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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Inclusive Leadership, Innovative Performance, Intellectual Stimulation and Higher Education	This study examines the impact of inclusive leadership on the innovative performance amid teachers in higher institutions in southern region of KP, Pakistan. The research explores mediating roles of intellectual stimulation, thereby offering inclusive analysis that how inclusive leadership practices shape professional outcomes in educational settings. The study highlights the pathways that how inclusive leadership affects innovative performance over intellectual stimulation. Thus, using a structured survey methodology, data were collected from a sample (333) of teachers in higher education institutions in KP, Pakistan. The statistical analyses were employed to test the hypothesized relationships (association), and mediating effects to attain desired information used for decision making and contributing knowledge. The findings of study reveal that inclusive leadership significantly enhances innovative performance through the intellectual stimulation. In this drive, the present research underlines critical standing of inclusive leadership in creating dynamic, equitable and innovative academic environment, that contribute towards desired and leading sustainable development of higher education sector and thereby offering some recommendation as extracted from main findings.
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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary competitive and dynamic organizational landscape, the leadership practices that foster innovation and inclusivity are pivotal to realizing sustainable success. In this linking, the inclusive leadership as characterized by its focus on encouraging participation, valuing diversity, and promoting sense of belonging, has emerged as crucial driver of employees' performance and organizational development (Xin, Yu, Gao, Liu & Luo, 2024). Thus, inclusive leadership plays a

critical role in enhancing career sustainability by nurturing adaptability, resilience and prolonged professional growth, influences performance by creating environments wherein individuals feel empowered to share ideas and take creative risks (Mansoor, Farrukh, Wu & Wahab, 2021). The stimulation inspires employees to challenge traditional norms thereby driving innovation (Khan, Rooh & Naveed, 2022). It explores that how inclusive leadership practices fostering intellectual stimulation to drive sustainable and innovative outcomes (Weiss, Kolbe, Grote, Spahn & Grande, 2018). The study explores leading issues where innovation, and career development are critical in an era marked by rapid change and increasing complexity, and where inclusive leadership has gained prominence as critical determinant of employee and organizational success in the diverse leading circumstances.

The existing literature provide actionable and significant strategies for leaders, policymakers, and institutions to create innovative, reasonable, and growth-oriented environments, thereby aligning leadership with broader societal and institutional goals (Leong & Amran, 2014). It ensures that employees feel empowered, respected and integral to institution, that impact significantly their performance and professional development (Khan, Saqib, Rehan & Hamid, 2020). The inclusive leadership fosters collaboration, values diversity, and inspires participation of all employees, plays a vital role in shaping workplace dynamics. The inclusive leadership contributes to innovation by creating situation that encourages idea-sharing, creativity, and risk-taking (Dahleez Aboramadan & Abdelfattah, 2023). The performance is dynamic for the institutions to remain competitive and adapt to ever-changing market demands. Also, career sustainability is the ability of employees to attain long-term career growth (Gong, Liu, Rong & Fu, 2021). When employees feel supported and included, they are likely to engage in behaviors that lead to improved processes and innovative solutions. Understanding mechanisms over which inclusive leadership influences these outcomes is critical. This study focuses on the role of intellectual stimulation and perceived discrimination as facilitating factors.

The inclusive leadership contributes to career sustainability by fostering an environment where employees can develop their skills, and pursue expressive chances (Fu, Cherian, Ahmad, Scholz, Samad & Comite, 2022). The intellectual stimulation, a crucial element of leadership, inspires employees to challenge norms, think critically, explore novel methods, thereby driving innovation (Gitu & Awuor, 2022). The institutions serve as the hubs of knowledge creation and innovation, making leadership practices crucial for fostering environment conducive to creativity (Asiedu, Anyigba, Ofori, Ampong & Addae, 2020). In higher education, inclusive leadership has emerged as transformative approach, emphasizing the value of collaboration, diversity and empowerment between the faculty and students (Faria, Wanke, Ferreira & Mixon, 2018). The leaders who adopt inclusive approach prioritizes open communication, inspire participation from varied groups and create culture of mutual respect and trust (Ye, Wang, & Guo, 2019). Inclusive leadership in higher education entails the practices that actively promote equity, hold diverse views, ensure that all the individuals feel respected and valued in their institutions that drives their behaviors towards the attainment of desired outcomes. In higher education, it might obvious over innovative research breakthroughs, teaching methods, and development of creative administrative strategies towards desired successes.

