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## Inclusive leadership in Higher Education Institutions: the Effects on Innovative Behaviour and Psychological Contracts

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# **Inclusive leadership in higher education institutions: The effects on innovative behaviour and psychological contracts**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Higher education institutions are characterised by generating knowledge and innovation, where teamwork and leadership are key. This paper focuses on inclusive leadership and analyses its impact on organisational conditions (perceived organisational support -POS-) and behavioural results (employees' innovative behaviour and psychological contract breach) in European higher education institutions. Results show that inclusive leadership has a significant, direct and positive effect on employees' innovative behaviour and POS. Inclusive leadership also has an indirect and positive effect on employees' innovative behaviour and an indirect and negative effect on psychological contract breach, both mediated by POS. Some recommendations are provided to European universities to improve their management and results, as well as differentiating themselves from other universities.

## **Keywords**

Inclusive leadership, perceived organisational support, employees' innovative behaviour, psychological contract breach, higher education institutions.

# **Inclusive leadership in higher education institutions: The effects on innovative behaviour and psychological contracts**

## **Introduction**

Higher education institutions are characterised by generating knowledge and innovation, where teamwork and leadership are key. Knowledge is developed in different research projects and transmitted through communities of practices and teaching, especially in science-oriented universities. The way that researchers are led impacts the results obtained by higher education institutions. Therefore, leaders are critical in these institutions as key drivers of their employees' innovative behaviour (Gong et al., 2009). However, leaders in higher education organisations need to renew and rethink traditional management and organisational practices and policies (Aboramadan et al., 2021). Inclusive leadership refers to the behaviours that allow team members to feel included in a group where they can be themselves and be recognised for their contributions and individual talents, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, origin, disability, etc. (Aboramadan et al., 2020; Ashikali et al., 2021). Instead of encouraging personnel to adhere to the norms of the dominant groups within a team, inclusive leaders demonstrate openness, interactive communication, accessibility and inclusiveness (Ashikali et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2019). In this way, they better meet the needs of their staff (Hollander, 2009). They consider different perspectives and views to make better decisions by maximising the advantages of diversity. Employees feel they are part of a group contributing to team processes and outcomes without losing their sense of uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011).

As inclusive leadership produces organisational effects on employees and organisations, this study considers perceived organisational support among employees due to the influence of inclusive leaders (Qi et al., 2019). Leaders' supportive behaviours help followers feel that their contributions are well valued and their well-being is important, which should enhance perceived organisational support (Qi et al., 2019) and reduce psychological contract breach.

Higher education researchers should develop innovative behaviour because it leads to new ideas to improve knowledge, work and performance. Innovative behaviour is related to employee creativity, which is a multistage process involving recognising problems, generating ideas, building

support for these ideas, and implementing them (Choi et al., 2017). This study also focuses on employees' innovative behaviour as an attempt to avoid traditional ways of thinking (Aboramodan et al., 2020; Kessel et al., 2012). We identify some of the enablers and predictors of innovative behaviour, such as inclusive leadership and perceived organisational support.

The positive effects of inclusive leadership on employees could affect their psychological contract, reducing contract breach. Moreover, perceived organisational support could mediate between inclusive leadership and psychological contract breach because it increases concern about the staff's welfare and helps employees and organisations to achieve their goals (Eisenberger et al., 1997).

Therefore, we investigate the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour and psychological contract breach, considering the mediating role of perceived organisational support. It is important to highlight that perceived organisational support decreases the perception of psychological contract breach among employees.

From the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organisational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986), and in connection with the behavioural theory of firms (Cyert and March, 1963), a theoretical model has been established, and three objectives are addressed in this study. First, it advances the knowledge about inclusive leadership, analysing its direct effect on organisational conditions (perceived organisational support) and behavioural results (employees' innovative behaviour). Second, it extends the literature on the mediating role of perceived organisational support on psychological contract breach in higher education institutions. The impact of inclusive leadership on reducing psychological contract breach among university professors is a way for universities to become more competitive. Lastly, the findings of this study highlight the impact of inclusive leadership and perceived organisational support on behavioural results (employees' innovative behaviour and psychological contract breach) in European higher education institutions, considering the mediating effect of perceived organisational support.

