VARNA FREE UNIVERSITY "CHERNORIZETS HRABAR"
Faculty of Social, Economic and Computer Sciences
Department of Administration and Management

ACADEMIC OPINION

By Assoc. Prof. Miglena Pencheva, PhD
Regarding the doctoral dissertation entitled:
"Leadership Potential of Pedagogical Specialists in Vocational High Schools as Centres of Excellence"
Submitted by Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova
For the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD) in the doctoral programme "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production", Professional Field 3.7. Administration and Management.

This academic opinion has been prepared in accordance with Order No. 623 of 1 October 2026, issued by the Rector of Varna Free University.

1. General Characteristics of the Dissertation

The dissertation addresses a topical and significant issue in the management of educational organizations, namely the formation and development of the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists in the context of the transformation of vocational education and training. The topic is particularly relevant in a dynamically changing environment. In this respect, the research has both scientific significance and a clearly defined practical and applied orientation.

The submitted dissertation comprises 217 pages and includes an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and four appendices. The text is illustrated with 11 tables and 38 figures, while the bibliography contains 122 sources in Bulgarian and English. The structure follows the logic of scientific research, proceeding from the theoretical examination of leadership and its manifestations in the educational environment, through clarification of the specific characteristics of Centres of Excellence, to the development and testing of a model for enhancing the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists.

The object of the research is the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists at Todor Rachinski Vocational High School of Agriculture in the town of General Toshevo, considered as a Centre of Excellence. The subject of the research encompasses the competencies that constitute this potential and enable pedagogical specialists to act as active agents of new knowledge, innovative approaches, and sustainable patterns of behaviour. The research thesis is based on the understanding that leadership potential is determined by a combination of professional, pedagogical, personal, and managerial competencies that can be developed through purposeful efforts.

The research objective is clearly formulated and focuses on systematizing the key competencies of pedagogical specialists and developing and testing a model for the formation

and development of their leadership potential. To achieve this objective, six research tasks have been defined and are consistently addressed throughout the dissertation.

The theoretical part analyses major leadership concepts and identifies a three-component structure of leadership potential comprising socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic components. The doctoral candidate's effort to relate theoretical propositions to the specific requirements placed on pedagogical specialists in vocational education deserves a positive assessment.

A substantial part of the dissertation is devoted to the conceptual model developed for enhancing leadership potential, which integrates diagnostic, training, and evaluation functions. The model includes successive training phases, an individual development plan, self-assessment, and criteria for monitoring achievements. It has been tested in an authentic educational environment with the participation of 27 pedagogical specialists. The empirical research makes it possible to identify both the current state and specific characteristics of leadership potential, as well as opportunities for its purposeful development.

2. Evaluation of Scientific Results and Contributions

I endorse the general orientation of the contributions formulated in the dissertation, which can be classified as scientific, scientific-applied, and practical.

1. Scientific and theoretical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to the systematization and enrichment of knowledge concerning the leadership of pedagogical specialists in vocational education.

An original conceptual framework has been developed, integrating the socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic dimensions of leadership potential. This approach makes it possible to consider leadership not merely as an individual characteristic but also as a complex set of competencies manifested within a specific organizational and educational environment.

A model has been developed that integrates diagnostic, training, and evaluation activities into a unified system aimed at the progressive development of leadership competencies. The model establishes prerequisites for aligning individual professional development with the objectives and needs of the educational organization.

2. Scientific-applied contributions

A significant scientific-applied contribution is the development of a set of instruments for diagnosing and developing the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists.

The empirical study contributes through the diagnosis and analysis of the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists in a particular vocational high school. The findings make it possible to identify strengths and areas requiring further development, while also providing a basis for formulating targeted managerial and training measures.

3. Practical and applied contributions

The practical and applied contributions consist in testing instruments for the diagnosis, assessment, and development of leadership competencies, as well as in systematizing measures and recommendations for managing this process.

The proposed solutions can support the management teams of vocational high schools in planning professional development activities, promoting pedagogical leadership, and fostering an organizational culture oriented towards innovation, cooperation, and excellence.

I positively assess the author's efforts to connect theoretical propositions with the actual managerial challenges facing vocational education.

An important strength of the dissertation is the recognition that the development of leadership potential cannot be considered in isolation from the organizational environment, partnerships with businesses, and the need to adapt the educational process to new economic and technological conditions.

3. Recommendations and Comments

Alongside my positive evaluation of the dissertation, I would like to offer several recommendations primarily aimed at the possibilities for continuing and expanding the research.

First, the testing of the model within a single educational institution and with the participation of 27 pedagogical specialists calls for a degree of caution when generalizing the findings to vocational education as a whole. In future research, it would be beneficial to apply the model in vocational high schools with different educational profiles, organizational characteristics, and regional locations. This would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of its applicability.

Second, leadership involves not only the possession of certain personal and professional competencies but also the ability to influence followers. In this respect, incorporating students' perspectives would enrich the assessment of the manifestations of pedagogical leadership and its impact on educational outcomes.

These comments are constructive in nature and do not alter the overall positive evaluation of the dissertation and the results achieved.

4. Dissertation Abstract and Related Publications

The submitted dissertation abstract comprises 40 pages and reflects the main logic, content, and results of the doctoral research.

It presents the theoretical foundations of the study, the developed conceptual model, the results of the empirical investigation, and the formulated scientific and scientific-applied contributions.

The doctoral candidate demonstrates active publication activity, including scientific articles, conference papers, and educational materials in the field of leadership.

Five publications related to the research topic have been submitted for the present procedure. These publications meet the applicable scientometric requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD).

5. Opinion Regarding the Presence or Absence of Plagiarism

Based on the documents provided, the review of the scientific literature, and the substantive analysis of the dissertation and its abstract, no circumstances have been identified that would raise doubts about the author's academic integrity or provide grounds for establishing plagiarism.

6. Conclusion

The dissertation submitted by Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova represents a complete and independent scientific study of a topical issue related to the management and development of human resources in vocational education.

Its principal merits are reflected in its consistent logical structure, thorough theoretical examination of leadership potential, development of a conceptual model, and testing of that model in an authentic educational environment.

The research demonstrates the doctoral candidate's ability to identify a significant managerial problem, analyse it through an appropriate theoretical framework, and propose practically oriented solutions.

The results achieved are relevant to the development of management theory and practice in education, particularly in the context of establishing Centres of Excellence and enhancing the leadership competencies of pedagogical specialists.

The recommendations and limitations identified do not diminish the scientific value of the research but rather outline opportunities for its further development and broader applicability.

7. Final Evaluation of the Dissertation

Considering the relevance and significance of the research topic, the consistent theoretical and empirical investigation, the developed and tested model for enhancing leadership potential, and the scientific, scientific-applied, and practical results achieved, I consider that the dissertation meets the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its Implementation.

I hereby give a POSITIVE EVALUATION of the doctoral dissertation submitted by Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova, entitled “Leadership Potential of Pedagogical Specialists in Vocational High Schools as Centres of Excellence”, and support the award of the educational and scientific degree of DOCTOR (PhD) in the doctoral programme “Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production”, Professional Field 3.7. Administration and Management, subject to a successful public defence.

Date**:** 16 November 2026 Member of the Scientific Jury:

Place**:** Varna .....

(Assoc. Prof. Miglena Pencheva, PhD)