



ENHANCING HOSPITALITY EXCELLENCE: INTEGRATING SOFT SKILLS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES FOR CRUISE SHIP CREWS – CASE OF SEMESTER AT SEA

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Abstract. In today's increasingly globalized maritime industry, cruise ship crews face unique challenges that extend beyond technical skills. Cross-cultural communication, interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence (EI) have become essential competencies for maritime professionals operating in multinational crew environments. This study aims to analyze existing academic and industry literature to assess its alignment with industry needs, highlighting the importance of integrating soft skills that can enhance hospitality excellence and promote effective and successful relationships among crew members and between crew and passengers. The paper also explores the workplace factors and conditions that can promote excellence and successful, effective relationships between crew and passengers, as well as among the crew members.

The study employs a mixed-methods research approach that integrates literature review and content analysis with interviews. Initially, a comparative content analysis of secondary data will be performed, encompassing existing literature, curriculum documents, regulatory guidelines, and industry reports. Subsequently, interviews with key informants will be conducted, in particular with the senior office in charge of the crew training and former crew members from the Semester at Sea educational voyage program, which operates aboard the MV World Odyssey.

The study's findings are anticipated to highlight the importance of equipping maritime professionals with the skills to navigate cultural nuances and interpersonal dynamics, thereby bridging the gap between traditional crew training and development and the demands of a globalized industry. By identifying key elements of crew training, as well as workplace dynamics, such as intercultural communication practices, teamwork, and leadership styles, the study provides insights into enhancing interpersonal relationships in the maritime environment. Such contributions are essential for maritime education and training, as they can inform curriculum development by emphasizing the importance of soft skills alongside technical training. By incorporating these findings into educational programs, future maritime professionals can be better equipped to handle real-world challenges, ultimately leading to improved safety and customer satisfaction within the industry.

Keywords: Hospitality Services; Soft Skills; Intercultural Competencies; Cruise Ship Workforce; Workforce Development; Maritime Education.

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1. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND MARITIME TRAINING

1.1. Introduction

In the dynamic and globalized maritime sector, effective communication is vital—but remains profoundly challenged by both linguistic and cultural barriers. “In maritime communication, apart from language barriers, cultural barriers constitute the biggest obstacle. The result is distrust, conflicts, misunderstanding, and even communication failures.... Australian seafarers and pilots are more concerned about cultural barriers, while the Chinese are more concerned about language barriers.” (Wang, 2005, p. 345).

Globalization has made multicultural and multilingual crews an operational norm rather than an exception (Mejia, 2021). The nautical, whether shipping or cruising industry, is unique in itself, because it is prone to a multilingual and multicultural environment. A Swedish ship can be sailing in the Indian Ocean with cargo from Germany, a crew from the Philippines, India, and Pakistan, and a Swedish captain. The ship is made in Japan and is registered in Panama. The ship crew has to deal with different port authorities. They encounter various people, cultures, languages, laws, customs, and traditions at other places (Rehman, 2007).

As it is inevitable for culturally diverse crews to form, it is also natural that differences in understanding, behaviours, and communication styles arise, leading to misunderstanding, potential human errors, and distress. The (UK) Maritime and Coastguard Agency’s (MCA) Maritime Guidance Note, published in January 2017, listed the twelve most common human factors leading to accidents or incidents (Lyu, 2024). Situational awareness, alerting, and communication rank as the top three, accounting for 22.5%, 15.3%, and 13.4%, respectively (idem). Communication failures can lead not only to many maritime accidents, but also frequently to breakdowns in operational procedures (idem).

Literature acknowledges that cultural differences encompass not only nationality but also gender. Gender roles shape the lived experiences of women in the maritime industries, and often experiences of sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, unequal wage distribution, and “glass ceiling effects”, with decreasing percentages of female CEOs (Luna, 2022). In such a multifaceted and high-stakes environment, understanding and addressing the intersection of language, culture, and gender in maritime communication is not just beneficial—it is essential for the safety, cohesion, and efficiency of global maritime operations.

