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2020

van der Wal, Z. & Mussagulova, A. (2020). Are Asian public affairs students different?
Comparing job sector attitudes and sector preference between public affairs students at an
Asian and Dutch University. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 26(2), 150-170.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2019.1700091>

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/147983>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2019.1700091>

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Are Asian public affairs students different? Comparing job sector attitudes and sector preference between public affairs students at an Asian and Dutch University

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ABSTRACT

Public affairs programs aim to prepare students for public service roles by teaching certain skills and reinforcing prosocial motivations. Studies provide mixed results as to whether these aims are met. What we do not know is whether public administration and public affairs programs in Asia attract students different in their job sector attitudes and sector preferences from those in Western Europe. To this end, we analyze survey data on 247 students from public affairs programs in the Netherlands and Singapore. We find no significant difference in job sector preference. However, Singaporean students display a higher level of public service motivation (PSM) and a higher preference for pecuniary rewards. This implies that public affairs programs in Asia should take into account students' distinct motivations when designing curricula, and public affairs programs in both countries should leverage the prosocial motivation of students by enhancing their PSM through socialization during their educational experience.

KEYWORDS

Asia; public administration; motivation; MPA

Introduction

Studies have shown that Master of Public Policy (MPP) and Master of Public Administration (MPA) students have high levels of Public Service Motivation (PSM), which often translate into employment preferences for public and nonprofit sectors (e.g., Redman-Simmons, 2008; Rose, 2013; Richards, Gilbert, & Harris, 2002; Taylor, 2010; Vandenabeele, 2008; Van der Wal, 2017a; 2017b). For example, Chetkovich (2003) found that students of public policy in the US who aspire to public sector employment hope to make a difference in society to a larger extent than those who prefer private sector jobs, while those looking for private sector jobs are motivated by financial considerations. Moreover, studies suggest particular degree programs already attract certain individuals due to pre-educational socialization processes (De Graaf & de Graaf, 1996; Ng, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2008; Van Hooft, 2004).

However, almost without exception (Van der Wal, 2017b), these studies have targeted Western students, and we may wonder how findings translate to public

affairs students in Asia. Indeed, scholars have argued that government jobs in East Asian and South Asian countries have more stature (Infeld, Adams, Qi, & Rosnah, 2010; Ko & Han, 2013; Norris, 2003) and often provide primary and secondary benefits that are equal to or even better than private sector jobs (Fan, 2007; Taylor & Beh, 2013; Xu, 2006). Existing evidence is mixed. For example, sparse comparative data on MPP and MPA students from China and the US shows the latter are far more driven by intrinsic factors (Infeld, Qi, Adams, & Lin, 2009). In addition, Lee and Choi (2016) show that PSM is not associated with public sector employment choice in Korea, while job security was found to be a prominent reason why students intended to enter the public sector. Conversely, a study by Ko and Jun (2015) finds a positive association between motivation to benefit society and public sector job preference among Singaporean and Korean students, but no such relationship among Chinese students. In all, the mixed nature of empirical evidence indicates that Asian public affairs students may be less pronounced in their job sector preferences and perceptions than their Western counterparts.

However, empirical studies comparing students from Western and Eastern hemispheres are almost non-existent. This article, in trying to fill the existing scholarly void, aims to address three key questions:

- (1) Do public affairs programs in Asia attract individuals with distinctively different motivations, sector perceptions, and job sector preferences than similar programs in Western Europe?
- (2) Are perceptions and attitudes of students in each program skewed positively toward the public sector?
- (3) How do different job motivations explain students' choice of pursuing public sector employment?

To address these questions, we embark upon a baseline survey of two post-graduate student cohorts, using Singapore and the Netherlands as proxies for comparing attitudes and perceptions of students in Asia and Western Europe. We triangulate quantitative and qualitative survey data from 247 students. Using t-tests, regression analysis, and qualitative analysis of coded open question statements on the justification of job sector preference, we explore whether these degree programs attract a different caliber of students, how students view working life in different sectors, and where students want to work and why. This study is the first step toward constructing a more specific narrative about cross-cultural differences in public affairs education and educational socialization that merits further examination built on robust empirical evidence.

