

## Article

# The Mediating Effect of Perceived Institutional Support on Inclusive Leadership and Academic Loyalty in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Globally, people have a rising desire to obtain certificates, degrees, and diplomas in higher institutions, described as “diploma disease”. Additionally, the need for sustainable education becomes imperative as globalization increases. To meet these demands, there is a need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to have adequate support for both students and academics. However, these HEIs are faced with the challenge of meeting set goals and values. For leaders in HEIs, inclusion is a critical challenge. This paper investigates perceived institutional support’s (PIS) role in mediating the co-relationship between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership within HEIs. The study presents a literature review to give some background. This paper’s conceptual framework is built on PIS from social exchange theories. Based on the design, a quantitative survey was adopted for the study. A random sample of 402 academics in HEIs was deployed for the study. A questionnaire instrument was designed to elicit information from the respondents. A structural equation model (SEM) was then adopted for the data analysis. The SEM approach was utilized to investigate the connection between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership at HEIs, with the mediating factor of PIS. The findings reveal a positive relationship exists between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership. While PIS positively connects both, there is also an inference that institutional support exists. This study provides insights that could assist stakeholders in formulating policies on employee needs and what could be done to improve and attain sustainable education in HEIs. It highlights applicable impacts towards increased productivity in HEIs, reflecting achieved targets regarding key performance indicators (KPI) and improved institutional performance.

**Keywords:** academic loyalty; higher education institution; inclusive leadership; institutional performance; key performance indicator (KPI); leadership; perceived institutional support; policy; structural equation modelling; sustainable higher education; teacher support



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## 1. Introduction

The need to attain sustainable education becomes imperative as globalization increases. This trend has also been an attempt to meet education goals set by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) [1–3]. More so, there is a rising desire to obtain certificates, degrees, and diplomas from higher institutions. This attitude leads to a situation

termed the “diploma disease”, as described by Alam [4]. Whether the rising aspirations and demand to acquire these certificates could bring about sustainable education is still debatable [4]. Despite this, it is believed that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been confronted with increasing difficulties in upholding their values, meeting set goals, and achieving their objectives [4–6]. These challenges could be due to the increasing volatility of the global financial environment, multiculturalism, internationalization, migration, employment demands, rise in international competition, and privatization [7,8]. Kezar and Holcombe [9] also identified the factors that influence the drive into HEIs, including partnerships, greater accountability pressure, new technologies, an increase in prospective students, cross-border academic mobility, the need for shifting demographics, and new business models. With these challenges, HEIs need a new form of leadership to propel their institution’s vision, mission, and purpose towards ensuring they adhere to their values and can achieve their goals and standards.

One metric that is used by the leadership of various institutions includes defining key performance indicators (KPI) which help in measuring the employees’ performance as well as the institutional performance. It defines various targets, measurable tasks, and timelines for the indicators. To ensure inclusivity, there are usually discussions conducted between the leadership and the employees; thus, KPIs can enable inclusive leadership. Leadership has remained an important factor influencing value, standards, productivity, and performance in HEIs [10]. However, the review of leadership studies in higher education (HE) reveals that most of the discourse on leadership is not only interpreted by academics in different forms, but its approach in the sector has predominantly been a top-down approach [11,12]. Unfortunately, this top-down leadership approach is counterproductive and misaligned with the myriad of current issues facing today’s HEI, as leaders in the sector seemingly forget they are to provide both managerial and intellectual leadership. Alam [12], based on a case study in Malaysia, discussed the leadership models in privately run HEIs. They were considered enterprise-style leadership because they are highly centralized, making them unsustainable in an HE environment. The increasing focus on leadership in HEIs to achieve sustainable higher education has escalated the need to investigate how leadership styles in HEIs affect the academics in their institutions [13,14].

Different leadership models could be formed in educational settings, mainly where a managerial approach exists [12,15]. As a result, there is a need to ensure that educational leadership is not just encouraged but also sustainable. To promote this, managerial leadership should be involved in running the affairs of education and developing policies that can help manage the challenges that may face sustainable education [12,15]. One example of managerial leadership required to attain global educational best practices is loyalty and support toward academic institutions, students, and staff [16]. The greater focus of leaders in HEIs has been on providing managerial leadership, with little emphasis on the intellectual aspect. This helps stakeholders develop greater abilities to acquire knowledge and evolve in complicated environments. This also enables these stakeholders to learn more about the HEIs and adapt to the practices unique to their institutions. Thus, it breeds a more approachable set of stakeholders that could also provide necessary institutional support to the employees, which also requires a deeper understanding of the organizational culture of the HEI.

Organizational behavior studies have argued that intellectual leadership further creates inclusiveness and inclusive leadership, and relevant stakeholders can innovate and change flexibly by using quality management processes [17,18]. With intellectual leadership, the leader, through their position, delegates authority to make changes and, through inclusiveness, create a culture that supports the cross-functional sharing of ideas that build institutional memory and create co-ownership of institutional and departmental goals and strategies [19]. As a result, if leaders in HEIs adhere to their responsibility of providing both managerial and intellectual leadership by promoting inclusiveness and adopting it into their leadership style, institutions will have an increased tendency to surmount some of their challenges when academics are highly satisfied and loyal. According to Elegido [20],

an employee's loyalty is defined as their conscious commitment to serve the greater good of the organizational structure, regardless of whether doing so may involve sacrificing some component of their self-interest apart from what would be needed by their corporate or contractual duties as well as additional responsibilities. In other words, an employee's loyalty goes above and beyond what their employers require, both legally and morally. Moreover, the literature has identified some underlying factors that affect employee loyalty, directly or indirectly related to the organization's achievements and performance [21]. These include available career development and upgrading, motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic), job security, leadership support from supervisor/mentor/team members, and the organization's internal and external working environment [21,22]. So, the question is: can the leadership affect the HEI's output?

In light of this context, this investigation aims to carry out an empirical study on the relationship between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership in order to understand the support employees receive in HEIs. This research seeks to expand the understanding of perceived institutional support's (PIS) role as a mediator concerning academic loyalty and inclusive leadership. This article is outlined in the following order: Section 1 introduces the study, while Section 2 gives the background of the theory with some literature reviews and the research hypothesis. Section 3 provides the methodology, while Section 4 presents the results of the findings. Section 5 gives some discussions, while Section 6 covers the concluding remarks.

## 2. Theory

In this section, the theory behind this investigation is presented.