### Objectives & Hypotheses

1. To examine association among inclusive leadership, intellectual stimulation & innovative performance (correlation).
2. To examine mediating role of intellectual stimulation in linking inclusive leadership and innovative performance (mediation).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The inclusive leadership has emerged as the vital approach to fostering workplace innovation and enhancing career sustainability, mainly in the diverse and dynamic environments. By emphasizing equity, openness, and respect for diverse perspectives, inclusive leadership creates environment where employees feel empowered and valued to donate their ideas and talents (Shafaei & Nejati, 2023). Innovative performance is employee's ability to promote, generate, and implement new ideas improve organizational outcomes (Li & Tang, 2022). The leadership is critical in influencing interrelated outcomes like innovative performance and sustainability as supportive environment enables integration of diverse viewpoints, as crucial for innovation (Khan, Rooh & Naveed, 2022). The inclusive leaders, over valuing input from all team members enhance employees' confidence to take risks and think creatively. The inclusive leadership contributes to career sustainability by promoting a culture of continuous learning and psychological wellbeing (Carmeli, Reiter & Ziv, 2010). The literature revealed that career sustainability is ability to maintain meaningful services to evolving career demands while intellectual stimulation involves inspiring employees in order to challenge the status quo along with to think critically about their work from the different aspects towards successes.

The employees are likely to remain inspired & engaged when perceive their leaders as supportive and inclusive of professional growth. The inclusive leadership mitigates these effects by fostering inclusivity and equity, reducing biases, ensuring fair treatment (Fang, Chen, Wang & Chen, 2019). Thus, when the employees perceive a lack of discrimination, they are more likely to engage in the innovative activities and feel secure in career trajectory, realizing career sustainability, as evident in existing literature (Malik, 2016). The inclusive leadership is decisive driver of performance and career sustainability as future research may explore these dynamics across different industrial and cultural contexts to deepen pertinence and understanding (Wang, Wang, Zhou & Wang, 2020). By fostering intellectual stimulation, leaders can create environment that benefit both individuals and organizations. The inclusive leadership serves as the pivotal factor in enhancing innovative performance as well as career sustainability (Kim & Moon, 2019). This dynamic not only benefits individuals but donates towards organizational success, making inclusivity critical component of modern leadership practices. By addressing perceived discrimination and promoting intellectual stimulation, the inclusive leaders create environments where employees can thrive personally as well as professionally.

The inclusive leadership has gained prominence in higher education as critical factor in fostering diversity, innovation, and equity workforces. It reflects a leadership that values fairness, respect, and active inclusion of diverse viewpoints in decision-making processes (Xin, Yu, Gao, Liu & Luo, 2024). The actively involving diverse groups, helps leaders navigate intellectual and cultural

diversity within higher education, boosts collaboration and innovative thinking (Khan, Rooh & Naveed, 2022). Thus, creating environment that values diverse experiences and eliminates biases, innovative performance in higher education is ability to generate and implement creative ideas lead to advancements in teaching, research, and administration (Khan, Saqib, Rehan & Hamid, 2020). It emphasized standing of inclusivity in leadership to boost organizational learning and knowledge-sharing in reshuffling processes using technology and fostering inclusive governance structures (Gong, Liu, Rong & Fu, 2021). The literature revealed that higher education leaders who prioritize inclusivity drive higher research output along with engagement in innovative teaching practices, inclusive decision-making in academic governance that boosts institutional innovation and flexibility, developing interdisciplinary partnership, securing research support and producing impactful outcomes.

