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Perspectives on public and private sector and students' choice of career

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Abstract

This study investigates students' perceptions of the public sector and examines how these views influence their career preferences. Data were collected via a questionnaire distributed to 190 students in Norway, comprising undergraduate business students and experienced public-sector employees enrolled in a Master of Public Administration (MPA) programme. Employing quantitative methods, including t-tests and correlation analysis, the study identifies significant differences in attitudes towards the public sector between these two groups, as well as between students aspiring to careers in the public versus the private sector. The public sector is generally perceived as more bureaucratic, less flexible, and less conducive to rapid career progression. By contrast, the private sector is associated with greater efficiency and enhanced individual career opportunities. In particular, access to a professional network is seen as highly advantageous in the private sector. These insights are especially relevant for policymakers and public-sector employers seeking to attract talent in an increasingly competitive labour market, particularly amid ongoing workforce shortages.

Keywords: career, attitudes towards public sector, business students, management students

Introduction

Norway is currently facing a labour shortage, with both the public and private sectors increasingly competing for qualified candidates. As this competition intensifies, gaining a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students' career choices becomes ever more critical.

Recent years have seen a decline in interest in public sector careers, a trend observed by Bright and Graham (2015). While previous research has documented substantial national variations in career preferences (Ko & Jun, 2015) and explored the divide between public and private sector career trajectories (e.g., Pedersen, 2013; Piatak et al., 2020), the topic remains relatively underexplored—particularly within the Norwegian context.

Much of the existing literature emphasises Public Sector Motivation (PSM) as a key explanatory factor (Awan et al., 2020; Das 2023; Ritz et al., 2021), suggesting that individuals attracted to the public sector differ from their private sector counterparts in terms of values and motivations (Ng & Gossett, 2013). Nevertheless, the direction and causality of these differences remain contested (Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Breitsohl & Ruhle, 2016). Norway, characterised by high levels of public trust in governmental institutions (OECD, 2022), offers a particularly compelling setting for further examination.

Van der Wal and Oosterbaan (2013) highlight notable differences in career preferences between MPA (Master of Public Administration) and MBA (Master of Business Administration) students. Similarly, Korac et al. (2019) argue that PSM is one among several critical factors shaping public sector career choices.

This study contributes to the existing literature by comparing the career perceptions and preferences of two groups in Norway: undergraduate business students and experienced public sector employees undertaking an MPA programme. It investigates how their career aspirations correlate with their perceptions of public sector characteristics. While each group offers distinct perspectives, the contrasts between them remain insufficiently explored, rendering this analysis highly relevant to both national and international audiences.

Theory, literature review and research questions

Existing literature provides strong evidence that career preferences and perceptions of the public sector differ significantly between students associated with public sector education and those enrolled in traditional business programmes (Bertrand et al., 2020; Opstad, 2022). These differences are often rooted in varying motivations, values, and expectations concerning work environments, career opportunities, and the role of different sectors in society.

To explore these distinctions, the present study adopts a theoretical model comprising five key dimensions that influence students' career preferences and evaluations of the public sector. These dimensions include perceptions of bureaucracy and inefficiency; attitudes towards the size of the public sector; views on flexibility, working conditions, and profit orientation; confidence in the sector; and the importance of networks in achieving career goals. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework underpinning the study, illustrating how these five dimensions are hypothesised to influence students' sectoral preferences.

