

## **REVIEW**

by Prof. Ivanka Milkova Kostova, PhD, Professor at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

on a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in: **field of higher education:** 3. Social, economic and legal sciences

**professional field:** 3.8. Economics

**doctoral program:** Marketing

**Author:** Valeria Emilova Toncheva.

**Topic:** INFLUENCE OF DUAL TRAINING ON THE BRAND IMAGE OF VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS

**Scientific supervisor:** Assoc. Prof. Teofana Valentinova Dimitrova – Staneva, PhD, Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

### **1. General description of the submitted materials**

By order No. PD-22-1102 dated 13.05.2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" (PU), I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for ensuring a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic INFLUENCE OF DUAL TRAINING ON THE BRAND IMAGE OF VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.8. Economics, doctoral program: Marketing. The author of the dissertation is Valeria Emilova Toncheva - a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations with a scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Teofana Dimitrova – Staneva, PhD, from Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations.

The set of materials on paper submitted by Valeria Toncheva is in accordance with Art. 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the University of Plovdiv, and includes the following documents:

- application to the Rector of the University of Plovdiv for the opening of the procedure for the defense of a dissertation;
- autobiography in European format;
- protocol of the departmental council, related to reporting the readiness to open the procedure and with a preliminary discussion of the dissertation;
- dissertation;
- author's abstract;

- list of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation;
- copies of scientific publications;
- list of noted citations;
- declaration of originality and reliability of the attached documents;

The doctoral student has attached three publications.

## **2. Brief biographical data about the doctoral student**

Valeria Toncheva was born on 01.04.1994. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in International Economic Relations at the Paisiy Hilendarski University in 2017. In 2019, she graduated with a master's degree in Marketing at the Paisiy Hilendarski University. Since 2022, she has been a full-time doctoral student in the doctoral program in Marketing at the Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations at the Paisiy Hilendarski University. She is fluent in English and Spanish. She has worked as a teleagent, translator, expert in Business Development and European Policies, and has participated in international projects as a local manager and coordinator.

## **3. Relevance of the topic**

In terms of content, the dissertation deals with an extremely topical problem.

The brand image in the context of VET coincides with the corporate image of the vocational high school. Its effective management implies knowledge of the factors that have a positive or negative impact on it. There is currently no empirical data available on the effect of one of these factors - dual training (or the combination of traditional classroom training with learning in a real work environment) in Bulgaria. This is a relatively new approach, applied in the country for less than ten years, but it is one of the main focuses for the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as for many schools.

Bulgaria is still at an early stage of introducing VET, making comparisons with advanced countries such as Germany and Austria. It is at this stage that it is of utmost importance to study the effects of introducing workplace training in secondary education. For schools, which are in practice the main driver of dual education, it is of particular importance to study whether this change in the educational process has a positive impact on their brand image and which aspects of education have the strongest impact on consumers' perception of the brand.

When conducting a literature review, it was found that there is a small number of studies on the Bulgarian dual education system, a significant part of which were carried out by organizations outside Bulgaria. The literature does not address the marketing side of the

problem of offering dual education and does not address the effects on the brand image of high schools.

It can be concluded that the topic of the dissertation was very successfully chosen. It is extremely relevant, distributable and has great practical significance. The doctoral student has substantiated this significance and relevance very well.

#### **4. Understanding the problem**

The dissertation analyzes the relationship between dual education and its various aspects and the brand image of the vocational high school, which will lead to a better understanding of the reaction of the consumer-student to the school's efforts to improve the educational service and to provide guidelines for improving the image, which can be used by schools at the national level.

The problem of this study is stated clearly and categorically in the introductory part. Concepts are presented and a literature review and analysis of publications in the field studied by the doctoral student is proposed. The essence of the problem is indicated, as well as the results of its solution.

I believe that there is a thorough understanding of the research problem.

#### **5. Research Methodology**

The doctoral student has chosen an appropriate methodology and research tools that correspond to the complex, multidimensional nature of the study.

