O P I N I O N

By Professor, Doctor of Sciences, Sevdalina Ilieva Dimitrova—Professor in Professional Field 3.7 "Administration and Management"—regarding a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" (PhD) in Professional Field 3.7 "Administration and Management," within the doctoral program "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production." The dissertation, titled "Leadership Potential of Pedagogical Specialists in Vocational High Schools as Centers of Excellence," was authored by doctoral candidate Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova.

This opinion has been prepared pursuant to Order No. 623 of the Rector of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar," dated October 1, 2026, appointing a scientific jury

1. General characteristics and assessment of the dissertation thesis

Today, as information technologies and digitalization processes across all spheres of public life—accompanied by the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence—confront vocational education and training (VET) with the urgent need to develop professional competencies alongside leadership potential, the situation is more pressing than ever. This challenge aligns with the concept of "collective qualification" as a human resource management model designed to address the growing expectations of learners. Now more than ever, educators must possess not only professional competencies but also leadership qualities. This is essential for motivating learners in line with the "knowledge–science–business" triangle—a core principle underpinning the development and establishment of Centers of Excellence in Vocational Education and Training (CEVET). Consequently, the research problem addressed in this dissertation is highly relevant; it stems from the need to identify, structure, and cultivate the key competencies and leadership potential of educators within the framework of various initiatives aimed at achieving excellence. In this context, the research thesis and two sub-theses have been formulated, based on the applicability of a three-component model for the development and cultivation of leadership potential within the educational sector. The validity of this approach is supported by the scientifically grounded objective of the doctoral candidate’s

research—namely, the development of a model for fostering leadership potential. This model was piloted at the "Todor Rachinski" Vocational High School of Agriculture in General Toshevo—an institution recognized as a Center for Excellence in Vocational Education and Training (CEVET)—a fact facilitated by the candidate's role as the school's principal. The research objective is achieved through the resolution of six specific research tasks, addressing the defined object and subject of study via an appropriate methodology, all within clearly delineated and specified research limitations. Consequently, this dissertation addresses existing gaps in scientific knowledge and practical application regarding the development of leadership potential among pedagogical professionals, aligning their professional competencies with the demands of both the educational and labor markets. The scientific and applied results obtained confirm the alignment between the dissertation's topic and the content of the work itself.

The research methodology selected for the development of this dissertation is based on generally applicable methods and tools of scientific inquiry—both theoretical and empirical. The final research results are presented in their completed form across 217 pages, including 11 tables, 38 figures, and 4 appendices. The bibliography comprises 122 sources, the scientific and practical value of which—as well as the authority of their respective authors—is beyond question.

The dissertation follows a classic structure: a list of tables, a list of figures, a list of abbreviations, an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices. This structure aligns with the objective and the specific tasks set out to be addressed. The summaries and conclusions at the end of each chapter support the fulfilment of the research tasks, the substantiation of the research thesis and working hypothesis, and the achievement of the objective of the doctoral candidate's scholarly inquiry.

The research, analyses, model, methodologies, and proposals presented by the doctoral candidate support the dissertation's compliance with the requirements regarding the addressing of a specific problem and the demonstration of novelty in the derivation of its scientific and applied scientific results—the positive assessment of which is beyond doubt.

2. Characteristics of the scientific and applied scientific contributions in the dissertation. Reliability of the material

The dissertation is complete; the research objective has been achieved, and the research tasks have been addressed. The exposition follows a logical sequence and is analytical in nature, drawing upon relevant specialized literature and factual sources. The author has examined a sufficient body of specialized literature and the regulatory framework pertaining to the subject matter. The research is grounded in best practices, trends, and priorities regarding the development of professional competencies and the cultivation of leadership

potential among pedagogical staff in vocational high schools designated as Centers for Vocational Training (CVTs). This assessment is supported by the scientific and applied research outcomes presented in the dissertation, as well as the proposals put forward by the doctoral candidate—proposals which I endorse and fully support.

3.1. Scientific Results:

3.1.1. Theoretical knowledge has been further developed and enriched through the author's conceptual framework for the teacher-leader in a Center for External Assessment (CEA), incorporating socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic components.

