

Developing Professional Identity in Future Military Officers for Contemporary Defence Challenges

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Abstract

This study examines the formation of the professional identity of future officers in the context of contemporary defense challenges, with a focus on pedagogical competence. A quantitative study was conducted using a questionnaire developed by the author. Cadets rated pedagogical competence as no less important than tactical and technical competence; however, they indicated that psychological competence is not sufficiently developed. The study's findings contribute to research on officers' professional identity by emphasising the educational aspect of military professionalism. Pedagogical, leadership, and psychological competencies should be systematically integrated into officer training programs to strengthen professional identity. In this article, pedagogical competence is defined as an essential element of the professional identity of future officers, helping them respond to contemporary defense challenges.

KEY WORDS: *military education; cadets; officer development, pedagogical competence; professional identity formation; professional socialization.*

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1. Introduction

The evolving security environment and increasingly complex military operations require officers to demonstrate not only operational capabilities but also strong leadership and training skills [1, 2]. The military forces of the future require a new type of officer—a professional capable of operating in a complex environment, adapting to constant change, and developing subordinates' competencies [3, 4]. Contemporary defence challenges increasingly extend beyond conventional military operations [5, 6, 7]. Hybrid threats, rapid technological innovation, multidomain operations, cyber security, cognitive warfare, and cooperation with civilian institutions require officers to perform multiple professional roles simultaneously. Consequently, future officers must demonstrate not only operational effectiveness but also cognitive flexibility, ethical judgement, resilience, and the ability to facilitate learning within military organisations. Professional identity therefore becomes a dynamic construct that enables officers to adapt continuously to changing operational and organisational environments rather than merely fulfil predefined functional roles [5]. Modern defence organisations rely on sustainable, knowledge-based training systems that can adapt to technological, organisational, and strategic changes [8]. Consequently, military institutions integrate professional values, standards of conduct, and cultural norms into their competency frameworks [9], fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development [10].

An officer's professional identity is not an innate trait—it develops through socialisation, experience, reflection, and interaction with the organisational environment. Identity is formed through the processes of “being” and “becoming,” where “being” refers to the officer's current understanding of their role and daily professional practice, and “becoming” to continuous professional growth, learning, and adaptation to organisational and operational requirements [11]. Professional identity is increasingly understood as a dynamic process in which professionals continuously reconstruct their roles in response to changing organisational expectations and operational environments

[12]. Contemporary research increasingly conceptualises professional identity as an evolving integration of professional values, self-perception, ethical commitment, and occupational responsibilities rather than merely the acquisition of competencies. Professional identity develops through continuous participation in professional communities, critical reflection, resilience and authentic practice, allowing individuals to internalise the norms and values of their profession while adapting to new professional challenges. This developmental perspective is particularly relevant in military education, where future officers gradually construct their understanding of leadership through practical experience and professional socialization [13, 14, 15].

Modern military leadership increasingly prioritises influence, ethical responsibility, and the development of subordinates, and cannot be based solely on formal status or hierarchical authority [16]. In modern armed forces, leadership is increasingly recognised as a developmental process centred on empowering subordinates rather than exercising formal authority alone. Officers are expected to facilitate learning, encourage professional growth, and foster adaptive thinking within their units. Consequently, educational competence becomes an essential expression of military leadership and contributes directly to the formation of an officer's professional identity [13]. Accordingly, an officer's competence must encompass not only technical and tactical skills, but also communication, mentoring, coaching, and training abilities [9]. Therefore, officers are expected not only to lead operational activities but also to support their personnel's professional growth, moral development, and competency development. In this context, the ability to teach and lead others becomes an integral part of leadership practice.

From this perspective, teaching others represents more than a functional responsibility. It constitutes an important mechanism through which officers internalise military values, strengthen professional self-awareness, and reinforce their identity as military leaders. Educational interactions therefore become an essential component of officer professional development rather than merely a means of transferring knowledge. For this reason, an officer's professional identity is inseparable from the ability to instruct military personnel didactically. The traditional authoritarian training model is becoming insufficient in a complex operational environment. The development of didactic skills in officer training should be based on contemporary educational paradigms. A modern officer must be able to apply problem-based learning, situational analysis, simulations, and team-based training methods [16,17]. This means that an officer must not only manage personnel but also organise the learning process, apply appropriate teaching methods, and foster professional autonomy among soldiers [11].

Within the military education system of The General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania (MAL), such developmental competencies play a significant role in shaping the professional identity of future officers. Professional identity forms through role experimentation, social interaction, and social recognition [18], and these processes are strengthened through structured training, feedback, and reflection. Exposure to leadership responsibilities during studies enables cadets to understand leadership as an obligation to develop others. Consequently, instructional and developmental competencies function not merely as supplementary skills but as integral components influencing the formation of a military officer's professional identity. Although contemporary military education increasingly emphasises leadership and competency development, relatively little empirical evidence explains how cadets themselves perceive instructional competence as part of their emerging professional identity. Addressing this gap contributes to a better understanding of officer development in the context of rapidly changing defence environments.

