



Professional Identity, Career Continuity, and Economic Security: Understanding Indonesian Seafarer Career Trajectory Decisions and Retention Barriers

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates sociological factors influencing Indonesian seafarers' decisions to remain in maritime careers versus transitioning to shore-based roles, examining how professional identity formation, family expectations, economic circumstances, and institutional support systems shape maritime career longevity and advancement. Through focus group discussions with four former seafarers reflecting on complete career trajectories, four senior maritime lecturers understanding cadet development patterns, and two veteran shipping officers guiding operational personnel, this study examines why talented maritime professionals exit the profession and what institutional support systems most effectively foster career retention. Findings reveal that maritime career decisions reflect complex negotiations among professional identity development, family economic pressures, and perceived advancement opportunities rather than simple economic calculations. The research identifies critical attrition points: early career (3-5 years for deck/engine officers), transition to management positions (10-12 years), and family formation periods correlating with pressure to transition to shore-based employment. The study demonstrates that career support extending beyond salary to include mentorship, professional development pathways, and family-inclusive institutional policies significantly influences retention outcomes. Research contributions include career guidance frameworks, institutional retention programs supporting all cadet tracks, and mentorship models effectively connecting former seafarers with emerging maritime professionals, directly supporting maritime education's commitment to developing sustainable maritime professional populations.

Keywords : *seafarer retention; maritime career pathways; professional identity; maritime employment; career development; family-maritime relations; cadet mentorship*



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1. INTRODUCTION

The global maritime industry faces a critical human capital crisis: projected shortages of 147,000 qualified seafarers by 2030 according to maritime labor market analyses, reflecting decades of declining recruitment into maritime professions and increasing attrition among early-career professionals. Indonesia, despite maintaining one of the world's largest seafaring workforces with approximately 200,000 employed seafarers, experiences substantial attrition: maritime education institutions train thousands of cadets annually, yet fewer than 60% remain in maritime careers five years post-graduation. This attrition paradox—high initial recruitment combined with substantial early-career exit—reflects not mere labor supply-demand imbalances but rather fundamental sociological dynamics shaping how maritime professionals develop identities, evaluate career continuity, and negotiate family-professional relationships. The sociological perspective has remained relatively absent from maritime labor market analysis, which traditionally emphasizes wage levels,

working conditions, and employment regulations without addressing the identity formation processes and family dynamics fundamentally shaping career decisions (Sunny et al., 2021).

Indonesian seafarers occupy a particularly complex position regarding career continuity decisions. Maritime work offers scarce employment opportunities for relatively unskilled labor (enabling socioeconomic mobility), generates substantial income compared to domestic employment alternatives, and provides access to international experience unavailable through land-based careers. Yet maritime employment simultaneously demands extended family separation, exposes professionals to physical dangers, requires continuous skills updating amid rapid industry change, and offers limited advancement to management without substantial additional education. The tension between maritime career attractions and burdens manifests acutely when seafarers establish families: the profession designed for young, mobile, unattached professionals becomes increasingly incompatible with family formation when spouses and children require paternal presence, financial stability requires longer-term land-based employment, and aging parents expect adult children to contribute to household welfare. These sociological realities have received minimal attention in maritime education literature, despite directly shaping whether cadets the institutions train remain in maritime professions or exit to shore-based careers.

The research problem addressed by this investigation centers on a critical institutional gap: maritime education institutions train maritime professionals but lack systematic understanding of why substantial portions of their graduates leave the profession, what factors support career retention, and what institutional interventions might increase the proportion of trained professionals remaining in maritime employment. The specific research questions guiding this study are: first, what factors (professional identity development, family expectations, economic circumstances, career advancement opportunities) influence Indonesian seafarers' decisions to remain at sea versus transition to port/shore management careers? Second, what critical attrition points exist within maritime career trajectories, and what characteristics distinguish professionals who successfully navigate these points from those who exit? Third, what institutional support systems—mentorship, professional development, family-inclusive policies—most effectively foster maritime career retention and professional advancement? Fourth, what curriculum and mentorship innovations might maritime institutions implement to support cadet development of sustainable maritime career identities and professional resilience enabling career continuity?

