

Universities as Inclusive Communities: Faculty Wellbeing, Neurodiversity, and Social Cohesion

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Abstract: No Higher education institutions play a vital role in promoting social cohesion, human capital development, and national progress. While inclusivity has received considerable attention in relation to student experiences, relatively little research has explored inclusivity from the perspective of faculty members, particularly regarding neurodiversity, psychological safety, and workplace belonging. This study investigates faculty perceptions of inclusivity within higher education institutions and examines how inclusive academic environments contribute to institutional effectiveness and nation-building outcomes. Grounded in Workplace Inclusion Theory, Psychological Safety Theory, Organizational Culture Theory, and Sustainable Development perspectives, the study adopts a comparative mixed-methods design involving faculty members from higher education institutions in Oman and Europe. Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of closed-ended and open-ended items examining institutional inclusivity, neurodiversity awareness, psychological safety, belonging, institutional support, wellbeing, and engagement. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative responses will be analyzed thematically. The study proposes that inclusive and neurodiversity-aware academic cultures foster stronger faculty wellbeing, engagement, and institutional commitment, which in turn contribute to institutional effectiveness and broader nation-building objectives. The research aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). By foregrounding faculty voices, the study contributes to the emerging scholarship on inclusive higher education and offers evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

Keywords: Faculty Inclusivity, Neurodiversity, Psychological Safety, Higher Education, Faculty Wellbeing, Organizational Culture, Nation Building, Sustainable Development Goals, Oman, Europe.

Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to contribute not only to teaching and research but also to broader societal goals such as social cohesion, innovation, equity, and sustainable development. Universities serve as important sites for knowledge production and human capital development and are therefore central actors in nation-building processes (Marginson, 2016). As institutions become more diverse and globally interconnected, the need to create inclusive academic environments has become a major concern for educational policymakers and institutional leaders. Research on inclusivity within higher education has traditionally focused on students, particularly issues of access, participation, disability support, and belonging. Comparatively less attention has been directed toward faculty experiences despite the critical role faculty play in shaping institutional culture, student learning, research productivity, and organizational effectiveness. Faculty experiences of inclusion, belonging, and support influence not only individual wellbeing but also institutional performance and

sustainability. Recent discussions surrounding workplace inclusion have expanded to include neurodiversity, which recognizes natural variations in cognitive functioning, including ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and other diverse cognitive profiles. Neurodiversity-inclusive workplaces emphasize acceptance, flexibility, psychological safety, and support rather than deficit-based approaches. Although neurodiversity has gained increasing attention within organizational and workplace studies, its application within higher education faculty contexts remains underexplored.

Problem Statement

Despite growing institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how faculty members experience inclusivity within higher education institutions. Existing studies have predominantly focused on students, leaving faculty voices underrepresented within the literature. Furthermore, neurodiversity inclusivity among faculty remains a relatively neglected area of research despite increasing international recognition of neurodiversity as an important workplace issue. The situation is particularly pronounced in non-Western contexts where discussions surrounding neurodiversity, workplace accommodations, and psychological safety remain emergent. In Oman, higher education institutions continue to evolve as part of national development initiatives aligned with Oman Vision 2040. However, little is known about how faculty members perceive institutional inclusivity, belonging, psychological safety, and support for neurodiversity. Similarly, comparative studies examining faculty inclusivity across Oman and Europe remain scarce.

Research Gaps

Several important gaps emerge from the literature. First, most higher education inclusivity research focuses on student populations rather than faculty experiences. Second, neurodiversity within higher education workplaces remains underexplored, particularly among academic staff. Third, limited research has examined the relationship between inclusivity, psychological safety, belonging, and institutional effectiveness within higher education contexts. Fourth, comparative studies involving Oman and European higher education institutions are scarce. Finally, little research explicitly connects faculty inclusivity to broader nation-building objectives and Sustainable Development Goals.