The main contribution of this study is to take a step forward in considering inclusive leadership and organisational conditions (perceived organisational support) to obtain key behavioural results among academics (improve employees' innovative behaviour and diminish psychological contract breach), which should be the foundation for individual and organisational performance (Huhtala and Parzefall, 2007). We provide a management model to optimise the performance of these institutions and their staff by improving organisational and behavioural conditions.

This study has been carried out to cover the gap in academic behavioural performance optimisation using a new leadership style: inclusive leadership. The growing diversity of academic staff and students, as well as inclusive leadership characteristics, justify its consideration. Furthermore, academic staff must adapt to student diversity, maintaining and improving the effectiveness and quality of teaching and research services. To do this, everyone in charge should display effective leadership (Evans and Chun 2015) to adequately manage this diversity. The lack of an organisational culture, especially in departments, makes the use and management of effective leadership difficult (Evans and Chun 2015). Therefore, this study focuses on inclusive leadership, organisational conditions and academics' behavioural results to shape a high-performance management model.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review is provided to justify the hypotheses proposed. Second, the sample, measures and procedures are explained, followed by the results. Finally, the discussion and conclusions are described, including recommendations, limitations and future research paths.

## **Theoretical Background**

The evolution of leadership theories is based on the social and cultural backgrounds of society. Inclusive leadership appeared in management with Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) and Hollander (2009) when they identified interdependent relationships between leaders and followers fomented by the appreciation of others' contributions. *Inclusive leadership* manages the relationship among different identities efficiently, respecting individuals' diversity and self-value and satisfying people's need for self-enhancement and certainty (Randel et al., 2016). It makes "the positive effect of identity-related diversity" easy (Qi et al., 2022). Furthermore, inclusive leadership encompasses the "leaders who exhibit visibility, accessibility, and availability" while working together with followers (Carmeli et al., 2010), making employees comfortable by downplaying differences in status and power (Hassan and Jiang, 2021). In addition, this type of leadership encourages communication and collaboration, prompting employees and leaders to express their views and opinions (Carmeli et al., 2010) and highlighting the individual value of staff. These effects improve psychological safety

(Detert and Burris, 2007; Mikyoung and Moon, 2019) and lead to positive individual performance (Ahmed et al., 2020).

This variable is also related to the development of management change (Bowers et al., 2012) and employee belongingness (Randel et al., 2016), increasing subordinates' creativity (Zhu et al., 2020) and innovative work behaviour (Javed et al., 2019a and 2019b). Qi et al. (2019) explored the link between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour, where perceived organisational support was a mediator. In the context of academia, Aboramadan et al. (2020) linked inclusive leadership with extra-role behaviours (organisational citizenship and innovative work behaviour) and with organisational learning as a mediator. Major developments are presented in this study to better understand the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour and perceived organisational support in academia. Psychological contract breach is also considered because it is critical to high-value performance.

*Employees' innovative behaviour* considers different activities related to the innovation process (rather than the outcome of the innovation) (Qi et al. 2019), such as idea generation, idea championing, idea promotion, and idea realisation for new processes, techniques, technologies (Qi et al., 2019) and knowledge to enhance business and personal performance. This concept goes beyond creativity (Shin et al., 2017) because it explores opportunities and the production, development and implementation of new ideas and behaviours that lead to organisational changes (Al Darmaki et al., 2020).

In higher education, inclusive leadership encourages innovative work behaviour for many reasons. First, inclusive leaders encourage workers to become involved in innovative processes, namely, research, which is a vital activity in higher education. Second, employees' interests and feelings are highly valued by inclusive leaders (Javed et al., 2019b), so workers develop greater commitment in return (Aboramadan et al., 2020). They become more innovative because their points of view and contributions are valued (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Third, inclusive leaders provide resources (time and information) to foster innovative employee behaviour (Reiter-Palmon and Illies, 2004) and shared knowledge, enhancing autonomy and freedom (Foss et al., 2013). Fourth, inclusive leaders are available and supportive (Ashikali et al., 2021), motivating their followers to become involved in innovative behaviours (Altunoglu and Gürel, 2015). Finally, inclusive leaders create an environment where employees can express their ideas and suggestions (Vladić et al., 2021). They are accessible and open to different proposals, information and feedback (Arnold et al., 2000; Carmeli et al., 2010), giving employees a greater sense of responsibility (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993). Therefore,

inclusive leadership promotes a more innovation-supportive work environment (Carmeli et al., 2010) and encourages innovative behaviour (Randel et al., 2016).

