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Perceptions and experiences of career success among aspiring and early career accountants and the role of organisational support

Denise Jackson¹  | Julia Richardson²  | Grant Michelson³  |
Rahat Munir⁴ 

¹School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Western Australia, Australia

²School of Management and Marketing, Curtin University, Bentley, Western Australia, Australia

³Department of Management, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

⁴Department of Accounting and Corporate Governance, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Correspondence

Denise Jackson, School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, WA, Australia.
Email: d.jackson@ecu.edu.au

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Abstract

Positive perceptions of career success are critical among accounting professionals, given their connection with performance, turnover and organisational commitment. Drawing on career stage theory, this study explores the perceptions and experiences of career success among 475 aspiring (Accounting/Finance students), 305 early career accountants (ECAs) and 165 managers/recruiters in Australia. Findings reflected both objective and subjective dimensions of career success alongside notable differences between aspiring accountants and ECAs, highlighting shifting views across the career stages of exploration and establishment. While ECAs were largely positive about their access to career success, managers/recruiters identified ways to create further opportunities for ECAs' career success.

KEYWORDS

career context, career stage, career success, objective career success, subjective career success

JEL CLASSIFICATION

J24, J28

1 | INTRODUCTION

Accounting and finance careers have been evolving in recent decades, with no signs of easing in the coming years. Accounting graduates traditionally involved in bookkeeping roles are shifting to a more business advisory type function (Frey & Osborne, 2017) and mid-career account-

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ants are increasingly responsible for many human resource processes. Changes in the accounting profession have resulted in declining numbers of employees maintaining careers with one organisation; accountants are now expected to have more than one career taking on different roles over the span of their working life (Mitchell et al., 2022). These developments have seen a shift in terms of the knowledge, skills and capabilities required to successfully achieve desired career outcomes at various stages of an accounting career, as observed in Tan and Laswad's (2018) review of accounting job adverts in Australia and New Zealand, and global talent shortages in the industry (CPA Australia, 2019).

An important part of improving talent attraction and retention is understanding how individuals at early career stages perceive and then experience career success, given its well-documented connection with other work-related outcomes, such as individual performance, job satisfaction, turnover intentions and organisational commitment (Choi & Nae, 2022; Kundi et al., 2022). A recent review of careers scholarship (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017) identified career success as 'a major issue in contemporary research' (p. 589). Recognising its impact on work performance (e.g., Beigi et al., 2018; Heslin, 2005), it is garnering attention from accounting, management and human resource management scholars and practitioners, and there is growing motivation to integrate such careers research with other professions (Hall & Las Heras, 2010).

Career success comprises two distinct, albeit related, dimensions: objective and subjective career success (Giraud et al., 2019; Spurk et al., 2019) and there is growing recognition that these are best understood as residing in the eye of the beholder (Benson et al., 2020; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2019). Exploring differences in perceptions of career success (both objective and subjective) by age and career stage (Giraud et al., 2019; Santos, 2016; Spurk et al., 2021) is considered important. Indeed, noting its inherent dynamism and complexity, recent research suggests that access to, and experiences of, career success change over the lifespan where more experienced workers enjoy both greater objective and subjective career success compared to their less experienced counterparts who may struggle to navigate the increasing instability and uncertainty of the contemporary labour market (Hakhmigari et al., 2019). Building on this research, this paper explores perceptions of career success among accountants at different stages of their career in Australia. Drawing on Super's (1990) conception of 'exploration' and 'establishment' as two of the five stages of career development, (i.e., growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement), we examine perceptions and experiences of success among aspiring accountants (i.e., those studying Accounting and Finance in higher education institutions) whom we define as being at the 'exploration' stage and early career accountants (i.e., those relatively new to accounting roles) whom we define as being at the 'establishment' phase.

Our paper also recognises the importance of understanding how perceptions of career success differ across work contexts (Briscoe et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2021), enabling the profession to tailor relevant measures to better support new accountants. We acknowledge that 'careers are always careers in context' (Mayrhofer et al., 2007, p. 215), and the impact of professional contexts and profession-specific 'scripts' and their influence on respective career trajectories and norms for behaviour (Lui et al., 2003; Zikic & Richardson, 2016). Akkermans and Kubasch (2017) note that while career success is the dominant area of research in career literature, they emphasise the value of further empirical investigation of both objective and subjective career success dimensions and determinants for specific groups in the labour market (i.e., students and early career workers) to further our understanding and advance literature on career success. Relatedly, according to Dries (2011), career success cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the relevant contextual specificities including the norms of the respective profession and individual factors such as career stage. Indeed, by way of an example, Vidwans and Du Plessis' (2020) study of accounting professionals in New Zealand highlighted the role of organisational and gendered constraints on career success.