1.2. Evolving Competency Needs in the Modern Maritime Industry

Literature establishes that technical skills alone are no longer sufficient for success in the modern maritime industry. Instead, a complex interplay of soft skills, cultural awareness, and emotional and cultural intelligence has become increasingly vital, especially in cruise ship environments where crews are not only multinational but also operate within hospitality-focused service models. This shift reflects broader trends in global labor and service industries, where interpersonal and intercultural competencies are essential to effective team dynamics and customer relations.

1.2.1. Cross-Cultural Communication

Findings by Mejia (2021) reveal that in select international vessels, cross-cultural communication skills are prioritized, as well as the importance of English as a common standard for effective communication. Fluency in (Maritime) English is recognized as a fundamental competency in the maritime industry to facilitate practical communication skills, and as such, it should be enhanced in the official training. However, a gap exists between the Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutions and the technological advancements in the shipping world, highlighting the need for improved funding opportunities that provide financial and technical support (Chirea-Ungureanu, 2021). Nonetheless, further training in Maritime English would not fully resolve the communication issues, as intercultural communication could be impeded by factors such as: attributing different meanings to body language and gestures; slang and humor can be understood differently and be found rude or offensive to other cultures; behaviors that are acceptable in one culture can be embarrassing or disrespectful to others (Lyu, 2024).

A major theme emerging from the literature is the critical impact of communication failures on maritime operations. As reported by Lyu (2024), communication breakdowns are among the top causes of human error incidents at sea. These failures are often rooted in not just language barriers, but more profoundly in cultural misunderstandings (non-verbal communication, slang, and humor can all be easily misinterpreted across cultures). The recognition that Maritime English alone cannot bridge this gap (Chirea-Ungureanu, 2021) indicates a significant shortfall in training standards, where linguistic instruction is prioritized over holistic intercultural communication training.

1.2.2. Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is intended as being “cognizant, observant, and conscious of similarities and differ-

ences amongst cultural groups" (Goode, 2001). Thus, in the maritime sector, cultural awareness can aid in managing expectations and challenges faced when working on an international crew (Horck, 2006).

At the current state of the art, there is no international framework of regulations and model courses provided to maritime companies concerning multicultural issues (Chirea-Ungureanu, 2021; Hu, 2017). In 2010, the IMO Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) opened to include courses on cultural awareness. According to reports, the brief requirements emphasized effective communication, requiring companies to ensure that ship personnel on watch can communicate effectively. However, they do not address the impact of cultural differences on communication (Hu, 2017). The model courses that overtly mention cultural issues are four, covering the topics of "Personal safety and social responsibilities", "Ship simulator and bridge teamwork", "Proficiency in crisis management and human behaviour training including passenger safety, cargo safety and hull integrity training", and "Human resource management". However, the average number of hours dedicated to cultural awareness issues in these four model courses is only about 1.7 hours (Horck, 2006).

Although the IMO's STCW (2010) acknowledges the importance of cultural awareness, actual training hours devoted to it are minimal (Horck, 2006). The regulatory framework appears symbolic rather than substantive, leaving MET institutions to fill the gap without adequate guidance or funding. This deficiency suggests a disconnect between policy and practice, a recurring concern in international maritime governance. As crews become increasingly diverse, the lack of structured cultural training undermines not only team cohesion but also passenger safety and satisfaction.

1.2.3. Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Performance

The inclusion of emotional and cultural intelligence in literature points to an evolving understanding of maritime professionalism. Individuals with high emotional intelligence (EQ) and cultural intelligence (CQ) are shown to be better leaders and more adaptable workers (Parkman, 2020), particularly in emotionally charged or socially and culturally complex environments, such as cruise ships. However, the current MET curricula offer little in terms of formal EQ and CQ development. This is a missed opportunity, particularly for officers and hospitality staff, whose roles demand empathy, perspective taking, and regulation of emotional labor.

