



## COGNITIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS OF ADAPTATION TO STRESSFUL SITUATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract.** *The professional activity of higher education leaders involves continuous interaction with complex organisational demands, intensive information flows, time limitations, interpersonal challenges and situations of uncertainty. This paper examines the cognitive and psychological factors that contribute to adaptation to stressful situations in higher education management, including cognitive appraisal, psychosemantic interpretation, cognitive flexibility, emotional self-regulation, coping strategies and the role of professional experience and reflection.*

**Keywords:** *higher education; leadership; psychological adaptation; professional stress; cognitive appraisal; cognitive flexibility; psychosemantics; emotional regulation; coping behaviour.*

### INTRODUCTION

Higher education management is becoming increasingly complex as universities respond to rapid technological, organisational and social transformations. Leadership frequently requires decision-making in situations where complete information is unavailable. Such circumstances create conditions in which psychological adaptation becomes essential for maintaining effective professional functioning.

Selye (1976) considers stress as a non-specific adaptive response to demands placed upon the organism. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) expanded this perspective by emphasising cognitive appraisal: the psychological impact of an event depends on how an individual evaluates its significance and assesses available resources for coping with it. Two leaders exposed to similar organisational conditions may therefore experience substantially different levels of stress. The purpose of this paper is to examine the cognitive and psychological mechanisms through which higher education leaders interpret and adapt to stressful situations.



## MAIN PART

The first psychological response to a stressful management situation is closely related to its cognitive appraisal. A situation may be evaluated as a threat, a potential loss, an uncontrollable problem or a professional challenge. Jabbor (2019), examining psychosemantic analysis of texts as an approach to psychological research, draws attention to the possibility of investigating psychological phenomena through semantic structures and subjective meanings. From this perspective, information received by a higher education leader can be considered not only as objective data but also as material that is psychologically interpreted within an existing system of personal and professional meanings.

Psychological adaptation is closely related to the ability to reorganise cognitive strategies when professional circumstances change. Jabbor (2020), studying cognitive methods in psychological research, highlights the role of cognitive constructs and differences in the organisation of individual cognitive experience. Cognitive complexity allows an individual to differentiate between multiple aspects of a phenomenon rather than interpreting it through a limited number of rigid categories. This characteristic has direct relevance to management activity, since higher education problems are rarely determined by a single factor (Hobfoll, 1989).

Emotional self-regulation does not mean suppressing emotions. Rather, it involves recognising emotional responses, understanding their source and preventing them from automatically determining management behaviour. Reflection plays an important role in this process: a reflective leader can examine not only the external problem but also the internal reaction to it.

Problem-focused coping is particularly effective when the stressful situation can be influenced directly (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When professional demands cannot be changed, adaptive coping involves cognitive reappraisal: the leader identifies which aspects remain controllable and directs psychological resources towards them. The Job Demands–Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides a theoretical framework for understanding this balance.

Professional experience represents an important resource for psychological adaptation because it provides leaders with established cognitive schemes for recognising and responding to recurring situations. However, experience does not automatically



guarantee adaptation. Reflection transforms experience into an adaptive psychological resource: the leader evaluates which previous strategies were effective, why they worked and whether the current situation is sufficiently similar to justify their repeated use. Stressful situations may thus become sources of professional learning when they are cognitively and reflectively processed.

## CONCLUSION

Psychological adaptation to stressful situations in higher education management is a complex process involving cognitive, emotional, behavioural and reflective mechanisms. Professional stress is determined not only by the objective intensity of management demands but also by the subjective meanings and evaluations attached to them. Cognitive appraisal occupies a central position in the adaptation process: the way leaders evaluate professional events determines whether those events are perceived primarily as uncontrollable threats or as difficult but manageable professional tasks.

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