This leads us to the following research questions: First, how do aspiring and early career accountants (ECAs) perceive career success? Second, to what extent do ECAs experience career success and does this vary by individual and work characteristics? Third, how supported are ECAs in achieving career success and how can this be improved? To address these research questions, we examined open and closed response survey data on perceptions of career success among 475 Accounting/Finance students and 305 ECAs, representing 'exploration' and 'establishment' career stages in the profession, respectively. We also investigated ECAs' experiences of career success, and the viewpoints of 165 managers/recruiters about the level of support for ECAs' and how their career success could be improved. This paper first reviews literature on career success and the role of career stage and organisational context, followed by methodology and results. We discuss the implications of these, before considering the study's contribution, limitations and directions for future research.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Objective and subjective career success

Heslin's (2005) pioneering work on how best to conceptualise and evaluate career success highlighted how extant research invariably differentiates between objective and subjective forms of success, the former referring to observable indicators, such as remuneration and organisational position or status (Blickle et al., 2018), and the latter to intangible phenomena such as personal satisfaction from doing one's job, 'making a difference' to the lives of others and perceptions of professional development (Ng & Feldman, 2014). There has been considerable attention in the literature to the importance of career success and how it is positively associated with individual career behaviours such as 'career crafting' (Vidwans & Du Plessis, 2020), career self-management (Ng et al., 2005) and further career success. On this last point, the more career success one has, the more career success one is likely to have, creating a 'virtuous circle' of positive outcomes for individuals and employers (Janssen et al., 2021; Stumpf, 2014).

Subjective career success is widely understood as a multi-faceted and nuanced construct (Heslin, 2005), its most critical component being personal satisfaction with one's career (Janssen et al., 2021). Adding complexity to our understanding of career success, Heslin and Turban (2016) have highlighted its inherently dynamic nature, be it objective or subjective, stating that it signals something about 'the quality of the journey rather than the destination' (p. 155). This suggests the need to consider how career success may change over time and space, i.e., across an individual's career trajectory and between different career contexts.

2.2 | Career success and career stage

In contrast to Levinson et al. (1978), who proposed a model of life stage development whereby one's career is closely associated with age, Super (1957, 1990) put forward a career development model based on five career stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement. The growth stage occurs during early childhood with concerns about the future and occupational choice. Exploration is a period of discovery with respect to both the self (e.g., exploring one's career interests and aspirations) and the environment (e.g., exploring occupational requirements for entry and potential career paths). Thus students, as aspiring accountants, would be concerned with exploring requirements to enter the accounting profession and equipping themselves with relevant skills through formal study. It may also involve periods of work-integrated learning through internships, i.e. 'learning the ropes'. The establishment stage is characterised by consolidation of career choices and career identity. In this instance it means identifying oneself as an accounting professional, growing levels of organisational commitment, less likelihood of moving between

different organisational contexts and greater clarity around aspirations for career advancement. The fourth stage, maintenance, relates to retaining what has been established, or what Inkson et al. (2015) describe as 'holding steady in position, maintaining performance, conserving what has been accomplished' (p. 91). The final stage, disengagement, represents a decline in occupational interest, deceleration and withdrawal. Super's articulation of career stage therefore reveals that individuals can withdraw from their jobs and organisations at any point, and certainly well before one's planned retirement age.

Expanding on Super's five stages and addressing concerns about the rigidity of defined age-stages, however, Savickas et al. (2009) has proposed the idea of 'mini-cycles within cycles' where individuals may circle between and within stages, for example undertaking periods of exploration during the maintenance stage and vice versa. Following a similar line of thinking and moving away from age-stages, we conceptualised professional tenure as an indicator of career stage rather than age, heeding Hess and Jepsen's (2009) cautionary note that 'career stages should not be measured through linear measures of age and tenure, but through assessment of career concerns, related to career stages' (p. 265). We also follow Lynn et al. (1996) who used years in the accounting profession as a reflection of career stage, where someone could be at a later stage in their overall career and life (i.e., older) but relatively new to accounting after transitioning from another field. We are, therefore, interested in individuals' career stage in accounting specifically and its impact on their perceptions of career success.

2.3 | Career success and context

There have been frequent demands for more research on the impact of cultural, organisational and professional contexts on opportunities for, and experiences of, career success (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Dries, 2011; Mayrhofer et al., 2016). Highlighting the impact of organisational structures on career success, for example, Janssen et al. (2021) reported that individuals working in highly formalised career contexts may feel they have limited influence on opportunities for objective career success. Those in more flexible career contexts (e.g., academia) have pointed to the criticality of subjective career success as individuals take greater responsibility for their career and are more likely to incorporate their own values and sense of authenticity into their perceptions of career success (Beigi et al., 2018; Sherif et al., 2020). Understanding organisation factors that support career success may augment employee well-being and commitment, and thus an organisation's ability to attract and retain talent (Barnett & Bradley, 2007).

