

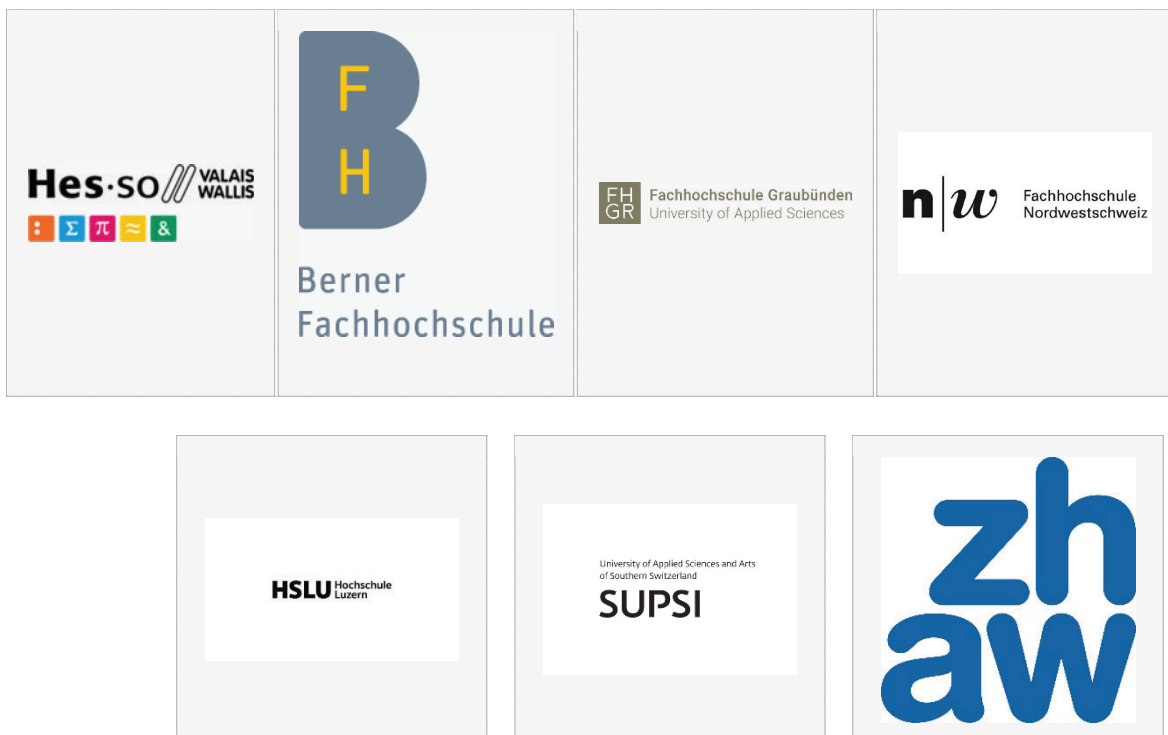
Attractiveness of Economics and Service Study Programs in Swiss Schools of Management at Universities of Applied Sciences

Exploring students' perceptions through a qualitative study based on focus groups

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



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Executive summary

This report presents the findings of an exploratory study conducted on behalf of the Association of Management Schools in Switzerland (AMS) at seven universities of applied sciences (UAS). The study is embedded in a broader context characterised not only by declining enrolments in business administration programmes, but also by the observation that a significant share of holders of a vocational baccalaureate in Economics & services do not continue their studies at tertiary level.

The study aimed to identify the key factors influencing the attractiveness of business administration programmes at Swiss universities of applied sciences, as well as potential barriers to programme selection. In this perspective, the project focused on the motivations and perceptions of (potential) future students regarding studies at Schools of Management.

Against the backdrop of declining interest in business administration programmes in Switzerland, 15 focus groups were conducted, structured around a discussion guide based on seven working hypotheses, to examine the central factors shaping students' study choice decisions.

The analysis reveals several recurring themes: students' information deficits regarding UAS, questions of practice orientation, opportunity costs, a perceived lack of institutional profile, as well as considerations of digital and international relevance, personal purpose, and social influence. In addition, several more minor themes emerged. These findings highlight a range of factors that intervene at different stages of the study choice process and that contribute to shaping students' perceptions of business administration programmes.

