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PUBLIC SERVICE BY CHOICE OR CHANCE? IMPLICATIONS FOR POSITIONING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore career intentions and motivations behind the aspirations of fourth-year students in the Public Administration bachelor program in Bulgaria for future careers in the public sector. The research, based on survey data, analyzed how academic satisfaction, perception of public sector career opportunities, and alignment with public service values shape student intentions and perceived preparedness for public service roles. Spearman's correlation and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to identify if there are relationships between academic satisfaction, perception of public sector job opportunities, commitment to public service values, and aspiration for careers in the public sector. No statistically significant differences were identified between students who chose Public Administration as their primary program and those who did not, indicating that motivation for public service can be shaped during the course of study. The findings provide insight for both universities and public sector organizations that wish to recruit and retain young professionals who will be committed to advancing the missions of these organizations through curricula, recruitment practices, and employer branding.

KEYWORDS: public administration, career choice, student motivation, public sector employment, public administration marketing

JEL: I23, J24, H83

INTRODUCTION

The study of university student attitudes toward employment in the public sector is essential if we are to adequately address the challenges that the public administration faces when trying to ensure highly qualified services. Various institutions and organizations at the regional and national levels are engaged in the provision of daily solutions to complex economic and societal challenges, such as the design and provision of services for citizens and businesses, economic and health inequalities, and crises, etc. Despite their fundamental responsibilities, they often face significant obstacles in their attempts to attract and retain young professionals, since the offers from the private sector are often more financially appealing.

Students enrolled in higher education in Public Administration are supposed to join the public sector after their graduation that will allow them to contribute to societal well-being and align their professional lives with core values such as altruism, justice, and equity. At the same

time, the long-standing perceptions related to bureaucratic inefficiency and ineffectiveness, lack of options for rapid career growth, and lower salaries compared to the private sector might deter even the most idealistically inclined persons. To properly address such challenges, it is important to understand the factors that influence students' preferences and expectations regarding public sector employment.

Public administration departments must therefore rethink how they present career opportunities to students. Rather than focusing solely on job security or long-term stability, they should highlight the opportunity to contribute to society, develop skills, and pursue meaningful goals. They could, for example, use real examples from young professionals, attend public sector events offer internships, and maintain an active presence on social networks. When students see that public service offers purpose, growth, and real-world impact, they are more likely to view it as a serious and appealing career path.

As an initial step toward a deeper understanding of young people's motivation to join the public sector administration in Bulgaria, the present study is guided by the following research question: *What are the key factors that influence students' attitudes and readiness to seek employment in the public sector?* The answer would reveal the intersection of their educational preparation, personal motivations, and career development opportunities to identify the key elements that might enhance their interest in public service roles.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Is university education important for career choice?

The relationship between students' satisfaction from their higher education experience and their intended career path has been extensively researched as a common theme could be found: students' satisfaction and career intentions are influenced by a complex interaction of cognitive (internal), contextual (external), and role-based (institutional) factors that affect how well students perceive their educational experience aligns with prospect career aspirations.

Cognitive factors, including the desire for self-fulfillment, autonomy, and social status, have been identified as key motivators behind career intentions in the research by Haase & Lautenschläger (2011). Contextual factors, such as family influence, job security, and perceived opportunities, further impact these decisions. Thus, students' career objectives are directly influenced by both their personal aspirations and perceptions of the environmental conditions. These findings align with motivational theories such as the Theory of Social Learning and the Theory of Planned Behavior, which stress the role of intention in translating motivations into action. Zengin et al. (2011) reinforce this perspective as they point out that students often do not view their education as sufficient to prepare them for the day-to-day realities of their intended career, which can further reduce the positive correlation between motivation and professional intent.

James and Yun (2018), based on a survey of Canadian college students, investigate the relationship between students' satisfaction with their higher education experience and employment expectations. Their findings reveal that students' satisfaction was determined by both the academic and social aspects of college experience (e.g., student-faculty interaction,

participation in clubs and organizations, and the perceived quality of education). Also, while students' employment expectations are an important aspect of the higher education experience, they did not negatively affect students' perceptions of their colleges. Instead, students' perceptions of their readiness to join the workforce and their beliefs about what skills they had acquired through their education were associated with higher levels of overall satisfaction. Therefore, universities should seek to improve the quality of their academic programs and better align their curricula with the needs of employers if they wish to increase their students' satisfaction and employment outcomes.

Vartic (2023) expands upon these ideas and adds a comparative generational point of view: while in 2005 self-esteem and respect were the primary drivers of students' career choices, at present, finding the work absorbing and financial stability become the most important drivers of students' career choices. This shift likely reflects changing social values, particularly due to technological advancements and global events such as COVID-19. To provide relevant and effective educational options for the next generation, higher education institutions will need to adapt their academic offerings to meet the changing priorities of Generation Z, who place greater value on independence, rapid reward, and a balance between their personal and professional lives.

Students' attitudes towards specific fields of study, such as economics and organizational theory, often reflect their personalities and their career paths. For example, Opstad (2022) reported that in a Norwegian context, male students tend to be more interested in economics, while female students are more interested in management and organizational theory. Students' preferences for specific academic disciplines often reflect their perceptions of whether these fields are relevant to future roles in leadership positions and the public sector.

Quinlan and Corbin (2023) further advance understanding of how university education may shape career preferences through a qualitative investigation of the evolution of university students' career interests. They challenge traditional vocational psychology theories that assume that career interests are stable from adolescence to adulthood. A survey of 663 graduates from a UK university found that 61% of students reported a change in their career interests during their time at university. These changes were characterized as either a refinement within the same field (30 %), a complete shift to a new career sector (19 %), an increase in clarity regarding their career (12 %), or a complete abandonment of previous career intentions (5 %). Academic curricula (46 %), placements/internships (14 %), work experiences (7 %), and cocurricular activities (6 %) were cited as factors influencing the development of the students' career interests. These results suggest that career interest is a dynamic process shaped by university experiences rather than a fixed trait, and thus emphasize the importance of the integration of career learning into disciplinary curricula.

1.2. Who is the public sector attractive to?

Despite its inherent bureaucracy and structural challenges, the public sector has been perceived as a provider of stable and meaningful employment, as it offers job security, career opportunities, and the chance to contribute to social welfare. If university departments of Public administration have information about what attracts young people to jobs in the public

sector, then they could use this information to develop messages that are more targeted and engaging, and develop curricula that are relevant to their needs and interests. The main question in this section is what type of people are attracted to such career options, and the answers might be found in existing academic research on the topic.

One of the primary motivations for pursuing a career in the public sector is alignment of the work with personal motivations. The term "Public Service Motivation" (PSM), which was developed by Perry and Wise (1990), refers to "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions" (p.368) and prioritizes societal and organizational welfare and describes it through dimensions of civic duty, social justice, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Subsequent studies have revealed the influence of antecedents such as parental modelling of altruism, religious socialization, and professional identification on the development of PSM, which differentiates public sector employees from their private sector counterparts (Perry, 1997).

Pfeifer (2008) utilized data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) and surveys of university students in Germany to examine how risk aversion affects preference for public sector employment. The results showed that high-risk averse students are more likely to enter the public sector due to the inherent job security, although pay may be lower than in the private sector. This wage differential reflects compensating mechanisms: the private sector pays a premium for risk tolerance, while public sector stability attracts risk-averse workers.