Theoretical framework

Studying sector choice and its determinants enhances the design and delivery of graduate curricula as well as career counseling. Ultimately, it may also

mitigate turnover and facilitate better human resource planning in less popular job destinations. Such is currently the case of both government and nonprofit employers who face intense competition from other sectors to recruit talented employees. The rise of more collaborative modes of working and organizing has resulted in the waning of interest in traditional public sector careers among the next generation of workers (Bright & Graham, 2015; Kjeldsen & Jacobsen, 2013; Pedersen, 2013). This is an important development that merits further scholarly and practitioner attention given the assumption that motivation and commitment are influenced by employees' preferences for their chosen occupations (Bright & Graham, 2015).

There is no shortage of academic perspectives on sector preferences of university students (Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, & Anker, 2008) and what affects them. However, findings are inconclusive at best. The nature of graduate degree programs is said to be a major factor that "socializes" individuals into a particular field through teaching strategies, and the essential knowledge of the chosen field (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). However, Bright and Graham (2015) in their study of 552 students from 25 public affairs programs find that the graduate program curriculum has no meaningful relationship with government career preferences. A study of Asian MPA students in Singapore has shown that pre-entry and post-entry public sector perceptions remain relatively unchanged, while their overall preference for public sector employment, however, is not uniform (Van der Wal, 2017b).

The findings regarding personal backgrounds, professional and personal communities and their impact on subsequent sector choices are also mixed. One study found that older individuals preferred government work more than did their younger counterparts (Lewis & Frank, 2002), whereas other studies found no such relationship (Holland, 1959; Kjeldsen, 2012; Tschirhart et al., 2008). In terms of gender, several studies found no meaningful relationship between gender and an individual's preference for government careers (Clerkin & Cogburn, 2012; Kjeldsen, 2012; Lewis & Frank, 2002; Pedersen, 2013; Rose, 2013; Tschirhart et al., 2008), whereas other studies found that females preferred government work more than did their male counterparts (Blank, 1985; Liu, Hui, Hu, Yang, & Yu, 2011; Ng & Gossett, 2013; Ritz & Waldner, 2011; Vandenabeele, 2008).

Other notable studies point to the importance of professional and personal communities for future sector choice. For example, the involvement of experienced practitioners, consultants, and adjuncts in public affairs degree programs has positive effects on students (Irvin, 2003; Letzmann, Nickels, & Stockdale, 2010; Milam, 2003). Other studies have found that the work experiences of parents, relatives, and friends are related to the career interests of students (Adams, 2000; Liu et al., 2011; Pedersen, 2013; Van der Wal &

Oosterbaan, 2013) with those, whose family members worked in the public sector more likely to pursue this line of work.

As far as we know, little has been written about employment sector preference distinctions across cultural and geographic dimensions. It remains unclear whether national and societal characteristics have a role to play in affecting individuals' attitudes toward future sector choice. This is further complicated by the field's tendency to project Western assumptions, concepts, and instruments on public and private sector characteristics and their differences to Asia, which has proved ineffective, if not outright flawed (Infeld et al., 2010, 2011; Kim et al., 2013; Van der Wal, 2015). For example, although it is clear that future Asian public and private sector leaders may differ in many aspects, they seem less antithetical than their Western counterparts (Van der Wal, 2017b; Van der Wal & Oosterbaan, 2013).

In this vein, one strand of scholarship on public sector employment preference looms large. Public service motivation (PSM) is intrinsically linked to studying employment sector preference (Ritz, Brewer, & Neumann, 2016). The main tenet of this relationship is the value congruence between the individual desire to help others and the opportunities that the public sector provides for those values to be enacted (Jin, McDonald, Park, & Yu, 2019; Perry & Wise, 1990; Leisink & Steijn, 2008; Vandenabeele, 2008). A number of studies show that PSM can act as a predictor for public sector employment preference (Lewis & Frank, 2002; Wright & Christensen, 2010).

These findings may shed some initial light on the determinants of sector choice in the Asian context. Unlike the research vacuum on the comparison of employment sector preferences in public affairs graduate programs internationally, there exists a rapidly growing body of research from non-Western contexts, and Asian countries in particular, on PSM. The findings suggest competing motives and drivers are at play for public servants in those settings, often with external rewards dominating (Ko & Han, 2013; Liu & Tang, 2011; Perry, 2014; Van der Wal, 2015). For example, Chen and Hsieh (2015) observe that the motivation of public service officials in non-Western contexts might be spurred by a range of extrinsic motivations, particularly pecuniary incentives (the "love-of-money") and job security, or at least by mixed motives extending beyond just PSM (Yung, 2014). Thus, scholars aiming to meaningfully measure their motivations and drivers have to include other dimensions than just, for instance, PSM, and be mindful of the importance of extrinsic drivers in Asian contexts.

