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**RESEARCH PAPER**

# Inclusive leadership and career sustainability for Teachers in Higher Education Institutions: The mediation role of intellectual stimulation

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the role of inclusive leadership in fostering career sustainability of faculty members in higher education institutions (HEIs) of KP, Pakistan. The study examines the role of intellectual stimulation as a mediator. In this study, quantitative and cross sectional survey design, which are based on the positivist epistemological approach, was used. Self-administered and structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 333 teachers of HEIs in KP (Pakistan). The items were all anchored with a five-point Likert scale. The analyses to test the hypothetical relationships were carried out in IBM SPSS. The findings revealed that inclusive leadership has significant positive direct effect on teachers' career sustainability, demonstrating that inclusive leadership builds the psychological and social environment for faculty to sustain meaningful, long-term career paths. Inclusive leadership was also highly predictive of intellectual stimulation, suggesting a cognitive pathway for how inclusive leadership can stimulate faculty learning, critical inquiry and creative problem solving. Intellectual stimulation, in turn, had a large impact on predicting career sustainability. Intellectual stimulation was found to partially mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and career sustainability. This study makes a contribution to the existing literature by introducing a leadership-cognitive pathway based on the theory of transformational leadership. First, it extends the existing mediation models focusing mainly on career success in the workplace and feedback from developmental leaders by adding a leadership-cognitive pathway based on the theory of transformational leadership. Second, it brings the linkage between inclusive leadership and career sustainability into the perspective of the current scenario of Higher Education (HE) in developing countries, a topic that barely appears in the international literature on career sustainability.

**KEYWORDS** Inclusive Leadership, Career Sustainability, Intellectual Stimulation, Higher Education Institutions, Mediation, Pakistan, Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Exchange Theory

## Introduction

Career sustainability has become one of the most significant outcomes of investigations into the workplace dynamics of contemporary organizations (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020). The sustainability of the individual is essential to the sustainability of the organization: in professions like higher education where academic success is driven largely by the consistent participation, professional growth and retention of faculty, the notion of career sustainability is not just about individual fates but about institutional fates (Tordera, Peiró, Ayala, Villajos, & Truxillo, 2020; Barthauer, Kaucher, Spurk, & Kauffeld, 2019). However, while research on its forerunners has increased, the cultivation and constraining conditions of university teachers' career sustainability are still poorly understood, especially in developing-country higher education systems in which the higher education environment is characterized by resource scarcity, hierarchical norms,

and institutional rigidity, resulting in unique conditions in which faculty careers are developed.

Theoretically and empirically, inclusive leadership with a focus on openness, accessibility, and the high value placed on the unique identity and contribution of each member has garnered increased attention as a leadership style that is especially applicable in diverse, knowledge-rich, professionally autonomous environments (Randel, Galvin, Shore, Ehrhart, Chung, Dean, & Kedharnath, 2018; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). The two conditions identified by Shore, Cleveland, and Sanchez (2021) that are characteristic of experienced inclusion are created in inclusive leaders.Inclusive leaders creates context in which employees feel they are part of a group, and their unique skills are appreciated. The linkage between inclusive leadership and the various worker outcomes is rather positive, such as innovative work behaviours (Javed, Naqvi, Khan, Arjoon, & Tayyeb, 2019; Qi, Liu, Wei, & Hu, 2019)psychological safety (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010), job satisfaction (Dahleez, Aboramadan, & Abdelfattah, 2023), and thriving at work (Zeng, Zhao, & Zhao, 2020).The present study builds on the relationship between career sustainability and thriving at work as observed by (Fang, Ren, Chen, Chin, Yuan, & Lin, 2021)that found career sustainability was positively predicted by the latter, which is not directly explored in the current study.

Regardless of this foundational work, the cognitive-motivation sequence from inclusive leadership to career sustainability is still not well theorized. Previous mediation processes have emphasized affective and relational styles (flourishing, developmental feedback, psychological ownership), and the intellectual stimulation as a cognitive pathway has received less attention. According to transformational leadership theory Bass and Avolio (1995), intellectual stimulation involves the actions of a leader who helps followers think differently, question their beliefs and assumptions, and engage in higher-order thinking and analytical creativity in their work. A mechanism of intellectual stimulation is theoretically interesting as it may help inclusive leaders motivate faculty to engage in the cognition and thinking that can support long-term faculty career paths in higher education, where faculty careers are maintained through continuous intellectual development, pedagogical innovation, and research productivity (Sánchez, Salanova, & Gumbau, 2018). When inclusive leaders accept, acknowledge, and respect differences in intellectual contributions and model critical openness, they make the act of challenging assumptions just part of the way. They normalize the challenge of assumptions that intellectual stimulation requires, and thereby activate a cognitive process that teachers can use to enhance their skills, sustain their professional motivation, and foster adaptability, necessary for career sustainability.