More recently, Asseburg & Homberg (2018) conducted a meta-analysis and surveyed 600 final-year students in Germany regarding PSM and sector rewards as predictors of public-sector attractiveness. Although PSM was the most significant predictor of sector preferences, its effect was enhanced when combined with nonmonetary rewards such as career stability and social impact. Additionally, Ni et al. (2022) surveyed 566 Chinese college students and analyzed how occupational values (e.g., prestige, stability) affect their willingness to apply for civil service positions. Political efficacy partially mediated the relationship between occupational values and the willingness to apply for public service positions, suggesting that students are more interested in pursuing a career in the public sector when they feel that their values and effort will have a meaningful impact. Sahinidis et al. (2019) further examined how cultural and economic factors affect students' perceptions of working in the public sector using university students in Belgium and Greece. In Greece, economic instability led students to view the public sector as a stable source of employment and therefore prefer it. In contrast, the students in Belgium viewed the public and private sectors as having similar potential and, therefore, had relatively balanced preferences.

Further, Sahinidis et al. (2019) explored the attitudes of university students in Belgium and Greece, as the goal was to try to understand how cultural and economic factors shape perceptions of public sector employment. In Greece, where economic instability has increased job insecurity, the public sector, for stability, made it a preferred choice among students. In contrast, Belgian students displayed more balanced preferences, influenced by both public- and private-sector opportunities. More recently, Dufault et al. (2023) examined the role of personality traits in influencing interest in public sector careers among Canadian first-year management students utilizing the Big Five personality model. They found that agreeableness

and neuroticism are positively correlated with public sector interest, while extraversion correlates negatively. Students seeking stability and team-oriented activities tend to be interested in public roles, and this is consistent with Pfeifer's (2008) finding that risk-averse personalities prefer the public sector. The researchers also found that federal government roles were viewed as slightly more attractive than municipal or provincial positions and, therefore, indicated that there may be nuances even within public sector preferences.

In the Bulgarian context, Bayrakova (2015) found that the most important work values for university students were economic security, personal development, utilization of ability, achievement, and advancement, while values such as physical prowess, risk, and authority were ranked lower. The results show a strong presence of intrinsic motivation and self-growth objectives, as well as a desire from students for secure long-term jobs and incomes. Notably, female students placed higher values on progress, diversity, altruism, and autonomy than did males; they placed greater value on physical prowess and authority. Thus, the attractiveness of public sector jobs for Bulgarian youth will be based upon whether the public sector can offer opportunities for personal growth and accomplishment combined with economic security, and if so, how well the public sector can balance those factors.

1.3. Can the public sector compete for the next generation?

Due to the increased difficulty in attracting young professionals into public service, the area of "marketing" public sector employment has been a growing area of research. The more recent literature explores how the attractiveness of potential employers can be communicated to Generation Z and to those with high public service motivation (PSM).

Ritz and Waldner (2011) argue that, due to demographic change and increasing competition in the labor market, Human Resource (HR) marketing will become a significant factor in the success of public sector institutions. The researchers surveyed Swiss university students and applied the Person-Organization Fit (P-O Fit) Theory to test the attractiveness of the public sector as an employer. The results found that PSM was a significant predictor of public sector attractiveness and related behaviors such as the likelihood of applying for a job or recommending an organization. While internal motivators are important, external motivators still exist; therefore, a balance must be established when developing employer branding initiatives.

Vandenabeele and Jager (2020) expand on the previous focus by conducting a survey-experiment to determine how recruitment messaging affects perceived attractiveness. PSM moderated the effect of public value-oriented recruitment messaging; specifically, organizations that include public values in their recruitment messaging became more attractive to those with higher levels of PSM. However, Vandenabeele and Jager also noted that the results did not fully align with theoretical expectations, suggesting that additional research is needed to develop practical HR applications and integrate PSM into recruitment strategies.

El-Menawy and Saleh (2023) examined the role of social media platforms as a mediator of the relationship between employer attractiveness and Generation Z's intention to apply for jobs.

Their structural equation model, based on a sample of Egyptian university students, shows that employer image and branding significantly affect Gen Z's decision-making process. Economic value, reputation, and development opportunities were prioritized over diversity and work-life balance. The relationship was partially mediated by social media platforms, which highlight the importance of employer branding strategies that are consistent with the values and digital behaviors of Gen Z. Similar conclusions reached Vieira et al. (2024), who found out that while employer branding is a valuable tool, current models rarely account for Gen Z's expectations such as flexibility, mobility, and technological integration. Traditional Talent Attraction Theories and Gen Z's labor market behaviors have created a disconnect between them, indicating a gap in practical frameworks for this generation.

Descos and Gospic (2019) also focused on Gen Z, but within the context of white-collar work environments. Using qualitative interviews, they identified six key factors that influence employment decisions: trust and freedom, flexibility, alignment of values, meaningful work, preference for small enterprises, and digital affinity. The results support the idea that organizational ethics and work-life fit are important factors for younger job seekers, as the importance of nonmonetary factors in employer branding and recruitment strategies increases.

More recent research further highlights the complexity of job preferences among public sector employees and confirms that both symbolic and instrumental factors play a significant role. In addition to a discrete choice experiment that found that symbolic attributes, such as alignment with public values and the organization's mission, influence public service job preferences, instrumental factors such as job stability and salary remain the most influential, even among individuals with high levels of PSM (Ripoll et al., 2025). The findings suggest that appeals to a mission-driven organization alone are insufficient and that public sector marketing should also emphasize concrete, tangible benefits. An analysis of online employer reviews showed that public sector employees prioritize social attributes such as interpersonal respect and team dynamics over purely altruistic motivations when recommending their employers (Vogel & Satzger, 2025). These challenge previous assumptions that inherent motivation is the primary driver of public employees and support a multidimensional approach to employer branding.

Taking into account these findings, university departments of public administration would face a strategic challenge: how to better position public service as a desirable career path. While government institutions are encouraged to adapt their recruitment messages to meet the expectations of Gen Z, academic programs must also evolve. The curricula should be revised to reflect contemporary public sector realities, such as digital transformation, policy innovation, and citizen participation. Students should be provided with coherent examples of how a degree in Public Administration can lead to meaningful careers. Collaboration between public institutions and universities, access to internships, and visible career outcomes can help students see the value of their studies.

1.4. Research hypothesis

Based on the literature reviewed on public sector employer attractiveness, PSM, and career decision making, the study examines the degree to which two dimensions of student engagement with public sector employment, intention and perceived preparedness, can be influenced by three elements of individual perception: academic satisfaction, perceived career opportunities, and alignment with public service values. The focus is on undergraduate public administration students. Students' reported perceptions of their educational experiences will be compared to determine whether they have a positive relationship with the intentions of those who pursue careers in the public sector, as well as with their self-assessed sense of preparation for such careers. These relationships are formally stated in the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1a (H1a):

Students who report higher satisfaction with their studies in public administration are more likely to intend to seek employment in the public sector after graduation.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b):

Students who report higher satisfaction with their studies in public administration are more likely to feel well prepared to enter the public sector workforce after graduation.

Hypothesis 2 (H2):

Students who perceive greater career opportunities and job stability in the public sector are more likely to intend to seek employment in this sector.

