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Who is the student?
First year business students’ notions of value and usefulness of their education

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Abstract

With New Public Management (NPM) influencing governance of universities a major focus is put on private value in the coupling of higher education and employability. In the mindset of NPM the students are seen and treated as customers or consumers. As a Swedish case, 15 first-year business economy students were asked about their expectations on the usefulness of their education. The empirical material showed a significant gender difference. The preliminary research question drawn from the empirical material is: How do we construct the business administration student through university governance? The paper discusses the findings in the light of the alternate mind-set of Public Value (PV) and suggests more attention to be put in goals and incentives of higher education on public value and democratic core principles such as gender equality. This is a first draft on this empirical material in the beginning of the second year of a four year doctoral candidature.

Introduction

Governance of universities differ depending on country, but a common trend in the Western world in recent decades is governments’ desire to use the private sector governance mechanisms to streamline higher education; adjusting to emphasis on markets, strong performance measurements, audit systems and empowered management focusing on an efficient and results oriented organization (Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008). Hence, focus has shifted from democratic core issues to cost efficiency, productivity and competition (Cardoso, Carvalho, & Santiago, 2011; Stensaker, 2006).

How NPM has influenced higher education has been well documented in several different countries’ contexts, for instance calling for increased competition, financial control and growth for pay related to performance for faulty in countries such as the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Norway (Ferlie et al., 2008). A Norwegian study shows how adopting NPM has led to more complex organizational identities among academic institutions (Stensaker, 2006). In Portugal the influence of NPM has affected terms of employment, slowly increasing short-term engagement in universities. At the same time Portuguese student organizations lose their influence over university governance (Cardoso et al., 2011; Santiago & Carvalho, 2008). A study from the UK shows a shift towards a system with increased centralization of management in higher education (Shattock, 2008). A Portuguese study show how NPM affects gender in higher education. Both men and women in academia tend to see their organization as “ungendered”, however, managerial styles more identified with women seemed to be less valuable then managerial styles identified with men (Carvalho & Machado, 2010). Adopting a Foucaudian feminist framework NPM can be seen as a political struggle for women on several levels in university organizations. In a UK study female academics state that in increased competition they do not have the same possibilities competing for high status projects within the university as their male colleagues. Many female academics feel marginalized, silenced, “the other” (Thomas & Davies, 2002). These two later studies show that NPM in university organization does
affect gender, however among university staff.

Usefulness is a central concept for the Swedish Universities in the 21st century. According to the Swedish Higher Education Act 2009:45 (sv. Högskolelagen 2009:45), the research conducted at Swedish universities must be useful and both education and research should be conducted focusing on solving real problems in society, hence the education ought to be useful to society putting an emphasis on employability. The focus on the role of universities in society, and the discussion on science and education from a perspective of usefulness, is not an exclusively Swedish issue, but reflect an international phenomenon (Gibbons, 1994; Watson, 2007). However, usefulness in relation to higher education has been questioned, for instance for supporting local instead of global solutions, commissioned instead of original ideas and authoritarian instead of critical thinking (Hasselberg, 2009). When higher education solely promotes economic and technological development in society there is a risk that we might overlook and endanger empathic and democratic values (Nussbaum, 2010). Hence, focusing on efficiency and market solutions for the public sector NPM has been criticized, calling for a change of discourse (O’Flynn, 2007).

With a focus on cost efficiency and productivity a major implication of NPM in higher education is the perception of the student. According to the mind-set of NPM the students are viewed and treated as consumers or clients (Cardoso et al., 2011; Emery, Kramer, & Tian, 2001; Newson, 2004; Slaughter & Larry, 2001). A customer can be described as a person who bases her choices on the market on the rights of individual freedom and rational choices. Being a customer, the opinion of the student in evaluation is vital stressing the link between studies and employability (Stensaker, 2006). Already by the recruitment phase advertisement and commercials promote the mind-set of the student as a consumer or a customer of higher education rather than a public sector user or a citizen (Cardoso et al., 2011).

