manner.

Overall reduction in experience required to be a Marine Pilot and subsequent lowering of professional standards

Professional standards displayed by Pilots in Australia are considered by many to be amongst the best in the world. From our experience many foreign ship Masters comment that they find the pilotage process in Australia to be conducted to a consistently high standard. We believe this can be attributed in part to the base level of knowledge that Pilots have prior to commencing their pilotage training, the high standard of training specific to the pilotage task that is received, the regulation of pilot certification, and the process of selection of pilot applicants.

A move to reduce the requirements from the current Master Unlimited Certificate will no doubt result in a reduction of the base experience of Marine Pilots in Australia. Whilst one could argue that pilotage does not require much of the knowledge base that is required to obtain a Master's qualification it is fair to say that pilots rely on lessons they learned throughout their career at sea whilst conducting the pilotage task. It would seem odd to be able to conduct the navigation of a large ship in confined waters, a high risk operation, without being experienced enough or qualified to be able to command it in the open ocean.

Age profile and maturity of candidates completing the course

The current process of recruiting and training pilots with a Master Unlimited Certificate ensures candidates will be of an older age profile, and will therefore be more likely to have an appropriate level of maturity to conduct the pilotage task. Pilots are often faced with situations where they must act with authority and be willing to stand their ground on

the decisions they make. This will require experience and maturity – two things that a school leaver who completes the proposed course may lack. The Masters of the ships that are being piloted must also feel and treat the pilot as an equal rather than a subordinate.

There are also many examples of age profile relating to the level of risk people are willing to take. The most obvious of these is in insurance premiums for motor vehicles. The age profile will also affect the stability of the individual and their likelihood to continue with a chosen career path.

Lack of funding for successful completion of elements of the course

The draft standards refer to the candidates completing time on a ship handling simulator, manned model training, seetime on trading vessels, time on tugs and time with a pilotage organisation. All of these items would come at considerable expense and to our knowledge there has been no definitive answer as to who will be paying for all of these items. There does not appear to be a formal commitment to assisting with the funding of such activities from the stakeholders and we doubt that such things would fall into the other course fees that are covered under the HECS system. It would seem to be putting the cart before the horse to develop a course without the appropriate financial backing from the stakeholders.

The potential employment issues resulting from pilots being recruited in this manner

It seems that some sectors of industry are viewing this manner of recruitment as a “low cost” alternative to the current method of recruiting pilots. Most of the private pilot organisations in Australia already set a higher standard of base experience than a Master Unlimited Certificate, typically requiring previous pilotage experience, Pilotage Exemptions as Master and minimum command times as Master. It is therefore unlikely that these organisations would recruit directly from those completing the alternative pathway course. Instead it is our belief that we would see new pilots trained in regional ports on considerably lower salaries on the premise that they can transfer to more lucrative positions after a substantial time piloting.

To some this may sound acceptable however we see a number of issues with it. The stakeholders in the smaller ports will have trouble retaining appropriately trained pilots due to inequities in remuneration. The experience base of pilots in these ports will be lower, hence the risk profile in the port will be higher. The standard of a pilot in these smaller ports is potentially lower than that in a major port resulting in lower levels of service to Masters of vessels calling there. The smaller ports will be a less attractive option for experienced pilots as they will be training people who do not have the desire to remain in that port but see it merely as a stepping stone.

Summary

The above points highlight some of the issues we see with the proposed draft standard. We feel that there are other alternatives that could be investigated to solve the problem of the shortage of pilots in Australia, remembering that this problem has been created largely by the demise of Australian shipping. The Australian Government in conjunction with stakeholders should be seeking to increase the number of Australian seafarers. Pilot organisations (and other organisations that have been attracting seafarers into non-seafaring roles) should be contributing to the training of Australian seafarers rather than leaving it solely to shipowners. Shipowners trading on the Australian coast that choose not to employ Australians onboard could be taxed or forced to pay a levy to contribute to the training of Australians.

Persons wishing to be pilots that already hold trading certificates for smaller vessels can now more easily obtain a Master Unlimited Certificate under AMSAs “Tinny to Tanker” process. Candidates could be chosen by pilotage organisations and sponsored to undertake the seetime and college time so that they get the appropriate experience to obtain a Master Unlimited Certificate prior to becoming a pilot. This can be done without investing time and money into an alternative pathway course whilst maintaining the base level of qualifications for pilots in Australia.

We suggest that the group that have been focusing on the course content for an alternative pathway could also consider some of the above mentioned options which could provide both short and long term solutions for the shortage of pilots in Australia.

This document has been written by the AMOU (Australian Maritime Officers Union) North Queensland Port Pilots Council which is made up of AMOU delegates from the Ports of Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Gladstone and has been endorsed by the majority of MSQ pilots.