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No laughing matter

ALL those old jokes about the Swiss navy are rendered just a little more hollow by news that the Berne government plans to make the largest contribution so far to the new Malta-based IMO International Maritime Law Institute.

Under an agreement just signed, the Swiss are to pay £40,000 a year for the next three years, as well as a one-off payment of £25,000 towards the institute's library.

The buildings and land for the institute, which opens in November, are being provided by the Maltese government. There will be no direct contribution from hard-pressed IMO central funds, leaving the funding to voluntary contributions from individual governments.

We understand that each of the 20 students on the year-long course — half of them women — will be expected to find half the estimated £15,000 fellowship

cost, and that the balance has already been covered by contributions.

Funding of any library can be like trying to fill a bottomless pit, but IMO is happy that the Swiss contribution is enough to cover the basic requirement for books.

The Swiss are not the first nation to spring to mind in the context of backing this sort of maritime venture. But we are told they thought it made a lot of sense, and the Swiss are nothing if not sensible.