1.2.4. Gender and Cultural Norms: Intersectional Gaps

Emotional intelligence is the ability of individuals to understand and recognize their own emotions and those of others and use this information to inform their behaviour when adapting to different environments and forming emotional responses (Coleman, 2008). The literature indicates that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to exhibit better leadership skills and are more productive workers (Parkman, 2020). For cruise workers who are exposed to a variety of emotional situations in their social and professional interactions, it is a critical ability to recognize the emotions of others, and adapt their behaviours to them.

Thus, existing literature lacks a comprehensive examination of the cultural awareness training available in the maritime world. However, it is highlighted that there are different spheres of acknowledgment and concerns, ranging from language to cultural diversity to gender norms that need to be addressed.

A notable addition to the discourse is the gendered experience in maritime work. Luna (2022) documents the continued presence of discrimination, harassment, and wage inequality faced by women. While cultural training often focuses on nationality, these findings underscore the need for a more intersectional approach that incorporates gender dynamics as well as other forms of diversity. Moreover, for a genuinely inclusive training framework, diversity must be viewed not just as a cultural issue but also through the lens of power, identity, and structural inequality.

1.2.5. Implications for Curriculum, Research, and Training

This discussion highlights the pressing need to incorporate soft skills, specifically intercultural communication, emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, and diversity sensitivity, into maritime training. Regulatory bodies and MET institutions must reassess their priorities to align more closely with the realities of modern seafaring, particularly in the cruise industry. By combining empirical data from crew interviews with this robust theoretical foundation, future studies can provide a valuable contribution to maritime education reform and workforce development. Literature highlights key curricular gaps, notably in cross-cultural communication, emotional and cultural intelligence, and gender and diversity, more generally, sensitive training, which qualitative data can further substantiate or challenge. The Semester at Sea program offers a unique case study, as it embeds educational missions in a working cruise vessel envi-

ronment, allowing a more intentional reflection on crew-passenger dynamics and learning outcomes.

2. HOSPITALITY SERVICE EXCELLENCE IN THE CRUISE INDUSTRY

In the context of hospitality and tourism, cruise service excellence has evolved into a multifaceted concept that extends beyond basic service delivery to encompass emotional engagement, cultural sensitivity, and brand trust. The extant research indicates that service quality, encompassing reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, has a significant impact on passengers' perceptions of cruise brands and their loyalty intentions (Lobo, 2008). This aligns with the idea that in the cruise industry, where experiences are prolonged and immersive, the emotional and psychological facets of service encounters play a more central role than in other sectors of tourism. Kang (2020) further emphasizes that cruise passengers often associate service excellence not merely with comfort or luxury, but with the authenticity of interpersonal interactions and the attentiveness of crew members. These attributes contribute to passengers' perceived well-being, a key determinant of overall satisfaction and future patronage.

Moreover, recent findings from Asia-based case studies suggest that cultural alignment between service providers and passengers influences the perceived quality of service and brand reputation in cruise tourism (Yoon and Cha, 2020). Cruise operators that invest in culturally aware hospitality training and empower their crew members to tailor services to guests' cultural expectations tend to outperform their competitors in terms of customer satisfaction. The literature advocates hospitality models that prioritize personalization and service innovation, leveraging guest feedback, service recovery practices, and front-line staff empowerment to ensure seamless guest experiences (Vlasceanu, 2020). As such, achieving service excellence in cruise operations requires a holistic integration of technical, interpersonal, and cultural competencies embedded within crew training and daily service routines.

Programs like *Semester at Sea* demonstrate a unique model for hospitality service excellence by integrating experiential learning with intercultural training aboard a working cruise vessel. Crew members, exposed to educational and multicultural interactions, develop competencies that go beyond conventional training standards—adapting communication styles, managing emotional labor, and resolving interpersonal challenges in real-time. However, the study also highlights the inadequacies of current regulatory frameworks such as STCW (2010), which include only

minimal instruction—approximately 1.7 hours—on cultural issues despite the rising complexity of globalized maritime workforces (Horck, 2006). Gender dynamics further complicate the service landscape; women often encounter discriminatory norms and structural barriers in maritime roles, yet current training rarely addresses these intersectional realities (Luna, 2022). Thus, achieving hospitality excellence in cruise settings requires an overhaul in maritime education—one that embraces a holistic model of training, integrating technical ability with intercultural sensitivity, leadership acumen, and emotional intelligence.