2. Method of Investigation

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the contribution of competencies related to teaching, mentoring, and the development of subordinates to the formation of professional identity among future military officers. The research was conducted at the Military Academy of Lithuania (MAL) and involved second-year cadets, as this stage of professional preparation is widely regarded as a critical period for professional socialization, leadership development, and identity formation.

The primary objective of the study was to investigate cadets' perceptions of competencies associated with developing subordinates and to explore the extent to which these competencies are integrated into their emerging professional and leadership identities. To achieve this objective, data were collected using a purpose-designed questionnaire developed by the researcher. Prior to administration, the instrument underwent an expert review process to assess its content relevance, structural coherence, clarity of wording, and overall internal consistency, thereby ensuring its suitability for the intended research context.

The final version of the questionnaire comprised 14 items organized into four theoretically grounded dimensions representing key components of the competency to develop others. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistical methods. Initially, data screening procedures were performed to identify missing values and ensure the completeness and quality of the dataset. Subsequently, frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated for each questionnaire item to evaluate the prevalence and intensity of cadets' perceptions. Item-level analysis was undertaken to provide a detailed understanding of the relative importance of specific competency-related behaviors and attitudes. Comparative analysis of mean scores across dimensions was employed to identify dominant and less-developed aspects of the competency profile. To assess the internal consistency of the measurement instrument, reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Furthermore, dimension-level aggregation of item scores allowed for the examination of broader competency domains and their relative contribution to the formation of professional identity. The findings were interpreted in light of the theoretical framework underpinning professional identity development and leadership competency formation in military education.

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process. Given that the data were derived from self-reported assessments, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting participants' subjective perceptions and experiences. Consequently, the results provide descriptive and interpretative insights into the phenomenon under investigation rather than evidence of causal relationships between the examined constructs.

3. Investigation Results

The study used a four-dimensional analysis to examine cadets' views on the importance of pedagogical competence, the process of developing it, and their self-assessment in teaching and leadership.

Dimension I. Assessment of the Importance of Pedagogical Competence (Q1–Q3). Respondents view pedagogical competence as an important part of a future officer's professional activities and consider it to be on par with tactical and technical competencies. The high ratings of the statements indicate strong agreement regarding the importance of pedagogical competence. The statement that received the highest level of agreement was that pedagogical competence is just as important as tactical or technical competence. Additionally, the majority of respondents agreed that pedagogical competence is essential for successful professional performance as an officer.

Dimension II. The Process of Developing Pedagogical Competence at the MAL (Q4–Q6). The study results indicate that opportunities to develop pedagogical competence are provided throughout the course of study; however, integrating pedagogical topics into professional military subjects is met with mixed feelings and is not always perceived as consistent. Although the majority of respondents viewed the opportunities to develop pedagogical competence favourably, a significant portion adopted a neutral stance. The aspect of integrating pedagogical topics into professional military subjects received the lowest rating in this dimension.

Dimension III. Assessment of Teaching Competencies (Q7–Q9). Respondents rate their teaching skills fairly positively, particularly their ability to provide constructive feedback. There is less confidence in lesson planning and assessment. Most respondents believe that their teaching skills are sufficiently developed, but some responses remained neutral. The highest rating in this dimension was given to the ability to provide motivational feedback to soldiers.

Dimension IV. Development of Leadership Competencies (Q10–Q14). Respondents view the importance of leadership, values, and ethics for pedagogical competence positively; however, the development of psychological competence during the study process is considered insufficient. The average scores for statements reflecting the importance of leadership and values were among the highest in this dimension. Meanwhile, the statement regarding the development of psychological competence received the lowest ratings across the entire questionnaire.

I. Importance of PC Q1–Q3: equal to tactical skill Also key for job performance	II. Developing PC Q4–Q6: mostly favourable ratings Weakest: integration into courses
III. Teaching skills Q7–Q9: skills seen as adequate Strongest: motivational feedback	IV. Leadership & values Q10–Q14: leadership valued highly Weakest: psychological competence

Fig. 1. Four dimensions of a study on the development of future officers' professional identity through pedagogical competence.

A few patterns stand out across the dimensions: the strongest agreement (Dimension I) centers on pedagogical competence being seen as equal in importance to tactical and technical skill, while the weakest points cluster around integration — both the integration of pedagogical topics into military subjects (Dimension II) and the development of psychological competence (Dimension IV), which received the lowest score of the entire questionnaire. Teaching self-assessments (Dimension III) sit in between, with cadets most confident in giving motivational feedback but less sure about lesson planning and assessment.

