

“Why Do Medical Students Fail in Studies?” A Case Study

Chan Choong, Foong¹, Nurul Atira Khairul Anhar Holder¹, Nik Nadia Nik Nazri¹, Wei-Han, Hong¹, Vinod Pallath¹, Joong Hiong, Sim¹, Jamuna Vadivelu¹

¹Medical Education and Research Development Unit (MERDU), Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya; foongchangoong@um.edu.my

Introduction: Revealing reasons as to why medical students struggle in their studies would help to develop corresponding student support for students. As early remedial actions could prevent further attrition and dropouts, the purpose of this study is to investigate possible reasons for medical students failing their Year 1 studies.

Methods: Six Year 1 students who were required to repeat the year due to academic failure, consented to participate in this study. The students were interviewed and wrote reflective essays on their previous Year 1 learning experience. Methods (interviews and reflective essays) and analysts (two coders) were triangulated to uncover their reasons for struggling in studies. This study adopted an embedded case design and each student is a unit of analysis (Yin, 2003). Through qualitative analysis, codes were developed to illustrate each student's learning experience.

Results: The first student, James, was unsure whether it was his or his father's wish for pursuing medicine. James was overconfident before the midterm examination, but after failing, he lost his confidence and the motivation to study. Lack of discipline and ineffective methods of studying also contributed to his eventual failure. The second student; Kelly's main drives for pursuing medicine were her desire to help people and to prove herself to all her doubters. As the new student, she was needed to participate in the informal orientation programme. However, problems arose as she suffered from culture shock and peer influence. Laziness in studying, ineffective studying methods and overactive participation in extracurricular activities could be the intertwining causes. The third student, Mary wanted to help her father who has Parkinson disease and aimed to find a cure for Parkinson and Alzheimer. She seemed to lose direction and experienced burnout due to her personal problems and unhelpful peers' advice. She might have also adopted ineffective studying methods. The fourth student, Nanny, took up medicine merely to try out the course, coupled with the fact that she was not aware of other courses available. Possible causes of her failure include laziness in studying, poor time management, peer influence, lack of discipline, ineffective methods of studying and overactive participation in extracurricular activities. Like Nanny, the fifth student, Stephen, was not exposed to other available courses.

However, his main reason for pursuing medicine was because of his father's wish. Stephen suffered from a great amount of stress which led him to experience regular panic attacks before examinations. Hence, he did not attend the final examinations and eventually failed. The sixth student, Xavier, was heavily influenced by peers to take up the medical course. He seemed to be overconfident before attending the midterm examinations and hence, became lazy. Xavier reflected that he may have adopted ineffective studying methods.

Conclusion: Repeat students shared one common trait. The students were unaware of their limitations, or there were no strategies or actions to address their limitations. Future designs of student support must first and foremost help these struggling students to recognise their limitations to promote active engagement in self- or faculty-driven remedial actions.

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