3. STUDY PURPOSE

Given these realities, this study examines the extent to which maritime education and training programs address the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of cross-cultural collaboration aboard ships. By integrating insights from literature and interviews with cruise ship personnel, particularly from the Semester at Sea program, the study explores how cultivating emotional intelligence, intercultural communication, and collaborative competencies can improve not only crew dynamics but also passenger experiences. In doing so, it proposes a more holistic vision for maritime training—one that equips future professionals to navigate not just oceans, but also the complex human landscapes that define the modern maritime workplace.

4. METHODS

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, enabling a comprehensive and multidimensional investigation of hospitality service excellence on cruise ships, particularly concerning the integration of soft skills and intercultural competencies in maritime training. The approach combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques to explore how crew members navigate interpersonal, cultural, and emotional challenges in real-world operational contexts. The rationale for using a mixed-methods design lies in its ability to triangulate findings—ensuring a robust analysis that captures both the breadth of existing academic and institutional discourse and the depth of lived crew experiences.

4.2. Phase 1: Comparative Content Analysis

The first phase of the research involves a comparative content analysis of secondary data. This includes a systematic review of (1) peer-reviewed academic literature in hospitality, tourism, and maritime education; (2) curriculum outlines from Maritime Education

and Training (MET) institutions; (3) International regulatory standards (e.g., IMO STCW Convention, 2010), and (4) industry reports from cruise lines, training bodies, and hospitality associations.

The content analysis aims to assess how current training frameworks and policy documents address—or fail to address—key themes, such as emotional intelligence, cross-cultural communication, cultural awareness, and gender inclusivity, in the context of hospitality services aboard cruise ships.

4.3. Phase 2: Qualitative Interview

Building on insights from the content analysis, the second phase involves semi-structured interviews with key informants, crew members from the Semester at Sea educational voyage program, which operates aboard the MV World Odyssey. Interview questions are designed to explore (1) perceptions of service excellence and hospitality expectations on board; (2) experiences with cross-cultural interactions and team communication; (3) reflections on training adequacy and real-world preparedness; and (4) emotional labor, leadership, and conflict resolution in diverse crew settings.

Interviews will be conducted virtually via secure platforms. Each session will be recorded (with informed consent), transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding. The purpose is to contrast institutional training models with the lived experiences of maritime professionals, thereby identifying alignment, discrepancies, and emergent needs.

5. RESULTS

Table 1 presents a summary of peer-reviewed studies on cruise employee training. Additionally, Table 2 shows a structured summary of cruise employee training curriculum based on common Maritime Education and Training (MET) modules and international standards.

5.1. Cross-Cultural Communication as a Core Competency

Research strongly emphasizes that cross-cultural communication is critical in cruise operations, where crews are inherently multinational and diverse. Several studies highlight that miscommunication due to cultural misunderstandings—not just language differences—is a major source of operational inefficiencies and guest dissatisfaction (Chirea-Ungureanu, 2021; Yoon and Cha, 2020). Effective communication training must address both verbal and non-verbal cues, cultural context, and varying perceptions of service expectations among different nationalities.

5.2. Gap Between MET Curricula and Industry Needs

Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutions continue to focus heavily on technical and procedural content, with limited emphasis on soft skills. For example, the IMO's STCW model courses include only minimal hours (approximately 1.7) on cultural awareness and interpersonal communication, which is insufficient given the challenges cruise workers face (Horck, 2006). The need for curriculum reform to include more robust training in cross-cultural interaction is widely acknowledged.

5.3. Interpersonal Skills and Guest Satisfaction

Cruise employees' ability to manage relationships, resolve conflicts, and deliver emotionally resonant experiences is a key driver of guest satisfaction and brand loyalty (Lobo, 2008). These skills are particularly critical in long-duration voyages, where service consistency and emotional labor become central to customer experience. Interpersonal training—often overlooked—can significantly reduce friction among crew and enhance teamwork.