Related work

Inclusivity in Higher Education

Inclusivity has become a central concern within higher education policy and institutional development. Contemporary understandings of inclusivity extend beyond demographic representation to encompass the extent to which individuals feel valued, respected, supported, and able to participate meaningfully within institutional life (Mor Barak, 2016). In higher education settings, inclusivity is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional construct involving equitable participation, belonging, recognition, accessibility, and institutional support. The growing emphasis on inclusivity reflects broader global commitments to equity and social justice within education. Universities are increasingly expected to create environments that support diverse populations while promoting institutional effectiveness and social responsibility. Research indicates that inclusive institutional cultures contribute positively to organizational trust, collaboration, wellbeing, and employee engagement (Shore et al., 2011). Conversely, exclusionary environments may contribute to reduced morale, lower organizational commitment, and diminished institutional effectiveness. Despite growing interest in inclusivity, much of the higher education literature continues to focus on students rather than faculty members. Issues such as student access, disability support, inclusive pedagogy, and student belonging have received considerable scholarly attention. Comparatively little research has examined how faculty members experience inclusivity within academic workplaces, particularly in relation to workplace culture, institutional support, and professional participation (Svendby, 2024).

Faculty Inclusivity and Academic Workplaces

Faculty members are central to the functioning of higher education institutions through their contributions to teaching, research, mentorship, governance, and community engagement.

Consequently, faculty experiences of inclusion or exclusion have implications that extend beyond individual wellbeing to institutional performance and educational quality.

Research examining workplace inclusion suggests that employees who perceive their workplaces as inclusive report higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, engagement, and productivity (Shore et al., 2011). Within higher education, inclusive academic environments have been associated with stronger collegial relationships, greater participation in institutional activities, and enhanced professional satisfaction.

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of leadership and organizational support in fostering inclusive workplace cultures. Dahleez et al. (2023) found that inclusive leadership positively influenced job satisfaction among employees in Omani higher education institutions through the mediating effects of psychological ownership and employee thriving. Similarly, research on academic staff wellbeing demonstrates that supportive workplace conditions significantly influence professional engagement, wellbeing, and organizational commitment (Michulek et al., 2024).

These findings suggest that faculty inclusivity is not merely an issue of fairness but also a strategic factor influencing institutional resilience and effectiveness.

Psychological Safety in Higher Education

Psychological safety has emerged as one of the most influential concepts within organizational and educational research. Edmondson (1999) defines psychological safety as a shared belief that individuals can express concerns, ask questions, admit mistakes, and contribute ideas without fear of embarrassment or punishment. Within higher education institutions, psychological safety is particularly important because faculty members operate within environments characterized by performance evaluation, accountability, peer review, and professional scrutiny. When faculty members perceive their institutions as psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage in collaborative activities, participate in decision-making processes, and contribute innovative ideas. Research consistently demonstrates positive relationships between psychological safety and employee wellbeing, learning, engagement, and organizational effectiveness (Edmondson, 1999). Recent studies also suggest that psychologically safe environments are especially important for individuals from underrepresented groups and those with diverse cognitive and working styles. Consequently, psychological safety is increasingly viewed as a critical component of inclusive academic workplaces.

Belonging and Institutional Support

Belonging represents another important dimension of workplace inclusion. Strayhorn (2012) defines belonging as the perception of being accepted, respected, valued, and supported within a particular environment. Although belonging has often been studied in relation to students, growing evidence suggests that it is equally important for faculty and staff. Faculty members who experience a strong sense of belonging are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement, motivation, collaboration, and institutional commitment. Belonging has also been associated with improved wellbeing, job satisfaction, and professional persistence. Conversely, feelings of exclusion or marginalization may contribute to isolation, disengagement, and turnover intentions.

Institutional support plays a crucial role in fostering belonging. Faculty perceptions of leadership responsiveness, professional development opportunities, resource availability, and fair treatment contribute significantly to their sense of inclusion within the academic community. Studies examining higher education workplaces consistently identify institutional support as a key predictor of faculty satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Neurodiversity and Faculty Inclusivity