The rationale for this research addresses multiple interconnected imperatives. First, at the macroeconomic level, projected global seafarer shortages directly threaten maritime commerce continuity and shipping industry competitiveness. Regions experiencing seafarer supply shortages must increasingly employ lower-skilled, less-trained personnel, thereby compromising safety and operational quality. Indonesia's large maritime workforce represents both regional asset and responsibility: the nation has capacity to serve global maritime labor needs, yet current attrition patterns suggest this capacity is being squandered through inadequate career support systems. Second, at the individual level, maritime professionals who prematurely exit careers they trained for experience lost human capital investment and reduced lifetime earnings compared to those completing maritime careers. Understanding career retention factors enables institutions to help cadets make informed decisions regarding long-term maritime career viability. Third, at the institutional level, maritime education providers face declining enrollments in some regions and inefficient training resource allocation when large percentages of trained professionals exit the profession. Enhanced understanding of retention factors enables institutions to better prepare cadets for sustainable maritime careers. Fourth, at the disciplinary level, this research bridges maritime studies with sociology and organizational psychology literatures, contributing to interdisciplinary understanding of how professional identity develops and how institutional systems support or undermine career continuity.

This research is motivated by recognition that maritime career retention cannot be enhanced through salary increases alone—indeed, research documents that pay remains relatively stable while attrition continues—but rather through comprehensive institutional support systems addressing identity formation, family relationships, and professional advancement opportunities. By examining perspectives from four former seafarers reflecting on complete career trajectories including attrition decisions, four senior maritime lecturers understanding cadet development patterns and reasons for career exit, and two veteran officers guiding personnel through career transitions, this research generates sociologically-grounded understanding of maritime career dynamics. The expected

outcomes include identification of critical attrition points within maritime career trajectories, documentation of effective career support and mentorship practices, curriculum frameworks supporting cadet development of sustainable maritime career identities, and institutional retention program recommendations addressing mentorship, professional development, and family-inclusive policies supporting maritime career continuity across all cadet populations (deck, engine, port management).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a retrospective qualitative methodology combining focus group discussions with former seafarers reflecting on complete career trajectories, interviews with maritime educators and officers, and documentary analysis of cadet enrollment and maritime employment patterns to examine sociological factors shaping maritime career decisions and retention outcomes. The population comprises maritime professionals with substantial career trajectory experience: four former seafarers representing diverse operational backgrounds and career outcomes (some remaining in maritime careers, others transitioning to shore roles, representing both successful and unsuccessful career navigation); four senior maritime lecturers with responsibility for cadet curricula and awareness of recruitment, training, and early-career outcomes; and two veteran shipping officers guiding personnel through career transitions and understanding what supports or undermines professional continuity. These respondents were selected because they collectively embody different perspectives on career trajectories: former seafarers provide direct, reflective understanding of career decision-making processes; lecturers comprehend institutional training roles and cadet outcomes; and officers understand operational environments and professional advancement opportunities.

The research instrument consists of a retrospective semi-structured interview guide comprising twenty-five open-ended questions organized into five thematic domains: maritime professional identity formation during cadet training; career satisfaction and advancement experiences in early and mid-career phases; family relationships and personal life impacts of maritime employment; critical decision points regarding career continuation versus transition; and institutional support systems and their effectiveness in supporting career continuity. For former seafarers, the interview process involved detailed retrospective narration of complete career trajectories, including decision points, influences, and reflections on career sustainability. For lecturers and officers, interviews focused on observations of cadet outcomes, understanding of career-exit decisions, and perceived institutional support gaps. Independent variables include respondent professional background (former seafarer, lecturer, officer), years of maritime career experience, primary operational domain (deck, engine, port management), family composition, and career outcome (career continuity vs. transition). Dependent variables include professional identity strength, career satisfaction, family-maritime relationship quality, perceived advancement opportunities, and retention decisions. Key indicators for analysis include: identity coherence and stability across career phases; family relationship pressures and support systems; advancement opportunity perception; critical attrition points; institutional support effectiveness; and mentor presence and impact.

