

Article

Profiling Public Sector Choice: Perceptions and Motivational Determinants at the Pre-Entry Level

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Abstract: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development now guides public administrations in conveying all their functions. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), directly or indirectly, need effective public services and officials for successful implementation. Although working in public entities has been related to ‘a sense of duty and morality’, literature reports that motivation and sense of self-worth among public officials have been declining for many years, which in turn can endanger their performance, diminish their willingness to attend to civic affairs, and become committed to their organisation. Public officials’ motivation has been widely addressed through the lens of public service motivation and public sector motivation. Fewer studies, however, have focused on the factors of choice at a pre-level entry. This paper intends to address this gap by pondering on what influences student’s intention to work in the public sector. Understanding what drives potential future public officials’ motivation is crucial for public service sector effectiveness. Following a case study approach with a sample of 2251 undergraduate and post-graduate students of a Portuguese university, findings show an attribution of similar strengths and shortcomings to public and nonprofit sectors, a more positive perception of the private sector and job stability as the strongest motivation.

Keywords: public service motivation; sustainable development goals; university students; case study; Portugal

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s and 1980s, several changes affected the public sector all over the world, with Portugal being no exception [1–3]. Such changes have been analysed mainly from the New Public Management (NPM) viewpoint, a movement drawing its intellectual inspiration from public choice, agency theories and managerialism. The NPM reforms supported governments to provide service delivery and public policy recurring to a wide range of private and nonprofit actors and practices [4,5].

Based on the assumption that the Public Administration was over-bureaucratised and inefficient, the NPM movement argued for the primacy and advantages of private sector management practices and for the benefits of their use in public sector organisations. This was particularly applied in the human resources management domain with public models becoming more similar to the private [6]. ‘Run government like a business’, ‘make government work better and cost less’, and ‘please the customer’ became widespread metaphors in political and academic arenas [7].

Although on the whole there are some far-reaching trends, experience in Europe in the past decades displays different administrative reform paths and outcomes mainly due

to different degrees of reform capacity, sustainability of reform approach, and a 'fitting context' [8]. According to Lægread [9], the argument is that global myths and prescriptions for administrative reforms are interpreted and responded to differently depending on national and sector specific institutional arrangements and historical traditions. As such, since there is no common NPM model nor a coherent episteme, many of such initiatives resulted in hybrid and ambivalent management choices [10]. In the UK, for instance, although the 1980s and 1990s were dominated by centrally directed NPM reforms to make more use of private sector bodies to deliver public services, introduce more competition and marketisation in the public sector, following reforms have softened the competitive elements, namely in healthcare and education [11,12]. In some Eastern European Countries, such path was clearly followed. In Estonia, for instance, the search for efficiency has been the defining characteristic of the reforms, with the public service system being approached through the lens of cost-efficiency and reducing the number of officials. It is within this context that Sarapuu and Saarniit [13] (p. 324) argue that "the democratic aspects of public service and its role in carrying certain values in the state have been over-shadowed by the efficiency concerns". Hungary, however, followed a completely different path, with a post-2010 shift towards strong-state-inspired, illiberal governance and centralisation of power [14]. Northern European countries have also instigated NPM reforms. In Norway, for instance, the boundaries between the public and private sectors, between the national and subnational levels, and between policy areas have become more blurred [9]. Public Administration in Southern European countries, like Italy [15] or Portugal [16], has also been living in a period of ongoing reforms based on a managerial frame of reference and focus on effectiveness and efficiency, reduction of costs and size.

Importantly, the adaptation of the managerial style of the private sector to the public administration has had a critical impact in the human resources domain. One of the most cited is the loss of specific features usually regarded as attractive to qualified human resources, such as the guarantee of job security and more predictable promotion opportunities [17]. Within this context, public sector workforce recruitment has been systematically addressed in the literature as a problematic issue that needs to be tackled, albeit there is no consensus on the measures and practices to promote towards a positive change [18].

In this regard, and benefiting from a psychology-informed approach, a particularly relevant stream of research in the field of Public Administration and Public Policy has focused on the pivotal notion of employee motivation for and in the public sector, from the perspective of both Public Sector Motivation theory [19] and Public Service Motivation theory [20].

Public sector motivation is conceptualised as the desire to act based on self-interest, aimed at maximising the utility of individual preferences and choices as postulated by Rational Choice theory [21]. Accordingly, the attractiveness of public sector relies on certain institutional values and extrinsic incentives such as high-job security, relatively decent salary level, career progression and pension schemes [22,23].

Developed as a counterweight to the motivation of self-interest in rational choice theories [24], the notion of public service motivation is that individuals have an orientation to do good for others and society, thus desiring to engage in actions that can have impact on public interest [25]. Given its association with increased commitment, engagement and performance [26], public service motivation is seen as a key factor to attract and, more importantly, maintain qualified human resources, being a reliable and predictable venue to enhance employee motivation [27].

