

Resisting consumerist rationalities in higher vocational education

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Abstract

Swedish higher education policy is currently moving toward consumption ideals that focus on promoting the efficiency and economic viability of student choices. This paper scrutinizes students' practical considerations when making decisions regarding their education and future occupations and the choice rationalities and motives that these reflect. This issue is empirically investigated via a semi-structured questionnaire (n=322) distributed to students from seven vocational Swedish human resource management (HRM) university programs. Vocational university programs like HRM are a significant growth sector in higher education. What is unclear, however, is whether these forms of education reinforce a desired policy ambition toward consumerist subjectivity among choice agents. The results of the study do not exclusively or even primarily express consumerist subjectivity. By vitalizing Pierre Bourdieu's term "reasonable", an organic form of reasoning becomes apparent that does not separate intrinsic dimensions of learning, knowledge, or personal and social concerns from merit and economic compensation. Moreover, the results indicate that security and interpersonal distinctions relating to professional alignment are situated in the forefront of the expressed motives for these educational choices.

Keywords: *Higher vocational education, consumer, choice agents, neoliberal policy, Pierre Bourdieu*

Introduction

This paper investigates students' choice rationales and motives in seven Swedish higher education professional programs. Of particular interest is how student motives can be seen to reflect knowledge and competence claims in relation to the policy objectives of promoting a consumerist rationale for viable academic and professional alignment. What is indicative for current policy development is how terms of knowledge reflect neoliberal rationalities and how entrepreneurial practices are growing in influence at the expense of academic traditions (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The logic that manifests itself both politically and in the practices of higher education institutions (HEI) can be understood as reflecting an ambition to offer "products" in

an educational “market” (Brown, 2011). The tendency is no longer to perceive students as critical agents in the pedagogical process or as part of a public good objective, but rather as significant consumers of services (Biesta, 2011, p. 60).

Educational policies promoting various market solutions and consumerist objectives vary among countries depending on how HEI have traditionally been organized and the forms of control they employ (Dill, 1997; Frost, Hattke, & Reihlen, 2016). The student-as-consumer approach has received considerable attention in the research literature, notably in countries with pronounced marketization of higher education, such as the US, the UK, and Australia (cf. Baldwin & James, 2010; Marginson, 2006; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). This development is characterized by increased tuition fees and quality standards or regulations that enhance consumer identities and rights in HEI.

However, there is also a general global trend toward the consumption ideal that is evident in countries with less distinct marketization of HEI (Beach, 2013; Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011). Firstly, the development is commonly indicated by promoting the efficiency and economic liability of students’ choices (Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011). Secondly, different ways of introducing consumption ideals tend to be ideologically marked by the mistrust toward the traditional role of HEI professionals (similar to other professional groups in the public sector), where academic collegiality more or less becomes an obstacle to the new demands of HEI to keep up with the times (Ahlbäck Öberg & Sundberg, 2016; cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; SOU, 2015:92).

In the Swedish case, this is a development that should be seen in the context of how higher education during the last 40 years has gone from elite education, to a uniform mass education after the 1977 reform, and later to a pronounced marketization of its role and function during the 1990s (Fransson, 2012).¹The last 10 years in particular illustrate an economic and ideological drift since the reform of the 1970s.

More specifically, the recent HEI development in Sweden emerged from the criticism of the rigidity of HEI and bureaucratic regulation of educational provision, with alleged poor adaptation to the labor market needs (Askling, 2012). As a result, the processes of changing HEI that became evident during the 1990s moved toward increased decentralization that amplified the power of local HEI boards to decide the direction of their educations, but was also followed by an economic allocation system linked to students’ throughput (Unemar Öst, 2009). The far-reaching market adoption that is apparent today was quantified with the Bologna Process in 2004, and later with the extensive deregulation of HEI in 2011 (Fransson, 2012). The Bologna Process

introduced a neoliberal ideological advancement of the curricula by implementing new ideals of the relations between teachers and students (Rider, 2012). These ideals essentially advocate converting HEI to vendors of educational goods and viewing students as potential consumers of employable knowledge. With the institutional autonomy reform implemented in 2011, HEI also increasingly transformed into New Public Management-inspired organizations, where adjustments to employability and economic benefits had significantly increased impacts at the expense of academic and pedagogic values (Björck, 2013; Sundberg, 2013).

