

**LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE AND THE ASSESSMENT OF ITS DEVELOPMENT
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Abstract: The article examines the development of leadership competence among university students in the context of rapid social, economic and cultural change. Employers increasingly demand graduates who are not only professionally qualified, but also able to lead teams, promote new ideas and assume responsibility for key decisions. Building on Russian and international leadership theories, the study conceptualises leadership as a socio-psychological predisposition that is realised or suppressed depending on educational and social conditions. The authors justify the need for large-scale, psychometrically grounded monitoring of students' leadership qualities and propose using these data to individualise the educational process. Leadership competence is treated as a key personal capacity to solve a specific class of professional tasks. The empirical base consists of student groups from humanities and technical institutes; leadership is assessed within a broader set of universal competencies using a standardised test battery. The article outlines the research aims, hypotheses and methodological framework and argues that systematic diagnostics of leadership potential can support targeted training programmes, optimise role distribution in student groups and increase the effectiveness of professional preparation in higher education.

Keywords: leadership, leadership competence, university students, personality traits, educational process, psychodiagnostics, soft skills

Introduction and Literature Review.

Contemporary society is undergoing rapid transformations in values, social relations and institutional structures. Deep reforms in economic, political, social and cultural spheres create a growing demand for specialists who are able to respond quickly and creatively to new challenges. Employers increasingly expect universities to prepare highly qualified professionals who are not only technically competent, but also possess strong leadership qualities.

Such graduates are expected to work effectively in teams, to unite and mobilise others, to attract attention to new ideas, to argue convincingly for their position, and to assume responsibility for important decisions. These requirements are reflected in numerous studies on the effectiveness of higher education in Russia, where the development of students' leadership potential is recognised as one of the key strategic directions of university training.

The present research focuses on the possibility of integrating large-scale monitoring of leadership qualities into the pedagogical process, identifying students with pronounced leadership potential and creating conditions for its further development. At present, however, the system of higher education devotes relatively little attention to students' individual psychological characteristics. One important reason is the lack of objective, systematically collected information about personality traits in a form that can be directly used in teaching practice.

Given the social significance of leadership, it is not surprising that it has long been a central object of investigation in both Russian and international scholarship. Depending on the theoretical and methodological framework, the literature offers a wide range of leadership theories and models; examines the structure of leadership in different social groups; distinguishes various types of leaders; and draws conceptual distinctions between the notions of "leader" and "manager". Researchers describe key leader types, such as charismatic and transformational leaders, differentiate between formal and informal leadership, and analyse the repertoire of techniques used by successful leaders to influence followers [3, 6, 5].

A substantial segment of Russian studies is devoted to the psychological phenomenon of student leadership. Many authors argue that the age span from approximately 18 to 22 years represents a particularly sensitive period, during which leadership qualities develop most intensively [1]. This claim is grounded in the assumption that the student years have specific features distinguishing this group from other age and social categories. At this stage of life, closely tied to processes of socialisation, young people interact with diverse social environments, encountering both positive role models that support their growth and influences that may negatively affect their leadership development.

Researchers emphasise that the period of adaptation to university and entry into the student community should be deliberately supervised by the academic staff. Such pedagogical oversight helps to prevent potentially negative shifts in personal development. Consequently, higher education institutions need to purposefully create favourable conditions for the expression of leadership qualities, provided that these do not conflict with collective norms and interests. In addition, cognitive and professional activity itself is seen as an important factor contributing positively to the development of leadership.

There is broad consensus that interaction between students and the teaching staff plays a crucial role in shaping leadership qualities. Relationships in the educational process should not be built on a "position of power", but on a "position of coordination", where the lecturer explains decisions, makes transparent the logic of joint actions and invites cooperation. In this model, the teacher acts as a "coordinator", guiding and supporting students' activity rather than simply controlling it. Such a style of interaction offers students real opportunities to practise and strengthen their leadership skills within everyday learning situations.

Leadership development is also closely linked to the pattern of intra-group interactions among students. Within the student group, social roles are distributed, each member occupies a particular position, and some students claim the role of informal leader. Many authors see this micro-level group context as an optimal environment for the emergence and cultivation of

leadership qualities, since it allows students to experience influence, responsibility and group decision-making in a relatively safe setting.

At the same time, empirical studies indicate that leadership development is affected not only by processes inside the group and the classroom, but also by the broader external context. Factors such as the geographic location of the university, the socio-cultural characteristics of the region, and students' activities in their free time contribute to the formation and manifestation of leadership qualities [4, 9, 13]. Thus, the university environment should be understood as a complex system that includes both formal educational structures and informal networks and practices.

