

Article

Public or Private? An Exploratory Study of Career Preferences Among Business and MPA Students in Norway

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines preferences for public- and private-sector employment among two groups of students in Norway with different educational and professional backgrounds: 145 bachelor's students in business administration and 56 Master of Public Administration (MPA) students. Cross-sectional survey data from two higher education institutions were analysed using exploratory factor analysis, comparisons of means, and linear regression. The groups differed substantially in their sector preferences and in the importance they attached to several job attributes. However, the research design cannot separate differences related to the programmes from differences arising from self-selection, age, work experience, occupational background, or career stage. Business students showed a stronger preference for the private sector and placed more emphasis on status and prestige. MPA students showed a stronger preference for the public sector and placed more emphasis on societal contribution and teamwork. Societal contribution was positively associated with a public-sector preference in both groups, although the separate models do not show whether the associations were equally strong. The groups did not differ in their ratings of the combined measure of job security and flexibility. Norway's welfare and labour-market institutions are discussed as a possible contextual explanation, but this mechanism was not tested. The study provides an exploratory and context-sensitive account of how public-service motives and more self-regarding job attributes may coexist in career preferences.

Keywords: business students; MPA students; career preferences; public-service motivation; public-sector employment; Norway

1. Introduction

Public and private employers compete for qualified graduates, but the job attributes linked to sector preference may differ between institutional settings. Previous studies show that business students often prefer private-sector employment, both in Norway and internationally (Holum et al., 2024; Ng & Gossett, 2013; Van de Walle et al., 2015). However, much of this literature uses public-service motivation and self-interest as broad explanations without clearly showing how specific job attributes relate to each perspective. Evidence from comprehensive welfare states also remains limited.

Findings from one country cannot be transferred directly to another. Labour-market conditions, cultural expectations, welfare institutions, and the organisation of public services differ across countries. These differences may shape both the perceived advantages of each sector and the importance attached to particular job attributes. Even so, interna-



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tional research consistently links sector choice to individual interests, values, and work preferences (Van der Wal & Oosterbaan, 2013; Wittmer, 2000).

Public and private organisations have different purposes and operate under different institutional constraints. Potential employees may therefore assess pay, security, meaningful work, career advancement, autonomy, and work–life balance differently in the two sectors. Understanding these assessments is particularly important for public employers competing with private firms for economists, engineers, information-technology specialists, managers, and other highly qualified staff.

This article compares two groups with contrasting educational and professional backgrounds. The first consists of bachelor's students in business administration and economics, most of whom are preparing to enter the labour market. The second consists of MPA students, many of whom already work in teaching, nursing, or other public-service occupations. The comparison is not a test of programme effects. Rather, it describes patterns among groups that differ in education, age, experience, occupational background, and career stage.

The study addresses a narrower incremental gap than earlier work. Holum et al. (2024) examined public- and private-sector career preferences among business students in Norway and Poland. The present study does not treat the Norwegian business-student results as wholly novel; they provide a benchmark and partial replication. The additional contribution is to compare those patterns with an educationally and professionally different MPA group, to examine whether the same job-attribute dimensions are associated with sector preference within each group, and to assess how far established PSM- and utility-related relationships appear to carry over to this Norwegian setting. The contribution is therefore primarily empirical and comparative rather than a new general theory of sector choice.

Three kinds of contribution are distinguished throughout the paper. Findings that reproduce established relationships, such as the positive link between societal contribution and public-sector preference, are treated as confirmation. Differences involving the MPA group and the combined pattern across the two samples are treated as new empirical evidence for these data. Explanations based on Norway's welfare institutions and labour market are treated only as contextual interpretations because the institutional mechanisms were not measured directly.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Career attitudes influence educational choices as well as expectations about future employment (Baker et al., 2018). Expected labour-market outcomes may include the likelihood of finding relevant work, employment security, well-being at work, and earnings. Standard economic theory views such decisions as choices between alternatives offering different combinations of monetary and non-monetary benefits.

A substantial literature examines why individuals choose public-sector employment. Public organisations differ from private firms in their purposes, accountability relationships, and employment conditions, and may therefore attract people with distinctive values and preferences (Lewis & Frank, 2002).

Two broad explanations are especially relevant. The first is the desire to serve others and contribute to society, which lies at the heart of public-service motivation (PSM). The second concerns utility: people may prefer a sector because its monetary and non-monetary conditions match their own preferences. Although these explanations are analytically distinct, both involve a match between individual motives and perceived sector attributes. A sector preference may therefore combine prosocial and self-interested motives. Teamwork,

autonomy, learning, and the work environment can provide personal benefits while also enabling a contribution to public service (Latan et al., 2022; Van de Walle et al., 2015).

