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Hong Kong's hands-on hotel

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Hotel ICON serves as a training facility for hospitality students. Source: Supplied

THIS is surely the most swish campus on earth - a glass-skinned building alongside Victoria Harbour in the heart of Kowloon's East Tsim Sha Tsui district.

It contains Asia's largest indoor vertical garden, a collection of carefully curated local artworks, designer-dressed staff, sumptuous digs and a bar that commands a panoramic view.

This smart Hong Kong establishment looks very much like a hotel, and that it certainly is - Hotel ICON is a collaboration that reflects the creative flair of the likes of architect Rocco Yim, design veteran Terence Conran and botanist Patrick Blanc. But it's something else besides, for this is where students of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) come to undertake the rigorous research and training that will prepare them for a career in top hotels.

"We see ourselves as a bit of a nursery," says Richard Hatter, general manager of Hotel ICON and adjunct associate professor at the SHTM.

"The hotel combines the advantages of a real-world hotel environment with a structured educational program."

Its owner is the Hong Kong Polytechnic University; in vesting its interest so thoroughly, the university has committed to holding its students to the very highest standards, exposing them to a coalface that encompasses all the challenges that come with running a luxury property.

Here they can avail themselves of niche learning opportunities that aren't available in a classroom - such as food and wine masterclasses in working kitchens, mentorship from seasoned hoteliers and interaction with discerning guests.

More training encourages the students to pursue a specialty in various hospitality fields.

The staff not only serves guests professionally but is taking an active role in teaching and mentoring the next generation of hoteliers in a real-life situation.

This unique concept benefits not only the students but guests, for at their service are hoteliers-in-training who are energetic, filled with fresh ideas and fully informed about the latest trends in tourism and hospitality.

"As a teaching and research hotel, we're able to try out a lot of new things," Hatter says.

"For example, we use the latest system to provide a paper-free and wireless check-in, check-out service. Innovation is at the core of everything we do, and this sets a good example to the students."

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