The link between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour has not been developed in higher education, but it has been studied in telecommunications companies in Vietnam, mediated by person-job fit (Choi et al., 2017); in Chinese service-based organisations (banks, law offices, retail stores), mediated by perceived organisational support (Qi et al., 2019); and in Palestinian universities mediated by organisational learning (Aboramodan et al., 2020). Hence, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H1: Inclusive leadership is positively related to employees' innovative behaviour in higher education.

*Perceived organisational support (POS)* refers to “the degree to which an individual believes that the organisation cares about his/her values and input, and provides him/her with help and support” (Erdogan and Enders, 2007). It reflects “employees' beliefs regarding how much their respective organisation is committed to them, values their contribution, and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger et al., 1986). It is a perception of an organisation's commitment to its employees (Zare, 2012). The theory of organisational support is the main conceptual framework of POS.

Inclusive leadership involves favourable treatment that is perceived by employees, such as supervisor support and active listening, and it can increase POS (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Supervisors are an essential source of organisational support because they provide organisational resources and rewards to their subordinates (Wayne et al., 1997). If employees perceive that (inclusive) leaders value their contributions and care about their well-being, they perceive supportive behaviour that could enhance POS. In the case of higher education institutions, where intellectual capital and teaching and researching activities are key, employees' perceptions of open communication, continuous organisational assistance and concern for others' interests (Carmeli et al., 2010) are recognised as critical in favouring POS. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Inclusive leadership is positively related to employees' perceived organisational support in higher education.

Considering the norm of reciprocity (as part of the social exchange theory), workers who perceive support from their organisation feel obliged to work hard to achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In these situations, employees will have more positive work-related attitudes (Trybou et al., 2014), fulfil in-role behaviour better (Barksdale and Werner, 2001) and demonstrate superior work performance (Shanock and Eisenberger, 2002) and extra-role behaviours (Altunoglu and Gürel, 2015). Employees' emotional commitment and sense of responsibility increase altruistic (Janssen, 2003) and innovative behaviour. Creativity and generating, promoting and acting on ideas and concepts can be stimulated by POS, resulting in innovative work behaviour. At the same time, spontaneous problem-solving and decision-making processes are associated with POS (Eisenberger et al., 2002) and lead to innovative behaviour. In academia, the positive effects of POS on innovative academic behaviour may be similar because of the special characteristics of the work (people-intensive professional) and staff. Contrarily, when employees perceive little organisational support, their attachment to innovative processes decreases (Bosnehlles and Veenendaal, 2019). Therefore, this study examines the following hypothesis:

H3: Perceived organisational support is positively related to employees' innovative behaviour in higher education.

A *psychological contract* is an agreement between an employee and his/her employer based on their unwritten mutual expectations and subjective and implicit beliefs about their interrelationship (Raulapati et al., 2010; Bankins and Formosa, 2020) regarding practices and policies in the organisation. It also includes a reciprocal exchange agreement, which is predominantly examined between employers and employees (Bankins and Formosa, 2020). The *breach of a psychological contract* from the perspective of employees reflects the failure of the organization to meet one or more obligations (Hattori, 2010) or fulfil its obligations or promises (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). When this occurs, employees show less organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour, job satisfaction and work performance. Their intentions to leave increase (Chen et al., 2008), with adverse effects for the organisation.