Both theories have informed a wide array of studies focused on occupational choice and on the differences between work motivation among public sector employees and their counterparts in the private sector. Recent international reports, however, state that motivation and sense of self-worth among public officials have been in decline for many years, which in turn can endanger their performance, diminish their willingness to attend

to civic affairs, and become committed to their organisation [28–32]. According to the same reports, the understanding of what triggers such decline and how citizens perceive the public sector and the role of public services is of particular relevance in ensuring the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and, accordingly, all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Following Haider et al. [33], human resources and SDG are interconnected through the common component of the human factor, since people's attitudes, behaviours and resource consumption have a direct impact on social, economic and ecological practices. However, Haider et al. [33] add that it is becoming increasingly harder to attract and retain the younger generation in the public sector, given their prejudiced perception of the public sector is relatively conservative, bureaucratic, and slow to change, hence preventing the top talent and highly educated younger generation from joining public services.

Few studies, however, have addressed the relevant factors of choices at a pre-level entry, and most of them with a focus on US or Asian students (e.g., [34,35]). The research developed by Marinas et al. [36] for Romanian BA students, Hinna et al. [37] for British and Italian students, and Van der Wal and Mussaguloova [38] comparing students from Singapore and the Netherlands, are the few exceptions that have addressed European universities.

Given the scarcity of research in this subject and the lack of attractiveness of the public sector systematically highlighted in the literature and in the United Nations, OECD and European Commission reports, especially in the aftermath of the last decade financial crisis, mapping these factors and how they interact is fundamental to achieve a broader comprehension on how the public sector is represented and in which way this may drive or hinder preferences of potential public and private sector employees.

This paper intends to contribute to this topic by pondering on the factors—perceptions and motivations—that may play a role in university student's intention to work in the public sector. More specifically, the aim is fourfold: (i) to understand how students perceive the public sector, which are the features they associate it with, and how it differs from the private and nonprofit ones in the Portuguese context; (ii) to access what are the main motivational factors that students consider important when choosing a sector of activity; (iii) to explore if there are differences between their initial motivation to work in a specific sector and the current motivation, thus having a proxy of the impact caused by the academic experience; (iv) to determine if such features and choices vary according to the degree students are obtaining and respective scientific domain.

Using a Portuguese university as a case study, this article asks two major complementary questions: do students perceive the public sector differently from the private and nonprofit sectors? What motivates students to choose working in the public sector? This approach enables to closely examine the data within a specific context [39]. The decision on who should be responsible to provide public services, mostly focused on the dichotomy public/private, is widely discussed in literature. Less discussed is if and how the academic experience may influence the motivation to work in the public sector. Different techniques as the multicriteria analysis are used to evaluate the alternatives [40,41]. However, in this study, the aim is to contribute to clarify if the scientific domain and the academic experience affect the students' intent to work in the public sector.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. In the next section, the research methodology is presented, namely, the instrument used, the process of data sampling and gathering, and the procedures conducted. In the third section, the main results of the study are presented regarding the perceptions and motivations of students with respect to the public sector. The fourth section contains a discussion of the results in light of other studies' findings. The final section outlines the main conclusions of the study and underlines the importance of the issue at stake for public administration, especially in a post-2008 financial crisis and current COVID-19 pandemic in which the demand for public services has deepened.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Instrument

The data was collected with a survey comprising a set of questions related to sociodemographic information, motivational factors and perceptions held on the three sectors: public, private and nonprofit. Besides the general sociodemographic variables—age, sex, political affiliation, course of studies and professional experience—the professional activity of the participants and their parents were also taken into account, as well as two questions aimed at accessing the initial and current choice of sector to develop the future activity, respectively “In which sector were you planning to work in when you started this course?” and “Currently, in which sector are you planning to work?”.

The extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors underlying the choice of a specific sector and the type of features perceived by the participants as characterising the sectors were designed according to the insights of Public Sector Motivation Theory and Public Service Motivation Theory. Departing from the works developed by Gabris and Simo [19] and Perry and Wise [20], a literature search based on these theories was conducted both to identify what is not known or problematic in the literature regarding the issue at stake and to guide our survey script. At the end, the participants had to rate, on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very much important), what motivated them to work in a certain sector: “Community-oriented results”; “High remuneration”; “Job stability”; “Career promotion”; “Job flexibility”; “Learning opportunities”.

