



Ms. Khoo I-Jean Head, A*STAR Graduate Academy, (A*GA)

THE TALENT HUNTER

A*STAR is well known to be a meeting place of great minds from all over the world. With globalisation, this is where local researchers collaborate and engineer new breakthroughs alongside reputable researchers from over 60 countries. What is lesser-known is that it takes a team of dedicated professionals to sustain this pool of diverse international talent.

Khoo I-Jean is one of the “talent scouts” who helps make this possible. She oversees an array of programmes under the A*STAR Graduate Academy (A*GA) to attract young scientists-in-the-making, both Singaporean and international, to join A*STAR for studies, internships, and research attachments.

“We need a strong core of Singaporean scientists to build up the country as a research hub, and we also need

talented scientists from different parts of the world to work with them,” shares I-Jean. “Every place has its own culture and system of training. Our international talent bring with them diverse perspectives, mind sets and approaches to problem-solving, which enrich us immeasurably.”

Talent undergirds the entire R&D ecosystem. I-Jean underscores its importance, “It is the people who conduct the cutting-edge research and creates technologies. The availability of well-trained research talent is often given as an important reason why companies choose to site their research investments here.”

Pursuing Talents

Scouting for talent is no walk in the park, given how competitive science and technology is as a global industry. Apart from her role in planning, which involves recruiting young local talent for A*STAR, I-Jean also manages the award of international scholarships to promising PhD candidates to pursue their degrees in Singapore.

I-Jean reveals, “We partner established organisations from countries all over the world to publicise the scholarships. Besides going on promotional trips to spread the word about A*STAR and what we do, the team works with country advisors who have established networks and are familiar with the education system in their areas. Researchers who attend conferences and seminars abroad also take on the role as A*STAR ambassadors who help promote our scholarships to other potential applicants. Having a strong web presence helps too.”

As a result of such active marketing, every year, up to a few thousand

applications for PhD scholarships are received from countries as far away as Colombia and Kenya. But shortlisting the best candidates is far from straightforward.

“It is hard to have an intimate knowledge of the education systems in every country. Even though there are university rankings and equivalency tables, the rankings may not truly reflect the academic rigour of a university. Not everything is about good grades – we also need to discern if the candidates are able to contribute to the vibrancy of the research community here,” says I-Jean.

Seeing The Bigger Picture

Science has always been her calling. Trained in biomedical engineering, I-Jean chose to embark on a career in an administrative role within the R&D infrastructure, over a career in laboratory research.

“I want to be involved in contributing to the growth of R&D here in a different way. The most fulfilling part of my work is that it impacts individuals. Because of A*GA, young talent are given the opportunity to be future scientists.”

Despite the fact that her work involves planning, I-Jean has one simple rule when it comes to work – “Take each day as it comes.” She explains, “I have a more ‘controlling’ personality, so it’s important for me to realise that life doesn’t always go as planned. Sometimes, you’ve just gotta roll with the punches!”

I-Jean’s arsenal of interests helps her to keep that aspect in check. Tinkering with the piano, strumming on the ukulele, chasing Korean drama serials and catching up on fiction are just some of the hobbies to encourage what she calls the ‘laid-back’ side of her.

Recalling her years with the agency, I-Jean sums it up, “Since I joined in 2004, my work has been pretty diverse. I’ve worked in communications, planning, events management, operations and talent development. I tend to be a detailed person, but I’ve also learned to keep my eye on the big picture and know that I’m making a contribution to Singapore’s R&D ecosystem. It’s pretty rewarding!”

“Knowing what I do, however small, is making a difference, to someone’s life and to Singapore’s R&D ecosystem, is highly motivating.”