The theoretically important and empirically under-studied context for the present study is the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Institutional contexts in HEIs in Pakistan are very hierarchical, characterized by limited resources and institutional rigidity, which can influence both the implementation of inclusive leadership in the institutions and the impact of any implementation, as a productive crucible in which the proposed relationships can be tested (Lašáková, Bajzíková, & Dedze, 2017). Furthermore, the sustainability of KP faculty in their careers, including providing professional development, work-life balance, early signs of fatigue and burnout prevention, and sustaining faculty for the long-term, is a policy priority for a higher education system aiming to foster research capacity and pedagogical excellence in a competitive global and regional knowledge economy (Riccomini, Cirani, de Carvalho, & Storopoli, 2021).

The present study aims to tackle these gaps in theory and practice by examining the mediating role of intellectual stimulation between the variables of inclusive leadership and teachers' career sustainability in HEIs from KP. The analyses to come make three main points. First, it proposes an intellectual stimulation as a cognitive-motivational path to

connect inclusive leadership with career sustainability, which complements the existing mediation models in the literature that have examined that path through thriving at work and developmental feedback (Fang et al., 2021), by using a leadership-cognitive path rooted in transformational leadership theory. Secondly, it places this mediation model in the Pakistani higher education context, which helps to bring evidence to bear on a relationship that is largely studied in the East Asian and Western contexts. Third, the finding that the full mediation chain (inclusive leadership, intellectual stimulation and career sustainability) is empirically supported provides institutional leaders and policy makers with theoretically supported and actionable guidance for investing in faculty career sustainability by targeting specific, developable leadership behaviors.

**Literature Review**

Two theories are complementary and provide the basis for this study. Transformational leadership theory was placed forth by Burns (1978) and expanded on by Bass and Avolio (1995), who identified intellectual stimulation as one of the four dimensions of a leader's behavior (along with individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence) that can inspire followers to achieve greater professional involvement than is immediately necessary. In terms of the followers, intellectual stimulation specifically refers to the extent to which followers perceive that their leader is stimulating them to question assumptions, to reinterpret problems, and to think creatively about the situation (Bass & Avolio, 1995; Khan et al., 2022). Inclusive leadership is an emergent concept that incorporates the transformational approach into diverse- and knowledge-rich contexts, and emphasizes equity, belonging, and the intentional valorization of each person's identity and skills (Randel et al., 2018; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Theoretically, in the higher education environment where faculty members continue to work because their careers are driven by intellectual stimulation, pedagogical innovations, and engagement with research, these two constructs are complementary: Intellectual stimulation is possible and effective in environments that support it, which is achieved through psychological safety, equitable participation and respect for diverse contributions, and here lies the power of inclusive leadership.

According to social exchange theory Emerson (1976) career sustainability outcomes are mediated by relational processes that emerge as a result of this type of leadership behaviour. Faculty feeling valued, challenged, and treated fairly by leadership respond positively with increased participation, motivation, and professional dedication in the learning and adaptation process that leads to career sustainability (Fang et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). These frameworks collectively create the causal structure of the study: inclusive leadership elicits intellectual stimulation as a cognitive-motivational process, which in turn supports faculty's career pathways by providing a context for the career development requirements of faculty critical thinking, creative adaptability, and career renewal for long-term career sustainability.