The perceptions held by the participants on the three sectors (public, private, and nonprofit) were measured with a set of 13 items. The participants had to indicate for each sector the absence or presence of each of the 13 features: “Teamwork promotion”; “Innovative services”; “Participatory decision-making within the institution”; “Development of society”; “Intellectually stimulating work environment”; “Balance between work and personal life”; “Possesses changeable structures and cultures”; “Easy to fire workers”; “Transparency promotion”; “Satisfaction of clients/users assessment”; “Competitive market”; “Job security”; “Social recognition and prestige”. A last question—“Public service should be provided by?”—included the three sectors as options, allowing the participants to choose more than one. The survey can be found in the supplementary material.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

The study adopted a purposive sampling aligned with the goal of addressing perceptions on a pre-level entry, considering only students—enrolled in BSc and MSc degrees—of one university. There were limitations of time and resources to conduct a large-scale survey that included other universities as well with similar representation. Henceforth, we chose to have a thorough description of just one institution—University of Aveiro (UAVR)—as the common denominator for all the students from different cycle of studies and courses. Founded in 1973, UAVR is one of Portugal’s 14 public universities, being widely recognised as one of the most innovative universities in Portugal. It is ranked #581-590 in QS Global World Rankings 2021. Attended by about 15,000 students on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, UAVR offers a wide range of degree programmes in various areas of knowledge.

A request to collaborate with the process of data collection was sent to all the directors of BSc and MSc of 62 courses of the university, of which 48 courses (77.4%) accepted to participate. The data was gathered in two ways: online, in which the directors shared the survey with the students of the respective course and using paper-pencil surveys. In the latter, the surveys were conducted by a group of students within the context of a curricular unit of “Management and Public Administration”, so as to allow for a first experience with this step of the research process. The students collected the data during classes of curricular units from several courses from 2017 to 2018. An introduction to this study was given by the researchers to all the sampled students. The participants

were informed that their responses would be used only for research purposes and would be kept confidentially.

In total, 2296 students agreed to participate, but only 2251 questionnaires were considered valid for analysis (2% invalid surveys). Of the total valid surveys, 66.2% are women ($n = 1491$) and 33.7% are men ($n = 759$). One participant did not report the gender. The sample includes three different age groups: 18–20 years old (56.3%), 21–30 years old (39.5%) and above 30 (3.9%). Participants were enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate studies, with the larger part of the sample, 69.8%, being at the BSc level ($n = 1624$); 11.5% in Integrated BSc and MSc ($n = 259$) and 16.3% enrolled in a MSc ($n = 368$). Participants were recruited from a wide set of courses ($n = 48$), distributed by 20 scientific areas of expertise of the following six scientific domains: Health and Medical Sciences ($n = 379$; 16.8%); Exact Sciences ($n = 61$; 2.7%); Natural Sciences ($n = 155$; 6.9%); Social Sciences ($n = 915$; 40.6%); Engineering and Technology ($n = 501$; 22.3%); Humanities ($n = 240$; 10.7%). In what concerns the professional experience, 23.5% ($n = 251$) of the participants had worked in the public sector; 60.2% ($n = 644$) indicated previous experience in the private sector, and 16.4% ($n = 175$) had already worked in the nonprofit sector.

The majority of the participants' parents work in the private sector, 50.7% ($n = 1142$), followed by the public sector, 31.3% ($n = 704$), whereas 13.3% ($n = 299$) indicate that the parents work in both public and private sectors. Only 0.9% of the participants' parents work in the nonprofit sector ($n = 21$). Finally, the majority of the participants do not have any political affiliation (86%). The summary characterisation of the sample is in Table 1.

Regarding data analysis strategies, descriptive (mean and standard deviation; frequencies), bivariate (independent samples t-test) and multivariate (MANOVA) statistics were conducted using SPSS version 23 statistic software package.

Table 1. Characterisation of the studied sample.

	Total	
	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Women	1491	66.2
Men	759	33.7
No report	1	0.1
Age groups		
18–20	1268	56.3
21–30	890	39.5
>30	87	3.9
No report	6	0.3
Academic degree		
BSc level	1624	69.8
Integrated BSc and MSc	259	11.5
MSc	368	16.3
Scientific domains		
Health and Medical Sciences	379	16.8
Exact Sciences	61	2.7
Natural Sciences	155	6.9
Social Sciences	915	40.6
Engineering and Technology	501	22.3
Humanities	240	10.7
Professional experience		
Public sector	251	23.5
Private sector	644	60.2
Nonprofit sector	175	16.4

Parents' work		
Public sector	704	31.3
Private sector	1142	50.7
Public sector + private sector	299	13.3
Nonprofit sector	21	0.9

3. Results

3.1. Student's Perception of the Main Features of Each Sector of Employment

A list of 13 items corresponding to features potentially connected to the three sector's praxis and environment was presented to the students in order to indicate the extent to which each feature was associated with each sector. These dichotomous answers are taken here as proxies of how students represent and perceive public, private and nonprofit sectors.