The described development of HEI can accordingly be seen as the fundament of neoliberalism in terms of market rationality inspiring active encouragement of local agency and institutions toward worldwide economic progress through competition (Giroux, 2004). These changes affect educational programs where knowledge and educational curricula become more or less consumption-oriented and market-driven. The structural impact on students means, in strict terms, turning them into choice agents as consumers with an opportunity to influence the form and content of education on market terms (cf. Apple, 2004; Beach, 2008).

The Swedish higher education sector as a whole, however, is not characterized by uniformity, but rather by diversity. This variety has been created over time and is the result of struggles between different logics (cf. Benner, Stensaker, & Unemar Öst, 2010). Over the last 20 years, Sweden has moved toward a diverse HEI landscape of traditional universities, elite institutions, and various types of new institutions. This gives rise to internal dynamics within the university sector that tend to focus on funding in a competitive landscape, and which have been followed by a substantial managerialism approach to education and research strategies (Alvesson & Benner, 2016; Widmalm, 2016). These are trends that are related to the generic emphasis of the “knowledge society”—basically how Sweden can make use of comparative advantages through education in an international economy (Karlsohn, 2016). From the dominant political perspective, this is a development that is considered to require flexible adaptation of knowledge and new demands of productivity in the organization of HEI in contemporary times (Jessop, 2008).

Epistemological notes on choice agents

The development of Swedish HEI toward global policy formations focusing on economic contribution includes legislative rules and organizational changes that contribute to a certain righteousness of how to form a viable educational system. In turn, these should not be perceived as merely discursive; rather, they are substantial structures that possess organizational and material characteristics, which are conditioned by meaning-making if agents are to adapt to the promoted political ideals

(cf. Jessop 2008). The rational indicative of present developments in Swedish HEI is to establish institutional arrangements that promote the students' individual responsibility for their own employability (Puaca, 2014). The overall trend is to enforce goals and motives of "having" an education with less emphasis on being educated, and with eroded critical enhancements, particularly in vocational education (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). Essentially, this is about how HEI can increase students' motives for employment and economic liability through educational choices.

What emerges is a utility principle based on the premises that individual students have a relatively clear objective, adequate knowledge of the various educations and competences, and awareness of the likely outcome of various educational options (SOU, 2011). These policy emphases on choices in education and in relation to labor market outcomes come close to the "rational choice" perspective in its stricter versions, i.e., emphasizing preferences as partly given and partly hierarchically ordered in accordance with people's perseverance in pursuing utility maximization (Sullivan, 2006). There are, however, obvious problems with such viewpoints of educational decisions in terms of rational choice (Daoud & Puaca, 2011; Reay, David, & Ball 2005). Educational and career choices rather tend to be pragmatic and relationally based on how education and career decisions are anchored in people's dispositions and understanding, which are rooted in social and cultural contexts (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Hodgkinson & Sparks, 1997; Reay, 1998)

We will examine the terms of motives in education by using Pierre Bourdieu's term of being "reasonable," which includes a multifaceted dimension regarding how to understand people's commitment, motives, choices, or other preconditions to action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The *reasonable* is distinct from the *rational*, as underlined in rational choice theory, since it originates from a practical sense. It is a "practical logic" that originates from embedded experiences and emotions, i.e., the habitus, which delineates what people consider self-evident and accordingly reasonable (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466–468). Students can, for instance, be understood as rational or consumerist, but in line with the idea of the "reasonable" only if understood in relation to the complexity of habitus and how social structures forms meaning (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18–20).

In Bourdieu's words, these are essentially epistemological distinctions of how to perceive an agent as an "actualizer":

This is to say that agents are not pure creators, who invent in a vacuum, *ex nihilo*, but rather that they are, so to speak, *actualizers* who translate into action socially instituted

potentialities; these potentialities in fact exist as such only for agents endowed with the socially constituted dispositions that predispose them to perceive those potentialities as such and to realize them. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 10–11) [*Italics in original*]

The social habitus, as indicated above, consists of relatively sustainable and transferable dispositions, which guide people's recognition of social potentials. These are processes about how the nature of things becomes internalized by actors and structure the actors' ability to act upon the world; furthermore, they are a prerequisite for what motives are expressed as reasonable, e.g., what is desired and how this can be obtained (Bourdieu, 2007[1977], p. 76). People's aspiration with their future is not about hierarchical ranking of motives or preferences, but instead is an *organic* orientation taking into account aesthetical dimensions, such as desires, emotions, and solicitudes, as well as the practical orientation of, e.g., work or education (Daoud & Puaca, 2011). This, in turn, rests on a certain familiarization in which the practical schemes that precondition choices reflect a greater totality of reason than a naïve agency of utility endeavors (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 79–82).