Further, studies show that while public servants in Asia may at times have negative perceptions of public sector jobs and governmental capacity in general, they still portray a desire to work in public agencies and seem to be able to disassociate their own sentiments from the external, societal high standing of government employment (Infeld et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2011; Pandey & Jain, 2014; Van der Wal, 2017a, 2017b).

Based on this, we formulate three research hypotheses to guide our empirical analysis:

H1: The public affairs program in Singapore attracts students with lower PSM and a less positive perception of the public sector than in the Netherlands;

H2: The public affairs program in Singapore attracts students with a higher preference for pecuniary rewards compared to the Netherlands.

H3: Students with a higher level of PSM are more likely to prefer postgraduate public sector employment.

Developing better awareness of the effect of geographical setting for sector perceptions and sector choice may have significant implications for public affairs education programs globally. If context makes a difference, leading Western programs and curricula should not be blindly copied by non-Western education institutions as they may have limited contextual relevance to the students. This raises fundamental questions about the “Asian” nature of public affairs education in Asian countries, many of which have been modeled after their elite Western peers. However, if on the other hand both groups are fairly similar in their preference for public sector, this may signal the need to reinforce the “publicness” of public sector employment, its benefit for the society and capitalize on the calling of the new generation for a meaningful and effective public service.

Methodology

Mixed methods design

We use quantitative and qualitative survey data in a “mixed methods” approach (e.g., Creswell, 2003) in our pursuit of better understanding of whether public affairs programs in Singapore and the Netherlands attract individuals with different motivations and sector preferences, as well as why these are distinctive in the Singapore context, using the insights from the students themselves. To produce such insights, we include an open question in our questionnaire on the main reason for sector preference.

Sample and respondent selection

Our respondents are the 2013/14 and 2014/15 cohorts of MPP and MPA students at two highly ranked Schools of Public Policy, based in Singapore and the Netherlands. We selected Singapore and the Netherlands as

interesting cases in their own right for studying the sector choice of public affairs students and their attitudes toward public sector employment. The school of public policy in Singapore is relatively young, not unlike the nation of Singapore. It attracts students from emerging countries in East and Southeast Asia and positions itself as the pioneering public policy school aiming to prepare future leaders of Asia. The program in the Netherlands, on the other hand, is a long-running public affairs program in a country with a well-established tradition of public administration built on Weberian rational-legal administration principles.

We conducted our surveys right at the start of their degree programs, in the first few weeks of their enrollment. We chose to target the students at the beginning of their program to

1) achieve a larger sample, as some students in the Singapore program leave for a double-degree program at partner universities after the first year of their studies, and 2) to get a relatively unscathed view of their motivations, values, and perceptions (Van der Wal & Oosterbaan, 2013) as we are interested here in the regional comparison rather than the effect of the degree program itself (Kjeldsen & Jacobsen, 2013; Van der Wal, 2017b).

We conducted the survey in person in the classroom, and we approached missing respondents online immediately afterward. After a collection period of 14 months, we recorded data from a total of 251 MPP and MPA students (247 questionnaires contained complete and reliable data). Because we approached our respondents face-to-face, we managed to get high response rates (91% across cohorts). Our Asian sample includes respondents from 15 different Asian countries, with China, India, Indonesia, and Singapore making up 65%; respondents from the Netherlands program are Dutch nationals.

Table 1 demonstrates descriptive statistics. The Dutch sample is on average both younger and less experienced than the Asian sample. Respondents in Singapore identify themselves as religious to a greater degree than their colleagues in the Netherlands. This is an interesting finding, given that previously a positive association has been found between PSM levels and religious socialization (Perry, 1996; Ritz et al., 2016).