As shown in Table 2, the feature with higher frequency of answers for the public sector is its role in contributing to the "Development of society" (87.4%), followed by "Job security" (73.9%) and "Teamwork promotion" (73.1%). The features less associated with this sector are, respectively, the ability to foster "Innovative services" (42.2%), "Participatory decision-making" (40.2%) and "Easily changeable structures and cultures" (22%). The latter suggest that the public sector is perceived as a more stable and constant field, falling behind in the competitiveness and innovation that is clearly salient in the representations of the private sector, which is highly associated, precisely, with the promotion of a "Competitive market" (92.7%) and "Innovative services" (92.3%), followed by "Intellectually stimulating work environment" (84.6%). On a related note, and albeit the higher frequency of answers to "Easy to fire employees" (70.1%) when comparing to the public (51%) and the nonprofit (58%) sectors, "Job security" is also highly associated with this sector (69.7%), more than with the nonprofit (51.9%) and just slightly above the perception of this aspect for the public (73.9%). Hence, it appears that, overall, the perceptions held towards the private sector are more positive than for the other two, featuring both relative stability and innovation as well as the capacity to enable "Social recognition and status" (81.7%). In addition, our sample perceives this sector as contributing almost at the same level of the public sector to the "Development of society" (83.1%).

Table 2. Frequency values of the features that students associate to each sector.

	Public	Private	Nonprofit
	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes
Teamwork promotion	73.1%	81.3%	95.3%
Innovative services	42.2%	92.3%	69.4%
Decision-making participation	40.2%	63.4%	81.9%
Development of society	87.4%	83.1%	92.1%
Intellectually stimulating work environment	49.5%	84.6%	75.7%
Balance between work and personal life	67.3%	59.9%	75.2%
Easily changeable structures and cultures	22.0%	46.8%	65.1%
Easy to fire employees	51.0%	70.1%	58.0%
Transparency promotion	47.5%	43.2%	77.0%
Users/clients satisfaction assessment	60.1%	84.8%	71.0%
Competitive market	47.6%	92.7%	33.9%
Job security	73.9%	69.7%	51.9%
Social recognition and status	58.3%	81.7%	66.4%

In what regards the nonprofit sector, it is important to highlight the higher frequency of its role in contributing to “the Development of society” (92.1%), which alongside “Teamwork promotion” (95.3%) and “Participatory decision-making” (81.9%) are not only the features more related to this sector but also the ones that are more associated with it than with both private and public sectors. Another interesting result is the perception of this sector as the one that is more prone to “Transparency promotion” (77%) as opposed to the public (47.5%) and the private (43.2%). The promotion of “Social recognition and status” (66.4%) and the “Intellectually stimulating work environment” (75.7%) although less salient than in the private sector, are higher than what students perceived for the public sector.

3.2. Perceptions of Features According to Cycle of Studies and Scientific Domain

Overall, master’s and undergrad students tend to have similar perceptions of the three sectors, with a few exceptions. Master’s students tend to be more optimistic about the public sector than their counterparts are, with more than half considering that it promotes a stimulating work environment, and transparency and, also, more obstacles for firing workers. In addition, less than half consider that the private sector promotes a good life–work balance as opposed to undergrad students who are more optimistic about the private.

When comparing the responses according to the scientific domain of the participants, there are only slight divergences, which occur mainly regarding the provision of innovative services, the existence of a stimulating work environment, working in a competitive market, and the prestige of professional activities (see Table 3).

Table 3. Perceptions of sectors by scientific domain.

Item	Patterns
Provision of innovative services	Widespread view on the lack of capacity of innovation from the public sector, especially by Social Sciences and Humanities’ students. The only exceptions are students of Exact Sciences.
Promotion of teamwork	Even though all sectors are perceived as able to promote teamwork, the students associate it more with the nonprofit sector.
Participation in decision-making	The public sector is seen as the one with a lower chance to participate in decision-making. The private sector and, especially, the nonprofit are seen as promoting their employees’ participation in organisations’ decision making.
Development of society	All sectors are considered profitable venues to develop society. When comparing public with private, the first is considered as contributing more, however, both fall behind the nonprofit sector.
Stimulating work environment	With the exception of medical sciences students, who consider that the public sector offers an intellectually stimulating work environment, there is no consensual view on this issue. As for the private and nonprofit sectors, the general view is that both promote a stimulating work environment.
Allowing a work–personal life balance	There is a more favourable and unanimous view of the public sector allowing for a better work–personal life balance than the private sector. However, the nonprofit is, again, privileged as the one with better chances to have a balanced work–personal life.
Open-mindedness to change the structure and culture	The public sector is perceived as the more difficult to change. However, the opinions regarding the private sector are not unanimous and only the nonprofit is perceived as open to changes in structure and culture.
Capacity to lay off	The private sector is perceived as the one where it is easier to fire workers. However, albeit with a slight difference, there are more students believing that there are no major obstacles in firing workers in the public sector.
Promotion of transparency	Students tend to agree on a lack of transparency either in the public or the private sector. By contrast, there is more transparency in the nonprofit sector.