Hypothesis 3 (H3):

Students who report a greater alignment with public service values and socially important causes are more likely to express an intention to work in the public sector after graduation.

Hypothesis 4 (H4):

Students whose first program choice was the Public Administration program show a stronger alignment with public service values.

To test these hypotheses, a structured methodology is employed to capture the major factors that affect students' decisions about public sector careers. The study is based on the previously discussed theoretical frameworks and uses a quantitative approach to assess the effect of academic satisfaction, perceived career opportunities, and the alignment of students' values with those of the public sector.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

2.1. The sample

The survey was conducted in April 2025. The questionnaire was distributed to students from the Department of Management and administration in a university situated in Sofia, Bulgaria. They are in their fourth year of study in the accredited Bachelor program of Public Administration and were expected to graduate in July 2025. The group consists of 69

students, as those who attended lectures and seminars were given the option to complete the questionnaire. The number of students who responded was 36, which represents a response rate of 51,2 %. To ensure clarity and comprehension, the questionnaire was administered in the students' native language, Bulgarian.

2.2. Research method

The survey items were consolidated into a single online questionnaire comprising 39 questions and administered via the Microsoft Forms platform. Students were previously informed about the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their responses. They were explicitly told that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The questionnaire was designed as a pilot survey to explore factors that might influence Public Administration students' career intentions and serves as a starting point for future research efforts of the respective department. It includes three main sections that correspond to the researched constructs and represent the independent latent variables.

- satisfaction with studies (10 items);
- perceptions of career opportunities and stability in the public sector (10 items);
- personal values related to socially important causes (10 items).

Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale in descending order (strongly agree = 5 to strongly disagree = 1). The vertical configuration was chosen to avoid the selection bias (Maeda, 2015). Two questions measured the intention to seek employment in the public sector (1 item) and the preparedness to enter the public sector workforce upon graduation (1 item), as they represent the dependent variables.

At the end of the questionnaire, six questions (control variables) were added regarding demographic characteristics (3 items), the frequency of attendance at lectures and seminars (2 items), and a completed internship in a public organization (1 item). The author fully acknowledges the existence of validated questionnaires, but this pilot survey was deliberately kept concise and in line with the department's needs. The insights gained would guide the refinement and development of future iterations.

To assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales, the Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated for each of the three hypothesized constructs. Given the limited sample size ($N = 36$), the results are treated as preliminary but provide useful information for future scale refinement. There is good to excellent reliability across all scales (George & Mallery, 2016, p. 240). The first scale measuring satisfaction with studies in public administration (Construct 1) had a Cronbach alpha of 0.804, indicating good internal consistency. The second scale assessing perceptions of career opportunities and job stability in the public sector (Construct 2) yielded a coefficient of 0.864, which is again considered good. The highest reliability score was observed for the third scale, which aims to capture personal values and interest in socially significant causes (Construct 3), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.921 (excellent internal consistency).

2.3. Applied statistical analyses

To test the hypotheses, a set of nonparametric statistical techniques was applied. Given the ordinal nature of the data and the small sample size, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to assess the associations between the three primary constructs and the two dependent variables: (1) intention to seek public sector employment, and (2) perceived preparedness for public service roles (H1a, H1b, H2, and H3). To explore potential differences in PSM by students' initial program choice (H4), a Mann-Whitney U test was used. This nonparametric alternative to the independent samples t-test is suitable for comparing median scores between two independent groups, especially when the data are ordinal and nonnormal. This analytical approach, though exploratory, was selected to align with the research objectives and data structure, as it provided an initial empirical basis for future, more extensive research on public sector career motivations among university students. Data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25).

2.4. Limitations

The empirical research has its set of limitations that need to be taken into consideration while interpreting the results:

- 1) First, the number of participants in the study ($N = 36$) was relatively small, which limits the statistical power and generalization of the results. Although the response rate was reasonable for the class size, the results are exploratory and cannot represent trends of a larger group of public administration students in Bulgaria. Additionally, the sample had a disproportionately large number of women (72.2%), which may affect the results regarding value alignment and professional motivation.
- 2) The second limitation is that the survey data were collected in one university department in Sofia. Therefore, the findings may have been influenced by the specific local academic culture and the labor market situation at the time.
- 3) Third, all data were self-reported through a structured questionnaire, which introduces the potential for response bias, particularly social desirability bias. Students may have responded in ways they believed were expected of them, especially on items related to values, public service, and career intentions, despite assurances of anonymity.
- 4) Fourth, while the internal consistency of the scales was confirmed through acceptable Cronbach's alpha values, the questionnaire was developed as a pilot instrument specifically for this study. Although informed by existing theoretical frameworks, it would benefit from further refinement and formal validation before being used in larger-scale research.

Last but not least, the study employed a cross-sectional design and captured student perceptions at a single point in time. As a result, it is not possible to establish causality between the independent variables (e.g., satisfaction with studies, perceived opportunities, value alignment) and the dependent outcomes (e.g., intention to join the public sector). Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for tracking how these attitudes develop

over time and in response to real-world experiences, such as internships or exposure to the labor market. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings, but instead point to important elements of future research that can build on the preliminary insights offered here.

3. RESULTS

The demographic characteristics and educational backgrounds of the 36 respondents are outlined in Table 1. Females represent 72.2% of the sample population and males 27.8%. Most students (66.7%) are 22 years of age, and 22.2% are 23. Since the average age of the sample is 22.5 years, the sample falls into the Gen Z cohort. When students were asked which bachelor's degree program they initially preferred, 38.9% chose Public Administration. Almost all of the respondents (97.2%) indicated that they had completed an internship in a public agency or organization. A large number of interns are anticipated because completion of internships is required for graduation from this program. Regarding their assessment of the internship, 33.3% rated it as excellent, 19.4% rated it as good, and 38.9% rated it as average; a small percent (8.3%) rated it as poor. With respect to lecture attendance, 47.2% of students reported attending lectures often, and 30.6% reported attending every week. Only a few students (13.9% and 8.3%) indicated that they attend lectures sometimes or rarely. Similar results were obtained regarding seminars (practical classes): 44.4% reported attending often, and 38.9% indicated attending every week.