The recommendations are intended to support Schools of Management in better addressing the expectations and concerns expressed by (potential) students. They include refining the student recruitment strategy, strengthening the communication and positioning of business school programmes (including digital communication), maintaining and reinforcing the practice-oriented nature of curricula, and further developing models that enable students to combine work and study. Furthermore, digital and international elements should be prominently featured in the curriculum. The study's limitations as well as avenues for further research are discussed.

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Introduction: context and background of the research

This report is part of a mandate entrusted by the Association of Management Schools Switzerland (AMS) to a consortium of seven universities of applied sciences (UAS) to conduct exploratory research aimed at identifying the key factors driving the attractiveness of business education programmes at Swiss UAS, as well as potential barriers to their attractiveness. This applied research project is motivated by two observations. First, a decline in enrollment in economics and service programs has been observed for several years (FSO, 2024). Second, 30 to 40% of holders of a vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Service do not continue their studies at a tertiary level institution (SCCRE, 2023). In light of this situation, the AMS seeks to obtain information that will enable it to gain qualitative insights into the factors influencing students' decisions not to enrol in Economics and Services programs at Swiss UAS; to gain in-depth insights into participants' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the factors contributing to the decline; and to understand students' motivations and disincentives for subject choices. To obtain initial answers to these questions, fifteen focus groups were conducted in Switzerland through the project's partners:

- HES-SO Valais-Wallis (Frédéric Cornu, project manager, and Alexandra Hugo)
- BFH (David Hischier)
- FHGR (Tanja Ospelt, Gian-Andri Hässig)
- FHNW (Jörg Wombacher)
- HSLU (Sheron Baumann, Christine Beeler, Lukas Lehmann)
- SUPSI (Carlo Ferraris, Désirée Di Benedetto, Mattia Bedolla)
- ZHAW (Sandra Spörri, Claude Müller)

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. Following the review of the literature on the attractiveness of tertiary education, we present the methodology adopted in this study. We then report the most salient findings. Finally, we offer recommendations and outline avenues for future applied research to further develop the insights emerging from this exploratory study.

Literature Review

Although this project is exploratory in nature, we conducted a targeted review of scientific literature related to the attractiveness of tertiary education, and more specifically of programmes in economics and services, with the following objectives:

- to identify factors related to our research topic that may influence prospective students' educational choices,
- to identify studies conducted in the Swiss context,
- to develop an interview guide including the most relevant questions for addressing our research objectives.

Our literature review includes studies drawn from the fields of sociology, psychology, economics, and education. These research areas were selected for pragmatic reasons, insofar as they reflect the areas of expertise of the members of the project team. In the following section, we highlight the main insights derived from this body of literature.

Sociological perspectives on educational aspirations and study choices

Sociological research emphasizes the strong influence of social origin and institutional structures on educational aspirations and study choices. According to Boudon (1973), social inequalities operate through primary effects (socially differentiated academic performance) and secondary effects, whereby students from different backgrounds evaluate the costs, risks, and benefits of higher education differently. These mechanisms help explain why some students may refrain from enrolling in full-time tertiary degree programmes despite sufficient academic ability.

From a complementary perspective, Bourdieu and Passeron (1964, 1970) highlights the role of cultural capital and *habitus* in shaping educational trajectories. Familiarity with academic norms and dominant representations of legitimate education varies across social groups, contributing to differentiated perceptions of the accessibility and desirability of study programmes, including business-related fields.

Empirical evidence from Switzerland confirms the importance of these structural factors. Burger (2021) shows that early tracking and institutional sorting strongly shape educational pathways, with transitions to tertiary education being more likely among students from higher social origins. As pathways become more institutionalized, the room for individual agency decreases, which may contribute to the appeal of practice-oriented or vocational alternatives.

Finally, sociological studies underline that educational aspirations are also shaped by values and meaning attributed to education. Hadjar et al. (2021), drawing on Boudon and Bourdieu, show that aspirations reflect socially structured value orientations related to status, security, or personal fulfillment (see also Lindenberg, 1996). These subjective dimensions influence how the societal relevance and legitimacy of study programmes are perceived.

Psychological perspectives on study choices and program attractiveness

Jüttler and Schumann (2022) established that teachers' professional knowledge plays a significant role in students' study programme choices. Their research identified small to moderate correlations between students' perception of their economics teachers' professional knowledge and the students' own economic competencies. Regarding economics as a study choice, results showed small to moderate effects from both pedagogic content knowledge and general pedagogic knowledge that students perceived in their teachers, highlighting the dual importance of subject expertise and teaching ability.

