

Seafarers Of The Future

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Colombo International Nautical and Engineering College, known as CINEC Campus was founded in 1989 by Ceyline Group of Companies, with the vision of catering to the growing demand for competent Sri Lankan seafarers. The establishment of CINEC sought to nurture well-disciplined and dedicated seafarers who possessed the prowess to tackle any challenge encountered during the demanding career of a Merchant Navy officer. At this juncture, as CINEC celebrates its Silver Jubilee, Capt Ajith Peiris, President of CINEC shares his thoughts on its challenging journey of success in becoming one of the premier higher education institutions in Sri Lanka.

By Hansani Bandara | Photography Isuru Upeksha

CINEC is celebrating 25 years this year, can you tell us the significance of this milestone?

When we look back at the last 25 years, we are very happy and proud of our achievements. We had a very humble beginning, starting with just two floors of our office building of the Ceyline Group; and the practical sessions were conducted at the fire brigade or the port. Nevertheless, we managed to develop the company step by step, to the present level to be the most developed maritime institution in South Asia and the best in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, without limiting ourselves to maritime disciplines, we have ventured into other areas such as engineering, industrial engineering, logistics and transportation and information technology (IT). Now we have introduced programmes in aviation and hospitality as well. We are a premier private higher education institution in Sri Lanka.

We train and educate around 20,000 students per year, which for a private institution is quite high. Winning the National Quality Award for the fourth consecutive year and winning the Asia Pacific Award for World Class Excellence in Education in 2010 and 2012 are significant milestones that we have achieved. In recognition of these accomplishments the President of Seychelles and the Prime Minister of Fiji have entrusted CINEC with the management of the maritime colleges of those two countries.

CINEC Has Paved The Way For Our Youth To Be Competitive And Be On Par With Other Seafarers From Around The World In Terms Of Skills And Training. Today, Sri Lankan Officers And Engineers Have Earned A Good Reputation And Are In Demand.

We are proud that we have supported the Sri Lankan youth to gain employment on foreign ships for a period of 25 years by providing the required training that is internationally recognised. Through this endeavour we have supported the Sri Lankan economy as well, since Sri Lankan seafarers contribute almost 200 million dollars per annum by way of foreign exchange earnings to the country. At least 75 percent of all seafarers from Sri Lanka are trained at CINEC.

What was the thinking behind the establishment of CINEC in 1990? How important is it for Sri Lanka to have such campuses?

Ceyline, which is the parent company of CINEC was involved in crew recruitment and management; and when we were conducting our operations we felt that there is a great demand for well-trained Sri Lankan Officers and Engineers on foreign ships. But unfortunately at that time, there wasn't any structured training programmes conducted in Sri Lanka, which adhered to international standards and was compatible with the demand in the international market. The University of Moratuwa had a few courses for engineer and officer cadets.

However, the seafarers need to be trained in a disciplined environment because a ship is a confined space. If you are not disciplined and safety-conscious you might be endangering yourself. Due to these reasons we thought we have to establish an institution on our own. CINEC has paved the way for our youth to be competitive and be on par with other seafarers from around the world in terms of skills and knowledge. Today, Sri Lankan officers and engineers have earned a good reputation and are in demand.

CINEC operates based on partnership that Ceyline formed around six years ago with the Aitken Spence and two German Companies-Rickmers and Komrowski.

Why should a student select CINEC, what are the courses available and how do you provide a total educational experience?

CINEC is the only maritime college that offers courses starting from seamen level up to Chief Engineer/ Ship Captain levels, which makes it the ideal place for anyone seeking maritime career opportunities. At the same time, when it comes to employability for Sri Lankan people, we attract most number of foreign shipping companies. There is no other private training institution that has this kind of a campus environment of which discipline is an integral aspect of the education. This is of paramount importance to people who wish to develop a career at sea.

We have a well spread campus with a calm and peaceful atmosphere, which is conducive for learning. What you see in most other places are just buildings in the city limits, whereas at CINEC, the students are provided with all facilities. We offer recreational facilities including yoga to enhance the mindset of students. They are also encouraged to organise CSR projects and social events in order to experience a holistic campus life. We do not believe in just giving knowledge. While imparting

knowledge remains one of our primary focuses, we also target to produce more useful and balanced individuals to our society, where we can be proud to call them products of CINEC.

