

Factors Influencing the Decision on the Selection of Allied Health Careers Among Singapore Residents

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Abstract

Background: Singapore's ageing population has created significant healthcare workforce shortages, especially in allied health. This called for the urgent need to increase the local manpower to mitigate this issue.

Objective: To understand the factors influencing career choices in allied health among Singaporean youths.

Methods: This study utilized an online questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire was distributed via social media, targeting Singaporean residents between the ages of 16 and 30 years, excluding existing allied health students/professionals. A subgroup analysis was also done by splitting respondents into 3 age groups (16-18, 19-24, and 25-30 years).

Results: Among the 305 responses collected, the most preferred allied health professions were psychologist, dietitian or nutritionist, and counsellor. Across all age groups, the top deterring factors were long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime, and low paying profession. For ages 16-18 and 19-24 years, increased salary and flexible work schedule were the top enticing factors. For respondents aged 25-30 years, flexible work schedule was the top factor instead, followed by increased salary.

Conclusions: Generally, the top enticing factors included increased salary, flexible work schedule and positive work environment, while the top deterring factors were long hours, exhaustion, working overtime, low paying profession, and financial issues incurred from allied health education. The subgroup analysis revealed some deviations of priorities between the different age groups which could be suggestive of the difference in perceptions between age groups. Larger, comparative studies are required to understand the needs and perceptions of young Singaporean residents more comprehensively.

Keywords: Allied health, Career choices, Singapore, Subgroup analysis, Influences

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Introduction

In Singapore, the proportion of citizens aged 65 and above has increased to 18.4% in 2022 from 11.1% in 2012.¹ This indicates a rapidly ageing population. Consequently, there has been a shortage of human resources in various sectors, particularly in healthcare. This is worsened by the rapidly increasing demand for healthcare and the rising prevalence of chronic illnesses within Singapore's ageing population. According to the Ministry of Health in Singapore, there currently are 58 000 healthcare workers, but 82 000 will be required by 2030.² In response to Singapore's healthcare manpower shortage,

attempts to retain and employ more local and foreign healthcare workers have been made. Despite the government's efforts, staffing shortages still persist as a major issue in the healthcare sector.³ This study aimed to identify the factors that influence Singapore residents when choosing allied health as a career.

Methods

Most of the respondents were within the surveyors' personal contacts. This study's inclusion criteria included Singaporean residents (inclusive of permanent residents) who were between the ages of 16 and 30 years. This study's exclusion criteria included respondents who were existing allied health professionals or students enrolled in allied health courses.

In this study's surveys, it was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that by choosing to participate, respondents consented to the use of their data for research purposes. Participants were also assured that all collected data would be kept strictly confidential. For biographic data, this study only gathered respondents' age, gender, and occupation. This helped to reduce their identifiability and ensured anonymity.

This study employed a quantitative online questionnaire to gather data. The questionnaire was designed to assess respondents' preferences and deterrents regarding careers in allied health professions. The online questionnaire was distributed through various social media platforms such as Instagram. Data were collected from 23 November 2022 to 29 December 2022.

The survey had a total of 2 sections. The first section of the survey gathers the respondents' biographic data, including their ages, gender, and occupations. The second section of the survey collected information regarding the respondents' preference in various allied health occupations. Additionally, it aimed to identify the top factors that entice and deter them to work in these professions.

Respondents were initially presented with several individual allied health professions and groups of allied health professions. Descriptions of the main job scope for each individual allied health profession and each group of allied health professions were given to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the allied health professions (Supplementary S1). For example, for the counsellor group, which included genetic counsellors, mental health counsellors, and family therapist counsellors, the main job scope was to provide professional advice to individuals, families, and healthcare providers. Furthermore, they were asked to pick up to 3 professions that they would prefer the most and up to 3 that they would prefer the least. Subsequently, they were asked to identify up to 3 factors that would most deter them and up to 3 that would most entice them to pursue a career in allied health.

Results

Sociodemographic

Out of 305 respondents, 150 were aged 16-18 years, 90 were aged 19-24 years, and 65 were aged 25-30 years. In terms of occupation, 201 of the respondents were students, 10 were serving National Service in Singapore (NSF), 19 were unemployed, 2 were self-employed, 1 was part-time employed, and 72 were full-time employed.

Allied Healthcare

When it came to which allied health professions respondents would prefer the most, psychologist was the top choice, with 148 out of 305 respondents selecting it. This was followed by dietitian, or nutritionist (n = 91) and counsellor (n = 83). Respondents aged 16-18 years most frequently chose psychologists (n = 76), counsellor (n = 42), and child life therapist (n = 41). In the 19-24 age group, the most popular options were psychologist (n = 48), dietitian or nutritionist (n = 29), and child life therapist (n = 20). Most chosen options from respondents aged 25-30 years were psychologist (n = 24), dietitian or nutritionist (n = 23), and counsellor (n = 22) (Table 1).

