VARNA FREE UNIVERSITY "CHERNORIZETS HRABAR"
FACULTY OF SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND COMPUTER SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT

REVIEW
by Prof. Snezhanka Kostadinova Ovcharova, PhD

regarding a dissertation for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree PhD in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences,
Professional Field 3.7 "Administration and Management," Doctoral Program "Organization and Management outside the sphere of material Production"

On the topic:
LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL OF EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS AS CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE

by: Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova
Scientific Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Velislava Nikolaeva

This review has been prepared in accordance with Order No. 623/01.10.2026 of the Rector of VFU and the decision from the first meeting of the scientific jury.

I. General Overview of the Dissertation:

The dissertation has 217 pages and is structured as follows: an introduction, a main body consisting of three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and four appendices. The content of each chapter is organized into separate sections. The main text includes 11 tables and 38 figures, which are listed at the beginning of the work. The bibliography comprises 122 titles in Bulgarian and English. The list of selected scholarly articles, monographs, and regulatory documents demonstrates the author’s in-depth knowledge of the issues explored in the dissertation.

Based on the similarity report, the review of available scientific literature, and the content analysis of the dissertation and the abstract, no circumstances have been identified that would give rise to doubts regarding the author's academic integrity or indicate the presence of plagiarism.

II. Information about the Doctoral Candidate

Kristiyana Ivanova holds a Master’s degree in Bulgarian Language and Literature and also possesses a second-level professional qualification as an Agricultural Engineer. Her doctoral training was conducted through independent study within the doctoral program "Organization and

Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production" (Professional Field 3.7: Administration and Management) at the Department of Administration and Management of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar." The numerous certificates, distinctions, and awards she has received demonstrate a commitment to the continuous enhancement of her knowledge and skills. Kristiyana Ivanova possesses extensive professional experience in the field of education. Currently, she serves as the Director of the Vocational High School of Agriculture in the town of General Toshevo.

III. Assessment of the Form and Content of the Dissertation.

Relevance of the Issues Addressed in the Dissertation.

The dissertation submitted for review focuses on a topical and significant scientific subject: leadership in vocational education. This theme is particularly important within the context of contemporary technological and economic developments, which are giving rise to new professions and educational needs. Consequently, educational professionals are required to acquire leadership competencies and apply them in the training of young people and adults—most notably within centers of excellence. The doctoral candidate demonstrates a personal motivation for conducting this theoretical and empirical research and has provided a thorough justification for the significance of the topic.

The structure of the dissertation follows the established logic of scientific research—from a theoretical review and the clarification of key concepts, notions, and relationships, through the methodological rationale, to empirical research and the development of models and recommendations.

In the introduction to the dissertation, the author outlines her personal motivation for finding a solution to the research problem: “the identification, structuring, and development of key competencies and leadership potential among trainers (both managerial and operational staff), so that they meet the contemporary requirements of vocational education and the strategic goals of the Centres of Excellence.”

The thesis being defended is clearly stated: “the leadership potential of educational professionals depends on a specific set of competencies they possess, through which—by means of the teaching process—they shape individuals suited for future ‘green’ and sustainable professions. These competencies encompass professional and pedagogical knowledge and skills, as well as personal traits, innovative thinking, and leadership abilities; these enable the teacher to serve as an active agent for new knowledge and behavioral models, adapted to the contemporary demands of the educational and economic environment.” The doctoral candidate has further refined this thesis through two specific working sub-theses.

The object of the dissertation is the leadership potential of the pedagogical staff at the "Todor Rachinski" Vocational High School of Agriculture in the town of General Toshevo, Dobrich District, as Center of Excellence. The subject of the research is also precisely defined: the competencies that constitute the leadership potential of these educators, enabling them to become active agents of new, green, and sustainable knowledge—knowledge which they translate into practical skills and capabilities for their students.

The objective of the study is clearly defined: “to synthesize, systematize, and critically analyze the key knowledge, skills, and competencies of pedagogical professionals—based on a theoretical and

practical review of specialized literature and best practices—and to develop and pilot a model for the formation and development of their leadership potential." This objective is achieved through six specific tasks that correspond to the content of the dissertation.

The limitations in the dissertation's introduction are outlined with sufficient clarity and provide a framework for the doctoral candidate's research.

In the first chapter, the doctoral candidate provides a critical review of theoretical frameworks. The conceptual apparatus-specifically the concept of leadership and its distinction from administration and management-is clarified. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes various concepts and models, which serve as the basis for synthesizing three interconnected components of leadership potential: socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic. Key abilities and skills constituting leadership potential are systematized (p. 26). I highly value the author's clearly articulated personal opinion on the issues under investigation, as well as the working definitions formulated. The specific nature of leadership among pedagogical professionals, along with their interrelated roles, is also presented. The chapter concludes with findings and summaries.