### 2.1. Conceptual Framework

Higher education is receiving increased attention, with more people seeking qualifications at HEIs. Furthermore, this trend can largely be attributed to trying to meet education goals set by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly in higher education [2,23,24]. Despite this, these higher education institutions (HEIs) struggle to uphold their values and achieve global objectives [8,25,26]. Some of the reasons for these challenges are the lack of structural or institutional support received in HEIs, thus the need for the present study.

An earlier study identified an important aspect of student learning based on institutional support against the teacher's emotional support, seen through the mediating roles of perceived competence, autonomy support, and peer relatedness [27]. Similar study by Granziera et al. [28] considered the mediating effect (or role) which the perceived instrumental support as well as perceived emotional support from teachers in elementary schools, have towards students in terms of student engagement, academic buoyancy, and academic skills of the students using similar perceptual support approach. In another study, Yano et al. [29] looked at the perceived social support (PSS) received at the HEIs using a questionnaire obtained at a university campus to evaluate the safety perception using the multidimensional scale approach. In addition, recent studies investigated the impact of emotional support from the teachers on the students, which was described as perceived institutional support, as it helps improve their academic skill development, participation, and buoyancy [29–31].

Relevant studies have shown that academics who are emotionally committed to their institutions show heightened performance in teaching and research engagement, low absenteeism, and a reduced tendency to move to another institution [32]. As a direct result of this, academics are becoming more conscious of the level of commitment shown by their higher education institution (HEI) towards them in terms of approbation, compensation, accessibility towards library sources, accessibility to necessary information, new prospects, promotions, respect, values, and other types of assistance required for performing exceptionally well in their respective professions. It is noteworthy to add that the development of higher education has been supported by various organizations that promote quality guide-

lines for higher education [33–35]. These organizations support higher education, provide regular updates on higher education, and enhance the developments being made in HEIs, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [36–38] and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [39–41]. Given this present study, the recent recommendation of UNESCO includes having a market-based and decentralized system in HEIs so that the educational system has a more flexible structure [42,43]. However, this present research seeks to consider adaptable theories to support it.

This study, therefore, builds on organizational support and social exchange theories as designed by Blau [44] and Eisenberger et al. [45], two earlier organizational management theorists. While organizational support theory (OST) presumes that, in “determining the organization’s readiness to reward increased work effort and to meet socioemotional needs, employees develop global belief concerning the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being” [45], social exchange theory (SET) presumes that “people do not only maintain a relationship for personal interest but for friendship and the interest of the organization” [44]. Additionally, the SET assumes employees will trade under the norm or reciprocity on dedication and effort for physical and socio-emotional returns based on the relationship exchange with the employer/manager/leader [21,35,44]. Due to this, within the HEI context, where academics find leadership to be inclusive, they can perceive leadership support to achieve their physical and socio-emotional needs. The academics, based on SET, will most likely reciprocate the effort of the employer/manager/leader with a loyalty that will benefit and be in the organization’s interest.

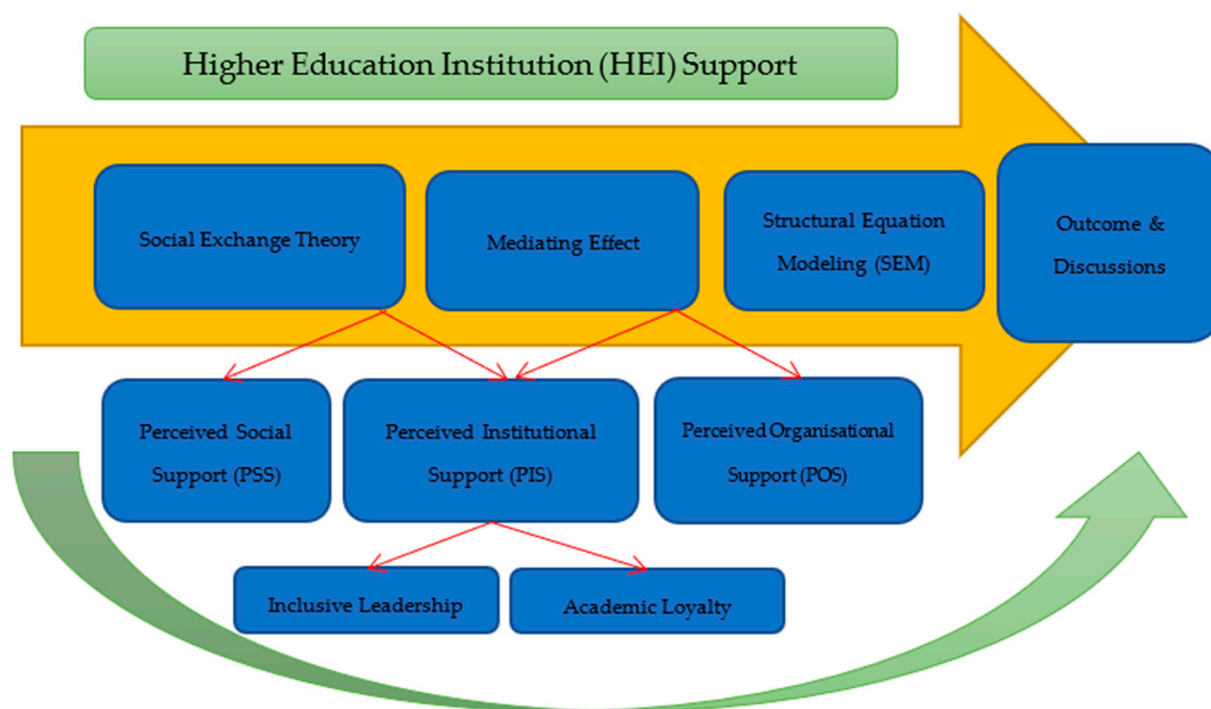
The literature indicates that according to the OST, “the development of perceived organizational support (POS) is encouraged by employees’ tendency to assign the organization humanlike characteristics” [45]. Therefore, on a contextual basis, this study introduces the terms “perceived institutional support (PIS)” and adaptation of the “POS” by focusing on HEIs. The HEIs are considered differentiated forms of organizations acknowledged globally as part of an overall national innovation system where numerous theoretical, empirical, and normative questions emerge as knowledge, an asset needed for production [46]. Additionally, HEIs, like most organizations, rely on diverse and multidisciplinary individuals with various degrees of knowledge-based assets. However, they are more involved in developing, producing, and disseminating knowledge [11]. As a result, this differentiates academics from employees because their scholarly background and HEI engagement in learning, teaching, and research activities identify primarily with their individuality and not the HEI [14]. As such, the approach utilized here is considered.