An alternative mind-set calls for a new perspective of viewing the student. Instead of viewing the student as a customer or a consumer, we could view the student as a knowledge creator. The student can then be seen as a co-owner of the process of education, bringing in to the education her own knowledge and notions affecting the education that is taking place (Slaughter & Larry, 2001). However, most students do not see themselves as co-creators of knowledge, especially as they are encouraged to think about themselves as receivers of a knowledge-service by scholars, policymakers and journalists (Newson, 2004). When defining and discussing a client in public sector there is always a tension between the customer and the citizen, between values sprung from private business and democratic values (Alford, 2002; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). The ambition of this paper is however to, through an empirical example, discuss the implications of viewing and discussing the student as a customer alternate as a citizen. My preliminary research question is therefore forme as such: How do we construct the business administration student through university governance?

Keywords

New Public Management, Public Value, students, gender

The business economy student - a Swedish case

Studies in Business administration (sv. företagsekonomi) is fast growing and is today the largest educational topic in the humanities and social sciences in academia (Regeringskansliet, 2013). To clarify, the Swedish word företagsekonomi has several equivalents in English; business studies, management, organizational theory, strategy, marketing and accounting (Brunsson, 2010; Rehn, 2007). During the academic year 2010/2011 about 53 000 students (Högskoleverket, 2012) where
registered in business administration out of a total of approximately 360,000 registered students (Regeringskansliet, 2013) at universities in Sweden, i.e. students of business administration make up about 15% of all Swedish students. These students are a heterogeneous group concerning age, gender and social background and after finishing their studies they are spread in a wider variety of organizations than most other groups of students (Högskoleverket, 2006:11).

**Methods**

During September 2012 15 interviews were conducted with first year business economics students at a Swedish university. The interviews focused on their choice of studies and their perceived notion of the usefulness of their studies. The students were introduced to the planned study by a short presentation at an introductory lecture. Those who were interested in participating signed up on a list. From this list a random selection was made where the only possibility to generate a diversity in the sample was to get a balance in gender based on the students first names. This resulted in eight women and seven men in the sample.

The interviews lasted about 1-2 hours and were methodologically inspired by life story interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in whole. Life story interviews are a qualitative method with the aim to gather information about a person’s whole life. One characteristic of the life story interview is that the method gives the respondent the opportunity to organize events in life into a context. Practiced correctly the life story takes the form of an autobiography. (Atkinson, 1998) In this case, however, the purpose was to shed light on a shorter part of the respondent’s life; the time up to the study choice and their perceptions of the time after graduation. Hence the role of the interviewer was only to help the respondent to travel forward and backward in time and following the structure of the life story interview I asked the students to go back in life as far as they wanted in order to find events that might have affected their study choice. Otherwise, it was the student's story, choice of words and the context that the interviews were founded on.

When analyzing the material there was a significant difference between men and women in the themes they brought up about their childhood and events that they believed might have affected their study choices. This was an unexpected result and I therefore started separate the answers depending on gender. I will present a small part of the results in this paper. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and the citations are translated.

**Gathering and analyzing the empirical material**

The aim of my study was to discuss how students argue about their choice of and perceived usefulness of their education. In what way do business administration students describe how their education will be of use to them and how they will be of use for society after they acquire education? Half of the women in the study did not describe any positive role models in working life whatsoever. Instead, six out of eight described their own study choice as an “anti-choice” compared to their mothers working life. Their mothers worked in public sector; health care, public schools or as nursery teachers and they spoke about their mothers working life as both physically and psychologically stressful. An interesting factor is that in many stories the mothers directly had encouraged their daughters to choose “something else”.

"My mother has really influenced me, because she has never been satisfied with her job, she has never been happy in her job or what she gets out of it. (...) She is a medical secretary. So it’s pretty damn important, but they get no money and therefore she has not had an equally fun
life. (...) I've heard mom's version that she has not been happy with what she gets out of it or the job itself. " (female student, nr 6)

"But she (mum) says it herself. Studying to be a nurse? No no no, you shouldn’t! She doesn’t like it, no, it's too trying, people don’t feel good. Only diseases and I don’t think she thrives in it herself. She thinks it's too much misery in it so no, she told me not to study that.” (female student, nr 14)

“My mum is a teacher so I think I've got it a bit from the start like that, no, do not become a teacher. No, she doesn’t think it is … good.” (female student, nr 4)

"...but it was so heavy and it's also the fact that my mother often comes home and she has a sore back and she has a sore arm and she has a sore leg. It's very hard work. She works at the retirement home and it's very hard work so I would surely not like to work like that every day. ” (female student, nr 1)

Among the eight women interviewed only one spoke about a positive female role model from her childhood, an aunt working as a successful middle manager.