We focus on career success in accounting, noting growing interest in the facilitators of, and opportunities for, career success in this industry (Drewery et al., 2020). This may in part be due to recent forecasts of the profession's expansion, where demand for accounting services grew by more than 15 percent between 2010 and 2019 (CPA Australia, 2019). While the World Economic Forum (2020) identified accounting/bookkeeping/payroll as the third most likely jobs to be displaced by artificial intelligence, Jackson et al. (2020) argue that automation is creating more challenging, value-added roles in the profession. Such enhanced roles could conceivably present more opportunities for both objective and subjective career success with increasing opportunities for high value 'knowledge work' and professional development (Bessen, 2015). Relatedly, media and industry reports (Gillezeau & Fowler, 2019; Morgan McKinley, 2018) and academic literature (Blackmore et al., 2017) indicate widespread perceptions of greater access to both objective and subjective career success in the Big Four professional firms (Deloitte/EY/KPMG/PwC), compared to their smaller counterparts. Such assertions, however, are countered by studies that report on gender-based challenges – such as working practices that do not support family commitments – which can inhibit females' success in the Big Four context (Lupu, 2012; Vidwans & Du Plessis, 2020). Indeed, Adapa et al. (2015) reported that gender discrimination was less evident in smaller accounting organisations in the Australian context.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Participants

Totals of 475 students, 305 ECAs and 165 managers or recruiters (herein referred to as managers) of ECAs participated in the study, completing a questionnaire tailored to their specific career stage and/or role in the Australian accounting profession. The sample's characteristics are summarised in Table 1. Students were studying Accounting and/or Finance in an east coast university ($n = 282$) or in one of two west coast ($n = 193$) universities in metropolitan Australia. To be classified as an ECA, participants must have been working in an accounting role for 1–5 years and have a degree. Recognising that accounting organisations recruit from different fields of study (Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand, 2017), degree type was not specified. Approximately two-thirds of ECAs were aged above 30 years, suggesting many may have transitioned into accounting from an earlier career. Around one-half of managers were in human resource-related, rather than accounting, roles. Both ECAs and managers were located across Australia, with representation from all States/Territories.

3.2 | Procedures

Following ethics approval, the 305 ECAs and 165 managers were recruited via a survey panel provider, with data gathered between March and April 2020. Data from aspiring accountants (or students) were collected using an online survey between March and July 2020. Accounting/Finance students from the three participating universities were recruited via announcements on learning management systems and/or respective accounting/finance student societies' communication platforms. Survey participation was encouraged through a random prize draw for gift vouchers. Student cohorts were not known to the research team.

3.3 | Measures

Students, ECAs and managers first answered a series of closed questions on demographic/background characteristics. To address the first research question, students and ECAs were then asked the following open question: 'how do you define career success?'. For the second research question, ECAs were asked: 'Using this definition, how successful would you say you are in your career right now?'. Responses were rated using a five-point Likert scale (not very successful = 1 to very successful = 5). For research question three, managers rated, on a five-point Likert scale (not at all = 1 to extremely well = 5), 'how well does your organisation support its early career accountants to achieve career success?'. Finally, and also for the third research question, managers were invited to respond to the open question: 'What actions could your organisation take to improve ECAs' career success?'.

3.4 | Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 24.0. Means, standard deviations and frequency counts were computed for both ECA and manager rating data on career success. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA; $\alpha = 0.05$) was used to investigate variations in ECA perceptions of levels of career success by gender, age, organisational context and area of accounting. ANOVA was also conducted for managers' ratings for support for career success, by gender, role type

TABLE 1 Summary of participant characteristics ($n = 945$).

Variable	Sub-groups	Students ($n = 475$)		ECAs ($n = 305$)		Managers ($n = 165$)	
		<i>N</i>	Valid %	<i>N</i>	Valid %	<i>N</i>	Valid %
Gender	Male	195	41.1	187	61.3	95	57.6
	Female	277	58.3	116	38.1	69	41.8
	Transgender	3	0.6	1	0.3	0	0.0
	Non-binary	0	0.0	1	0.3	1	0.6
Age	Less than 20 years	60	12.7	2	0.7		
	20–29 years	344	72.5	104	34.1		
	30–39 years	53	11.2	140	45.9		
	40+ years	17	3.6	59	19.3		
Citizenship	Domestic	206	43.4				
	International	269	56.6				
Level of study	Undergraduate	285	60.0				
	Postgraduate	190	40.0				
Year of study	First	165	34.7				
	Second	178	37.5				
	Third/more	132	27.8				
Work experience	Yes	250	52.6				
	No	225	47.4				
Accounting area	Management accounting			52	17.0		
	Financial accounting			168	55.1		
	Risk/audit/assurance			32	10.5		
	Corporate/commercial finance			25	8.2		
	Tax			15	4.9		
	Other			13	4.3		
Work setting	Small private business (0–49 employees)			45	14.8	13	7.9
	Medium private business (50–149 employees)			81	26.6	40	24.2
	Large private business (150+ employees, not Big Four)			82	27.0	36	21.8
	Public sector organisation			24	7.9	6	3.6
	Not-for-profit organisation			6	2.0	5	3.0
	Big four (Deloitte/EY/KPMG/PwC)			66	21.7	65	39.5
Position within organisation	Proprietor/director					25	15.1
	Executive manager					28	17.0
	Line manager					31	18.8
	Human resource manager/coordinator					81	49.1

and organisational context. Data normality was assured by skew and kurtosis falling within the acceptable ranges of ± 3 and 10, respectively (Kline, 1998).