Based on the present study, the effectiveness of structural equation modeling (SEM) has been validated because related studies on leadership, organizational culture, change management, and teaching methods in academic settings have utilized SEM to identify the effect of various factors on the system [47–50], as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Themes for validating the structural equation modeling (SEM) in the study.

S/N	Themes	References
1	Leadership	[47,48]
2	Organizational Culture	[48]
3	Change Management	[48,49]
4	Teaching methods	[50]

However, there is a gap in applying this structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to perceived leadership in HEIs, which warrants the present study. In this research, the conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1, showing the perceived institutional support (PIS) from social exchange theories.



**Figure 1.** The study's conceptual framework is based on the adopted theories.

## 2.2. Inclusive Leadership and Academic Loyalty

Leadership is all about relationships. It is a continuous process of collective acquisition and knowledge exchange between leaders and subordinates [51]. However, most of the management and leadership research in HE is grounded in psychological and behavioral approaches that underestimate the dynamics of power and politics in shaping perception and enacting leadership [52]. The review of relevant literature indicates HE leadership is “an instrument to support ‘planning’, ‘development’, ‘implementation’ and ‘evaluation’ of academic work to achieve ‘excellence’ in the performance” [53]. Therefore, it can be concluded that the paramount role of leaders in the HE environment is to inspire their fellow academics to do groundbreaking studies, reach the highest standards of teaching, and produce innovative outputs.

Furthermore, it has been identified that a good leader must be adaptive to specific situations and the subordinates’ needs to achieve a higher degree of effectiveness in meeting their individual and organizational goals [54]. HE leaders must be able to invigorate and energize their subordinates in both managerial and intellectual situations to get them actively involved in the collective processes, activities, and actions that will ensure adequate performance and quality standards in the institution. While the relationship between leadership, employee performance, and satisfaction has been documented extensively across various organizational sectors [55], our review of available literature indicates that no study has investigated the impact of inclusive leadership in HE that may influence academic loyalty.

An earlier study presented at an education conference by Gbobaniyi and Srivastava [16] considered two control variables in the institutional case of HEIs, which made a precursor for the present study based on the mediating effect of Perceived Institutional Support with inferences to be made on both academic loyalty and inclusive leadership from comparative analysis. However, this present study explores it in more detail. Studies in organizational behavior on leader-subordinate relationships identified that leadership breeds trust, thereby influencing employee performance, commitment, and satisfaction [56,57]. On the other hand, trust enables cooperative behavior, promotes a network-based approach, promotes more work outputs, and encourages problem-solving. In addition, trust lessens the likelihood of disputes, lowers the cost of transactions, makes it easier to organize ad



hoc groupings quickly, and encourages the development of efficient interventions for crises. Therefore, given that there is no universally agreed-upon definition of inclusive leadership, this study builds its definition of inclusive leadership in the literature as a form of leadership that guarantees team members are treated with respect and fairness, inspired to be innovative with the job, and can express their opinion even if it contradicts that of others or that of the organization [58]. Therefore, in the context of this HEI study, the authors argue that inclusive leadership is leadership that will foster the uniqueness of academics, strengthen their belongingness to the HEI, and influence academics to show support for the HEI's effort and contribution to their development [59]. However, available knowledge suggests that in the analysis of an inclusive leadership approach, its engagement and development in HEIs may exist in different forms and levels, including organizational or managerial leadership (executed through formal leadership positions), professional leadership (executed through upholding professional standards and performing in functional roles), intellectual and disciplinary leadership (expanding the boundaries of knowledge and conceptual understanding), personal leadership (based on credibility, charisma, expertise, and other qualities), team leadership (developed through collaborative agendas and working practices) and political leadership (building coalitions, networks, and social capital) [52]. Therefore, this study argues that with an inclusive leadership approach in HEIs, academics will have increased job satisfaction levels and loyalty because they are the primary and most-valued asset that brings about overall achievement and improvement to the institution [60–63].

On the other hand, academic loyalty can be described as an activity whereby some factors influence the attitude, thereby giving way for one's behavior to manifest. Building upon the definition of Allen and Grisaffe [64], we argue that academic loyalty is the mental condition that explains the relationship between academics and HEIs and affects their decision to remain in the institution. Existing literature discusses that in the past, once hired, academics saw their employment as a lifetime job, and managers also expected unstinted loyalty to the institution [65]. However, the idea of academic loyalty has transformed in academia with the start of globalization in HEIs, where institutions began to face restructuring due to internationalization, local and international partnerships, and relocations that have resulted in both the increase and downsizing of academics. The manifestation of the issues described earlier has brought about HEIs breaking the rules, where mutual obligations between HEIs and academics are being reconsidered and lifetime employment and devotion have become less expected. Moreover, it is known as "institution-hopping" as it is becoming something that is believed to be a common occurrence, and people who work in academia are always trying to improve their working circumstances and increase their remuneration. Metha et al. [65] indicated the internal and external dimensions of employee loyalty. The literature identified that the internal dimension of loyalty focuses on the emotional component (i.e., the feeling of caring, affiliation, and commitment), which is argued to be the dimension employers and managers must nurture and appeal to, while the external dimension is the way loyalty manifests itself (i.e., the behaviors that display the emotional component [65]).

Studies on organizational leadership and job satisfaction indicate a positive relationship between workplace climate, job satisfaction, and employee productivity when leadership is non-authoritarian, non-controlling, and supportive [66]. In simple terms, leadership impacts the employees' performance by cultivating an organizational atmosphere that people see as supportive of their growth and accomplishing their goals. Consequently, it is arguable that in environments where academics regard leadership as being non-authoritative, participatory, inclusion-based, and open to supporting teaching and research activities within that institution, there is a greater possibility for an increase in productivity. Furthermore, research has also shown that a 10% improvement in the perception of inclusion boosts employees' work attendance, heightens their value orientation, and increases their loyalty [58]. Following the discussion, it can be argued that when academics feel unvalued and the leadership is not open and non-supportive to their growth

goals and objectives, the likelihood of loyalty decreases, thus influencing the decision to transfer service by working with more HEIs. A further possibility is that they will need to switch to different HEIs where they perceive that support is more readily available. On the contrary, the likelihood of loyalty increases in institutions where the academic staff perceive themselves as valued and supported.