Evaluation of the citizen/client satisfaction	The general view is that in all sectors the satisfaction of citizens/clients is taken into account and evaluated.
Working in a competitive market	In this subject, there is a clear advantage of the private sector standing at the opposite end of the nonprofit sector which is perceived as not acting in a competitive market. Regarding the public sector, there is a general perception that the competitiveness is lower, except for the students of medical sciences and natural sciences.
Promotion of job security	Students perceive a similarly high job security in public and private sectors. The perspective is less optimistic for the nonprofit sector.
Prestige of professional activities	For a larger number of students, working in the private sector or the nonprofit sector is more prestigious than working in the public sector. Furthermore, a higher percentage of students from Humanities and Engineering and Technologies perceive that is not prestigious to work in the public sector.

3.3. Motivational Factors and Determinants to Choose a Sector of Employment

To enhance the understanding of the weight of certain motivational factors to work in a given sector, descriptive analyses were conducted to obtain mean and standard deviation values. As shown in Table 4, “Job stability” appears as the strongest motivation ($M = 4.46$; $SD = 0.663$), followed by “Career promotion” ($M = 4.19$; $SD = 0.743$) and “Learning opportunities”. On the other hand, “High remuneration” ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 0.726$) and “Job flexibility” ($M = 4$; $SD = 0.722$) are moderately valued but to develop a professional activity “Oriented for the community” is the motivational factor with least impact ($M = 3.86$; $SD = 8.18$). A one sample t-test confirmed that the values are significantly above at $p < .01$ from the mid-point of the scale with the majority of the participants considering all factors important and very much important.

Independent sample t-tests were conducted to see whether there were differences between men and women. These were found regarding Job Stability— $t(2231) = 3.247$; $p = 0.01$ —and Community oriented results— $t(2234) = 6.069$; $p = 0.01$ —which are slightly more valued by men.

Cronbach’s alpha was computed for all participants and motivation-related items, with a low value of 0.676, which is higher (0.716) without the item “Oriented for the community”. This result at par with this being the only item not solely focused on individual gain, reinforces its use as a different variable of motivation (“Community based motivation”). Interestingly, the individual-based motivation includes the typical motivational factors put forth by Public Sector Motivation Theory whereas this communitarian orientation reflects more the scope of Public Service Motivation Theory.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations values for motivational factors to work in a specific sector.

	M	SD
Community oriented results	3.86 *	0.818
High remuneration	4.03 *	0.726
Job stability	4.46 *	0.663
Career promotion	4.19 *	0.743
Job flexibility	4 *	0.772
Learning opportunities	4.18 *	0.747

* $p < 0.01$.

3.4. Motivation to Choose a Sector of Employment: Are There Any Differences between Community-Based Motivation and Individual-Based Motivation?

In order to explore if there were differences between community-based motivation and individual-based motivation, and cycle of studies, a MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) was conducted, with the two dependent variables of motivation and BSc,

Integrated MSc and MSc as the “between-subjects factor”. Significant differences were found between the three only for the Community-based motivation, $F(2, 2207) = 9.153$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2p = 0.08$, which is significantly higher at the BSc level and very low at the MSc level.

Another MANOVA was conducted taking individual and community-based motivation as dependent variables and the six scientific domains as the “between-subjects factor”. Significant differences were found between the six groups for both individual-based motivation, $F(5, 2216) = 11.002$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2p = 0.024$, and community-based motivation $F(5, 2216) = 14.968$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2p = 0.033$.

More specifically, Health and Medical Sciences is the scientific domain that distinguishes itself from the others with the highest community-based motivation. On the other hand, the current motivation to work in the private sector is highest in the Exact Sciences’ students and more significantly associated with individual-based motivation. On this note, students from Social Sciences also present the highest individual-based motivation when comparing to the other five scientific domains. Finally, the observation of the plots with the estimated marginal means of current motivation to work in the public sector and individual-based motivations vis a vis communitarian-based motivation corroborates this pattern, namely the connection between higher motivation to work for the public sector and community-based motivation type.

3.5. Evolution and Patterns of Motivation to Choose a Sector of Employment

When asked to recall in which sector they were planning to develop their activity in the beginning of the course, the majority of our sample opted for just one, privileging the private sector ($n = 1164$, 51.7%) over the public sector ($n = 715$, 31.8%) and nonprofit ($n = 32$, 1%). A few, however, were considering more than one ($n = 291$), particularly public and/or private ($n = 234$). The latter and three other combined iterations—40 students were considering the three sectors, nine only the private and nonprofit, and eight the public and nonprofit—appear to have become even more residual over time. When asked about their current motivation, only 132 put forth private and public; 24 targeted the three sectors, and six both the private or the public with the nonprofit.