Given the sample disparity, we do not claim our findings are generalizable to entire continents, which are highly versatile and diverse. Rather, we set out to take the first step toward providing an insight into the type of individuals who choose to study public administration and public affairs in Singapore, which is a major Asian educational hub attracting students from the entire region. We also attempt to provide similar insights from a public affairs program in the Netherlands which has a long-running tradition of high-quality public affairs education. What we aim to achieve is a snapshot of motivations and perceptions in both countries which are worthy representatives of public affairs education tradition in their respective regions, and

Table 1. Respondent characteristics of two samples of public affairs students ($n = 247$).

Respondent characteristics	Netherlands ($n = 54$)	Asia ($n = 193$)
Age	%	%
20–24	49.1	14.4
25–29	34.5	31.3
30–34	12.7	29.8
35–39	1.8	18.5
40 and older	1.8	6.1
Gender		
Male	40	42
Female	60	58
Years of pre-enrollment work experience		
None	49.1	11.7
<2	27.3	6.6
2–5	10.9	20.4
>5	12.7	61.2
Sector of pre-enrollment work experience		
Public sector	20	49.4
Private sector	18	15.1
Nonprofit sector	11	11.8
Combination of sectors	1.8	11.8
No previous work experience	49.1	11.8
Preferred sector of postgraduate employment		
Public sector	70.9	63.2
Private sector	16.4	18.9
Nonprofit sector	12.7	14.8
Combination of sectors		3.2
Religious		
Yes	27.3	48.2
No	72.7	51.8
Parental employment		
Public sector	30.3	29.2
Private sector/own business	52.3	43.1
Nonprofit sector	7.34	1.8
Other/not working	10.1	25.8

highlight differences that merit attention and further investigation in future studies.

Questionnaire and measures

The items used in this study, and the corresponding reliability measures (for scales made up of multiple items) are summarized in [Table 2](#). Responses to all questionnaire items took the form of a choice on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Our empirical approach is as follows. First, we compare the mean scores of the two samples, using a t-test. Second, we employ a logistic regression to identify the empirical connection between PSM and public sector employment choice. Third, we analyze qualitative responses to the open question on employment sector preference.

Table 2. Items used in the study.

Construct	Items
Public service motivation (Houston, 2000, 2011, 2014; Vandenabeele & Van de Walle, 2008)	How important is the following to you? (1) Contributing to society
Pecuniary rewards	How important is the following to you? (1) High salary
Public values (Van der Wal, 2017a) $\alpha = .73$	(1) Equality. (2) Peace. (3) Self-sacrifice. (4) Justice. (5) Compassion.
Public sector perceptions (Taylor, 2005, 2008; Van der Wal, 2017a, 2017b)	Positive (1) When you work for the government, you can contribute positively to society. Negative (2) In general, the government is very bureaucratic.
Private sector perceptions (Van der Wal, 2017a)	Positive (1) In general, business works much more efficiently and effectively than the government. Negative (2) In the business sector, people often play “dirty games” to maximize profit.

The dependent variable is public sector employment preference, which is a binary variable, where “1” indicated a preference for public sector employment. Respondents were asked to choose a preferred sector (public, private, or nonprofit), and we grouped preference for public and nonprofit sector employment into one category. Independent variables are public service motivation (PSM), pecuniary rewards, public values, positive and negative public and private sector perceptions. We conceptualize PSM using an item which aims to identify the propensity toward other-regarding behavior and the importance of contributing to the society. Similar items have been used to measure PSM in previous studies (Houston, 2000, 2011, 2014; Vandenabeele & Van de Walle, 2008). To identify the desirability of pecuniary rewards we use the importance of high salary as a proxy. We measured the positive perceptions of public and private sector, as well as public values, using a 5-point Likert-scale with the items used previously in a study by Van der Wal and Oosterbaan (2013).

The item on employment sector preference was followed by an open question asking the respondents to state in one sentence why their preference lies with that sector. This allowed us to explore further why respondents are leaning toward a certain sector. We coded, clustered, and ranked their responses summarized in Table 5.

Results

Table 3 reports descriptive statistics as well as differences in mean values of the main constructs used in this study, between both samples. Despite the difference in focus of the program, we combined the responses of MPA and MPP students in the Singapore sample, because after running t-tests for all the constructs we found no statistically significant differences between the two programs. Standard deviation values were also low.

