

Bridging the Gap: The Need for Research in the Middle East

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The commencement of medical school marks the start of a demanding time for students. Multiple stressors, including social, academic and emotional are navigated successfully by many students; although, others are less able to deal with the transition into this complex new life and fail to achieve academic success. Student failure and attrition result in wide ranging detrimental costs, not only to the student concerned, but to the institutional reputation, income stream and to other stakeholders including sponsoring bodies, parents and communities¹. In addition, the effects of failure can have an unexpected long-term impact. Yates et al revealed that poorly performing students in the early years of medical school may be at an increased risk of subsequent medical misconduct².

There are many aspects of the Middle Eastern education setting which are under-researched; most educational research has been conducted in the United Kingdom, Europe and North America and very little research has been done in the Middle Eastern region despite the great increase in educational operations in recent years. From a global viewpoint, medical education research has not majorly progressed in the last decade. It lacks methodological rigor, funding and longitudinal research aspects³. Set against this is the need to provide greater levels of quality assurance, concerning the student learning experience and the impact of previous learning.

The globalization of medical education has continued to increase over the last decade. However, it still faces many challenges⁴. One major aspect is international curriculum transfer. RCSI Dublin has an outcome-based system-oriented medical curriculum which has been developed over many years and has been adopted in Bahrain. Although this would appear to offer an ideal model for the establishment of a new medical school in a developing environment, it is acknowledged that a cross-cultural dimension must also be incorporated to meet the challenges of localizing the curriculum. Transition of students from secondary level to third level education is widely acknowledged to be a challenging period in a student's educational journey⁵. These aspects are further exacerbated when the complexity of study through English, independent learning, and an unfamiliar outcomes based curriculum are introduced.

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Awareness of potential predictors and causative factors of academic success and failure are important for all established medical schools striving to ensure high completion rates

and to implement support mechanisms for inadequately performing students. It is vital that universities seeking to establish international campuses in the Middle East, understand that the student body can face a myriad of transitions including language, attendance, study skills, self-realization, and curriculum adaptation, in addition to social and cultural adaptation challenges. Recognizing the importance of understanding the student transitional journey and its impact on academic success, RCSI continues to research these factors in this key transitional stage in the students' educational journey⁶⁻¹⁰. Based on research findings, a range of educational initiatives, including providing a transitional year of study through establishing the Medical Commencement Program (MCP), developing the Student Success Centre, which is dedicated to the provision of academic and pastoral student support, implementing peer-assisted learning activities and providing students with language support through pre and in-session language programs, have been launched.

Whilst insufficient research currently exists into reasons for academic failure and predictors of academic success, the findings from such research, if acted upon, can yield long-term benefits for students, medical schools and their stakeholders¹¹. Such support needs to be integrated into institutional strategies and operations and stem from insightful student-centered research which bridges the gap from secondary to tertiary education, to better understand the complexities of the first steps of tomorrow's doctors.

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