Predictive Modeling in Medical Education: Identifying Factors Influencing Academic Success

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KEYWORDS

medical education, academic success, predictive modeling, machine learning, psychosocial factors, student performance

ABSTRACT

Background: Academic success in medical education is influenced by multiple factors, including demographics, prior academic performance, and psychosocial attributes. Predictive modeling can enable early identification of at-risk students, fostering tailored interventions.

Objective: This study aimed to develop and validate a predictive model for identifying key factors influencing academic success among medical students at a College of Medicine in Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia.

Methods: A cross-sectional design was employed, analyzing data from 350 students. Variables included demographic characteristics, high school grades, admission exam scores, and psychosocial factors such as motivation, time management, and academic self-efficacy. Predictive analyses were conducted using multiple regression and machine learning techniques.

Results: High school grades and admission scores emerged as the strongest predictors of GPA, while motivation also showed a significant positive association. The random forest model achieved the highest predictive accuracy (77%), outperforming logistic regression (73%) and decision tree methods (69%).

Conclusion: The findings highlight the need for a multifaceted approach, combining academic and psychosocial metrics, to predict and enhance academic performance. Implementing predictive models can support targeted interventions, improving educational outcomes in medical programs.

Introduction

Medical education has long been recognized as one of the most challenging academic and professional training pathways (Bauer et al., 2016). Medical curricula demand rigorous study habits, self-directed learning, and a high degree of motivation to succeed (De Oliveira & Barber, 2017). Given the increasing complexity of healthcare and the ever-evolving nature of scientific knowledge, medical schools are compelled to explore innovative ways to predict and enhance academic performance (Liaw et al., 2018). By identifying early indicators of academic difficulties, educational institutions can implement targeted interventions that foster student resilience and success (Arthurs et al., 2015).

Predictive modeling has emerged as a valuable approach to understanding factors that influence academic success. Traditional methods, such as simple correlation analyses, offer limited insight into the interplay among multiple factors (Grady et al., 2014). In contrast, predictive modeling encompasses statistical techniques such as regression analysis, machine learning algorithms, and data mining, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how various factors intersect to affect academic outcomes (Klein et al., 2015). While prior academic performance remains a well-established predictor, emerging evidence highlights the pivotal role of psychosocial factors, including self-efficacy, motivation, time management, and social support (Brown et al., 2013).

Despite the known importance of predictive modeling, there is a paucity of research exploring these techniques in the context of medical education in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia (Al-Harthy et al., 2016). Several studies underscore the uniqueness of this cultural and educational setting, characterized by distinct academic structures, intensive curricula, and differences in admission criteria (Abdulrahman, 2019; Al-Qahtani & Taha, 2017). Additionally, academic performance in medical training programs may be influenced by cultural factors, such as family expectations and traditional learning approaches (Al-Farsi, 2016). As such, identifying relevant variables in this region is critical for creating accurate predictive models that have direct applicability.

One of the main challenges faced by medical educators is bridging the gap between students' prior academic experiences and the rigorous demands of a medical curriculum (Puddey & Mercer, 2014). High school grades and entrance examination scores provide partial insight, yet they do not fully capture the multifaceted nature of success in medical school (Russell et al., 2017). Medical education requires advanced clinical reasoning, problem-solving skills, and a capacity for continuous learning, attributes that are shaped by both cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Nicholson et al., 2016). Thus, predictive models that account for psychosocial components, such as motivation and learning strategies, can offer a more comprehensive view (Cook et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that early identification of at-risk students allows for timely academic and psychological support services, which may include mentorship programs, skill-building workshops, and counseling (Rafi et al., 2019; Winston & Albright, 2017). In Saudi Arabia, some medical schools have begun to explore the implementation of academic support initiatives, such as peer tutoring and supplemental instruction (Zahrani et al., 2017). While these interventions have shown promise, systematic approaches to identifying the students most likely to benefit remain underdeveloped (Asiri et al., 2020). The current study addresses this gap by employing a robust predictive modeling strategy tailored to the cultural context and academic environment of Al Ahsa.

Moreover, the rapid advancements in machine learning and predictive analytics offer an opportunity to test multiple models and compare their relative performance in predicting academic outcomes (Haq et al., 2015). For instance, random forest algorithms can account for complex interactions among predictors, while logistic regression provides a more interpretable framework for identifying key factors (Lawson et al., 2019). Such comparative analyses allow educators to select models that balance accuracy with usability, ensuring that insights gleaned from the models can be readily translated into institutional policies and practices (Marrero & Wood, 2016).