Inclusive leadership is seen as a “relational behavioral” approach that involves openness and accessibility with a proactive invitation to all from different social and personal roles (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Randel et al., 2018). Inclusive leadership theory is different from the previous diversity-management theories, which focused on demographic representation, in that it takes into account the feelings of inclusion, which Shore et al. (2021) defined as belonging to the group and being valued for one's unique identity and expertise. The psychological and motivational environment exists where faculty members can invest themselves in long term career development and can begin to contribute to institution-level innovation. From an empirical perspective, an inclusive leadership has shown a positive relationship with psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010; Li & Tang, 2022), innovative work behaviour (Javed et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2019; Guo et al., 2023), flourishing at work (Zeng et al., 2020), and career sustainability (Fang et al., 2021). Within the HEIs, Dahleez et al. (2023) found that job satisfaction is mediated psychological

ownership and employee thriving with the mediation of inclusive leadership in the Omani HEIs, while Shabeer et al. (2020) showed that career adaptability is positively mediated by inclusive leadership in Pakistani HEIs through the mediation of organizational based self-esteem. The findings of the present study extend the findings of Fang et al. (2021), who found that inclusive leadership positively correlates with career sustainability for both the growing of employees at work and the developmental feedback they receive from their supervisors as complementary cognitive-motivational mechanisms. Even with this growing of evidence, the mental journey of activating the mental engagement necessary for sustained faculty career development remains theoretically underspecified, which is the main gap addressed in this study.

Career sustainability denotes to the ability of people to sustain productive, meaningful and health promoting occupational experiences throughout the entire span of their careers (De Vos et al., 2020). It involves flexibility in adapting to new job requirements, lifelong skill development, balancing work and life, stress resilience and congruence of individual career goals with institutional goals (Chin et al., 2021; Barthauer et al., 2019). In a higher education context, maintaining careers is even more important, as faculty careers are both structurally complex, meaning that the job involves multiple aspects of teaching, research, administration, and community engagement and are more susceptible to either contractual insecurity or burnout or technological advances and disruption (Tordera et al., 2020). Organizational conditions and individual characteristics influence career sustainability in the academic environment. Leadership has been identified as an organizational antecedent, with inclusive leaders who can proactively provide equitable developmental opportunities, acknowledge individual contributions, accommodate a work-life balance, and create psychologically safe climates, allowing faculty to have meaningful and long-term career trajectories (Fang et al., 2021; Baldridge & Kulkarni, 2017). While there was a focus on individual mechanisms underlying career sustainability career adaptability, resilience, and professional identity the leading-level cognitive pathway of intellectual stimulation as a mechanism that enables leaders to spark continuous learning and counseling for ongoing career sustainability is understudied in the HEI context.

Intellectual stimulation, one of the four dimensions of transformational leadership mentioned by (Bass & Avolio, 1995), involves leadership behaviour that encourages followers to challenge the status quo, shift their thinking, and reimagine problems by offering higher levels of analytical creativity and intellectual curiosity. Intellectually stimulating leaders do not implement solutions that are already ready; instead, they provide context for followers to think in new ways, forming novel problem representations that become the basis for (Sánchez et al., 2018) metacognitive flexibility necessary for innovation and adaptability in the workplace. Cognitive stimulation from leaders can foster greater research creativity, pedagogical experimentation and the implementation of new teaching technologies in higher education, as academics are especially sensitive to 'validation-based leadership' behaviors that support their cognitive autonomy without stifling it (Khan et al., 2022; Etomes et al., 2024).

In practice, it is proven that Intellectual stimulation is associated with better performance in various organizational settings. The current study was found to be very contextual in nature, as the relationship between situational leadership and sustainable performance in KP HEIs was mediated by intellectual stimulation, as confirmed by (Khan et al., 2025). In a review of the components of transformational leadership, Hosna, Islam, & Hamid,(2021) showed that intellectual stimulation has a positive correlation with sustainable employee performance. Life-long learning, career coaching, career mentoring and career development are found to be positively impacted by transformational leadership behaviors, such as intellectual stimulation in career development research (Pembi et al., 2024; Gayathri et al., 2025). Although evidence of the role of intellectual stimulation is what successfully converts inclusive leadership into a higher education employee's lasting sense of career sustainability, the specific path from inclusive leadership to career sustainability,

which involves the intellectual stimulation that generates the renewed sense of faculty career, has not been directly studied in the higher education literature, thus representing the key window for a review that will form a broad theory of career sustainability within higher education. While there is evidence that intellectual stimulation is this pathway, the critical theoretical gap that this study attempts to bridge is the lack of direct research on the link between inclusive leadership and career sustainability in the higher education literature, as this path involves the renewal of sense of faculty career and adaptive learning from intellectual stimulation.