In our approach, we investigate how the expression of the reasonable appears in an organic manner regarding students' motives for education and work. When it comes to vocational education, this is arguably about whether and how qualifications and merits can be separated epistemologically from academic content and the satisfaction of mastering skills or other potentials for personal or social change.

We thus pose the following research questions:

- (i) Are consumerist motives apparent in students' motives, and if so, how? This would fundamentally be how the investigated HRM students' expectations of education and work appear and what considerations that are given to education and work content.
- (ii) What alternative explanations are there for how students form motives and expectations of education and work?

In our case, the distinction of motives in education is empirically operationalized by investigating how the emphasis of qualification and assessments appears in combination with values related to employability and economic exchange. Our hypothesis is that students (if they have internalized their identity as a consumer of education) should ideally, within a neoliberal rational, recognize the strategic dimension of education as "goods" (reflected in an emphasis on credentials) in relation to market value. For instance, this could mean less interest in academic, moral, or civic content due to a perceived exchange value of education. We suggest

that it is not an unambiguous case (cf. Winch, 2000). The question is thus whether consumerist claims on choice agents are valid, and if so, under what conditions?

The organic approach of the reasonable does not rule out either material or content-oriented expectations of education and work. It is basically about how the intervening aspects of form (market attestation of education) and the content of knowledge gained in education are expressed as useful by students. Material or instrumental yields of education can, for instance, be fully in line with the view of actors as reasonable within a given social space for action. However, the intrinsic dimension is how epistemological realms of education and future professional tasks appear in relation with material or instrumental values. For instance, this could be about intervening motives of intellectually stimulating work in relation with a good salary. The epistemological distinction of content could also include social aspects of education and work, such as opportunities for social interaction, teamwork, and social commitment in the form of work that people experience to be of value to others (cf. Sayer, 2011). A substantial content-oriented motive may also, but not necessarily, mean high expectations of the nature of education and work and lower expectations of employability.

The study investigates the above mentioned concerns in HRM programs through a semi-structured questionnaire (n=322) administered at seven Swedish universities. HRM programs are particularly suited for the type of study we intend to carry out, as they are located within a field of tension between the demands of academia and the expectations of students and workforce representatives (Larsson, 2011; Watson, 2010). More specifically, knowledge and competences are transformed, established, and legitimized in the interaction between particular universities, various labor representatives, and students (Theandersson & Rolandsson, 2013). Accordingly, this educational category is increasingly being exposed to commodification through close relations to management objectives and entrepreneurship. Interestingly, limited focus has been placed on students as choice agents within these educational domains and the reasons for choosing them (Beach & Puaca, 2014; cf. Hallier & Summers, 2011).

The consumerist approach

When it comes to notions of the ideal student in Sweden, an ongoing shift is apparent in how knowledge is understood both as a political ideal and in HEI practice. There is an undeviating causality apparent between investments in education and measurable effects that provide an instrument of control of both the educational process and its effects (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). The pedagogy of HEI becomes a means for this utilization, in which students are expected to be significantly utility seeking in their motives for education (Rider, 2012). The perception of the student has shifted

both politically and in the internal organization of HEI from being a subject of knowledge to a purchaser of market qualifications (Widmalm, 2016). It is a political and organizational development that builds on the supposition that greater evaluations of measurable outputs and external accountability are mechanisms for increased quality of HEI (Ahlbäck Öberg, Bull, Hasselberg, & Stenlås, 2016). These measurable indications of quality are basically centered on a student with supposedly rational preferences, who makes choices based on their evaluation of relevant skills for employability and labor market demands. Accordingly, HEI ought to correspond with courses and curriculum relevant to students' expectations. It is a mode of reason where both HEI and students become united in the same goal of contributing to employability. In this rational, a consumption perspective would have better promotional effects on how teaching is conducted and the nature of professionals' practices.

