# OPINION

**by**

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boryana Todorova Varbanova,**
**"Vasil Levski" National Military University – Veliko Tarnovo**

**SUBJECT:**

The dissertation thesis of Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova for the award of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" (PhD), titled: "LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL OF PEDAGOGICAL SPECIALISTS IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS AS CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE", within professional field 3.7 "Administration and Management," in the doctoral program "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production".

The author of the dissertation is a doctoral student pursuing independent study within the doctoral program "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production," in the professional field of "Administration and Management" at Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar" (Varna), under the academic supervision of Prof. Velislava Nikolaeva, PhD.

This opinion is submitted in my capacity as a member of the Scientific Jury, appointed by Order No. 623 dated October 1, 2026, issued by the Rector of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar," pursuant to Article 4, Paragraph 2 of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADASRB), the Regulations for the Application of the ADASRB, Article 2 of Ordinance No. 12 on the Acquisition of the Educational and Scientific Degree of "Doctor" and the Scientific Degree of "Doctor of Sciences" at Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar," and in accordance with the decision of the Scientific Jury reached during its first meeting.

**1. Brief presentation of the dissertation.**

The submitted dissertation has a total length of 217 pages. It comprises a list of tables, a list of figures, a list of abbreviations, an introduction, a main body organized into three chapters (each containing four sections), a conclusion, a statement of contributions, a bibliography, four appendices, and a Declaration of Originality and Absence of Conflict of Interest. Summaries and conclusions are provided at the end of each chapter.

The work includes 38 figures and 11 tables. The bibliography consists of 122 sources, including books, monographs, articles, regulatory and strategic documents, and electronic resources.

**The relevance** of this topic is driven by the rapid evolution of professions and competencies, the link between vocational education and sustainable development, the digital transformation, the establishment of Centers of Excellence within vocational high schools, and a fundamental shift in the understanding of the nature of the teaching profession.

**The research problem** stems from the need to determine how the key competencies and leadership potential of educational professionals—including both management and teaching staff— can be identified, structured, and developed to meet the contemporary requirements of vocational education and the strategic goals of Centers of Excellence.

**The object** of this research is the leadership potential of educational professionals at the "Todor Rachinski" Vocational High School of Agriculture in the town of General Toshevo (Dobrich Region), which functions as a Center of Excellence.

**The subject** of this research is the set of competencies that constitute the leadership potential of educational professionals, enabling them to become active agents of new,

"green," and sustainable knowledge—knowledge which they, in turn, translate into practical skills and capabilities for their learners.

**The objective** of this dissertation is to synthesize, systematize, and critically analyze the key knowledge, skills, and competencies of educational professionals—drawing upon 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.

Stemming from this objective are the following **research tasks:**

1. To examine specialized literature regarding leadership and the qualities that shape a leader's personality, specifically in the context of the teacher's role within the secondary education system.
2. To investigate the environment for developing the leadership potential of educational professionals, with a specific focus on those working within Centers for Vocational Training.
3. To clarify the rationale behind the existence of Centers for Vocational Training and Professional Education (CVTPE) as drivers of knowledge within the "knowledge triangle."
4. To develop a conceptual model for identifying, fostering, and ensuring the sustainable development of the leadership potential of educational professionals working within both the vocational education system and Centers for Vocational Training.
5. To pilot the developed model in practice, and to formulate conclusions, generalizations, and recommendations for its implementation within Centers for Vocational Training.
6. To substantiate the potential of the developed model for implementation in other educational institutions within the secondary education system—not limited to the segment of vocational education and training.

The first three tasks establish the theoretical and contextual foundation; the fourth transforms this foundation into a model; the fifth tests the model in a specific practical setting; and the sixth outlines the possibilities for its transferability, while acknowledging the limitations of the study.

Two **working hypotheses** have been formulated:

*Sub-hypothesis 1:* If the developed three-component model for the development of leadership potential is implemented through targeted training and a supportive organizational environment, educational professionals will demonstrate positive dynamics in the socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic components of their leadership potential.

*Sub-hypothesis 2:* The practical applicability of the three-component model for the formation and development of leadership potential among educational professionals is evidenced by the creation and use of individual development and self-assessment plans, leadership-oriented lessons, and criteria for tracking leadership skills within an actual educational setting.

## 2. Assessment of the results achieved

Contemporary challenges place increasing demands on vocational education and training. The establishment of Centres of Excellence serves as a response to current issues—on one hand, the need to develop modern facilities and infrastructure, and on the other, the need to secure qualified pedagogical staff capable of driving change, collaborating with partners, and fostering a culture of achievement.