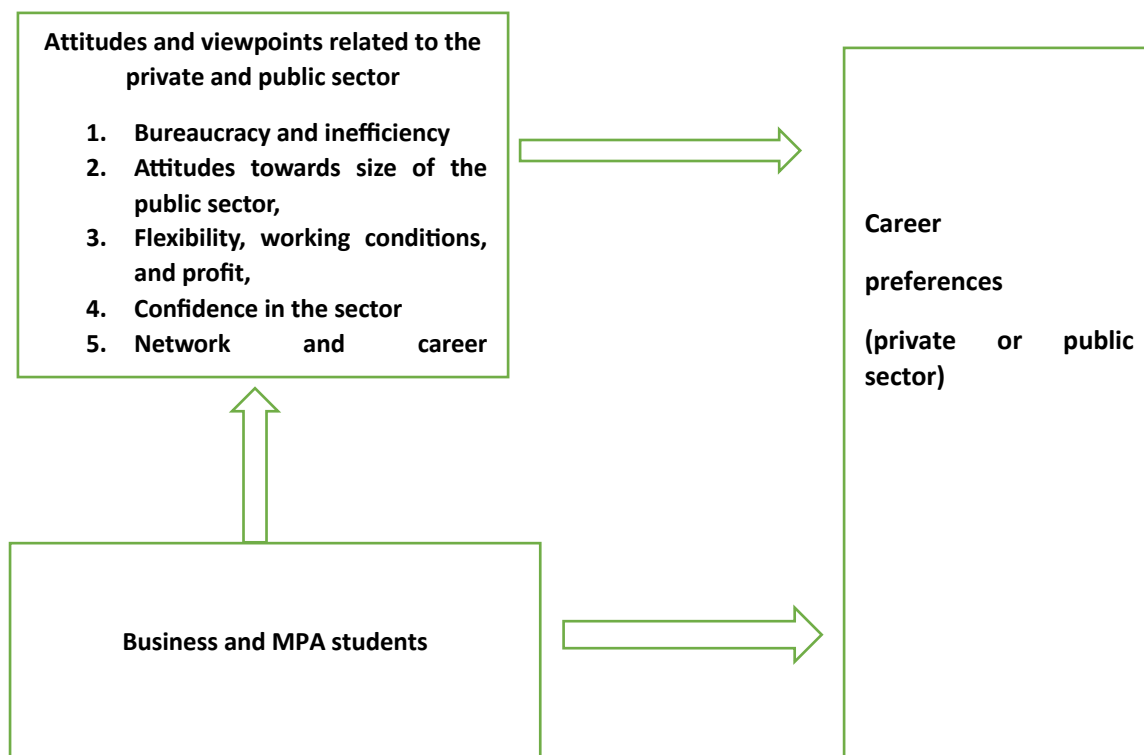


Figure 1 The model

Although each of these factors has been examined individually in previous research, their relative importance may vary depending on national context and educational background. Norway's unique socio-political environment, characterised by high levels of trust in public institutions, offers a particularly compelling context for further investigation. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by examining how these five factors shape the career preferences of two distinct groups: traditional business students and public sector employees enrolled in an executive MPA programme. It is anticipated that the influence of these dimensions will differ between the groups.

The following sections provide a detailed discussion of each factor, drawing on existing research to contextualise their relevance. This review forms the basis for the formulation of the study's research questions, which aim to identify systematic differences in attitudes towards the public sector and the underlying drivers of career choice. Each dimension will be discussed individually, with each section concluding in the presentation of one or two specific research questions (RQ).

1. Bureaucracy and Inefficiency

Working in the public sector often requires individuals to adapt to formal rules, procedures, and hierarchical structures (Egeberg & Stigen, 2021). While some perceive bureaucracy as providing a stable and structured environment, others view it as rigid and inefficient, potentially limiting personal growth and innovation (Bertrand et al., 2020).

Students with high levels of Public Service Motivation (PSM) are more likely to accept or even prefer bureaucratic environments, viewing them as consistent with their values and professional goals (Vandenabeele, 2008). By contrast, those who associate bureaucracy with inefficiency may be more inclined to pursue careers in the private sector, which is often seen as more flexible, responsive, and career-oriented (Ronquillo et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, perceptions of bureaucracy do not affect all students uniformly. Some may regard it as a barrier to advancement, while others value the predictability, job security, and clear organisational structure it offers. This variation highlights the importance of individual values and career aspirations in shaping attitudes towards bureaucratic environments.

Based on this discussion, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: To what extent is there a relationship between students' perceptions of bureaucracy and inefficiency in the public sector and their sectoral job preferences?

2. Attitudes Towards the Size of the Public Sector

The size of the public sector has long been a subject of political and academic debate, often reflecting deeper ideological beliefs about the appropriate role of government in society (Benito et al., 2015; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2022). A larger public sector is commonly associated with the provision of welfare services, redistribution of resources, and societal stability, while critics argue that it may hinder economic dynamism and individual initiative (Boyne, 2002).