It has also been highlighted that new requirements for performance-based financing of Swedish HEI can, putting aside the risk of eroding academic ideals, also encourage internal relationships within HEI where students are considered merchandise (Beach, 2013). Educations are then to a greater extent processes of market yields than intrinsic values of knowledge. Students are expected to undertake the role of a consumer of qualifications and competences (Brown, 2011; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016). HEI, in turn, tend to adopt their objectives to reflect what students demand, which reinforces less professional autonomy among academic staff and increased managerial control (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2016).

For those who actually internalize the reasonableness of a student as a consumer, the appeal of education is not intellectual development. It can even involve resistance to participate in the educational process if it does not immediately relate to a perceived benefit (Nixon, Scullion, & Molesworth, 2011). From such a perspective, education is a product and educational processes are beneficial if they clearly represent a means to entrench an exchange value on market terms.

The consumerist approach would thus require students to adopt certain market-oriented strategic dispositions for attaining skills and approaches for independent learning. Accordingly, the responsiveness toward promoting consumerist motives is essentially related to labor market expectations and employability. One trend identified in the research literature is that the market logic that currently characterizes HEI causes students to focus on consumerist values and leads to poor academic achievement (Arum & Roksa, 2011). The development towards market-values of education can also be related to general trends, emphasizing that recent generations are focusing more on money, image, and fame than ever before (Twenge et al., 2012).

These findings point to an increasingly materialistic and instrumental approach to higher education and work (Myers, 2000).

However, the research has also underlined that how exactly consumerist motives appear remains unclear (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016). As illustrated in Tomlinson's (2016) study, consumerist values might on the one hand be evident, but not unambiguously, and the value students give to university studies incorporates significant dimensions of a critical agency. It is somewhat relatively unexplored whether it is academic subject, merit necessary for a professional establishment and employability or either of these dimensions that become focal for students' motive (Saunders, 2015).

What prevails specifically in vocational education in HEI is how the selection and organization of knowledge closely interact with local conditions for how knowledge is assigned relevance and a practical orientation of learning. The opposite dimension of these tendencies would be knowledge orientation, which indirectly relates to the material world and expectations of the surrounding community through emphasis on more autonomous knowledge realizations and independent professional thought, with less emphasis on apparent economic receptivity (cf. Brante, 2010).

The case of HRM programs

The processes of political and organizational developments are indicative for our understanding of consumerist subjectivity in relation to Swedish HEI and for how different motives in choices appear in relation to academic disciplines and professional orientation. In particular, HEI programs characterized by weak professional framing have been identified to fortify instrumental motives among students toward formal goals with education and employment (Abrandt Dahlgren et al., 2006; Larsson, 2011). Vocational students have subsequently been identified as considerably driven by motives and aims of education related to credentials—basically to get a degree—and with less emphasis on educational content. In addition, the issue of social security seems to be vital for students in vocational education. Notably, research points to how these students tend to strive for decent social standards, economic safety, and steady employment, in comparison to elite oriented educations where students tend to aim for cosmopolitan standards and status (Beach & Puaca, 2014; cf. Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009). However, an aggravating condition regarding HRM educations is the unclear reasons why students pursue these branches of education and what their expectations are regarding the content or outcomes (Hallier & Summers, 2011; cf. Larsson, 2011).

What distinguishes HRM programs in the HEI context are their vague professional contours. Based on classical professional theory, they should be labeled semi-professions (Evetts, 2006; Wilensky, 1964). Seen in a historical context, these are occupations developed based on the need in the early 1900s for personnel administration, evolving later after the 1980s into consultative roles and support for line managers (Mahoney & Deckop, 1986; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2007). In addition to being a weak profession, the Swedish HRM programs in HEI have been weakly institutionalized since the HEI reform of 1993. Although they were once coherent programs that were relatively similar throughout the country, now each university has the opportunity to design their own contents and forms. The variations of HRM programs, according to an evaluation by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket, 2004), have increased significantly. One apparent factor is that universities are aiming to profile themselves in order to clarify the differences between the various educational programs. This development was also related to benchmarking in order to make courses attractive for students, motivated by the changing demands of the labor market for these categories of education. However, the characteristics of these educations create several dilemmas. The first one is the problem of attaining a professional knowledge base that is under threat, while the second is the increased pressure to adapt to the labor market, which makes it hard to maintain a balance between academic values and external demands. These are significant dilemmas that have been pointed out both in Sweden and in international research (see, e.g., Beach, 1997; Beck & Young, 2005; Bernstein, 2000; Brante, 2013).