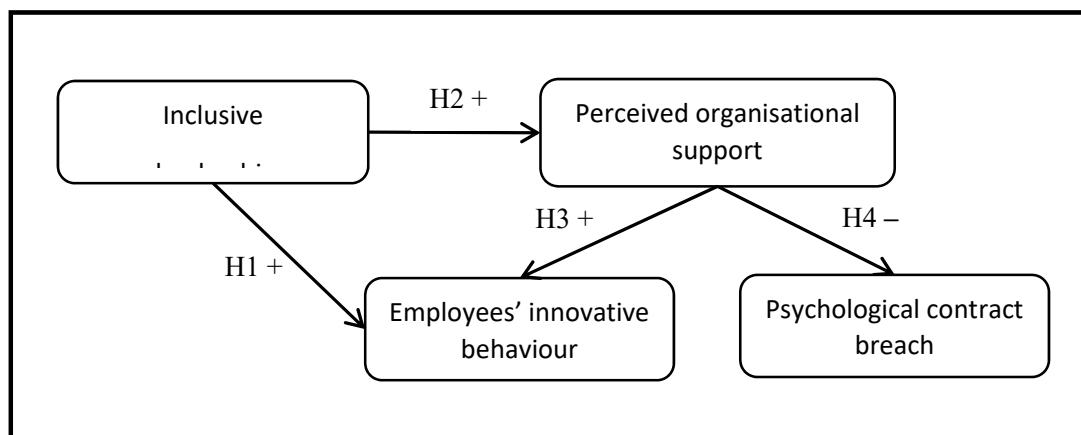
POS plays a critical role (providing assistance and a supportive relationship) in preventing psychological contract breach because it establishes a balance between mutual expectations, beliefs and interrelations based on the norm of reciprocity (social exchange theory). If employees believe that their organisation is committed to them, values their contributions and cares about their



well-being, some psychological contract beliefs are covered by POS, reducing the risk of breach. Both variables highlight social exchange processes in the formation and upkeep of employer-employee relationships. That is, a balance is achieved between employees' efforts on behalf of the organisation and what desirable impersonal and socioemotional resources the organisation is willing and able to give (Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006). However, a vital temporal link must exist between the employee and their organisation. If not, employees will not be aware of POS or the treatment their organisation has given its staff throughout its history (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In return, employees strive to reach organisational goals that reflect their gratitude to the organisation for the support they receive (Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003). Academics need POS and a strong psychological contract to maintain and enhance their performance, especially when facing adversity or failure. Likewise, higher education institutions are interested in retaining knowledge workers (Deas and Coetzee, 2020), paying special attention to the perceptions of the psychological contract of their staff. Therefore, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H4: Perceived organisational support is negatively related to employees' psychological contract breach in higher education.

According to the previous hypotheses, a theoretical model is proposed, as shown in Figure 1. In it, POS plays a critical role because it could be affected by inclusive leadership and could mediate the indirect influence of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour and psychological contract breach.



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model

## **Methods**

Data was collected from various European technical universities through an online questionnaire as part of a collaborative European project. 113 completed questionnaires were obtained between April and May 2022. The sample is comprised of 54% men, 42.5% women and 3.5% without denomination, with an average age of 47.19. 69.9% are Spanish. Most of the sample are professors (15.9%) or associate professors (54.9%) with an average of 15.31 years working in their current institutions. 96.5% of the universities are public.

All of the variables included in the survey were evaluated using previously tested measures on a 5-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree; 5 - strongly agree).

*Inclusive leadership* is assessed with 8 items adapted from the measures used by Aboramadan et al. (2020), Carmeli et al. (2010) and Qi et al. (2019).

*Employees' innovative behaviour* is measured with 9 items adapted from Aboramadan et al. (2020), Choi et al. (2017), Janssen (2000) and Javed et al. (2019a).

*POS* is estimated with 7 items following the proposals by Cheng and O-Yang (2018), Eisenberger et al. (1986), Eisenberger et al. (1997) and Qi et al. (2019).

*Psychological contract breach* is estimated with 4 items adapted from Robinson and Morrison (2000).

All the items of the variables are in Table 1, where mean and standard deviations are included.

A path analysis was developed to test the hypotheses of the theoretical model (Figure 1). That is, to check whether inclusive leadership influences employees' innovative behaviour, POS and psychological contract breach, and whether there is a mediation effect of POS on the relationship between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour and psychological contract breach. SPSS24 and AMOS18 were used to make all the calculations.

Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) recommendations were followed to minimise common method bias, including a cover letter, separate sections in the survey, and Harman's one-factor analysis (a principal component analysis where unrotated factor solutions are checked). No single factor

emerged (specifically, seven factors), where the first factor accounted for 24.86% of the 80.41% explained variance (<50% of all the variables in the model). Although some common method bias could be found in the data, its effects are minimal (Lindell and Whitney 2001).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of variables and items