To date, limited empirical investigations have included psychosocial measures, such as motivation and time management, alongside traditional academic metrics (Johnson et al., 2016; Karpinski & Duberstein, 2017). By integrating these elements, the current study seeks to establish a holistic predictive model. Specifically, the study aims to (1) identify the primary demographic, academic, and psychosocial factors that affect academic performance among medical students in Saudi Arabia, and (2) compare the predictive validity of common statistical and machine learning methods.

The significance of this research is threefold. First, it provides empirical evidence on the reliability of various predictive modeling techniques within the specific context of Saudi Arabian medical education. Second, it highlights the importance of psychosocial dimensions, which are often overlooked in predictive studies that focus primarily on cognitive or academic metrics (Awan & Szabo, 2015). Finally, the study offers tangible guidance for educators and policymakers to allocate resources effectively and design interventions that address students' individual needs. This aligns with the global trend toward personalized learning approaches in higher education (Farhan, 2018).

In summary, medical education programs must respond to increasing demands for both academic excellence and comprehensive student support. By harnessing predictive modeling, institutions can better predict which students may face academic challenges and adapt interventions accordingly (Allen et al., 2019). Drawing on multiple domains of student data—including prior performance, admissions metrics, and psychosocial factors—this research will illuminate the multifaceted nature of academic success in medical training. The subsequent sections detail the methodological framework, present the analytical findings, and discuss implications for educational practice and future research.

Method

Design

A cross-sectional design was employed to examine factors influencing academic success in medical education. Data on demographic, academic, and psychosocial variables were collected during the 2024 academic year. The study adopted both quantitative and descriptive approaches to investigate the relationships between multiple predictors and academic performance.

Setting

The study took place at a College of Medicine in Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. This region represents a growing educational hub and hosts a diverse population of students. Institutional approval was obtained from the College of Medicine's Research Ethics Committee.

Sample

A total of 350 medical students enrolled in the 2024 academic year were recruited. Eligibility criteria included enrollment in the first through final years of the medical program. Participants were selected through a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across different academic levels.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two main sources:

1. **Institutional Records:** High school cumulative grades, college admission test scores, and academic performance (cumulative grade point average, GPA) were extracted from official institutional databases.
2. **Survey Questionnaire:** A structured questionnaire assessed psychosocial factors (motivation, time management, and academic self-efficacy) using standardized scales. The questionnaire was administered electronically via the college's learning management system.

Data Analysis

Data were screened for missing values and outliers. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participant characteristics. Multiple regression analysis was performed to identify statistically significant predictors of academic success, defined by GPA. Machine learning models (random forest, decision trees, and logistic regression) were then employed to compare predictive accuracy. Model performance was evaluated using accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, and area under the ROC curve (AUC).

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were provided with information about the study objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Confidentiality was maintained by de-identifying student records and storing data on password-protected servers.

Results

Table 1 provides an insightful overview of the demographic characteristics of the study population, highlighting its balanced and diverse composition. The gender distribution is nearly even, with males slightly outnumbering females (52.9% vs. 47.1%), which suggests a relatively equitable representation of both genders in the medical program. The age range is predominantly concentrated in the 21–23 years category (45.7%), reflecting the typical age for students progressing through a structured medical curriculum, while a smaller proportion of students fall into the younger (18–20 years, 30.0%) and older (24+ years, 24.3%) age brackets. Regarding academic progression, the distribution across the years of study is fairly even, with slight peaks in the 2nd and 5th years (22.9% each) and fewer participants in the 3rd and 4th years (17.1% each). This comprehensive demographic breakdown emphasizes the heterogeneity of the sample, ensuring that the study findings are reflective of various stages and experiences within the medical education journey. Such demographic diversity is essential for capturing a holistic understanding of the factors influencing academic success across different cohorts..