The literature review on global HEI rankings indicates that four main criteria are used to measure the ratings: quality of education, quality of faculty, research output, and academic performance [67]. Studies have indicated that HEIs may not be able to achieve good ratings and high rankings across these four main criteria if they do not provide the environment for their academics to be loyal to the institution [68,69]. In addition, Marconi and Ritze [70] indicated a positive relationship between an HEI's rankings and a list of factors that may impact the job satisfaction and loyalty of academics, including the HEI's expenditure per student, mission, size, and productive efficiency. The study emphasized that for an HEI to achieve productive efficiency, academics must have high job satisfaction and loyalty levels [70]. This has further generated arguments in the literature, as some studies have argued that the retention of academics, in essence, their loyalty to the HEI, is also positively related to an HEI's international outlook and influential ranking [61–63]. However, this study further argues that HEIs must ensure that leadership strategies are inclusive to promote academic loyalty, resulting in greater quality, a more global perspective, and a more influential ranking. Inclusive leadership helps to eliminate negative attitudes and views about race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle, socioeconomic class, age, language, religion, disability, and their intersections [71,72]. Available knowledge indicates that inclusive leaders foster an open and approachable environment for the workforce, ensuring that workers feel psychologically comfortable voicing views that frequently do not align with the organization's established norms [10].

This study's review of HEI-related literature indicates that most HEIs adopt institutional leadership; that is, leadership is based on constrained agency, influence, or negotiated power and typically uses a backward-leaning vision to remind them of their core values [73]. However, the institutional approach to leading in HEIs has been argued to be a reason many have continuously been faced with increasing challenges, i.e., academic retention because the management approach and strategies do not adequately consider the diversity of the academic workforce in handling concerns and issues of their academics [74]. The review of relevant literature indicated that while some participants were satisfied with the leadership approach of their HEIs, others felt the absence of inclusive leaders and suggested that "inclusive leadership should concentrate on changing the work environment through engaging the minority of the academic members to act as a diversity change agent" [75]. This study suggests that where HEIs ensure a shift to an inclusive model of leadership that recognizes the leader as a significant factor in influencing the academic's experience and satisfaction in the workplace, the use of such an approach will ensure efficient operations that provide positive work-related outcomes and improved loyalty [76]. Hence, the study posits that higher education institutions (HEIs) that promote inclusive leadership will have an increased inclination to have a greater rate of academic loyalty compared to those whose leadership strategies do not involve an inclusive approach.

This present study aligns with the relevant literature on a causal relationship between inclusive leadership and academic loyalty and argues within the HEI context that PIS will help identify the underlying mechanism and better explain the relationship between them [77]. This research will make contributions to the literature in four aspects. Firstly, although knowledge in the literature indicates that inclusive leadership depicts a positive relationship with job satisfaction and commitment, work engagement, innovative behaviors, and well-being [78–81], there is yet no research to have investigated the extent to which inclusive leadership in an HEI setting influences the loyalty of academics. Secondly, this study advances knowledge on the scope of inclusive leadership in an HEI context, which has been indicated to not be well studied [75,82]. Thirdly, with inclusion research still regarded as developing, it may be deemed to be at the infant stage [83], with limited

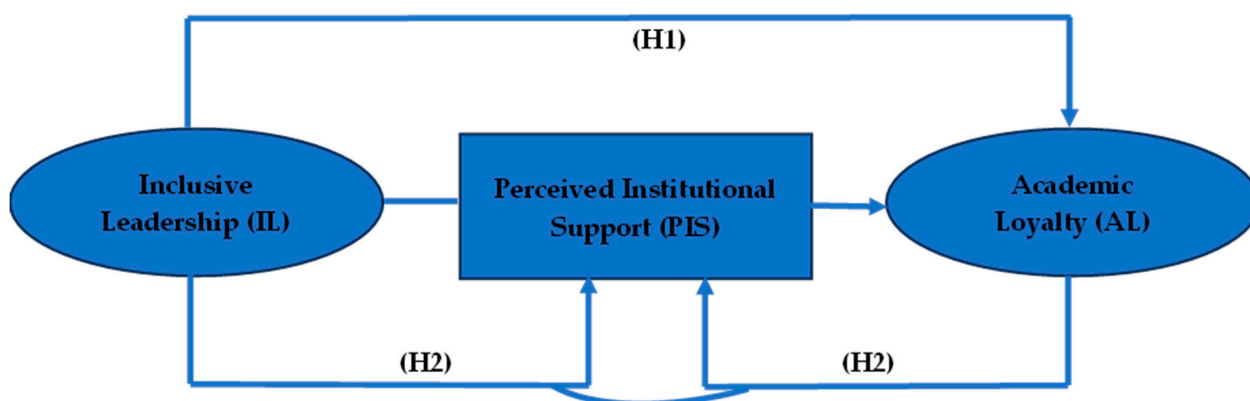
empirical research on inclusive leadership [84]. This study contributes to and advances knowledge on the effects of inclusive leadership and academic loyalty. Fourthly, the paper makes contributions and advances the work on Perceived Institutional Support (PIS) in a HEI setting. To that end, this investigation places the following two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *There are positive impacts of inclusive leadership on academic loyalty.*

In some HEIs, the literature review identified some studies that presented concerns that respondents shared and validated this hypothesis. The concerns include that they would have preferred having inclusive leadership in their institutions, as some colleagues get treated differently and disabled staff may not be fairly treated. The situations around such uneven treatment, unfairness, discrimination, etc., affect inclusion in HEIs. Additionally, there are issues of leadership having bottlenecks in the form of unnecessary bureaucracy for obtaining approvals for career advancements and professional development, as exists in developing nations. Other situations are the misuse of power or having an extreme rewards system in place, but relative to the locus. Though most existing studies in developing nations like Nigeria consider inclusive education but not inclusive leadership [85–87], there is a need to understand the relationship between inclusive leadership and HEIs. Thus, this hypothesis must be considered in this investigation.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *The effect of inclusive leadership on academic loyalty is positively mediated by perceived institutional support.*

The discussions made using this hypothesis have shown the usefulness of inclusive leadership in HEIs. However, a particular aspect regarding the influence of inclusive leadership on academic loyalty was not considered in detail, looking at previous studies by various authors in this subject area [88–92]. Thus, there is a need for this investigation to be conducted. Following the model developed for the study, the hypothesis was first tested and confirmed. Figure 2 illustrates this research's hypotheses and the connection between academic loyalty, inclusive leadership, and perceived institutional support.