Chapter Two analyzes the specific characteristics of a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) based on a three-component leadership structure. The doctoral candidate demonstrates an excellent grasp of European policies and strategies for promoting knowledge and innovation, and seeks to implement them within a Bulgarian vocational high school. Figure 4 (p. 79) presents the systemic components of a CoVE. Further on, the chapter describes the specific subject of the study: the "Todor Rachinski" Vocational High School of Agriculture in General Toshevo. Key aspects highlighted include a culture of achievement, skills ecosystems, partnerships with the business and scientific sectors, individualized learning, and the challenges associated with the teacher's leadership role. The chapter concludes with a summary and key findings.

Chapter Three presents one of the dissertation's primary contributions—a conceptual model for the development of leadership potential (p. 119, Fig. 5) - which integrates diagnostic, training, and evaluative functions. The model is implemented through two training phases, an individual development plan, and self-assessment. It also incorporates leadership-focused lessons and criteria for tracking achievements. This chapter presents the results of an empirical study conducted at the "Todor Rachinski" Vocational High School, involving 27 teachers. The doctoral candidate has performed a comprehensive analysis, offering a critical assessment of the state of leadership potential within the high school across three structural components. The learning and cognitive tasks employed in the instructional process are described in detail. The content-related and technological aspects regarding the piloting of the training model for the development of leadership potential are systematized. Given the limitations outlined by the author, it can be concluded that the model is applicable within a real-world educational environment. The chapter concludes with findings concerning the sustainable development of leadership potential.

The dissertation's conclusion summarizes the results achieved and the contributions of the work.

IV. Evaluation of the Autoreferat and Publications

The extended abstract is 40 pages long. Its content covers key aspects of the theoretical review and the analysis of the empirical research results. Evidence is presented regarding the applicability of the model, as well as the significance of the contributions to both theory and practice.

The doctoral candidate has been actively engaged in publishing, as evidenced by numerous articles, conference papers, and textbooks on leadership for grades 9–11. Five publications have been submitted for the current defense, all of which meet the relevant scientometric requirements.

V. Scientific and Scientific-Applied Contributions of the Dissertation.

Kristiyana Ivanova presents scientific, scientific-applied, and practical contributions, which I consider to be the original work of the doctoral candidate.

The scientific contributions of the dissertation relate to the enrichment of theoretical knowledge through a conceptual framework developed by the author. This framework connects leadership, the teacher-leader, and the Centre of Excellence by incorporating socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic components. A valuable contribution is the development of a three-component conceptual model of the leadership potential of pedagogical professionals, which integrates classical and contemporary leadership theories with the specificities of vocational education and training.

Scientific-applied contributions include the toolkit for diagnosing, assessing, and developing leadership potential within a Center for Excellence. The research establishes a link between the personal development of educational professionals and the organizational conditions that facilitate the manifestation of leadership.

Practical contributions include: the piloting-within the Center for Excellence—of the developed model for fostering the leadership potential of educational professionals; and the systematization of measures and recommendations for a policy on developing leadership potential within the Center.

VI. Comments and Recommendations regarding the dissertation

A significant portion of the comments made during the preliminary discussion of the work have been addressed by the doctoral candidate. With the aim of enhancing future research activities, I offer the following:

- The *Conclusions and summaries* provided for sections *2.2 and 2.3*, as well as *for sections 3.2 and 3.3*, are presented as separate, unnecessary additions; the general conclusions for each chapter are sufficient.
- A key characteristic of leadership is the presence of followers; therefore, in any future empirical research, it would be advisable to also seek the perspectives of the students.
- To demonstrate the pragmatic component and the established network-based collaboration with the business sector regarding a specific subject, it is necessary to include feedback from employers.

These comments do not diminish the merits of the dissertation or the results achieved; rather, they are intended to enhance the work, which is recommended for publication.

Question: What motivational approaches would the doctoral student, in her capacity as a practicing leader, employ to address the weaknesses in leadership potential at the vocational high school that she identified in her study?

VI. Overall Assessment of the Dissertation and Conclusion

Based on the above, I conclude that the dissertation titled “Leadership Potential of Pedagogical Specialists in Vocational High Schools as Centers of Excellence,” authored by Kristiyana Ivanova, complies with the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and the Regulation for its implementation. The work presents relevant and significant scientific, scientific-applied, and practical contributions. The findings contribute to the enrichment of management theory and practice regarding the leadership competencies of educators within centers of excellence.

Based on the above, I express my positive assessment and recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury award the educational and scientific degree PhD to Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova, within the doctoral program "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production," Professional Field 3.7 "Administration and Management."

Date: 03.11.2026 Reviewer: ……..…

(Prof. Sn. Ovcharova, PhD)