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WMU - the place of learning

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John Guy looks at the work and role of the World Maritime University.

IN a museum in Malmö, southern Sweden, there is a tableau showing a man called Mårten Triewald talking to Swedish noblemen. He is there because it was he who went to England, an advanced nation, and brought back the skills that backward Sweden needed to develop itself.

That skill transfer took place 250 years ago. Now, opposite the museum, is a place from where skills are being transferred to other countries, so that they too can develop themselves. It is the World Maritime University (WMU), a place of learning.

The WMU is not truly an international organisation in its own right. It depends on IMO. But it is a very international place, and its importance to world shipping cannot be overestimated.

It is international because its students are drawn from every country in the world, with over 100 countries being represented so far in the student list. Likewise the staff, with 12 nationalities amongst the permanent workforce and many more amongst the 80 visiting professors who enrich the courses.

The WMU is important to world shipping because it is the only place where administrators, advisers, port managers, surveyors, teachers and all the people needed to make developing countries function properly can go to get a tailor-made course to help them better their work. And their country.

The WMU was born in 1981, when IMO realised that it was no good asking developing countries to implement conventions without doing something to provide the people needed to do the implementing. So an instrument for implementation was created. The first students came in 1983. This year saw the seventh intake, making over 600 students to date.

It is the quality of the students which makes WMU special. And that quality attracts the academics which makes WMU special. The students are predominantly drawn from the so-called less developed countries, consistent with the aims of the institution. But at the request of the students themselves, up to ten per cent of the student body can come from developed states.

Wherever they come from these are no ordinary students. The average age is thirty-five. Most of them already occupy important positions in the maritime infrastructure of their countries. There is intense competition within the developing countries for the fellowships to WMU. So the students are highly motivated to succeed. They are under considerable pressure to come back with a degree, if only because there are others who also wanted to come, and couldn't.

The university offers one basic degree, a two year Master of Science (MSc). There are seven subject areas, leading to different degree titles. These are General Maritime Administration, Ports and Shipping Administration, Maritime Safety Administration (Nautical), Maritime Safety Administration (Technical), Maritime Education and Training (Nautical), Maritime Education and Training (Marine Engineering) and Technical Management of Shipping Companies.

The students work very hard. They are hungry for learning. That attracts the best kind of teacher, one who really wants to teach, but WMU looks not only for teachers, but for teachers with professional experience. The work experience of the staff is as important as the work experience of the students. Important because if the students can see that the teacher has done the job, they can respect him. And important because the courses are not simply academic; they have to be practical, related to real life and real-life problems.

More than an academic qualification, the WMU courses are a mid-career training for existing executives. The courses follow a similar basic structure. The first year is broadly academic and lecture-based, running from March through to December. This puts the academic period into the Swedish summer, and lets the students go home when the winter bites. The second year is made up of field work or job experience, followed by the writing of a dissertation.

Throughout the two years, the courses are enriched by visiting professors. These are academics and successful professionals who give their time, free, to providing special seminars in their subject area. Drawing from literally a world of experience, the visiting professors are there to transmit experience.

WMU has its problems. Some, the cultural ones, can be turned into opportunities. Some, notably the financial ones, cannot. On the cultural side, WMU takes in 100 students a year, with widely different religious, feeding and living habits. There is no benchmark for academic standards or common behaviour. In this sense, WMU suffers from many of the problems of the UN itself. The difference is that WMU manages to overcome the problems. The dividends are becoming obvious as ex-students start to appear in the delegations to IMO conventions. A network of administrators who are able to work together and able to understand each other is being built up across the world.

The financial problems are not so simple. Sweden provides both the host city and thirty per cent of the budget. Forty per cent comes from student fellowships, provided by a variety of countries and institutions.

The shortfall is made up from the UNDP and one-off grants from different sources. The WMU needs, and deserves, a permanent, or long term cover for that thirty per cent of its budget. It should come from the developed countries. They can afford it, and they will benefit from it.

The whole world works better if shipping works better, because shipping is the only truly global business. As CP Srivastava, chancellor of WMU, told the 1989 inauguration, north, south, east and west are only directions for navigation, not parts of the world. If students come away with only that, WMU will truly be a place of learning.