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**The Effect of Inclusive Leadership on Innovation Strategy in  
Multicultural Workforces: A Study of the  
United Arab Emirates**

**Dr. Aisha Al Mansoori**



## The Effect of Inclusive Leadership on Innovation Strategy in Multicultural Workforces: A Study of the United Arab Emirates



**Dr. Aisha Al Mansoori**

College of Business and Economics, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, UAE



### Article history

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article was to analyze the effect of inclusive leadership on innovation strategy in multicultural workforces: a study of the United Arab Emirates.

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The study found that inclusive leadership has a significant positive effect on innovation strategy within multicultural workforces in the United Arab Emirates. Leaders who demonstrated fairness, openness, and empowerment created psychologically safe environments that encouraged employee voice, collaboration, and creativity. Inclusion practices were shown to mediate the relationship between workforce diversity and innovation outcomes, meaning that diversity alone did not guarantee innovation unless supported by inclusive leadership behaviours. Furthermore, organisations that institutionalised inclusive policies such as

transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and cross-cultural teamwork exhibited stronger innovation capabilities. The findings also revealed that larger firms and those with formal inclusion programmes achieved higher levels of strategic innovation compared to smaller firms with less structured inclusion efforts.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Social exchange theory (SET), The Categorization-Elaboration model (CEM), Dynamic capabilities view theory may be used to anchor future studies on the effect of inclusive leadership on innovation strategy in multicultural workforces: a study of the United Arab Emirates. Companies should design leadership development programmes that explicitly train managers to foster voice, psychological safety, and knowledge sharing across diverse nationalities. Policymakers should promote diversity and inclusion (D&I) reporting standards for both large firms and SMEs, linking compliance to innovation grants, tax incentives, or preferential procurement policies.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive, Leadership, Innovation, Strategy, Multicultural, Workforces*

## INTRODUCTION

An innovation strategy is a coherent and master plan that aligns a firm's or nations technological, financial, and human resources with its objectives to achieve long-term competitive advantage through the systematic development and commercialization of novel products, processes, and business models. In developed economies, this strategy is fundamentally characterized by substantial, sustained investment in formal Research and Development (R&D), robust intellectual property protection laws, and synergistic partnerships between high-caliber academic institutions and advanced industries. For instance, the United States exemplifies a technology-push and market-creating strategy, where corporate behemoths like Alphabet (Google) and Microsoft consistently top global R&D expenditure rankings; in 2022, U.S. business R&D expenditure reached an estimated \$711 billion, accounting for nearly 40% of the global total, a clear indicator of a strategic national commitment to dominating high-technology sectors (Battaglia et al., 2020). This approach is complemented by a vibrant venture capital ecosystem that funds high-risk, high-reward startups, ensuring a pipeline of disruptive innovations.

Similarly, Japan has historically pioneered a deeply integrated process-oriented and incremental innovation strategy, institutionalized through systems like the Toyota Production System, which emphasizes *kaizen* (continuous improvement), lean manufacturing, and total quality management to achieve unparalleled operational efficiency and product reliability. This systemic focus on honing manufacturing processes has been instrumental in allowing Japan to maintain its status as a manufacturing powerhouse, with the sector contributing approximately 20.3% of its GDP in 2021, significantly higher than the average for other G7 nations. The Japanese model demonstrates that strategic innovation is not solely about radical invention but can be powerfully driven by the relentless refinement of existing processes, ensuring global competitiveness in advanced electronics and automotive industries through superior quality and efficiency, a strategy now being emulated globally.

In developing economies, innovation strategy is often a pragmatic response to local constraints, diverging from the capital-intensive R&D model to focus on frugal innovation, adaptation, and the strategic leveraging of existing digital technologies to solve pressing socio-economic challenges. These strategies are typically characterized by extreme cost-effectiveness, high scalability, and a profound understanding of the unique needs and limitations of consumers at the base of the economic pyramid, often leading to solutions that bypass legacy systems entirely. A quintessential example is the digital finance revolution in India, catalyzed by the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), which created an interoperable, public-facing digital payments architecture; this platform processed over 74 billion transactions worth more than \$1.7 trillion in 2022 alone, dramatically enhancing financial inclusion and formalizing the economy by reaching populations underserved by traditional banks. This aligns with the concept of "frugal innovation" creating more business and social value while significantly minimizing the use of financial resources allowing nations to leapfrog stages of technological development (Pansera & Martinez, 2017).