For students considering career paths, perceptions of public sector size may carry significant implications. Those aspiring to careers in the public sector may prefer a larger public sector, viewing it as offering greater employment opportunities, career stability, and avenues for public service (Perry & Wise, 1990). Conversely, students oriented towards private sector careers may perceive an expanding public sector as a threat to market opportunities and private initiative, potentially favouring a more limited governmental role (Andersen & Jakobsen, 2011).

In the Norwegian context—where the public sector plays a particularly prominent role in the economy—the size and expansion of the public sector may be viewed either positively or critically, depending on individual career aspirations and ideological leanings.

In light of this discussion, the resulting research question is proposed:

RQ2: To what extent do students' attitudes towards the size of the public sector influence their sectoral career preferences.

3. Flexibility, Working Conditions, and Profit Orientation

Flexibility, working conditions, and profit orientation are key factors influencing individuals' career choices between the public and private sectors. Kozjek and Ferjan (2015) report that employees in the private sector tend to value various forms of flexibility—such as more diverse work tasks, greater autonomy in adjusting work effort, and performance-based wage structures—that are often less prevalent in the public sector. For many job seekers, such flexibility plays a crucial role in evaluating potential employers.

Beyond workplace flexibility, ideological and ethical considerations also shape sectoral preferences. In fields such as healthcare and education, debates persist over whether services should be delivered publicly or privately. Advocates of public provision argue that it ensures fairness and accessibility for all citizens, whereas critics of privatisation often contend that it emphasises profit over equity, potentially exacerbating inequality (Valls et al., 2022). Conversely, proponents of private provision emphasise innovation, efficiency, and responsiveness to individual needs (Nafsia, 2023).

Perceptions of profit orientation can therefore significantly influence attitudes towards sectoral employment. Individuals who believe that the private sector places excessive emphasis on profitability may be more inclined to prefer public sector roles, which are often perceived as being motivated by public service rather than market incentives.

Asseburg and Homberg (2020) highlight that attraction to a sector is significantly shaped by salary levels, working conditions, and career development opportunities—factors that are central to the public–private divide.

Based on these insights, the following research questions are put forward:

RQ3a: To what extent do students prefer employment in the sector they perceive as more flexible and offering better working conditions and career opportunities?

RQ3b: Are individuals who believe the private sector places too much emphasis on profitability more likely to prefer employment in the public sector?

4. Confidence in the Sector

Confidence in a sector's stability, integrity, and societal value is another important factor influencing students' career preferences. According to Latan et al. (2022), trust and social responsibility are important factors for career satisfaction. High levels of trust in public institutions, as observed in Norway (OECD, 2022), may strengthen the attractiveness of public sector employment by reinforcing perceptions of job security, ethical standards, and societal contribution.

Individuals who view the public sector as trustworthy and effective may be more inclined to pursue careers within it, aligning their career choices with a broader sense of public purpose (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015). Conversely, scepticism towards public institutions—whether related to concerns about inefficiency, politicisation, or lack of innovation—may drive individuals towards the private sector, which is often associated with meritocratic advancement and performance-based rewards (Taylor & Taylor, 2011).

Perceived confidence is thus not only a matter of institutional trust but also linked to expectations regarding career development and professional fulfilment. If students perceive one sector as offering more promising or ethically sound career paths, they are likely to factor this into their employment decisions.

This argument gives rise to the research question below:

RQ4: To what extent does students' confidence in the public sector influence their preference for public versus private sector employment?

5. Networks in Achieving Career Goals

Access to professional networks is widely recognised as a critical factor in career development (Seibert et al., 2001). Networks can facilitate access to job opportunities, mentorship, and career advancement, and their importance may differ between the public and private sectors.

In the private sector, career progression is often closely tied to networking and informal recruitment processes, where professional contacts can provide significant advantages (Ng & Burke, 2005). In contrast, public sector employment tends to rely more heavily on formal, transparent recruitment procedures, which may reduce the relative advantage of personal networks but can also limit opportunities for informal career acceleration (Pedersen, 2013).

Students who value strong professional networks as critical to their career success may therefore be more attracted to the private sector. Conversely, those who place greater trust in merit-based, formal hiring processes may find the public sector more appealing.

Recognising the role of networks in shaping career opportunities, the following research question is proposed:

RQ5: To what extent does the perceived importance of professional networks in career advancement influence students' preferences for employment in the public or private sector?