As for the current motivation regarding just one sector, the preference for the private sector increased from the initial 51.7% ($n = 1164$) to 55.4% ($n = 1247$). The initial intention to work exclusively in the nonprofit sector, 1% ($n = 32$), also slightly increased to 1.7% ($n = 39$). The motivation to choose only the public sector is the only one with a decrease, albeit residual, from 31.8% ($n = 715$) to 30.4% ($n = 685$).

In order to explore the association between the initial and current motivation to choose a sector of activity, the answers frequencies to the two questions were subjected, separately, to chi square tests. Globally, the participants tend to report a current motivation coherent with the initial one. This result suggests that the academic experience may not have had a significant impact in the perceptions and underlying motivations guiding the prospective choice of an employment sector at a pre-entry level.

When analysing the motivations expressed according to the graduation level of studies, the results indicate that undergrad (47.1%) and postgrad students (62.4%) express a motivation to work in the private sector.

The association between the willingness of undergraduate students to work in the public sector and of postgraduate students to work in the private sector were statistically significant.

Considering that undergrad students, at the BSc level ($n = 1624$), tend to prefer the private sector (47.1%), it is important to highlight that the result reported above concerning the higher motivation of the total sample to work in the private sector, 62.6% ($n = 1404$) may be due to the higher number of undergrad students, at the BSc level ($n = 1624$), in contrast with the number of students enrolled in Integrated MSc ($n = 259$) and MSc ($n = 368$).

In what refers to the current motivation to work in the public sector, 54.6% of students of Health and Medical Sciences, 45.9% of students of Exact Sciences, 36.8% of students of Natural Sciences, 39% of students of Social Sciences, 42.5% of students of Humanities, and 19.2% of students of Engineering and Technology stated that they were willing to work in the public sector.

Furthermore, the association between willingness to work in the public sector and scientific domain of studies was found to be statistically significant, $\chi^2(5) = 124.413$, $p < 0.001$, mostly due to the relatively lower percentage of students of Engineering and Technology (19.2%). In regards to current motivation to work in the Private Sector, 53.3% of students of Health and Medical Sciences, 54.1% of students of Exact Sciences, 56.1% of students of Natural Sciences, 59.8% of students of Social Sciences, 78.2% of students of Engineering and Technology and 61.7% of students of Humanities declared that they were willing to work in the private sector. The association between willingness to work in the private sector and scientific domain was, again, found to be statistically significant, $\chi^2(5) = 74.219$, $p < 0.001$. This trend was due to the relatively higher percentage of students of Engineering and Technology (78.2%) and, to a lesser degree, students of Humanities (61.7%) who stated they would favour work in the private sector. Finally, only 4% of students of Health and Medical Sciences, 3.3% of students of Exact Sciences, 9% of students of Natural Sciences, 3% of students of Social Sciences, 1.6% of students of Engineering and Technology and 3.8% of students of humanities stated their favour in relation to work in nonprofit Sector. Statistical analysis uncovered a statistically significant dependence of willingness to work in nonprofit sector and scientific domain, $\chi^2(5) = 21.325$, $p < 0.001$, to a large extent due to the relatively higher percentage of students from Natural Sciences (9%) who stated their willingness to work in the nonprofit sector.

Crossing the participants sex and preference to work in a given sector, and despite the significant differences between the number of participants in both groups—women ($n = 1491$, 66.2%) and men ($n = 752$, 33.4%)—the pattern observed is similar with a higher motivation to work in the private sector expressed by 64.6% of men ($n = 486$) and 61.6% of women ($n = 918$). In total, 29% of men ($n = 219$) indicate they would be interested in the public sector and only 20 of the participants (2.6%) intend to work in the nonprofit. As for women, a more expressive 42% ($n = 625$) of the participants are targeting the public sector and 55 (3.7%) the nonprofit sector.

It is important to highlight that 66 men and 46 women did not reply to this question and 134 women and 34 men have indicated their motivation to work in more than one sector. One interesting detail: 42.5% of participants ($n = 424$) with motivation to work in the public sector have parents who also work in the public sector whereas 38.2% ($n = 381$) of the participants targeting the public sector have parents working in the private sector. The motivation match for the private sector is higher with 57.8% of participants with parents working in the private sector wanting to follow this path.