As for the courses offered, apart from maritime we conduct undergraduate programmes on Mechanical and Civil Engineering, Electronics, Management Studies, Communication and IT. There are training courses on aviation, while degrees are also offered in transportation and logistics, going all the way up to PhD level.

We have also formed collaborations with respected universities such as the University of Wolverhampton in the UK and the Dailian Maritime University in China- the largest maritime university in the world, and also other universities in USA and Australia to further enhance opportunities and exposure for students to international curriculum.

Maritime education is very important because a seafarer has a greater earning capacity and they will be able to generate greater foreign revenue for the country through employment overseas. Can you elaborate on this? How can such opportunities be enhanced?

This aspect has been discussed at various forums. In fact I have been serving on the Advisory Board of the Ministry of Ports and Shipping and we have been encouraging the government along with the private sector to take initiatives to promote the skills of Sri Lankan seafarers among maritime nations of the world such as Japan, Norway, Greece and Korea. If the public and the private sector can jointly conduct promotions, the demand could be increased. There is a good demand for our people to choose careers in this sector given the high levels of remuneration, which are not offered in any other industry. For an instance, a school leaver joining the officer cadet or the engineering cadet programmes at CINEC after completing Advanced Levels can earn about USD 2,000 per month after three years of training, provided they successfully complete their courses on time. Is there another industry where you can earn that amount just three years after leaving school?

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Unlike in the past, when the common perception was that troublesome individuals were sent on ships because they could not be controlled by their families, today there is prestige associated with these jobs. Technology has developed immensely and knowledgeable people are required to run ships. The number of ships, speed and sizes of ships have increased and there is a need for responsible and reliable people to operate them since these are million dollars worth of ships. This is a job that gives you a good status and good remuneration.

In Sri Lanka, you see people who join ships from low income earning families, earn well and in turn support their families. When such families are developed – and most often they venture into entrepreneurship through small businesses – gradually the village too is developed and finally the country develops. Such is the ripple effect of this development, which starts with one individual joining a ship.

We are proud because we have produced thousands of such individuals, giving them an opportunity, training and knowledge so that the country will benefit. That's the satisfaction we have.

How is the demand for Sri Lankan seafarers within the industry on a global scale?

Sri Lankan officers and engineers are very well sought after because they have gained a reputation as responsible, disciplined and knowledgeable seafarers. However, the demand is not so much when it comes to seamen. Our seafarers are known to be loyal workers. They will not change their job from one company to another. They also have a competitive advantage over other nationalities since Sri Lankans possess good communication skills with better education levels. Most of the Sri Lankan workers, even seamen, have at least Ordinary or Advanced Level qualification and have the knowledge of English, which is the working language of the shipping industry.

This area of education and also employment are relatively unexplored in Sri Lanka, how can we make this a more popular avenue for students,

what are the entrance requirements?

For the Officer Category entry requirements are three passes in the Science stream at the Advanced Level Examination. But if a student does not have three passes but has gone through the A/L classes for two years, they have to study for six months in a foundation course. For a seamen the entry requirement is the O/L qualification with credit passes in English, Mathematics and Science subjects.

However, I believe that in addition to academic qualifications it is more to do with your attitude, aptitude, common sense and discipline, which matters most for a career on a ship. In seafaring what you receive after the training is a certificate of competency.

On our part, CINEC is making every effort to make this avenue more popular among students. We take part in various educational exhibitions in Colombo, Kandy, Galle and Kurunegala. We have established training centres in the North and East as soon as the conflict was over.

The government too should contribute by encouraging students to explore such opportunities. Schools in the past used to have sea scout programmes. This is a good extra-curricular activity to be re-implemented and developed in schools in order to create awareness on the opportunities in the maritime economies. Schools can establish seafarer clubs and we can support and provide resources for them through the industry. The government has a key role to play since this is a good foreign exchange earner.

After graduation does CINEC assist students with employment as well?