One of the most significant developments within contemporary inclusion research is the growing recognition of neurodiversity. The neurodiversity paradigm views neurological differences such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other cognitive variations as natural forms of human diversity rather than deficits requiring correction (Doyle, 2020). Neurodiversity scholarship emphasizes strengths-based

approaches that recognize the unique contributions neurodivergent individuals can bring to organizations, including creativity, innovation, problem-solving, and alternative perspectives. Increasingly, organizations are adopting neurodiversity-inclusive practices aimed at reducing barriers and promoting equitable participation. Despite growing interest in neurodiversity within workplace research, relatively little attention has been directed toward neurodivergent faculty experiences within higher education. Existing studies suggest that neurodivergent academics often face challenges related to disclosure, stigma, workplace expectations, and institutional support (Sarchet, 2024). Many individuals may be reluctant to disclose neurodivergent identities due to concerns about professional perceptions or career progression. Research further indicates that neurodiversity-inclusive workplaces benefit not only neurodivergent individuals but also organizations more broadly through enhanced innovation, flexibility, and diverse perspectives (Doyle, 2020). These findings suggest that neurodiversity inclusivity should be considered a central component of contemporary higher education inclusion strategies.

Recent scholarship suggests that higher education institutions are gradually shifting from accommodation-based approaches toward creating genuinely neurodiversity-inclusive academic environments. Rather than viewing neurodiversity solely through a disability framework, contemporary research increasingly advocates for strengths-based institutional cultures that recognize cognitive diversity as a source of innovation, creativity, and organizational resilience. Hamilton (2023) argues that higher education institutions should move beyond individual accommodations and instead redesign institutional structures, pedagogical practices, and workplace cultures to become inherently inclusive for both neurodivergent students and staff. This perspective reflects a growing recognition that inclusivity requires systemic institutional change rather than isolated support mechanisms.

Recent evidence also demonstrates that faculty experiences differ substantially from those of students and deserve greater scholarly attention. Wilson et al. (2025), in a scoping review of faculty and staff belonging in higher education, concluded that a sense of belonging among academic staff enhances organizational commitment, interdisciplinary collaboration, productivity, and retention. The review further found that faculty from historically marginalized groups frequently experience lower levels of belonging because of institutional exclusion, inequitable policies, and limited recognition, highlighting the importance of inclusive organizational cultures. Neurodiversity has similarly emerged as an important area of higher education research. Sarchet (2024), in a systematic literature review of disabled and neurodivergent faculty, identified persistent barriers related to stigma, disclosure, workplace inequities, and insufficient institutional support. The review revealed that many neurodivergent academics engage in self-accommodation or conceal aspects of their identities due to concerns about professional credibility and career advancement. These findings reinforce calls for universities to develop policies and organizational cultures that normalize neurodiversity and promote psychological safety for all faculty members. Research has also begun to examine neurodiversity from an organizational development perspective. Meletiadou (2025) reported that management schools and universities continue to face significant challenges in developing neurodiversity awareness among academic staff. The study argues that faculty development initiatives should include structured neurodiversity training to foster inclusive leadership, reduce stigma, and improve institutional responsiveness to diverse cognitive profiles. Complementing these findings, recent organizational research emphasizes the importance of psychological safety as a mechanism through which workplace inclusion influences organizational outcomes. Studies suggest that inclusive institutional practices strengthen psychological safety by encouraging open communication, trust, and collaborative relationships among academic staff, ultimately improving workplace wellbeing and institutional effectiveness. Although much of this research has been conducted outside Europe and the Gulf region, the findings consistently demonstrate that inclusive organizational cultures positively influence faculty engagement and professional satisfaction. Collectively, these recent studies demonstrate that faculty inclusivity extends beyond diversity policies to encompass psychological safety, belonging, organizational support, and neurodiversity awareness.

However, the literature also reveals several unresolved issues. Most empirical studies have been conducted in Western higher education systems, while evidence from the Gulf region remains scarce. Furthermore, relatively few investigations have examined faculty inclusivity through the combined lenses of neurodiversity, organizational culture, Sustainable Development Goals, and nation building. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comparative examination of faculty perceptions in Oman and Europe, thereby extending current knowledge on inclusive higher education policy and practice.