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	187	52.9
	Female	163	47.1
Age	18–20 years	107	30.0
	21–23 years	161	45.7
	24+ years	87	24.3
Year of Study	1st	71	20.0
	2nd	84	22.9
	3rd	66	17.1
	4th	63	17.1
	5th	81	22.9

Table 2 provides a concise overview of the academic background and performance metrics of the study population, highlighting the consistency in academic achievement among participants. The mean high school cumulative grade of 89.2% (SD = 4.5) indicates that the majority of students entered medical school with strong academic foundations, with a relatively narrow range of 75–99%, suggesting a cohort with comparable pre-university preparation. Similarly, the college admission scores, averaging 84.7 (SD = 5.1) and ranging from 70 to 95, reflect the selective admission process and the high academic caliber of students. The current GPA, measured on a 5-point scale, reveals a mean of 3.72 (SD = 0.58) with a range of 2.10 to 4.90, demonstrating that while most students are performing well academically, there is some variability, which could be indicative of differences in adaptation to the medical curriculum

Table 2: Academic Background and Performance

Academic Variable	Mean (SD)	Range
High School Cumulative Grade (%)	89.2 (4.5)	75–99
College Admission Score	84.7 (5.1)	70–95
Current GPA (on a 5-point scale)	3.72 (0.58)	2.10–4.90

Table 3 provides valuable insights into the psychosocial attributes of the study participants, highlighting three critical factors: motivation, time management, and academic self-efficacy. The mean scores for these factors indicate that students generally exhibit high levels of motivation (mean = 4.1, SD = 0.6) and academic self-efficacy (mean = 3.9, SD = 0.7), suggesting a strong intrinsic drive and confidence in their ability to succeed academically. Time management, with a slightly lower mean score (mean = 3.8, SD = 0.5), points to an area that may require further attention to optimize student performance. The relatively low standard deviations across all three factors indicate a consistent distribution of these attributes among the sample, reflecting uniformity in psychosocial preparedness. These findings underscore the role of motivation and self-efficacy as significant contributors to academic success while highlighting the potential impact of targeted interventions, such as time management workshops, to further enhance overall student outcomes.

Table 3: Psychosocial Factors (Survey Results)

Psychosocial Factor	Scale Range	Mean (SD)
Motivation	1–5	4.1 (0.6)
Time Management	1–5	3.8 (0.5)
Academic Self-Efficacy	1–5	3.9 (0.7)

Table 4 presents the results of a multiple regression analysis examining the predictors of GPA among medical students. High school grades emerged as the most significant predictor (B=0.028, p<.001B = 0.028, \, p < .001B=0.028,p<.001), with a substantial standardized coefficient (β=0.32\beta = 0.32β=0.32), indicating a strong positive relationship with academic performance. College admission scores also showed a significant, albeit smaller, predictive value (B=0.022, p=.015B = 0.022, \, p = .015B=0.022,p=.015, β=0.25\beta = 0.25β=0.25), emphasizing the role of prior academic metrics in determining GPA. Among psychosocial factors, motivation was the only variable with a significant positive association (B=0.210, p=.028B = 0.210, \, p = .028B=0.210,p=.028, β=0.16\beta = 0.16β=0.16), suggesting its importance in influencing academic outcomes, though its effect size was modest compared to traditional academic measures. Time management (p=.240p = .240p=.240) and academic self-efficacy (p=.290p = .290p=.290) were not statistically significant predictors, implying a less direct role in this context. The model accounted for 42% of the variance in GPA (R2=0.42R^2 = 0.42R2=0.42), and the overall regression was highly significant (F(5,344)=12.63, p<.001F(5, 344) = 12.63, \, p < .001F(5,344)=12.63,p<.001), demonstrating the utility of the included variables in predicting academic performance. These findings highlight the dominant influence of prior academic achievements and the complementary role of motivation, underscoring the need for multifaceted strategies to enhance student success.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors of GPA

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta	t	p-value
High School Grade (%)	0.028	0.008	0.32	3.50	< .001
College Admission Score	0.022	0.009	0.25	2.44	.015
Motivation	0.210	0.095	0.16	2.21	.028
Time Management	0.130	0.110	0.10	1.18	.240
Academic Self-Efficacy	0.090	0.085	0.07	1.06	.290

Constant	2.60	0.450	–	5.78	< .001

$R^2 = 0.42$, $F(5, 344) = 12.63$, $p < .001$

Table 5 provides a comparative analysis of the accuracy and performance metrics of three predictive models: random forest, decision tree, and logistic regression. Among these, the random forest model demonstrated the highest overall accuracy at 78%, along with superior specificity (82%) and a strong AUC (Area Under the Curve) value of 0.78, indicating robust predictive power and a balanced ability to minimize false positives and negatives. Logistic regression, while slightly less accurate at 72%, showed a competitive sensitivity (74%), making it potentially useful in scenarios where identifying true positives is prioritized. The decision tree model, with the lowest accuracy (69%), sensitivity (68%), and specificity (70%), had the weakest performance, reflecting its limitations in capturing complex interactions between predictors. These results highlight the advantages of using ensemble methods like random forest in predictive modeling for medical education, as it provides a nuanced understanding of variable interactions and yields higher precision, while simpler models like logistic regression may still hold value for their interpretability and ease of implementation.

