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Perceptions of Success: A Cross-Sectional Study of Medical Students from a Private University in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The motivation for a medical student to choose medicine as a career is manifold, and it is overall due to the pursuit of success. **Objective:** To understand what medical undergraduate students perceive as success and the factors they consider essential to achieving success. **Methods:** The required sample size based on a population of 450 students with a confidence level of 95%, margin of error of 4%, and response distribution of 50%, is 258. We employed a cross-sectional study design, surveying 268 clinical year students (Years 3, 4, and 5) using a pre-validated questionnaire. Students were randomly selected. We rated their perception of success in life based on five common attributes and rated the six identified factors that they perceived as important in their road to success. **Results:** We had 260 respondents. Financial stability (29.9%), personal growth (24.6%), and work-life balance (23.5%) were the most valued indicators of success. No statistically significant differences were found across gender, year of study, or ethnicity, indicating consistent perceptions across different groups. In examining the factors for success, strong family relationships (Mean=6.41, SD=0.918) and good health (Mean=6.08, SD=1.070) received the highest ratings. Good time management, economic stability, health, and study habits showed statistically significant variability between the groups. The least important was good teaching-learning methods. **Conclusion:** These findings highlight the importance of personal well-being and socio-economic stability in shaping both academic outcomes and the broader definitions of success, suggesting that interventions should focus on enhancing time management, health, and financial literacy.

Keywords: Perception of success, medical students, academic achievement, financial stability

INTRODUCTION

Medicine is a coveted field among many students, and the general understanding is that they will succeed if they become doctors. The motivations for choosing a medical career are diverse, and they range from altruism and desire to help others [1], intellectual curiosity, financial

stability [2], and perceived success. Success has an expansive definition; it is a concept that is ever changing, it is deeply personal, and its meaning is as perceived by the individual. Traditionally, success amongst medical students is commonly associated with academic performance and clinical skills [3-5].



In today's digital age, the rise of social media platforms has introduced a new concept called fame, which was traditionally considered recognition. There are very few articles on this. Fame, now an influential factor, redefines "success" for medical students and doctors. Through social media such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, medical students can share their journeys, educate the public, and gain widespread recognition, influencing their perception of success [6]. This ability to connect with and inform the public is considered a valuable skill and a marker for success [3].

Financial well-being has been associated with having a higher quality of life and has often been associated with success amongst doctors and professionals. Amongst students, they often perceive it as a key component in their definition and association with success [7-8]. Post-graduation earning potential is one of the important factors. Specialties that can provide higher salaries, such as obstetrics and gynecology, orthopedics, and dermatology, are often more successful, influencing many students' career choices [9]. This professional trend highlights how the power of income can outshine personal interests or societal needs, leading students to prioritize financial stability.

Success is a multifaceted concept, understood as multidimensional, and extends beyond the traditional constructs of grades and income [10]. It encompasses various dimensions of life, including health, finances, career, relationships, skills, intellectual growth, and emotional well-being. Some medical students perceive work-life balance as a crucial factor in defining success, as it helps them manage stress and prevent burnout [11]. Work-life balance during medical school also sets the base for long-term career satisfaction. Doctors who can develop this balance early in their careers are more likely to maintain it throughout their professional lives, leading to better and greater job satisfaction and significantly lower rates of burnout [12]. This balance contributes to a fulfilling and happy career by allowing medical professionals to enjoy their own lives while excelling in their professional occupation. Some consider strong, trust-filled relationships as success. Emotional success is about managing feelings and finding

inner peace. Each person defines success individually, aligned with their personal values and life goals [13]. Family support also plays a significant role in presenting how medical students define and experience "success" [14]. Family provides emotional support, which is very important for the rigorous demands and challenges of medical school. In addition, when asked about their idea of success, many rich and famous people provided diverse answers. These ranged from happiness, satisfaction, relationships, leaving behind a legacy, and making an impact in life [15].