This theoretical construct of the synergistic relationship between inclusive leadership and intellectual stimulation is coherent, as evidenced by the empirical evidence. A key aspect of the psychological conditions for intellectual stimulation is when faculty are psychologically safe; when they feel psychologically included, equally treated, and valued for their contributions and different approaches, they feel safe enough to participate in the difficult thinking processes assumption questioning, risk taking, creative problem reframing that stimulation requires (Carmeli et al., 2010; Zeng et al., 2020). In contrast to exclusionary leaders who advocate for the merit of different viewpoints while disparaging dissent or self-reflection, inclusive leaders foster such critical reflection and independent thinking, and express it openly.

Based on those empirical findings, Khan et al. (2022) found that inclusive leadership behaviours significantly predict intellectual engagement among faculty, and Guo et al. (2023) found that job crafting, a behavior similar to intellectual engagement, is positively predicted by inclusive leadership. The expectation from social exchange theory is reinforced by faculty who feel truly included, who are motivated to return the favor by increased intellectual engagement, and who activate the cognitive processes by which intellectual stimulation works (Emerson, 1976; Fang et al., 2021). In this relationship, the first step of the proposed mediation chain thus gets set.

Theoretically, intellectual stimulation is seen not only as a mechanism of sustaining faculty's careers but also as a process that continuously provides faculty with cognitive tools, such as critical thinking, creative problem-solving, metacognitive flexibility, and ambiguity tolerance, that serve as a means for them to adjust to the changing careers demands and remain engaged in their career in a meaningful and productive way over time (De Vos et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2021). Leaders who encourage faculty to think differently about problems, use new ways of doing things, and go beyond conventional thinking and approaches spark a learning orientation and professional renewal that is part of career sustainability (Barthauer et al., 2019; Tordera et al., 2020). Its underlying mechanism is based on self-determination theory; intellectual stimulation meets faculty members' basic psychological needs for competence and autonomy, which fosters higher levels of intrinsic motivation that helps keep them engaged in their careers during difficult times (Bass & Avolio, 1995; Hosna et al., 2021).

Transformational leadership practices, such as intellectual stimulation, have been found to have a positive correlation with career development outcomes such as mentoring, coaching, and professional growth in the banking and hospitality industries, as well as in education (Pembi et al., 2024; Magasi, 2021). Specifically in higher education, Etomes et al. (2024) found that intellectual stimulation was the teacher (KP HEI) with the highest correlate effect for sustainable productivity, while Khan et al. (2025) found that intellectual stimulation was a mediator between leadership and the sustainable productivity of KP HEI teachers. The results overall support the hypothesis that career sustainability is a proximate cognitive-motivational correlate of intellectual stimulation, which is activated by inclusive leadership.

**Hypotheses**

H1: Inclusive leadership has a significant positive impact on teachers' career sustainability.

H2: Inclusive leadership has a significant positive impact on intellectual stimulation among teachers.

H3: Intellectual stimulation has a significant positive impact on teachers' career sustainability.

H4: Intellectual stimulation mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and teachers' career sustainability.