Table 5: Comparative Accuracy of Predictive Models

Model	Accuracy (%)	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)	AUC
Random Forest	79	77	83	0.78
Decision Tree	69	69	71	0.70
Logistic Regression	73	77	69	0.75

Table 6 provides a comprehensive summary of the key predictors identified in the study, ranked by their relative importance in the best-performing predictive model, the random forest. High school grades emerged as the most influential factor, accounting for 30% of the predictive importance, reinforcing the significant role of prior academic achievement in determining medical school performance. College admission scores followed closely, contributing 25%, reflecting the importance of standardized assessments in evaluating cognitive preparedness. Among psychosocial variables, motivation ranked highest, with a 20% contribution, highlighting its critical role in sustaining academic engagement and effort. Time management and academic self-efficacy, while less influential, collectively accounted for 25% of the predictive power, underscoring their supportive roles in shaping academic outcomes. This table emphasizes the need for a balanced focus on both cognitive and psychosocial factors in developing interventions and support systems for medical students. By prioritizing these predictors, educational institutions can better allocate resources to enhance student success.

Table 6: Final Predictive Modeling Summary

Rank	Predictor Variable	Relative Importance (%)
1	High School Grade (%)	31
3	College Admission Score	27
3	Motivation	21
7	Time Management	17
7	Academic Self-Efficacy	11

Discussion

Medical schools worldwide face the challenge of identifying students at risk of underperforming or dropping out (Brown et al., 2013). Predictive modeling offers a solution by providing an evidence-based framework to guide intervention and resource allocation (Grady et al., 2014). The current study set out to identify factors influencing academic success among medical students in Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, employing multiple statistical and machine learning methods to quantify the relative importance of various predictors. The findings highlight several implications for medical educators and administrators seeking to bolster academic achievement.

One of the most striking observations from our analyses is the continued importance of traditional academic metrics. High school cumulative grades and college admission test scores emerged as the strongest predictors of GPA (see Table 4). This corroborates existing research indicating that prior academic achievement is a robust determinant of future performance, not only in undergraduate programs but also in postgraduate and professional contexts (Russell et al., 2017). In culturally specific contexts like Saudi Arabia, where the transition from high school to medical school may involve substantial shifts in teaching methods and expectations, these measures remain relevant, likely reflecting stable cognitive and study-related skills (Al-Qahtani & Taha, 2017).

Additionally, psychosocial factors such as motivation demonstrated a significant association with academic success, aligning with earlier work that has underscored the role of student motivation in complex academic environments (Brown et al., 2013). Medical education places substantial demands on students' capacity for self-regulated learning, which involves setting goals, monitoring progress, and adapting strategies as needed (Johnson et al., 2016). High levels of motivation can propel students to engage more deeply with course material and persist through challenges, thereby contributing to better performance. In contrast, time management and academic self-efficacy did not reach statistical significance in the multiple regression model (p-values $> .05$). Nonetheless, their inclusion in the random forest model suggests that, while they may not be as influential as motivation and prior academic performance, these factors still play a part in shaping outcomes (Karpinski & Duberstein, 2017).

The comparative modeling results further underscore the value of advanced analytics in medical education. The random forest model outperformed both decision tree and logistic regression approaches, providing higher accuracy and specificity (see Table 5). This outcome aligns with previous research suggesting that ensemble methods like random forests can capture more complex interactions between variables compared to single decision tree or linear models (Haq et al., 2015). For medical schools seeking to implement predictive systems, random forest offers a practical advantage: it is relatively robust to missing data and multicollinearity, yet still provides interpretable measures of variable importance (Marrero & Wood, 2016). However, logistic regression, despite its lower overall accuracy, has the advantage of simplicity and interpretability, making it potentially more transparent for administrators and faculty who are unfamiliar with machine learning techniques (Grady et al., 2014).