Research has found systematic, though context-dependent, differences between public- and private-sector employees (Prysmakova, 2020). Financial rewards and opportunities for advancement are often more important in the private sector, while stability, meaningful work, and societal contribution are frequently linked to public employment. These distinctions are not universal. The appeal of particular job attributes depends on national institutions, occupations, and individual circumstances.

2.1. Public-Service Motivation

Public-service motivation provides an influential explanation of why individuals are attracted to public employment (Houston, 2000; Ritz & Waldner, 2011; Vandenabeele, 2008). Perry's (1996) original framework encompasses four dimensions:

1. Attraction to public participation: an interest in contributing to public affairs and policy processes.
2. Commitment to public values: a commitment to the public interest, democratic principles, and civic duty.
3. Compassion: empathy and concern for other people, particularly those in need.
4. Self-sacrifice: a willingness to place societal interests above personal advantage.

Together, these dimensions capture motives that extend beyond material self-interest. PSM explains attraction and fit; it does not assume that all public employees are altruistic. People may prefer workplaces in which they can express public-service motives. Societal contribution is therefore expected to be positively associated with public-sector preference, although self-selection and experience may also influence the observed relationship.

Working in the public sector may also be perceived as less prestigious than working in the private sector, which can negatively affect recruitment (Bright, 2021).

2.2. Self-Interest and Utility Maximisation

A complementary explanation is that people choose the combination of working conditions they prefer, including pay and prestige, security, workload, autonomy, collegial relations, flexibility, work–life balance, and learning opportunities (Delfgaauw & Dur, 2008). An attribute matters when a person values it and believes that one sector offers it more effectively. Sector choice therefore involves trade-offs. Status and prestige, work environment, job security and flexibility, autonomy, and development and work demand mainly represent attributes that provide personal utility, although they are neither purely selfish nor exclusive to one sector.

Students preparing for occupations such as teaching and nursing may place more importance on non-financial rewards than students in economics and business. These rewards include contact with other people, societal contribution, varied tasks, personal fulfilment, and security (Lechner et al., 2018). Teamwork is treated here as a mixed motive: interaction and belonging provide personal benefits, while cooperation and helping others can support service-oriented goals. Sector choice may therefore involve several trade-offs rather than a simple contrast between altruism and financial reward (Opstad, 2021).

Workload and work–life balance may also influence career decisions. However, public-sector jobs should not be assumed to be less demanding than private-sector jobs. Workload, performance pressure, autonomy, and flexibility vary considerably between occupations and organisations in both sectors.

2.3. Sustainability and Sector Choice

Sustainability has social, environmental, and economic dimensions (Koppenjan & Enserink, 2009). In this study, it is treated as a value-oriented motive that may combine personal and collective concerns. Giving priority to sustainable development may reflect a commitment to long-term public value, but sustainability is not a standard dimension of PSM and may also attract employees to private organisations. Public organisations may offer opportunities to pursue collective goals, while private organisations increasingly include sustainability in their strategies and operations. Ma et al. (2020) suggest that the public sector can support sustainable public-private projects. One of the sustainability items also concerns benefiting society, creating some conceptual overlap with societal contribution. The distinction between the two measures should therefore be interpreted with care.

The eight measures are linked to three theoretical categories for interpretive purposes. Societal contribution is the composite most directly connected with PSM because it captures civic duty, influence on public decisions, and benefits to society. Status and prestige, job security and flexibility, work environment, autonomy, and development and work demands mainly represent utility-related bundles because they concern personal rewards, working conditions, discretion, learning, and effort. Teamwork is a mixed motive: collegial interaction can provide personal utility, while cooperation and helping others can support service-oriented goals. Sustainability orientation is also mixed because it can express long-term public value while remaining attractive in private organisations. These links organise the analysis; they do not establish the eight composites as validated, unidimensional measures of PSM or utility maximisation.

This mapping leads to three directional propositions. Proposition 1: greater importance attached to societal contribution should be associated with stronger public-sector preference. Proposition 2: greater importance attached to status and prestige should be associated with a weaker public-sector preference and a stronger private-sector preference. Proposition 3: greater importance attached to job security and flexibility should tend to be associated with public-sector preference, although the strength of this relationship may be weaker in a secure welfare-state labour market. For teamwork, autonomy, sustainability orientation, work environment, and development and work demands, the direction is left open because these attributes can be valued and supplied in both sectors.

3. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Figure 1 presents the theoretical and empirical organisation of the study. It maps the eight exploratory job-attribute composites onto PSM-related, utility-related, and mixed-motive categories and shows that their associations with public- and private-sector preference are examined empirically. Student group is shown separately as a grouping and comparison variable, not as a causal determinant. Because programme, experience, occupation, age, and career stage are closely connected, observed group differences may reflect selection and accumulated experience and cannot be attributed to education alone.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What differences in career preferences and perceptions of public- and private-sector employment are observed between the two educationally and professionally distinct student groups?

The framework distinguishes differences in group means from associations within each group. Mean differences show whether the groups value attributes differently. The regression models examine whether each attribute is associated with sector preference after accounting for the other measured attributes. Because the models are estimated separately, they do not test whether coefficients are equal across groups. The second research question is therefore exploratory:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Which exploratory job-attribute composites are associated with public-sector preference within each student group, and do the directions of these associations provide descriptive support for the propositions across the two groups?

Theoretical categories and exploratory job-attribute composites

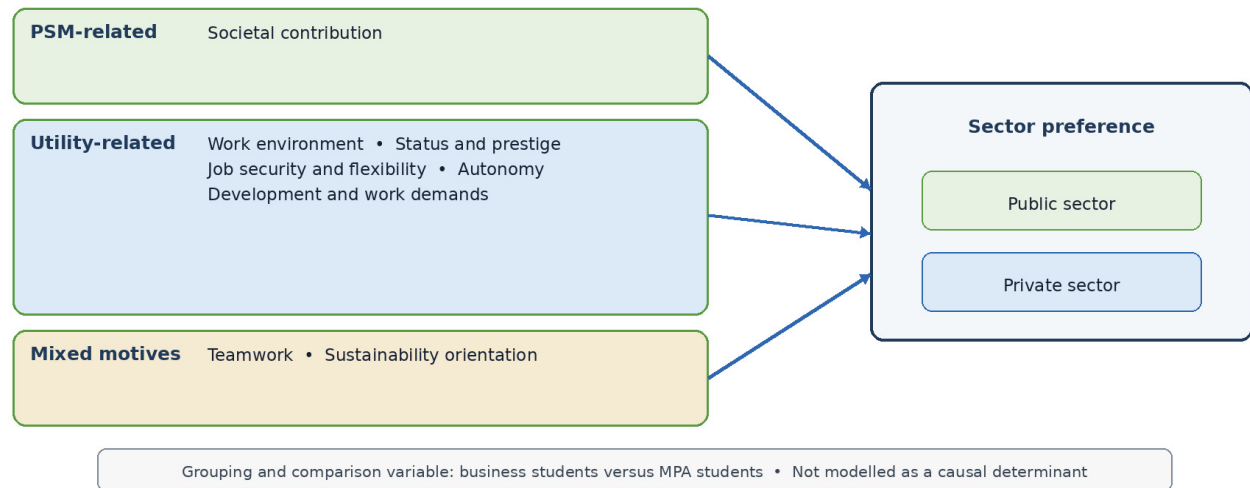


Figure 1. Theoretical categories, exploratory job-attribute composites, and sector preference.

The study does not formally test equality of coefficients across groups. A similar direction in the two separate models is therefore used only as descriptive evidence and not as proof that a relationship is statistically the same in both groups. A pooled model with group-by-attribute interactions would be required for a formal comparison; this is identified as a priority for future work.

The small number of MPA respondents reporting a preference for private-sector employment does not permit a corresponding group-specific regression for that sector. The third research question therefore focuses on business students:

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Which preference factors are associated with business students' preference for private-sector employment?

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Design and Empirical Basis

The study uses cross-sectional survey data collected in 2022 at two Norwegian higher education institutions. Students in selected programmes were invited to take part voluntarily, and about half of those eligible completed the questionnaire. The sample was not random and was not designed to represent Norwegian students in general. Voluntary participation creates a risk of self-selection bias, while the inclusion of only two institutions further limits generalisability. The results are therefore interpreted as descriptive patterns and conditional associations within the sample, not as population estimates or causal effects.

The questionnaire covered perceptions of public- and private-sector employment and the importance attached to different job attributes. Its design drew on earlier research, including Easterling and Smith (2008). Respondents rated statements that were subsequently organised into eight exploratory composites: work environment, societal contribution, status and prestige, job security and flexibility, teamwork, autonomy, sustainability orientation, and development and work demands. A seven-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

4.2. Participants

The first group consisted of 145 bachelor's students in business administration. Most were at an early stage in their careers and preparing to enter the labour market. Their responses therefore mainly reflect expectations and preferences formed before extensive full-time work experience.

