

Object No.34

The University supermarket

By Leigh Sparks



The University of Stirling is a global institution. The University has played a transformative role in Asia's retail sector and it is a magnet for international students. Their presence on campus is reflected on the supermarket's shelves where these bottles – the objects for this chapter – try to draw attention to themselves.

The University has strong links with Asia, attracting many Asian students to its programmes, and playing a role in the development of highly-skilled graduates for the workforce in countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, China and Japan. Many of the leaders of Singaporean retail have been taught by the University, and with almost 1,500 alumni, its reputation in retail is particularly strong. This is the story of how it came about.

In the wake of Margaret Thatcher's government cuts to higher education funding in 1981, a drive for new subjects and markets became a priority. In the autumn of 1983, John Dawson took up the Fraser of Allander Professorship of Distributive Studies, launching the Institute for Retail Studies. The Institute developed a suite of successful educational programmes, and collaborative research projects with industry.

The then Principal, Sir Ken Alexander, was very much in favour of making international links and when Wang Ting Min of the Singapore Retailers Merchants Association approached John Dawson after a presentation (in 1987, somewhere, but not Singapore), he found a receptive and mutual interest in discussing retail focused education, especially for those already in business.

Singapore was then a young country fast emerging after independence, and with a dynamic modernising vision from Premier Lee Kwan Yew. Transforming the retail sector was important in this, both for Singaporeans and for attracting tourists and investors. So, in 1989 the Institute and the Singapore Retailers Merchants Association launched a part-time Diploma in Retail Management aimed at middle managers and supervisors. Run over two years, with year one taught by local Singaporean tutors, the first teaching in Singapore took place in 1990. Since then, there have been almost 50 intakes of students.

In 1987 the Institute developed and launched a new Masters in Business Administration in Retailing and Wholesaling by distance learning. It was supported by some major retailers including Marks & Spencer and Tesco. As Singapore grew and developed, and as the Diploma in Retail Management became successful, this MBA was added to the portfolio in Singapore, in partnership with the renamed Singapore Retailers Association. The MBA ran between 1994-1998 and 2006-2015; the gap partly due to the ASEAN financial crisis. During this time it produced over 150 MBA graduates from Singapore and the wider region.

Alumnus Terry O'Connor, Managing Director of Courts (Singapore) Ltd. praises the flexibility of the MBA in Retailing which enabled him to focus on his studies outside the peak retailing months. He says: "Academic study, led by Paul Freathy and Keri Davies, was relevant and stimulating, providing a firm basis for strategic decision making."

By the mid-2000s, the Singapore government was focused on global excellence,

and the need to build full-time and part-time educational ladders of achievement, within Singapore, and using the country as a hub for the wider region. After a worldwide search, the Institute for Retail Studies was appointed under the Foreign Specialised Institutes Initiative to develop a Bachelor of Arts in Retail Marketing with Nanyang Polytechnic, thus bridging the Diploma to MBA gap. Honorary Graduate, and former Principal and CEO of Nanyang Polytechnic, Dr Lee Mun Chan, recalls Professor Paul Freathy enthusiastically embracing the retail partnership opportunities. This three-year initiative ran from 2008-2011 before transferring to the Singapore Institute of Management from 2012. Other degree programmes – widening out to cover sport, management, marketing and sustainable events management – have since been added to this partnership.

In 1987, the idea was to use Stirling's academic retail expertise to develop the management of the Singapore retail sector, and to have a positive impact on the sector performance and its status. Over the 30 years since, the Institute's staff have taught and researched in the country on formal programmes, and on executive education and industry seminars. PhD graduates and honorary graduates (including Dato' Jannie Chan, one of Singapore's leading female retail entrepreneurs) have added to Stirling's influence and impact.

Retail education in Singapore is the longest and most extensive trans-national education development by the University. It is an object lesson in collaboration and sustained relationship building with academic, trade and government partners, with government agencies being strong financial investors and collaborators in this learning. The impact has been wide reaching on the retail sector in Singapore, the University, individual staff members and our alumni.

Alumnus Victor Chai, CEO of Dairy Farm Singapore recalls why he enrolled on the programme: "I got into retail by default and developed great experience, but I didn't have a degree and wanted to develop my career path, to upgrade and improve." Lim Tay Beng, MBA Retailing in 2009, agrees: "I was working hard, supporting my family but getting a formal qualification is also important in Singapore for your career." Ms Ban Yan Wee had a career in Dior before founding the successful TYAN Fashions Group. She says: "Singapore Retail is tough and an MBA helps you to keep up with constant change."

Although conceived by John Dawson, the irony is that he's never yet made it to Singapore; but his vision and foresight lives on across Singapore today.

.....
Professor Leigh Sparks is deputy principal for internationalisation and graduate studies, and Professor of Retail Studies.