

'Working hard, working happy' is in medical school's DNA

Nurturing leadership and a strong collaborative culture inspire Duke-NUS Medical School's employees – from faculty to non-academic staff – to reach their fullest potential

By Bryant Chan

An organisation is only as good as its people, says Professor Thomas Coffman, dean of Duke-NUS Medical School.

To support its people to their fullest potential, the school has created a working environment that encourages innovation, openness and respect. It offers a framework of different opportunities at all levels so that staff feel valued and supported – emotionally and professionally.

The formula has worked, with the school achieving stellar results in creating a pipeline of doctors who eventually have the potential to become Singapore's leading clinicians-scientists, and in delivering breakthrough discoveries that advance the quest for cures to common diseases in Asia. To date, Duke-NUS has graduated 561 doctors, published more than 9,400 research papers, been awarded 136 patents, and attracted more than \$700 million in research funding.

The organisation is ranked one of Singapore's best employers in 2022, according to a list compiled by *The Straits Times* and global research firm Statista. It is ranked 106th overall, and sixth in the education category.

"Our terrific achievements are directly related to our staff's talents and well-being," notes Prof Coffman. "So we'll always have a relentless focus on that, moving forward."

Ms Karen Chang, senior vice-dean and group director of the office of corporate services, says: "Our people are our greatest asset, and we keep them engaged by developing clear strategies that include workforce priorities such as talent development, recognition, wellness and work environment."

Assistant Professor Irene Lee from the office of education credits her smooth transition – from scientist to medical educator – to the support from her supervisors.

Where supervisors elsewhere might have seen the pursuit of such opportunities as detracting

from her research work, her mentors at Duke-NUS instead encouraged her to forge ahead.

"They invested in my overall professional development by listening, mentoring and creating relevant career growth opportunities," she recalls.

Investing in staff development

This culture of support extends to non-academic staff. When senior executive Muhammad Yusuf bin Abdul Rahman wanted to move to his current position as student support manager, his transition process was expedited by his supervisors both old and new. He gained the skills for his new job through online workshops and seminars that the school offered.

"This new role has allowed me to expand my skills and achieve career aspirations while enjoying in-depth conversations and interactions with our students," he says.

As a school that was created as a partnership between two great universities – Duke University in North Carolina, United States, and the National University of Singapore – it is only natural that collaboration and togetherness would be part of the institutional DNA of Duke-NUS, says Prof Coffman.

"The two main things that we do in the school are educate and research, and to do those things successfully, you have to collaborate and work as a team," he continues. "And at our core, what we do is harness those characteristics and apply them to our staff development and support."

Associate Professor Ashley St. John from the emerging infectious diseases programme finds ample opportunities to collaborate not just with Duke University, but also within Duke-NUS.

She works closely with multiple departments within Duke-NUS, from filing patents and liaising with companies through the Centre for Technology and Development, to connecting with the public via the communications department.

"All of these departments

work really efficiently together at Duke-NUS and I always feel supported – that we are a team with shared goals," she says.

Even in non-research-related matters, collaboration is still valued. Mr Yusuf regularly partners with other departments to create mental health advocacy programmes, and as previous chair of the staff recreation committee, worked with colleagues to develop wellness activities.

A workplace where people feel supported

Just as importantly, it was collaboration that facilitated the continued support of students, even during the pandemic. Asst Prof Lee and other Duke-NUS faculty members developed an academic coaching programme, which helps monitor student performance and identify those in need of academic support.

Prof Coffman says: "We're really committed to creating a workplace where people can optimise their abilities and creativity. And to do that, our staff have to be happy and productive; working hard, working happy."

In particular, the implementation of a recent staff peer support system aims to keep morale high, particularly in times of pandemic. "It provides a safe environment for employees to share their concerns and personal challenges, and lets them receive help safely and confidentially," says Ms Chang.

"We have trained staff to help support their fellow staff, to recognise and interact with their colleagues who may be struggling," says Prof Coffman. "It creates a sense of community and support, and energises the people who have participated in the peer support programmes."



(From L-R): Associate professor Ashley St. John, emerging infectious diseases programme; Mr Muhammad Yusuf bin Abdul Rahman, senior executive, student affairs; Professor Thomas Coffman, dean of Duke-NUS; Mr Goh Yew Lin, chairman of Duke-NUS' governing board; assistant professor Irene Lee, office of education and Ms Karen Chang, senior vice dean & group director of corporate services, with Duke-NUS medical students. PHOTO: DUKE-NUS MEDICAL SCHOOL

66

Thanks to the dedication of our faculty, scientists and staff, Duke-NUS is flying the Singapore flag on the world stage, a leader in outstanding medical education, translational biomedical research and transformative innovation.

MR GOH YEW LIN
chairman, Duke-NUS' Governing Board

"It helps them feel empowered at a time when many have felt helpless," he adds. "And this allows us to focus our staff capabilities and talents into creating a resilient workforce."

Chairman of the Duke-NUS Governing Board, Mr Goh Yew Lin, says: "The inclusion of Duke-NUS in the Best Employers Singapore 2022 is especially meaningful to us as we just celebrated our 17th anniversary on April 14. Together with our Academic Medicine partner SingHealth, we have created a vibrant environment that integrates academic pursuits with clinical excellence."

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4 WAYS Duke-NUS Medical School supports staff holistically

EMPHASIS ON MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Wellness initiatives include a staff peer support system and two annual "Well-being Days", so that employees can take time off from work to recharge.

ENHANCED LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS

Under the Learning and Wellness initiative, employees are encouraged to take half a day each month to further build their competencies and interests.

OVERARCHING STAFF RECOGNITION FRAMEWORK

Good performance and attitudes at work are incentivised with the Dean's Excellence and Administrative Achievement awards.

FLEXI-WORK POLICIES

As the school transitions to working in the new normal, Duke-NUS will continue to offer employees flexibility in working hours and where they choose to work.

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• Duke-NUS Medical School's emphasis on teamwork and an open, supportive environment have made it one of the best places for employees to work and grow. PHOTO: DUKE-NUS MEDICAL SCHOOL