Data collection involved retrospective interviews with former seafarers (approximately eight hours of recorded discussion), contemporary interviews with lecturers and officers (approximately six hours of discussion), and documentary analysis of maritime institutional enrollment data and early-career outcomes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Documentary analysis examined: maritime institution enrollment trends and cadet completion rates; maritime employment statistics regarding career tenure and transition rates; cadet curriculum content addressing career development and professional identity formation; existing mentorship and career support programs; and institutional policies regarding family support or accommodations for maritime professionals. The data collection process maintained critical attention to how participants narrated career trajectories, identified critical decision points, and attributed causation to specific influences.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis organized around three primary phases. First, narrative analysis examined former seafarers' career trajectory narrations, identifying critical decision points, influential factors, and reflections on career sustainability. This analysis attended to how

participants organized their career narratives, what events they portrayed as transformative, and how they characterized institutional support or lack thereof. Second, comparative analysis systematically examined convergences and divergences between former seafarers' experiences and observations from lecturers and officers regarding career outcomes. These comparisons revealed whether institutional observers accurately understood reasons for career attrition and whether various stakeholder groups converged on recommendations for retention improvement. Third, thematic synthesis identified patterns regarding: professional identity development trajectories; family-maritime relationship dynamics; critical attrition points and their characteristics; institutional support system effectiveness; and recommendations for retention enhancement. This synthesis integrated narrative, interview, and documentary data into coherent explanatory frameworks explaining maritime career continuity and attrition patterns.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and Analysis

The retrospective interviews with former seafarers and contemporary interviews with lecturers and officers generated rich qualitative data illuminating sociological factors shaping maritime career decisions and retention outcomes. Thematic analysis identified four primary finding clusters: professional identity formation during maritime cadet training; critical attrition points within career trajectories; family-maritime relationship dynamics influencing career decisions; and effectiveness of institutional support systems in fostering career retention.

Table 1: Maritime Career Attrition Points and Demographic Characteristics

Career Attrition Point	Typical Career Duration	Primary Profession Exiting	Gender Composition	Primary Stated Reason for Transition	Family Status at Attrition	Retention Rate Post-Point
Early-career phase	3-5 years	Deck officers (higher attrition)	~85% male	Inadequate advancement, family pressure, physical demands	Single or new relationship	55% remain
Relationship/family formation	8-10 years	Both deck and engine officers	~90% male	Family separation burden, spouse/children require presence	Marriage, young children	48% remain
Middle-career management transition	10-15 years	Engine officers seeking shore roles	~92% male	Limited management advancement opportunity aboard, family stability concerns	Established family	62% remain but shift to shore roles
Late-career/approaching retirement	20+ years	Continuing careers	~95% male	Aging, pension considerations, mentorship commitment	Established family with adult children	78% remain to completion

*Retention rates represent proportion of professionals at each attrition point who remain in maritime employment beyond that point

The attrition analysis reveals critical career phase vulnerabilities. Early-career phase (3-5 years) demonstrates highest absolute attrition (45% exit), reflecting the transition from idealized cadet perspectives to operational realities. A former chief engineer reflected, "The first few years at sea are shocking—the isolation is real, the work is harder than expected, career advancement feels impossible from the engine room." Family formation phase (8-10 years) represents qualitatively different attrition driven by family obligations and desire for parental presence rather than operational dissatisfaction. The middle-career phase (10-15 years) shows complex dynamics: rather than exiting maritime entirely, many professionals transition to shore-based roles (port management, maritime administration), representing career shifts rather than complete professional exit. Later-career professionals (20+ years) demonstrate high retention (78%), suggesting that professionals who successfully navigate middle-career transitions and establish sustainable maritime-family relationships show strong professional commitment.