Organizational Culture and Educational Policy

Organizational culture significantly influences how inclusivity is experienced within institutions. Schein (2010) defines organizational culture as a system of shared assumptions, values, and practices that guide behavior within organizations. In higher education settings, organizational culture shapes perceptions of fairness, participation, recognition, and belonging. Educational policy scholars argue that institutional policies are not simply implemented but are interpreted and enacted within specific organizational contexts (Ball, 2012). As a result, there is often a gap between formal policy commitments and lived experiences. Institutions may adopt inclusivity policies while faculty members continue to encounter barriers related to participation, support, or recognition. Tierney (2008) similarly emphasizes the importance of organizational culture in shaping higher education institutions. Understanding faculty perceptions therefore provides valuable insight into how inclusivity policies function in practice and how institutional cultures can either facilitate or hinder inclusive outcomes.

Inclusivity, Sustainable Development, and the SDGs

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. Although discussions surrounding the SDGs often focus on students and educational access, faculty inclusivity also contributes directly to several sustainability objectives. SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) is reflected through efforts to promote faculty wellbeing, psychological safety, and supportive workplaces. SDG 4 (Quality Education) depends not only on student learning but also on creating environments where educators can thrive professionally. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) emphasizes healthy and productive workplaces characterized by fairness and inclusion. Faculty inclusivity is also closely connected to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which seeks to reduce barriers to participation and advancement. Neurodiversity-inclusive practices, equitable treatment, and institutional support contribute directly to this goal. Furthermore, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) highlights the importance of fair, accountable, and inclusive institutions, making faculty experiences an important indicator of institutional effectiveness. Finally, the comparative dimension of this study aligns with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which promotes international collaboration and knowledge exchange across regions and educational systems.

Higher Education and Nation Building

Higher education institutions contribute significantly to nation building through their roles in knowledge production, human capital development, civic engagement, and social cohesion (Marginson, 2016). Universities shape future leaders, generate innovation, and contribute to economic and social development. Inclusive academic institutions strengthen nation-building processes by promoting fairness, participation, equity, and institutional trust. Faculty members who feel valued and supported are more likely to contribute effectively to teaching, research, mentorship, and institutional development. Consequently, faculty inclusivity has implications that extend beyond individual workplaces to broader societal outcomes. From a humanities perspective, universities function as cultural institutions that shape values, identity, citizenship, and social relationships. Examining faculty inclusivity therefore contributes to understanding how higher education can foster more equitable and cohesive societies.

Research Gap

Despite growing interest in inclusivity within higher education, several important gaps remain. First, the literature continues to prioritize student experiences while faculty perspectives remain comparatively

underexplored. Second, neurodiversity inclusivity among academic staff represents an emerging area of inquiry with limited empirical evidence. Third, few studies have examined the relationships among inclusivity, psychological safety, belonging, institutional support, and nation-building outcomes within a single framework. Additionally, research examining faculty inclusivity in Gulf higher education contexts remains limited, and comparative studies involving Oman and Europe are particularly scarce. Finally, although inclusivity is increasingly linked to sustainable development, few studies explicitly examine how faculty inclusivity contributes to SDGs and nation-building objectives. This study addresses these gaps by investigating faculty perceptions of inclusivity, psychological safety, belonging, institutional support, and neurodiversity awareness within higher education institutions in Oman and Europe. Through its comparative and interdisciplinary approach, the study seeks to advance understanding of how inclusive academic environments contribute to institutional effectiveness, sustainable development, and nation building.

Key Contribution

This study makes several important contributions to higher education research, educational policy, and nation-building scholarship. First, it shifts the focus of inclusivity research from students to faculty members, an area that remains comparatively underexplored despite faculty playing a central role in teaching, research, institutional governance, and knowledge production. Second, the study advances the emerging discourse on neurodiversity in higher education by examining how neurodiversity-inclusive practices influence faculty belonging, psychological safety, wellbeing, and institutional engagement. Third, by adopting a comparative perspective between Oman and Europe, the research provides novel cross-cultural evidence on faculty inclusivity, addressing a significant gap in the literature where studies from the Gulf region remain scarce. Methodologically, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of faculty experiences. Finally, the research contributes to policy and practice by proposing an evidence-based framework that links faculty inclusivity to institutional effectiveness, sustainable development, and nation building. In doing so, it demonstrates that fostering inclusive and neurodiversity-aware academic environments is not only an organizational responsibility but also a strategic investment in educational excellence, social cohesion, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Method, Experiments and Results

This study employs a comparative mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The target population consists of faculty members working in public and private higher education institutions in Oman and selected European countries.