"My aunt can have something to do with it. She's a boss. I figured that what she does could be fun. What to study then? It might matter. It's not something I go around thinking about but I look up to her and yes, I think looking up to her is a bit of… You know I've heard mom's version. She is not happy with what she gets out of work or the job itself. And then she can, as the sister of her you know, just like that, get people to both make good money and thrive. It's a bit fascinating." (female student, nr 6)

Two of the women spoke about their fathers as professional role models.

"He is very economical and he has his own business and he works as a manager at the municipality so he....he has a great economic interest but that was never something I jumped at... I was never really interested. (female student, nr 14)

"He works at a bank. Not so high up, he works at a small part… he works with start-ups, like if they are going to get…well… I am not really sure what he does. (...) It feels like he is better of then my mum anyway. Ugh, I feel terrible saying this. ” (female student, nr 6)

Even if the fathers to these two women professionally are closer to their study choice, none of them are told to be the direct reason for their choice. But it still seems like they have contributed with positive notions on the professional life of a business administrator.

Among the male students there was a greater variety of role models, both male and female. Here is a description of a male role model:

“My relative ... he’s very decent and he ... it is a stable and secure guy simply. I do not know ... it was well a bit like that ... when you're young and you have role models and I thought it was a good role model simply. So ... and he knew what he wanted and he did get through with everything he did, so it gave this feeling of security. So maybe I felt that I was secure too ... like him”. (male student, nr 2)

Another male student spoke about both his parents as professional role models:
"My father, he likes to present, he likes to talk in front of people. When you are young you don’t really like doing that but after a while you realize that it is kind of fun. And my mum as well, she is, well, like a manager or something in a retirement home, what do you call it? Like in charge of a unit. I don’t know. I think you get it like automatically. (…) Taking responsibility, that’s what I mean. It’s like they paint you into a corner. Becoming a manager.”

(male student, nr 8)

Another male student told about his parents’ professional lives as contrasts, for him his mother was a professional role model.

"My mother has a higher education and my father doesn’t so I have seen the differences in working conditions and salaries. Even though, my mum is a woman she makes more money than my dad who is a man. (…) When I was living at home my mother used to work as an economist for the Defense Forces. Her job seemed really interesting. It was very much juggling with numbers. I was allowed to help her sometimes.”

(male student, nr 12)

One of the male student talks about his father’s company as the direct reason for choosing business administration.

"It all started a year ago. I finished high school. Took a year of… Well, I applied for university but I wasn’t accepted. It was something else, not business. It was computer science… Then I started working with my father. He runs a small firm. So I started working there, doing marketing. Drive. Come up with ideas, develop. Uh, and work with other companies, transactions, and these kinds of things. And it led to entrepreneurship actually. It felt like it was my thing. (…) It felt like I was in control … responsibility, a lot of responsibility. And then this strategic way of thinking, always thinking ahead to survive later. And yes … that was probably what led me here.”

(male student, nr 9)

In guiding the students forward in time I asked the students to tell me about their dreams, hopes and fears about their future careers. The aim was to understand how they talked about the usefulness of their education. Many of the students found it hard to describe their expectations on working life. In those cases I encouraged the respondent to think about his or her career just after the studies, in ten years’ time and to think back on the working live from an imagined age of 80 years old. After a while the question was appreciated by most of the interviewees and they became considerably more engaged.

Here, a big difference between the women and men where the majority of the women combining working life and family formation, the majority of the men separating working life and family formation. For the women, having children was discussed as a positive, in most cases nearly as a mandatory, part in life. But at the same time having children in the future was something that clearly limited their variety of choices in their present study situation.