The second group consisted of 56 MPA students. Most had several years of work experience, often in public-service occupations such as teaching and healthcare. Many may therefore have chosen both public employment and MPA education before taking part in the survey. The groups differ not only by programme, but also by age, experience, occupational background, and career stage. The survey did not provide usable measures of age, years of experience, career stage, or previous or current employment sector for the present models, so these possible confounders could not be controlled statistically. Group membership should therefore be understood as a broad background marker rather than as an educational effect.

The gender composition also differed. Men accounted for 58% of the business students and 36% of the MPA students. Across the full sample, 52% of respondents were men.

4.3. Statistical Analysis

The analysis had three stages. First, exploratory factor analysis was used to organise the job-attribute items into provisional dimensions. Second, independent-samples *t*-tests were used to compare group means. Hedges' *g*, with approximate 95% confidence intervals, describes the size of the differences. Holm-adjusted *p* values were used within each family of comparisons to limit the family-wise Type I error rate. Third, linear regression models examined conditional associations between the dimensions, gender, and sector preference. Hedges' *g* expresses a difference between two group means in pooled standard-deviation units and corrects for small-sample bias. Absolute values of about 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 are commonly interpreted as small, medium, and large differences. Here, a positive value means that the business students had the higher mean, while a negative value means that the MPA students had the higher mean.

The exploratory analysis produced eight provisional composite measures: work environment, societal contribution, status and prestige, job security and flexibility, teamwork, autonomy, sustainability orientation, and development and work demands. Table 1 reports the retained items, their loadings, and Cronbach's alpha values. The available archived output does not include the full pattern matrix, the KMO statistic, Bartlett's test, eigenvalues, explained variance, or results from parallel analysis. These diagnostics cannot be reconstructed from the summary output. The factor structure should therefore be regarded as preliminary rather than as a validated measurement model.

The following considerations guided item retention: (a) a primary loading of about 0.40 or higher; (b) limited loading on unrelated factors; (c) a clearly stronger loading on the assigned factor than on other factors; and (d) internal consistency above 0.70. Two items with loadings below 0.40 (0.379 and 0.342) were retained in the original composites to preserve content coverage and because both composites met the reliability criterion. Their retention departs from the loading guideline and weakens the evidence for the measurement model. Accordingly, the labels describe broad bundles of observed job attributes rather than theoretically established latent dimensions.

Seven response categories allowed respondents to express meaningful differences while keeping the scale manageable (Joshi et al., 2015). The number of items differed between dimensions. Some labels were revised to reflect their content more accurately. 'Development and work demands' replaces 'skill development' because the scale combines learning and task variety with hard work and extended hours. 'Job security and flexibility'

is explicitly treated as a composite of security, stability, flexibility, and work–life balance. ‘Status and prestige’ also combines status, salary, prestige, and qualification demands. ‘Sustainability orientation’ includes an item on benefiting society and therefore overlaps conceptually with societal contribution. These composites are useful for exploratory analysis but should not be interpreted as pure measures of single underlying attributes.

Table 1. Factor structure and internal consistency of the career-preference dimensions.

Career-Preference Dimension and Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach’s α
Work environment		
Have good relationships with colleagues and supervisors	0.991	0.967
Experience little pressure from supervisors	0.867	
Contribution		
Contribute to the needs of society and the public	0.786	0.778
Be able to influence public decisions	0.719	
Fulfil my civic duty	0.630	
Have the opportunity to benefit society	0.541	
Status and prestige		
Provide high social status	0.786	0.750
Has prestige	0.685	
Provide a higher salary than the average earned by fellow students	0.683	
Provide a high salary	0.561	
Be attractive and require strong qualifications	0.379	
Job security and flexibility (work–life balance)		
Provide a high level of job security	0.808	0.716
Offer a stable and secure future	0.604	
Place greater importance on job security than on salary	0.567	
Offer a good work–life balance	0.421	
Teamwork (working with people)	0.905	0.844
Work with people	0.890	
Provide opportunities to help others	0.539	
Work in a team	0.477	
Autonomy		
Offer independence and freedom	0.667	0.727
Offer individual flexibility	0.578	
Sustainability orientation		
Prioritise sustainable development over profitability and high salaries	0.608	0.750
Contribute to sustainable development in society	0.577	
Have the opportunity to benefit society	0.463	
Development and work demands		
Require hard work to achieve satisfactory results	0.626	0.725
Require work beyond normal working hours	0.576	
Provide opportunities to learn new things	0.491	
Offer varied tasks	0.440	
Encourage creativity and new ideas	0.342	

The regression analysis estimated the association between each exploratory composite and sector preference while holding the other composites and gender constant. Age, work experience, employment sector, and career stage could not be included because usable measures were unavailable. The MPA model is particularly exploratory because it is based on 45 complete cases and includes nine predictors. The coefficients may therefore be unstable, and the statistical power is limited. The negative sustainability coefficient

may reflect suppression, conceptual overlap, or sampling variation and should not be interpreted causally.