Another paradigm is China's state-orchestrated strategic pivot from a reputation of imitation to a global powerhouse of indigenous innovation, driven by ambitious national industrial policies like "Made in China 2025." This comprehensive strategy involves significant state subsidies, mandates for intellectual property creation, and a focus on dominating critical future sectors such as artificial intelligence, 5/6G telecommunications, and electric vehicles (EVs). The success of this targeted approach is evident in China's rise to become the world's top filer of international patents through the Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT) and its dominance in the EV

battery supply chain, controlling over 70% of global production capacity. This demonstrates a sophisticated innovation strategy that combines state direction with market forces to build sovereign technological capabilities and reshape global value chains in its favor, moving decisively up the value ladder from manufacturing to innovation.

Innovation strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa is predominantly necessity-driven and defined by the phenomenon of digital leapfrogging, where mobile-centric, context-specific solutions are developed to address fundamental infrastructure gaps, particularly within the financial, agricultural, and health sectors. These strategies are frequently catalyzed by a burgeoning tech startup ecosystem and are almost entirely predicated on the pervasive adoption of mobile technology, which enables the bypassing of traditional and costly fixed-line infrastructure. The archetypal example remains Kenya's M-Pesa, a mobile money service that evolved into a comprehensive financial platform; by 2022, it had over 30 million active users in Kenya and facilitated transactions equivalent to over 87% of the country's GDP, fundamentally revolutionizing financial inclusion by providing secure savings, credit, and payment services to the previously unbanked, thereby saving users significant time and costs associated with travel.

Beyond finance, a critical strategic focus is on agricultural innovation, which is vital for economies where agriculture employs a majority of the workforce. Services like Hello Tractor, founded in Nigeria but expanding across the continent, exemplify this by providing smallholder farmers with affordable, on-demand access to smart tractor services via a smartphone-based booking app, effectively creating an "Uber for tractors" model. This innovation strategy directly tackles the chronic issue of low mechanization, which severely limits productivity and farm yields, by leveraging a digital platform to optimize the utilization of scarce capital equipment. These models highlight a strategic orientation towards leveraging mobile digital platforms to create inclusive, resilient, and impactful solutions tailored to local realities (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2021). However, these strategies often operate within fragile innovation ecosystems that face significant challenges, including limited access to scaling capital, unreliable electricity, and underdeveloped physical logistics networks, which can constrain their full potential and geographic spread.

Inclusive leadership represents a sophisticated and proactive leadership paradigm that moves beyond the mere demographic composition of diversity to actively create an environment of authentic belonging and leveraged difference. It is conceptually defined by a set of deliberate behaviors and a cognizant mindset where leaders demonstrate an unwavering openness to new ideas, a humility regarding their own limitations, and a deep-seated curiosity about the experiences and perspectives of others. This approach is fundamentally anchored in the leader's ability to foster two distinct psychological experiences within team members: a sense of belongingness, where one feels treated as an insider, and a sense of uniqueness, where one feels valued for their distinct skills and background (Shore et al., 2018). Core manifestations of this style include empowering employees through meaningful delegation and autonomy, ensuring equitable treatment and access to growth opportunities, and, most critically, cultivating a climate of psychological safety where interpersonal risk-taking such as proposing a half-formed idea or challenging a prevailing assumption is not just tolerated but actively encouraged. This comprehensive framework positions inclusive leadership not as a passive moral imperative but as a strategic enabler that unlocks the full cognitive and creative potential of a heterogeneous workforce.