Holzer et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional online survey with third and fourth-year high school students in Northern Switzerland (n=1,790) examining criteria for university major selection. The foremost criterion across all respondents was "interest in the field," followed by "income" and "job security."

Clear differences emerged between student groups. Prospective medical students highly valued "meaningful work," "teamwork," and "opportunity to work independently." In contrast, law and economics students emphasized "income" and "career opportunities," showing strong career orientation with a focus on extrinsic motivators like "income" and "social prestige." Students selecting other majors generally placed more importance on extraprofessional concerns and

work-life balance. Gender analysis revealed that young women tended to prioritize work-life balance, particularly regarding family life (Holzer et al., 2022).

Kühling-Thees et al. (2018) found no significant differences in subject-relevant prior knowledge between economics students who dropped out and those who continued. However, significant differences were observed in intellectual capability (higher among continuing students). Dropouts showed a higher proportion with vocational training and a higher proportion with low interest in subject content. Half of the dropouts cited self-assessed personal suitability as their reason for leaving.

Research in Spain by Arce et al. (2015) categorized dropout reasons into six distinct factors and main dropout motives related to incompatibility with work, economic factors, and university-related issues (environment, teachers, and difficulties).

Economic perspectives on educational choices and programme attractiveness

Economic research emphasizes that students' educational choices are strongly influenced by expected returns to education, in terms of employment prospects, income, and career advancement. Studies have shown that anticipated economic benefits play a central role in the decision to pursue tertiary education, with students being more likely to enrol when they expect favorable labor market outcomes (Montmarquette et al., 2002).

Empirical evidence from Switzerland highlights both the perceived advantages and the trade-offs between academic and vocational pathways. Comparing graduates from vocational and academic tertiary education, Backes-Gellner and Geel (2014) show that vocational graduates tend to enter the labor market more quickly, while academic graduates often benefit from stronger long-term career prospects and access to higher-level positions. However, wage expectations do not always reflect these nuances. Cattaneo (2024) demonstrates that the Swiss population systematically expects significantly higher wages from academic education, and that these expectations – often socially differentiated – shape educational preferences, particularly among parents.

At the same time, economic studies point to potential risks associated with academic pathways. Research on overeducation among Swiss university graduates shows that a substantial share of graduates work in jobs that do not fully utilize their qualifications, which is associated with persistent wage penalties (Diem & Wolter, 2014). This mismatch between education and labor market outcomes may undermine the perceived attractiveness of academic programmes.

More broadly, studies indicate that students' perceptions of employability, career security, and the relevance of acquired skills are central to their study choices (Baumann & Keimer, 2023; Nägele et al., 2018). From an economic perspective, the attractiveness of business-related programmes thus depends not only on expected earnings, but also on clear signals regarding labor market relevance and career opportunities.

An educational perspective on career choices and the appeal of teaching methods

Research suggests that migrant students in Switzerland are significantly more likely to pursue academic education than their Swiss-native peers, even after controlling for background characteristics (Tjaden & Scharenberg, 2017; Wolter & Zumbuehl, 2018). This reflects the concept

of ethnic choice: first-generation immigrant parents tend to favour generalist baccalaureate schooling, whereas parents with vocational training backgrounds, whether native-born or Swiss-raised migrants, are more likely to value apprenticeship-based pathways (Delay, 2022)

Path dependency also plays a role: graduates of commercial vocational training (CVT) and vocational baccalaureate programmes in business (VBB) frequently choose business studies as a logical continuation of their prior education, often regardless of genuine subject interest (Jöhr, 2023). Conversely, those who considered but ultimately rejected business administration commonly cited a lack of content interest as their primary reason.

Among vocational baccalaureate holders, those in economics and services have the lowest transfer rate to tertiary education in Switzerland, with around 20 percent not advancing within eight years (SCCRE, 2023). Since the vocational baccalaureate is the primary admission route to Universities of Applied Sciences (SCCRE, 2018), these institutions are particularly sensitive to shifts in enrolment, a concern reinforced by the stagnating number of vocational baccalaureate certificates since the mid-2010s (SCCRE, 2023).

There is evidence that higher education institutions struggle to meet Generation Z's expectations: large shares of students internationally report a perceived lack of focus on creativity, outdated curricula, and insufficient technology (Adobe, 2016).