Generally, the design of HRM education seems to be relatively autonomous (Legge, 2005; Gilmore & Williams, 2007), which is also true of the terms that indicate different orientations toward horizontal labor market orientations of education (cf. Beck & Young, 2006). This is thus similar to how academic vocational educational programs are formed, established, and legitimized in a new academic landscape that is characterized by a market approach and notable competition between HEI (Beach, 2013). In other words, these are indefinite lines of education or careers that are heterogeneous in terms of knowledge and competence claims and the types of jobs these educations are considered to lead to (Löfgren Martinsson, 2009; Mercer, Barker, & Bord, 2010). An essential demarcation line is how the labor market orientation and academic subjects appear within these educational areas, together with how the cooperation between representatives from work-life areas, educational sites, and students takes place and shapes the programs. The actual content within the programs is, for example, affected by labor market adaption, academic knowledge, and students' expectations regarding their educations and/or future careers. HRM programs thus constitute an intriguing case study of how demands from different actors and the labor

market relate to the adaptation of professional and practice-related skills as well as academic disciplinary and scientific knowledge claims in HEI.

In order to understand different knowledge claims of students on their education, it is important to consider the motives for applying for a course within HEI. In a study on HRM students in a small-sized university college, uncertainties regarding the program's focus and vague knowledge claims were noticeable among the students (Puaca, 2013). The reasons and motives for choosing these lines of study were generally expressed by students as one option among other vocational training programs in HEI. Local restrictions related to their domiciles and social background also appeared to be a significant influence on their education choices (cf. Colley et al., 2003). In several cases, motives were also interwoven with previous occupations or lines of education. This indicated “semi-skilled” choice strategies apparent among socially heterogeneous student groups with motives such as reasonable standards and less interest in elite education or occupations (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). The question regarding how HRM students envisage the future in relation to their education has been further explored by Beach and Puaca (2014), showing how identities in an educational context are constantly marked by contingencies, i.e., they depend on the ambient conditions and the negotiations that take place within an educational sector.

The investigation

The results were derived from a quantitative analysis of structured questions (322 students; 255 women and 67 men) and content analysis of open-ended questions (159 students; 125 women and 34 men) within the same student cohort.² Students participated in the questionnaire during the first month of their studies in an HRM program at four mid-size university colleges and three larger universities in Sweden. The ambition was to investigate students' initial expectations and ambitions with future education and work.

The response rate was 75%, and the students' age ranged from 18 to 50, with a median of 24 years. The majority (79%) were women. In terms of social background, the students came from heterogeneous class backgrounds—with the majority from a middle-class background.³ Of the participants, 98% were born in Sweden.

The methodological design for the investigation involved developing a theoretical and explorative approach toward students' commitments to these educations (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). The questionnaire provided a quantitative set of questions where students were asked about background information, motives, and ambitions with respect to their education and future employment. These were investigated in an

explorative design by comparing means between the attitudinal variables with paired samples t-tests. In a complementary manner, content analysis was conducted in relation to the statistical analysis of the open-ended questions (cf. Domas White & Marsh, 2006).

The purpose of the analysis was to investigate our assumptions derived from previous research that points to the issue that students in programs characterized by weak professional framing tend to be driven by goals and aims of education related to its exchange value on the labor market and with less emphasis on educational content. Another attribute of these student groups is the desire for social security in terms of economic safety and steady employment (Beach & Puaca, 2014). One distinction of HRM students is the so-called “non-choice” distinction, where students tend to choose from several alternative vocationally oriented study programs.

In the quantitative part of the questionnaire, we used a 9-point attitudes scale (interval level) to approach these categories. In total, 16 statements were constructed in order to measure HRM students’ attitudes toward education and their future working life. The first seven statements that covered the students’ attitudes toward education consisted of the following two categorizations of “the reasonable” extracted from our organic theoretical assumptions. It was, firstly, consumption-oriented values in terms of formal *credentials* and market exchange in terms of *employability* and *good salary*. Secondly, we were interested in exploring interest in educational content and expressions of less market-orientated approaches to higher education, e.g., willingness to acquire *increased knowledge* in general, specific *knowledge about society and human beings*, as well as emphases on *self-realization*. The next nine statements covered the students’ attitudes toward their future working life and consisted of different kinds of values related to monetary exchange, security, work-related content, and social aspects of working life.