The inclusive leadership creates an enabling environment for innovation in higher education by fostering collaboration, inspiring diverse ideas, and addressing barriers such as exclusion and bias. In this linking, by reducing discrimination, the inclusive leaders ensure equal access to resources, recognition, and prospects for the innovation (Randel, Galvin, Shore, Chung & Dean, 2018). The inclusive leaders promote cross-departmental collaborations, that source of significant academic and research advances. It highlighted how inclusive leadership fosters trialing with technology-driven learning solutions and found that the inclusive leadership enhances the research output by helping intellectual risk-taking and interdisciplinary exploration (Qurratulain, Bashir, Hussain, Ahmed & Nisar, 2020). The leaders inspire faculty to adopt diverse teaching methods that cater to varied learning needs, leading to improved teaching innovations (Chebon, Aruasa & Chirchir, 2019). The leaders think and explore novel solutions as stimulation is relevant in education, where academic leaders inspire the innovative research and teaching approaches (Li, Shao, Wang, Fang, Gong & Chang, 2022). The leadership was linked to improved research collaborative publishing and funding acquisition as leadership reduces siloed thinking thereby enabling managerial and academic innovations.

Consequently, despite the advantages of inclusive leadership, implementing it in institution often faces challenges and established academic cultures may resist new leadership styles as limited budgets can hinder the implementation of inclusive initiatives. The inclusive leadership addresses biases, empowering understated groups to subsidize to institutional innovation (Gong, Liu, Rong & Fu, 2021). The inclusive leadership has emerged as a dynamic leadership approach in fostering a participatory and equitable environment in institutions (Khan, Rooh & Naveed, 2022). The faculty may have varying understanding, assurance to inclusivity, ensuring equity in resource allocation, and promotion practices. The regular dialogue and workshops to promote inclusivity and directly impacts performance by creating environment where creativity and originality are encouraged (Kim & Moon, 2019). In institutions, leadership approach translates into enhanced the research, teaching, and improved problem-solving abilities. By embracing diversity, fairness, and valuing input, inclusive leadership creates the collaborative culture that is vital for innovation and long-term development (Carmeli, Reiter & Ziv, 2010). In this drive, the leaders who actively listen, and

provide useful feedback, and involve their teams in decision-making foster a sense of motivation as well as ownership.

The empowerment through recognition and participation inspires higher levels of creativity and performance. By minimizing fear of judgment, the inclusive leadership enables open dialogue and experimentation (Arthur & Priscilla, 2022). The inclusive leaders promote free exchange of ideas among diverse groups, leading to innovative solutions. The career inspires individuals to maintain careers while adapting to changing professional landscapes, leaders offer personalized support to team members, helping them navigate career challenges, learning and skill acquisition, inclusive leadership prepares individuals for future opportunities (Liu Sun & Hao, 2022). Thus, inclusive leadership supports this by fostering personal growth, professional development, and resilience among employees as inclusive leadership plays a pivotal role in driving innovative performance and ensuring career sustainability in higher education institutions (Knippenberg, & Ginkel, 2022). By creating environment of equity, respect, and collaboration, inclusive leaders can inspire the creativity, foster professional growth, and equip teams to excel in an ever-evolving educational landscape (Xin, Yu, Gao, Liu & Luo, 2024). Recognizing individual needs, flexibility helps keep long-term career engagement as innovative performance in education to ability of institutions as well as individuals.