While vocational baccalaureate numbers are declining and specialized baccalaureate qualifications are rising, this shift has not translated into growth in business education, where vocational baccalaureate holders remain the dominant entry group (FSO, 2024; SCCRE, 2023). Declining enrolment in vocational training in business and administration since 2000, alongside growth in social work, education, and healthcare via specialized secondary schools, suggests that upper secondary trends are a reliable predictor of tertiary enrolment patterns.

The scientific literature reviewed provided the basis for the formulation of seven working propositions, which guided the development of the interview guide used in the focus groups. These propositions constitute analytical lenses intended to structure data collection and support an in-depth exploration of students' motivations, perceptions, and doubts regarding tertiary education and business-related study programmes:

P1: Classical business administration is perceived by students as “too general” or “not future-oriented.”

P2: Other programmes in the field of economics and services (e.g. International Management, Business Informatics) are known but do not appear significantly more attractive.

P3: Dual or practice-oriented training alternatives (higher vocational education, direct employment, trainee programmes) seem more attractive to many students than a traditional full-time degree programme.

P4: There is a lack of knowledge regarding the content and career prospects of a degree in business administration.

P5: Business-related study programmes are not sufficiently perceived as future-relevant (e.g. digitalization, sustainability, entrepreneurship).

P6: Social or family support for a UAS degree is declining or shifting toward other fields (healthcare, technology, social work).

P7: For many young people, the question of personal meaning and societal contribution plays a central role in their choice of study. Business programmes may not be perceived

as meaningful or “purpose-driven” – unless they explicitly address topics like sustainability, social responsibility, or innovation (post-materialist orientation).

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used to find out why interest in economics and services programmes is declining in Switzerland. Focus groups allowed a deeper exploration of the opinions and thoughts of the participants. The answers could be explained by the participants, new aspects emerged due to the group dynamics, the interaction between the participants could also be considered, and there was the possibility to ask follow-up questions. This allowed a more nuanced insight to be gained than through questionnaire surveys. This was particularly relevant, as the existing literature points to a lack of empirical studies on the subject. As a result, conducting a questionnaire-based survey would have been challenging.

Fifteen focus groups were conducted by the UAS at various locations in the German, Italian, and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. The primary target population was vocational baccalaureate students, who participated in nine focus groups. In addition, three focus groups consisted solely of learners from apprenticeships, while three further focus groups combined vocational baccalaureate students and learners from apprenticeships. Each focus group consisted of three to ten participants, with a total of ninety individuals taking part across all focus groups. During the recruitment process, participants were invited to volunteer for the focus groups based on their interest in taking part. While a more heterogeneous selection would have been desirable, recruitment was ultimately constrained by participants’ availability and willingness to participate. Recruitment was carried out by the individual UAS. Table 1 below summarizes the information relating to the focus groups conducted by each UAS involved in the project.

Table 1 Overview of the focus groups conducted during the project

Educational institution	Number of participants	Participants’ educational track	UAS in charge
WKS Bern	5	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	BFH
BFSL Langenthal	7	Commercial employee apprenticeship	BFH
KV Wirtschaftsschule Chur	10	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	FHGR
FHNW Basel ¹	7	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services and Commercial employee apprenticeship	FHNW
EPCA Sion	5	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	HES-SO Valais-Wallis
EPCL Lausanne	4	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	HES-SO Valais-Wallis
CEPN Neuchâtel	4	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	HES-SO Valais-Wallis
CEC André-Chavanne Genève	8	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	HES-SO Valais-Wallis
KV Zug	8	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	HSLU

¹ The focus groups conducted at FHNW was held on its premises as part of events aimed at promoting its study programmes.

Educational institution	Number of participants	Participants' educational track	UAS in charge
KV Luzern	5	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services and Commercial employee apprenticeship	HSLU
KV Luzern	3	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	HSLU
CPC Chiasso	3	Commercial employee apprenticeship	SUPSI
CPC Chiasso	7	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	SUPSI
KV Business School Zurich	8	Vocational baccalaureate in Economics and Services	ZHAW
Berufsfachschule Uster	6	Commercial employee apprenticeship	ZHAW

The interview guide was developed based on the literature reviewed above and structured around seven working propositions outlined in the preceding section. These propositions address, among other aspects, perceptions of business administration as a field of study, awareness of alternative study programmes, the role of practical relevance and dual study formats, as well as value orientations such as sustainability, purpose, and social contribution. The full discussion guide is provided in Appendix A. The focus groups covered five thematic areas: general educational and career orientation, perceptions of business study programmes, reasons for and against studying business at a university of applied sciences, and the image and communication of such programmes.