Results indicate that Singaporean students have a slightly higher PSM with a mean score of 4.565 against 4.364 in the Netherlands. This is against our first hypothesis. Students in Singapore also attach a higher importance to having a high salary than their counterparts in the Netherlands, which is in line with our second hypothesis. Public values in the Singaporean sample are slightly higher than in the Netherlands. Dutch students have a more positive perception of the opportunities that public sector provides for contribution to society; however, they see public sector as somewhat bureaucratic. At the same time, the students in the Singapore sample have a less negative perception of the private sector than their Dutch counterparts.

In both samples, graduate students prefer employment in the public sector over the private and nonprofit sector jobs, confirming our third proposition. However, the difference in future sector employment is not statistically significant between the two samples.

In the next step, we test the association between preference for public sector employment and PSM, as well as the desire for a high salary. Given the binary nature of the dependent variable we employ logistic regression to estimate two models. In Model 1, we test the role of PSM in public sector employment preference, in Model 2; the role of high salary. We control for demographic characteristics, as well as the location of the institution – the Netherlands or Singapore. In addition, we use public values, and positive and negative public and private sector perceptions as covariates. **Table 4** is the summary of the findings of the regression analysis.

Table 3. Descriptives and t-test results for job sector attitudes and preference ($n = 245$).

Variables	Netherlands ($n = 54$)		Singapore ($n = 191$)		t	df
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Public service motivation	4.364	.649	4.565	.557	2.279*	244
Pecuniary rewards	3.600	.709	3.817	.763	1.885*	244
Public values	7.333	1.069	7.694	1.372	1.782*	240
Positive public sector perceptions	4.000	.608	3.328	1.266	-3.804**	242
Negative public sector perceptions	3.891	.533	3.531	1.241	-2.089*	243
Positive private sector perceptions	3.527	.790	3.307	1.077	-1.409	242
Negative private sector perceptions	3.400	.830	3.100	.992	-2.039*	242
Future preferred sector of employment (0 = private sector; 1 = public sector)	.836	.373	.812	.391	-.402	245

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Logistic regression models.

Public sector employment preference	Model 1	Model 2
Independent variables	1.678*** (.400)	
PSM		
Salary		-.973** (.296)
Public values	.086 (.155)	.202 (.135)
Positive public sector perceptions	.323 (.219)	.512* (.227)
Negative public sector perceptions	-.819 (.274)	-.671* (.267)
Positive private sector perceptions	-.186 (.240)	-.235 (.242)
Negative private sector perceptions	.304 (.219)	.312 (.213)
Control variables		
Age	-.195 (.289)	.108 (.277)
Gender	-.400 (.335)	-.325 (.353)
Work experience	-.375 (.304)	-.471 (.305)
Sector of work experience	1.628** (.515)	1.534** (.487)
Religious	-.414 (.435)	.255 (.415)
Parental employment	-.022 (.148)	-.089 (.147)
Location (1 = Singapore; 0 = Netherlands)	-.511 (.574)	.058 (.539)
Constant	-3.267 (2.107)	4.912* (2.082)
Observations	245	245
Pseudo R^2	.220	.185

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Model 1 demonstrates a strong positive correlation between preference for public sector employment and PSM. The results of Model 2 show that the desire for a high salary is negatively correlated with the public sector employment preference. Public values do not seem to have a statistically significant association with preference for public sector employment in both models. The same applies to perceptions of both public and private sectors in Model 1. However, in Model 2 a positive perception of the public sector has a positive correlation with public sector employment preference, while a negative perception of public sector has the opposite effect. Sector of prior work experience is a strong predictor of the desire to work for public sector post-graduation, and this finding is consistent across both models.

Prior experience in the public sector is strongly and positively correlated with preference for public sector employment in the future. The location of the institutions, or context, does not seem to have a statistically significant correlation with the preference for public sector. In both models tested, demographic characteristics of both samples do not seem to have a statistically significant correlation with public sector employment preference, indicating that the differences between samples in terms of age, work experience, religion, and parental employment do not drive the differences in public sector employment preference. The major driving force behind the employment preference does seem to lie in the sector of previous work experience.

To summarize, our hypothesis 1 is not supported, as the students from Singapore demonstrate a higher level of PSM than their colleagues in the Netherlands. Hypothesis 2 is supported as students in Singapore have a higher preference for a high salary than those in the Netherlands. Hypothesis 3 is supported for both samples as the regression analysis results demonstrate that PSM has a strong and positive correlation with public sector employment preference for both samples.