Open survey responses were analysed using Microsoft Excel. Widely used in qualitative analysis, particularly in organisational research (King & Brooks, 2018), thematic analysis enabled exploration and comparison of student and ECA open responses about perceptions of career

success. Using an inductive approach, individual responses for both cohorts were examined to generate a coding scheme, resulting in a framework of major and sub-themes for each cohort. The themes were reviewed and cross-checked among the research team, along with any ambiguous responses which were recorded in an audit trail; consistent with best practice (Carcary, 2009). Inter-coder reliability was assured by comparing the identified major themes and corresponding sub-themes until consensus was reached. Overall, these actions strengthened the rigour of our analysis (Harley & Cornelissen, 2022). Manager responses about organisational support for career success among ECAs were also explored again using thematic analysis, inductive coding at individual level producing a series of major themes and sub-themes. Indicative quotes are included in the findings to represent identified themes, denoted by S (student), E (ECA) or M (manager) and respondent number.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Student perceptions of career success

Analysis of students' perceptions of career success suggested 10 themes, shown in Table 2 with a count of comments for each theme and sub-theme. Themes are presented with the greatest frequency count first. Respondent comments could feature in more than one theme. The most common theme reflected contemporary understandings of subjective career success: experiencing enjoyment from one's role. This, in turn, comprised two sub-themes: pursuing a career they were passionate about, and feeling positive about the people they interacted with and their organisational context. Indeed, 98 students specifically referred to pursuing a career they had a passion for as a marker of career success, 'Having a career that I am passionate about and that fits into my personal skills/capabilities' (S140).

The second most common theme among students reflected perceptions of objective career success: high levels of financial benefits which were also regularly seen as enabling financial independence, 'Being somewhere where you are happy, earning enough to not worry about money

TABLE 2 Student perceptions of career success ($n = 475$).

Theme	Sub-theme(s)	Count	Total
Enjoyment	Passion for work	98	116
	Social networks and positive environment	18	
Financial benefits	Good remuneration and financial independence	86	108
	Stability	22	
Professional fulfilment			78
Lifelong learning			60
Achieving career goals			59
Making a difference	Community-based	43	55
	Within organisation	12	
Balance and well-being	Work-life balance	49	51
	Well-being	2	
Recognition and status	Recognition and social status	40	50
	Working for high profile organisation	8	
	Leading others	2	
Advancement			42
Challenging work			31

and being able to get what you want' (S322). With widely reported concerns about volatile labour markets, it was somewhat surprising that stability featured in only 22 responses, 'Having the experience, skills or other relevant qualities that makes an individual an asset that a firm would like to keep or is attractive to other firms, in other words job security' (S170). Even so, financial independence and the importance of remuneration still featured significantly, suggesting a strong inclination towards objective career success.

Experiencing a sense of professional fulfilment also featured highly in student responses as the third theme, 'When you feel inner satisfaction with the things you are doing' (S95). Connections between different forms of career success were also evident where students associated the fourth theme of lifelong learning with subjective career success, i.e., developing their skills and knowledge, with markers of objective career success. For example, 'A career which encourages you to do the best you can and advance in it, as well as being provided with regular learning programs and being able to positively influence others' (S297). The fifth theme, achieving career goals, had many students emphasising achieving personal and professional goals, and continuously reviewing and refining targets in line with their learning, experience and achievements: 'Career success is when you can finally say "I have made it" and be happy while saying it' (S364). Acknowledging the inherently relational aspects of careers, some students also commented that their own career success would positively influence others in their personal and professional networks, such as family, friends and organisational and industry peers.

'Making a difference' to their personal and professional networks and communities and achieving work-life balance were also considered markers of subjective career success. While making a difference to their organisations was important for students, 'Being able to bring value (via skills and personal experiences) to my team and the business' (S39), it featured less than making a difference to personal networks and society more generally, 'A successful career is one that can support my family to live a quality life and can provide positive impact on society and the environment' (S142). Achieving work-life balance was reflected in 49 statements: 'Career success for me is when I enjoy doing my job and at the same time I can drive home from work and spend ample time with my family' (S14). Yet only two respondents aligned this form of career success with well-being, meaning either not being exposed to stress at work or being able to manage it to not have a deleterious impact on their work performance or life outside of work.