Conceptual Framework

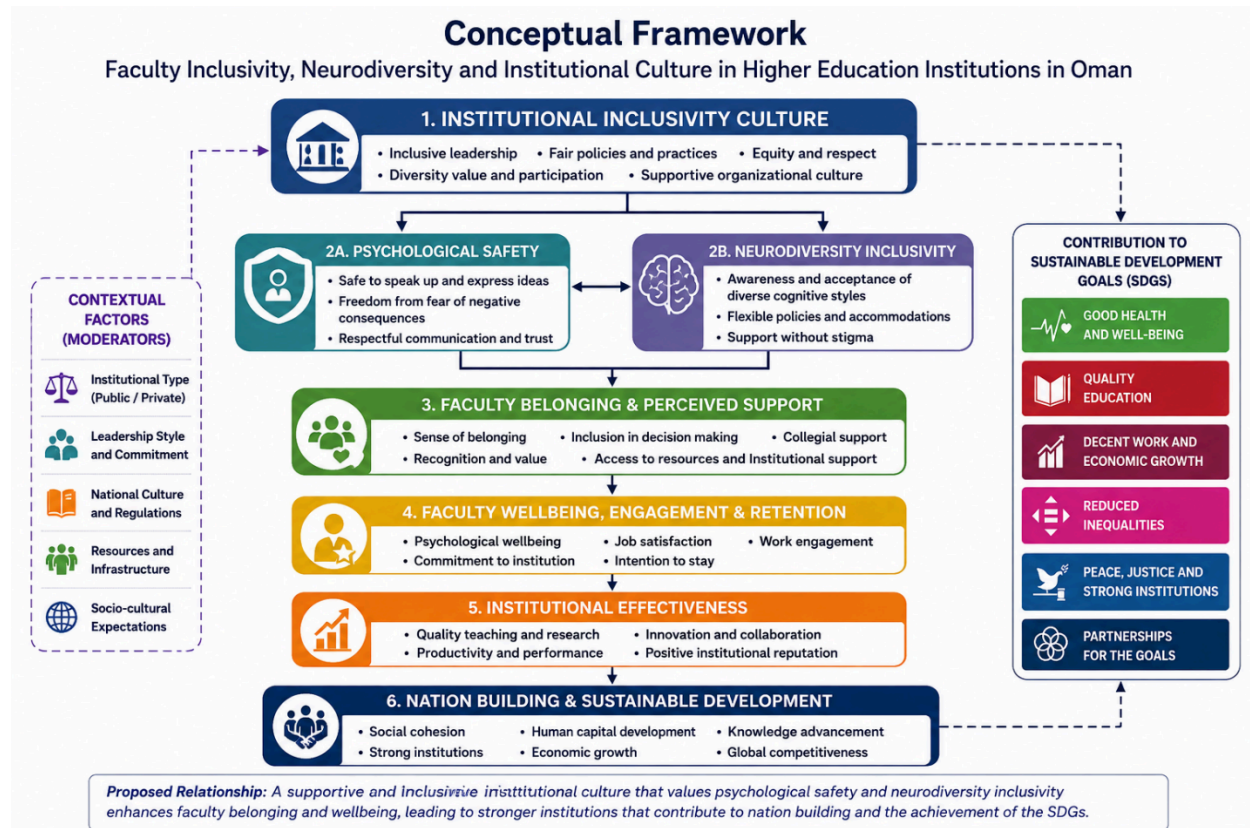


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that integrates Workplace Inclusion Theory (Mor Barak, 2016), Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999), Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 2010), and Sustainable Development perspectives. The framework positions faculty inclusivity as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond demographic representation to encompass fairness, participation, belonging, institutional support, psychological safety, and neurodiversity awareness. Collectively, these dimensions contribute to faculty wellbeing and institutional effectiveness while supporting broader societal and developmental objectives (see figure 1). The framework proposes that institutional inclusivity culture serves as the foundational condition for creating supportive academic environments. An inclusive institutional culture is characterized by equitable policies, fair treatment, respectful interactions, meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and recognition of diverse perspectives. Such environments provide the structural and cultural conditions necessary for faculty members to feel valued and respected within their institutions. Within inclusive institutional cultures, faculty members are more likely to experience psychological safety, defined as the confidence to express ideas, concerns, questions, and personal needs without fear of embarrassment, stigma, or negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is particularly important in higher education environments where faculty operate within systems characterized by evaluation, accountability, and professional scrutiny. Institutions that foster psychological safety encourage open communication, collaboration, and innovation while supporting faculty wellbeing and professional engagement. Alongside psychological safety, the framework incorporates neurodiversity inclusivity as a critical dimension of contemporary higher education environments. Neurodiversity recognizes natural variations in cognitive functioning and working styles, including ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and other diverse neurological profiles (Doyle, 2020). Institutions that