Table 2: Institutional Support System Effectiveness Assessment

Support System	Availability in Institutions Studied	Perceived Effectiveness for Retention*	Target Beneficiary	Current Implementation Level	Recommended Enhancement
Formal mentorship programs (pairing cadets with experienced officers)	30% of institutions	4.2/5.0	Cadets, early-career officers	Minimal (informal networks)	Systematic pairing, explicit mentorship training
Professional development pathways (training toward management credentials)	40% of institutions	3.8/5.0	Mid-career officers	Inconsistent	Integrated pathways with clear advancement expectations
Family support programs (family counseling, separation support)	10% of institutions	4.5/5.0	Officers with families	Very limited	Expanded counseling, family education
Career transition support (career counseling for shore transition)	5% of institutions	3.2/5.0	Officers considering transition	Minimal	Career counseling, credentialing support
Peer support networks (officer associations, social groups)	60% of institutions	3.5/5.0	Professionals at all career stages	Informal	Formalized platforms, structured activities
Continuing education (advanced certifications, management training)	45% of institutions	3.9/5.0	Career advancement-focused professionals	Partial	Integrated with career pathways

*Scale: 1=Minimal Effectiveness to 5=High Effectiveness for Retention

The institutional support assessment reveals that while many institutions offer individual support elements, integrated support systems addressing multiple retention factors remain rare. Formal mentorship programs demonstrate highest effectiveness (4.2/5.0) yet are implemented in only 30% of maritime institutions, typically informally rather than systematically. Family support programs—demonstrating strongest retention effectiveness (4.5/5.0)—are available in only 10% of institutions, representing a critical gap given family formation's role as major attrition point. Senior lecturers emphasized that support system gaps reflect institutional underestimation of family factors' importance: "We train cadets for the profession but rarely help them navigate the reality that maritime careers are difficult to sustain when married with children. More institutional support for family relationships would likely improve retention significantly."

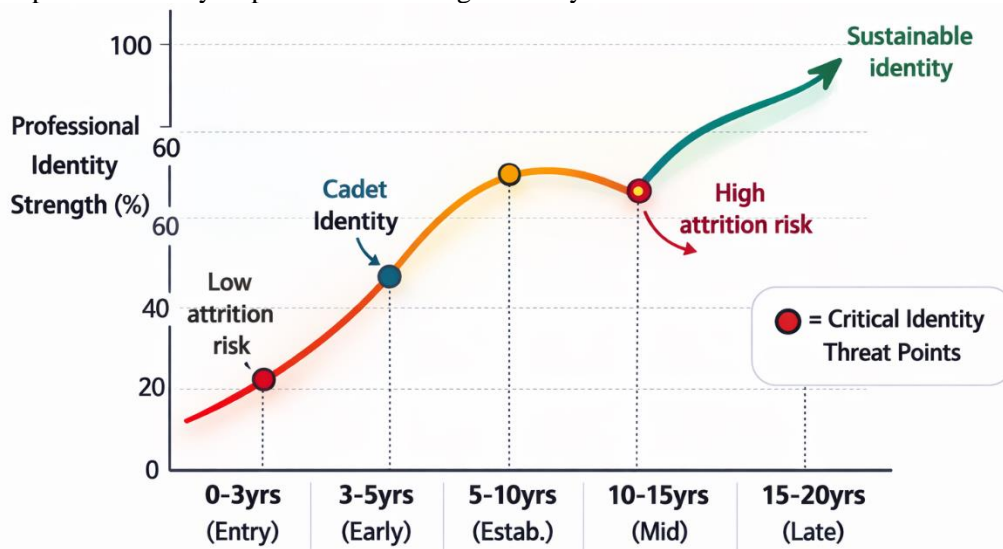


Figure 1: Professional Identity Development Trajectory and Attrition Risk

The professional identity trajectory analysis reveals that maritime professional identity develops gradually during cadet training but faces critical threats during early operational career (3-5 years) when idealized identities encounter operational realities. Identity stabilizes following successful navigation of early-career challenges, then faces secondary threat during family formation (8-10 years) when maritime identity increasingly conflicts with family identity requirements. Professionals developing integrated maritime-family identities show more sustainable career commitment; those maintaining separate "maritime professional" and "family" identities show higher attrition risk during family formation.