"But in ten years’ time, then I will be 30. Then I really want to be settled, or I want to be on the way….at least. You know, building more on my family then my career….mmm…my career should already have been explored by then, that is how I imagine it.”

(female student, nr 6)

"I don’t know how I will combine this (work as a business woman) with having a family yet. (…) In ten years’ time I imagine that I will have a family. Then I have to think about them in the first place. After all I want to be with my children. (- - -) Well I think it is hard to have a job in
this area, combining it with a family. I am really afraid to spend too little time in my family and too much time at work. I think you really have to prioritize from the beginning to get it right.” (female student, nr 4)

In some of the interviews the female students compared their dreams, hopes and fears of their working life with that of their sisters or their own mothers. Here is one example:

"At least I won’t have to work weekends. I am thinking, like being a nurse or something... It’s like when I was little and my mum just, like at three o’clock at Christmas eve: "ok, I am going to work now!” I’m like: brrr, that is something I never want to do.” (female student, nr 14)

Several of the female students expressed fear of ending up in a situation in working life where they would have no influence, a feeling of meaninglessness.

"It feels like I am really anxious to be able to influence a little, see some results of the work I will do. So the results of your work just don’t disappear somewhere, everything you do (...) then it will just be meaningless....if you just work and work and nobody notices. (female student, nr 4)

Looking for citations where the women spoke about their expected position in working life, the majority of the women described their expected positions as administrators, developers or middle management.

"I have always thought of...like....being a boss or something, I mean I don’t think I am fit to be a boss. I think I would more like to be a project leader. (...) Well, I am not really sure what a project leader does. But you are like a superior but still not a boss. Like... the subordinates have their bosses but you are more like a coordinator.” (female student, nr 3)

"No, but if I am allowed to dream, just dream. I would say that I would like to work with marketing and be a part of really big projects. Because I like to work project based. Then it is never... like the same old song. No, I like working in projects... I would be really satisfied just having a work where I get to meet people. Like for instance working in a bank, that would be nice... I don’t know. As long as I don’t have to just sit in an office all day....” (female student, nr 14)

"Yes, (in the future) I am working in a big company. Maybe in Sweden, maybe somewhere else. Well, I can’t know exactly, to 100% where I will actually work, but anyway... Maybe with people, like a developer or something... as long as I don’t have to sit in an office just counting numbers... “ (female student, nr 15)

Only in one of the interviews did a female student describe her dreams about the future as becoming a manager — an entrepreneur.

"Well, I think I could become... I could study to become an accountant. And if I have the right resources and the right contacts I could open my own auditor bureau. Because I would like to, in the future, to open my own auditor bureau. And I could do it..... I could imagine doing it.” (female student, nr 1)

When the male students talked about their working life their views of their career were clearer and more progressive than the women interviewees. When reflecting on their career in ten years’ time the
majority of the men felt that they had made big leaps in their careers. To have reached a position higher up in the hierarchy was thought of rather as something that was obvious rather then as a possibility.

"I could imagine starting as an accountant assistant, I don’t know where but I could start as an accountant assistant. Then we’ll see how it develops further... as internal auditor or something like that, or accountant. No matter which way I’ll go, it can progress to Audit Manager in the field." (male student, nr 12)

"Yes, I have (thought about that). Its like... becoming a CEO. But I don’t have to become a CEO, it could be like becoming a principal of a school or something. Some sort of leader anyway. (male student, nr 8)

"By then I will probably....then I will be...financial manager at a major company....and... I feel that I am really good at what I am doing... I have probably just become a financial manager since at the same time when I graduate I don’t want to just jump around on different jobs. I do want to learn and grow gradually. (...) After I graduate I will work max 4-5 years, then I will change position to get more experience and competence and then mix everything I have learnt. That’s how you get progress. Then I will, well, I hope I will... Maybe it is a bit soon to say that I will be a financial manager in ten years from now, but that is what I want.” (male student, nr 10)

Only one of the male student’s talked about his future career as something else than becoming a manager. In this description the male student talked about his profession as caring.

