

The Respective Roles of Classification Societies and Vetting Agencies in Supporting the Maritime Industry Adopt and Maintain High Standards of Safety and Environmental Compliance

IACS

International Association
of Classification Societies



Introduction

Classification Societies and Vetting Agencies are distinct, yet related aspects of the maritime industry serving different purposes. Working towards the same objective of ensuring the safety and quality of ships by minimising potential accidents and failures, both the processes of classification and vetting have distinct focuses involving different stakeholders.

Classification Societies

The purpose of a Classification Society is to develop and apply its rules for construction and maintenance of ships (structural, engineering, and mechanical system), and perform statutory certification as a Recognised Organisation (RO) acting on behalf of a Flag Administration. They offer assistance to the maritime industry and regulatory bodies as regards maritime safety and pollution prevention, based on the accumulation of knowledge derived from the performance of ships against class and statutory regulations.

Classification Societies are involved with the ship throughout its lifecycle, including design approval, survey during construction and in service, issuance of classification certificates, etc. In turn, ship service experience as well as research and development are used to refine the Rules, making the whole process a cycle of continuous improvement. As such, and in addition to feedback gained from experience, class societies spend significant resources to develop rules and requirements to tackle new risks allowing for the implementation of new technology, typically new fuels, cyber threats, etc. A commitment to research and development is not only integral to refining the Rules and its fundamental importance is recognised by way of it being a prerequisite for Membership of IACS¹. Consequently, classification societies have a unique insight into the technical background that supports the rules and the intended safety objective that will be met through their application.

Furthermore, classification societies are engaged in a broad range of related services including statutory survey, survey of materials and equipment, safety management audits etc. which also provides valuable experience that can be used in the rule development process.

¹ Membership Criterion 8 – Technical ability to contribute to IACS

Vetting Agencies

According to Windward AI, vessel vetting is a process of evaluating and assessing the suitability of a vessel for a particular purpose, such as carrying a certain type of cargo, or operating in a specific region. This evaluation typically involves a review of the vessel's technical and operational characteristics, and its safety and compliance record.

Vetting is generally performed on request of charterers and vetting inspectors collect data according to the vetting system requirements. In contrast, a rating system uses vetting data for the purpose of identifying suitable vessels. The typical work of vetting departments comprises collecting and evaluating information from a large number of sources.

Classification Society Activities Compared to Vetting Agency Activities

Class and vetting agencies can operate in harmony, as they fulfill distinct yet complementary functions within the maritime industry. Comparative analysis shows that there are a lot more differences than similarities between the two. Classification societies traditionally serve shipbuilders and shipowners (by proving for compliance with SOLAS Reg. II-1/3-1²) and insurers and perform public functions as ROs. Vetting is a private and voluntary system, initially set up by oil companies to assist them in choosing the appropriate vessels to charter for their trade, and subsequently adopted by other charterers for other trades.

Surveying and certification are undertaken by classification societies to ensure compliance with their rules who also accept the legal liability for the accuracy of the certification provided. The work of Class is however not limited to their classification and statutory work. They also have an important role as advisers to the shipping industry, sharing their experience, technical proficiency, and extensive R&D programmes. Vetting Agencies on the other hand do not issue documentation that legally certifies the compliance of a vessel with international rules and statutory requirements.

To be employed by an IACS Classification Society as survey and/or plan approval staff, it is required that such personnel be fully qualified and meet the

² SOLAS ii-1/3-1 "... ships shall be designed, constructed and maintained in compliance with the structural, mechanical and electrical requirements of a classification society which is recognized by the Administration in accordance with the provisions of regulation XI-1/1..."

minimum requirements as laid out in the IMO's Code for Recognised Organisations (The RO Code) and is subject to periodical third party assessments (e.g. audits, VCAs, etc.). These requirements involve a mix of theoretical and practical training to ensure proficiency with the rules, technical standards or statutory regulations and to carry out survey or design assessment work independently. Competence acquired through training is evaluated via written/oral examinations. Moreover, surveyors are required to maintain their qualifications through continuous professional development, attending training courses, and staying updated with the latest industry standards and technological advancements. There are also obligations on IACS Member's to maintain formal records of the qualifications, experience, practical and theoretical training, and ongoing examinations of their surveyors, all of which is verified annually during performance reviews. All IACS Members also undertake annual Activity Monitoring to determine whether the individuals maintain the competence and capability to satisfactorily perform the work for which they are qualified, to identify needs for continual improvement in aligning the technical services across the organisation, and to identify need for improvements in the guidance, processes, training and supporting tools provided for the technical staff. While some Vetting Agencies maintain stringent standards and transparent processes in selecting their vetting inspectors, who may be highly qualified, there are no externally mandated requirements for these roles either in terms of initial qualifications or experience or with regards to ongoing professional development nor a third-party assessment of their ongoing competence and qualifications.