Table 1. Demographic and background information of the respondents

Variable	Sample (N)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	26	72.2
Male	10	27.8
Total	36	100.0
Age (in completed years)		
21	1	2.8
22	24	66.7
23	8	22.2
24	1	2.8
25	1	2.8
29	1	2.8
Total	36	100.0
First choice: Public Administration		
Yes	14	38.9
No	22	61.1
Total	36	100.0
Completed internship		
Yes	35	97.2
No	1	2.8
Total	36	100.0
Evaluation of internship experience		
Poor	3	8.3
Average	14	38.9

Variable	Sample (N)	Percent (%)
Good	7	19.4
Excellent	12	33.3
Total	36	100.0
Frequency of lecture attendance		
Rarely	3	8.3
Sometimes	5	13.9
Often	17	47.2
Every week	11	30.6
Total	36	100.0
Frequency of seminar attendance		
Rarely	2	5.6
Sometimes	4	11.1
Often	16	44.4
Every week	14	38.9
Total	36	100.0

Source: own data from survey

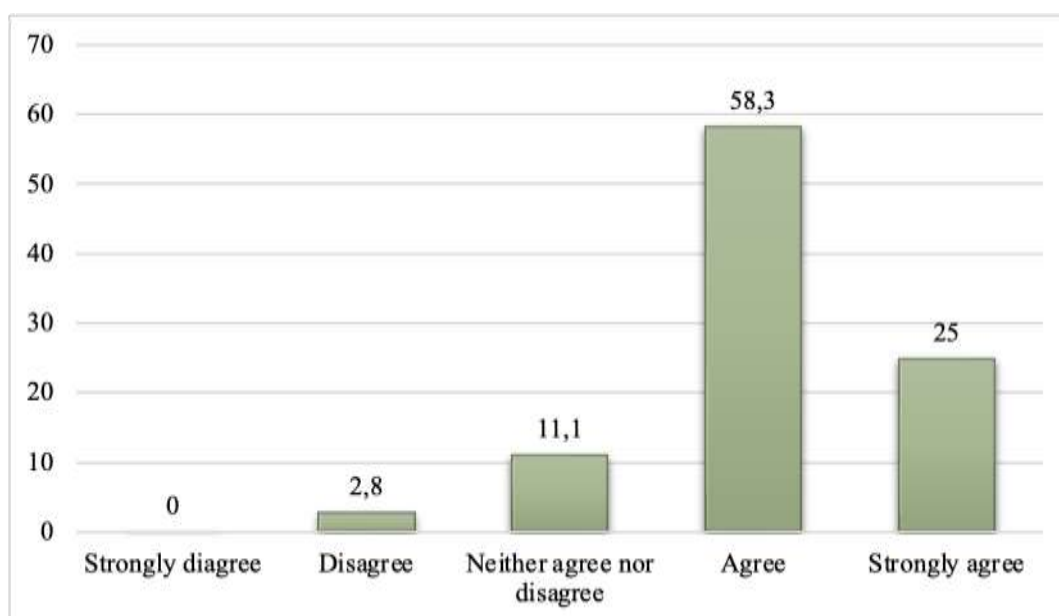
Construct 1: Academic Satisfaction and Preparedness

This construct was used to assess students' levels of satisfaction with their public administration studies and their perceived readiness to enter the public sector workforce. Reliability analysis was performed on all the items within the construct and revealed high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .804). To evaluate the contribution of each item to the overall scale, Corrected item-total correlations (CITC) and Cronbach's Alpha if the item was deleted were evaluated, and confirmed that most items had good contributions to the overall scale, as values ranged from .261 to .645. Due to their greater contribution to the reliability of the construct and the greater theoretical relevance, two items were selected for visual representation:

- Item 1: *'I am satisfied with the quality of teaching in the public administration program'*. (CITC = .645)
- Item 4: *'I feel confident in applying the knowledge I have gained in a public sector job'*. (CITC = .629)

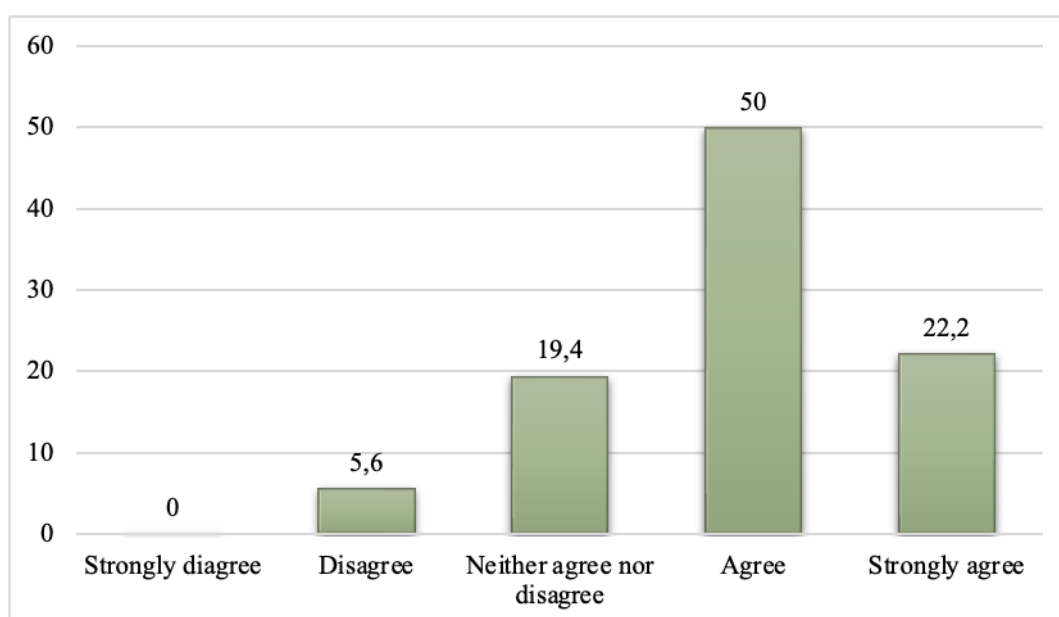
Bar charts for these two items are presented in Figures 1 and 2. Most students reported satisfaction with the quality of the teaching, and a substantial proportion expressed confidence in applying their knowledge in a practical setting. These patterns indicate a general positive perception of academic experience and readiness for work in the public sector.

Figure 1. Distribution of responses to ‘I am satisfied with the quality of teaching in the public administration program.’



Source: own data from the survey

Figure 2. Distribution of responses to: ‘I feel confident about applying the knowledge I have gained in a public sector job.’



Source: own data from the survey

To examine the relationship between academic satisfaction and the further intention of seeking employment in the public sector (H1a), a Spearman rank order correlation was conducted: $\rho(36) = .579$, $p < .001$. The correlation is positive, which indicates that the more satisfied students are with their studies, the stronger their intention to join the public sector

after graduation. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, this represents a moderate-to-strong effect size. The determination coefficient of determination ($\rho^2 = .579^2 = .335$) shows that approximately 33.5% of the variance in the intention to work in the public sector is associated with their satisfaction with the academic program.