In addition to the quantitative set of questions, the open-ended questions encouraged students to write down their expectations and wider social concerns regarding their education. This part of the questionnaire consisted of five questions in which students could express their ambitions, expectations of, and motives for choosing their study program and future career. They were also asked to write down what they expected from their education and what future outcomes they hoped to achieve through studying at a HRM program. In addition, they were asked to write down both their fears and broader expectations of life in terms of the next five years.

Prioritized motives of higher education

In the survey, the students were asked to estimate the importance of seven motives for education on a 9-point scale, where the highest priority was ranked 1 and the lowest 9. The differences between means were analyzed with paired samples t-tests. A significance level of $p \leq 0.1$ was applied in our analyses. Means and standard deviations for each motive are displayed in Table 1. The result shows that the majority of the motives for education are fairly highly prioritized. The students' motives seem to be characterized by exchange values of *credentials*, *employability*, and *good salary* as well as values related to educational content in terms of *increased knowledge*, *knowledge of society and human beings*, and *self-realization*. We can observe that the most highly prioritized motives both involve content orientation in terms of *increased knowledge* and *employability*. The monetary exchange is also an important factor, although this was not one of the most distinctive responses. In addition, motives related to *few or no alternatives* have a low priority.

Table 1: Variables related to motives for higher education

<i>Motive</i>	<i>Type of motive</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>s</i>
1. <i>Increased knowledge</i>	<i>Content-oriented knowledge interest</i>	2.1	1.7
2. <i>Employment opportunity</i>	<i>Exchange value</i>	2.2	1.8
3. <i>Knowledge of society and human beings</i>	<i>Content-oriented knowledge interest</i>	2.6	1.7
4. <i>Get a university degree</i>	<i>Exchange value</i>	2.7	2.0
5. <i>Self-realization</i>	<i>Content-focused knowledge interest</i>	2.7	1.7
6. <i>Good salary</i>	<i>Monetary exchange</i>	3.3*	1.8
7. <i>Few or no alternatives</i>	<i>Non-choice</i>	7.8*	2.1

*The mean of the variable deviates significantly from the means of the other variables ($p \leq .01$).

The values that emerge regarding HR students' motives for higher education, as illustrated in Table 1, are not unambiguous. There are high expectations for returns of education in terms of employability, formal merits, and high salary. This result could be considered indicative of a consumerist attitude where education is perceived as a commodity with an emphasis on formal qualifications that serve as means for material or social exchange on the labor market. However, the results also provide an indication of a content-driven interest that manifests as benefits deriving from increased knowledge and self-realization, which can also be considered an indicator for content-focused knowledge interest.

The values that appear can be described as representing comprise, since the students express both material yields and immanent values oriented toward knowledge content

and personal development. The result also shows nuances that are worth examining. Although the expectation of a high salary is a relatively high priority, it has a significantly lower priority than all other variables with the exception of the “non-choice” variable. The “non-choice” variable is also the only variable whose mean is on the negative end of the scale, which suggests that these students have a clear motive for attending the HRM programs. This indicates that significant motives cannot be reduced to consumerist ideals of employability, which we will return to later.

Table 2 shows (in terms of means) the degree to which HRM students valued their expectations on nine different work values related to their future occupation. The variables are measured on the same scale as the variables in Table 1. These expectations can help to gain a broader understanding of their motives for pursuing higher education.

Table 2: Variables related to different kinds of work value expectations

<i>Work value</i>	<i>Type of work value</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>s</i>
<i>1. Opportunities to meet people</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>1.4</i>
<i>2. Steady employment</i>	<i>Security</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>1.6</i>
<i>3. Varied tasks</i>	<i>Job content</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>1.4</i>
<i>4. Intellectually stimulating work</i>	<i>Job content</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>1.4</i>
<i>5. Work that is of value to others</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>2.2</i>	<i>1.6</i>
<i>6. Use skills acquired through one's education</i>	<i>Job content</i>	<i>2.3</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>7. Job security</i>	<i>Security</i>	<i>2.4</i>	<i>1.6</i>
<i>8. Teamwork</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>2.6</i>	<i>1.6</i>
<i>9. High salary</i>	<i>Monetary exchange</i>	<i>3.0*</i>	<i>1.4</i>

*The mean of the variable deviates significantly from the means of the other variables ($p \leq .01$).