Risk assessments are undertaken by both Class and Vetting Agencies. Class conducts risk assessments for new designs to ensure its safety and compliance with industry standards and regulations. However, risk assessments undertaken by Vetting Agencies serve a different purpose which is to assess the operational risks and the suitability of a vessel for transporting a specific cargo.



THE RESPECTIVE ROLES OF CLASSIFICATION SOCIETIES AND VETTING AGENCIES IN SUPPORTING THE MARITIME INDUSTRY ADOPT AND MAINTAIN HIGH STANDARDS OF SAFETY AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE

The table below provides a comparison of the key different focuses of the two functions:

Ship Classification	Ship Vetting
Technical experts focusing on the ships' design, construction, quality of structures, machinery, electrical and control systems etc as per rules and regulations.	Objective is to provide a comprehensive assessment of operational aspects, performance of the crew, suitability for specific cargo types or voyages etc against their own requirements.
Performed by classification societies as defined in IACS Charter Annex 4 ³ .	Performed by charterers, cargo owners, P&I or vetting organisations etc.
Development and maintenance of their own class rules through extensive research and development and detailed knowledge of the technical background behind the rules.	Desktop driven from a multitude of sources including the use of third-party inspection reports such as SIRE, CDI, class records (conditions, status), survey reports etc.
Appraisal of design, and drawings by Rule application and advanced direct numerical simulation and analysis, surveys during the construction (to ensure compliance with approved drawings) and operation of a ship by fully qualified surveyors.	Assessments could be conducted before each charter or voyage.
Class and Statutory surveys are performed from first principles each time which then provides an assurance over a given period of the vessel's condition (subject to it being properly maintained and operated in accordance with class rules and statutory regulations).	Evaluates the vessel's past safety, compliance, and incident history at a specific point in time.
Maintains high standard of quality in the application of rules and regulations and other services in compliance with IACS QSCS, IMO RO Code and EU Regulation.	Are not bound by specific international standards, rather follows their own sets of criteria and processes.
A valid class certificate assures the structural integrity of a vessel and its compliance with classification rules (covering also machinery, electrical and automation systems, material and welding, surveys, etc.) and statutory regulations requiring the vessel to have a class certificate (e.g. SOLAS reg. II-1/3-1).	A successful vetting outcome provides an indication to interested parties that the vessel is suitable and reliable for the specific voyage in terms of its operations, compliance, and risks.
Takes legal responsibility for the work undertaken and the decisions made.	---
Conditions of Class can be issued to assist the vessel in preparing and scheduling maintenance and repairs while continuing to operate safely as classed ships.	Used by Vetting Agencies to indicate potential areas of operational interest to third parties unrelated to safety.

Conclusion

While it is clear that Classification Societies and Vetting Agencies serve distinct roles, the coexistence of both can enhance the overall safety and operational efficiency of the maritime industry and neither one can replace the other. It is acknowledged that vetting plays a role in evaluating a vessel's operational standards, it cannot however replace the essential functions performed by Class in ensuring the structural integrity and safety of the vessels in a manner that is fully transparent and is subject to third party oversight and audit. A successful, collaborative approach between Class and Vetting Agencies requires a comprehensive understanding of each other's roles and, importantly, both their strengths and limitations. Vetting agency findings that are reviewed with a clear understanding of the class related elements will enable all parties to establish a more accurate interpretation of the information provided. Ultimately, the services provided by Classification Societies and Vetting Agencies demonstrate a shared commitment to maritime safety and, when properly applied, serve as tools to reinforce high standards of safety and environmental protection.

³ SOLAS ii-1/3-1 "... ships shall be designed, constructed and maintained in compliance with the structural, mechanical and electrical requirements of a classification society which is recognized by the Administration in accordance with the provisions of regulation XI-1/1..."

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