

Training and social security schemes for fishers - State of play and perspectives in the EU


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Fishing is still one of the most dangerous and risky occupations worldwide. High standards of safety at sea and working conditions are crucial to maintain a vibrant and prosperous population of active fishers, simplify their mobility and attract younger generations to the fishing profession. Yet, an EU framework for the training of fishers and for the delivery of standard certificates of competency is lacking. Moreover, the functioning of the system of recognition of fishers' qualification certificates across EU Member States has not been thoroughly assessed until now. Besides, to what extent EU fishers are covered – or not – by social security schemes remains an overlooked aspect of the social dimension of the EU Common Fisheries Policy.

Main findings

The **recognition of certificates of competency in the EU fishing sector** is governed by the 'Professional Qualifications Directive' 2005/36/EC, which is non-specific to the fishing sector. The system is based on a one-directional recognition of qualifications, in a process initiated by the applicants who received qualifications in their home Member State, with their applications being evaluated by the competent authority in the host Member State.

The study

analyses the mutual recognition of fishers' certificates of competency and the functioning of social security schemes for fishers in the EU.

The study shows that the fishing profession is currently regulated in 10 Member States, encompassing 46 *regulated* professions, and giving access to 78 *actual* professions in the categories: skipper/master, chief/first mate, mate/second hand, engineers and seaman (see Figure). The levels of training and the qualifications required to exercise a specific fishing profession vary greatly between countries. This significantly hampers the recognition of certificates, and therefore the mobility of fishers across the EU.

Of the 1740 applications for fishers' mobility processed in the period 1997-2022, 82% were assessed positively. Most positive host-country decisions were by Portugal, France, Spain and Denmark. These countries have ratified the IMO International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F). The STCW-F convention entered into force in September 2012, but by 2023 it has been ratified by only 10 EU Member States.



Social security is a national responsibility of EU Member States. The extent to which the 125 000 EU fishers are covered by social security schemes is poorly documented, and depends on the type of their employment status and on the Member State where the profession is exercised.

Fishers under standard employment relationships work almost exclusively in large-scale and distant water fishing, which employ 45% and 4% of EU fishers respectively. They work under formal contracts with a fishing company or agency and are paid a monthly salary, a shared remuneration, or both. Almost 80% of these fishers are full-time employees, and their social security schemes follow the national standard schemes.

The largest share of EU fishers (around 50% of the total) work in the small-scale fishing sector. For this fleet, reliable statistics on the number of fishers and their employment status are not available. A majority of them


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are self employed, and remain uncovered for some risks including unemployment, sickness and occupational accidents. Insufficient or inadequate social security could be discouraging workers from undertaking employment in the sector or deter them from taking on the risks associated with part-time or temporary work.

Policy recommendations

An **EU standard for training of fishers**, rooted in the STCW-F Convention, would create a much-needed level playing field among Member States for the delivery of fishers' certificates of competency. Such a standard could guide the enactment of a **EU Directive** specific for the fishing sector on the mutual recognition of certificates issued by Member States, as it has been done for EU seafarers, and could contribute to the overall attractiveness of the fishing profession.

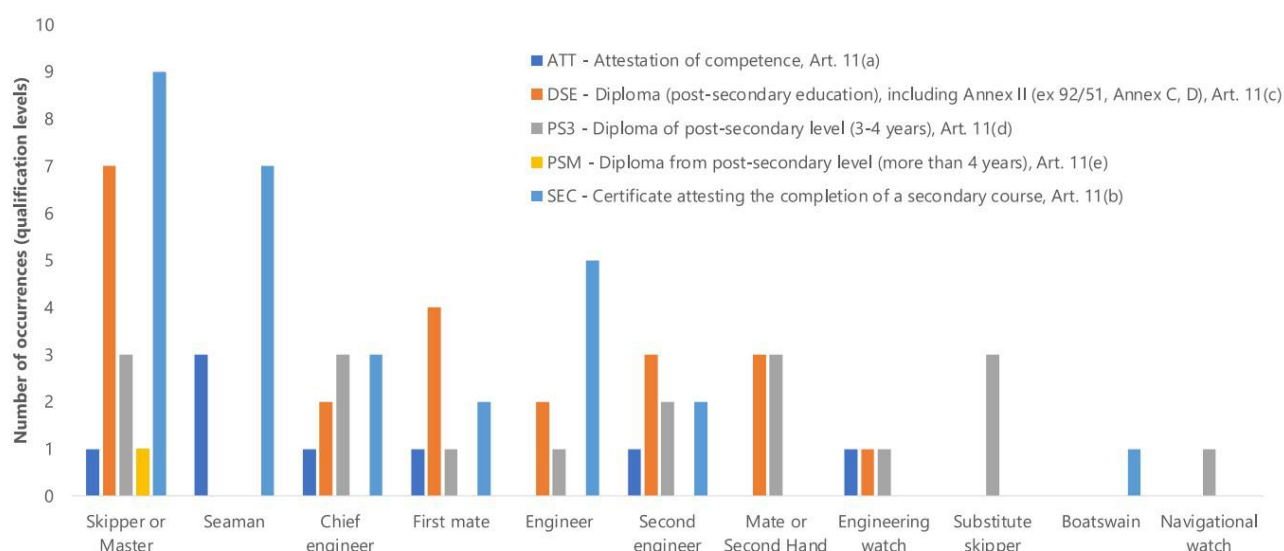
The EU could consider improving **collection of data** by Member States on the employment status associated with **social security coverage** in the fishing sector. Collaboration with national agencies in charge of social security could facilitate the collection of these data.

The study has also identified a series of best-practice examples applied in specific Member States that could be replicated with a view to improving social security for fishers in the EU, stimulate generational renewal and increase the attractiveness of the fishing profession.

These practices concern:

- Integrating social security under standard employment relationships and self-employment in a **single specific legislation** for social security of workers in the fishing sector.
- Fostering social security schemes that provide fishers with a **minimum monthly wage** independent of their shared remuneration systems. This would allow fishers to benefit from a minimum living standard and simplify their protection during short unemployment periods.
- Promoting the recognition of **fishing as an arduous and hazardous occupation**, and provide early retirement possibilities and special allowances in the case of accidents at sea.
- Ensuring coverage of social security during **periods of training of newcomers** interested in becoming fishers.
- Allowing small-scale fishers, who consider fishing a 'way of life', to **continue working after retirement**. Many small-scale fishers carry on fishing activities after retirement, and 'bridging periods' could contribute to reduce this kind of unpaid work.
- Supporting social security for fishers to **adapt to more frequent cessation needs** due to climate change and increased occurrence of extreme climatic events.

Qualification levels for access to fishing professions in the studied Member States



Data Source: Regulated Professions Database.

Note: The categories on the horizontal axis are the result of the analysis in section 2.3. of the study. Actual professions refer to all functions in the respective categories that can be carried out by the holder of the qualification.

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