3.6. Public Service Provision: Who Should Be Responsible?

Nearly half of our participants ($n = 1117$, 49.6%) consider that the public service should be provided by the public sector, followed by 398 (17.7%) who admit the intervention of the other sectors in the provision of public services. It is worth mentioning that 198 of the participants (8.8%) state that public services should be provided solely by the private sector. On this matter, responses by gender are very similar: 67% of women ($n = 749$) and 33% of men ($n = 368$) think that the public service is a responsibility of the Public Sector. Again, around 50% of both groups put forth other combined solutions.

Among the 1117 (49.6%) of participants that consider that public service should be provided by the Public Sector, 44.5% are from Social Sciences ($n = 499$ out of 915); 49.7% from Engineering and Technology ($n = 249$ out of 501); 45.4% from Health and Medical Sciences ($n = 172$ out of 379); 56.8% from Natural Sciences ($n = 88$ out of 155); 33.8% from Humanities ($n = 81$ out of 240). As the numbers show, a substantial number of participants

from each academic background believe that the public sector is duly responsible for the public service.

4. Discussion

In this study, we identified that students tend to represent the public sector—structurally and culturally—as stable and solid, with higher job security and contribution to society’s development. This representation, also reported in other studies (e.g., [36,42]), contrasts with the perception of the private sector as more dynamic, innovative and stimulating, whilst allowing a relative stability and, also, social recognition and status. The nonprofit sector benefits from similar social recognition alongside a higher transparency, anchored on the idea of making a great social impact. However, it lacks many of the positive features that the students generously attribute to the private sector, similarly to what was found in other studies (e.g., [35]). Interestingly, these comprise not only the usual features but also unexpected ones, such as a relatively high job security. In a study examining the factors that affect people’s career choices [43], no evidence was found sustaining that individuals who value more job security are more likely to choose public sector employment for their career rather than the private or nonprofit sectors. It may be the case that the representations of the private sector are not consensual and that tacit assumptions associating stability mainly to the public sector need to be reviewed. Additionally, let us not forget the probable spill-over effect regarding job stability perception in any sector in the aftermath of this past decade of financial crisis and its impact on employment prospects.

On a related note, and although we cannot infer the underlying reasons for the preference that our participants show towards the private sector, it is important to highlight that more than half of the participants’ parents work in the private sector. This specific interpersonal factor is proven to influence students’ perception about economic sectors and professions as well as their future job choice [36]. In a similar vein, another study [44] shows that individuals with a parent working for the government were more likely to have government jobs.

Our study also revealed interesting results regarding the perceptions of features according to the cycle of studies and the scientific domain. Regarding the dichotomy public vs. private sector, it is interesting to observe that MSc students—older and more experienced—tend to be more optimistic about the public sector as opposed to undergrad students who show a predisposition for the private sector. This different pattern of choice, depending on cycle of studies and age, has been found elsewhere (e.g., [43,45]). Moreover, the public sector is generally perceived as lacking the capacity for innovation and a stimulating work environment, as opposed to the private sector, with the exception of students from Exact and Medical Sciences. Considering the technological and scientific demands of these two, one may say that this result speaks well both of the case university as of other public sector institutions within the Portuguese context (e.g., laboratories, hospitals) regarding infrastructure, resources and research means. On the other hand, students from Humanities as well as from Engineering and Technologies consider that it is not prestigious to work in the public sector. The lack of prestige in the public sector has been pinpointed before as one of the obstacles faced by governments in recruiting and retaining highly qualified civil servants and is seen as a belated consequence of the widespread of New Public Management [46]. It would be important to better understand why students from both fields do not see public service as prestigious. Is it a comparison with further prospects in the private? Is it a consensual representation? How is prestige conceptualised and understood? Through which criteria? The mapping of different representations and specific factors should be a concern for further research.

Our study also shows that the most important motivation underlying the choice of a sector is the prospect of job stability, followed by career promotion and learning opportunities. The motives concerning individual gains and outcomes are more valued than more altruistic and community-oriented ones. In this regard, women tend to value

slightly more than men the latter—contribution to community—and also job security, aligned with a trend found in another study [33]. Detaining ourselves a little longer on the participant sex differences, the patterns presented by women, in our sample, besides the abovementioned, also differ from other studies concerning, for instance, a preference to work in the public sector [44]. This is not observed in the present study since both men and women tend to prefer the private sector.

Our findings concerning the motivation to choose a sector of employment show that students from Health and Medical Sciences display the highest community-based motivation when comparing to other scientific backgrounds. A previously found correlation between placing a higher priority on helping others and choosing government service (e.g., [44]) finds some resonance in this study, since the higher percentage of students motivated to work in the public sector are, precisely, from Health and Medical Sciences.

In this study, we proposed an association of individual-based motivation to some assumptions of public sector motivation vis a vis public service motivation, which is represented here by the community-orientation motive. In this line of thought, previous studies have shown that a strong interest in helping others does increase the likelihood that the current or future job is in the public sector [47]; that the greater the level of public service motivation the lower is the value attributed to desired monetary rewards [48] and that material incentives are poor predictors of work motivation in the public sector [49].