The regression samples are smaller than the full samples because complete-case analysis was used: respondents with a missing value on the dependent variable, gender, or any of the eight dimension scores were excluded from the corresponding model. This reduced the business sample from 145 to 134 and the MPA sample from 56 to 45. The archived analysis output does not provide enough information to determine whether excluded observations differ systematically from retained observations, so missing-data selection remains a limitation.

Comparisons of means identify differences between the groups, but do not account for several characteristics at the same time. The regression models therefore supplement the bivariate comparisons.

Gender and all eight exploratory composites were entered in the models simultaneously. The models estimate associations with public-sector preference within each group and with private-sector preference among business students, holding the other variables constant. They do not test whether the coefficients differ between the groups. The model is:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Gender}_i + \alpha_2 \text{WorkEnvironment}_i + \alpha_3 \text{Contribution}_i + \alpha_4 \text{StatusPrestige}_i + \alpha_5 \text{SecurityFlexibility}_i + \alpha_6 \text{Teamwork}_i + \alpha_7 \text{Autonomy}_i + \alpha_8 \text{Sustainability}_i + \alpha_9 \text{DevelopmentDemands}_i + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where Y_{ij} is respondent i 's preference score for sector j (private or public); α_0 is the intercept; α_1 – α_9 are unstandardised coefficients; gender is coded 0 = woman and 1 = man; the eight dimensions are mean scores on seven-point scales; and ε_{ij} is the error term.

The dependent variable is a seven-category Likert-type preference score. Linear regression treats the spacing between adjacent categories as approximately equal and estimates changes in the conditional mean score. With seven ordered categories, this provides a transparent exploratory summary, but the assumption is an approximation rather than a property of the measurement scale. An ordered logit or probit robustness model would require the original case-level outcome and predictor data, which were not available in the archived analysis material used for this revision. The OLS coefficients are therefore retained and interpreted only as conditional associations in the observed score; an ordered-response analysis remains an important robustness check for future work using the original data.

The samples are small and non-random, particularly the MPA sample. This limits both precision and generalisability. The mean comparisons and regressions are therefore used as complementary exploratory analyses, not as confirmatory tests of programme effects.

Because the models were estimated separately for each group, a relationship found in both groups is described only as a similar within-group pattern. Statistical significance in both models does not show that the coefficients are equal.

5. Results

The results are presented by research question. Tables 2 and 3 compare the groups and report Hedges' g , confidence intervals, and Holm-adjusted p values. Tables 4 and 5 present the exploratory regression models.

Table 2. Sector preferences and programme choice by student group.

Item or Dimension	Business M (SD)	MPA M (SD)	Hedges' g [95% CI]	Adjusted p
Prefer private sector	5.34 (1.29)	2.98 (1.30)	1.82 [1.46, 2.18]	<0.001

Table 2. Cont.

Item or Dimension	Business M (SD)	MPA M (SD)	Hedges' g [95% CI]	Adjusted p
Prefer public sector	2.93 (1.40)	4.82 (1.43)	−1.34 [−1.67, −1.00]	<0.001
I can imagine working in the private sector	5.47 (1.16)	4.42 (1.49)	0.83 [0.51, 1.15]	<0.001
I can imagine working in the public sector	3.85 (1.34)	5.60 (1.07)	−1.37 [−1.71, −1.04]	<0.001
I chose my education because I prefer private-sector work	4.40 (1.61)	2.19 (1.23)	1.45 [1.11, 1.79]	<0.001
I chose my education because I prefer public-sector work	2.43 (1.27)	3.79 (1.57)	−1.00 [−1.32, −0.67]	<0.001

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Positive g values indicate higher means among business students; negative values indicate higher means among MPA students. Values of about 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 are commonly interpreted as small, medium, and large differences. The p values are adjusted using the Holm method. N = 145 business students and 56 MPA students.

Table 3. Career-preference dimensions by student group.

Item or Dimension	Business M (SD)	MPA M (SD)	Hedges' g [95% CI]	Adjusted p
Work environment	6.01 (0.91)	5.63 (0.99)	0.41 [0.09, 0.72]	0.071
Contribution	4.67 (1.03)	5.54 (0.78)	−0.90 [−1.22, −0.58]	<0.001
Status and prestige	4.90 (1.04)	4.30 (0.93)	0.59 [0.28, 0.91]	<0.001
Job security and flexibility	5.20 (0.96)	5.23 (0.82)	−0.03 [−0.34, 0.28]	0.825
Teamwork	4.73 (1.15)	5.38 (1.14)	−0.56 [−0.88, −0.25]	0.003
Autonomy	5.49 (1.00)	5.12 (0.92)	0.38 [0.07, 0.69]	0.071
Sustainability orientation	4.23 (0.97)	4.58 (0.93)	−0.36 [−0.67, −0.05]	0.071
Development and work demands	5.20 (0.89)	5.31 (0.77)	−0.13 [−0.44, 0.18]	0.774

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Positive g values indicate higher means among business students; negative values indicate higher means among MPA students. Values of about 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 are commonly interpreted as small, medium, and large differences. The p values are adjusted using the Holm method. N = 145 business students and 56 MPA students.