Due to the established lack of data related to the issue under consideration, a two-phase study was chosen. The first phase is a qualitative study among the administration of schools in the Plovdiv region that actively use the method of work-based learning. The purpose of this survey is to collect information about the policies and opinions of the management staff managing the brand - school and to provide a basis for preparing the questionnaire used in phase two - a quantitative study of the opinions of students in dual classes. The results of both studies provide answers to the questions posed by the hypotheses of the dissertation work and show the impact of dual learning on the brand image of a school that uses the method.

The main methods for recording data in accordance with the established two-phase research program are: conducting unstructured in-depth interviews and conducting written surveys on site in the primary units. Data processing was done using software products – Excel, IBM SPSS V4, SmartPLS 4. Their statistical analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics and the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method.

## **6. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation work**

The presented dissertation work is 131 pages long. Structurally, it includes an introduction, 3 chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix. The results were obtained using modern tools and are illustrated with appropriately selected 7 figures and 17 tables. The appendix presents questionnaires.

The list of used literary sources lists a total of 168 sources, of which: 16 in Bulgarian and 152 in a foreign language (147 in English, 3 in German, 1 in Indonesian and 1 in French). The indicated literary sources are current and directly related to the topic of the dissertation.

The introduction to the dissertation formulates the main goal and five logically related tasks for its achievement. The object and subject of the study are correctly defined, as well as the main goal of the author - to establish the relationship between dual education and its various aspects and the brand image of the vocational high school, which will lead to a better understanding of the reaction of the user - student to the school's efforts to improve the educational service and to provide guidelines for improving the image, which can be used by schools at the national level.

The first chapter of the dissertation provides a literature review, defines key concepts in the field of brand management, and presents a set of factors influencing the brand image of the vocational school. The dual education system is presented and a comparative analysis of its implementation in Bulgaria, Germany, and Austria is prepared.

The second chapter examines previous research on the brand image of educational institutions, on the basis of which a two-phase research methodology has been developed. Four hypotheses have been formulated and a toolkit for studying brand image in the context of VET in our country has been developed.

The third chapter analyzes the results of the two phases of the empirical study. The first provides information from management staff in high schools, and the second tests the influence of selected factors on the image of the school. Three of the four hypotheses have been confirmed, as the following have a strong impact on the brand image: the perceived quality of the educational service, attitudes towards dual education, and brand associations.

The final part of the study summarizes the research correctly conducted, linking the main results obtained with the set tasks and defined hypotheses. In addition to being a basis for future research, the derived dependencies are very accurately related to the main goal of the study, which gives logical completeness to the dissertation work.

The tasks were fulfilled in the course of the study, and the formulated research thesis was proven. The structure of the dissertation research is logically constructed and corresponds to the set goal and tasks.

In the theoretical part of the dissertation research:

The doctoral student has conducted a serious literature review. Both traditional and modern theories and concepts are presented, analyzed and systematized, revealing the essence of the researched concepts. The systematizations and generalizations made demonstrate thoroughness and conscientious work with literary sources, skills in applying analytical techniques for processing a significant volume of information with various research methodologies. All citations and comments by the author are correctly cited, which facilitates references to the cited sources. The author's participation in the discussions on the researched problems is active and reflects skills to express one's own critical thinking and to formulate new conclusions and findings.

I give a very high assessment of the literature review, the methodology used, as well as in terms of the implementation of the tasks set to achieve the research goal.

In the applied part of the dissertation research:

The doctoral student completely correctly applies the methodology proposed in the second chapter for conducting the empirical research. The results of the applied research: questionnaire surveys are presented at a good level with sufficient volume, scope and content of evidentiary and analytical material.

The work contains specific results and empirical evidence that objectively reflect the real achievements of the conducted scientific research.

The presented dissertation is a comprehensive, completed study on a current and significant socio-economic problem. I appreciate the highly formulated conclusions, as well as the specific recommendations made.

## **7. Contributions and significance of the work for science and practice**

I accept the reference for the candidate's scientific contributions.