Methodology

The aim of this study is to enhance understanding of students' career preferences, particularly in relation to the public and private sectors. To investigate this, a questionnaire was developed and distributed in 2022 to students at two higher education institutions in Norway. Participation was voluntary, and the overall response rate was approximately 50% of students enrolled in the relevant courses. The COVID-19 pandemic likely contributed to lower attendance and participation than would normally be expected.

To ensure a broader perspective on student preferences, two distinct groups were surveyed. The first group consisted of undergraduate business students, most of whom are enrolled in a bachelor's degree program in administration and economics. A high proportion of these students typically continue into graduate-level studies in similar fields.

The second group comprised students enrolled in a MPA program—an experience-based degree primarily targeting professionals in the public sector. These students are generally over the age of 30 and seek to strengthen their career prospects either within the public sector or through a potential transition to the private sector. Many have a professional background in fields such as education or healthcare, for example, as teachers or nurses.

The questionnaire consisted of a series of statements rated on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated “completely disagree” and 7 indicated “completely agree.” This quantitative design enabled the systematic analysis of student perceptions regarding sectoral characteristics and career motivations. A total of 135 responses were collected from business students at NTNU and 55 responses from MPA students.

The survey was developed by the author, drawing conceptual and structural inspiration from prior studies, particularly Easterling and Smith (2008). The instrument was tailored to capture students' views on factors such as bureaucracy, sector size, working conditions, flexibility, profitability, trust, and the role of networks in career advancement.

Research Instruments and Analytical Approach

To analyze the data, two primary statistical methods were employed:

1. Comparison of means was used to identify statistically significant differences between the two student groups across key dimensions of interest.
2. Correlation analysis was conducted to assess the strength and direction of relationships between variables, such as sector preference and perceptions of sector characteristics.

Although a linear regression analysis was initially considered to explore the combined effect of multiple factors on career preferences, it was not implemented due to the limited sample size within the MPA group. The small number of observations in this subgroup reduced the model's reliability and statistical power.

The use of multiple analytical methods provides a more nuanced understanding of student attitudes. While comparisons of means highlight intergroup differences, correlation analysis offers insight into how individual perceptions may be related.

Findings and Analyses

This section presents the findings from the survey, focusing on differences between business students and MPA students across key dimensions related to sectoral career preferences. The results are organised according to the research questions (RQs) and are supported by data from Tables 1 and 2.

Sectoral Career Preferences

As shown in Table 1, there is a significant difference between the two student groups regarding preferred sector of employment. MPA students report a markedly stronger preference for public sector careers than business students, with mean scores of 4.82 and 2.93, respectively. Conversely, business students exhibit a considerably stronger preference for private sector employment, with mean scores of 5.34 compared to 2.98 among MPA students. This finding confirms previous research suggesting that most business students predominantly envision private sector careers (Pedersen, 2013). Henstra and McGowan (2016) suggest that part of the explanation for the declining interest in the public sector is due to a generational shift among the youth.

Although there is good gender balance across the sample overall, a predominance of men is observed among business students, whereas women are in the majority among MPA students.

Perceptions of Bureaucracy and Inefficiency (RQ1)

The survey results show that students, in general, perceive the public sector as cumbersome, bureaucratic, and inefficient, with mean scores exceeding 4.0. This is in line with previous findings (Newman et al., 2022). Interestingly, MPA students—despite their direct experience in the sector—perceive it as even more bureaucratic than business students do, with mean scores of 5.29 and 4.73, respectively. Greater knowledge of the public sector thus appears to reinforce, rather than challenge, perceptions of bureaucracy.

Table 2 reveals a significant pattern among business students: those who prefer the private sector perceive the public sector as more bureaucratic and inefficient, while those who would like to work in the public sector hold more positive views. Among MPA students, a similar trend is observed, albeit with lower correlation values and slightly weaker significance.

These findings support RQ1, indicating that negative perceptions of bureaucracy are closely linked to a preference for private sector careers.

Table 1: Presentation of the results of the survey, using a Likert scale (1-7), are presented, except for gender for all respondents and broken down by the two student groups. A standard two-sided t-test was used to determine if there are significant mean differences.