This dissertation presents a conceptual model for developing the leadership potential of pedagogical staff within Centres of Excellence, a model that has been developed and empirically tested in practice. It provides a theoretical and critical analysis of both classical and contemporary leadership theories. The study examines the integration of leadership approaches into the school education system, aiming to apply this model to assist educators in shaping leadership attitudes and behaviour in students. Based on field research, a three-component model for developing leadership potential was developed, which was integrated into a broader conceptual framework. This framework encompasses two interconnected processes: the training of pedagogical staff and the creation of organizational conditions that foster leadership within the Centres of Excellence. The author develops a leadership profile for teachers, a "leadership-oriented" lesson format, individual development and self-assessment plans, and professional innovation networks, alongside a system of criteria and indicators; the author also proposes a specific definition for "Centres of Excellence." The model offers a comprehensive methodology for the development and practical manifestation of leadership potential.

The proposed model was piloted at the "Todor Rachinski" Vocational High School of Agriculture in the town of General Toshevo. It is applicable to other established Centers of Excellence and can be adapted for implementation within vocational high schools across Bulgaria’s secondary education system.

The research findings indicate that teachers are not merely conveyors of knowledge but also leaders. This necessitates the possession of leadership skills, enabling them to foster an environment conducive to the development of both the learners and the educational institution where they teach. Following the training, positive trends were observed across all components of the model; the most consistent results were noted in the development of leadership-oriented interactions and the gradual introduction of leadership-focused lessons. These findings substantiate the author’s thesis that the leadership potential of educators within Centers of Excellence can be systematically cultivated through the creation of an appropriate organizational environment and the application of a specifically designed training model. Regarding the sub-hypotheses, the results support the premise of positive development—varying in intensity—and demonstrate the practical utility of individual development plans, leadership-focused lessons, and the established system of criteria.

The results achieved by doctoral candidate Kristiyana Ivanova open avenues for future research, including the long-term monitoring of the sustainability of these outcomes, as well as the expansion of the model’s experimental application to educational institutions outside the vocational education and training sector.

**3. Nature of the Contributions**

The author of the dissertation categorizes the contributions of the study into three groups:

***3.1. Scientific Contributions:***

• Theoretical knowledge has been enriched through a conceptual framework developed by the author, which links leadership, the teacher-leader, and the Centre of Excellence via socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic components.

• A three-component conceptual model of the leadership potential of pedagogical professionals has been developed, integrating classical and contemporary leadership theories with the specificities of vocational education and training.

***3.2. Scientific-Applied Contributions:***

• A toolkit for diagnosing, assessing, and developing leadership potential within a Centre of Excellence has been developed and pilot-tested.

• The relationship between the personal development of a pedagogical professional and the organizational conditions enabling the manifestation of leadership has been substantiated. It is demonstrated that the model must combine training with a culture of trust, participation, partnership, and opportunities for practical initiative.

***3.3. Applied Contributions:***

• The developed Model for the Development of Leadership Potential of Pedagogical Professionals has been pilot-tested in a Centre of Excellence.

• Specific measures and recommendations for establishing a policy to develop the leadership potential of teachers within Centres of Excellence have been systematized and synthesized.

• The potential for adapting the model to other Centres of Excellence, vocational high schools, and other educational institutions has been substantiated, provided that the instruments are tailored to the specific organizational and professional environment.

I accept the contributions as grouped and formulated above. I consider these to be the author's own original work; they enrich both the theory and practice regarding the enhancement of the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists working in Centers for Vocational Training (CVTs) and within the vocational education system as a whole.

There is no evidence of plagiarism in the submitted materials, and the sources used are cited correctly in accordance with academic standards.

**4. Evaluation of scientific publications**

The candidate meets and even exceeds the minimum national requirements (50 points under indicator group "G," against a requirement of 30). Five sole-authored scientific publications have been submitted (in the *Yearbook of the International University College* and the journal *Educational Pathways*). There are no co-authors, which confirms the candidate's leading personal contribution to the subject matter. The submitted publications align with the topic of the dissertation.

**5. Critical assessments, observations, and recommendations**

I have no critical remarks for the author.

I recommend that PhD candidate Kristiyana Ivanova expand her publication activity in international peer-reviewed journals (Scopus/Web of Science).

**CONCLUSION**

The dissertation titled "Leadership Potential of Pedagogical Specialists in Vocational High Schools as Centers of Excellence" constitutes a completed scientific study that meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and Ordinance No. 12 of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar."

In my capacity as a member of the Scientific Jury, I provide a positive assessment supporting the conferment of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" upon the doctoral candidate, Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova.

26.10.2026 г.

Prepared by: ……..

Assoc. Prof. Boryana Varbanova, PhD