Achieving recognition and status featured as a theme among 50 students, albeit in different ways. For most it was about achieving credibility at work and being regarded as a 'good worker' or colleague and an asset to an organisation, while for others – to a lesser extent – it was more about working in high-profile firms, notably one of the Big Four. Career stage theory would locate students at the exploration stage; thus, it is unsurprising that only two respondents associated career success with leading, mentoring or empowering others. Rather, respondents tended to focus on their own career trajectories, particularly upward career mobility, i.e., advancing through internal promotion and working up the organisational hierarchy.

Advancement, understood as an objective form of career success, featured in 42 comments. The final theme of challenging work, a subjective measure, related to satisfaction gained from their role and links to markers of objective forms of career success: 'The ability to continuously learn in your chosen field, increasing your knowledge, experience, status and responsibilities within your position. Ability to know more than you did last week and apply that knowledge in tackling future tasks' (S248).

There was widespread recognition among students that achieving career success is a dynamic process: 'I define career success as a journey rather than a destination. I believe that we are continuously engaged in creating targets for ourselves once one is achieved' (S292). There was also widespread recognition that it would invariably be challenging, particularly given the unpredictability of contemporary job markets: 'It's hard work, along with a pinch of luck' (S257). Students also recognised that career success (objective or subjective) relates to self-perception: 'Career success is subjective...' (S26), and 'Career success may differ from one to another' (S466).

TABLE 3 Early career accountants' perceptions of career success ($n = 305$).

Theme	Sub-theme(s)	Count	Total
Financial benefits	Good remuneration	67	81
	Stability	14	
Enjoyment	Passion for work	53	63
	Social networks and positive environment	10	
Advancement			59
Achieving career goals			40
Lifelong learning			34
Challenging work			32
Making a difference	Community-based	15	34
	Within organisation	19	
Balance and well-being	Work-life balance	18	25
	Well-being	7	
Recognition and status		24	24
Professional fulfilment			12

4.2 | ECA perceptions of career success

ECAs' perceptions of career success also reflected 10 overall themes and were similar to students, although the frequency counts varied and there were some different priorities among the themes (Table 3). Overall, ECAs placed greatest emphasis on financial benefits (objective career success). Like students, remuneration featured more than stability, yet there was a shift from being financially independent to being able to support others: 'Financially earning enough to support the family' (E153). Enjoying their work was also widely associated with career success, albeit secondary to financial benefits, among ECAs with similar sub-themes as for the student cohort. Having a passion for their work, often described as 'loving one's job', and being able to pursue a career in a field they studied, were important to 53 ECAs.

Professional advancement and moving up the organisational hierarchy, i.e., objective career success, was relatively more important to ECAs than to students, the former highlighting both internal promotion and being able to access external job opportunities through reputation and growing their respective skill base. Achieving their respective career goals 'those set out personally within the company and reaching them within the set timeframe' (E214), and lifelong learning, 'Constantly learning new skills, even once you're at a point where you can be the teacher' (E9) (subjective career success) were also seen as markers of career success among ECAs. Lifelong learning arguably demonstrated an understanding that knowledge and skills are critical for objective career success, i.e., higher remuneration and career progression.

Challenging work was important, and more so among ECAs than students, with one ECA stating, 'For me it is about having consistent progression into new and more challenging roles rather than staying stuck in the same role' (E35). Making a difference also featured as a defining theme among ECAs yet with emphasis on internal influence – creating value for their respective organisation – rather than for their personal networks or the wider community, as was the case for students. For example, 'How you have impacted your clients' lives positively' (E209), and 'Being able to groom others' careers' (E156). The theme of balance and well-being was evident, and well-being featured more in this cohort's responses than for students. Recognition and status formed one of the less mentioned themes and was different to students with working for high-profile organisations and leading others' sub-themes absent for this group. Instead,

ECAs appeared to place more emphasis on their own successes and internal progression than employment with a reputable organisation. Professional fulfilment ranked as the final theme in terms of frequency of response, 'A job that is purposeful and gives me a sense of gratification that is meaningful' (E275), as did positive work environment and relationships, 'Being happy with good people around and strong culture' (E80).

4.3 | ECA experiences of career success

Using their own definition of career success, 17 percent of ECAs rated themselves as 'very successful', 58.7 percent as 'reasonably successful', 19.7 percent were neutral and 4.3 percent 'not very successful', with only one considering themselves as 'not at all successful'. The mean rating was 3.88 (SD = 0.745). ANOVA ($\alpha = 0.05$) indicated no significant variations in ECA responses by organisational setting or area of accounting. However, a significant variation was reported for gender, $F(1, 301) = 6.390, p = 0.012$. Mean scores were higher for ECAs who identified as males (3.96, SD = 0.729) than females (3.74, SD = 0.759). There was also a reported variation for age group, $F(3, 301) = 5.299, p = 0.001$. Tukey post-hoc analysis showed that ECAs aged above 40 years achieved significantly higher mean scores for career success than those between 20 and 29 years.

