



Passing the test

Three years ago, the Institute of Chartered Shipbrokers was almost out for the count. **Paul Berrill** talks to Julie Lithgow about how the organisation got its mojo back



01. Of the annual ICS prize-giving ceremony and dinner at historic Theatre House, London (Photography: Danny Cornelissen)
03 Julie Lithgow. The institute is a really special little place... it's old-school but not old-fashioned (Photography: ICS)

When Julie Lithgow became director of the Institute of Chartered Shipbrokers (ICS) 3½ years ago, it was heading towards insolvency. Appointing a young but obviously dynamic woman who had never run a company before must have felt like a gamble, but it proved to be an astute move.

The ICS was created in 1911 to set standards that would improve the quality of young British shipbrokers coming into the Baltic Exchange. A century later it was spending twice as much as it brought in from membership fees and was six months away from going bust.

Now it has a much wider remit, with an international presence that spanned 103 examination centres round the world this year, assessing whether people of almost any nationality have applicable qualifications for a far wider range of careers in shipping, including the maritime law, ship finance, management and agency sectors.

Its place in the modern world involved students sitting exams in April, in locations on every continent: from Canada, the country with the world's longest coastline, to the landlocked Czech Republic, Switzerland and Zimbabwe; from Norway's second-biggest city, Bergen, in the north to the New Zealand capital, Wellington, in the south.

"The institute is a really special little place. I don't think I understood how special when I applied for the job. I had the impression it was an old-fashioned, old boys' thing," Lithgow says. "Young people in Greece are coming in flocks to us because shipping is one of the few secure industries they can still see. We are old-school but not old-fashioned. It doesn't need to be new to be good."

But under her leadership the institute has modernised its way of doing things, cutting its cost base, while adding members: there are now 4,000.

It subsidises the exams, setting the cost at a remarkably low £60 (\$88) — the same the world over, to ensure the widest accessibility. Its success is measured by the fact that up to 90% of students who pass their exams sign up to become members because, Lithgow says, they want to help mentor the next generation.

"Our members are special people. Our exams are not obligatory, so to be a student in



the first place, you need a curiosity about wanting to learn more, then you have to have tenacity, because these are hard exams. And you have to have the courage to put yourself forward for an exam that has only a 50% first-time pass rate," she says.

Lithgow, with others at the heart of the ICS, sits the exams each year. She admits to

struggling with the finance paper but adds that, despite the difficulties of passing essay-based tests for today's students more used to multi-choice assessments, it is only then that the real work starts.

"Unlike many other institutes, which have membership benefits, our bylaws are called the privileges and obligations of membership. They effectively

say: 'You benefited from this network, and the work starts when you become a member. There is an expectation now you should be supporting and mentoring young people through their careers.'"

Its global examination system places the ICS squarely within the pattern of shifting world business in which more and more shipbroking is done in

Before joining the ICS in 2011, Julie Lithgow was head of business intelligence at Pole Star Space Applications, working on government liaison for IMO regulation and with the European Naval Force in the Gulf of Aden as part of the military response to pirate attacks on commercial shipping.

Previously she was communications and marketing manager for V Holdings, and before that campus manager of the Nautical Institute, the professional body for qualified seafarers.



During the Second World War British prisoners of war (POWs) in German camps sat the ICS exams, thanks to the efforts of the Red Cross. Some Polish POWs also got the qualifications but were not entitled to membership, as it was not extended beyond the UK until 1985. Today more than 50% of students are still British but numbers are growing round the world. In April last year an unprecedented 1,000 exams were sat in Greece, and numbers are rising fast in India and China.

Asia and the shipping industry is growing in regions such as West Africa.

"If you work in shipping, you know it benefits you to have a trained and qualified person you can trust in a place like Ghana," Lithgow says of ICS qualification.

Modernising the ICS involved going through a similar process to many other traditional institutes, which as not-for-profit organisations may not have always been run in the most businesslike way.

Lithgow says the institute was not thinking deeply enough about how it was spending money. Its council now travels economy rather than business class and happily stayed at the YMCA for a recent meeting in Hong Kong. It has also started publishing its own books as a way of raising revenue, and accepts help in kind from members volunteering the use of their premises.

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The better financial position is allowing the ICS to reduce the prices it charges, to

alleviate rising costs caused by the strength of sterling that have meant, for example, that students in Sierra

Leone are paying double what they did five years ago.

Lithgow hopes to work for the ICS for a few more years yet, but adds: "It's important I see this as a temporary job. With an organisation that has been around for 100 years, I need to think about where it will be in 50 years."

Increased use of technology is one of the longer-term aims. It is not yet possible to set exams on computers, as not all students have the same access to information technology. The institute is looking for wider national recognition of its qualifications, and at models for apprenticeship schemes, including work experience, that can be used round the world.

Basic-level introductory courses are also being pursued because about half the students now approaching the ICS are looking to start a career in shipping rather than, as was true 20 years ago, already having jobs but seeking qualifications that built on their base level of knowledge.

Kenya exemplifies a country where there was no tradition of maritime services or any form of shipping business training or education, but investment in

the port of Mombasa and growing trade with the outside world has made the potential of a shipping career more visible to local people.

Mentoring has been important for Lithgow throughout her career. "I wouldn't have got this far if there weren't people who took my phone calls or met me for coffee and answered my questions," she happily admits. Companies that give students study leave will retain staff because of the goodwill it engenders, she argues.

But she wishes the industry could be more positive about itself. "Shipping is such a force for good — it is safer and cleaner than a hundred years ago. The people in it have to be smart."

For herself and her future, she enthuses: "Ports are really interesting, salvage is fascinating. I have learned that honesty, being forthright, credibility and reputation go a long way in this business."

"But first I have got to make sure the institute is ready to be handed over to the next director, who will need to be more comfortable with an outgoing PR and marketing stance and take it through to its next phase." ♦

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01 Julia Lithgow at the ICS's annual prize-giving, with Richard Cind, who is sponsored by the institute (Photograph: Mark Dalton)

02 Arunima Tem Beate, right, presents Siemsa Bafane, of Durban, South Africa, with the award for the candidate from an African ocean centre gaining the highest mark in shipping business (Photograph: Dany Cornelius)