4. Result Discussion

The study found that future officers perceive pedagogical competence as an important part of professional competence and associate it with successful officer performance. These findings support recent evidence suggesting that effective officer development requires not only operational competence but also well-developed psychological characteristics, interpersonal skills, and adaptive leadership capacities [19]. Respondents view pedagogical competence as equal to tactical and technical competencies, which confirms the prevailing view in modern military leadership that an officer's role is not limited to the execution of operational tasks. These results align with theoretical assumptions that

the modern professional identity of an officer is shaped not only by technical preparedness but also by the ability to educate, motivate, and train subordinates. The findings support the growing understanding that professional identity formation extends beyond the acquisition of military knowledge and operational skills. Rather, it develops through the integration of pedagogical competence, leadership, ethical responsibility, and reflective professional practice. In this respect, instructional competence should not be regarded as an auxiliary qualification but as one of the defining characteristics of contemporary military professionalism.

The study also revealed that the process of developing pedagogical competencies at the MAL is viewed with mixed feelings. Although respondents acknowledge that opportunities to develop pedagogical competencies are provided during their studies, the integration of pedagogical topics into professional military subjects is not perceived as sufficiently consistent. This suggests that pedagogical competencies are not yet fully and systematically integrated into military training. These results reflect a broader issue discussed in contemporary military education literature, which emphasises the need to integrate teaching, mentoring, and leadership competencies into the overall officer training system.

The results of the assessment of didactic competencies show that cadets rate their ability to provide constructive feedback and communicate with subordinates quite favourably, but have less confidence in their abilities regarding systematic instructional planning and assessment. This may indicate that practical communication skills develop more naturally through daily military activities and social interaction, whereas didactic planning competencies require more targeted pedagogical training. These results align with theoretical principles that a modern officer must be able not only to lead but also to organise the learning process and apply various teaching methods.

The study's data also revealed weaknesses in the development of cadets' psychological competencies. It was this aspect that the study participants rated lowest in the questionnaire. This suggests that, at present, cadets, as future officers, feel inadequately prepared in psychological resilience and interpersonal relationships. It is precisely these competencies that are crucial in today's complex military operations to ensure effective leadership, motivate subordinate soldiers, and promote their well-being. Therefore, strengthening psychological competencies could become one of the most important directions for the further training of officers.

These findings also correspond with broader changes in contemporary defence systems, where organisational adaptability depends increasingly on continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and the capacity of officers to develop others. Consequently, strengthening pedagogical competence contributes not only to individual professional development but also to organisational resilience and military effectiveness.

In summary, the study's results suggest that pedagogical, didactic, and leadership competencies are important for the formation of a future officer's professional identity. Professional identity develops through participation in military culture, organisational socialisation, and the gradual internalisation of military values and norms [20], while structured educational experiences, leadership practice, and reflective learning provide important mechanisms through which this identity is strengthened during officer preparation. Therefore, to foster the professional identity of future officers while taking into account contemporary defence challenges, it is necessary to purposefully integrate aspects of developing these competencies into the curriculum of study programs. In study programs, greater attention should be paid to the problem areas identified during the study in courses directly related to the development of these competencies.

Limitations. The study is limited by its focus on an only MAL context and by reliance on self-reported data. Therefore, the findings reflect perceived rather than objectively measured competence. Future research may integrate qualitative methods or longitudinal designs to explore identity development over time.

5. Conclusions

The cadets who participated in the survey have mixed feelings about the process of developing pedagogical competence during their studies. Cadets acknowledge that they are given opportunities to develop pedagogical competence during their studies, but they doubt the consistency and systematic nature of this process.

The study revealed that future officers view pedagogical competence as a significant component of their professional activities and associate it with effective leadership and the ability to train subordinates. Respondents consider pedagogical competence to be on par with tactical and technical competencies; therefore, it can be concluded that educational activities are perceived as an important part of an officer's professional identity. The study results showed that the MAL provides opportunities for the development of pedagogical competencies, but the integration of pedagogical topics into professional military subjects is not sufficiently consistent. It was also found that cadets place greater trust in practical communication skills and the provision of feedback than in systematic lesson planning and assessment.

The most significant problem emerged in psychological skills development, which the study participants rated as the lowest. Respondents consider the development of psychological competencies to be inadequate; therefore, greater attention must be paid to this area in the officer training process. These findings indicate that professional identity formation should become an explicit objective of officer education programmes. Integrating pedagogical competence, leadership, psychological preparedness, and lifelong learning within military curricula would better prepare future officers for the complex demands of contemporary defence environments.

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