Students speaking out: justification of job sector preference

Table 5 presents categorized and coded 194 responses to the open-ended survey question,

“Please describe the reason for your sector preference in one sentence,” resulting in five main coding categories that are grouped by preference for employment sector. The numbers in parentheses refer to the number of statements belonging to the same coded group with the two most interesting quotes representing the group of statements. The majority of the respondents prefer to work in the public or nonprofit sector when they graduate.

The Dutch sample

For students in the Dutch sample, the job content seems to be the deciding factor in their preference for public sector employment, followed by the desire to serve the nation, the perceived fit with the characteristics of the public sector, serving others, and making a greater impact. A few respondents juxtapose public and private sector values by focussing on the perceived difference in sector goals – profit-making in the private sector versus serving the larger society, in the public.

Consistent with oft-mentioned assumptions in the sector preference literature, the students who prefer private sector employment after they graduate are generally less vocal about the ways in which the private sector can benefit the others or contribute to bettering the public outcomes. To this group of respondents, the sector fit and the job content is what makes the private sector attractive. However, one of the respondents does state that they would like private sector employment with a focus on the public sector. The students in the Dutch sample generally find the public sector attractive because of its impact, and its alignment with their values and goals, which is consistent with the quantitative findings of the higher PSM levels among these students.

The Singaporean sample

The students in the Singaporean sample prefer public sector employment because of its perceived alignment with their career goals, interests, job demands, and sector fit. The opportunities to serve the nation and create

Table 5. Sector of post-graduate employment preference explained (Asia vs. the Netherlands).

1. Job content, career opportunities, personal growth												
SECTOR	Asia:39		Netherlands:23		2. Being of service to others		3. To serve the nation		4. Fit with industry/sector		5. Making greater impact	
	Asia:39	Netherlands:23	Asia:24	Netherlands:5	Asia:17	Netherlands:16	Asia:37	Netherlands:13	Asia:16	Netherlands:4		
PUBLIC and NON-PROFIT	"I value performance and result more than salary."	"I have a very positive view about employment in the public sector. Fair hours, stable employment makes a difference"	"I think this gives most scope for creating the environment for others to flourish."	"Driven to pursue the public interest"	"My country needs to build public sector capacity."	"To do something useful for your country other than making money"	"Familiarity with the process and system it works."	"I don't like the competitive part of the private sector and the immense focus on finance of it"	"Provides me the opportunity to not stop at advocacy but also implement."	"Making a better world"		
	Asia:111 Netherlands:51	"Diversity in careers."	"Autonomy, less red tape, less "shareholder" approach"	"To help people"			"I relate to it the most."	"I have a good experience in this sector, I like it now"	"I think it is the sector where I can have most impact."	"I want to do something meaningful"		
PRIVATE	26	19	24	5	16	16	30	7	15	4		
Asia:22 Netherlands:10	"I want to experience a more competitive working environment." "More career opportunities, more profit."	"I'd prefer a less bureaucratic sector, but with a focus on the public sector"		"To help build up private sector in my country"			"Private sector dynamics are closer to my personality."	"The money you can earn is higher in this sector than the other two sectors"	I believe businesses are equally important in influencing policy decisions of government and trained professionals have a major role to play there.	0		
	13	4	0	0	1	0	7	6	1	0		

public value, and make a significant impact, take the backstage for this group of respondents. This is in line with our quantitative findings, which indicate a lower level of PSM compared to that of the Dutch sample. Interestingly, one of the respondents mentions that the private sector is equally important for influencing the decisions of the government which may benefit everyone. This sentiment is a good example of the sector-agnostic outlook said to be common among the new generation workforce due to the rise of the cross-sector collaboration in delivering public services.

The pay in the private sector as well as career opportunities seems to be an important consideration for students who are leaning toward private sector employment. “Profit” and “career opportunities” are cited as some of the reasons for private sector preference. The qualitative findings complement our quantitative data in important ways: the service and public value aspect of public sector employment attract the students in the Dutch sample, whereas the Asian respondents in our study display a more pragmatic approach – sector-fit and alignment with long-term career goals and opportunities.