Despite its benefits, implementing inclusive leadership faces challenges in higher education, such as change resistance, bureaucratic barriers and lack of diversity amid leadership roles. Institutions that prioritize inclusive leadership are better positioned to achieve academic excellence and long-term achievements (Perry, Block & Noumair, 2021). The inclusive leadership in higher education is critical framework for fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion within academic institutions. In the rapidly globalizing world, wherein educational institutions serve as hubs for diverse ideas and individuals, inclusive leadership ensures that all the stakeholders feel respected, valued, as well as empowered to contribute to institutional success (Sugiyama, Cavanagh, Esch Bilimoria & Brown, 2016). In this connection, the inclusive leaders create policies towards diversity-driven innovation and thrives for better problem-solving, creative ideas, and institutional growths (Lei, Bing, Liu, Wei & Yanghong, 2019). Therefore, the inclusive leaders foster environment where all voices are heard, enhancing academic research and teaching outcome as required for the desired reputation. This, in turn, positively impacts retention rates, academic successes, and personal development (Arthur & Priscilla, 2022). The inclusive leadership is crucial for creating thriving academic environment that helps innovation and success for sponsors in the education, leaders can transform institutions into dynamic spaces.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design is an important element in research that provides the comprehensive map for conducting the research upon particular issues in order to chase hypothesized relationship among research variables (Patton, 2015). The research design of current study is quantitative wherein some linkages amid variables based upon basis on theoretical framework and theoretical background support to reach desired outcome (Chawla & Sondhi, 2011). In research, developing comprehensive

strategy is vital for conducting meaningful and effective research for contributing existing knowledge on the issues. In this linking, this study used quantitative strategy to analyze variables as well as reaching desired conclusion (Ridenour & Newman, 2008). Similarly, cross-sectional approach was used to conduct research, reaching desired outcomes. Thus, the quantitative research approach is essential for conducting research and attaining desired leading outcomes. Likewise, the population of this study comprised the teachers (3088) hailing from the higher educational institutions, KP, Pakistan. A sample of 354 was selected by using statistical formula for sample-size determination to select the suitable sampling that are used to conducting current research in the particular context. In this regard, 354 questionnaires were distributed where 333 were recollected and used for analysis.

Therefore, the present study is expected to analyze the data and to reach the required conclusion thereby processing the collected data, extracting the results and reaching the desired outcomes. The collection of relevant facts and figures is important for conducting the research, analyzing the themes and reaching desired conclusion (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The secondary data was collected over diverse online databases on the research issues while primary data was collected through the structured questionnaires are adopted from the previous research studies. The questionnaire in also important in collecting the responses from the respondents about the research issues under study in order to analyze the data and reaching desired conclusion. In research, ethical considerations are important for conducting research in systematic manner to attain the reliable outcomes to ensure research ethics along with the privacy and confidentiality of respondents (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2008). In this linking, the mediation is thus used to further strengthen these research outcomes in order to provide the clues about the role of third variable in linking the predicting and criterion variables of study based upon the literature support and contribution of existing knowledge upon research issues under study in the particular situations and context for the knowledge development as required.

## RESULTS OF STUDY

The results of study, based upon the main findings and outcomes, explaining the descriptive and inferential dimensions have been produced in this section in order to better understand that what was aimed and what is achieved while analysing the data through different procedures to reach the desired conclusion. These results have been produced in the systematic manner to produce the desired outcomes based upon the assumptions and the efforts to examine these assumptions through particular procedures.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

	Descriptive Statistics				
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Inclusive Leadership	333	1.30	4.80	3.2459	.73012
Intellectual Stimulation	333	1.33	4.67	3.1209	.80910
Innovative Performance	333	1.60	4.60	3.4484	.66280
Valid N (listwise)	333				

Table 2 Reliability Statistics

Variables	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Inclusive Leadership	10	0.861
Intellectual Stimulation	10	0.749
Innovative Performance	10	0.766
Overall Value	30	0.899

Table 3 Correlation Analysis (H1)

		[1]	[2]	[3]
Inclusive Leadership [1]	Pearson Correlation	1	.447**	.461**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	333	333	333
Intellectual Stimulation [2]	Pearson Correlation	.447**	1	.386**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	333	333	333
Innovative Performance [3]	Pearson Correlation	.461**	.386**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	333	333	333

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation procedure was used to examine the association among the research variables like inclusive leadership, intellectual stimulation, and innovative performance, in order to confirm the existence of association with respect to strength and direction. The results of correlation revealed that there is positive and significant association among the research variables likewise inclusive leadership as well as innovative performance ( $R = .461$  &  $P = .000$ ), intellectual stimulation and innovative performance ( $R = .386$  &  $P = .000$ ), inclusive leadership and intellectual stimulation ( $R = .448$  &  $P = .000$ ), and consequently from these correlations results, the hypothesis about the association is accepted.