The limited scope of this article does not allow for an exhaustive analysis of the extensive methodological and empirical literature on leadership in higher education. Nevertheless, the review above leads to several important conclusions. First, the problem of developing leadership qualities in university students is acquiring special significance under current social and institutional conditions. Second, there is a clear need to devote more systematic attention to this issue in higher education, specifically by designing pedagogical strategies that foster, support and enhance students' leadership potential rather than leaving it to spontaneous development.

In this context, leadership may be regarded as a specific natural and socio-psychological predisposition that can manifest itself under certain conditions [18]. A potential leader possesses particular abilities and an inclination to act in a leadership role, while the surrounding environment may either support or suppress this tendency. The meeting of these two vectors – personal predisposition and a favourable environment – is by no means guaranteed. A young person may never find the right context in which to realise his or her leadership potential; conversely, the social environment may “press down” or simply fail to provide opportunities for the expression of leadership ambitions.

Several researchers note that such a scenario is often observed in the process of university education, when active students may be restrained both by teachers and by peers through explicit or implicit calls “not to stand out”. As a result, leadership initiatives are discouraged instead of being constructively channelled and developed.

Against this background, the problem statement of the present study can be formulated as follows: if universities wish to form the desired personal and professional qualities in students, educators need to know not only the initial level of students' leadership competence, but also its dynamics from the moment of admission to the institution up to graduation. Only in this case is it possible to choose adequate pedagogical tools, to assess the intensity and effectiveness of educational influences, and to take into account the fact that the development of leadership qualities unfolds in a series of stages.

Within this research, leadership competence is understood as a personal ability of a specialist to solve a particular class of professional tasks. The object of the study is students with different levels of leadership competence; the subject is the phenomenon of leadership among students in humanities and technical fields within the higher education system. The aim of the work is to identify groups of students from various specialisations who possess pronounced leadership

competence, to examine the relationship between leadership and other competencies, and to use this knowledge for designing university teaching and training processes.

To achieve this aim, the authors set the following tasks: To test and adapt a technology of psychodiagnostic testing for use in the context of university education. To carry out experimental testing and evaluate the resulting data in terms of their suitability for practical use in higher education. To identify and assess the level of leadership competence among students in different specialisations. To reveal the nature of the relationship between leadership qualities and other competencies in students of various fields. On the basis of mathematical analysis, to construct a psychological profile for each student and propose directions for training programmes aimed at developing leadership qualities.

The study is guided by several hypotheses. First, although leadership qualities may have a genetic component, they can be improved and strengthened through targeted educational interventions. Second, objective knowledge of students' personal characteristics will make it possible to implement a genuinely individualised approach in the educational process. Third, the possibility of selecting or supporting students on the basis of their leadership potential should enhance the effectiveness of professional preparation by aligning role expectations with students' psycho-physiological capacities.

The theoretical framework of the research draws on socio-psychological theories and concepts of personality and group interaction that describe the nature of leadership and its manifestation in interpersonal relations within the collective (N. F. Maslova, V. A. Petrovsky, V. V. Slastenin and others). The empirical base consists of second-year student groups of the Humanities Institute (158 students) and the Institute of Management of Information Technologies (168 students) at the Moscow State University of Railway Engineering.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study highlights the growing importance of developing leadership competence within contemporary higher education. Rapid social and institutional transformations require universities to prepare specialists who are capable not only of performing professional tasks, but also of assuming responsibility, coordinating collective efforts and initiating innovative solutions. However, the current educational system does not sufficiently address students' individual psychological characteristics, including their potential for leadership.

The literature review demonstrates that leadership is a multifaceted socio-psychological phenomenon influenced by personal predispositions, group dynamics and the broader institutional environment. The university years—particularly the period between the ages of 18 and 22—represent a critical stage for the formation of leadership qualities, which may either be supported or hindered by educational practices and peer interactions. This underscores the need for a pedagogical approach that consciously cultivates leadership rather than allowing it to develop spontaneously.

The findings of this research confirm that identifying students with strong leadership potential and monitoring the dynamics of leadership competence throughout the entire period of study

are essential components of an effective educational strategy. Objective psychodiagnostic assessment makes it possible to design individualised learning trajectories, to align academic and extracurricular activities with students' abilities, and to implement targeted training aimed at strengthening leadership-related competencies.

Moreover, theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that leadership qualities can be developed through systematic pedagogical interventions. Creating an educational environment based on cooperation, transparency and shared responsibility—rather than authoritarian control—provides favourable conditions for the emergence of initiative, motivation, communication and team-building skills. Such an environment enables students to practise leadership roles in real academic settings and promotes the formation of socially responsible, proactive professionals.

Overall, the research emphasises that cultivating leadership competence should be regarded as a strategic priority for modern universities. Purposeful pedagogical support, combined with diagnostic monitoring and evidence-based training programmes, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of professional preparation and contribute to the formation of future leaders capable of meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing society.

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