4.4 | Organisational support for career success

When asked how well organisations supported ECAs in achieving career success, 21.8 percent of managers rated this 'extremely well', 52.7 percent as 'reasonably well', 21.2 percent as average and only 4.2 percent as 'not very well'. None of the managers selected 'not at all'. The mean rating was 3.92 (SD = 0.773). ANOVA results indicated no significant variations by organisation position or work setting.

Thematic analysis revealed seven themes on managers' responses to how well their respective organisations supported opportunities for career success (Table 4). The most common theme was training and development, encompassing informal and formal education and training: 'Provide a more hands-on approach to training, ensuring help is available with both bottom-up and top-down communication' (M21). Informal and experiential opportunities for learning included mentoring, coaching and on-the-job training to build confidence and upskill ECAs. Supporting ECAs through professional accreditation exams was most frequently mentioned as an example of formal support for career success, along with providing opportunities to practise skills and gain experience in different business areas. Having a formal probationary learning period was

TABLE 4 Actions to improve early career accountant career success ($n = 165$).

Theme	Sub-theme(s)	Count
Training and development	Formal education and training Informal development	46
Opportunities to gain experience		29
Personal agency		23
Performance and feedback		12
Career guidance and pathways		11
Collaborative work environment		9
Incentivise		9

also considered important, 'instead of placing them into an accounting position straight away without any in depth knowledge of how we operate our systems and manage financial dealing with our clients/customers' (M38). It is notable that training and development connects directly to students' and ECAs' perceptions of career success by supporting and encouraging professional advancement, lifelong learning and, relatedly, professional recognition. Some managers spoke of the need to engage those in early career stages in more challenging and complex work to develop knowledge and practical abilities, 'Currently, ECAs in our workplace are typically only given simple jobs as they do not have the sufficient knowledge or experience with anything more' (M2). Other approaches to supporting ECA career success were senior staff providing career guidance and opportunities to diversify their professional experience and encouraging personal agency in career planning. Managers also spoke about the value of a collaborative work environment where ECAs and more experienced staff can 'Get together and share knowledge' (M59), creating a positive culture which fosters collegiality and knowledge sharing. Having effective performance management and constructive feedback systems to encourage goal setting and review emerged as a theme, some managers positing these processes as a valuable opportunity for clarifying and communicating possible career pathways to ECAs. Finally, motivating ECAs to achieve success through financial reward was important to some managers, 'Provide further training and incentives to advance careers quicker internally' (M142).

5 | DISCUSSION

Using career stage as years in the profession (rather than an individual's age) and building on extant literature exploring career success in specific professional contexts (Beigi et al., 2018; Crossland et al., 2014; Sherif et al., 2020), this study has examined perceptions of career success among Accounting/Finance students understood as being at the exploration stage and ECAs understood as being at the establishment stage of their careers. It has also examined ECAs' experiences of career success and managers' perceptions of organisational support for career success. In doing so, it answers Akkermans and Kubasch's (2017) call to examine career success in specific contexts, thereby advancing 'the literature on career success both in a general and more specific way' (p. 590). It also aligns with the purported 'comeback' of context in careers studies and increasing calls for a greater understanding of the impact of professional context on opportunities for, and experiences of, career success (Dries, 2011; Santos, 2016).

Whereas extant literature on careers in the accounting profession has identified differences in work attitude across career stages (Lynn et al., 1996) – particularly among males – we have reported how Accounting/Finance students (as aspiring accountants) and ECAs have relatively similar perceptions of career success, regardless of their being at the exploration or establishment stage. Each cohort identified to differing extents: being able to pursue a career in a field they were passionate about, and which furnished a sense of challenge, professional fulfilment, receiving high remuneration and benefits, achieving professional advancement, satisfying career goals, being able to 'make a difference' and experiencing work-life balance. This finding aligns with Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) conception of the 'Kaleidoscope Career Model' where early stages of careers (in this case exploration and establishment) are characterised by aspirations for 'challenge' with a later leaning towards authenticity and balance. This echoes Heslin's (2005) argument that 'people conceptualize and evaluate their career success in realms (e.g., work-life balance, contribution, fulfillment)' (p. 114). An overarching theoretical finding, therefore, is that regardless of their career stage, aspiring and current accountants' perceptions of career success are characterised in equal measure by objective and subjective 'realms'.