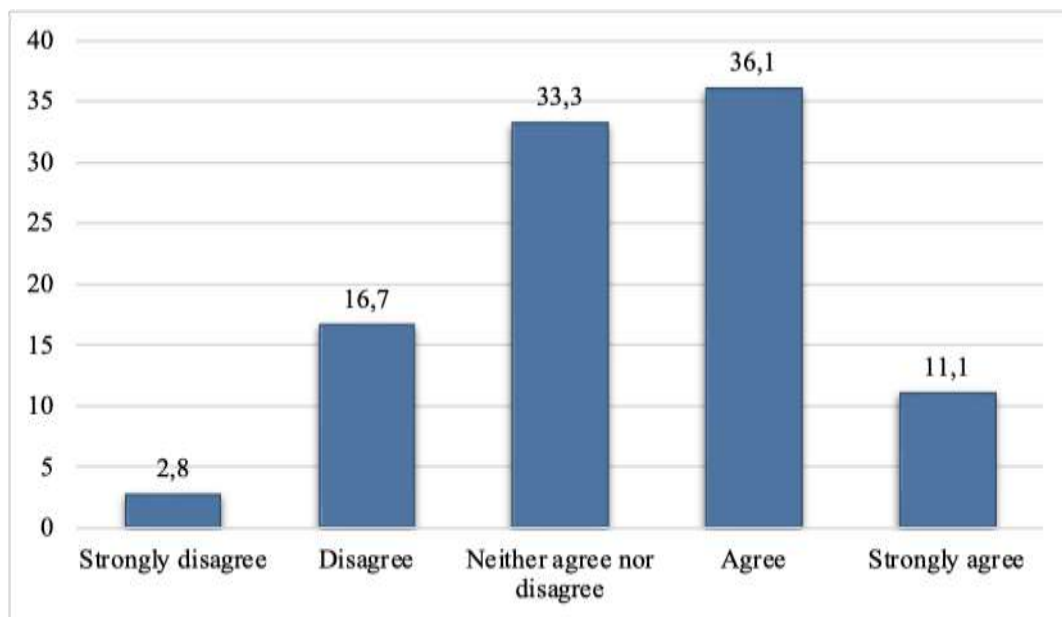
With reference to H1b, a second Spearman correlation was conducted to test the association between students' satisfaction with their public administration studies and the sense of preparedness to start work in the public sector. The results revealed a statistically significant positive correlation, $\rho(36) = .428$, $p = .009$, but with a moderate effect size. The coefficient of determination ($\rho^2 = .428^2 = .183$) suggests that approximately 18.3% of the variance in the perceived preparedness is associated with their satisfaction with the academic program.

Construct 2: Perception of Career Attractiveness and Stability in the Public Sector

Construct 2 evaluated the students' perceptions of career opportunities, job stability, and the long-term attractiveness of working in the public sector. The measurement scale had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .864$). High CITC values (.70), indicating how well each item correlated with other items on the scale, were found for many of the items. To illustrate response patterns, three of them with the highest scores were selected for bar chart presentation.

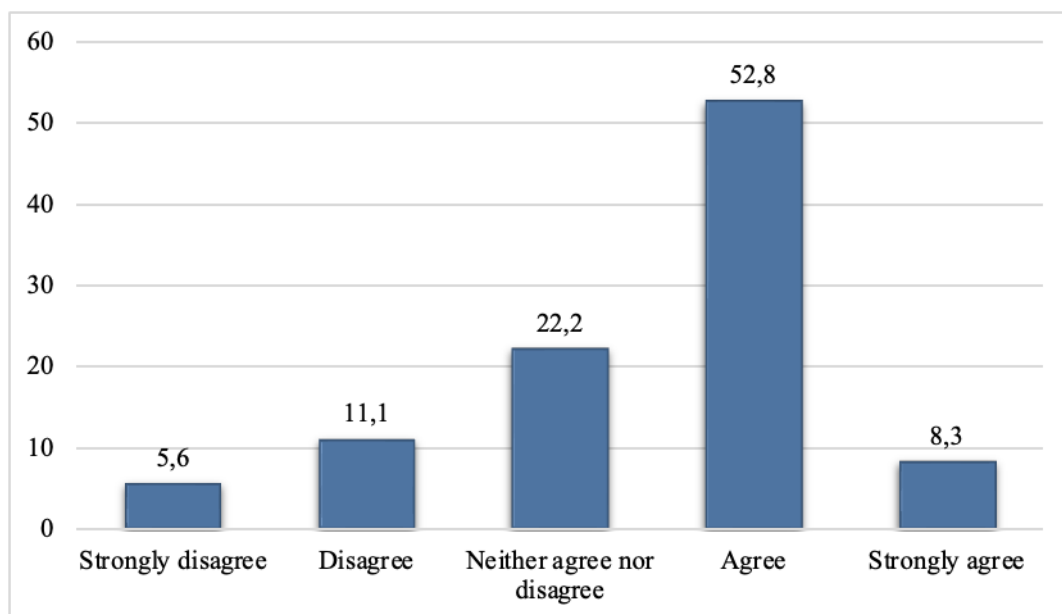
- Item 12: *"The career growth opportunities in the public sector appeal to me."* (CITC = .801)
- Item 14: *"I perceive the public sector as a good platform for long-term career development."* (CITC = .759)
- Item 20: *"The overall reputation of the public sector encourages me to consider it as a career option."* (CITC = .727)

Figure 3. Distribution of agreement with the statement: *‘The career growth opportunities in the public sector are appealing to me.’*



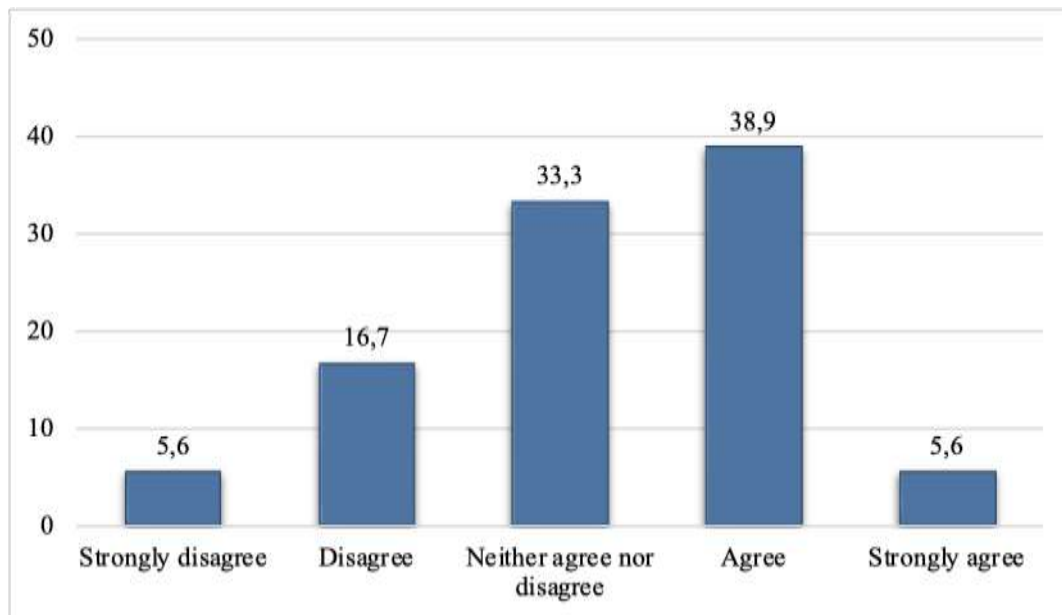
Source: own data from the survey

Figure 4. Distribution of agreement with the statement: *“I perceive the public sector as a good platform for long-term career development.”*



Source: own data from the survey

Figure 5. Distribution of agreement with the statement: *“The overall reputation of the public sector encourages me to consider it as a career option.”*



Source: own data from the survey

A Spearman's rho (ρ) was calculated to determine whether the strength of student perceptions of public sector career opportunities was related to their intention to pursue public sector jobs: $\rho(36) = .728$, $p < .001$. The result showed a positive relationship, indicating that when students perceived greater job security and career advancement opportunities in the public sector, they were more likely to express interest in employment in this area. The coefficient of determination ($\rho^2 = .728^2 = .530$) indicated that approximately 53.0% of the variance in intention to work in the public sector is explained by students' perceptions of public-sector career attractiveness and stability.