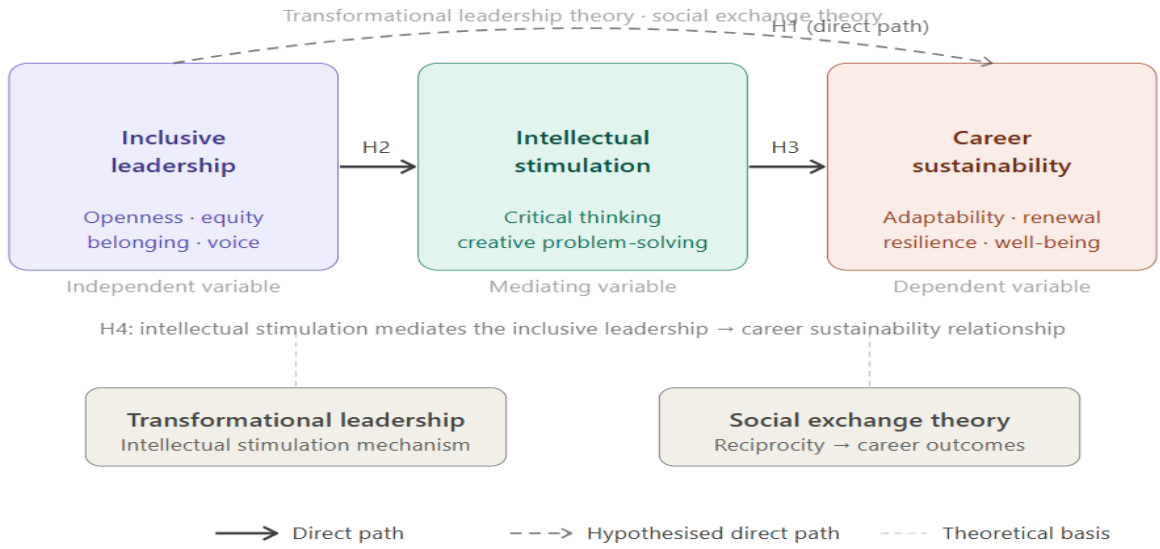


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

**Material and Methods**

The quantitative and cross sectional research methodology was used in this research paper. This approach is aligned with positivist epistemological approach. Positivism suggests that social phenomena have measurable attributes, and that relationships can be systematically found between constructs, using deductive hypothesis testing (Saunders et al., 2007). This is a suitable position because the study aims to test the theoretically formulated propositions that are made between the variables of inclusive leadership, intellectual stimulation and career sustainability. It was decided to use a cross sectional survey design because it is an efficient and proven technique in capturing perceptual data from a large sample of respondents at one point in time, as is common in organizational behavior research (Chawla & Sondhi, 2011). Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in Pakistan were chosen as the contextual setting for this study because of the theoretical relevance of its boundary conditions in the context of a developing country, characterized by unique institutional structures, resources, and cultural dynamics. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect responses from desired respondents. A total number of 354 questionnaires were sent to 354 respondents, of which 333 (94.07%) were returned and were appropriate for analysis, greatly reducing and reducing the non-response bias concerns, as is common in academic staff survey research (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

All constructs were operationalized by using validated scales from the literature and making adaptations to the higher education setting. The scale used to measure inclusive

leadership was the nine-item scale from Randel et al. (2018) that reflects openness, accessibility and the encouragement of varied contributions, which are broadly congruent with the study's theoretical framework. Intellectual stimulation was measured through questions taken from Khan et al. (2022) assessing leaders' actions to challenge followers to consider assumptions and to be creative. The measure of career sustainability utilized was the scale from Baldridge and Kulkarni (2017) which was designed to capture professional adaptability, skill renewal and career engagement over time. Each item was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree). A set of scales that have been previously validated would ensure content validity and enable comparability with other studies, following best practices in quantitative organisational research (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020).

IBM SPSS (Statistics) was used for data analysis. There were three stages in the analytical process. Descriptive statistics and reliability evaluation of all scales (Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha \geq 0.70$) were used to characterize the sample and to test the internal consistency of all scales (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020). Second, the direction and magnitude of bivariate associations among the three variables of the current study was examined through Pearson correlation analysis, a precondition for testing regression and mediation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Third, the (Baron and Kenny 1986) causal steps procedure, as operationalized by (Hayes' 2008) PROCESS macro, was employed to test the direct-effects hypotheses (H1–H3) and to test the mediation of intellectual stimulation in the relationship between inclusive leadership and career sustainability (H4). Common method variance is a concern in single-source, cross-sectional survey designs, and was addressed through Harman's single factor test as a diagnostic check (Podsakoff et al., 2003), as well as procedural precautions such as ensuring that predictor and criterion items were physically separated in the questionnaire during design efforts to promote anonymity and guarantee that no respondent would have to complete the entire questionnaire twice (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

## Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics were computed for all demographic variables. The sample comprised 72.7% male and 27.3% female respondents. In terms of experience, 63.7% had below 15 years of service. The majority were below 40 years of age (60.7%), held local residence (55.3%), qualified at M.Phil. level (62.8%), and served as Assistant Professors (34.5%). Subsequently, inferential statistics were computed for examining the structural relationships between the study's constructs.

**Table 1**
**Descriptive Statistics**

| Variable | 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 |
| Career Sustainability | 333 | 1.63 | 4.70 | 3.3763 | .60910 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 333 | | | | |

**Table 2**
**Reliability Statistics**

| Variables | Items | Cronbach Alpha |
|---|---|---|
| Inclusive Leadership | 10 | 0.861 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | 10 | 0.749 |
| Career Sustainability | 10 | 0.741 |
| Overall Value | 30 | 0.878 |

All Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded the threshold of 0.70: inclusive leadership ($\alpha = 0.861$), intellectual stimulation ($\alpha = 0.749$), and career sustainability ($\alpha = 0.741$). The overall alpha across all 30 items was 0.878, confirming strong internal consistency of the instrument (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020).