	All		Business students (N=135)	MPA students (N=55)	Difference (Business-MPA students)
	Mean	St. dev	Mean	Mean	
Prefer Public sector	3.47	1.64	2.93	4.82	-1.895***

Prefer Private sector	4.68	1.67	5.34	2.98	2.354***
Gender (1:M,0:F)	.52	.50	.58	.36	.225
1.Bureaucracy and inefficiency					
The public sector is bureaucratic	4.89	1.25	4.73	5.29	-.563***
There is a lot of bureaucracy in the private sector	4.06	.98	4.18	3.75	.432 ***
The public sector is inefficient	4.19	1.43	4.40	3.92	.375
The public sector is as efficient as private sector	3.10	1.29	3.01	3.07	-.363*
The public sector is more cumbersome than the private sector	4.84	1.31	4.75	5.00	-.248
2.Attitudes towards size of the public sector					
The public sector in Norway is too large	3.69	1.34	3.71	3.62	.095
3.Flexibility, working conditions, and profit					
a)There is a great deal of flexibility in private sector	4.78	1.14	4.99	4.26	.725***
a)It is easier to achieve good working conditions in the private sector than in the public sector	4.81	1.36	4.66	5.13	-.468**
b) The private sector focus too much on profitability	4.32	1.47	4.19	4.60	-.413*
4. Confidence					
I have great confidence in managers in the public sector	4.51	1.27	4.50	4.58	-.079
I have great confidence in managers in the private sector	4.46	1.18	4.47	3.97	.599***
5.Network and career goals					
One must have the right attitudes to make a career in the private sector	4.59	1.33	4.72	4.22	.506**
One must have the right attitudes to make a career in the public sector	4.49	1.34	4.46	4.60	-.137
You depend on a good network and acquaintances to be successful career-wise in the public sector	3.93	1.34	3.86	4.09	-.230
You depend on a good network and acquaintances to be successful career-wise in the private sector	5.19	1.13	5.24	5.05	.184
*p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01					

Table 2: Presentation of Correlation coefficient for the Two Student Groups Divided by Preferences for the Private and Public Sectors

	MPA students		Business Students	
	Private	Public	Private	Public
1.Bureaucracy and inefficiency				
The public sector is bureaucratic	.111	-.147	.376***	-.290***
There is a lot of bureaucracy in the private sector	.151	.023	.167	-.068
The public sector is inefficient	.050	-.100	.352***	-.287***
The public sector is as efficient as private sector	-.217	-.014	-.339***	.297***
The public sector is more cumbersome than the private sector	.087	-.183	.264***	-.271***
2.Size of the public sector				

The public sector in Norway is too large	.365***	- .438***	.263***	-.108
3.Flexibility, working conditions, and profit				
a)There is a great deal of flexibility in private sector	.005	.050	.316***	- .319***
a)It is easier to achieve good working conditions in the private sector than in the public sector	.102	-.335**	.132	-.018
b)The private sector focus too much on profitability	-.108	.175	-.288***	.277***
4.Trust and confidence				
I have great confidence in managers in the public sector	-.334**	.113	-.221***	.202**
I have great confidence in managers in the private sector	.102	-.335**	.368***	-.216**
5.Network and attitudes for obtaining jobs achieving career goals				
One must have the right attitudes to make a career in the private sector	.072	.069	.229***	- .239***
One must have the right attitudes to make a career in the public sector	-.014	-.139	-.088	.133
You depend on a good network and acquaintances to be successful career-wise in the public sector	.033	-.245*	.016	.167
You depend on a good network and acquaintances to be successful career-wise in the private sector	-.013	-.095	.015	.026
*p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01				

Attitudes Towards the Size of the Public Sector (RQ2)

There are also clear effects regarding perceptions of the size of the public sector, with the strongest effects observed among MPA students. As indicated in Table 2, a larger public sector is associated with better job opportunities and career prospects. Students aspiring to public sector careers prefer that the public sector remains large, whereas those aiming for private sector careers tend to favour its contraction, potentially at the expense of the public sector.

These findings align with previous research by Cassel et al. (2018) and Vigoda (2000) and largely confirm the assumptions underlying RQ2.