The finding that male ECAs were more likely to report achieving career success than their female counterparts reflects Greguletz et al.'s (2019) conception of 'gendered modesty', denoting how women may underestimate their own value and achievement of success compared to

their male counterparts. It may also reflect persistent inequalities in accounting organisations, which can constrain females' career progression (Cullen & Christopher, 2012; Tiron-Tudor & Faragalla, 2022), and the importance of flexible work practices, as evidenced in Whiting's (2008) study of the New Zealand accounting profession. Likewise, the finding that older ECAs (i.e., those above 40 years) reported achieving significantly higher levels of success than their counterparts between 20 and 29 years, reflects existent literature on observed differences between older and younger age cohorts and reported career success (Hakhmigari et al., 2019).

Through the lens of career stage theory, Accounting/Finance students are at the early exploration stage of their respective careers as they develop requisite skill sets through formal education and training and explore potential opportunities in the accounting profession. They appear strongly focused on their personal and professional development, and achieving career goals consistent with this, and their experience and achievements. ECAs are more advanced than students, however, having moved into the establishment stage in the profession, enjoying greater occupational stability and seeking further advancement. Indeed, career advancement was an important signal of career success for them, which included aspirations for promotion in the organisational hierarchy, and more so than students, many of whom may not have formally commenced their career. Their greater emphasis on occupational achievement and recognition, rather than making a difference, is consistent with earlier research (Poon et al., 2015).

A major finding is that both cohorts, regardless of career stage, perceived the ability to pursue a career that they were passionate about and where they could experience a sense of challenge were key markers of career success. Moreover, enjoyment was the most common theme for students and second for ECAs. This resonates with earlier studies on how fulfilling one's passion has a positive impact on perceived opportunities for and experiences of career success (Heslin, 2005; Richardson et al., 2017; Svejenova, 2005). It also echoes themes in the burgeoning literature on 'career calling' and how 'following one's heart' provides a pathway to both objective and subjective career success (Dobrow-Riza et al., 2019). Interestingly, the importance of work and career aligning to personal values was absent despite literature on career identity development which emphasises successfully reconciling professional and general selves (Fellenz, 2016).

Whereas subjective forms of career success were prominent in this study, both groups accorded significant importance to financial remuneration, an explicit form of objective career success, reflecting earlier studies on the accounting profession (Deloitte, 2016). The reported emphasis on attaining roles with enough remuneration for financial independence (another marker of perceived career success) at both cohorts' life stage, also echoes Janssen et al.'s (2021) contention that one form of career success functions as a career resource for others, creating a 'virtuous circle' fostering other forms of career success. Indeed, connections between different forms of perceived career success permeated our findings where students and ECAs regularly associated one marker of career success with others. For example, lifelong learning and professional development and fulfilment (subjective career success) augmented employability, hierarchical advancement and remuneration (objective career success).

We identified further similarities across the cohorts, such as work-life balance evident as a marker of (subjective) career success although perhaps not to the extent suggested in earlier work (Tremblay et al., 2014), particularly among students. We reported how 'making a difference' figured in both cohorts' perceptions of career success, regardless of professional tenure. However, an important nuance was students connecting the difference to their personal networks and society more generally, whereas ECAs emphasised impact in their respective organisations, variously understood as 'creating value' in the respective business context and leading to further professional opportunities as a key dimension of the establishment stage, 'advancement or transfer to new or higher responsibility' (Inkson et al., 2015, p. 91). This may reflect students not having commenced full-time accounting work and, therefore, not yet having had an opportunity to develop a sense of organisational commitment as they 'learn what they might become' (Inkson et al., 2015, p. 91). Slight differences notwithstanding, these findings suggest that perceptions

of career success in the accounting profession remain constant regardless of career stage, and a balanced approach to perceptions of career success, according similar weight to both objective and subjective dimensions across both cohorts.

The similarity in perceptions of career success may reflect what Dany et al. (2011) and Zikic and Richardson (2016) refer to as 'career scripts', understood as the 'rules and norms that individuals have in mind when they think of their careers' (Dany et al., 2011, p. 967). It may be that there are certain career scripts in the accounting profession informing incumbents' perceptions of career success, regardless of career stage. As accounting students have yet to formally enter the profession, their perceptions of career success are perhaps informed by the same 'career scripts', communicated through higher education institutions as centres of learning and preparation for entry into the profession and/or recruitment agencies, student groups, and family and friends. Indeed, although Dany et al. (2011) argue against reducing individuals to being 'institutional automatons' who follow pre-ordained career scripts, the similarities in students' and ECAs' perceptions of career success infers the presence of a powerful set of 'scripts' about what constitutes career success in the profession. Increasing engagement among the profession, the industry's professional associations and higher education institutions may explain these scripts (Adler & Stringer, 2018) and is critical for preparing students for future work and career (Jackson & Meek, 2020).

Alternatively, of course, it may be less to do with the respective career context and more to do with similarities between individuals who are drawn to the accounting profession, thus suggesting the possibility of a shared 'career anchor' (Schein, 1996). To quote Schein, individuals in this industry may share both 'basic values [and] motives and needs as they pertain to their [respective] careers' (p. 80). Acknowledging the role of structure and agency (Cohen et al., 2004) in individual career trajectories, it may be more a combination of the two, i.e., of professional career scripts informing individual perceptions of career success, and of individuals sharing the same perceptions of success being drawn to a profession such as accounting.