In addition to open discussion questions, several projective and associative techniques were employed. Participants completed a value-matching exercise in which they identified their three most important personal values and reflected on whether these could be fulfilled through a business degree. A narrative projection exercise invited participants to imagine meeting their future self in 2030 after completing a business degree and to reflect on that experience. Finally, participants developed their own advertising slogans for a business degree that they would personally find convincing. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. Sessions were audio-recorded where data protection requirements permitted.

The focus group data were analyzed using a coding system developed in advance, which was applied consistently across all participating universities of applied sciences (see Appendix B). Participants' statements were first coded at the level of each individual university. Where the existing categories proved insufficient, additional codes were created to capture new or unexpected themes. In a second step, the codes from all universities were consolidated and analyzed across institutions. The analysis was guided by the seven working propositions and aimed at identifying overarching patterns, commonalities, and differences in participants' perceptions and attitudes.

Main Findings

The results are presented with reference to the seven working propositions, which were used as analytical lenses for interpreting participants' statements. Rather than being tested in a confirmatory manner, the propositions served to assess whether and how the empirical material supported, nuanced, or contradicted them.

The propositions are discussed according to their empirical salience, starting with those most strongly supported by the data and followed by those that are partially supported or not supported. Overall, the data strongly support some propositions (notably Propositions 3 and 4), partially support others (Propositions 1, 5, and 7), and do not support two propositions (Propositions 2 and 6) (see Table 2). In addition, two closely related propositions (Propositions 2 and 5) are discussed jointly, as the analysis revealed overlapping and interdependent dimensions in participants' accounts.

Before turning to the thematic results, it is important to note that the data do not allow for systematic comparisons between regions, as the focus group material does not include quantitative measures enabling statistical testing of regional variation. Any region-specific interpretation should therefore be approached with caution. In addition, the distribution of focus groups across regions is uneven (e.g., a smaller number in the Italian-speaking region compared to the German-speaking region), which may amplify the visibility of individual statements and further limits the robustness of regional comparisons.

That said, taking these methodological limitations into account, the patterns emerging from the discussions were largely similar across regions. The results are thus presented transversally, focusing on shared perceptions and recurring themes rather than on regional differences. Only minor nuances can be observed: participants in the Italian-speaking region place somewhat more visible emphasis on work environment, autonomy, and well-being, while discussions in the French-speaking region more explicitly refer to salary transparency and questions of meaning. However, these nuances do not translate into fundamentally different decision logics across regions and should therefore not be overinterpreted. Rather, they may be considered as tentative observations that could be explored as hypotheses in future research.

For transparency, Appendix 3 provides a summary of each focus group, allowing readers to appreciate the empirical basis of the analysis.

Table 2 Overview of empirical support for the working propositions

Proposition	Level of support	Key insight
P1	Partial support	Business administration perceived as broad and flexible, but raises questions about professional positioning
P2	No support	Modern programme content alone does not increase attractiveness
P3	Strong support	Practice-oriented and part-time pathways are preferred over full-time study
P4	Strong support	Significant information deficits across all target groups
P5	Partial support	Digital and international elements enhance attractiveness; sustainability less convincing unless applied
P6	No support	No evidence of declining social or family support for UAS studies
P7	Partial support	Purpose matters, but remains secondary to financial security and career considerations

Information deficit at UAS (Proposition 4)

Participants in our focus groups noted a significant information deficit on the part of UAS, and this at various levels. First, they mention that information regarding studies in the economics and services tracks reaches them late in the year, as illustrated by this respondent: *“In January*

of the third year it's too late ... you could have convinced me earlier." (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Bern).