1. Theoretical - further development and enrichment of the existing scientific knowledge in the field of brand image of educational institutions offering and conducting dVET.

2. Methodological - a methodology has been developed and approved for conducting a two-phase study of the factors influencing the brand image of the vocational high school. For this purpose, a critical analysis and original interpretation of the existing literature in the field of brand image of educational institutions has been prepared, as well as a comparative analysis of the educational system in Bulgaria, Germany and Austria.

3. Practical application – the results of the conducted research and the recommendations made can serve to improve the image of secondary vocational schools in Bulgaria.

I consider the achievements to be the personal work of the doctoral student. The conclusions and proposals in the dissertation present Valeria Toncheva as an erudite researcher with good theoretical preparation, with the ability to make creative generalizations and formulate solutions for practice

#### **8. Assessment of publications on the dissertation work**

A total of 3 publications dedicated to the dissertation work, published in prestigious publications from participation in international scientific forums and conferences, are presented. The total number of points achieved is 30, with a minimum required of 30 points, according to the minimum national criteria. In terms of volume and quality, they correspond to the requirements for acquiring the ONS "doctor". I accept all publications as directly related to the dissertation work. They summarize and publish essential problems and results of the research in the dissertation work.

#### **9. Personal participation of the doctoral student**

I have no doubts about the personal merit of the doctoral student for the contributions and results achieved. They are the personal work of the doctoral student.

#### **10. Abstract**

The presented abstract of the dissertation work is 32 pages long. It reflects the goals and objectives of the study, the emphases of the individual chapters of the dissertation, as well as the author's contributions. The abstract is developed in accordance with the requirements for its preparation and reflects the main results and contributions of the dissertation.

#### **11. Critical notes and recommendations**

The dissertation is excellently illustrated, clearly outlined contributions with potential for development.

I have no significant critical notes on the dissertation research.

Given the relevance and significance of the scientific research, I recommend that the doctoral student in the future develop it into a monographic work and publish the results in the global databases Scopus and WoS.

#### **12. Personal impressions**

My personal impressions of Valeria Toncheva are: a highly intelligent, educated and ambitious young person, which her professional path and current work eloquently confirm.

### **13. Recommendations for future use of the dissertation contributions and results**

The study achieves the set goals and objectives, and the conclusions drawn provide a basis for specific recommendations for improving the image of vocational high schools offering VET. This study lays an important foundation for future scientific research and practical steps in brand image management in the field of vocational education. The development of the dual education model in Bulgaria requires not only institutional support, but also a strategic approach to building a positive public image of these educational institutions, which reflects their role as a link between education and employment. Interested parties in the study may be educational and training organizations for the purposes of vocational training, organizations from the non-governmental sector, state and regional authorities.

I believe that the results of the dissertation research have a high degree of practical applicability.

Possible directions for further research include:

1. Expanding the comparative analysis of education systems (Chapter I) to cover all countries with dual education and examining how the method is adapted to the local economic environment.
2. Further research on the brand image of vocational high schools (Chapter III), including:
  - Conducting in-depth interviews with students from the target group to confirm the results;
  - Expanding the survey to a national level for greater representativeness;
  - Comparison with opinions of students from other countries to assess the effectiveness of different education systems;
  - Incorporating perspectives from all stakeholders - business, parents, experts, etc.;
  - Conducting periodic research to track trends and the impact of changes in the system on the image of high schools.

### **CONCLUSION**

The dissertation contains scientific, applied scientific and applied results that represent an original contribution to science and meet all the requirements of the Law on the

Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of the PAISII HILENDARSKY University.

The dissertation shows that the doctoral student Valeria Emilova Toncheva possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty of marketing, demonstrating qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my positive assessment of the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation, abstract, achieved results and contributions, and I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Valeria Emilova Toncheva in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.8. Economics, doctoral program: Marketing.

05. 2025

Prepared the review: .....

Prof. Ivanka Kostova, PhD