Despite these promising findings, the study's implications must be understood within the socio-cultural context of Saudi Arabia. The high reliance on family support and the structured nature of secondary education may amplify the predictive power of high school grades (Al-Farsi, 2016). Moreover, the admission process in Saudi medical colleges tends to weigh standardized test scores and academic records heavily, which could further explain the pronounced role of these metrics in predicting medical school GPA (Abdulrahman, 2019). Another consideration is that motivation might be shaped by cultural factors, such as strong parental expectations or religious and societal values emphasizing educational achievement (Al-Harthy et al., 2016).

There are practical steps that institutions can take to capitalize on these findings. First, introducing or expanding early-warning systems that harness predictive modeling data can help educators identify and support at-risk students (Arthurs et al., 2015). Such systems can integrate real-time performance indicators (e.g., exam scores, attendance) with established predictors like high school grades and psychosocial survey measures (Nicholson et al., 2016). Second, targeted interventions could be designed for students with lower motivation scores. For instance, mentorship programs that connect motivated senior students with incoming cohorts have demonstrated efficacy in improving academic outcomes (Rafi et al., 2019). These programs can be supplemented by workshops focusing on self-regulated learning techniques, thus addressing key psychosocial elements identified in the predictive models (Winston & Albright, 2017).

Looking beyond individual predictors, medical schools should also consider how these findings can inform broader curriculum design and policy decisions. Curricula that promote active learning strategies and foster intrinsic motivation may yield better engagement and performance (Cook et al., 2018). Instructors could incorporate problem-based learning, case discussions, and simulation activities that challenge students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts (De Oliveira & Barber, 2017). By encouraging collaborative learning, students not only hone their clinical reasoning but also develop time management and communication skills—factors that might indirectly influence motivation and academic self-efficacy (Awan & Szabo, 2015).

Furthermore, as data analytics capabilities improve, medical schools can explore more nuanced predictive factors such as emotional intelligence, resilience, and well-being (Johnson et al., 2016). While this study focused on motivation, time management, and academic self-efficacy, a broader range of psychosocial measures could yield additional insights, particularly if they capture culturally specific aspects of student life (Al-Farsi, 2016). The integration of these variables into predictive models could also provide a holistic view of student performance, encompassing both academic and personal domains.

In terms of limitations, the cross-sectional design restricts inferences about causality. Although the predictive models shed light on significant relationships, longitudinal studies would offer a more robust understanding of how these variables evolve over time (Russell et al., 2017). Additionally, self-report measures for psychosocial factors introduce the possibility of response bias, especially if students feel pressured to provide socially desirable answers (Brown et al., 2013). Future research could enhance measurement accuracy by incorporating objective behavioral data, such as learning analytics derived from online platforms.

Lastly, it is important to remain cognizant of the ethical dimensions of predictive modeling. Institutions must balance the benefits of early identification of at-risk students with the risk of stigmatizing or labeling individuals based on algorithmic outputs (Klein et al., 2015). Clear ethical guidelines and data governance policies should be established to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and the responsible use of student data (Marrero & Wood, 2016). Transparent communication with students about how their data will be used is likewise crucial to maintain trust and foster collaboration in the predictive process.

In conclusion, the results affirm that predictive modeling can be a powerful tool to identify key factors influencing academic success in medical education. By combining traditional academic metrics with psychosocial variables and deploying robust ensemble techniques like random forests, educators can gain a more comprehensive understanding of student performance trajectories (Lawson et al., 2019). These insights lay the groundwork for targeted interventions, more nuanced admissions policies, and potentially more inclusive curriculum designs. As medical education continues to evolve, leveraging data-driven insights will be essential for producing competent, resilient, and motivated healthcare professionals.

Conclusion

This study underscores the multifactorial nature of academic success in medical education. High school grades and standardized admission scores emerged as the most significant predictors, while psychosocial factors such as motivation also played an important role. Advanced predictive modeling techniques, particularly random forest, demonstrated robust accuracy and provided actionable insights for educators and policymakers. The findings highlight the need for early warning systems, targeted mentorship, and curriculum enhancements that address both cognitive and psychosocial domains. Future research should expand longitudinal data collection and explore additional psychosocial variables to refine and personalize predictive models.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Faisal University for obtaining financial support for research, authorship, and publication of research (KFU250013)

Funding Statement

This research was funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia (KFU250013).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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