Second, they perceive a lack of information regarding the specializations offered by the Schools of Management at UAS, as highlighted by one of the respondents: *"I have noticed there is hardly any information about what we can study; you have to research everything yourself."* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Bern). In the same vein, they feel that the UAS do not provide them with enough information regarding the career opportunities offered by studies in economics and services, as mentioned by a respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Vaud: *"Explain a little bit about what we can become after graduation—our career prospects—so that we can be told clearly that with this, you can become that."*

The respondents interviewed suggested several areas for improvement that could help bridge this communication gap. Some proposed that UAS websites be redesigned to make them more user-friendly. Indeed, the data collected show that respondents struggle to find useful information on these portals. Among the specific suggestions made, prospective students called for more visual content to help simplify the information. For example: admissions → specializations → jobs/salaries. Additionally, short video clips featuring interviews with current students and/or alumni would help prospective students get a clearer picture of what studying at a UAS is like. According to those who participated in our focus groups, social media should be used more effectively, as mentioned by one respondent, as evidenced by the following quote: *"I saw a TikTok ad from a UAS that immediately caught my attention—short, catchy content works."* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Bern).

Finally, several participants believe that an information session in classrooms, led by UAS representatives, relatively early in the school year would be a significant tool for communication and information regarding the options offered by business schools. *"Even if they just pop into the classroom for a minute ... that could help enormously."* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Neuchâtel).

Practice orientation, and Opportunity Costs of Studying (Proposition 3)

Practical experience is the key factor when choosing a degree programme. Such programmes are perceived as particularly attractive when academic study and professional work are closely linked – for example, through part-time or dual-track models, project-based work, or internships. However, simply combining theory and practice is not enough: what students learn must be immediately applicable. As one respondent mentioned: *"Because I often ask myself now in school, what do I need this for, will I need this again, or can I forget it again after the exam?"* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Bern). There is a strong preference for programmes with a clear connection to the real working world, practical case studies, and a tangible professional benefit. Practice-oriented pathways such as the Higher Technical School (HF), direct entry, or traineeships appeal to students across all groups.

Part-time study at a university of applied sciences is considered the ideal combination of earning and learning. Full-time study, on the other hand, is viewed as financially risky: those who study full-time not only lose income but also delay their own career development, and there were concerns that they might not be able to find a job afterward, as mentioned by one respondent: *"So many jobs don't want you if you don't have professional experience. And [...] I think the combination of both is so cool."* Another respondent from the same focus group noted, *"If*

I study full-time, I lose years of experience and salary” (respondents from a focus group held in the Canton of Lucerne). The loss of income and the feeling of being stuck in one’s career are thus key obstacles that prevent many from even considering full-time study.

Generalism/lack of profile (Proposition 1)

Respondents perceive UAS business schools as offering very strong theoretical and practical foundations across various fields. As a result, a degree in these programmes is seen as a “door opener” due to its generalist focus, as this respondent notes: *“It feels like there is so much in it; it is not only finance but many other things as well.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Bern). Nevertheless, this strength can become problematic because respondents struggle to envision how to position themselves in their future careers: *“It’s broader. We touch on many topics without becoming true specialists. You still need to specialize within the company afterwards.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Valais).

Digital and international relevance (Propositions 2 and 5)

Modern programme content such as digitalization and sustainability alone does not automatically increase the appeal of a degree programme – this proposition is not supported by the data. Digital and international elements, on the other hand, demonstrably increase appeal, while sustainability, as a standalone feature, is hardly convincing. One respondent mentioned: *“Sustainability is important, but I want to be sure I can find a job afterward.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Basel).

Specifically, it is clear that labels need substance. “Digital” and “international,” as well as English-language programmes, noticeably boost appeal, as mentioned: *“I would like a programme taught in English with an exchange semester ... A business degree with a focus on sustainability interests me the least.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Bern) and *“For me, it’s not so much about spending time abroad as it is about learning English. Especially for my future career, depending on the industry. It just helps more if you know English. And then it’s not like a barrier you face when you don’t know a word. In our line of work, in business, we’ve always communicated in German. And when you hear it in English too, you know how to handle it, so you can use both. For me, it’s very important now.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Zurich). AI as a tool is welcomed, whereas AI is primarily referred to economics: *“AI and the economy certainly have great potential for the future”* or *“AI and the economy, AI can be fascinating because it’s sure to become even more important in the future”* (respondents from a focus group held in the Canton of Zurich).

Sustainability is only convincing when it is taught in a practical way, as a mere label, it generates little enthusiasm. Digital and international fields of study increase attractiveness, whereas sustainability as a central profile feature remains less convincing.