"Well, I don’t know why, but banking has always been something that I thought could suit me....eh...I don’t know. I just think that becoming a personal banker could be fun. To help with personal finance, sort of helping others. It’s like... maybe there is a parallel to my interest in becoming a police. To do good for people who are in trouble. It is the same thing. Improve someone else's life. That's what policemen are for, too. Improve someone else's life. It's a bit the same with those who work as personal bankers, to make the most of another person's situation economically then. Money is not everything, but it's very much..." (male student, nr 2)

A few of the male students talked about forming a family, but for them the issue was further away in life and did in no way complicate working life as for the women:

"I want to have a god job with a god salary where I don’t stand still. Where I feel good and well, if I get a family one day, that we can have a good life. It’s as simple as that. ” (male student, nr 2)

In the following dialogue the question about family and children was provoked by the interviewer.

Interviewer: “How does your life look like then. You have your own company. Are there any other parts in life that are important?”
Respondent: “Absolutely. You have to find someone to grow old together with. Children and everything, but that comes later. It’s not in ten years’ time, it’s more than ten years.”
Interviewer: “You don’t have any thoughts on how to combine…”
Student: “Yes, of course. There has to be a balance. But the company is important. So I separate them.” (male student, nr 9)
To summarize, all of the men interviewed told discussed role models in working life that in one way or another had inspired them. Among the female students very few spoke about inspiring role models, instead the majority of the women spoke about their study choice as a reaction to their mothers’ working life. The majority of the female students spoke about their mothers directly telling them not to choose the same path as they did: not to choose traditionally female professions in health care, public school or child care. Instead the mothers have encouraged their daughters to choose “something else”.

When fantasizing about working life the women expressed great concern about how their study choices today would affect their possibilities of combining work life with motherhood in the future. There were also indications on concerns about meaninglessness in future working life. Their expectation on career was primarily as project leaders, administrators and developers. The male students had greater tendencies to separate imaginations on family formation versus working life. Their fantasies of career moved around considerably higher organizational positions then the female students, aiming for management or becoming CEOs.

**Discussion**

With the influence of NPM in the governance of universities striving for performance measure, productivity and competition the link between higher education and employability has increased. As a result the tension between the student as a customer and the student as a citizen becomes interesting to observe and discuss (Alford, 2002; Cardoso et al., 2011; Emery et al., 2001; Stensaker, 2006). In this study notions on usefulness of first year business administration students was investigated, showing a great difference between men and women both in their explanations on study choice and in their notions of their future working life.

Previous research shows that the choice to study a certain subject at the university can be based on chance or on simple anecdotal information (Fiedler, Wong, & Liu, 2007). There are however many other factors that affect student choices; parents profession and educational level and role models such as teachers, parents, friends and even movie stars (Kennedy, Drennan, Renfrow, & Watson, 2003; Nauta & Kokaly, 2001; Nauta, Saucier, & Woodard, 2001; Paola & Gioia, 2012; Schein, 1996). Becoming a higher-level manager or a CEO was for several of the male students in this study seen not only as a possibility but also as a future reality. They had a wider variety of role models encouraging them to imagine a career higher up in an organizational hierarchy. For the male students the tension between working life and family was not an issue. The female students’ ambitions in this study were primarily to become project leaders, developers and middle management. For the majority of the female students an important goal with their education was also to escape a traditional female labor situation with hard physical and psychological work. When choosing what to study stories about their mothers working lives seemed to be of great importance. These stories did not come up immediately in the interviews, but once told they were referred to in several later phases in the women’s stories; in concern about their own future working life and in expected tension between working life and their future roles as mothers and wives. An important part of the usefulness of their education was becoming “something else” – this “something else” creating concerns for juggling career versus family life.

We might say that these gender differences are not a big problem. These students are just entering their studies and they have their entire studies ahead of them that will encourage them into more equal directions. After all gender and equality today is an important issue in most universities curriculum. But unfortunately change is not the case. Looking at statistics among business administration students who graduated in Sweden in 2009 the distribution of titles in 2012, three
years after graduation, shows that only 12% of the women compared to 24% of the men had reached manager positions and only 1% of the women had reached the title CEO compared to 5% of the men. Conversely 21% of the women worked as administrators compared to 10% of the men and 13% of the women were assistants compared to 5% of the men (Beck, 2013). This shows that the career structures described by the students when entering their university studies has not changed during their years in higher education. Also, nearly a third of Swedish students in business administration today feel lost in their future profession and has no guidance in career planning (Beck, 2013). Large classes and few tutorial hours increase the importance of universities adapting to diverse life experiences, individual goals and objectives of studies.