In this context, understanding how medical students define and perceive success is increasingly important in the evolving social and digital landscape. Traditionally, it has been academic excellence and clinical skills, and these determine whether a student is successful in their undergraduate life. However, recent studies have shown that there is a broader spectrum of factors ranging from motivation, learning strategies, to perseverance and self-awareness [16]. Their perception of success also affects their choice of specialties later in life. This is significant as this decision will not only define their career but will also impact the distribution of health workers between these specialties [17]. Sometimes students develop an unrealistic definition of success, neglecting their psychological and emotional health, leading to burnout. Therefore, institutions also need to understand their students to be able to design appropriate support systems [18].

Given the limited research available on medical students' perception of success, this study aims to explore what success means to students at a private medical university in Northern Malaysia. Additionally, we seek to identify the factors they currently consider important and those they believe will contribute to their future success.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a cross-sectional study among the medical students at this private university. Before the survey commenced, consent was obtained from the students, and the consent was incorporated into the questionnaire. Students

could not proceed with answering unless they had consented to take part in the survey.

Questionnaire

Data was collected using a pre-validated questionnaire, which was personally distributed by the research team during small group teaching sessions. These sessions took place when students were present on campus following their clinical postings, and completed forms were collected at the end of the classroom session. The questionnaire was administered to medical students in the clinical years specifically, Years 3, 4, and 5 within the Faculty of Medicine. To ensure the exclusion of responses from students in other faculties, data on faculty affiliation was also gathered.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections in addition to demographic information: (1) students' perceptions of success in life, and (2) the perceived importance of various factors contributing to future success. The domains used to assess perceptions of success were derived from feedback provided by a group of Year 3 students and included academic achievement, financial stability, personal growth and happiness, recognition and fame, and work-life balance.

Six key factors were identified as potentially contributing to future success: effective time management, stable economic conditions, good health, strong study habits, supportive relationships (including family), and effective teaching and learning methods. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each factor on a scale from 1 (least important) to 10 (most important).

Sample size

The total number of students from the faculty of Medicine is approximately 450 for the five years of study. Based on this population, with a 95% confidence interval, a margin of error of 4%, and a response distribution of 50%, the expected sample size was 258. Participants were randomly selected based on the responses.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Only students from the faculty of Medicine, from the clinical years of study, i.e., years 3, 4, and 5, and from the university concerned who consented to take part in the survey were included in the analysis.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the university from the Faculty of Medicine Research and Human and Animal Ethics Committee with reference number (FOMSSM/B27/2024/27). This committee also investigates the face validity of the questionnaire. Data was collected from December 2024 to January 2025. There was no identifying data collected, and all information collected was kept confidential by the researchers.

Data analysis

Data was presented in frequencies and percentages for the perception of success. We calculated the mean and standard deviation for the factors. Data was presented as descriptive statistics in the form of tables. Chi-square was used to determine the association between the demographic variables and the perception of success. The mean score and standard deviation for the factors were calculated. Significance level was kept at $p < 0.05$.

All data collected was transcribed into Excel and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v.23. The reliability test was conducted on 28 samples. We checked for internal consistency for questions on success and the factors. Using Cronbach's alpha, we had a value of 0.800 for the 7 variables.

RESULTS

A total of 260 respondents participated in the study, representing students across three academic years. The majority were from Year 5 ($n = 121$, 45.8%), of Indian ethnicity ($n = 175$, 66.3%), and female ($n = 149$, 56.4%). The ethnic composition of the sample closely mirrored that of the clinical-year student population.

Financial stability emerged as the most significant indicator of success across all demographics and is cited by 33.0% of males and 27.5% of females. This was followed by personal growth, which was valued by 21.7% of males and 26.8% of females, respectively. Recognition (4.5%) was the least valued criterion for success. Respondents' perceptions of success were consistent across different years of study and ethnic groups. Amongst the 25.4% of respondents in year 3, most

valued financial stability (38.8%). The total of 28.8% of respondents in Year 4 valued work-life balance (27.6%). However, from 45.8% of respondents in Year 5 financial stability was again valued the most. As presented in Table 1, no statistically significant differences were observed in perceptions of success based on gender ($p = 0.647$), year of study ($p = 0.263$), or ethnicity ($p = 0.647$).