Variable	Items	Mean	Standard deviation
<b><i>Inclusive Leadership</i></b>	My leader is open to considering new ideas.	3.96	1.48
	My leader is looking for new opportunities to improve work processes.	3.97	1.50
	My leader is open to discussing the desired goals and new ways of achieving them.	3.92	1.44
	My leader is available for consultation about professional questions and problems.	3.98	1.51
	My leader is an ongoing “presence” in this team-someone who is readily available.	3.83	1.48
	My leader is ready to listen to my requests.	3.94	1.57
	My leader encourages me to consult him/her on emerging issues.	3.76	1.56
	My leader is accessible to discussing emerging problems.	3.90	1.53
<b><i>Employees' innovative behaviour</i></b>	In my higher education institution, I can create new ideas for difficult issues.	3.73	1.20
	In my higher education institution, I can search for new working methods, techniques or instruments.	3.95	1.08
	In my higher education institution, I can generate original solutions to problems.	3.94	1.06
	In my higher education institution, I can mobilise support for innovative ideas.	3.52	1.17
	In my higher education institution, I can acquire approval for innovative ideas.	3.53	1.22
	In my higher education institution, I can inspire enthusiasm among important organisational members about innovative ideas.	3.27	1.25
	In my higher education institution, I can transform innovative ideas into useful applications.	3.26	1.33
	In my higher education institution, I can introduce innovative ideas into the work environment in a systematic way.	3.19	1.24
<b><i>Perceived Organisational</i></b>	In my higher education institution, I can evaluate the usefulness of innovative ideas.	3.18	1.27
	My higher education institution cares about my opinions.	3.17	1.30
	My higher education institution really cares about my well-being.	3.28	1.17

<b>Support (POS)</b>	My higher education institution would forgive an honest mistake on my part.	3.40	1.53
	My higher education institution wouldn't take advantage of me	3.37	1.28
	My higher education institution shows a great deal of concern for me.	2.85	1.28
	My higher education institution is willing to help me if I have a special need	3.33	1.23
	My higher education institution takes great pride in my accomplishments at work.	3.47	1.38
	My higher education institution has broken many of its promises to me even though I've upheld my side of our agreement.	2.38	1.31
<b>Psycholo- gical contract</b>	My higher education institution makes me very angry.	1.87	1.02
	My higher education institution makes me feel betrayed.	1.88	1.10
	My higher education institution makes me feel extremely frustrated because of the way I have been treated.	1.94	1.11

## Results

To obtain the value of each variable, their items were averaged. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 2. Participants perceive medium-high levels of inclusive leadership in their institutions (3.91 out of 5), innovative employee behaviour and POS are not as evident (3.51 and 3.27 respectively), and psychological contract breach is not prevalent (2.27). The correlations among the variables are high, especially that between innovative employee behaviour and POS. We can also highlight the negative relation between psychological contract breach and the rest of the variables considered.

Table 2 also includes the Cronbach's alpha of each variable with values between .744 and .895 (higher than .70), which is an acceptable level of reliability and internal consistency (Hair et al., 2009).

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS18 was performed to confirm that the items used to measure one variable did not load significantly onto another. Table 2 details the composite

reliability (CR), which is above 0.7 for all the variables, and the convergent validity through average variance extracted (AVE), which is above 0.5 and lower than CR, indicating that the measures used are reliable (Hair et al., 2009).

**Table 2.** Descriptive, reliability and validity statistics and bivariate correlations.

	Mean (Standard deviation)	Cronbach 's alpha	AVE	CR	1	2	3	4
1. <i>Inclusive leadership</i>	3.91 (1.38)	.973	.895	.986	-			
2. <i>Employees' innovative behaviour</i>	3.51 (1.01)	.946	.782	.970	.516** *	-		
3. <i>Perceived organisational support</i>	3.27 (1.07)	.917	.744	.952	.481** *	.709** *	-	
4. <i>Psychological contract breach</i>	2.27 (.75)	.915	.847	.957	- .204**	- .251**	-.313 ***	-

\*\*\* p<0.001; \*\*p<0.05; \*p<0.1

A path analysis was developed to test the hypothesis following the theoretical model established. The results are shown in Table 3, where the good fit of the model is tested (Arbuckle, 2008).