According to the Swedish Department of Education, the aim of higher education is, in selection: to commit education in a scientific or artistic way and to cooperate with the surrounding society. Attention is to be put into gender equality and understanding of differences linked to ethical and geographical differences. Despite knowledge and skills acquired, students are supposed to independently and critically judge and solve problems in order to be able to meet requirements and shifts in the future labor market (Regeringskansliet, 2013). Rendering the text from the Swedish Department of Education, differences in the conditions for men and women in higher education and how these differences might affect students’ possibilities to meet requirements in their future professions is therefore a question that requires great attention from university governance, as well as teachers and students themselves.

Public Value (PV) or New Public Service is proposed as an extension on NPM. The way to increase value of public resources in PV is in a way equivalent to value creation in private entrepreneurial organizations (Moore, 1995), not forgetting the difference that public sector does not have private owners like a private enterprise, instead the public sector is owned by the citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). PV places the citizen in the centre, aiming at helping citizens’ articulate interests and creating opportunity for dialogues rather than focusing on steering and controlling (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; O’Flynn, 2007; Stoker, 2006). With a both “post-bureaucratic” and “post-competitive” shift away from the primary focus on efficiency and adjustment to markets PV is suggested as an alternate way of constructing service delivery in public sector (O’Flynn, 2007; Stoker, 2006). In PV focus in goals and incentives lies on collective, or citizenry, value rather than in private value. Instead of aggregating individual preferences, collective preferences are expressed. It is not up to the individual to express value but to the citizenry (Alford, 2002; Alford & Hughes, 2008; Kelly, Muligan, & Muers, 2002; O’Flynn, 2007).

Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) propose the name New Public Service as a very similar idea, grounding the mind-set in 1) theories of democratic citizenship, 2) models of community and civil society and 3) organizational humanism and discourse theory. This requires a widespread public dialogue to make an active citizenship possible (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). The central proposition of the PV paradigm is proposed distribution of service in a way that is fair and equal, outcomes that should embrace higher aspirations then efficiency and creation of trust, legitimacy and confidence (Kelly et al., 2002; O’Flynn, 2007). Recent studies suggest a lack in research on PV on questions of heterogeneity as well as a lack of empirically testable propositions (Williams & Shearer, 2011).

In higher education a major part of the service distributed is knowledge. The empirical material in this paper suggests that how this knowledge is distributed today is not based on equal ground. Students perceive the knowledge they get based on their background, ultimately on their gender. Further, in the mind-set of PV outcomes should embrace higher aspirations then value described as efficiency. This study shows that usefulness of an education not only can be found in terms of
employability and adjusting knowledge to demands in the labor market. Instead goals and incentives should be aspiring for higher democratic values, for instance gender equality (Kelly et al., 2002; O’Flynn, 2007).

**Conclusion**

This paper discusses PV in business administration as an example of an extension on NPM (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Moore, 1995; M. H. Moore, 1994; O’Flynn, 2007). When using the mind-set of PV the student is not only a customer, shopping for the best place to find an exam. The student is not a standardized consumer that we can sell standardized goods or services to. Higher education is not only a consumption goods, it is a public goods that threw the student affects society. Every student, as a citizen that, brings in their own values to the education and unattended these values might in extension affect society. The mind-set of PV offers a different narrative where higher education not only is a question of several individuals being adjusted for the labor market, instead higher education is a collective consumed service or goods affecting society (Alford, 2002; Moore, 1995; Stoker, 2006).

The results from this study indicate that goals in higher education should be aiming higher than effectiveness and adjustment to the labor market. Instead democratic values should be formulated and labelled around the shifting faces of the student. This means shifting focus from private value such as employability and instead thriving for democratic core values, such as gender equality.

**References**


