Spotting a fake is no simple matter

The SIRC COLUMN

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Aquaculture certificates make life at sea more hazardous, says Nik Winchester of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre. But tackling the problem is a challenge

WHEN seafarers take up a new position, they possess a sheaf of documents, yet acting on one as if it was their first trip to sea.

More systematic research conducted in 2004 by the Seafarers’ International Research Centre found evidence of a plethora of fraudulent practices actually on the go. The Seafarers’ International Research Centre found evidence of a plethora of fraudulent practices actually on the go. These practices are demonstrated by the certificates that they possess. A certificate of competency defines its level of qualification in accordance with STCW’95. It specifies any additional skills or restrictions. The emphasis is on the maritime security features it possesses and what criteria do they apply when a certificate, or any document, is presented to them as evidence of legitimate qualification and experience. The response to this problem – a problem that will only become more perilous – is both to treat the source of the problem and to stop the circulation of existing fraudulent certificates through the maritime sector.

In the following comments I wish to report on a number of findings from a more recent research project that deals with the issues of how certificates are treated when they are presented to the different bodies within the maritime industry. Given that it is true that there are fraudulent certificates, then how does the maritime industry seek to stop their continuing usage? The emphasis is on the maritime industry as a whole: not a series of discrete bodies but a community attempting to deal with a problem within its bounds.

When a certificate, or commonly a number of certificates are presented to a flag state, an employer or training establishment, those who receive them are afforded the opportunity to check them and decide whether to accept them as evidence of legitimate qualifications. The issue here is what do these institutions do, and how do they go about it, in accepting these certificates?

The first problem for those institutions is that they will receive a plethora of certificates issued from a variety of bodies located around the world. There is no centralised database of certificates that they can check with. However, in the course of the research we found that links between institutions were frequently non-existent or, where they existed, they were not used.

Often certificates would be reviewed of what a particular certificate is to approach certification exists, and the only way to tackle it successfully is both to treat the source of the problem and to stop the circulation of existing fraudulent certificates through the maritime community. When it comes to the latter, the maritime sector is only beginning to address the problem – a problem that will remain until the problem becomes more systematic and recognises that it needs to be addressed by the maritime community as a whole.

A certificate is to approach the institution that issued it and ask them to verify the certificate. However, in the process of the research we found that links between institutions were frequently non-existent or, where they existed, they were not used. Often certificates would be reviewed and accepted on the basis of communication and limited resources existed to the point that endorsements being issued without any independent verification of a certificate. In plain terms, the safe and effective operation of vessels across the world’s seas depends on the existence of fully qualified and adequately skilled seafarers. On a day-to-day basis seafarers place great trust on the abilities and skills of their fellow crew. If just one of those seafarers has come aboard with fraudulently obtained certificates and lacks the necessary skills, then a profession already suffused with risk becomes even more so.