Table 4 Model Summary (H2)

R	R Square	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.4466	.1994	.3589	100.4414	1.0000	331.0000	.0000

Table 5 Coefficients of Regression (H2)

Model	Coefficient	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.0241	.1303	15.5366	.0000	1.7678	2.2804
Inclusive Leadership	.4089	.0408	10.0220	.0000	.3286	.4892

Predictor: Inclusive Leadership, Criterion: Intellectual Stimulation

### Mediation Second & Third Steps (b & c')

Table 6 Model Summary (H2)

R	R Square	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.5028	.2529	.3302	50.1523	2.0000	330.0000	.0000

Table 7 Coefficients of Regression (H2)

Model	Coefficient	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.6394	.1812	9.0485	.0000	1.2830	1.9958
Intellectual Stimulation	.2228	.0598	3.7251	.0002	.1051	.3404
Inclusive Leadership	.3273	.0587	5.5804	.0000	.2119	.4427

Predictor: Inclusive Leadership, Intellectual Stimulation

Criterion: Innovative Performance

### Mediation Fourth Step (c)

Table 8 Model Summary (H2)

R	R Square	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.4609	.2124	.3470	68.8738	1.0000	331.0000	.0000

Table 9 Coefficients of Regression (H2)

Model	Coefficient	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.0903	.1591	13.1402	.0000	1.7773	2.4032
Inclusive Leadership	.4184	.0504	8.2990	.0000	.3192	.5176

Predictor: Inclusive Leadership

Criterion: Innovative Performance

The mediation procedure was used to examine the mediating role of intellectual stimulation in linking the inclusive leadership and innovative performance over four different paths of mediation procedure. Thus, the first mediation path revealed that there is 19.94% variance in the intellectual stimulation is due to inclusive leadership ( $\beta = .4089$  & P-value = .0000). The second and third paths of mediation revealed that there is 25.29% variance in innovative performance is due to inclusive leadership and intellectual stimulation with the significant impact like intellectual stimulation ( $\beta = .2228$  & P-value = .0002), and inclusive leadership ( $\beta = .3273$  & P-value = .0000), which provides the clues towards the fourth path of mediation in order to examine the direct relationship among research variables.

The fourth path of mediation revealed that there is 21.24% variance in the innovative performance is due to inclusive leadership with the significant impact ( $\beta = .4184$  & P-value = .0000) which thus provide the evidences towards the mediation decision that whether it is partial mediation of full mediation. The results revealed that there is significant decrease in coefficient values from (.4184) in direct relationship to (.3273) in indirect relationship while the p-values remained same which thus confirmed that intellectual stimulation partially mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative performance and thus hypothesis about the mediation is accepted and thus substantiated from mediation conclusion through outcomes of all the four mediation paths in the present study.

## DISCUSSIONS

The inclusive leadership has developed as transformative approach for nurturing equity, diversity, and innovation in higher education institutions. As HEIs face rising challenges like globalization,



technological progresses, and diverse residents, inclusive leadership provides the framework for talking these intricacies well (Xin, Yu, Gao, Liu & Luo, 2024). The inclusive leadership ensures diverse voices, including those of understated groups, are included in decision-making processes. Inclusive leadership is essential for creating the equitable and diverse academic settings wherein individuals from all backgrounds feel supported and valued (Leong & Amran, 2014). Leaders who hold inclusivity foster culture that respects and revels differences, enriching learning experience for all employees (Ye, Wang, & Guo, 2019). The higher institutions thrive on innovation, whether in teaching, research, administrative practices as it highlighted that inclusive leadership improves governance (Gong, Liu, Rong & Fu, 2021). Thus, the leadership inspires innovation by fostering the intellectual freedom and setting of collaboration. So, inclusive leadership ensures that faculty, and students feel safe sharing unconventional ideas without fear of exclusion or criticism (Li & Tang, 2022). The diverse teams led by inclusive leaders generate more creative approaches and solutions to complex problems.

