ACAMS (the Association of Certified Anti-Money Laundering Specialists) is the largest international membership organisation for AML Compliance professionals. It has members all over the world (about 50% in the US where it was originally set up) and it offers its members a forum for quality training, networking and exchanging ideas on financial crime prevention.

In November 2015, the ACAMS Cyprus Chapter was launched. It followed an initiative by Gregory Dellas, Manager, AML Risk Management at Bank of Cyprus. “I had always wanted a point of reference, somewhere I could turn to for knowledge and resources to help me do my job,” he says, “because Cyprus had very robust laws in place and the later audits confirmed this. However, in addition to the fact that laws and regulations are constantly evolving, the compliance profession has changed a lot over the past three years too. We are now using a more risk-based approach and working to create a culture of AML compliance in all sectors. So I wouldn’t say we’re late in setting up this ACAMS Chapter. What happened in 2013 gave us push in the right direction. Now is the right time for this.”

Cyprus is, in fact, one of the first countries in Europe to have its own ACAMS Chapter and, says Dellas, the response to its setting up has been huge. “We already have 50 members and we’ve had lots of people wanting to join – first they have to join ACAMS and we assist them in that. ACAMS has already begun offering courses through the European Institute of Management & Finance (EIMF).”

Professional AML training and qualifications are what ACAMS is all about and, says Gregory Dellas, the Certified Anti-Money Laundering Specialist (CAMS) credential is the ‘gold standard’, recognized internationally by financial institutions, governments and regulators as a serious commitment to protecting the financial system against money laundering. “CAMS certification ensures that those working in this area are properly trained and knowledgeable,” he explains.

The local Chapter will also provide a local forum where professionals can exchange ideas and share knowledge in order to become better equipped for dealing with day-to-day issues in order to protect themselves, their institutions, their clients and the country.

“ACAMS is a new chapter beginning...”

By John Vickers | Photo by Andreas Loucaides
Chapter is made up of volunteers who wish to enhance their knowledge through networking, organising local training sessions and holding round table discussions on specialized matters. We need to understand what is relevant to Cyprus and understand how best to deal with the financial crime risks that threaten the stability of the financial system,” Dellas says. “Sanctions compliance and terrorist financing, for example, are areas in which

we have to enhance our own specialist knowledge in Cyprus,” he goes on, “and the Chapter welcomes those wishing to do so, no matter which industry they come from. Training and personal development are key issues across the whole of the business arena.”

In the wake of the 2013 banking and economic crises, he believes that the island’s financial institutions now giving AML the attention that it deserves.

“AML has always been a key concern of financial institutions in Cyprus, especially of the banks,” he tells Gold. “What has changed is the move away from the ‘tick box’ approach towards a ‘culture of compliance’ and doing the right thing, which means doing things ethically and protecting the system. Contrary to what some people believe, compliance is not a business preventer but a business protector and enabler. We want to help legitimate business go through the system.”

While this may sound like nothing more than admirable theory, Dellas maintains that the banks in Cyprus are turning away potential clients much more frequently than people realize:

“Not only do we say no to potential clients, we’re doing it every day. Those of us from a banking background are familiar with the rules of due diligence and the KYC (Know Your Client) approach. Today, ethical behaviour is the key, not accepting deposits from just anyone.”

When it comes to anti-money laundering issues, Dellas insists, Cyprus is actually stricter than most of its EU counterparts and, in many ways, more advanced. He gives some examples: “According to the 4th AML Directive, tax evasion will be a predicate offence (meaning that it falls under the AML umbrella) as from 2017 but here it has been viewed as such since the end of 2013. Furthermore, the threshold for identifying the beneficial owners behind a legal entity is 25% throughout Europe whereas in Cyprus it’s 10%. This means that if there are 10 beneficial owners of a company in Europe (with no-one holding 25% or more), there is no requirement to identify them whereas here we would need to perform due diligence on everyone holding 10% or more, or otherwise controlling the company. Another provision of the Directive, regarding the treatment of local Politically Exposed Persons (PEPs) has been in force in Cyprus since 2013.”

So how does Cyprus compare with its competitors in the professional and financial services sector when it comes to attracting investments? Extremely well, says Gregory Dellas, especially when compared with non-EU jurisdictions but, equally, with its EU counterparts.

“The bigger organisations want to associate themselves with a place that is transparent,” he explains, “where

things work well, one that has a good name and reputation. Cyprus has a lot of advantages, including good tax laws that attract a lot of businesses to the island. As an EU member state we follow the EU directives which are already quite strict and, as mentioned before, in some areas our laws are even stricter still. So we have a very robust regulatory framework here and the way our professionals deal with issues of transparency and compliance these days is making us even better.”

No-one is under the illusion that money-laundering can be totally eradicated, says Dellas. “As long as there is crime in the world, fraudsters will always be looking for ways to get their money through the system. Our job is to keep abreast of what’s happening and preventing it. This is where CAMS certification comes in and ensures that those working in this area are properly trained and knowledgeable.”

The ACAMS Cyprus Chapter has already held two events with expert speakers from abroad and, following the Annual ACAMS European conference in May, which several Cypriot members will be attending, it will organise a couple of round table discussions on major issues from the conference.

“We are very happy with requests for membership as well as the increased interest from all over Cyprus, given the short time we’ve been around, and we are very active,” says the Chair. “We intend to remain active so as to promote best practices for the profession and, by extension, to restore and then maintain our country’s reputation.”

CAMS CERTIFICATION ENSURES THAT THOSE WORKING IN THIS AREA ARE PROPERLY TRAINED AND KNOWLEDGEABLE