We note that all variables are relatively highly prioritized. The highest priority factors are related to labor values of different character, such as social dimensions (opportunities to meet people), the security aspect (steady employment), the value of intellectually stimulating work, being able to use acquired skills, and aspects related to the job being of value to others. The economic exchange, which is operationalized here in the form of high salary, is also a relatively high priority even if significantly lower than all other items. This reinforces our assumption that there may be motives other than consumerist expectations in terms of material exchange for the strong priority given to intellectual, social, and security dimensions in relation to employment.

Another result worth highlighting is the expectation of work content that will facilitate opportunities to use the skills that students have acquired through their education. This might suggest that the substantial knowledge interests expressed in Table 1 and 2 are not only (or perhaps not even primarily) scholastic in nature, but are instead possible expressions of expectations of acquired skills to promote future professional development. Another result is the importance of security that is related to employment opportunities. Students are keen to obtain steady employment, and job security is also a strong motive.

The open-ended answers: motives and visions of social security

What should be noted is that students expressed several interrelated motives and visions regarding career, academic knowledge orientation, and orientations toward having a family. One of the most common patterns was that the importance of obtaining employment was linked to how to develop personally, which was related to issues of starting a family, living with a partner, or buying a house. These intervening aspects are dominant in the material and are thus arguably essential in understanding how students consider their education reasonable in social contexts that matter for them. It appears that students provide motives that are closely linked to wider recognition of social meaning through education. Essentially, the aspect of having a secure life appears as a focal point in these written answers. In particular, not getting a job after graduation is the worst-case scenario. As captured in the following quote, there is a strong awareness of material and social vulnerability: “I am unemployed and standing there with student debt and an education that I have not been able to dedicate myself to.”

The anxiety of social exclusion is most striking in the answers provided. However, the way education actually can provide a more secure foundation for social participation and how it becomes integrated with meaning and wider social concerns takes the apparently organic path of linking *personal development* through expressions of *social security*.

Personal development through social security

The students seemed to closely link social security with issues related to their motives for their education. When security is discussed, it is mainly about having good colleagues and supervisors and working at an interesting workplace. Students expressed that they wanted to get a job where the work tasks are both stimulating and moderately difficult. Judging from their responses, the essence of good colleagues seemed to involve being friendly and reliable. The importance of professional management was also underlined in several answers. One of the students expressed

that the workplace of her dreams was Google, “though the main thing is that I have sensible and kind colleagues and various exciting tasks.”

An interesting result is that little emphasis was given to strict career orientation. There were answers where the primary goal was expressed as “climbing the ladder” and working in “fast-growing enterprises”, but this kind of focus did not prevail. Only a couple of the answers mentioned a “high salary” as a goal or motive. The goals and emphases given by students did not separate having a career from vertical and intrinsically bound motives of knowledge. In essence, it was about how they can develop themselves through work, “facing challenges”, and ending up in a supportive and encouraging workplace. One student stated that, “I want to feel comfortable and feel confident with my skills”, which captures a significant standpoint in the investigation. There seems to be a focus on a workplace where they would be comfortable to go, with less focus on the social merit and economic compensation these employments could provide.

Another aspect raised by the questions was how their education, particularly in terms of curriculum and employment possibilities, relates to students’ ambitions. The issue of *skills* and the attributes this term was given by students were the most prevalent topics in this case. Being skilled in general meant that “knowledge about how organizations work”, “solving conflicts”, and “learning more about society” received considerable attention in the students’ answers. What could be noted was that these dimensions underlined forms of personal development, but these were commonly also related to what they wanted to accomplish in their future employment. These forms of skills, in part, corresponded to answers such as “...[t]hat I get a job where I can work with employees, not employers,” or answers that emphasize the work environment in general with a focus on the well-being of employees. In other cases, the ability of “recruiting the right people” or contributing in a manager position to sound HR policy was underlined.

What these answers had in common was the ability of bridging a personal concern with the academic knowledge content regarding how the education could provide personal satisfaction and security as well as a fruitful organizational contribution. These distinctions are not obviously separated in the students’ answers. The following student provides a rather comprehensive answer to the overlapping processes of motives that seem to be in play: “A job where I feel secure in myself, where I feel that my work is appreciated, and that I can help people to thrive in their workplace.”

These emphases are seemingly also related to the kind of work organization students want to work for. The value of getting into “the right organization” with “the right

values” was stressed in several answers. It also seems to be in line with the previously mentioned emphasis on personal development. The students frequently discuss how to match their own educational ideals with an organizational culture. This was basically expressed as getting a job in an organization where students could feel comfortable and aligned with organizational values and duties.