Discussion

The results of our study provide support for two out of three hypotheses we formulated. First, our hypothesis that the students in the Singaporean sample have a lower PSM level and a lower regard for the public sector than their Dutch counterparts was not confirmed. At first glance, this is at odds with the findings of some of the previous studies in Asia (Fan, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2016; Taylor & Beh, 2013; Xu, 2006). These findings, however, are in line with the results of the study by Ko and Jun (2015), who find that the students in Singapore rank chance to benefit the society relatively high. This is an interesting finding which merits further academic attention in order to attain a clearer picture of the status of PSM in the Asian public sector context.

Second, students in the Singaporean sample display a higher preference for pecuniary rewards as expressed in a high salary. This finding fits in well within the existing scholarship on extrinsic motivators in the Asian public sector employment context (Fan, 2007; Taylor & Beh, 2013; Xu, 2006), which demonstrates consistently that pecuniary rewards, such as salaries, bonuses, and secondary benefits remain an attractive feature of public sector employment in most Asian countries. An important takeaway for public sector managers is the importance of extrinsic rewards in attracting and retaining talented and educated graduates.

At the same time, our third finding demonstrates that there is a negative correlation between preference for a high salary and public sector employment choice, and a positive correlation between PSM and public sector

employment preference. This points to a pronounced divide between students driven by a desire to benefit the society and those, who would prefer a higher salary. An interesting consideration in this regard is that the Singaporean sample displays higher mean scores in both PSM and preference for pecuniary rewards than the Dutch sample, indicating that the contrast in motivations is more stark in the Singaporean sample. It also has implications for the design of the curriculum in the Singaporean context, which should aim to both socialize and enhance PSM of the students who prefer public sector employment, as well as sharpen the awareness of the public sector intricacies of those students who aim for the private sector opportunities.

Fourth finding demonstrates that previous sector of employment is an important predictor of public sector employment preference post-graduation, as students who have previously worked in the public sector are also less likely to switch sectors. This finding may have some common ground with a prominent research strand in public service motivation scholarship – the mediating role of person-organization fit in predicting employment preferences and positive work behaviors. For example, a study by Jin, McDonald, and Park (2018) finds that person-organization fit and organizational commitment mediate the relationship between PSM and organizational citizenship behavior.

Finally, the findings indicate that cultural context in this case does not play a meaningful role in shaping the sector choice. Despite the lower mean score for public sector preference in the Singapore sample, we cannot confirm that the graduate students in the Netherlands are in fact more inclined to join public sector than their colleagues from the Singapore public affairs program. At the same time, the difference in preference for a high salary and PSM is statistically significant between the two samples, and these are highly correlated with the employment sector choice. This may have some implications for the public affairs program in Singapore, in that the students in the program may be less inclined to join public sector if their primary goal is a generous benefits package. This, in turn, has implications for the content of the program, which needs to aim to equip students with a range of skills needed today regardless of the sector. Still, students from both samples prefer to join the public sector over the private and nonprofit sectors. In itself, this finding is “good news” for public affairs programs in both cases and may serve as indirect evidence that the schools are on the right track in fulfilling their mission to prepare and socialize public sector leaders of the future (Bright, 2005; Camilleri, 2007; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Ritz et al., 2016).

Limitations and future research

This study has two key limitations and subsequent implications for future research. First, given the small sample size of this study, the results are not

generalizable to the 22 countries making up the continent of Asia which is very diverse with regard to political systems, cultural contexts, demographics, and socio-economic conditions. The results may speak for China, India, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, in particular Singapore and Indonesia. In addition, the sample from the Netherlands is quite a bit smaller and junior in comparison. However, the fact that the samples do not differ significantly in terms of their job sector preference does seem to indicate both samples bear the characteristics of most public affairs students as shown in other studies (Rose, 2013; Taylor, 2010; Van der Wal, 2017a; 2017b; Van der Wal & Oosterbaan, 2013; Vandenabeele, 2008).

Second, a related concern is “that the public sectors of some Asian countries suffer from corruption and cronyism (Christie, Kwon, Stoeberl, & Baumhart, 2003), while Singapore is in many ways the exact opposite (Quah, 2011)” (Van der Wal, 2017b, p. 950). This may affect students’ perceptions of government capacity in these countries. Still, Singaporean respondents did not diverge widely from other respondents in their responses (Van der Wal, 2017b, p. 950).