5.4. Emotional Intelligence as a Predictor of Leadership and Service Quality

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognized as a fundamental skill in the hospitality domain. Employees with high EI are better able to empathize with guests, regulate their own emotional responses under stress, and work effectively in diverse teams (Kang, 2020; Parkman, 2020). However, few training programs incorporate structured modules on EI development, and its integration into leadership training for officers and frontline staff is still nascent.

5.5. Service Innovation through Intercultural Competence

Studies also link service excellence and innovation to high levels of intercultural competence among staff. Programs that promote cultural sensitivity, tolerance, and adaptability foster stronger crew cohesion and service personalization, especially important in Asian and European cruise markets, where guest expectations vary widely (Vlasceanu, 2020; Yoon and Cha, 2020).

5.6. Case-Based Learning and Experiential Programs

Educational models such as *Semester at Sea* or hospitality co-op placements that combine real-world exposure with soft skill development show strong promise. These environments provide controlled set-

tings for students and crew to develop cross-cultural fluency, emotional self-regulation, and hospitality finesse through immersive practice.

Table 1 presents a summary of peer-reviewed studies on cruise employee training. The list of studies emphasizes the critical importance of soft skills, such as

emotional intelligence, cross-cultural communication, and cultural awareness, in delivering high-quality service and ensuring guest satisfaction.

Table 2 shows a structured summary of cruise employee training curriculum based on common Maritime Education and Training (MET) modules and

Table 1. Summary of Peer-Reviewed Studies on Cruise Employee Training

	Focus Area	Key Findings
Yoon & Cha (2020)	Cross-cultural communication in cruise service quality	Cultural understanding critical to guest satisfaction and service quality
Chirea-Ungureanu (2021)	Training gaps in MET institutions for cultural communication	Training lacks coverage of intercultural competencies
Horck (2006)	Minimal STCW curriculum hours for cultural awareness	Only 1.7 hours of STCW courses address cultural awareness
Lobo (2008)	Customer loyalty through improved interpersonal service	Interpersonal skills drive guest loyalty and service ratings
Kang (2020)	Emotional well-being and guest satisfaction	Well-being linked to emotionally intelligent service delivery
Parkman (2020)	Emotional intelligence and leadership in hospitality	High EI predicts better leadership and guest interaction
Vlasceanu (2020)	Measuring customer satisfaction and service quality	Service quality improves with staff cultural adaptability

Table 2. Summary of Cruise Employee Training Curriculum based on Common Maritime Education and Training (MET) modules and International Standards (source: IMO, 2017)

Training Module	Focus Areas	Governing Standards / Notes
Basic Safety Training	• Personal Survival Techniques • Fire Prevention & Fire Fighting • First Aid • Personal Safety & Social Responsibilities (PSSR)	STCW A-VI/1
Security Awareness & Crowd Management	• Security Awareness/Designated Duties • Crowd Management • Crisis Management	STCW A-VI/6 & A-V/2
Customer Service & Hospitality	• Guest handling & service etiquette • Cultural sensitivity • Conflict resolution	Cruise line-specific programs; MET electives
Maritime English & Communication	• Maritime English • Radio protocol (GMDSS basics) • Cross-functional communication	IMO Model Courses; MET curricula
Environmental Awareness & Waste Management	• MARPOL compliance • Waste handling • Pollution prevention	MARPOL, STCW regulations
Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)	• Workplace safety • Injury prevention • PPE and hazard communication	IMO Model Course 3.11 or similar
Job-Specific Technical Training	• Engine Room Familiarization (technical crew) • Galley operations (kitchen staff) • Hotel ops (housekeeping, reception)	Department-focused, customized by cruise lines or MET centers
Onboard Induction Training	• Safety drills • Muster procedures • Ship layout • Emergency contacts	Company-level protocols; mandatory for all crew

