



The Characteristics and Value of the Sail Training Experience

This summary report sets out the approach, key findings and conclusions of a study of sail training conducted between summer 2005 and spring 2007, commissioned by Sail Training International to investigate the experience of participation in sail training for young people.

This current project is the largest and most wide-ranging study of sail training to date, and focussed on programmes for teenagers and young adults, using voyages of 5-15 days duration on vessels ranging from large square rigged ships to small yachts. The study took place in a range of national cultures, in Europe, Scandinavia, North America and Australasia.

Research approach

The project was based mainly on interviews focussing on young people's interpretations of their own experiences. A pilot study was undertaken during late Summer 2005, and provided the opportunity to develop approaches and frameworks for use in the main study. The majority of the fieldwork was carried out during and after the sample voyages by associates from within the participating organisations, drawn from among volunteer or paid staff.

Vessels were selected for inclusion in the study and included a range of types and sizes of vessel from different countries; the research design called for 30 voyages and 300 trainees as targets for inclusion in the study. Interviews were conducted with 325 trainees on a total of 35 different voyages as soon as possible after joining the vessel. Contact was re-established with as many as possible of these trainees after approximately 3 months and a short follow up interview conducted, most commonly by telephone.

Findings: Expectations, anxieties and social confidence

The most common reasons given for participating were the desire for positive experience, ideas of challenge and novel experience being the most important. Meeting new people, and a general interest in simply being at sea and experiencing a maritime environment were also common reasons for wanting to be involved. Expectations and anxieties about participation included seasickness and anxiety about working at heights, and it was common to hear of positive anticipation regarding excitement or adventure, making new friends and going to new places as well as being at sea and observing marine wildlife.

Most trainees found their expectations in respect of technical skills, teamwork, and friendship were met. Novice trainees were almost entirely satisfied that their expectations had been fulfilled, with only very small numbers reporting that, for example, their expectations regarding technical skills and teamwork skills had not been met. The single most important aspect for trainees is the social aspect of being with a group and forming new friendships.

Comparing reports of anticipated experiences and anxieties with post-voyage evaluations of positive and negative experiences almost one-quarter of participants expressed some anxiety about working at heights. Post-voyage, however, no one mentioned this as a negative experience and a small proportion reported this as one of their positive experiences. None of the pre-voyage concerns figure as strongly as negative post-voyage experiences, not even seasickness. The only concern that is strongly reflected in the post-voyage experience is that related to personal discomfort with one-quarter reporting this as a negative experience post-voyage.

Analysis of the changes in trainees' assessments of their own social confidence consistently shows that there is an increase in this measure between the beginning of a voyage and three months later. This effect is found to various degrees across the range of vessels and voyages in the study and does not appear to have a particular relationship with aspects such as size of vessel or rig type. Comparing naïve trainees and those with previous sail training experience shows that the increase in confidence appears to be long-lasting. We are convinced that young people consistently experience increases in their sense of confidence about themselves and their dealings with the world, following participation in sail training voyages, and that for some participants these changes are durable.

Findings: Differences between sail training approaches

The size and type of vessel in the study ranged from large square rigged ships carrying 30 or more trainees to small vessels accommodating 12 or fewer. Smaller vessels in the study were more likely to have more voluntary staff and the largest vessels were generally those with the all-professional crews. Larger vessels also generally undertook longer voyages with fewer intermediate stops. They did not however appear strongly associated with differences in approach and ethos in relation to the conduct of relations between staff and trainees.

The most striking feature of this comparison is how similar life is aboard sail training vessels of whatever nationality and size. We were nevertheless able to identify three important 'dimensions of difference'. *Relationships* among staff and between staff and trainees vary from more formal or authoritarian styles to more participatory approaches allowing greater freedom in relationships. More hierarchal or more egalitarian *structures* are evidenced by different degrees of emphasis on aspects such as the eating arrangements, the extent to which different spaces within the vessel are open to trainees or restricted to staff, and the use of formal titles among staff. The third dimension of difference is the extent to which structured, purposefully educational activities and reviewing of learning are used. In some cases most aspects of the programme were planned to maximise the potential for trainees' learning, whereas in others the emphasis appears to be almost entirely on letting the seafaring experience 'speak for itself' as the basis for trainees' learning.

Analysis of the impact of the different vessel programmes on changes in confidence, as measured by the confidence scale showed an overall positive change, and suggests that the effect is greater in some vessels than in others. The vessels producing the greatest effects in this respect are those with the most purposefully structured programmes. We find a clear and positive relationship between the extent of changes in participants' social confidence, and the extent of purposeful structuring of the educational programme operated in the vessel.

Conclusions

Participants respond in overwhelmingly positive ways to sail training. Trainees develop confidence in themselves, they develop their capacity for teamwork and they develop technical skills. Their views of the experience are broadly similar whatever tpe of vessel and style of operation is used. It is going to sea that counts for far more than possible differences of approach and style. While all sail training experiences are generally positive and beneficial, some appear to be more effective than others in developing social confidence. The more effective experiences in this respect appear to be those where there is a greater emphasis on specific programme activity designed to develop trainees' skills and understanding. For some participants at least, the benefits of the experience are durable rather than transient.

If the purposes of sail training are specifically concerned with learning and development, programmes with a more structured educational approach provide a more effective experience. That is not however to say that programmes with what we would characterise as a 'maritime heritage' approach, where the emphasis is much more on the experience of seafaring, unmediated by preoccupations with social and personal development, are not worthwhile and effective in their own terms. It is certainly not our view that the structured type of programme is superior, simply that it is more effective in achieving those particular ends.

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