3.1.2. New knowledge has been generated regarding the development of leadership potential in pedagogical specialists within Vocational High Schools (VHS)—functioning as Canters for Vocational Training (CVT)—through the substantiation of a scientific conceptual platform based on a three-component model of leadership potential, which integrates classical and contemporary leadership theories with the specificities of vocational education and training.

3.2. Scientific and Applied Results:

3.2.1. An empirical study was conducted using modern instruments for the expert assessment of leadership potential within the Centre for Professional Development (CPD). The study provides a scientific basis for the link between the personal development of pedagogical professionals and their leadership potential, the cultivation of a culture of trust, participation, and partnership, and the provision of opportunities for practical initiative.

3.2.2. A conceptual model for developing the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists has been created and piloted at the CVP; it enables the systematization and synthesis of specific measures and policies for establishing a framework for the development of teachers' leadership potential within the CVP, with an applicability that is adaptable to the specific organizational and professional environment.

The scientific and applied scientific results of the research conducted in the dissertation consist of demonstrating—using new approaches—significant and novel aspects of existing scientific problems and theories. These findings further enrich leadership theory and expand the understanding of how leadership potential is developed in pedagogical specialists within the field of vocational education and training.

The developed and tested model for the development of leadership potential of pedagogical specialists allows the rationalization of decisions for effective professional education and training according to the requirements of the labour market and European lifelong learning initiatives.

The results of the research conducted in the dissertation are the original work of the doctoral candidate and highlight the significance of the contributions made to the theory and practice of developing the leadership potential of pedagogical professionals. They may serve as a methodological

foundation for the future research work of doctoral candidate Kristiyana Ivanova.

3. Abstract and publications related to the dissertation

The abstract accurately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation and highlights the most significant aspects, results, and conclusions of the research.

Five publications related to the dissertation topic are listed in the VSU Yearbook of Scientific Works and in professional journals. These are sole-authored publications aligned with the author's research focus. They demonstrate depth and comprehensiveness in the preparation and execution of the research process. This is further evidenced by the submitted report on the minimum national requirements (MNR) for the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor," which shows a score of 100 points against a requirement of 80 points.

In the course of the procedure, I am not aware of any motivated written plagiarism reports. In the course of the review, according to my competences and the sources available to me, I have not found any plagiarism in the materials provided under the procedure.

4. Critical remarks and recommendations

While the dissertation has its positive aspects, it also contains certain shortcomings, which are presented here in the form of recommendations:

- It is advisable to limit the number of specific research tasks in line with the structure of the dissertation, which facilitates a clearer and more precise understanding of how they are addressed.
- in the future, the doctoral candidate should direct their publication activity toward journals that are refereed and indexed within the global scientific network.

The points raised are of a technical or discursive nature and are intended as recommendations. They do not diminish the merits of the dissertation; however, addressing them would contribute to greater specificity in the research and conclusions.

5. Conclusion

The dissertation, authored by doctoral candidate Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova, is a completed and well-structured scholarly work addressing an issue of current relevance to vocational education and training, with a focus on the leadership potential of pedagogical professionals. Significant scientific and applied research results have been achieved, demonstrating the candidate's ability to independently explore issues of importance to both theory and practice regarding professional competence and leadership qualities within the context of vocational education and training. The work has been developed in compliance

with the requirements of the *Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria* for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor," the Regulations for its implementation, and the regulatory framework of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar”.

6. Evaluation of the Dissertation

Taking into account the scientific and applied research results achieved in the dissertation, its merits, and the doctoral candidate’s successful research track record to date, I provide a **positive assessment** of the dissertation titled “Leadership Potential of Pedagogical Specialists in Vocational High Schools as Canters of Excellence,” authored by doctoral candidate Kristiyana Ivanova. I **recommend to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury** that the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” be awarded to Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova, within Higher Education Field 3: “Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences,” Professional Field 3.7: “Administration and Management,” and the doctoral program: “Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production.”.

28.10.2026 Member of the Scientific Jury:

Veliko Tarnovo Prof. Sevdalina Dimitrova, D.Sc.