**Table 3**
**Correlation Analysis**

| | | IL [1] | IS [2] | CS [3] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inclusive Leadership | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .447** | .631** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 333 | 333 | 333 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | Pearson Correlation | .447** | 1 | .478** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | .000 |
| | N | 333 | 333 | 333 |
| Career Sustainability | Pearson Correlation | .631** | .478** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | |
| | N | 333 | 333 | 333 |

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

All pairs of correlation coefficients are positive and significant at the 0.01 level. Career sustainability (r = .631, p = .000) and intellectual stimulation (r = .447, p = .000) are significantly related with inclusive leadership. Intellectual stimulation is positively related to career sustainability (r = .478, p = .000). They showed that all study variables were meaningfully positively correlated.

**Regression Analysis — H1: Inclusive Leadership → Career Sustainability**

Simple linear regression was conducted to test H1, which proposed that inclusive leadership has a significant positive impact on teachers' career sustainability.

**Table 4**
**Model Summary (H1)**

| Model | R | R Square | Adj. R Square | Std. Error |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .6307 | .3977 | .3958 | .47340 |

**Table 5**
**Coefficients of Regression (H1)**

| Model | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.6685 | .1161 | | 14.3683 | .000 |
| Inclusive Leadership | .5261 | .0342 | .6307 | 15.4062 | .000 |

a. Predictor: Inclusive Leadership, b. Dependent Variable: Career Sustainability

The model explains 39.77% of variance in career sustainability ($R^2$ = .3977, F(1, 331) = 237.350, p = .000). Inclusive leadership is a significant positive predictor of career sustainability (β = .5261, t = 15.406, p = .000). H1 is therefore supported.

**Regression Analysis — H2: Inclusive Leadership → Intellectual Stimulation**

**Table 6**
**Model Summary (H2)**

| Model | R | R Square | Adj. R Square | Std. Error |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .4466 | .1994 | .1969 | .59908 |

**Table 7**
**Coefficients of Regression (H2)**

| Model | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 2.0241 | .1303 | | 15.5366 | .000 |
| Inclusive Leadership | .4089 | .0408 | .4466 | 10.0220 | .000 |

a. Predictor: Inclusive Leadership, b. Dependent Variable: Intellectual Stimulation

The model accounts for 19.94% of variance in intellectual stimulation ($R^2$ = .1994, F(1, 331) = 100.441, p = .000). The rater score for inclusive leadership is a strong positive predictor of intellectual stimulation (beta = .4089, t = 10.022, p = .000). H2 is thus promoted.

**Regression Analysis — H3: Intellectual Stimulation → Career Sustainability.**

**Table 8**
**Model Summary (H3)**

| Model | R | R Square | Adj. R Square | Std. Error |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .4780 | .2285 | .2261 | .53626 |

**Table 9**
**Coefficients of Regression (H3)**

| Model | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 1.9618 | .1367 | | 14.3516 | .000 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | .3601 | .0364 | .4780 | 9.8960 | .000 |

a. Predictor: Intellectual Stimulation, b. Dependent Variable: Career Sustainability

The model explains 22.85% of variance in career sustainability ($R^2$ = .2285, F(1, 331) = 97.927, p = .000). The career sustainability is a significant positive predictor of intellectual stimulation (β = .3601, t = 9.896, p = .000). This means that H3 is supported.

**Mediation Analysis – H4: Intellectual Stimulation as Mediator (IL → IS → CS)**

Intellectual stimulation was tested as a mediator between the relationship of inclusive leadership and career sustainability using Baron and Kenny (1986) four-step procedure through the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2008) (Model 4).

**Step 1 (Path a): Inclusive Leadership → Intellectual Stimulation**

**Table 10**
**Model Summary — Step 1 (H4)**

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

**Table 11**
**Coefficients — Step 1 (H4)**

| 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 |

Inclusive leadership significantly predicts intellectual stimulation (β = .4089, p = .0000), explaining 19.94% of variance. The path a condition of mediation is satisfied.