The community-based motivation tends to be higher at the BSc level and very low at the MSc level, which imposes thinking on the underlying reasons for this inward-oriented evolution. Social conventional expectations and demands that become stronger with age, especially in more homogeneous and small-scale contexts, may play a significant role, hard to defy. However, what is the role of high education experience and socialisation in this process? What values are being put forth and are there any protective factors for this apparent individualistic determinism? The literature is not consensual regarding this pattern and cultural-based differences may impair a valid comparison, given different values system. For instance, a more collectivist system, in the case of Zhong and Bao [45], shows that older Chinese students are more concerned with altruistic values than younger ones. Pondering on these results requires keeping in mind a comprehensive socialisation model and a sharp questioning of what is being fostered during these formation years.

Finally, with respect to who should be responsible for public service provision, many students do not consider that the responsibility should rely only on the public sector, offering different combined solutions. This perspective is very much aligned with the Denhardt and Denhardt [7] New Public Service model that neither calls for a dominant intervention from the state in public service provision, nor claims to run government like a business. Nonetheless, it is worth saying that nearly half ($n = 1117$) agree, in fact, with the idea that public service is a matter for the public sector.

5. Conclusions

Tempestuous times, as observed during both the 2008 global financial crisis and the current COVID-19 pandemic, intensify the demand for public services and, simultaneously, put pressure on the supply side. Cost-containment measures, including the reduction of wages and benefits for public servants and pensioners and public service job cuts, namely in countries such as Portugal that signed the Memorandum of Understanding [50], diminished public trust and increasing competition with private sector employers over the dwindling workforce are also aggravating the circumstances [51]. Following the ‘war for talent’ expression labelled by Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod [52] and Korac et al. [51] argue that those in charge for recruitment in the public sector need to have a better understanding of what typifies citizens who prefer to work for the public sector over other employment opportunities.

Within this context, the aim of this paper was to identify the main motivations and perceptions held by undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding the choice of

employment sector (public vs. private vs. nonprofit). Although the lack of attractiveness of the public sector has been systematically highlighted in the literature (e.g., [53,54]), especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis, some of the findings of our study suggest a more hopeful view. Specifically, and mainly at the BSc level of different scientific domains, there appears to exist a high motivation at a pre-entry level of both course (initial motivation of sector choice) and job (current motivation of sector choice) to work at the public sector, which did not alter during the academic experience.

Furthermore, the public sector is perceived as having a major contribution to the development of society and a substantial percentage of the students surveyed think that the public service should be provided only by the public sector, which is also in line with current critical views regarding the privatisation or public–private partnerships that tend to weaken the public sector.

With respect to the students' perceptions about the three sectors of employment, the most salient features related to the public sector are the promotion of job security, the development of society and the promotion of teamwork. Such features are more similar to the leading ones of the nonprofit sector than to the most relevant ones of the private sector. In this sector, the main features of the representation held by students are the ability to provide innovative services, to work in a competitive market and to foster an intellectually stimulating work environment. Finally, the nonprofit sector, besides being perceived as the one able to provide a higher participatory decision-making, also shares, as mentioned above, some of the representational features of the public sector, namely teamwork promotion and the contribution to the development of society.

In what concerns the motivational factors to choose between the three sectors, our study reinforces the conceptual distinction between the assumptions of the two major theories of motivation, namely public sector motivation, based on self-interest, and public service motivation, very much rooted in the desire to serve the public interest and comply with specific institutional rules. It appears that the features of public sector motivation are more valued in our sample than the more community-oriented approach put forth by the Public Service Motivation Theory. The only exception are students from the field of Health and Medical Sciences, which are also the ones showing a greater interest for future employment in the public sector. Taking into due consideration the different opportunities and chances that the three sectors hold for distinct scientific domains, that are not equalised, the clear preference showed by students of Health and Medical Sciences to work in the public sector, guided by a high Public Service Motivation, is of utmost importance to further explore. This is even more important if one considers both the fundamental role of the health sector in society and the debate surrounding the provision of health-services by public vs. private vs. public–private partnerships, which also influence citizens' perceptions on the features of each sector.

This research is focused on one university of a southern European country, but findings do provide valuable insights that open the door to significant questions to be explored in future research and, accordingly, derive lessons for theory and future practice. Will the public sector be able to counteract its lack of attractiveness? It seems that a brighter viewpoint prevails amongst the younger generation. Still, further research involving, not only the use of the same survey to students from other universities, but also more in-depth analysis of this trend may provide valuable clues to specific antecedents and outcomes of public service motivation, that being crucial to foster both employee motivation and organisational performance, plays a fundamental role in public sector attractiveness.

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