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## PASSION FOR LEARNING: A.S. WATSON GROUP RETAIL ACADEMY

No one shops like Hong Kongers. Even during the COVID-19 era, they have continued to shop online and in person in one of the most competitive retail environments in the world. It is no surprise that this retail hotspot attracts people who love to connect consumers to their daily bread *and* their little luxuries.



The world's largest international health and beauty retailer, A.S. Watson Group (ASW), has its roots and headquarters in this super shopping city. It needs to attract and train the best in the city to become the best in the world. The A.S. Watson Group Retail Academy is crucial to achieving that goal.

Established with the cooperation of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), the Retail Academy has seen over 3,900 students graduate since its establishment in 2013. Working with PolyU, it has created a series of programmes intensely focused on the art, science and engineering of retail.

### REAL RECOGNITION

The Retail Academy programmes have been created with the support and blessing of the Education Bureau, under the auspices of its Qualifications Framework (QF), and bear the imprimatur of the Hong Kong Retail Management Association. With the aim of promoting lifelong learning, the QF supports the creation and accreditation of education programmes with clearly understood standards that students and employers alike can refer to. Standards awarded range from Level 1 to Level 7. A Level 5 programme is

the equivalent of an undergraduate degree at a local university, demanding the application of a high level of knowledge and skills to solve problems and innovate in the relevant sector.

Programmes can be very specific, depending on where ASW managers work. A staff member at Watsons may start with a Beauty Retailing course before moving on to a Health and Fitness Retailing course. An initiate at PARKnSHOP needs to take the foundation courses on Meat (Chinese) Retailing and Meat (Western) Retailing, and Cheese and Deli Retailing before advancing to a Level 3 food retailing accreditation. At FORTRESS, Electronic and Electrical Retailing is a popular choice. But all programmes culminate in the Level 5 Advanced Diploma in Retail Store Management in their respective arena.

That Level 5 diploma is unique; the Academy hosts the only Level 5 accredited Chinese retail programmes in Hong Kong. Promising students are supported with tuition and time off from regular duties to attend classes at PolyU. This pays off for participants, as approximately 75% of graduates of the first cohort of Level 4 and Level 5 programmes were promoted within a year.



## PASSION FOR LEARNING

Maurice Low's enthusiasm for the grape led him to Watson's Wine. He took professional wine tasting courses and was accepted into the company's Supervisor Trainee programme. His passion saw him backed by his manager to complete the Level 4 and Level 5 retail programmes with the Retail Academy. That learning has practical applications, as Maurice has worked to tightly integrate sales and marketing data and online and offline (O+O) tools to design in-store elements that delight customers and dramatically improve upselling results across O+O channels.

Roy Tsang is Watsons Hong Kong's Operations Manager responsible for over 130 stores across Hong Kong and neighbouring Macau. His rise at Watsons was buoyed by a Diploma in Professional Retail Management from the Retail Academy. Earlier in life, he had completed vocational programmes but the Retail Academy made it possible for him to go to the next level in his career.

It changed his thinking about teamwork on a philosophical level, emphasising a 'flying geese paradigm' of cooperation in which all team members elevate each other when they work together. Even customers can

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support their own shopping. Roy successfully implemented self-checkout services in stores that increased efficiency and moved shoppers through the checkout process more quickly.

Often, what is learned in the classroom can have immediate practical application. Kevin Ng attended hotel schools in Switzerland and Australia. As an Assistant Store Manager in ASW's high-end international grocery store GREAT, his High Diploma in Retail Management – Supermarket Chain brought him specific knowledge he needed while still in the programme. Kevin's class project became the 'grEAT to Go' app, created with both colleague collaboration and customer input. After three months of testing, it was launched and subsequently reduced waiting time at the Salad Bar and improved efficiency during the peak hours of operation.

These rising stars may, in the future, join another ASW initiative programme for upper-level leadership and strategy skills: the ASW Agile Leadership programme. Conducted in partnership with the globally renowned Ivey Business School at Western University, Canada, elite Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) professors work closely with ASW executives at Ivey's Hong Kong campus.

The rigour and relevance of the Retail Academy programme are recognised internally and externally, making it highly valued by the students and the ASW managers fortunate enough to work with the graduates. For those who have the passion to pursue their studies, the Retail Academy is their rocket ship to success.

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