Purpose & Impact (Proposition 7)

Respondents clearly highlight motivations related to financial security and career development when deciding on their professional future, particularly regarding the choice of a field of study, as illustrated by this respondent: *“Salary is a huge factor in choosing between the UAS School of Management and university. That’s why I’m here. I’m not going to lie.”* (respondent from a

focus group held in the Canton of Geneva). It should be noted, however, that most respondents also express a desire to pursue meaningful work, although this notion is understood in different ways. For some respondents, meaningful work is primarily associated with contributing to the well-being of society and of others – whether users or clients of organizations. For others, meaningful work is framed in a more individual sense, referring to work that is intellectually stimulating, prevents boredom, and allows them to feel useful and to contribute concretely to their organization, as illustrated by this respondent from a focus group in Zurich: *“For me personally, it's much more important to have a job that I really enjoy. When I get up in the morning, I want to be able to say that I'm doing something good. Because that's always been more important to me, ever since I was little. I love doing something that I really enjoy more than having a lot of money.”* A minority of respondents highlighted certain negative aspects of the economic and financial world: *“I think people who study economics don't primarily aim to help society. I think it's mainly a somewhat selfish field.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Neuchâtel), while not fundamentally questioning business and administration studies.

Influence of Social Environment (Proposition 6)

The information gathered during the focus groups shows that a large proportion of respondents operate within a social environment conducive to pursuing higher education, particularly within the schools of management at UAS. In other words, even though the decision to study is still perceived as an individual choice, participants indicate that they benefited from the support or influence of key figures in their social circles.

The family plays a central role, primarily in terms of moral support. A few respondents mentioned that their parents explicitly encouraged—or even urged—they to pursue an academic path: *“At home it was said: you're doing a School of Management. Period.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Zug) or *“My father is a role model in terms of education.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Ticino). Some respondents were motivated by the paths taken by certain friends: *“I have a few friends who are currently at a UAS School of Management. So they're pushing me, motivating me to go as... In any case, to try it out and see for myself what it's like.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Neuchâtel). Furthermore, some of the people interviewed indicated that they had been influenced by role models they encountered in their professional context – particularly during their apprenticeship – who motivated them to consider continuing their studies, such as this respondent who said, *“So I did a three-month internship. Every three months, I changed departments. And then I really got to know the whole department and met new people I could chat and talk to. And then I looked at their backgrounds. They were all students who had either finished university or the School of Management at UAS itself.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Vaud).

Overall, contrary to the initial proposition, the data provide little evidence of declining social or family support for UAS business studies. On the contrary, participants generally report a social environment that is supportive of pursuing higher education, particularly within schools of management.

Other *minor* themes

Some respondents highlighted the difficulties certain students face with mathematics: *“At the UAS level, this is why quite a few students struggle in these subjects or fail and then have to take remedial classes, etc., because most of them have done vocational training as commercial employees or in mathematics and commerce, but they are not prepared in mathematics for these higher education institutions because they don’t have the basics.”* (respondent from a focus group held in the Canton of Vaud). These respondents are surprised by the absence of this subject during the apprenticeship. For them, this is even more incomprehensible given that this subject already poses significant problems at the vocational baccalaureate level and serves as a deal-breaker during the first year of business school. According to these respondents, mathematics also acts as a barrier to pursuing studies beyond the vocational baccalaureate.

Although they represent a minority in our focus groups, we nevertheless wish to bring the issue of neuro-atypical students to the client’s attention. According to one respondent with dyslexia, more support measures should be made available to this population because they do not acquire skills in the same way as individuals without such disorders.

Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this exploratory study, we propose four recommendations for leaders of UAS schools of management. These recommendations are intended to support strategic decision-making with a view to enhancing the attractiveness of business education programmes.

First, we propose that schools of management further refine their student recruitment strategy. This should begin well before the completion of the vocational baccalaureate in Economics & Services. This implies that UAS schools of management should make themselves known to compulsory schools, particularly at the upper secondary level, and to career counsellors. We also suggest that management schools increase their visibility among vocational school students by targeting commercial apprentices earlier in their academic journey. To achieve this, information sessions should be organized more frequently and, in any case, sooner for students pursuing the vocational baccalaureate.