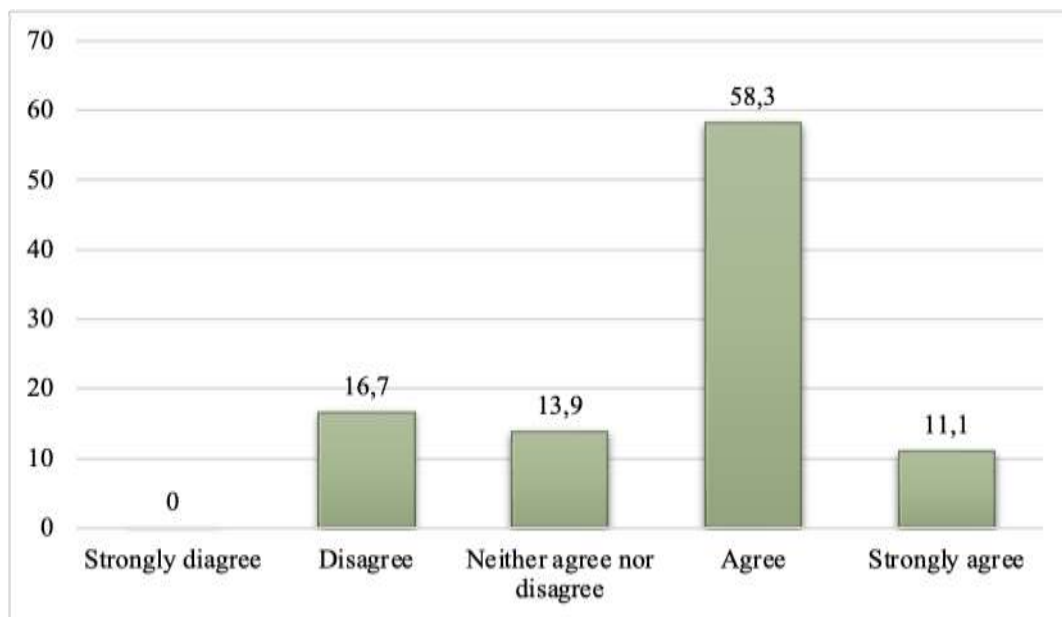
Construct 3: Public Service Motivation

Construct 3 focused on students' motivation to work in the public sector, specifically on intrinsic motivators, civic duty, social impact, and value alignment. The Cronbach's alpha for the 10 items was the highest ($\alpha = .922$) and indicated excellent reliability. Also, the CITC values for all items are adequate, with several values greater than .70. The two items with the highest score are used to illustrate the distribution of students' responses.

- Item 22: *“I feel a sense of responsibility to contribute to the provision of quality public service.”* (CITC = .853)
- Item 27: *“I am motivated by the idea of working for the public good.”* (CITC = .821)

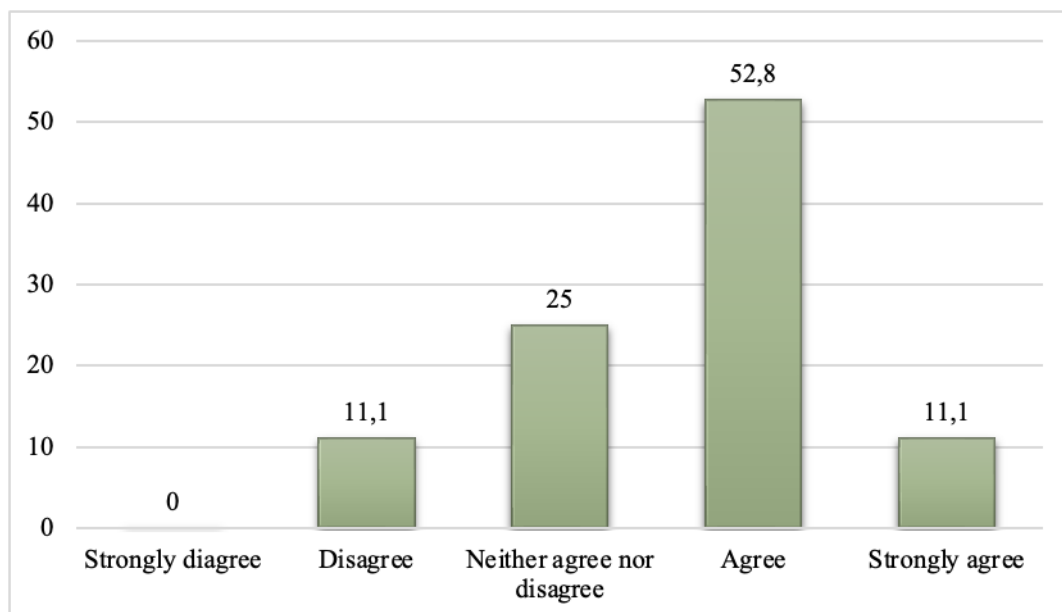
Figures 5 and 6 present the frequency distributions for the two statements. Response patterns reflect a generally strong agreement with values orientated toward public service among the students.

Figure 6. Distribution of agreement with the statement: *“I feel a sense of responsibility to contribute to the provision of quality public service.”*



Source: own data from the survey

Figure 7. Distribution of agreement with the statement: *“I am motivated by the idea of working for the public good.”*



Source: own data from the survey

To test the relationship between the alignment with public service values and their intention to work in the public sector, Spearman’s correlation was again applied: $\rho(36) = .548$, $p < .001$. The correlation was positive, which means higher endorsement of public service values and socially important causes corresponded to a stronger intention to pursue public sector employment. This reflects a large effect size. The coefficient of determination ($\rho^2 = .548^2 =$

.300) reveals that approximately 30.0% of the variance in students' employment intention is attributable to their alignment with public service values.

The fourth hypothesis aims to test whether the students whose first choice was Public Administration demonstrated greater alignment with public service values than the other students. This was tested using a Mann-Whitney U test, as the results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups, $U = 124.50$, $z = -0.962$, $p = .336$. The result suggests that a student's motivation to contribute to public service is not necessarily dependent on their initial program choice. Even those who entered it as a second and so forth choice appear to express comparable levels of alignment with values such as social responsibility, civic duty, and the desire to serve the public good. This illustrates that the academic environment and curriculum may support or reinforce students' commitment to public service regardless of their original reasons for choosing to enroll in the program.

4. DISCUSSION

This study provides several practical recommendations to university departments of Public Administration that seek to increase student recruitment and retention. With the identification of key factors that motivate students to consider careers in the public sector, such as academic satisfaction, perceived career opportunities, and alignment with public service values, the respective departments can develop more strategic, evidence-based approaches to attract the 'right' students (Van der Wal, 2015). These insights also have direct implications for public administration sector marketing campaigns, which can be designed to place emphasis on aspects that are most valued by potential candidates and to oppose prevailing stereotypes.