When it came to allied health professions that respondents would prefer the least, emergency medical personnel was the top choice, with 92 out of 305 respondents selecting it. This was followed by dental personnel (n = 79) and child life therapist (n =76). Respondents aged 16-18 years most frequently chose dental personnel (n = 42), emergency medical personnel (n = 39), and child life therapist (n = 38). In the 19-24 age group, the most popular options were child life therapist (n = 27), expressive art therapist (n = 27), dental personnel (n = 25), and emergency medical personnel (n = 25). Most chosen options from respondents aged 25-30 years were emergency medical personnel (n = 28), dental personnel (n = 12), child life therapist (n = 11), and counsellor (n = 11) (Table 2).

Table 1. Top 5 Preferred Allied Health Professions Among Respondents

Profession*	No. of Respondents			Total
	Age, y			
	16-18	19-24	25-30	
Psychologist	76	48	24	148
Dietitian or nutritionist	39	29	23	91
Counsellor	42	19	22	83
Child life therapist	41	20	20	81
Eye care specialist	28	14	15	57

*Each respondent could select up to 3 professions.

Table 2. Top 5 Least Preferred Allied Health Professions Among Respondents

Profession*	No. of Respondents			Total
	Age, y			
	16-18	19-24	25-30	
Emergency medical personnel	39	25	28	92
Dental personnel	42	25	12	79
Child life therapist	38	27	11	76
Expressive art therapist	36	27	8	71
Counsellor	32	22	11	65

*Each respondent could select up to 3 professions.

When it came to factors that entice respondents to become allied health professionals, increased salary emerged as the leading choice, with 189 out of 305 respondents identifying it as the most compelling reason to pursue a career in allied health. This was followed by flexible work schedule (n = 162) and positive work environment (n = 129). Respondents aged 16-18 years most frequently chose increased salary (n = 100), flexible work schedule (n = 86), and positive work environment (n = 71). In the 19-24 age group, the most popular options were increased salary (n = 60), flexible work schedule (n = 42), and more leaves (paid or unpaid) (n = 32). Most chosen options from respondents aged 25-30 years were flexible work schedule (n = 34), positive work environment (n = 29), and increased salary (n = 29) (Table 3).

When it came to factors that deter respondents from becoming allied health professionals, long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime emerged as the leading choice, deterring 201 out of 305 respondents. This was followed by low paying profession (n = 104) and financial issues (eg, debt from school) (n = 86). Respondents aged 16-18 years most frequently chose long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime (n = 105), financial issues (n = 55), and low paying profession (n = 51). In the 19-24 age group, the most popular options were long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime (n = 55), low paying profession (n = 37), and inadequate career progression (n = 30). Most chosen options from respondents aged 25-30 years were long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime (n = 41), health risks (n = 21), and inadequate career progression (n = 17) (Table 4).

Table 3. Top 5 Factors That Entice Respondents for Allied Health Profession

Factor*	No. of Respondents			Total
	Age, y			
	16-18	19-24	25-30	
Increased salary	100	60	29	189
Flexible work schedule	86	42	34	162
Positive work environment	71	29	29	129
More leaves	50	32	15	97
More emphasis on personal well-being	38	27	14	79

*Each respondent could select up to 3 professions.

Table 4. Top 5 Factors That Deter Respondents for Allied Health Profession

Factor*	No. of Respondents			Total
	Age, y			
	16-18	19-24	25-30	
Long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime	105	55	41	201
Low paying profession	51	37	16	104
Financial issues	55	21	10	86
Inadequate career progression	25	30	17	72
Health risks	29	14	21	64

*Each respondent could select up to 3 professions.

Discussion

Sociodemographic

Generally, it is expected that the younger the respondents, the less experienced and knowledgeable they are in the workforce, and the more their views are affected by their family members, friends, teachers or other social views as they have little experience in the workforce.⁴⁻⁵ Given that 240 out of 305 (78.7%) of this study's respondents were under the age of 25 years, this survey predominantly captured the perspectives of younger individuals, which could also reflect broader societal perspectives. Given that 201 respondents were students and only 72 of the respondents were full-time employed, this further emphasized the youth-centric nature of this investigation, targeting young individuals who may not have entered the labour force. The low number of respondents in categories like self-employed, part-time, and NSF indicated that these groups were not the primary focus and had limited representation in our data.