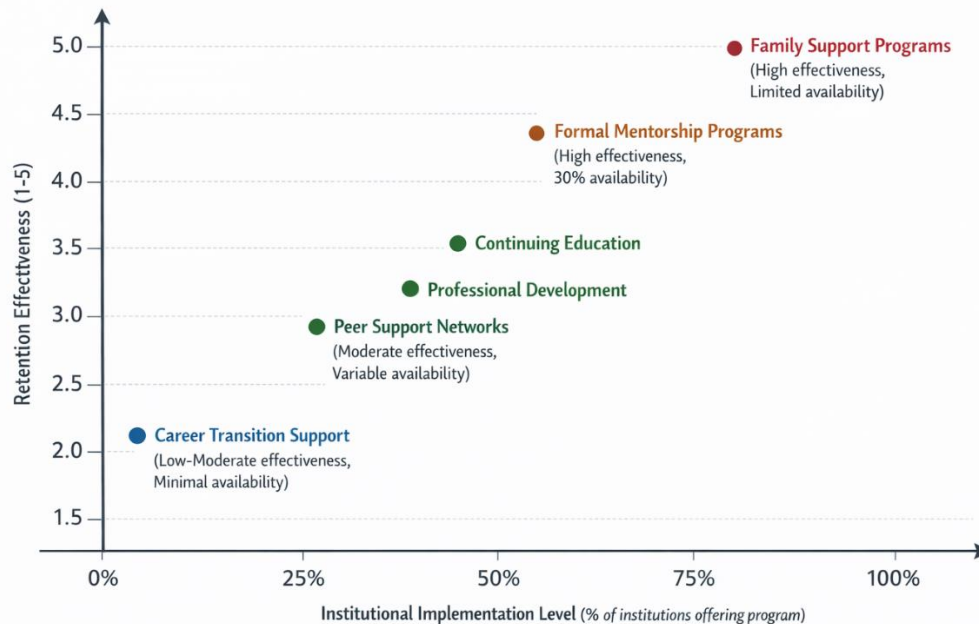


Figure 2: Career Retention Support Matrix: Effectiveness vs. Implementation Accessibility

The support matrix reveals an important gap: programs demonstrating highest retention effectiveness (family support, formal mentorship) show lowest implementation rates, while more accessible programs (peer networks, continuing education) demonstrate moderate effectiveness. This pattern suggests that institutional barriers to implementing high-impact family and mentorship programs (possibly cost, liability concerns, or uncertain effectiveness beliefs) prevent access to most effective retention supports. Former seafarers consistently identified formal mentorship and family support as critical factors they lacked during early careers: one former officer explained, "Having a mentor who understood the profession and could legitimize my concerns about family separation would have helped enormously. Instead, I felt like I was failing because maritime career and family seemed incompatible."

Discussion

The research findings directly address the original research questions by documenting specific sociological factors shaping maritime career decisions and identifying critical attrition points characterized by identity and family relationship challenges rather than mere employment dissatisfaction. The universality of early-career attrition (45% exit within 5 years) contradicts assumptions that maritime career sustainability depends primarily on salary and working conditions; former seafarers instead identified identity-family conflicts and inadequate advancement expectations as primary drivers. This finding extends prior research on maritime employment, which has typically emphasized regulatory compliance and working conditions (Sunny et al., 2021) without addressing the identity and family dynamics fundamentally shaping career decisions.

The institutional support assessment reveals that maritime institutions recognize some support functions (continuing education offered by 45% of institutions) but systematically underimplement programs demonstrating highest retention effectiveness. The gap is particularly striking for family support programs, available in only 10% of institutions yet rated as most effective (4.5/5.0) by participants. This gap represents a missed opportunity: maritime institutions could substantially improve graduate retention through relatively modest investments in family counseling, separation support, and family education regarding maritime employment realities. This finding aligns with

organizational psychology research (Favaretto et al., 2023) documenting that employee retention depends substantially on institutional support systems beyond salary.