The nexus between inclusive leadership and the successful formulation and execution of an innovation strategy is both causal and multi-dimensional. An effective innovation strategy

relies on a seamless pipeline encompassing ideation, development, implementation, and market adaptation, and inclusive leadership directly augments each of these stages through specific behavioral mechanisms. Firstly, the leader's role in establishing psychological safety is the bedrock of the ideation and creativity phase; it is the critical precondition that allows individuals to voice novel, unconventional, or disruptive ideas without the fear of embarrassment or reprisal, thereby dramatically expanding the organization's pool of potential innovations. Secondly, a leader's demonstrated humility and accessibility, which involves openly acknowledging their own knowledge gaps and actively soliciting input from all organizational levels and functions, directly enriches the problem-solving and solution refinement process, as it integrates a wider array of perspectives that can identify flaws and enhance the robustness of a new concept (Randel et al., 2018). Thirdly, the leader's commitment to empowerment and equity ensures that team members feel a genuine sense of ownership and psychological investment in new initiatives, which is paramount for securing buy-in and driving the successful implementation and adoption of new processes or technologies, overcoming the natural resistance to change. Finally, by consciously valuing and integrating diverse cultural and cognitive perspectives, inclusive leaders enable their teams to better anticipate global market needs, identify niche opportunities, and avoid groupthink, thereby directly strengthening the organization's strategic agility and new product development capabilities. In summary, within a multicultural context, inclusive leadership functions as the essential catalytic converter, transforming the raw, potential energy of a diverse workforce into the kinetic output of a dynamic, resilient, and successful innovation strategy.

### **Problem Statement**

The contemporary global business environment is characterized by rapid technological change and intense competition, compelling organizations to rely on innovation as the primary driver of sustainable competitive advantage. Simultaneously, demographic shifts and globalization have resulted in increasingly multicultural workforces, presenting both a challenge and a significant opportunity. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), with its exceptionally diverse demographic landscape where expatriates constitute nearly 90% of the population, epitomizes this global phenomenon (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2021). While this diversity offers a vast reservoir of perspectives, knowledge, and creative potential, its benefits are not automatic; diversity, without effective management, can lead to communication barriers, social fragmentation, and conflict, which ultimately stifle rather than stimulate innovation (Shachaf, 2008).

In response to this challenge, inclusive leadership has emerged in management literature as a critical antecedent for unlocking the performance benefits of diversity. Defined by behaviors that foster belonging, empower employees, and cultivate psychological safety, inclusive leadership is posited to create the synergistic environment necessary for teams to thrive (Randel et al., 2018). However, a significant gap exists in understanding the specific mechanisms through which this leadership style directly influences an organization's overarching innovation strategy within a complex, multicultural context like the UAE. Existing research has often examined these constructs inclusive leadership, diversity, and innovation in isolation or within Western contexts, whose cultural and institutional frameworks differ markedly from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region (Al-Asfour et al., 2022).

Consequently, it remains unclear how inclusive leadership behaviors translate into tangible innovation outcomes such as enhanced ideation, successful new product development, and strategic agility in the UAE's unique socio-cultural environment. This environment is shaped by a distinct national vision, a rapidly evolving economic landscape, and specific power-

distance dynamics that may influence the efficacy of inclusive practices. Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the critical lack of empirical evidence on the precise nature and strength of the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovation strategy within the multicultural workforces of the UAE. Without this understanding, organizations in the UAE and the wider GCC may be investing in diversity and innovation initiatives without the necessary leadership framework to successfully integrate them, risking strategic failure and the squandering of a significant competitive opportunity. This research seeks to bridge this gap by providing a contextualized model that elucidates how inclusive leadership can be systematically leveraged to fuel innovation strategy in one of the world's most dynamic and diverse economic hubs.