**Figure 2.** Proposed conceptual framework based on the research hypothesis.

The literature search indicates that more studies are suggested to understand the subject. There is currently less relationship seen in Figure 2 as proposed in the analysis; as such, further analysis is considered in the Section 2.3. Moreover, it is unclear which descriptors are needed for the indirect effects of inclusive leadership on academic loyalty. Similarly, that description requires more literature review to support this hypothesis. Thus, the results may be complemented by presenting direct, indirect, and total effects [93,94], but they are suggested for further studies as they are not part of the scope of the present study.



Additionally, conducting a bootstrap analysis would be recommended to ensure the validity of the mediation effects [95]. However, it is noteworthy to add that other concerns were not contained in earlier studies but exist in real-life leadership scenarios. Based on the presentation by Bourke and Titus [58], inclusive leadership can be inferred to be that form of leadership that has the characteristics of guaranteeing that team members are treated with respect and fairness, inspired to be innovative with the job, and can express their opinion, even if it contradicts that of others or that of the organization. To support the theoretical model earlier presented, academic studies have been used to validate the theories considered on leadership in HEIs. Different supporting studies exist that theorize inclusive leadership at different levels [88,89,96], its antecedents, and outcomes [59,92], including concepts of inclusive leadership [10,90].

### 2.3. Does Perceived Institutional Support Have Any Mediating Effect?

It is important to note that this section is a guideline to which this study is bound. After developing a theoretical framework for the contextual understanding of perceived institutional support (PIS) for higher education institutions (HEIs) by utilizing the theory of organizational support (OS), this study contends that perceived institutional support (PIS) is the inclination of the academic to attribute a humanlike quality to the HEI. This is because the OS theory suggests that employees develop a broad sense of how much their employer values their contribution and is concerned about their well-being to satisfy socio-emotional demands and properly appraise the benefit of higher work effort [97]. Given the consequence of this, the authors of the study contend that academics will be more inclined to interpret the actions carried out by an “agent of the HEI” or leader as a sign of the goal of the HEI rather than attributing those behaviors or actions to the motives of that leader. This implies that the leader might act outside the ambit of the HEI’s procedure due to the leader’s motivations, or non-inclusive leadership style. This action may affect how academics perceive institutional support. As discussed earlier, available knowledge from relevant literature indicated that participants felt non-inclusive, as there was little or no substantial change in the work environment that engaged academic members [75]. Building on this knowledge, we further argue that the concerns of the academics could be seen as an instance in which higher education institutions use the financial, moral, and legal responsibilities that are theirs contractually to aid and abet the actions of the HEI agents called “leaders”, thereby encouraging behaviors that are not inclusive. This aligns with OS theorists’ claim that employees personify their organizations, as they view satisfactory or unsatisfactory treatment as an indication of how the organization values them [32].

Furthermore, building on the extant literature on the OS theory that addresses the psychological processes underlying the consequences of the POS and that of this study’s PIS, the study contends that the PIS produces a felt obligation to care for academics’ welfare, which will also help the HEI achieve its objectives [98,99]. Therefore, the study contends that care from a personal and welfare perspective, such as work enrichments like “health insurance”, salary or pay, and additional financial aid, are crucial from an academic’s point of view. From a theoretical viewpoint, academics also desire to receive support for boosting their career development, professional profiles, and skills development. This is because academics want to be recognized as experts in their field. Academics are looking for opportunities to conduct research and financing for such research to collaborate and form partnerships with other relevant organizations, institutions, or government authorities. This will allow academics to have more of an impact on broader areas of sustainable education. This will also cover environmental, economic, and social policies attuned to HEIs. Subsequently, if academics perceive a general belief regarding their HEIs’ commitment to them to help reaching their desired goals, there is an enhanced possibility for such academics to have a higher obligation to their work and be loyal to the HEI. This is because there is a correlation between academics’ perceptions of a general belief regarding their HEIs’ commitment to them for support and academics’ likelihood of being more committed to the job they do.

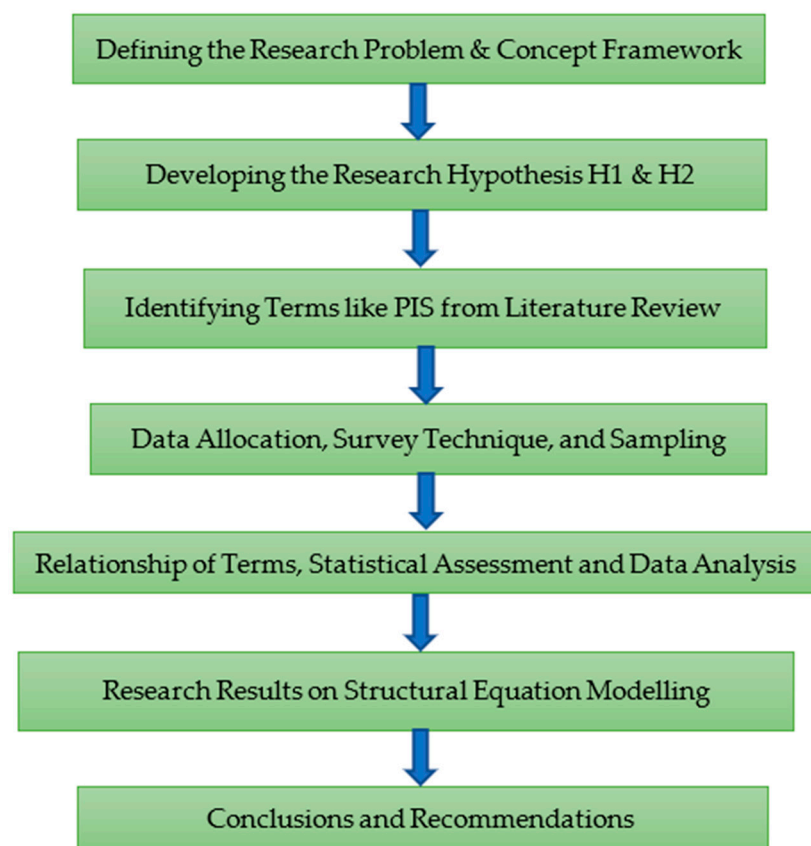
Secondly, this study contends that the PIS connotes approval and respect that fulfill academics' socio-emotional needs, allowing them to incorporate their membership in the HEI and its status into their social identity [100]. Furthermore, following knowledge from organizational learning literature, the study argues that PIS is a structure of organizational learning. The literature indicates that organizational learning refers to the process through which organizations create, acquire, and transfer knowledge to reflect new knowledge and ideas [101]. While Confessore and Kops [102] argued that a learning organization is characterized by teamwork, cooperation, innovation, and an information-based process, Jensen [103] contended that a learning organization ensures the continuous capacity to create knowledge by motivating employees to transfer information into new knowledge. The authors of this study, therefore, argue that only an HEI that promotes inclusive leadership will be able to have such characteristics and provide structures that ensure academics perceive institutional support through a formal system of training and development [96]. Additionally, an informal system could be provided for employees to share work advice in casual conversations, making management-based academics aware of both the leadership style and institutional support available to them [75]. Due to this, academics have the mindset that they are top achievers; as a result, they would like to be recognized for their performance and have a sense that they are valued within the institutions in which they work. When an academic perceives that the HEI recognizes excellence and provides necessary support towards achieving their goals, the likelihood of loyalty to the institution increases. Moreover, they will remain in their positions for longer and be pleased to claim the HEI as part of their societal identity to keep up with the demands of their professional or social circle.