At a time when individuals are exhorted to take responsibility for managing their own careers (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Arthur et al., 2017), we also examined ECAs' experiences of career success and managers' perceptions of the extent to which employers are supporting these. Thus, we respond to criticisms of too great a shift towards agency in contemporary career theory (Rodrigues et al., 2015) and answer calls for greater acknowledgement of the impact of context on both perceptions of career success and experiences of the same (Ng & Feldman, 2014). We have shown how over three quarters of ECAs believed that they were either very or reasonably successful. Relatedly, over three quarters of managers reported their organisations support ECAs' careers either extremely or reasonably well. This presents an alternative perspective to concerns about early career accountants having limited opportunities for career success (objective or subjective), at least in the accounting and finance industry. It also indicates that, in addition to individuals taking responsibility for their own career success, organisational support systems have an important role to play (Baruch, 2006). There are clear messages on the value of investing in mechanisms to identify and understand individual career aspirations and to support informal learning and career counselling (e.g., mentoring, coaching and communities of practice), formal training and development and meaningful and constructive performance reviews (Adler & Stringer, 2018; Allen et al., 2004; McManus & Subramaniam, 2014; Ng et al., 2005).

6 | CONCLUSION

Representing different career stages in the accounting profession, this study inquired into how students as aspiring accountants and ECAs perceive career success (research question one). We observed key similarities at these exploration and establishment career stages, with both subjective and objective career success factors (Heslin, 2005; Spurk et al., 2019) influencing perceptions

among students and ECAs and varying in relative importance as an individual moves through different stages of their career (Super, 1990). We found broad consistency among participants, regardless of career stage, in terms of the relative importance of challenge, enjoyment, fulfilment and financial benefits as markers of career success. Nonetheless, important differences across groups were also highlighted, such as in advancement, work-life balance and undertaking challenging work. We also explored the extent to which ECAs experience career success (research question two), showing the majority of surveyed ECAs experience career success, across different organisation settings and areas of accounting. Insights into organisational support for ECAs' careers (research question three) were also positive, highlighting opportunities for career success for those in the establishment stage of their careers and the value of mechanisms for support.

The study makes two important contributions. First, it makes a theoretical contribution by drawing on career stage theory (Super, 1957, 1990) to better understand how different cohorts perceive career success. Findings highlight the importance of both subjective and objective dimensions of career success at aspirant (exploration) and early career (establishment) stages, with nuanced differences as individuals progress. Our focus on one professional setting (accounting) advances our understanding of perceptions of career success in a specific context (Briscoe et al., 2021). We highlight how similarities among aspirant and early career accountants may reflect career scripts (Dany et al., 2011), irrespective of career stage, or the sharing of career anchors (Schein, 1996) among those attracted to the profession. Evidence of gender and age-based differences add further to the body of research on perceptions of career success.

Second, we provide empirical insights into how career success and development might be further strengthened by organisations. This is particularly useful for organisations seeking to remedy global talent shortages in the accounting profession (CPA Australia, 2019). Further, it points to implementing appropriate career management strategies and programmes that nurture broad understandings of subjective and objective career success of employees who are relatively new in the accounting profession. These might entail enriching roles to improve enjoyment and fulfilment, providing various training and experiential opportunities for learning (including mentoring and coaching), supporting ECAs through professional accreditation exams (thereby enhancing professional recognition), and allowing ECAs to practise skills and gain experience in different business areas. We therefore highlight the value of employee development, effective performance management and constructive feedback systems to support accounting professionals in achieving fulfilling, satisfying and successful careers.

In terms of limitations, the study used a suite of cross-sectional surveys in a single country. It may, therefore, be subject to social desirability bias in responses, and the inability to establish causal relationships between variables (Singleton & Straits, 2017). However, the large number of total respondents ($n = 945$) across three groups – students, ECAs and managers – provides confidence in the veracity of the findings. Further, given the age of the ECAs, we recognise their earlier career experiences may shape their perceptions of career success in accounting. Future research could investigate perceived career success of accounting professionals in other country settings and in later career stages. Further, investigation of ECAs' perspectives on levels and types of support for career success, and how these could be improved, would be worthwhile. Finally, research that seeks to distil how structural/contextual and agentic factors operate in explaining career success would be valuable, perhaps through examining various accounting 'career scripts' as well as those who share the same perceptions of success or 'career anchors' being attracted to accounting roles.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are not available due to ethical approval constraints.

ORCID

Denise Jackson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7821-3394>

Julia Richardson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5238-2376>

Grant Michelson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4186-7984>

Rahat Munir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3762-491X>

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