In sum, the security aspect was mentioned most prominently in the open answers. Not having a job is the worst-case scenario. What the responses indicate, however, is that social security is significantly linked to job satisfaction, and specific motives of personal satisfaction and development become apparent. In the students’ responses, development is primarily about having a career where greater knowledge can be developed, with notable emphasis put on the nature of the tasks and ending up at a workplace with a “good culture.” Fitting into a workplace without compromising their expressed ideals seems to be crucial.

The ability to make a change has a great impact in this regard, and is often linked to issues of personal development by learning more about themselves and society. These responses are often linked to how they can contribute to sustainable workplaces and initiate possible changes through professional expertise. This can partly be achieved by being a “good HR strategist”, or in other cases, by being able to contribute to consensus-oriented dialogs in the workplace. Little emphasis is given to instrumental and utility-maximizing orientations of knowledge in relation to promoting their careers or obtaining a high salary. The meaning of a “good career” is, in most cases, about how the knowledge content of education and more general social ideals can coincide with a stable and secure position in the labor market.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the questionnaire show that motives and decisions within education intervene with more holistic social values. On the one hand, students express motives that imply influences of subjectification to employability, career, and high salary. However, the predominant result is the gravitation toward knowledge content of the education, personal development, social or organizational change through work, and motives related to security. In other words, the purpose and meaning of having an education cannot be seen solely as expressions of consumerist motives in terms of gaining credentials in exchange for employability or careers that provide high incomes. Having educational qualifications seems instead to be considered a means for satisfying essential social and personal deliberations, which incorporates secure, stable, and stimulating work.

One conclusion is that the answers in our material do not exclusively or even primarily express consumerist subjectivity. What instead are apparent are organic forms of reasoning that do not separate intrinsic dimensions of learning, knowledge, and social concerns from merit and economic compensation (cf. Winch, 2000). Through their deliberations, students clearly illustrate an interpretive agency regarding how to achieve a decent life, and this can be seen to actually resist the neoliberal manipulative powers of policy and organization of HEI where maximizing the exchange value of education in the labor market is in the foreground. Students' expressions seem to turn the utility-seeking rationale on its head. More specifically, an aesthetic cognitive ethic appears as vital where security motives and imperatives to understand the social essentials and care about others are stressed (cf. Sayer, 2011).

To use Bourdieu's term of being an "actualizer", it is in this context that a certain interpellation between reasoning regarding social and personal potentials occurs, and thus how these can be imbedded with structurally bound determinants of labor market participation. Students seek social security and stability through education, which is essential for understanding how to interpret the "reasonable" in our study. Not surprisingly, labor market participation is crucial in these security variables; however, it is not separated from a meaningful context where students hope to develop personally and socially. The organic formation of meaning, in the practical sense, is accordingly rooted in commitments that transcend policy assumptions regarding rational and consumerist-oriented utility seekers. This is consistent with both the quantitative results and the written answers.

The results of the written answers provide a possible interpretation of the quantitative results. In particular, an organic approach to education appears where curricular emphasis is important for social or personal change, and these emphases were generally not separated from the meaning of a "good career" or professional development. Aspects such as being appreciated and feeling confident or skilled are crucial in terms of understanding what students' value as a good professional life. Other dimensions possess both social and emotional characteristics, e.g., doing a job that is beneficial for others, having the potential to make a difference at one's work organization, or more generically, having a family. These are forms of the "reasonable", which in turn rest on security dimensions linked particularly to job satisfaction and security. There seems to be a form of satisfaction that overlaps with ambitions of personal development expressed in terms of learning more about oneself, how society works, or improving the work climate in one's organization. These are essential aims that students wish to attain through curricular contents, and which become crucial to epistemologically linking employment and career to the meaning of a "good life" through education.

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¹It should be noted that the extensive expansion of higher education has not clearly resulted in strong forms of so called “overeducation” in the Nordic context; this is significantly attributed to Nordic welfare regimes and labor market characteristics with a large share of skilled employments (Barone & Ortiz, 2010)

²The semi-structured questionnaire is part of a larger national quantitative survey and evaluation of HRM programs. We are most thankful for the help and engagement of the involved teachers and for all the students that made this possible.

³The categorization of class position was conveyed by parents’ educational background and labor market position (MIS 1982:4).