**Table 3.** Path analysis results.

Relationship				Standardised regression coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value
<i>Inclusive leadership → E. Innovative Behaviour</i>				.227	.053	3.108	.002
<i>Inclusive Leadership → POS</i>				.481	.064	5.810	.000
<i>POS → E. Innovative Behaviour</i>				.600	.068	8.238	.000
<i>POS → Psychological Contract Breach</i>				-.313	.062	-3.489	.000

Model fit	$\chi^2$	df	P	GFI	NFI	CFI	PNFI	RMSEA	Hoelter, 01
	.545	2	.761	.998	.996	1	.332	.000	1893

Regarding the relationships, inclusive leadership has a significant and positive effect on employees' innovative behaviour and POS, so H1 and H2 are accepted. The direct and positive effect of POS on innovative behaviour is significant (confirming H3), and its direct and negative effect on psychological contract breach (better POS equals less psychological contract breach) is also significant (confirming H4).

The indirect effects mediated by POS were also checked by bootstrapping 5,000 samples at a confidence level of 95%, as shown in Table 4. Both are significant and important, showing its mediating effect.

**Table 4.** Indirect effects (IE) results.

Relationship	Mediating variable	Standardised regression coefficient IE	p-value	95% confidence interval
Inclusive leadership → E. Innovative Behaviour	POS	.289	.000	(.189 ~ .398)

Inclusive Leadership → Psychological Contract Breach	POS	-.151	.005	(-.259 ~ -.048)
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The predictive power of the model for employees' innovative behaviour is good because 54.3% (sample squared multiple correlation coefficient, R<sup>2</sup>) of the variation of this variable is explained by inclusive leadership and POS. In addition, 23.2% of the variation of POS is explained by inclusive leadership. Only 10% of the variation of psychological contract breach is explained by inclusive leadership and POS. In the latter case, more research is needed.

## Discussion and conclusions

Higher education institutions are key to generating knowledge and training future professionals, which is reflected in the values they transmit and the actions they carry out. Openness, inclusiveness, accessibility and interactive communication are characteristics of inclusive leadership (Ashikali et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2019) and encourage the integration of diversity in these institutions. The recognition of team members' contributions and talents regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, origin, or disability enhances employee performance (innovation, patents, research published in journals, etc.).

This paper analyses the impact of inclusive leadership on organisational conditions and behavioural results in European higher education institutions. Results show that inclusive leadership has a significant, direct and positive effect on employees' innovative behaviour and POS. Inclusive leadership also has an indirect and positive effect on employees' innovative behaviour and an indirect and negative effect on psychological contract breach, both mediated by POS.

The significant relationship between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour in the higher education context confirms what Aboramadan et al. (2020), Carmeli et al. (2010), Qi et al. (2019) and Randel et al. (2016) have found. Inclusive leaders are accessible and open to considering new ideas and discussing desired goals and new ways of achieving them, looking for opportunities to enhance work processes and develop talent. This has an impact on the autonomy and freedom of academics in discovering original solutions to difficult issues, looking for new working instruments, techniques or methods, or converting innovative ideas into useful knowledge and applications, inspiring enthusiasm (Aboramadan et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017; Javed et al., 2019a).



Likewise, these leaders provide enough resources to improve innovative behaviours (Reiter-Palmon and Illies, 2004), which is critical in academic work and performance.

Inclusive leadership also generates better POS, confirming the ideas of Carmeli et al. (2010) and Qi et al. (2019). The treatment, resources, help and rewards offered by inclusive leaders contribute to making employees feel that their organisation cares about them and their well-being, is willing to help them, forgives honest mistakes, takes pride in their accomplishments and talents at work and would not take advantage of them (Cheng and O-Yang, 2018; Qi et al., 2019). These factors contribute to creating an innovative environment in higher education institutions.

Surprisingly, the indirect effect between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour mediated by POS is significant (standardised regression coefficient .289), although the main relation does not lose its significance. This result is similar to that obtained by Qi et al. (2019). However, we consider that the mediation is partial because the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour is slight (from .516 of the total effect to .227) but still different from zero when the mediator is introduced (Kenny, 2021). We also complete the results offered by Qi et al. (2019) by developing our study in other service-based organisations (higher education institutions) in Europe and considering psychological contract breach.

Additionally, Table 3 shows the strong relation between POS and employees' innovative behaviour (standardised regression coefficient: .600). Employees who perceive strong POS may be more enthusiastic about working, developing their talents and knowledge, solving problems and making decisions (Eisenberger et al., 2002). They will consequently fulfil their in-role behaviour (Barksdale and Werner, 2001), enhance their work-related attitudes (Trybou et al., 2014), increase their work performance (Shanock and Eisenberger, 2002) and develop more creative and innovative behaviour and work.