Table 1: Demography and Perception of Success

Variable		Total count (%)	Academic achievement	Financial stability	Personal growth	Recognition (fame)	Work-life balance	X ²	p
Total (%)			46(17.4)	79(29.9)	65(24.6)	12(4.5)	62(23.5)		
Gender	Male	119(43.6)	22(19.1)	38(33.0)	25(21.7)	6(5.2)	24(20.9)	2.486	0.647
	Female	149(56.4)	24(16.1)	41(27.5)	40(26.8)	6(4.0)	38(25.5)		
Year of Study	Year 3	67(25.4)	12(17.9)	26(38.8)	17(25.4)	0(0)	12(17.9)	10.03	0.263
	Year 4	76(28.8)	12(15.8)	19(25.0)	21(27.6)	3(3.9)	21(27.6)		
	Year 5	121(45.8)	22(18.2)	34(28.1)	27(22.3)	9(7.4)	29(24.0)		
Ethnicity	Chinese	85(32.2)	18(21.2)	28(32.9)	18(21.2)	3(3.5)	18(21.2)	2.486	0.647
	Indian	175(66.3)	27(15.4)	49(28.0)	47(26.9)	9(5.1)	43(24.6)		
	Malay	4(1.5)	1(25.0)	2(50.0)	0(0)	0(0)	1(25.0)		

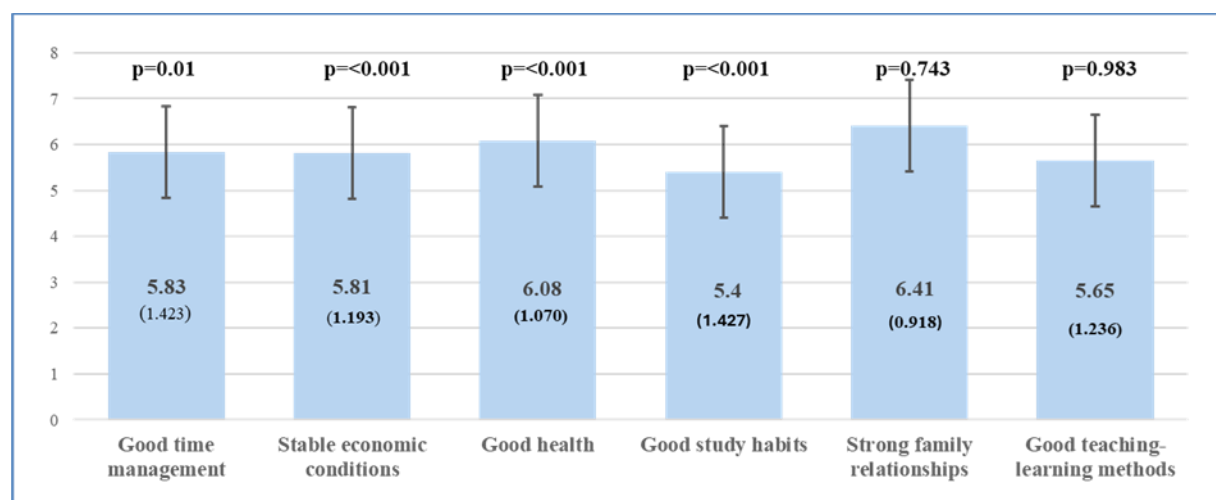


Figure 1: Mean score (Standard deviation) of factors considered important by respondents as contributing to success