## **Theoretical Review**

### **Social Exchange Theory (SET)**

Originated by Blau (1964), the core theme of SET is that human relationships are formed through a series of reciprocal interactions and mutual obligations. The theory posits that when one party provides a benefit to another, it creates an obligation for the recipient to reciprocate in kind, fostering trust, loyalty, and commitment. Its relevance to this topic is direct, as inclusive leadership characterized by trust, empowerment, and socio-emotional support initiates a powerful positive social exchange. In the UAE's multicultural context, when leaders demonstrate inclusivity, employees feel a strong obligation to reciprocate through greater engagement, knowledge sharing, and discretionary efforts toward innovative activities, thereby directly fueling the organization's innovation strategy (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

### **The Categorization-Elaboration Model (CEM)**

The Categorization-Elaboration Model, advanced by van Knippenberg et al. (2004), provides a dual-process framework for understanding diversity's effects. The model posits that while surface-level diversity can trigger social categorization and intergroup bias, its primary potential benefit lies in stimulating "information elaboration" the thorough exchange, discussion, and integration of diverse knowledge and perspectives. This theory is critically relevant as it directly links team composition to innovation outcomes. Inclusive leadership is the key mechanism that mitigates the negative social categorization processes in the UAE's multicultural teams while simultaneously stimulating the positive information elaboration process, which is the very cognitive engine required for developing novel and effective innovation strategies (Guillaume et al., 2017).

### **Dynamic Capabilities View**

The Dynamic Capabilities view, articulated by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997), describes a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments. It focuses on the higher-level capabilities of sensing opportunities, seizing them, and transforming the organization. Its relevance to this topic is profound, as it frames a superior innovation strategy as an outcome of dynamic capabilities. In the dynamic UAE market, inclusive leadership can be viewed as a meta-capability that enables the firm to better sense diverse market opportunities through its multicultural workforce, seize them by integrating varied perspectives into strategic decisions, and transform the organization by fostering an adaptive culture, thereby building a resilient capacity for innovation (Khan & Khan, 2021).

## **Empirical Review**

Chaudhry, Paquibut, and Tunio (2025) investigated whether workforce diversity and inclusion practices, such as fairness, belongingness, uniqueness, and an inclusive climate, together with organisational characteristics including type, size, and industry, contribute to innovative climate development in the UAE. Using a cross-sectional quantitative design with survey data from 511 employees across multiple industries analysed through PLS-SEM, the study revealed that inclusion practices exerted a stronger effect on innovative climate than mere diversity levels. Larger firms demonstrated higher engagement in innovation, while inclusion mediated the link between diversity and innovation. The authors recommended that UAE organisations prioritise formal inclusion practices such as policies, belongingness interventions, and inclusive leadership training while policymakers incentivise diversity and inclusion (D&I) reporting and capacity building for SMEs to harness innovation benefits.

Agarwal and Gupta (2021) examined the relationship between leadership behaviours and organisational innovation in UAE-based firms, with a focus on how leadership styles influence strategic innovation outcomes. Employing a mixed-method approach that combined surveys of managers with follow-up semi-structured interviews, they found that leaders who practised inclusive behaviours, such as soliciting input, empowering diverse employees, and ensuring psychological safety, were associated with stronger innovation orientation and more effective integration of cross-cultural knowledge into strategic decision-making. Their recommendations highlighted the need for leadership development programmes that explicitly teach inclusive decision processes and structures for systematic knowledge integration across diverse nationalities.

Elamin (2024) explored how diversity management practices influence employees' innovative work behaviour in UAE service organisations, paying particular attention to managerial inclusivity as a driver of innovation. Using a quantitative survey of approximately 120 employees and mediation analysis, the study found that diversity management and inclusive supervisory behaviours increased employee engagement and knowledge sharing, which in turn significantly predicted innovative work behaviour. The paper recommended that HR professionals and line managers operationalise inclusion by establishing clear norms for voice and cross-cultural collaboration, while also measuring engagement and knowledge-sharing as key indicators for the effectiveness of innovation strategies.

A 2021 study on leadership as a driver of employees' innovation performance within the UAE university sector investigated transformational and transactional leadership alongside the mediating role of cultural diversity among 633 employees from public and private universities. Using SEM with AMOS-21, the findings revealed that leadership positively impacted employee innovation, with cultural diversity partially mediating this relationship. Importantly, effective leaders were shown to transform diversity into creative outcomes by practising inclusive and culturally sensitive behaviours. Recommendations from the study emphasised targeted leadership training in higher education, aimed at leveraging cultural diversity for research, curriculum innovation, and institutional policies that enhance cross-cultural team collaboration.