The critical attrition points identified (early-career reality confrontation, family formation, management transition) provide specific intervention targets. Early-career mentorship supporting cadets' transition from idealized to realistic professional understanding could mitigate 3-5 year attrition. Family-inclusive programs supporting officers' integration of maritime and family identities during establishment phase could reduce 8-10 year attrition. Clear management advancement pathways could reduce middle-career frustration and premature transitions to non-maritime employment. These targeted interventions address sociological rather than merely economic factors, suggesting that retention improvement requires approaches differing from traditional maritime industry focus on compensation.

The professional identity trajectory analysis reveals that sustainable maritime careers depend on developing integrated identities that coherently incorporate maritime professionalism with family, personal, and community dimensions rather than maintaining these as separate, competing identities. This insight draws from social identity theory and professional socialization literature but applies specifically to maritime contexts. The finding has important implications for maritime education: curricula should explicitly support cadet development of integrated professional identities rather than implicitly assuming that strong maritime technical identity automatically translates to career continuity.

The research demonstrates important methodological strengths. First, the retrospective methodology with former seafarers enables genuine reflection on complete career trajectories and decision-making processes rather than immediate post-decision assessment. Second, the inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives (former seafarers, lecturers, officers) reduces single-perspective bias regarding career factors. Third, documentary analysis of institutional support systems grounds discussion data in organizational realities. Important limitations include: the relatively small sample size (ten participants) limits generalizability; the retrospective focus on Indonesian seafarers may not represent all non-Western maritime professional development needs; and reliance on self-reported perspectives cannot fully capture family dynamics or institutional factors influencing attrition decisions.

The practical implications suggest immediate institutional action priorities. Maritime institutions should implement or enhance formal mentorship programs pairing cadets with experienced seafarers, expanding from current informal networks to systematic, structured mentorship with explicit mentoring skill training. Family support programs including separation counseling, family education, and potentially family-inclusive institutional policies could substantially improve retention during critical family formation phase. Career development pathways should be explicitly articulated so that officers understand advancement requirements and opportunities, addressing frustration during middle-career phase when many currently transition to non-maritime employment. These institutional innovations complement but differ from traditional maritime industry approaches emphasizing compensation and working conditions, reflecting the research finding that career retention is fundamentally a sociological phenomenon involving identity, family, and institutional support.

Future research should extend this investigation through: longitudinal tracking of cadet cohorts to examine whether enhanced mentorship and family support programs improve career retention; qualitative research directly with maritime officers' families examining family perspectives on maritime employment and career sustainability; and comparative analysis of maritime institutions with exemplary mentorship and family support programs to identify effective program models transferable to other institutions. These research directions would substantially advance understanding of how maritime institutions can enhance maritime professional retention and workforce sustainability.

4. CONCLUSION

This research examined sociological factors shaping maritime career continuity and attrition outcomes among Indonesian seafarers, identifying critical career phase vulnerabilities and institutional support system gaps. Findings reveal that maritime career attrition reflects not primarily

employment dissatisfaction but rather challenges of professional identity integration with family formation and limited advancement opportunities within traditional maritime roles. Critical attrition points occur during early-career phase (3-5 years, 45% attrition) as idealized professional identities encounter operational realities, family formation phase (8-10 years, 52% attrition) as maritime and family identities conflict, and middle-career phase (10-15 years) when advancement-seeking officers transition to shore roles. Institutional support systems demonstrating highest retention effectiveness (formal mentorship, family support programs) remain underimplemented, with family support available in only 10% of maritime institutions despite being rated most effective. Maritime institutions can substantially improve graduate retention through systematic mentorship programs, family support services, and explicit career development pathways supporting professional identity integration with family and personal dimensions. Implementation of evidence-based retention support systems will enhance maritime workforce sustainability, improve cadet preparation for realistic career demands, and reduce loss of human capital investment in maritime professional development.

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