Among the factors (Fig. 1), strong family relationships had the highest mean score (Mean = 6.41), but the p-value (0.743) indicates no significant difference between groups. Stable economic conditions, good health, and good study habits showed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.001$) between the groups despite having lower mean scores. Good time management also showed a significant difference ($p = 0.001$). Good teaching learning methods had a low mean score, and there was no significant difference ($p = 0.983$) between the groups.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the medical students' perceptions of success and the factors that they believed contributed to achieving it. Overall financial stability was the most valued indicator of success, followed by personal growth and work-life balance. Academic achievement, which is most emphasized in educational institutions, ranked fourth here. The traditional and prevailing view of success in medical education focuses on academic performance and clinical competence, and this has consistently been given importance as a core competence. [19]. This suggests a paradigm shift in how students view success, moving beyond the traditional academic aspirations to a more holistic life. The findings here are consistent with those from previous research that students today define success with a broader definition where emotional well-being, career satisfaction, and economic independence are also valued [20,21]. In addition, in a study published in 2024, it was found that despite academic success being important, other factors influence it, such as self-fulfilment and personal habits, suggesting that intrinsic motivation and personal growth may be more important to the medical students' perception of success rather than grades alone [22]

There were no differences in gender, and our results showed similar distributions in perceived success indicators amongst males and females, thereby supporting the idea that gender may not be a strong determinant in how success is perceived by students. Here, the perceptions were relatively stable across the years of study, and Overall differences were not statistically significant, indicating that the core values that

were established early in their academic life remain consistent despite the challenges and their changing responsibilities in the clinical years of study. However, we need to be aware that students' motivations and perceptions can be influenced by various factors, including academic experiences and institutional culture [23]. There was no statistically significant difference observed in ethnicity, and this may reflect the shared academic environment and the similar socio-economic status of the respondents. Despite this, we must be aware that cultural differences may influence and affect students' values and their perception of success.

Among the factors believed to influence academic and personal success, strong family relationships scored highest, indicating that students perceive family support as the most important component of their overall success. Although the variability is low, this high mean score for strong family relationships suggests a consistent and widely shared belief across the groups. Good health is also perceived highly and shows statistically significant differences across the groups, implying that while health is considered essential, its perceived importance may vary across the groups. Good study habits and good time management, although perceived as moderately important, showed statistically significant differences and reflect that students differ in self-efficacy, discipline, and exposure to academic challenges.

Stable economic conditions showed significant variation across subgroups. Financial stability emerged as the most important factor for achieving success, with males having a slightly higher predilection than females. The importance of financial security is consistent with findings from an earlier section of the study, where it was seen that students valued financial stability as a prime indicator of success. The priority given to financial stability may also stem from the post-pandemic era, where many perceived job-market instability. Many students also have student debts to repay. The good-teaching learning methods scored lower in comparison, and there were no significant group differences. This may imply that students find this less impactful than internal factors like health and family support. Since the

post-pandemic, there has been a shift in the way students perceive effective teaching [24].

The low prioritization for recognition shows the trend away from external validation to a more internalized measure of success. This is in line with the Study-Deman-Resource Theory (SD-R), which states that students are more motivated by resources that fulfil psychological needs rather than accolades [25]

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study highlights a shift in how medical students define success. While traditional academic achievement remains relevant, students now place greater value on financial stability, personal growth, work-life balance, and strong family support. These values are consistent across gender, ethnicity, and academic years, suggesting that these values are deeply rooted and shared across the student community.

We recommend that educational institutions enhance student engagement and aim for an inclusive approach where they help support the students' academic well-being and personal aspirations. Interventions should focus on these key areas.

Author declaration

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Authors' contributions:

Conceptualization: YCH, SBR, PJE, PJH, CKZ, WGJ; Designing: YCH, SBR, PJE, PJH, CKZ; Internal content preparation: SBR, PJH, WGJ; Literature review: YCH, CKZ; Data collection: YCH, PJE, PJH, CKZ, WGJ; Data analysis: YCH, SBR, WGJ; Statistical analysis: YCH, SBR, PJE, PJH, CKZ, WGJ; Manuscript preparation: YCH, SBR, PJE, PJH, CKZ, WGJ; Manuscript reviewing: YCH, SBR

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The authors declare that there is no financial or non-financial conflict of interest.

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Data will be available on request from the corresponding author.

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