promote neurodiversity inclusivity acknowledge and value cognitive diversity, reduce stigma, provide flexible support systems, and create environments in which neurodivergent faculty members can participate fully and contribute effectively. By fostering awareness and acceptance of diverse cognitive approaches, institutions enhance creativity, innovation, and organizational adaptability. The framework further proposes that psychological safety and neurodiversity inclusivity strengthen faculty members' sense of belonging and perceptions of institutional support. Faculty who feel accepted, respected, and supported are more likely to develop stronger emotional connections to their institutions and perceive their workplaces as responsive to their professional and personal needs. These experiences contribute to higher levels of organizational commitment, professional satisfaction, and engagement. Faculty belonging and institutional support are expected to positively influence wellbeing, engagement, and retention. Faculty members who experience inclusive and supportive environments are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of motivation, collaboration, productivity, and professional commitment. These outcomes contribute directly to institutional effectiveness through improved teaching quality, research productivity, innovation, and organizational performance. At the broader level, the framework links institutional effectiveness to nation-building outcomes. Higher education institutions contribute to nation building through the development of human capital, promotion of social cohesion, advancement of knowledge, and strengthening of institutional trust. Inclusive academic environments support these outcomes by ensuring that faculty members are empowered to contribute fully to teaching, research, mentorship, and institutional development. Consequently, faculty inclusivity is conceptualized not merely as an organizational concern but as a strategic contributor to national development and societal wellbeing. The framework also aligns with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. By promoting faculty wellbeing and psychological safety, the study contributes to SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing). Through the creation of inclusive academic environments, it supports SDG 4 (Quality Education). By fostering equitable and supportive workplaces, it aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Neurodiversity inclusivity and equitable participation contribute to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), while fair and inclusive institutional cultures support SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Finally, the comparative nature of the study, involving Oman and Europe, aligns with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by promoting international collaboration and knowledge exchange. Based on this framework, the study proposes that institutional inclusivity culture positively influences psychological safety and neurodiversity inclusivity, which in turn enhance faculty belonging and perceptions of institutional support. These factors are expected to improve faculty wellbeing, engagement, and retention, thereby contributing to institutional effectiveness and broader nation-building outcomes. Furthermore, the study anticipates that differences may exist between Oman and European higher education institutions regarding faculty perceptions of inclusivity, psychological safety, neurodiversity awareness, and institutional support due to variations in policy development, organizational culture, and higher education systems. Data will be collected through an online questionnaire consisting of six sections: workplace inclusivity, psychological safety, belonging, institutional support, neurodiversity inclusivity, and perceptions of nation building and sustainable development. The survey will include Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to capture both measurable trends and lived experiences. A stratified sampling strategy will be employed to ensure representation across institution types, academic ranks, and disciplinary backgrounds. Participation will be voluntary, anonymous, and subject to ethical approval procedures. Sensitive questions regarding disability or neurodivergent status will not be asked directly; instead, the study will focus on perceptions of institutional support and inclusivity. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, independent-samples t-tests, ANOVA, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. Comparative analyses will examine differences between Oman and Europe as well as between public and private institutions. Qualitative responses will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to inclusivity, neurodiversity awareness, belonging, psychological safety, and

institutional support. The study is guided by a conceptual framework proposing that institutional inclusivity culture positively influences psychological safety and neurodiversity inclusivity, which in turn enhance faculty belonging and perceived support. These factors are expected to contribute to faculty wellbeing, engagement, retention, institutional effectiveness, and ultimately nation-building outcomes.

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