Furthermore, this study argues that academics' conviction in the validity of the performance-reward system would be bolstered by PIS because, in a situation where an academic produces an excellent performance, the individual endows trust that the HEI will recognize and value such performance with a commensurate reward that motivates future performances. Where such performance-reward expectations are met, the particular and other academics in the institution become motivated toward ensuring excellence in their performance, and this will further increase their loyalty to the HEI. This aligns with what an earlier study found, which is that motivation lends any human action both support as well as meaning [104]. Where the appropriate substance is in place to motivate and support action, employees view such an organization's leadership as providing them with the environment to achieve not only the organizational goals but also those of the employees.

In the context of academics, they want leadership that guarantees support and a fair opportunity for their continuous professional development in teaching and research. Additionally, our position aligns with Vroom's Expectancy Theory, which assumes that the choice of work behavior is a function of the individual's expectations and assessments regarding potential rewards [105]. In this study, it was argued that academics expect to have a work environment that supports their efforts to achieve their long-term career goals, where the leadership is inclusive and acts as an instrumentality for openness, fairness, and respect. This study contends that when leadership is seen as inclusive, it fosters an open and approachable environment for the workforce, ensuring that workers feel psychologically comfortable voicing views that frequently do not align with the organization's established norms [10].

### 3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology is presented, and the flowchart for the investigation is given in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** The methodological flowchart for the study.

### 3.1. Data Samples and Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling technique was adopted for this study. The sampled respondents comprised full-time academics randomly selected through LinkedIn from different HEIs globally. Each participant with visibility that is aligned with a higher education institution stands a chance of being selected for investigation. A total of 642 academics were contacted and sent questionnaires to complete. While all the participants for this study were sourced through LinkedIn, as a preventative remedy for common method bias, the researcher requested follow-up interviews to understand how academics feel about loyalty to their respective HEIs, reduce the effect of their desire for consistency, and minimize the potential for common method bias [106]. However, only 78 participants (41 from the UK, 12 from the Republic of Ireland, 3 from Saudi Arabia, 4 from Egypt, 8 from South Africa, 1 from Germany, 6 from Canada, and 3 from the US) agreed to interact with the research team. Out of the administered questionnaires, only 402 (63%) were fully completed and returned and were found valid for data analysis. Notably, using the purposive sampling technique requires more information on the sample characteristics, such as institutional characteristics/disciplines and respondent background characteristics. This study gave details about the sample's response rates, and the sample characteristics are full-time.

### 3.2. Likert Scale and Criteria Setting

In this study, the scale used for measuring the data, coding the terms, and applying the statistical methods utilized were selected based on the key elements considered. To measure inclusive leadership, a nine-item inventory was developed by adapting Carmeli et al.'s [10] measure of inclusive leadership, aiming at assessing three dimensions of inclusive leadership: accessibility, openness, and availability. Several key questions, which included the respondents' choice of leadership, were based on a five-point Likert scale as "1—Definitely Inclusive"; "2—Somewhat Inclusive"; "3—Not sure"; "4—Somewhat Institutional"; and "5—Definitely Institutional". One of the questions that were asked

concerned the type of leadership that respondents said was displayed by the line managers (head of department, dean, or associate dean). The findings of our factor analyses led to the discovery of a one-factor solution with an Eigenvalue of 6.07, which explained the reason for the variance of 69.73%, as such variation was high for the factors, and it has a factor load range of 0.57–0.83. This measure received a score of 0.93 on the Cronbach alpha test, which is comparable to the score of 0.94 that Carmeli et al. [10] acquired.

To measure academic loyalty, an eight-item inventory was developed by adapting Matzler and Renzl's [55] measure of employee loyalty to assess the relationship between trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Several key questions were posed to the participants, including the respondents' length of service at their HEIs and the likelihood that they will remain with the institution. In addition, the respondents were posed the question of whether their chance of staying longer with the institution would be purely impacted by issues involving the HEI, or whether it would be solely influenced by concerns concerning its existing leadership. Applying the scale from 1 to 5, based on a similar five-point Likert scale, the responses were as follows: "1—less than 3 months"; "2—between 3 and 6 months"; "3—between 6 and 12 months"; "4—between 1 and 3 years"; and "5—more than 3 years". This measure had 0.89 as its value for the Cronbach alpha.

### 3.3. Research Tools and Method

In this paper, the research tools utilized were selected based on the measured factors considered. The research tools used for the analysis of the data were SMART PLS and Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) v26. The research method was presented following the American Psychological Association (APA)'s specified procedure [107]. However, this study was not preregistered and was based on the questionnaire data gathered.

To measure perceived institutional support (PIS), the authors developed a 12-item inventory by adapting an established Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) from earlier research [98]. This study adopted Rhoades and Eisenberger's [32] recommendation for its 12-item inventory compared to Eisenberger et al.'s [98] 36-item SPOS. As the original scale is unidimensional and has high internal reliability, the use of shorter scales will not be problematic. Given the consequence of this, the investigation transforms the constructs of POS onto those of PIS, and it makes certain that the aspects that define the concepts of POS and PIS (such as the academic work contributions made, the value of employees, staff recognition, and care) are reflected in the 8-item scale in the study's questionnaire that we used. Some examples of what is included are as follows: The contributions from employees to the HEI's overall performance and rating are valued, and the HEI is concerned about the employees' level of job satisfaction at the HEI, as well as taking steps to ensure that the employees have access to all the necessary resources for working. The researchers devised a Likert SCALE with five points, ranging from "1—Strongly disagree" to "5—Strongly agree", with the intention of rating respondents' opinions. In addition, we determined the PIS using the Cronbach coefficient alpha, and the value that we obtained was 0.89.