Allied Healthcare

A significantly higher proportion of respondents aged 16-18 years (50.7%) and 19-24 years (53.3%) picked psychology to be one of the top 3 allied health professions. However, a smaller proportion (36.9%) picked psychology to be one of the top 3 allied health professions for those aged 25-30 years. Possibly, this trend could be attributed to the increasing emphasis on mental health in recent years, which might have raised awareness of this issue and consequently elevated the profile of psychologists among the younger generation.⁶

Interestingly, dental personnel were voted amongst the top 2 least attractive allied health professions in Singapore, despite dental hygienists being one of the highest paying allied health professionals.⁷ Similarly, occupational therapists, radiation therapists, genetic counsellors, and audiologists have some of the higher salaries, but were not one of the top 5 most attractive allied health professions. This may be due to respondents' lack of awareness about salaries, as such information was not provided; thus, choices were likely based on job descriptions alone. Due to a lack of literature investigating the barriers to entering allied health professions among young Singapore residents, comparison with literature targeting respondents from different demographics was conducted. A literature review conducted by Wallis et al⁸ agreed that financial costs of training pose a potential barrier, while a lack of awareness and misconceptions about allied professions remain the key obstacles.

Across all 3 age groups, the factor that deterred most respondents from becoming allied healthcare professionals was long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime with 201 selections, while low paying profession was second at 104 selections. The substantial difference between long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime and low paying profession could suggest that certain respondents might prefer a job that pays lower but is less demanding in terms of workload. Moreover, this could also suggest that respondents perceived the salaries in allied healthcare professions as inadequate given the high amounts of workload in allied health professions. Notably, this perception of allied healthcare as extremely demanding is supported by factual evidence. A 2019 study conducted in a Singapore tertiary hospital found that the self-reported burnout levels among allied health professionals were relatively high, with 67.4% of participants experiencing emotional exhaustion and/or depersonalization.⁹ Similarly, high burnout levels were also observed among physicians and nurses.¹⁰⁻¹¹ These findings generally align with this study, which identified long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime was

the strongest deterring factor for young Singaporeans considering a career in healthcare. The widespread awareness of burnout among healthcare professionals, as documented in existing literature, may have contributed to shaping these perceptions. This suggests that the high prevalence of burnout not only contributes to existing challenges within the profession, but also serves as a significant deterrent for prospective entrants into the field.

Among respondents aged 16-18 years and those in the 19-24 age group, increased salary emerged as the primary factor motivating them (100 and 60, respectively), while the second most enticing factor was flexible work schedule (86 and 42, respectively). Contrastingly, the top factor chosen by respondents aged 25-30 years was flexible work schedule, followed by increased salary. This might have possibly indicated a shift in priorities and career motivations as individuals progress into their late twenties as although financial considerations, represented by an increase in salary, remained significant, the emphasis on work flexibility became the dominant factor for respondents in this age bracket. This may be because individuals in their late twenties often take on greater responsibilities, such as starting a family. A flexible work schedule would therefore become increasingly important for achieving a better work-life balance, allowing one to meet both professional obligations and personal commitments.

Limitations

Firstly, an overwhelming proportion of respondents were students aged 19-24 years. As a result, the data disproportionately reflects the perspectives of students aged 19-24 years compared to other groups. Therefore, the results obtained might not reflect the perspectives of other groups accurately. However, this imbalance could be viewed as a strength, given that adolescents in this age range are often grappling with crucial career decisions.¹² Recognizing their concerns and preferences holds paramount importance for governmental bodies and educational institutions striving to allure and retain skilled individuals in allied healthcare fields.

Secondly, information on respondents' education levels were not collected. This omission is notable as educational attainment can greatly influence one's perspectives. The absence of this data might have resulted in overlooking a pivotal factor that could have contributed to our data. Consequently, extrapolating the study findings to encompass all students aged 19-24 years in Singapore might pose challenges. Further research is necessary to investigate the correlation between education levels and their priorities when it comes to choosing a career in allied health.

Thirdly, allied healthcare professions that were found to share significant similarities in their job scopes were grouped together as one option. As such, investigating the difference between the job scopes of allied health professions in the same group was not possible.

Lastly, many responses to the open-ended questions were vague — for example, describing occupations as simply interesting. However, more detailed responses were used for our analysis.

Future Research

Further research in this area could extend to investigating the correlation between education levels and their priorities when it comes to choosing a career in allied health. This could help governmental bodies and educational institutions to better cater to adolescents based on their education levels and increase the likelihood of them choosing allied health as their career. Additionally, examining the struggles faced by specific

vulnerable population groups, such as migrant allied health professionals, can yield valuable insights. These insights not only can be utilized to increase the allied health workforce, but also to enhance retention rates among existing allied health professionals.

Conclusions

The primary factors deterring Singaporean residents from pursuing careers in allied health professions were identified as long hours, exhaustion, or working overtime, low paying profession, and financial issue, while the factors that would entice them the most to pursue a career in allied health were increased salary, flexible work schedule, and positive work environment. Further research is strongly encouraged to explore these issues more deeply and support a better understanding among young Singaporeans. Such endeavours hold the potential to provide invaluable insights that can inform future initiatives aimed at addressing the challenges within allied health professions.

Additional Information

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Supplementary Material: Download Supplementary S1 from the following link: <https://he02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/ramajournal/article/view/271376/186670>

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