Table 4. Linear regression models of preference for public-sector employment.

Predictor	Business Students				MPA Students			
	B	β	p	VIF	B	β	p	VIF
Gender	0.12	0.04	0.142	1.20	0.21	0.07	0.170	1.15
Work environment	−0.09	−0.06	0.413	1.84	−0.078	−0.05	0.671	1.77
Contribution (society, etc.)	0.30	0.22	0.001 ***	1.36	0.37	0.20	0.049 **	1.69
Status and prestige	−0.22	−0.16	0.012 **	1.11	−0.22	−0.14	0.215	1.58

Table 4. *Cont.*

Predictor	Business Students				MPA Students			
	B	β	<i>p</i>	VIF	B	β	<i>p</i>	VIF
Job security and flexibility	0.13	0.09	0.168	1.50	0.38	0.22	0.027 **	1.36
Teamwork	0.10	0.08	0.348	1.75	−0.01	−0.01	0.981	2.65
Autonomy	−0.01	−0.01	0.880	1.57	0.21	0.13	0.424	1.42
Sustainability orientation	0.15	0.10	0.153	1.83	−0.37	−0.24	0.034 **	1.45
Development and work demands	−0.14	−0.09	0.156	1.58	0.17	0.09	0.419	2.39
Model summary	Adjusted $R^2 = 0.219$; $N = 134$				Adjusted $R^2 = 0.145$; $N = 45$			

Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; VIF = variance inflation factor. ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5. Linear regression model of preference for private-sector employment among business students.

Private-Sector Preference	Business Students			
Predictor	B	β	<i>p</i>	VIF
Gender	0.08	0.03	0.239	1.20
Work environment	0.21	0.15	0.017 **	1.85
Contribution (society, etc.)	−0.04	−0.03	0.620	1.36
Status and prestige	0.44	0.35	0.001 ***	1.32
Job security and flexibility	−0.24	−0.18	0.003 ***	1.50
Teamwork	−0.11	−0.10	0.21	1.75
Autonomy	0.05	0.04	0.581	1.57
Sustainability orientation	−0.15	−0.11	0.081 *	1.83
Development and work demands	0.21	0.14	0.010 **	1.58
Model summary	Adjusted $R^2 = 0.441$; $N = 134$			

Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; VIF = variance inflation factor. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

5.1. Group Differences in Career Preferences (RQ1)

RQ1 shows clear descriptive differences in sector preference and in some job attributes. These differences cannot be attributed to the programmes because the groups also differ in their professional and demographic backgrounds.

Interpretation. All six group differences are large and remain statistically significant after the Holm adjustment. The largest difference concerns preference for the private sector ($g = 1.82$), for which business students had the higher mean. The negative values for preference for the public sector ($g = -1.34$) and willingness to work in the public sector ($g = -1.37$) show large differences in the opposite direction, with higher means among MPA students. These findings describe differences between the groups and should not be interpreted as effects of the educational programmes.

Interpretation. The largest difference concerns societal contribution ($g = -0.90$), which was more important to MPA students. Status and prestige were more important to business students ($g = 0.59$), while teamwork was more important to MPA students ($g = -0.56$). Both differences are medium in size. The differences in work environment, autonomy, and sustainability orientation are smaller and are no longer statistically significant after the Holm adjustment. The groups gave almost identical ratings to job security and flexibility ($g = -0.03$), an important finding in this study.

5.2. Factors Associated with Public-Sector Preference (RQ2)

Table 4 presents separate exploratory regression models of public-sector preference. All eight dimensions and gender were entered simultaneously. Standardised coefficients (β) are reported alongside unstandardised coefficients to make the relative magnitude of

associations easier to assess. The variance inflation factors are below conventional thresholds, but this does not remove concerns about conceptual overlap, omitted background variables, missing-data selection, or unstable estimates in the small MPA sample.

Societal contribution was positively associated with public-sector preference in both groups ($B = 0.30$ for business students and $B = 0.37$ for MPA students). This is a descriptive similarity. Without a pooled model including interaction terms, the analysis cannot show that the association is equally strong in the two groups.