Second, directors of UAS schools of management should strengthen their role in defining and articulating a clear and coherent value proposition for their programmes, particularly at the stage where prospective students compare different study options. While the technical management of digital platforms is often centralized at the institutional (UAS) level, directors of schools of management retain substantial influence over programme-level communication. In particular, they can shape how their programmes are presented by prioritizing key messages, structuring information in a student-friendly way, and ensuring that the distinctive features of UAS business education – such as study formats, practice-oriented learning models, specialization pathways, and concrete career perspectives – are presented in a consistent, accessible, and intelligible manner. Beyond institutional websites, directors of schools of management can actively deploy communication formats that fall directly within their remit, such as programme-specific information events, targeted outreach to students in classrooms, and the systematic use of student and alumni testimonials. They can also develop school-level digital content (e.g., short videos or social media formats). These instruments are not primarily recruitment tools but serve to clarify the identity, positioning, and added value of schools of management at a crucial decision-making stage for prospective students.

Third, UAS schools of management should continue to emphasize –and where possible further strengthen– their distinctive model combining paid employment with study and a strong practice-oriented curriculum. The possibility to work alongside one’s studies, together with programmes that integrate applied projects, internships, and real-world problem solving, is highly valued by students and constitutes a central component of the attractiveness of UAS business education. Rather than diluting this profile, schools should preserve and reinforce it, as it represents a clear competitive advantage compared with other higher education institutions and directly addresses students’ concerns about employability, opportunity costs, and early professional integration.

Fourth, digital and international elements should be visible components of the curriculum, rather than optional add-ons. This includes, for example, English-language modules that prepare students for international professional environments, internationally oriented case studies and guest lecturers from abroad, as well as the applied use of AI tools and digital technologies within a professional context. Embedding these elements visibly in the curriculum signals to prospective students that the programme is future-oriented and globally relevant, both of which are increasingly important criteria in study choice decisions. Similarly, sustainability should be embedded in the curriculum in a consistent and application-oriented manner, rather than being communicated as an abstract guiding principle or stand-alone module. Sustainability topics should be integrated across disciplines and illustrated through concrete professional scenarios, real-world case studies, and practical projects. This approach ensures that students not only understand the relevance of sustainability in their future careers but are also equipped with the competencies to act on it.

Conclusion

This exploratory study provides rich qualitative insights into the factors shaping the attractiveness of economics and service programmes at Swiss universities of applied sciences. The findings highlight the central role of practice-oriented study formats, timely and targeted information, and the perceived relevance of degree programmes for future careers. While UAS business schools are widely recognized for their strong foundations and employability orientation, challenges remain in terms of visibility, clarity of positioning, and alignment with students’ expectations regarding meaning, career prospects, and learning formats. Taken together, the results underscore the importance for UAS schools of management to strengthen their communication, emphasize flexible and practice-based pathways, and articulate more clearly the value proposition of their programmes for diverse student profiles.

The final section of this report briefly highlights selected limitations of the study and points to future research directions.

Limitations

The findings presented here are based on focus group interviews and thus on self-reported perceptions, with the aim of gaining deeper insights into the choice of study programme. Participants were recruited from classes across Switzerland. The results reflect the perspectives of the selected sample. Generalizations about the entire population of potential students cannot be derived from them. The statements were transcribed and coded, and the analysis was based on

these statements. This approach carries the risk of smoothing out individual nuances. The data were collected in the fall of 2025, and it remains to be seen to what extent the expressed preferences will change under altered labor market or educational conditions. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether verbalized preferences align with actual decisions regarding the choice of study programme.

Furthermore, it should be noted that it proved difficult to include in the focus groups students who were not inclined to pursue tertiary-level education. Despite our efforts and the strong cooperation of the training institutions, we were unable to engage such profiles. As a result, most of our respondents consisted of individuals with a strong interest in continuing their studies at UAS schools of management. Only a small minority of participants were more sceptical about pursuing further education, without, however, being entirely opposed to a programme in economics and services.

Applied research avenues

Although the present report does not primarily pursue a scientific objective, the findings generated by this exploratory qualitative study point to several promising directions for future research. In particular, the themes emerging from the focus groups could be operationalized and examined through a questionnaire survey targeting students at the upper secondary level, notably commercial apprentices and students enrolled in vocational baccalaureate programmes in economics and services. Such an approach would make it possible to assess more broadly the prevalence of the patterns identified in this study across different student profiles. Beyond this, a more ambitious research design could adopt a systemic perspective by integrating multiple stakeholder groups, including students in upper secondary education, UAS students, career counsellors, and employers. Given the complexity of educational and career decision-making processes, focusing exclusively on prospective UAS students risks oversimplifying the mechanisms underlying the attractiveness of business and services programmes. A multi-actor perspective would therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping educational trajectories and study choices.

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