The inclusive leadership directly impacts the student outcomes by fostering environment where all students feel supported, engaged, and valued. The literature revealed that the inclusive leadership enhances team creativity by promoting the openness and reducing barriers to innovation (Kim & Moon, 2019). The inclusive leaders implement policies that address the unique needs of the diverse students' populations, such as the international students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. Inclusive leadership creates welcoming campus culture that enhances student academic performance and well-being (Gong, Liu, Rong & Fu, 2021). The leadership inclusivity positively influences students' sense of belonging and engagement. It highlighted those inclusive policies improve students' retention and graduation rates, leadership ensures to attract and retain talent from around the world (Chebon, Aruasa & Chirchir, 2019). The intellectual stimulation is foundation of effective leadership, in dynamic environment it inspires critical thinking, creativity, and innovation among faculty, and students, fostering culture of intellectual growth and academic excellence (Liu Sun & Hao, 2022). The leaders who prioritize the intellectual stimulation inspire individuals to challenge norms and pursue continuous improvement, making it a vital module of institutional success.

The stimulation is crucial leadership approach that can transform institutions into vibrant hub of innovation and growth to fostering stimulating academic environment, is vital driver for fostering innovative performance and ensuring career sustainability as leaders promote create environment (Arthur & Priscilla, 2022). The employees are encouraged to evaluate problems from multiple views, leading to innovative outcomes as it pushes teams to develop unique solutions that can give organizations the competitive edge. It boosts risk-taking while ensuring culpability and learning from errors allow the employees to freely share ideas (Gong, Liu, Rong & Fu, 2021). Employees are inspired to exaltation their skills and stay relevant in the growing markets as it offers chances for professional development through accreditations, and training programs, inspiring mentorship that pair the experienced professionals with the newer employees for mutual growth (Perry, Block & Noumair, 2021). The employees develop advanced strategic thinking capabilities are critical for career advancement and sustainability, that makes work meaningful and engaging, leading to

long-term commitment (Khan, Rooh & Naveed, 2022). The performance inspires faculty to make, devise, and encourage new ideas, methods, and solutions that boost learning, teaching, research, and academic success.

### CONCLUSION

This study examines the influence of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative performance and career sustainability, with perceived discrimination and intellectual stimulation as mediating factors. The inclusive leadership, characterized by accessibility, openness, and support, is posited to foster the workplace environment conducive to long-term career development and innovation. Moreover, inclusive leadership promotes career sustainability by nurture equitable and helpful environment that mitigates perceived discrimination in the institutions. The findings reveal that inclusive leadership significantly enhances innovative performance by encouraging intellectual stimulation, where leaders inspire problem-solving, creative thinking, and continuous learning. Conversely, inclusive leadership effectively reduces such perceptions, thereby creating a positive working climate and environment supportive towards attainment of desired outcomes leading to anticipated success. The findings underline the critical role of inclusive leadership in driving the institutional success by enhancing innovation and supporting employees' career paths. Inclusive leaders inspire employees to explore innovative ideas, think critically, and challenge conformist methods, which boosts their capacity for innovation. The leaders who are accessible, exposed to diverse outlooks, and kind create an environment that is conducive to creativity and long-term professional growth.

### Recommendations

1. The institutions should inspire leaders to adopt inclusive practices that foster openness, support, and collaboration and focus on building leaders' skills in equity, active listening, and valuing diverse perceptions.
2. Leaders should engage employees in innovation by providing intellectual challenges and chances for learning, structured brainstorming, innovation workshops and discussion can enhance intellectual stimulation.
3. Inclusive leadership should be perfected by organizational policies that ensure fairness in performance evaluations, promotions, and rewards as transparency in decision-making can ease perceptions of favouritism.
4. Provide employees with responsibility and autonomy in their roles to stimulate creativity and ownership thereby empowering the employees contributes towards both innovative performance and career sustainability.

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