We also confirm that POS has a direct and negative effect on psychological contract breach. This reflects that the more employees perceive their organisation's care, help and pride in them, the less psychological contract breach is prevalent. The reason for this is that listening and considering employees' opinions and worries can minimise broken promises and feelings of anger, betrayal and frustration (Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003; Robinson and Morrison, 2000). The balance between mutual beliefs, expectations and interrelations may play an important role in the relationship between employees and higher education institutions. Employees can feel encouraged to become involved and universities can retain talented and knowledgeable staff (Deas and Coetzee, 2020). Both aspects are critical for these institutions.

As previously stated, there is a significant and indirect effect between inclusive leadership and psychological contract breach mediated by POS. In this case, the mediation effect is full. The direct impact of inclusive leadership on psychological contract breach is -.204 without considering POS. However, when POS is introduced into the model, the significance of the main relationship is lost. Therefore, leaders who are available to their subordinates and communicate honestly, balance the expectations of the organisation and its employees helping to lower the incidence of psychological contract breach.

All these results advance the theories of organisational support, social exchange and organisational behaviour, highlighting the importance of inclusive leadership and the mediating role of POS. Inclusive leadership must be promoted in higher education institutions due to the effects it has on behavioural results and employee support. Therefore, these variables and their interrelationships (Figure 1) should be integrated into management models to optimise the performance of these institutions and their staff.

These conclusions may help European higher education institutions to improve their management and results, thereby differentiating themselves from other universities by implementing programmes that encourage inclusive leadership and organisational support.

Some *recommendations* are proposed at three levels: organisational, team and individual, to achieve this. At the organisational level, higher education institutions should make inclusive leadership a part of their vision and strategy, articulating a compelling narrative about why inclusive leadership is critical to academic success (its effects on innovative behaviour, POS and psychological contract breach). Additionally, integrating inclusive leadership into a global mobility strategy or global research strategy for staff is necessary due to its positive effects on performance. Therefore, inclusive leadership should be part of an organisation's planning, goals, diversity and inclusion policies and actions. Linking Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to diversity outcomes and inclusive behaviours (for example, with a survey about leadership commitment to diversity and inclusion among employees or international collaborations in research projects and papers) may be a way to measure the goals and objectives established.

Another important step at the organisational level is to foster an inclusive culture that encourages collaborative, trustworthy, relational, and authentic values as well as social justice among employees. Developing these values should help to create an inclusive environment where two-way communication empowers and encourages individuals to contribute to decision-making, openly participate in discussions or join in more internal research projects. Friction and criticism will appear,

but employees should understand that this is a part of the learning process without undermining the value of people's contributions and talents. Transparent, consistent and informed decision-making is a way to reduce non-constructive criticism.

At the team and individual levels, some intersectionality and soft skills must be worked on through the training offered by higher education institutions. Among the most important skills are communication, active listening, self-awareness (especially of unconscious biases that might exist toward others), self-confidence (be authentic or express yourself as you are), empathy and conflict management. These soft skills also influence values such as fairness and respect. Speaking up to challenge inappropriate behaviours or discriminatory situations in a direct but respectful way and being able to value all members' contributions equally are manifestations of these skills. Teamwork, creativity and resilience are also critical soft skills that foster inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour.

For team leaders, training may help them to acquire tools to support their diverse teams, considering their team members' character, prior experiences and worldviews in collaborative decision-making. It is key to provide regular opportunities for employees to voice their needs and concerns to promote their full participation and feedback. Their contributions should be acknowledged so their new ideas can be transformed into useful knowledge and applications and their proposals implemented whenever possible.

In the case of individuals, especially professors, inclusive leadership, cultural values and soft skills should be applied not only to co-workers and teams but also to students and included in lectures as part of transversal content.

## Limitations and Future Studies

This study has some limitations. It would be interesting to increase the sample, especially to non-Spanish higher education institutions. Demographic variables, such as age or nationality, should be considered in the model in case of variations, especially from a gender perspective. Opening this research to the industrial sector could also be a future research path.

To sum up, strengthening inclusive leadership will help higher education institutions foster innovative behaviour among their workforce and retain talented staff (diminishing psychological contract breach). The support given by leaders and institutions to obtain these results is vital.

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