We try to find placements wherever possible for the students after completion of their courses. We have cadet placements during the training period, which is where we face a bottleneck today. We are constantly trying to attract foreign ship owners to employ Sri Lankan cadets. Should the government join the private sector in promoting our local seafarers, this target could be easily achieved.

The courses at CINEC are comprehensive, can you elaborate on the academic staff as well?

For maritime disciplines, the academic staff mainly consists of experienced ship Captains and Chief Engineers who have gone through the training of trainer programmes. Apart from that we have instructors who are mainly former Sri Lankan Navy officials who conduct practicals. We have simulators and have sent our instructors for training abroad. One of our lecturers is also recognised as a consultant to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) for simulator training.

We have qualified professors and lecturers for our other degree programmes. Our total staff consists of 205 people out of which around 65 percent are academic staff. We also have about 80 visiting lecturers.

CINEC is a private educational institute, how important is it for Sri Lanka to have such private education providers?

Firstly, the government can't do everything by themselves. Secondly, where the private sector is concerned, it is always the subject professionals who are consulted regarding every matter. Therefore we know what exactly the demand is within and outside the country. We will also ensure that standards are maintained since the private sector has the flexibility to absorb the best people from the industry and from abroad as well. The state sector however is restricted from doing so due to their strict rules and regulations.

The negative side that we face in the private sector is that unlike the state sector, we have to source our own funds. The state sector has the benefit from attractive finance packages from donor agencies. But in terms of getting the best people, the private sector has the edge since they have the flexibility to offer higher salaries. It is essential that a country has a private sector as well as government sector educational institutes because all students cannot be absorbed into these systems alone.

In terms of government policy what more can be done for the educational sector and how can the private and public sector work together?

The best way forward for Sri Lanka is to establish public-private partnerships. Though it has been discussed in the past, there were barriers when it came to implementation. Our beginning was with two floors in our own office building. Then we saw a dilapidated and unused Fisheries Training Institute (FTI) in Mattakkuliya.

We negotiated with the authorities and agreed to utilise it under a 33 years lease agreement based on the condition that we will maintain the institution and revive their courses. But then we faced issues with government officials and it was always a battle where we had to spend time to solve these problems, which otherwise could have been used to manage the institute and developed it.

The FTI was a donation from the Japanese government and once we refurbished the building we invited the Japanese Ambassador to visit. In his visitor's comment he stated that it was the best partnership they saw in Sri Lanka; between the private sector and public sector, which can lead to successful ventures in education in Sri Lanka.

We Will Continue To Render Our Services To Our Country And Are Proud To Provide Our Expertise To Other Countries, Proving The Prowess Of Sri Lankans. Further, We Must Also Develop Our Education System And Invite Foreign Students To Study In Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka there are enough and more technical colleges and vocational training institutes with beautiful buildings and all the equipment but they are hardly functioning. If I put it in IT terms, there should be a mechanism where hardware is provided from the public sector and software from the private sector. It is a good concept to move forward.

But there are challenges when implementing such partnerships, which CINEC itself has faced before.

The message has to come from the top. At that time, when we formed this partnership it was not a government policy. But if the government spells it out and encourages its implementation as a policy, conveying this message to all officials from the top to the bottom, it could be executed. Then the issues could be minimised. This is not to say there will be no issues, but such problems could be addressed through discussion as long as there is a strong signal coming from the top supporting endeavours of this kind (PPP).

Can you tell us about yourself?

I studied at Royal College from 1960 to 1974. In 1974 I joined the Ceylon Shipping

Corporation as a cadet, where I was presented a scholarship to follow a two-year Cadet Training Programme on a Indian training ship-T S Rajendra. It was based in Bombay. In 1984 I was appointed as a captain on a ship at the age of 28 and I was travelling back and forth from Sri Lanka to Europe. I joined Ceyline in 1988 and since then I have been employed in the Company and dedicated myself to developing Ceyline and CINEC.

Final thoughts?

We will continue to render our services to our country and are proud to provide our expertise to other countries, proving the prowess of Sri Lankans. Further, we must also develop our education system and invite foreign students to study in Sri Lanka. At CINEC, we have somewhat achieved this as we have student from India, Maldives, Seychelles and Nigeria who study at our campus. If we can enhance this, Sri Lanka will be recognised as a hub for education.