The positive relationship between academic satisfaction and career intentions indicates that university departments should pay greater attention to the provision of high-quality teaching and the creation of curricula directly applicable to students' future employment. Prospective students are more likely to be attracted to programs in which the department has made it clear how their educational experiences will translate into meaningful, tangible employment opportunities (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2015). As a result, departments should provide clear messaging on course content, skill development, and the real-world application of public administration education during recruitment campaigns. They should also continually review their curricula to ensure that the courses are relevant, applied, and innovative. For example, including topics such as digital transformation, crisis management, and citizen engagement can help prepare students for emerging governance challenges. Teaching methods should also emphasize active learning based on case studies, projects, and collaboration with practitioners. The Department from which the survey respondents were selected actively develops such initiatives. One of them is called 'Open Semester', as prominent speakers with strong reputations and career paths in the public sector are invited to speak to students. These events allow them to learn valuable lessons, gain insight into real-world experiences, professional trajectories, and the practical challenges associated with public service. Meetings also provide a platform for students to engage in dialogue, ask questions, and gain insights that can shape their career expectations and motivation.

In terms of the respective Public Administration Department's connections with national and subnational public institutions and organizations, these relationships create opportunities for students to participate in internships, practitioner-led lectures, and other career development activities. Internships play an important role in shaping students' perceptions of public sector work. However, if internships are not meaningful and well-supported, they cannot reach their full potential. As a result, departments must work closely with host institutions to ensure that internships provide real responsibility, mentorship, and structured reflection. To support a more systemic approach to internships, departments can require regular updates from students, establish shared learning goals, and recognize students' contributions to the chosen internships.

The strong relationship between perceived job stability and career growth emphasizes the importance of framing public administration as a "mission-driven" choice and a smart, stable career path. Departments can partner with alumni and public institutions to promote examples of successful career trajectories and the opportunities for advancement, leadership, and policy impact available in the public sector. Departments can share these examples of success through career days and social media to redefine the public sector's image, break down prevailing stereotypes of bureaucracy, and instead portray the public sector as a dynamic and professional field.

The results of this study reinforce the need for public sector institutions to use more targeted and evidence-based marketing strategies to attract young professionals with a mission. Although academic program play a significant role in shaping public service motivation, students' career decisions are also influenced by how the public sector communicates its identity, values, and opportunities. This calls for a more proactive and strategic approach to public sector employer branding, particularly for Generation Z. Strategies to communicate this new value proposition must deliberately shift the public sector's identity and values away from procedural rigidity toward its potential for societal transformation. Instead of allowing established stereotypes, such as the idea that government work is inefficient, does not encourage innovation, or limits career progression, outreach efforts can focus on the wide variety of professional roles available in the public sector, its capacity for policy innovation, and the opportunities for meaningful impact.

Rebranding the public sector and communicating to Gen Z requires a commitment to engaging with the communication preferences of this age group. Public sector organizations must commit to the adoption of the digital-first approach and use platforms and formats that resonate with younger audiences (Smillie & Scharfbillig, 2024). Short-form video, authentic narratives, and transparent depictions of daily work can effectively communicate both the purpose and the lived experience of public service. Messages that highlight transparency, personal development, and ethical leadership, and that do not rely too heavily on institutional language, are more likely to capture the attention of prospective applicants who base their career choices on values and lifestyle considerations.

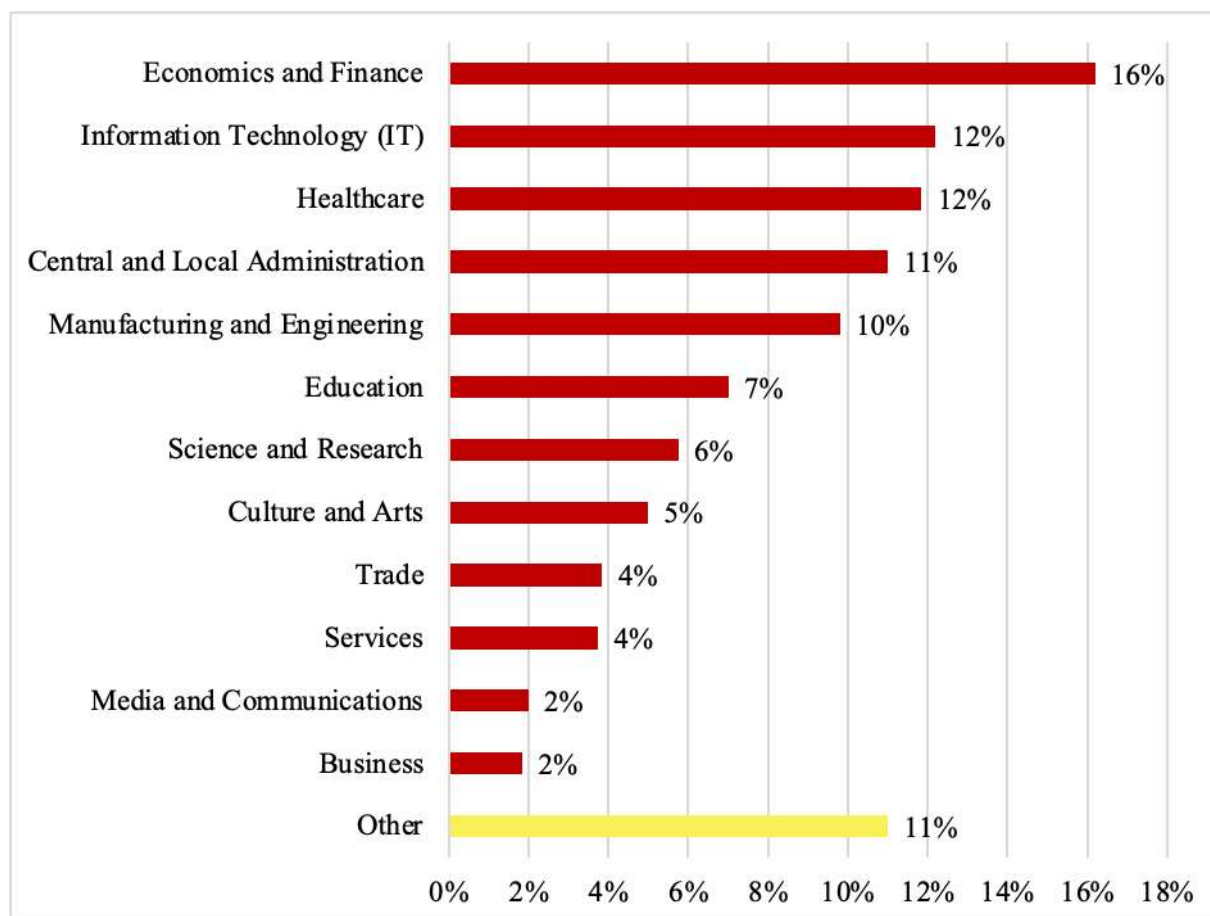
Equally important as promoting the public sector's image and reframing its value proposition is highlighting its career development infrastructure. Providing clearly articulated career development pathways and investing in skills such as project management, policy design, and

digital transformation can position government work as a platform for long-term professional growth. Promoting mobility between departments and participation in international initiatives can further enhance the appeal to graduates seeking dynamic and varied career paths. Strengthening collaboration with universities offers an effective channel for delivering these messages and experiences.

Consistent support for public service motivation throughout the sample, even among those who did not initially choose public administration, reveals that the program has strong potential to cultivate or reinforce intrinsic motivations over time. The lack of a statistically significant difference between the two groups further suggests that departments should not restrict their recruitment efforts to candidates who already possess PSM. A helpful analogy for this type of message development can be found in Bulgaria's recent military recruitment campaign entitled "Join the Bulgarian Army. Give Your Skills a Higher Purpose," which utilized modern multimedia, social media outreach, and purposeful messages that emphasized professional development, stability, and national contribution. A similar narrative approach that combines societal purpose with clear career benefits can help enhance the attractiveness of public sector careers to Gen Z.