**Steps 2 & 3 (Paths b & c'): IL + IS → Career Sustainability**

**Table 12**
**Model Summary — Steps 2 & 3 (H4)**

| R | R Square | MSE | F | df1 | df2 | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| .6679 | .4461 | .2067 | 143.9379 | 2.0000 | 330.0000 | .0000 |

**Table 13**
**Coefficients — Steps 2 & 3 (H4)**

| Model | Coefficient | se | t | p | LLCI | ULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.2153 | .1341 | 9.0640 | .0000 | .9515 | 1.4790 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | .2239 | .0433 | 5.1756 | .0000 | .1388 | .3090 |
| Inclusive Leadership | .4346 | .0391 | 11.1019 | .0000 | .3576 | .5116 |

While both inclusive leadership and intellectual stimulation being entered at the same time, 44.61% of variance in career sustainability is explained ($R^2$ = .4461, F(2, 330) = 143.938, p = .0000). Intellectual stimulation has a significant effect on career sustainability (β = .2239, p = .0000), satisfying path b. Inclusive leadership has a significant directly mediated effect (β = .4346, p = .0000), as noted as path C.

**Step 4 (Path c): Inclusive Leadership → Career Sustainability (Direct)**

**Table 14**
**Model Summary — Step 4 (H4)**

| R | R Square | MSE | F | df1 | df2 | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| .6307 | .3977 | .2241 | 237.3496 | 1.0000 | 331.0000 | .0000 |

**Table 15**
**Coefficients — Step 4 (H4)**

| Model | Coefficient | Se | t | p | LLCI | ULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.6685 | .1161 | 14.3683 | .0000 | 1.4400 | 1.8969 |
| Inclusive Leadership | .5261 | .0342 | 15.4062 | .0000 | .4590 | .5933 |

The direct effect of inclusive leadership on career sustainability is β = .5261 (p = .0000) with an explanatory power of 39.77% of the variance. The coefficient for inclusive leadership drops from .5261 (direct) to .4346 (indirect, with IS controlled), but does not change from being statistically significant. In the case of this reduction being statistically significant, even though the p-value doesn't get any smaller — this supports partial mediation. Intellectual stimulation also mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and career sustainability. H4 is supported.

## Discussion

The results provide consistent empirical support for all four hypotheses and collectively establish a coherent theoretical narrative about how inclusive leadership sustains faculty careers through cognitive-motivational pathways. The significant positive effect of inclusive leadership on career sustainability (H1: β = .5261, p = .000) represents the study's strongest direct effect, confirming that leaders who actively foster openness, equity, and genuine valuation of each faculty member's unique contribution create the enabling conditions through which teachers can maintain productive, meaningful, and health-preserving career trajectories over time (Randel et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2021). The magnitude of this effect (β = .5261) exceeds that reported by Fang et al. (2021) in their Chinese organisational study, suggesting that in the culturally hierarchical KP academic context, inclusive leadership's career-sustaining benefits may be particularly pronounced when they occur, because faculty careers are ordinarily more constrained by institutional norms that suppress voice and individualised recognition (Lašáková et al., 2017).

The significant positive relationship between inclusive leadership and intellectual stimulation (H2: β = .4089, p = .000) confirms that inclusive leaders do not merely generate affective safety — they actively activate the cognitive engagement through which faculty challenge assumptions, reframe problems, and pursue novel academic solutions (Bass & Avolio, 1995; Khan et al., 2022). Social exchange theory provides the explanatory mechanism: faculty who perceive genuine inclusion reciprocate through heightened

intellectual engagement, establishing the cognitive activation that sustains career development (Emerson, 1976; Zeng et al., 2020). This finding replicates and extends evidence from Guo et al. (2023) and Khan et al. (2022) that inclusive leadership behaviours significantly predict intellectual engagement in educational settings.

The significant positive effect of intellectual stimulation on career sustainability (H3: β = .3601, p = .000) confirms the proposed cognitive-motivational pathway: by continuously challenging faculty to question assumptions and approach their work with analytical creativity, intellectually stimulating leaders activate the learning orientation, professional renewal, and adaptive capacity that are constitutive of sustained career engagement over time (De Vos et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2021). This finding extends evidence from Hosna et al. (2021) and Etomes et al. (2024) that intellectual stimulation positively predicts sustainable performance, demonstrating that the effect extends specifically to career sustainability as an outcome distinct from task performance.

