

“Maritime Skills and Qualifications – Forging Ahead” – 15 October 2012

Over 90 delegates, representing a wide cross section of the maritime sector attended a Seminar entitled ‘Maritime Skills and Qualifications – Forging Ahead’ in London on Monday 15th October. The event was hosted by Trinity House, and showcased the current range of maritime related vocational qualifications and apprenticeships with links to Seafarer Certification.

Captain Ian McNaught, Deputy Master of Trinity House, opened the proceedings by drawing attention to the wide diversity of maritime activities that could be found within a two mile radius of the conference room. He went on to say that the Corporation had been involved with apprenticeships for well over 300 years, showing an early recognition of the importance of properly structured learning in order to undertake the hazardous occupation of seafaring.

Captain Nigel Palmer, OBE, Chairman of the Maritime Skills Alliance who also chaired the seminar then explained the background to the establishment and development of the Maritime Skills Alliance (MSA), which now consisted of 15 member organisations working to a principle of subsidiarity, coordinated by a small central secretariat. He emphasised the fact that the MSA focus was the ‘maritime wet side’ including the interface with ports, but not shore based marine activities such as ship building, boat repair and marine engineering. He went on to say that progress on developing the qualifications and apprenticeships had not been as speedy or easy as hoped, because of the various forms of ‘red tape’ However significant progress had now been made and delegates would hear the details of this during the morning.

Sir Alan Massey, the Chief Executive of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, gave a Keynote address, in which he referred to some of the deficiencies found onboard vessels during MCA port inspections and how this highlighted the need for fully competent seafarers to ensure vessels were safe to undertake a voyage. He said that the Maritime Studies suite of qualifications, which linked to MCA certification requirements, helped to simplify and open up entry and progression routes, in some cases for the first time. The value of reinforcing off job learning with on job practical experience at sea explained the need for minimum periods of sea time to achieve certification.

Philip Wells from the Maritime Skills Alliance gave details of the 23 Maritime related qualifications that were now accredited for use in England, Northern Ireland and Wales with more in the pipeline. They covered a range of levels from pre-employment to QCF level 3 with the option of further progression to an HNC/D or Foundation Degree. He explained that Scotland had a different framework requiring separate accreditation At present two qualifications were now available for use there and these would be added to over the coming months. He also said that there were now 5 Intermediate maritime apprenticeships available in England and eligible for Government funding. These offered pathways for: able seafarers/tug ratings both deck and engine, rivers, inland waterways and limited distances to sea (Boatmasters), sea fishing and stevedoring, plus two advanced

apprenticeships for Merchant Navy deck and engineer. Modern Apprenticeships with two pathways (Able seafarer/tug rating; deck, and sea fishing) were also available in Scotland

Captain Roger Towner, Head of Seafarer Services and Ship Registration at the MCA explained how the UK was but one contributor to the determining of European and International regulations that applied to various categories of vessel, their use and the competency requirements for the crew. There were therefore limits on the flexibilities that could be allowed, but where possible every effort was being made to simplify progression routes and to take full account of existing qualifications and experience. The MCA was pleased to be working closely with the MSA to achieve these ends and the Maritime Studies Qualifications helped make this process more transparent and easier to follow for those working in the sector.

John Chudley, Divisional Director Southern for the National Apprenticeship Service highlighted the importance of apprenticeships to the Government as a key part of its Skills Strategy which underpinned its Strategy for economic growth. Increasing importance was being placed on higher apprenticeships and he was pleased to note the progression routes that were being made available to those entering the maritime sector

During the afternoon delegates discussed the potential barriers to making best use of the maritime qualifications and apprenticeship pathways that were now in place, and how these could be overcome. It was agreed that more should be made of the diversity of opportunity within the sector and that more effort should be made to raise awareness of what was available to employers, learners and providers.

Representatives from Open Awards, (the awarding organisation for pre-employment qualifications), SQA Awards, (the MSA's preferred awarding organisation for qualifications related to MCA certification) and the National Apprenticeship Service for England were also present during the day to answer questions and provide additional information to the delegates. They also provided sponsorship for the event.

The event concluded with a drinks reception sponsored by Viking Recruitment, which provided a further opportunity for networking and informal discussion of the issues raised during the day

Reflecting on the day, Captain Nigel Palmer said, "It has been a very worthwhile event. I know from comments already made that those who attended now have a greater awareness of the range of maritime qualifications and apprenticeships that are currently available and eligible for public funding. A significant number of them are linked directly to MCA certification, providing a tremendous opportunity for the sector to recruit and train the workforce of the future with the prospect of a contribution to the cost from public funds."