Conclusion

With our empirical analysis, we tried to explore whether the public affairs programs in the context of Singapore and the Netherlands attract individuals with differing motivations, sector perceptions and job sector preference, whether perceptions and attitudes of these students are generally skewed positively toward the public sector, as well as the role of PSM and pecuniary rewards in choice of public sector employment. Our results are somewhat mixed in that they do point at an overall public sector job preference of public affairs students, but with sector perceptions and motivations differing between the two countries.

Our findings point to a higher level of PSM in the Singaporean sample, which goes against the common notion that extrinsic factors are a more important consideration in public sector employment in the Asian context than the desire to benefit the society (Fan, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2016; Taylor & Beh, 2013; Xu, 2006). At the same time, the findings point to a higher preference for pecuniary rewards in the Singaporean sample as opposed to their Dutch counterparts, which is consistent with the status of public sector employment in the Asian context, and the associated prestige and fringe benefits. However, further analysis of the association between PSM and preference for pecuniary rewards and public sector employment preference uncovers a strong positive correlation between PSM and preference for public sector employment, and a negative correlation of a preference for a high salary and the choice of public sector as a post-graduation employment option. Moreover, previous sector of employment seems to have

a strong correlation with the future sector of employment – those who previously worked for the public sector are more likely to indicate it as their post-graduation choice.

The second aim of our paper, congruent with the objectives of this symposium, is to outline the implications of our findings for public affairs education in Asia. In this vein, our paper concludes with four key findings with relevance to the analysis and development of public affairs education in Asia.

First, even though our findings indicate that the cross-national differences in sector preference are not statistically significant, in both samples students still lean toward public sector employment despite a somewhat subpar level of positivity toward the public sector. At the same time, there is a pronounced difference in the levels of PSM and a preference for a high salary, both being higher in the Singaporean sample.

These mixed findings imply that the content of public affairs programs should not necessarily be tailored along the geographical dimensions only but also take advantage of the socialization effect of education and enhance students' interests in the public sector, equip them with knowledge about their sector of choice and build on their value base. Second, PSM may be a good indicator of sector choice according to some scholars, and the findings of our study demonstrate that students with a higher PSM level are more likely to choose public sector employment. This may imply that even though the job-seeking incentives and career messaging public affairs programs aim to convey may not need to be differentiated for public affairs schools and curricula in Asia. At the same time, such curricula may benefit from more explicit attention to normative elements of public service employment, issues of ethics, values, and integrity, and more practical and inspiring examples of how public sector work can contribute to societal change and better performing governments. Doing so may enhance the motivational base of students and their positive outlook on public sector employment, and they may approach their jobs and careers with a more public value and public interest-oriented mind-set.

Third, however, public affairs programs may also need to equip their students with more non-sector-specific skills, which would help the students utilize their prosocial proclivities in any sector, as our findings indicate that the preference for a high salary remains an important consideration for some students, who are also less likely to choose public sector as their employment destination. This will help foster better cross-sector collaboration and launch successful careers in people- and public value-centric roles regardless of the sector. The solution to many policy challenges hinges on cultivating future “tri-sector athletes” – leaders who are able to engage and collaborate across all three sectors, meaning that students need to be able to navigate and master

a genuine appreciation of public, private and nonprofit sectors in equal measure.

Fourth and final, an increased focus on “sector agnostic”, transferable skills and mind-sets may align, in particular with the attitudes and career ambitions of generation Z and beyond, the new workforce. Studies show how this generation values work with immediate impact on society while being less attached to a specific sector or career path at the same time. It is clear that integrating the abovementioned recommendations in public affairs curricula in Asia may seem somewhat paradoxical or ambiguous at first: both strengthening the public service ethos and enhancing the image of government work while at the same time inculcating a broader appreciation of public value creation *across* sectors. However, finding ways to better emphasize that PSM and extrinsic motivations do not necessarily need to crowd out each other, and that the public sector can be a positive force, complementary to other sectors, rather than just a bureaucratic job provider, will contribute to producing a new generation of pro-active, collaborative public value creators. More experiential, experimental, and engaging learning platforms should undergird that process, if public affairs education wants to continue to be a sunset industry in Asia (Van der Wal, 2017c).

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