These findings, especially the significance of perceived career opportunities in shaping public sector intent and the widespread ambivalence about government employment, are consistent with national trends in Bulgaria. Data collected by CNTS in May 2025 indicate that Bulgarian students rank work-life balance as the most important factor when selecting a workplace, with 76 % prioritizing it. They strongly prefer hybrid work models that combine office presence with remote work, and show an apparent inclination toward a four-day workweek with six-hour days. Flexible start times are preferred to fixed schedules, while traditional working hours are the least attractive. Many seek professional independence: 41% aspire to own a business, and 34% prefer freelance work, while government or municipal employment ranks as the least desirable option. Financial stability matters, but passion for the job and alignment with personal interests carry greater weight in career decisions. Popular career sectors include culture and the arts, as well as business and media, reflecting a preference for creativity and self-expression. At the same time, fields like finance, IT, healthcare, and public administration are less appealing (see Figure 8). Team culture is an important factor, with 95% rating it as important or very important. Students value mutual support, shared responsibility, open communication, and a balance of youthful energy with experienced colleagues. They prefer collaborative, inspiring workplaces that offer diversity and strong leadership (TSentar za Novi tehnologichni sistemi za NBU, 2025).

Figure 8. Least preferred employment sectors among Bulgarian students (May 2025)

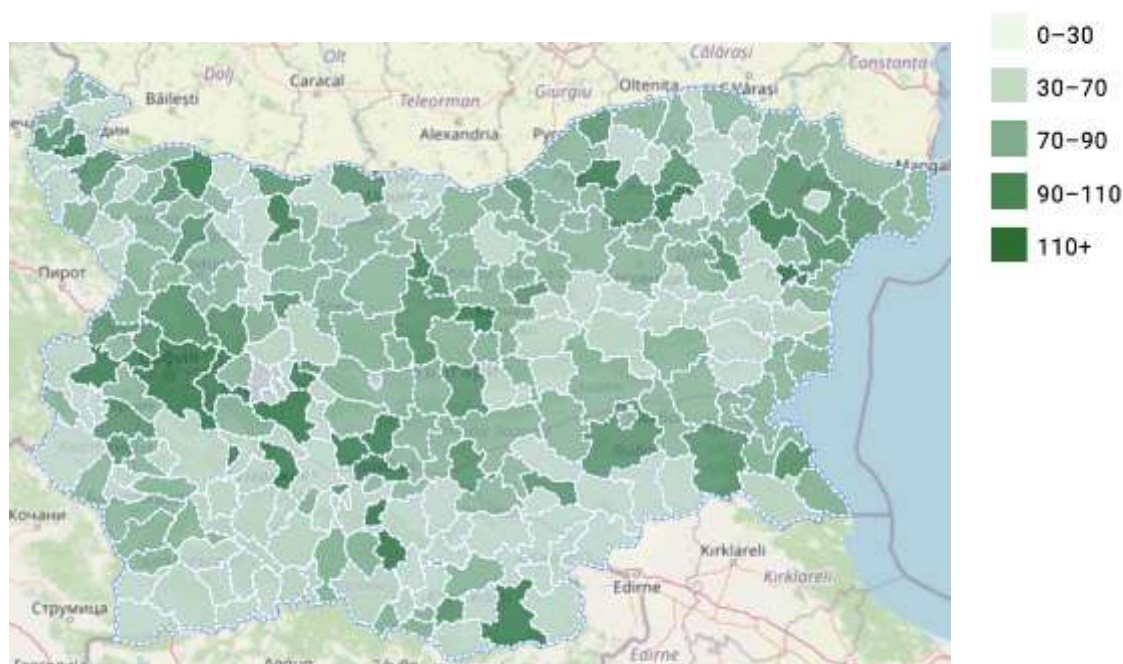


Source: TSentar za Novi tehnologichni sistemi za NBU, 2025

The results of this study present both an opportunity and a challenge for public institutions in terms of attracting and retaining young talents: Since the current student population is comprised of Gen Z, which views employment within government as less appealing than other career paths, public institutions must develop strategies to transform their image, and thus better appeal to the preferences of the next generation of employees. This means transforming their images from being seen as inflexible, hierarchical, and slow-moving to being marketed as flexible, mission-driven, and offering impactful contributions to society. Communication efforts will need to focus on what young adults consider important: achieving a healthy balance between work and life, having opportunities to grow professionally, and working in an inclusive, collaborative environment. Although salary may not be the main motivating factor, it is important that the communication strategy clearly communicates to future employees the available career advancement, skill building, and decision-making opportunities. Data from the National Statistical Institute in Bulgaria indicate that the average gross monthly salary for public institutions varies depending on the specific area of activity, but overall salaries remain significantly lower than those in the most competitive private sector industries. For example, within core public sector domains, the State Administration records monthly averages between 1 241 EUR and 1 542 EUR during the first three months of 2025. Despite the stability and security associated with these roles, the figures remain

substantially below high-skill private sector occupations such as information technology (2 748-3 338 EUR) and finance (1 767-2 323 EUR). This pay gap underscores the structural challenge public institutions face when they compete for highly qualified graduates, especially in areas where the private sector offers both higher pay and greater flexibility (NSI, 2025).

Figure 9. Average salary in the private sector as a percentage of that in the public sector, 2023



Source: 265 Istorii za ikonomika, n.d.

It should be noted that the national averages mask significant regional variation in the public-private pay balance. As for 2023 (the latest available information), in a significant number of municipalities throughout Bulgaria, public sector salaries exceed those in the private sector, especially in the southern regions (265 Istorii za ikonomika, n.d.). The most significant disparities in favor of public employment occur in municipalities that have on their territories major state-owned energy enterprises, such as Kozloduy (private sector salaries at only 34.3% of public levels), Batak (39,9%), and Radnevo (49,4%). In contrast, municipalities with modern mining operations or export-oriented manufacturing show the reverse pattern, with private sector wages outstripping public pay, most notably in Panagurishte (147,2 %) and Pirdop (160,7 %). In large economic centers, the difference between the two sectors is more moderate, reflecting the diverse economic structures and a larger workforce that tends to balance wage disparities.

CONCLUSION

Higher education has the potential to influence PSM, but the structural constraints on this influence must also be recognized. While value-based curricula, practitioner involvement, and applied learning may positively affect some students' attitudes toward joining the public sector, others may continue to be reluctant. This often arises from deeply ingrained perceptions about government jobs, including that government employment is less efficient than the private sector, that resources available are limited, innovation is not encouraged, and that salaries are lower. These perceptions cannot be easily altered by education alone.

Therefore, university program that promote motivation to serve the public interest are interdependent with reform efforts within the public sector itself. If graduates perceive that there is an alignment between their values as shaped in the academic environment and the conditions they will experience in their future workplaces, then they will be more likely to act upon the motivations created while pursuing their degrees. To create this alignment, public organizations must demonstrate transparency in decision-making processes, compensation systems that provide equitable pay for skills and responsibilities, and an organizational culture that supports innovative problem-solving, adaptability, and self-initiative.

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