international standards, referencing key international frameworks such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW). While foundational training focuses on safety, security, and operational skills, modules related to customer service, cultural sensitivity, and communication are either electives or specific to individual cruise lines revealing a lack of uniform emphasis on soft skills and intercultural learning.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The evolving dynamics of cruise ship operations in a globalized maritime industry highlight the need to go beyond technical skills and adopt a holistic training model focused on soft skills, emotional intelligence, and intercultural competencies. This study, viewed through the lens of the Semester at Sea program, illustrates how integrated experiential learning can connect existing MET standards with the complex realities of the cruise hospitality industry. As the research shows, the current STCW frameworks' limited focus on cultural awareness and communication training is inadequate for preparing maritime professionals for the challenges of diverse and emotionally nuanced work environments.

To cultivate true hospitality excellence and ensure operational safety, MET institutions and regulatory bodies must reform curricula to reflect the interpersonal and cultural dimensions of seafaring life. Incorporating comprehensive training in emotional intelligence, cross-cultural communication, and gender inclusivity is no longer optional—it is essential. Programs that embed experiential learning and real-world exposure, such as Semester at Sea, illustrate a promising path forward. By embracing these competencies, maritime training can better prepare future professionals to thrive in culturally complex environments, enhance crew cohesion, and deliver superior guest experiences aboard cruise ships.

6.1. Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study contributes to ongoing efforts to enhance maritime education and training through the integration of soft skills and intercultural competencies, several limitations must be acknowledged.

- Starting from the context, this research draws significantly from the Semester at Sea program—a unique, education-focused cruise environment that combines academic instruction with maritime operations. While this setting offers valuable insights into experiential and intercultural learning at sea, it may

not fully reflect the structural, commercial, and operational realities of traditional cruise lines. Crew members within the Semester at Sea context may receive atypical exposure to academic dialogue, multicultural engagement, and reflective practice, which limits the generalizability of findings to mainstream cruise operations or cargo shipping. Furthermore, unlike commercial cruises where passengers typically embark for short-term vacations ranging from a few days to two weeks, the students, staff, and faculty who constitute the “passengers” of Semester at Sea remain onboard for nearly four months. This prolonged interaction alters the crew's service experience: rather than accommodating a constantly rotating roster of guest preferences, they engage with a relatively stable and evolving onboard community. Additionally, while Semester at Sea participants seek enjoyment and memorable experiences, the presence of a strong academic and educational mission shapes the nature of social behavior onboard. The learning environment tends to foster respectful, mindful, and structured interactions, which may differ markedly from the more entertainment- and leisure-driven expectations found on conventional cruises. These contextual differences must be considered when extrapolating insights to other maritime hospitality settings.

- Considering the methodological constraints and empirical gaps, at the time of writing, the qualitative interview phase remains in progress, and empirical data from crew members and officers is still being analyzed. As such, our current conclusions are primarily grounded in secondary literature and curriculum analysis. Further validation through comprehensive field interviews and longitudinal studies is necessary. Additionally, assessing soft skills—such as emotional intelligence and cultural competence—presents inherent challenges related to subjectivity, self-report bias, and context dependence as highlighted before.

6.2. Recommendations for Training Reform and Policy Development

In light of the identified gaps, we propose the following actionable steps to bridge the divide between regulatory standards and the human realities of cruise ship operations. Among the traditional ones: MET institutions and cruise line training departments should co-develop elective or mandatory modules on intercultural communication, emotional intelligence and cultural awareness; international maritime stakeholders, including IMO working groups, MET networks, and unions, should advocate for amendments to the STCW Convention to explicitly include intercultural competence, diversity awareness, and emotional intelligence as core competencies.

Other recommendations should involve industry-academia partnerships for experiential learning: cruise lines, training centers, and universities should partner to create simulation-based and shipboard practicum programs, modeled after semester at sea and hospitality cooperative placements. These partnerships can allow cadets and crew to experience real-time intercultural dynamics and receive mentorship on interpersonal challenges.

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