Al-Naqbi and colleagues (2024) studied the pathways for advancing women's leadership in UAE higher education, focusing on how inclusive leadership practices shape organisational change and innovation capacity. Drawing on qualitative interviews and policy analysis with Emirati women leaders and HR stakeholders, the findings demonstrated that inclusive leadership practices such as mentoring, sponsorship, and transparent promotion criteria not only advanced gender diversity but also enhanced organisational absorptive capacity for new ideas, particularly in pedagogical and programme innovation. The authors recommended the

development of institutional gender-inclusion roadmaps, mentorship ecosystems, and mechanisms to measure innovation outcomes tied to inclusive leadership objectives.

Massouti (2024) examined the implementation of Dubai's Inclusive Education Policy (DIEPF) through the lens of school leadership practices. Using semi-structured interviews with ten private-school leaders in Dubai, the qualitative analysis revealed that leaders who modelled inclusive behaviours such as adaptive curricula, stakeholder co-creation, and teacher upskilling fostered small-scale pedagogical innovations and improved utilisation of multicultural student data. The study recommended sustained professional development for school leaders, allocation of dedicated resources for piloting inclusive practices, and the establishment of monitoring frameworks that link inclusive initiatives to measurable innovation outcomes.

A sectoral synthesis of diversity and inclusion practices and organisational innovation (2021–2024) consolidated findings from multiple UAE-based studies. The synthesis confirmed that inclusion, particularly leadership practices fostering psychological safety, voice, and equitable processes, acts as the proximate driver converting multicultural workforce heterogeneity into strategic innovation outcomes. Evidence across surveys and qualitative field studies consistently pointed to the importance of embedding inclusive leadership into organisational strategies, including recruitment, performance metrics, and the establishment of cross-functional innovation teams. Moreover, short-term behavioural mediators such as employee engagement, knowledge sharing, and psychological safety were identified as crucial indicators of innovation readiness. Policy implications emphasised the importance of developing national D&I metrics and providing targeted support for SMEs to embed inclusive practices that enable scalable innovation benefits.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## **FINDINGS**

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps.

### **Conceptual Gaps**

Although existing studies highlight the critical role of inclusive leadership and diversity management in fostering innovation, conceptual limitations remain. Much of the research relies on inclusion as the sole mediator between diversity and innovation, with insufficient attention to other potential mediators and moderators such as organizational culture, digital transformation, or knowledge management. Furthermore, innovation has often been measured in general terms such as innovative climate or employee innovation behavior without differentiating between incremental and radical innovation, or between process and product innovation. There is also a lack of theoretical integration, with limited use of frameworks like dynamic capabilities, institutional theory, or social capital theory, which could enrich understanding. Finally, most studies are cross-sectional, leaving unexplored the longitudinal effects of diversity and inclusion on sustained innovation outcomes.

### **Contextual Gaps**

The reviewed studies are concentrated within specific sectors such as higher education, service industries, and private schools, leaving other critical sectors including manufacturing, healthcare, technology, and public administration largely underexplored. While attention has been placed on leadership and managerial practices, employee-level experiences of inclusion or exclusion and their direct influence on innovation remain insufficiently examined. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), despite being central to the UAE's economic development, have received little research focus regarding their capacity to adopt inclusive practices for innovation. Moreover, few studies address the gap between national-level diversity and inclusion policies and their practical implementation within organisations. Intersectionality, particularly how gender, nationality, and age interact to shape diversity innovation dynamics, is another neglected area.