Based on Carmeli et al. [10], variables were selected for the present investigation. Thus, our study's variables included control variables, including respondents' age (using a four-item inventory), level of qualification (four-item inventory), and length of service (six-item inventory). The respondents' age was considered in this research because the authors hypothesize that older academics may have a greater propensity towards an institutional leadership style, while younger academics might have a greater propensity towards a leadership approach that is more inclusive in nature and inclination. The level of qualification (i.e., whether the respondents are bachelor-, master-, or doctorate-level degree holders) was controlled, as this study argues that academics with different educational qualifications behave differently. Academics with a relatively low educational qualification level might be more likely to look to institutional leadership for guidance. On the other hand, academics with a relatively high educational qualification level might be much more likely to adopt an inclusive leadership style. Based on the other factor, the length of service

was controlled, as the authors argue that while academics who have stayed longer with a particular HEI may not be bothered about the impact of leadership in the HEI, those who have stayed for a lesser number of years may easily become weary of the direction and impact of leadership towards their academic goals and achievements.

The SMARTPLS as well as Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 26 were utilized for the data analysis. To assess the validity and reliability of measurement scales, exploratory (i.e., varimax rotation) and confirmatory (i.e., Kaiser Meyer Olkin, Bartlett's test of sphericity, eigenvalues, variance explained, and Cronbach alpha) methods were used [108]. To assess the research variables and the suitability of the data set as a post-hoc technique to avoid the problem of the common method variance (CMV), correlation and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) marker techniques and descriptive statistics were conducted [109]. Based on the model for this article, SEM was utilized to estimate the research models. The study employed a two-way approach to SEM, where it assessed the construct validity using confirmatory factor analysis and then compared the sequence of nested structural models [110,111]. To remove the issues associated with using a single goodness-of-fit index in SEM [112], the study employed multiple goodness-of-fit indices [113]. To that end, the present investigation utilized measurements adapted from related references of organizational work and higher education settings (for instance, [10,32,55,98]).

#### 4. Results

The data in Table 2 show the findings conducted on a measurement scale for the reliability tests and validation tests. Following the guideline from Hair, et al. [114], the result of our statistical analyses indicated that (a) the value of factor analysis for all items that represented each variable was more than 0.5, indicating that the items were of the acceptable standard of validity analysis; (b) all research variables were above the acceptable standard of KMO test value of 0.6 and were significant in Bartlett's test of sphericity; (c) the Eigenvalue for all research variables was greater than 2 and the items for each variable exceeded factor loadings of 0.50 [114]; and (d) the acceptable standard of reliability analysis for all research variables exceeded 0.70 [54]. As shown in Table 2, the instruments used in this study were reliable, as they exceeded the acceptable level of 0.70, with Cronbach coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.84 [115].

**Table 2.** Findings of the reliability tests and validation tests conducted on the measurement scale.

Variables	Items	Factor Loading	KMO	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Eigen Values	Variance Expressed	$\alpha$ Coeff. Cronbach
Inclusive leadership (IL)	9	0.74	0.76	312.17 **	2.42	62.13	0.77
Academic loyalty (AL)	8	0.85	0.78	276.39 **	3.22	71.52	0.76
Perceived Institutional Support (PIS)	12	0.71	0.81	387.41 **	2.71	57.43	0.84
Age	4	0.82	0.75	209.13 **	3.41	64.88	0.79
Qualification level (QL)	4	0.69	0.73	294.15 **	2.15	75.19	0.81
Length of Service (LS)	6	0.77	0.86	338.84 **	2.56	69.12	0.72

Note: \*\* significant at 0.05 levels.

Table 3 gives the correlation made, reliability found, standard deviation obtained, and mean values. The values in Table 3 show the range of research variables that were considered in this investigation. According to the results of the bivariate correlations, inclusive leadership has a positive association with the two items, namely the loyalty of employees ( $r = 0.41, p < 0.01$ ) and their perceptions of the support of the institution ( $r = 0.03, p < 0.01$ ). Additionally, the findings indicated that an optimistic correlation existed



between employee loyalty and the degree to which institutional support is perceived by them ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 3.** Values on the correlation, standard deviations, and means.

Variable	Means	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6
IL	3.670	0.790	1					
AL	3.130	0.810	0.410	1				
PIS	2.780	0.720	0.030	0.220 *	1			
Age	36.130	7.090	−0.000	0.320 **	−0.060	1		
QL	3.770	0.880	0.050	0.020	0.010	0.330	1	
LS	8.460	4.610	0.110 **	0.360	−0.000	0.040	0.220 **	1

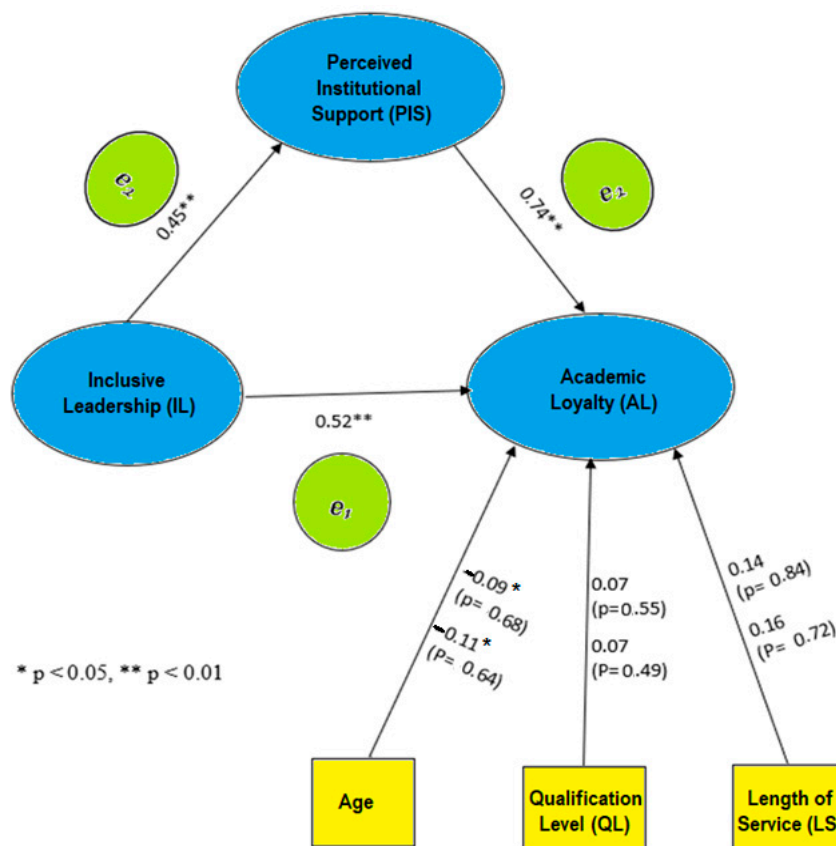
N—number of respondents = 402, S.D.—Standard Deviation, \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , type: two-tailed test.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), was applied to determine whether or not each measurement item was going to significantly unload onto the rating scales. This was done to provide further proof of the construct validity of the latent factors used in this investigation. Based on this CFA study, the findings of the entire CFA demonstrated an acceptable match with the available data, as RMSEA = 0.083; TLI = 0.926; NFI = 0.911; CFI = 0.932; GFI = 0.901; and CMIN/df = 2.774. This is based on the recommendation that CMIN/df must be less than 3 (i.e., CMIN/df < 3) and both values of CFI and TLI must be greater than 0.9 (i.e., CFI > 0.9; TLI > 0.9), RMSEA must be between 0.05 and 0.08, and the standardized coefficients from items to factors must range between 0.45 and 0.98 [108,116]. Additionally, the CFA revealed that each indicator variable's link with its corresponding construct was significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), demonstrating the hypothesized relationships between indicators and constructs and, thus, confirming convergent validity [117].