Views on Flexibility, Working Conditions, and Profit Orientation (RQ3a and RQ3b)

The results further show that business students are significantly more likely than MPA students to believe that the private sector offers greater flexibility (Table 1). Table 2 reveals a strong divergence within groups: individuals preferring private sector careers perceive significantly higher flexibility in the private sector, while public sector-oriented students are less convinced. This impact is especially strong among MPA students (significant at 1 percent level).

Students with professional experience in the public sector also believe that it is easier to obtain good working conditions in the private sector. MPA students reported an average score of 5.13 on this item, significantly higher than that of business students. Table 2 shows a clear divide based on the sector students prefer to pursue a career in. Those who choose the public sector disagree with the statement that the private sector offers better working conditions, and this effect is strongest among business students (significant at 5 per cent level). RQ3a is confirmed.

A positive correlation emerges between the belief that "the private sector focuses too much on profitability" and a preference for public sector employment. These patterns are particularly strong among MPA students and statistically significant at the 10 per cent level. Concerns about excessive profit focus in the private sector, especially among those currently or formerly employed in the public sector, are consistent with previous findings (Valls et al., 2022), supporting RQ3b. It is also worth noting the marked and significant distinction on this question among business students, depending on their sector preference. There are many factors that may influence this assessment, and this has been analyzed by, among others, Jeurissen et al. (2021).

Confidence in Sector Management (RQ4)

Trust in sector management shows an interesting pattern. While trust in public sector management is relatively similar between business and MPA students (Table 1), a notable difference appears in their views on the private sector. MPA students report significantly lower trust in private sector management, providing support for RQ4.

For both groups, there is a negative strong correlation between the preferred sector and trust in the opposing sector. Those preferring the private sector tend to have less trust in public sector management, and vice versa. There is a positive correlation between sectoral preference and trust in the chosen sector for both groups, although this effect is weaker and statistically insignificant for MPA students. This mixed picture is consistent with international research on trust as a determinant of career choice (Han, 2010). It may also reflect the Norwegian context, characterised by generally high levels of trust in institutions across both sectors (Alsos & Trygstad, 2019), which may moderate the effects typically found elsewhere.

Networks and Sectoral Career Preferences (RQ5)

Regarding the importance of networking for career advancement, little difference exists between the two groups (Table 1). However, business students believe that possessing the right attitudes is more important for success in the private sector, a difference that is statistically significant.

Table 2 shows that those favouring private sector careers place greater importance on the right attitudes for success, while students preferring public sector employment are more sceptical of this view. Among MPA students, there is a negative correlation between the importance attributed to networking and preference for public sector careers, suggesting that qualifications, rather than personal contacts, are considered more decisive within public sector career paths.

These results are consistent with international studies emphasising the role of networking and sector-specific career strategies (Chiappa, 2020), although the effects appear somewhat weaker in the Norwegian context, likely reflecting characteristics of the Nordic labour market (Opheim, 2007).

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the relatively small sample size of MPA students limits the generalisability of the findings. While the data provides valuable insights, particularly for comparative purposes, caution should be exercised when interpreting the results or applying them to broader populations.

Second, both the public and private sectors exhibit substantial internal diversity. This heterogeneity complicates analysis, as some parts of each sector may operate similarly to the other, while others differ significantly in terms of organisational structure, work culture, and expectations (O'Riordan & Humphreys, 2002). Thus, generalisations about "the public sector" or "the private sector" must be interpreted with care.

Future studies could benefit from a more fine-grained categorisation of sectors and roles to account better for internal variation.

Conclusion

This study highlights key differences in how students perceive the public and private sectors, with important implications for recruitment, workforce planning, and public management. Perceptions of bureaucracy, sector size, and working conditions are closely linked to career preferences: students who view the public sector as inefficient tend to favour private sector careers, while those with more positive perceptions of public service are more likely to seek public employment. These findings are especially relevant in the context of labour shortages and intensified competition for qualified talent.

Trust, networking, and attitudes toward career progression also influence sectoral preferences, albeit to a lesser extent. This may reflect the distinctive features of the Nordic labour market, including strong institutional trust and merit-based recruitment systems across sectors.

Overall, this study identifies distinct perceptual differences between business students and experienced MPA students. Business students display a stronger propensity to pursue private sector careers and hold comparatively more negative views of the public sector.

Future research should build on these findings by employing larger and more diverse samples, and by exploring sector-specific differences in greater depth.

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