Status and prestige had a negative coefficient in both groups ($B = -0.22$), but the coefficient was statistically significant only among business students. Business students who placed greater importance on status and prestige therefore tended to report a weaker preference for the public sector.

Job security and flexibility had the largest positive coefficient in the MPA model ($B = 0.38$), while sustainability orientation had a negative coefficient. These estimates should be treated with particular caution because the model includes nine predictors but only 45 complete cases, and because sustainability overlaps conceptually with societal contribution. The results may reflect unstable estimates or suppression and are best viewed as a basis for further research. None of the other coefficients were statistically significant.

5.3. Factors Associated with Private-Sector Preference Among Business Students (RQ3)

Table 5 shows that status and prestige had the strongest positive association with private-sector preference among business students. Job security and flexibility had a negative association. Work environment and development and work demands had smaller positive associations. These are conditional relationships within the sample and should not be interpreted as causal effects.

6. Discussion

6.1. Differences Between Business and MPA Students (RQ1 and RQ2)

The clearest empirical result is the contrast in sector orientation: business students preferred private-sector employment, whereas MPA students preferred public-sector employment. This difference is descriptively large, but it is not evidence of a programme effect because the groups also differ in age, experience, occupation, and career stage. Relative to Holum et al. (2024), the business-student pattern is best viewed as confirmation and a benchmark; the incremental evidence comes from placing it beside the experienced MPA group and examining whether the same job attributes are associated with sector preference in both samples.

The findings also clarify the limits of the theoretical claims. Societal contribution was more important to MPA students and was positively associated with public-sector preference in both groups. This supports Proposition 1 and is consistent with PSM, but it largely confirms an established relationship rather than constituting a new theoretical mechanism. Status and prestige showed the expected private-sector orientation, supporting Proposition 2. The results therefore suggest coexistence of public-service motives and utility-related considerations rather than a simple altruism-versus-self-interest divide.

The mixed dimensions are less straightforward. Teamwork differed between the groups at the mean level, but it was not a robust correlate of sector preference after the other dimensions were included. Autonomy and work environment showed only modest group differences. This is consistent with the idea that such attributes can be supplied in both sectors and should not be assigned mechanically to either PSM or self-interest.

The exploratory composite nature of the measures is important for interpretation. 'Job security and flexibility' combines security, stability, and work-life balance, while 'development and work demands' combines learning and varied tasks with hard work

and extended hours. An observed regression coefficient therefore cannot identify which component is driving the association. These results should be read as evidence about broad bundles of job attributes, not about theoretically established underlying dimensions.

The groups gave almost identical ratings to job security and flexibility, which qualifies a common expectation that security strongly differentiates public- and private-sector attraction. Proposition 3 therefore receives limited support at the group-comparison level, although the composite was positively associated with public-sector preference in the small MPA model and negatively associated with private-sector preference among business students. Because the measure also includes work–life balance, these coefficients cannot be interpreted as effects of job security alone.

Norway's welfare state, income protection, and relatively secure labour market provide one plausible context for the weak group difference in the security-flexibility composite. The present data do not measure perceptions of these institutions and contain no cross-national comparison. The institutional account is therefore a contextual hypothesis, not an empirically tested mechanism.

The MPA regression requires particular caution. With 45 complete cases and nine predictors, standardised estimates can help with scale comparison but do not solve the underlying precision problem. The sustainability coefficient is especially uncertain because sustainability overlaps with societal contribution and the sign differs from the simple group comparison. The negative coefficient is therefore treated as a possible suppression or sampling result rather than substantive evidence that sustainability discourages public-sector preference.

Taken together, RQ2 provides descriptive rather than formal cross-group evidence. Societal contribution has the same positive direction in both models, but equality of coefficients was not tested. Future work should use a larger pooled sample, group-by-attribute interactions, clearer single-construct measures, and ordered-response or other robustness models.

6.2. Business Students' Preference for the Private Sector (RQ3)

Among business students, job security and flexibility were negatively associated with private-sector preference. This finding is consistent with the suggestion that applicants who value security are more likely to prefer public employment, but the combined measure does not isolate job security (Santinha et al., 2021). Work–life balance may also contribute to the association.

Status and prestige were the strongest positive correlate of private-sector preference. This result accords with research linking sector choice to person-organisation and person-job fit and to expectations concerning advancement and rewards (Christensen & Wright, 2011; Vogel & Satzger, 2024).

Sustainability orientation had a small negative coefficient in the private-sector model. Because the measure overlaps with societal contribution and gave mixed results across the analyses, it cannot be concluded that sustainability values reduce the appeal of private-sector work. A clearer measure is needed before this finding can be assessed.

