

Training Future Macau Casino Bosses

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Eric Rechsteiner for the International Herald Tribune Kitty Kuong, front left, attended class at the University of Macau, which has courses that focus on the booming hotel and casino industry.

MACAU — Natalie Chan collected bets, dealt cards and calculated payoffs. She was not a croupier working in a casino — in fact, at 20, she was not even old enough to be on the gambling floor at the glitzy casinos just a short walk from campus.

But she is learning the tricks of the trade through a program meant to train [Macau](#) residents to run the hotels and casinos that have made this city Asia's answer to Las Vegas.

Last summer, Ms. Chan completed a dealer training course on a mock casino floor, in a room equipped with roulette wheels, blackjack tables and slot machines run by the [Macao Polytechnic Institute's Gaming Teaching and Research Center](#).

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“It wasn’t as easy as I expected it to be,” said Ms. Chan, who learned how to play blackjack and baccarat. “At the end of the training, we had an assessment and I had to perform several calculations while dealing the cards. It was challenging.”

Ms. Chan is a third-year student at the [University of Macau’s Hospitality and Gaming Management program](#), which grooms students for managerial and executive positions in the booming gambling and hospitality industry. Casino floor training is just one part of the course.

“Besides learning about the games, the training allowed me to experience what the dealers go through, the stressful environment that they have to work in, as well as what makes them tired,” Ms. Chan explained. “It gave me an idea of the things I need to be aware of when managing dealers in future.”

Macau opened its doors to major U.S. investors like Sands and Wynn Resorts when it liberalized its casino industry in 2002. It now has at least 35 casinos employing more than 81,000 staff. Its gambling revenue, which outpaces that of the Las Vegas Strip, is aided by the fact that casino gambling is illegal in mainland China, which sends more than 20 million visitors to the city each year.

But the sudden boom, combined with a lack of good local training, meant that many top-level positions were filled by expatriates from the West or other Asian cities like Hong Kong.

Amy So, coordinator for the Hospitality and Gaming Management program, said there were almost no education options in the field when the program opened in 2003.

“Before we started this program, Macau wanted to develop the hospitality and gaming industry, but at that time there were not a lot of people working in this profession and there were no such degrees offered,” she said.

Admission is competitive, with only 72 spots for 360 applicants last year, though Dr. So said the program might be expanded in the future.

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In recent years, it has evolved to cater to the emergence of huge family-friendly entertainment complexes, as opposed to the narrowly gambling-focused casinos that existed a decade ago. “I think the trend of this industry is moving toward developing integrated resorts where all the departments — including hotel, gaming, retail, conventions and exhibitions — work together,” Dr. So said.

The university’s courses also cover business, marketing, technology, events management, and food and beverage operations. Students have the choice of specializing in one of two streams: gambling management or convention and hospitality management.

Third-year students can join a two-week field trip to Las Vegas and Hawaii. They take morning courses at the [University of Nevada, Las Vegas](#), which offers degrees in hospitality management and hotel administration, and spend afternoons at casinos and hotels.

Kitty Kuong, 23, went on the trip last year. She said that Macau had room for improvement in comparison with the United States, where travel agents, hotels and the government work together. She will be among the first batch of students to graduate from the University of Macau’s convention and hospitality management stream this year.

“I can learn both the gaming aspects and also the hospitality aspects of the integrated resorts,” she said. “Also, some of the lecturers are from the industry. It is a good way for us to be in touch.”

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