### **Geographical Gaps**

Geographically, the research base is highly concentrated within the UAE, limiting regional and global comparability. Few studies have extended to other GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or Oman, where cultural and policy contexts are similar but organisational practices may differ significantly. Within the UAE itself, studies tend to focus on urban and economically advanced emirates like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, with limited exploration of the northern emirates, which may face distinct institutional and organisational challenges. Additionally, most research is centred on the private sector, overlooking innovation and inclusion practices in the public sector. Comparative studies benchmarking UAE organisations against global best practices in inclusive leadership and innovation remain scarce, creating a need for cross-national perspectives.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

This study underscores the pivotal role of inclusive leadership in shaping innovation strategy within multicultural workforces in the United Arab Emirates. Evidence across organisational contexts reveals that leaders who foster fairness, belongingness, voice, and psychological safety are more effective at translating workforce diversity into innovative outcomes. Inclusive leadership not only mediates the relationship between diversity and innovation but also enhances employee engagement, knowledge sharing, and cross-cultural collaboration factors that are essential for sustaining competitive advantage in a rapidly evolving global economy. Importantly, the findings highlight that inclusion is not merely a complementary practice but a strategic necessity for harnessing the potential of a heterogeneous workforce.

From a practical perspective, organisations in the UAE should prioritise embedding inclusion into leadership development programmes, HR practices, and performance systems to ensure that diversity is systematically leveraged for innovation. At the policy level, initiatives that incentivise diversity and inclusion reporting, particularly among SMEs, could strengthen national innovation capacity. Overall, the study contributes to both theory and practice by demonstrating that inclusive leadership is the proximate driver that enables multiculturalism to yield strategic innovation benefits, positioning it as a cornerstone for sustainable organisational growth in the UAE's dynamic business landscape.

### **Theory**

Future theoretical models should move beyond treating diversity and inclusion as static variables and instead conceptualise inclusive leadership as a dynamic capability that transforms workforce heterogeneity into innovation outcomes. This framework would formally incorporate constructs such as psychological safety, cross-cultural knowledge integration, and

belongingness as core drivers of innovation strategy, not just mediating factors. Scholars should refine and extend theories like Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Dynamic Capabilities View (DCV) to account for the UAE's multicultural context by theorising how “sensing” innovative opportunities arises from diverse perspectives, how “seizing” is enabled through inclusive decision-making processes, and how “transforming” is sustained through equitable structures of collaboration. To strengthen causal inference, longitudinal and multi-level studies should be conducted to track the co-evolution of inclusive leadership behaviours, employee engagement, and strategic innovation outcomes. Moreover, comparative research across GCC and emerging economies is required to build more generalisable theory on inclusive leadership and innovation in multicultural societies. These recommendations encourage the development of context-specific theoretical models that reject the simple application of Western leadership paradigms and instead integrate leadership studies, cross-cultural management, and institutional theory to better explain and predict innovation in heterogeneous workforces.

### **Practice**

For organisations, the findings emphasise the importance of embedding inclusive leadership as a strategic capability rather than a peripheral HR practice. Companies should design leadership development programmes that explicitly train managers to foster voice, psychological safety, and knowledge sharing across diverse nationalities. HR systems must integrate inclusion metrics into recruitment, appraisal, and promotion processes to ensure that innovation benefits are systematically derived from workforce heterogeneity. Managers should establish cross-functional innovation teams that leverage cultural diversity as a resource for creativity, while SMEs in particular should be supported to adopt low-cost inclusion practices such as mentorship schemes, inclusive decision-making forums, and employee resource groups that enhance innovation outcomes. Furthermore, firms should invest in continuous monitoring tools (e.g., engagement surveys, innovation performance indicators) that track the effectiveness of inclusive leadership practices in driving both incremental and radical innovations.

### **Policy**

At the policy level, there is a need for national frameworks that incentivise inclusive leadership as a lever for innovation capacity building. Policymakers should promote diversity and inclusion (D&I) reporting standards for both large firms and SMEs, linking compliance to innovation grants, tax incentives, or preferential procurement policies. National leadership academies and higher education institutions should integrate inclusive leadership training into executive education, particularly for sectors prioritised in the UAE Vision 2031 agenda. Policies should also encourage public–private partnerships that pilot inclusive innovation practices, particularly in under-researched industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, and education. Finally, policymakers should develop benchmarking systems that allow UAE organisations to compare their inclusive leadership and innovation practices against global best practices, while adapting them to the unique socio-cultural context of the Gulf region.

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