

ACADEMIC EDUCATION VS. VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR EUROPEAN NAVAL OFFICERS

Vergil CHIȚAC¹

Octavian TARABUTA²

¹Captain Professor Engineer, PhD, Naval Academy „Mircea cel Batran“

²Captain Assistant Professor Engineer, PhD, Naval Academy „Mircea cel Batran“

INTRODUCTION

Education and training (E&T) of the naval officers is a question of paramount importance for any effective navy. As most of the European navies are connected together within organizations of the European Union and/or NATO, the necessity of designing a compatible E&T system is increasing. Meanwhile, the newly born concepts of “smart defense” and “pooling and sharing” refer not only to policies and armament acquisition, but also to building a common E&T system, or at least compatible national ones. The main reason for that is, obviously, to inculcate the same professional and transversal competences for the European naval officers.

This paper discusses the ratio between pure academic education (AE) and vocational training (VT) that are both needed in forming the competences, from the perspective of an institution assigned to deliver officers on board naval or commercial ships. The authors, after an overview of AE & VT and their roles in building the navy officers' competences, analyze the causes of the present ratio AE/VT and try to foresee some courses of action for planning balanced but nevertheless compatible E&T systems.

ACADEMIC EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING ROLES IN BUILDING THE COMPETENCES

Academic education is mainly descriptive (declarative) knowledge that focuses on reading material, being told information, and discussing material. It also tends to have a strong focus on writing, although some academic disciplines focus more on this than others. Academic teaching emphasizes the understanding of *concepts* in a *theoretical setting* rather than applying them in a practical setting. That is why graduates from academic schools tend to have broader, less-applied skills.

On the other hand, vocational training is procedural knowledge. Students are taught *task specific* rules, skills, actions, and sequences of actions employed to reach goals. These are achieved mostly by the means of practical activities, where hands-on training is often used. Rather than designing concepts, students would be actually doing a task or building something, according to the definition of “learning by doing”. Military training that strongly relies on *procedures* is a good example of what VT is and does. However, despite its advantages, we should note the limitation of VT as procedural knowledge, namely its job-dependence.

COMPETENCES OF A NAVY OFFICER: TECHNICAL, OPERATIONAL AND LEADERSHIP

In 1996, in his report to the UNESCO, Jacques Delors stated the four final objectives education and training should accomplish: “To know, to do, to be and to live in the community”. As professional and transversal competences of a naval officer can be divided in three categories - technical, operational and leadership, we need to outline the features of AE and VT. From this perspective, academic courses are concerned with developing knowledge, vocational courses are concerned with developing abilities at performing tasks, while attitudes and values are imparted by both AE and VT.

The traditional way would separate academic education from vocational training, but in the era of a society

increasingly driven by industrial, economic and technological challenges, AE & VT should be non-exclusive. So the “battle” between *critical thinking* and/or *applied skill* has to be thoroughly analyzed in order to make the perfect balance that solid competences require.

THE BALANCE OF AE & VT FOR NAVAL OFFICERS

The key question we should answer is actually “How much AE and how much VT the naval officers need, and at what stage of education”? AE is implicitly required as most European Naval Academies deliver higher education study programmes. In the meantime, there is currently a surge in demanding VT i.e. skills at early stages of officers' education & training. Why is that? Because the results of AE are not as immediately visible as those of VT and enough decision-makers lack or don't afford the patience of a long term educational programme. As an argument of us, we can quote Michael Gove, UK education secretary: “For many years our education system has failed properly to value practical education, choosing to give far greater emphasis to purely academic achievements”.

If so, what is the ratio we should combine AE vs. VT? Taking in account not only the initial formation of a naval officer, we should also consider his/her continuous learning. In order to get the proper balance, let us first look at the conditions that determine the current ratio between AE and VT as we know it in Europe.

As we may guess, there are many objective and subjective variables that decide the amount of AE vs. VT. We will present them in a brief succession. The causes of different AE/VT ratios throughout the naval schools lay in the more or less different environments they act in and they can be grouped as:

- Political (laws of education, national doctrines and specific regulations of MoDs).
- Social (diploma recognition in civilian society, expected years of service, readiness for civilian afterlife).
- Financial (amount of money assigned to education).
- Cultural (history, traditions of each nation).

Nonetheless, on top of these we shouldn't neglect at all the new pan-European concept of *Lifelong Learning* that establishes the continuous character of the educational process for every individual. So the ratio is changing also during the career: one can acquire competences from the academy, application school, master and doctoral degree studies, then post-graduate specialty courses and leadership & staff courses, eventually strategic/political studies. Along officers' career path, AE is growing and VT is shrinking in their proportions.

The complexity of the combination of these factors is obviously awesome. Whoever looks for an in-depth image of these parameters in the EU/NATO countries will notice that each element can make this ratio to be significantly different in these military education systems. That is why setting a proper balance of AE & VT for the European naval officers is a matter of hard study and open minds, as well.

COMPATIBILITY AT THE CADET/YOUNG OFFICER LEVEL

Unfortunately, the likelihood of the study programmes is impeded by the national AE/VT ratio. Generally, although the learning outcomes are similar or even the same, the study programmes differ in many European states. Moreover, despite the attempts of making a choice between national education systems's stability versus its reformation for the sake of quality improvement, the diversity of naval education systems increased. That is why compatibility is weaker at early stages but improves later, as the cadet is climbing the educational gangway.

How can we measure the degree of compatibility among systems? – mainly in exchanges of officers or combined joint organizations/operations. There are currently powerful European means of increasing it. Compatibility is strongly aided by educational exchanges – most efficient means at this time. Erasmus University Charter (student and staff mobilities for exchanges at the higher education level) allows naval academies to take advantage of co-funding of their exchange expenses. There is also the European initiative for exchange of young officers – the “Military Erasmus”, which is still very generous but lacking funding. Bilateral cooperation is still a good way of exchanges at a smaller scale but it is nonetheless very effective.

THE WAY AHEAD. WHAT SHOULD WE DO? WHAT CAN WE DO?

We will try to debate on the question: “Is there a unique model of naval education appropriate to all EU/NATO states?” For those who recognize clearly the necessity of greater compatibility through a balanced AE/VT ratio, we suggest here some courses of action. Firstly, a general agreement on AE/VT ratio at the bachelor degree level (academies) should be set. From the perspective of the study programmes planning, that will be based on an agreement on a minimum set of outcomes/learning results for the cadets. In order to do this, the Bologna process – establishment of the European Higher Education Area - should be the guidance which will lead to increasing the role of the “Military Erasmus” initiative. Thus, the European naval academies would avoid educational endogamy.

Secondly, of course, there is a set of complementary ways of implementing the proper common competences, such as softening the reluctance in changing national policies, increasing awareness at the higher command/political level. Modular construction of study programmes, synchronization of modules and increase of use of English language for both staff and students are also required for a better educated and trained European naval officer.