Work environment and development and work demands had modest positive associations with private-sector preference. The latter measure combines learning and varied tasks with hard work and extended working hours and should not be interpreted as skill development alone. Business students may associate this broader combination with private employers, although both sectors can offer similar opportunities and demands.

Gender, societal contribution, teamwork, and autonomy were not statistically significant in the private-sector model. Given the sample size and the selection of respondents into business education, these results do not show that the factors are unimportant. In

particular, the absence of a gender coefficient does not show that gender equality explains sector choice.

7. Conclusions

This exploratory study examined career attitudes and sector preferences among two groups of students in Norway with different educational and professional backgrounds. The groups differed clearly, but programme affiliation cannot be separated from self-selection, age, experience, occupation, and career stage.

Business students reported a stronger preference for the private sector and placed more importance on status and prestige. MPA students reported a stronger preference for the public sector and placed more importance on societal contribution and teamwork. These differences remained statistically significant after the Holm adjustment. The smaller differences in work environment, autonomy, and sustainability orientation did not.

Societal contribution was positively associated with public-sector preference in both groups. This suggests that public-service motives may also be found among students outside public-administration programmes. However, the separate regressions neither show that the coefficients are equal nor explain how the preferences developed. Public employers seeking business graduates may still benefit from explaining how professional roles contribute to society and create public value.

The groups did not differ in their ratings of job security and flexibility. This measure was positively associated with public-sector preference in the small MPA model and negatively associated with private-sector preference among business students. Because it combines security and work–life balance, neither result should be described as an effect of job security alone. Norway’s welfare and labour-market institutions offer one possible explanation, but this mechanism was not measured and should be tested in cross-national research.

The findings have practical implications. Public employers should communicate opportunities for meaningful societal contribution, collaboration, professional development, responsibility, and advancement. Educational institutions can also broaden students’ knowledge of careers across sectors and challenge overly simplified assumptions about public and private employment.

The study has several important limitations. Participation was voluntary, the sample was non-random and drawn from only two institutions, and self-selection bias may be present. The groups differed in background characteristics for which usable control variables were unavailable. The cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions. Several standard diagnostics were unavailable for the exploratory factor analysis, two retained items had loadings below 0.40, and the measures of contribution and sustainability overlap. Two composite labels also cover items with rather different content. The original case-level data were not available in the archived analysis material used for this revision, so the requested ordered-response robustness models, bootstrap estimates, and coefficient confidence intervals could not be added without re-estimating the analyses from those data. Finally, the MPA regression was based on only 45 complete cases and included nine predictors, increasing the risk of suppression and unstable estimates. Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples, measure previous sector employment and career stage, validate the scales, use pooled models with interaction terms and bootstrap confidence intervals, compare OLS with ordered-response models, and test institutional explanations over time and across countries.

The contribution is deliberately modest. The study confirms several established relationships, especially the link between societal contribution and public-sector preference, while adding comparative evidence from a professionally experienced MPA group and

showing that broad job-attribute bundles do not always separate the sectors in the way suggested by simpler theoretical contrasts. The Norwegian institutional setting helps motivate these questions but is not itself tested as a causal explanation. Future research should build on this exploratory evidence with larger samples, cleaner measures, pooled interaction models, and cross-national designs.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was an anonymous questionnaire survey concerning students' career preferences. The researchers had no means of tracing individual responses back to particular students. Two official regulatory sources explain why prior approval or registration was not required: The Norwegian Health Research Act, Section 2 (Substantive scope of the Act). The Act states that it applies to "medical and health research on human beings, human biological material or personal health data." Under Section 9, projects falling within this scope require prior approval from a Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REK). The present study concerns educational and career preferences and does not involve medical or health research, biological material, patients, medical interventions, or personal health data. It therefore falls outside the substantive scope specified in Section 2. Accordingly, the requirement for prior REK approval under Section 9 does not apply. Sikt–Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research: "Carrying out a project without processing personal data". Sikt is a Norwegian government agency owned by the Ministry of Education and Research and provides national data-protection guidance for universities and research institutions. Its official guidance states under the heading "Carrying out a project without processing personal data": "If your project processes anonymous information, you do not need to notify Sikt of this." The same webpage specifically identifies paper questionnaires without names or indirectly identifying information as an appropriate procedure for collecting anonymous data. Because the survey collected only anonymous information, it was not subject to notification or assessment by Sikt. As the study was also outside the field of medical and health research, it was not subject to approval by REK. Thus, under the applicable Norwegian regulatory framework, ethics committee approval was not waived retrospectively; rather, no such approval was legally or institutionally required for this category of anonymous, non-medical research.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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