The partial mediation finding (H4) constitutes the study's principal theoretical contribution. The coefficient for inclusive leadership on career sustainability decreased from β = .5261 (direct) to β = .4346 (indirect, with intellectual stimulation controlled) while remaining statistically significant the definitive pattern of partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This confirms that intellectual stimulation operates as a genuine cognitive-motivational pathway through which inclusive leadership sustains faculty careers, complementing the affective mechanisms — thriving at work and supervisor developmental feedback — identified by (Fang et al.2021) as the dominant mediators in existing career sustainability models. The persistence of a significant direct effect indicates that inclusive leadership sustains careers through multiple additive channels, of which cognitive activation through intellectual stimulation is one important but non-exhaustive mechanism. Group mean analyses reveal that intellectual stimulation is the construct most sensitive to demographic variation (significant gender and experience differences), while inclusive leadership and career sustainability remain stable across all demographic groups — a pattern suggesting that leadership development interventions targeting intellectual stimulation may require subgroup-specific calibration to maximise career sustainability returns (Van Knippenberg & van Ginkel, 2022).

## Conclusion

The present study was aimed to investigate the mediation effect of intellectual stimulation between the relationship of inclusive leadership and teacher career sustainability in higher education institutions (HEIs) of KP, Pakistan. The survey data from 333 faculty members were used to test four hypotheses, which were analysed via correlation, regression and (Baron and Kenny's, 1986) mediation procedure, using the computer program, IBM SPSS. There was support for all of the four hypotheses. As expected, inclusive leadership indeed had a significant and positive direct effect on teacher career sustainability (H1: β = .5261, p = .000), indicating that inclusive leadership provides the facilitating conditions for teachers to experience the conditions of productive, meaningful and health promoting career pathways over time (Randel et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2021). This effect in the KP context also is stronger than the effects observed in prior studies as faculty voice in academic hierarchies with a hierarchical organizational structure usually is very weak (Lašáková et al., 2017; Shafaei & Nejati, 2023).

Second, inclusive leadership significantly predicted intellectual stimulation (H2: β = .4089, p = .000), which confirms that inclusive leaders not only evoke affective safety, but they also evoke the cognitive dimension (questioning, challenging assumptions, reframing problems) that is critical for sustained long-term faculty career development (Bass & Avolio, 1995; Khan et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2020). Third, intellectual stimulation also proved significant as a predictor of career sustainability (H3: β = .3601, p = .000), which indicates that by continually challenging faculty to question the world of work, think analytically, and

approach their work in creative ways, intellectually stimulating leaders activate professional renewal and adaptive capacity, the essence of sustained career engagement (De Vos et al., 2018; Hosna et al., 2021; Etomes et al., 2024).

This partial mediation finding (H4) is the main theoretical contribution of the study. When the direct effect of inclusive leadership on career sustainability was partially mediated by intellectual stimulation, the coefficient for the indirect path was statistically significant.

This finding validates the pathway of intellectual stimulation found in existing models to describe how inclusive leadership positively impacts faculty careers in addition to the affective mechanisms that seem to be dominant mediators of existing career sustainability models, identified by (Fang et al. 2021). If the pathway of inclusive leadership to career persistence remained significant, it suggests that other additive pathways play a significant role as well, including the intellectual stimulation pathway (Gong et al., 2021; Van Knippenberg & van Ginkel, 2022). The construct that is most sensitive to demographic variation is intellectual stimulation, as mean analysis shows significant gender differences ($p = .039$) and experience differences ($p = .036$); all other constructs were consistent across the demographic groups, and the measurement model is valid across groups, suggesting that cognitive activation effects are subgroup-specific. These findings collectively help extend leadership theory by highlighting the importance of intellectual stimulation as a theoretically distinct, empirically supported cognitive-motivational pathway between inclusive leadership and faculty career sustainability in HEIs; providing evidence from developing countries that supports the link between inclusive leadership and faculty career sustainability; and providing a theoretically-based, actionable pathway for developing countries to invest in faculty career sustainability through specific, developable leadership behaviours.

**Recommendations**

Future studies should use the comprehensive theoretical framework and findings of this study to explore inclusive leadership and career sustainability. More potential mediators and moderators should be investigated to further explore the phenomena. Moreover, future studies should use longitudinal design to examine the phenomena over a course of time. Furthermore, future studies should also examine these phenomena in other sectors and geographical regions to provide findings that are more generalizable.

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