Based on this study, a comparison was made between the fit of the study's measurement model and another two-factor model, in which items measuring academic loyalty and inclusive leadership were added to one component, and questions measuring PIS were added to a second factor. At that stage, the fit of this model was somewhat low and much worse than the proposed three-factor model. The results were: RMSEA = 0.121; TLI = 0.820; NFI = 0.842; CFI = 0.834; GFI = 0.812; and CMIN/df = 2.023; both the CFI and TLI values are lower than 0.90 (i.e., CFI < 0.9; TLI < 0.9), while the RMSEA value is less than 0.05 (RMSEA < 0.05). We assessed a one-factor model for common method bias by using Harman's one-factor test for common method bias. In this model, all of the questions that measure inclusive leadership, academic loyalty, and perceived institutional support were combined into a single component. The goodness-of-fit analysis conducted on the model was not encouraging, just like the one before it, and it was even worse than the recommended three-factor model, with the following values: RMSEA = 0.162; TLI = 0.623; NFI = 0.683; CFI = 0.718; GFI = 0.791; and CMIN/df = 2.120. It is possible to conclude that the hypothesized three-factor measurement model had superior goodness of fit with the data compared to the two-factor measurement model and the one-factor measurement model. The results from the modeling of this study are presented in Figure 4.

Previous research that bore on this subject (such as James et al. [118]) examined the hypothesized mediating connection using several comparisons for the nested model. This is because mediating models using SEM allows for the analysis of complex models, control for measurement error, specification of relevant paths, and avoidance of under/overestimation of moderation effects ([119]). The first thing that was done was testing the hypothesized mediating model, in which the role of perceived in-institutional support (PIS) was specified as a mediator for the association between academic loyalty (AL) and inclusive leadership (IL). This model also includes the control factors for academic loyalty: length of service (LS), qualification level (QL), and age. In this investigation, these three variables were defined. The findings, which are presented in Table 4, suggest that the model provides a satisfactory

match to the data: CMIN/df = 2.768; GFI = 0.891; CFI = 0.919; NFI = 0.908; TLI = 0.923; RMSEA = 0.081.



**Figure 4.** Relationship between the measured models (where  $e_1$  is Hypothesis 1,  $e_2$  is Hypothesis 2, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 4.** Comparing different structural equation models and calculating the path coefficients to test the moderating models.

First Hypothesis Model ( $e_1$ )		Second Hypothesis Model ( $e_2$ )	
IL → AL	0.520 **	IL → PIS	0.450 **
-	-	PIS → AL	0.740 **
-	-	IL → PIS → AL	0.360 *
Age → AL	-0.09 ( $p = 0.680$ )	Age → AL	-0.11 ( $p = 0.640$ )
QL → AL	0.07 ( $p = 0.550$ )	QL → AL	0.07 ( $p = 0.490$ )
LS → AL	0.14 ( $p = 0.840$ )	LS → AL	0.16 ( $p = 0.720$ )
CMIN/df	2.7740		2.7680
RMSEA	0.0810		0.0810
GFI	0.9010		0.8910
CFI	0.9320		0.9190
NFI	0.9110		0.9080
TLI	0.9260		0.9230

The control variables (length of service, qualification level, and age) were linked to academic loyalty. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ . AL—Academic loyalty; PIS—Perceived Institutional Support; IL—Inclusive leadership. QL—Qualification Level; LS—Length of Service; CMIN/df—Chi-square goodness-of-fit statistic/degree of freedom; RMSEA—Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; GFI—Goodness-of-fit Index; CFI—Comparative Fit Index; NFI—Normed Fit Index; TLI—Tucker-Lewis Index.

The results of the hypothesized models have been shown in Figures 2 and 4, as well as in Tables 4 and 5. Based on the models that were hypothesized, the direct effect of the path was significant from IL to AL, with a value of 0.52 and a probability less than 0.01. The outcome of the hypothesized model lends support to Hypothesis 1, which says that inclusive leadership has a beneficial effect on academic loyalty. In addition, the findings demonstrated that the direct impacts of the pathways IL to PIs and PIS to AL correlated 0.45 while being significant at  $p < 0.01$ , as well as having a correlation of 0.74 and a significance value of  $p < 0.01$ , respectively. Both paths led to the same conclusion.

**Table 5.** Total, indirect, and direct effects.

	Standardized Coefficient	T-Statistic	Lower Bounds	Upper Bounds	<i>p</i> -Value
Direct effect					
IL → AL	0.52	3.43	0.31	0.52	0.01
IL → PIS	0.45	2.86	0.18	0.24	0.01
PIS → AL	0.74	4.35	0.36	0.55	0.01
Indirect effect					
IL → PIS → AL	0.36	2.07	0.09	0.17	0.01
Total effect					
IL → AL	0.78	4.63	0.38	0.57	0.01

Considering the recommendations made by Aboramadan et al. [75], the authors performed a calculation of the indirect effects using a 5000-bootstrapping approach at a 95% confidence level. This was done to test the mediating effect. Table 4 gives a rundown of the findings obtained in the present investigation. The findings indicated that perceived institutional support (PIS) significantly and positively mediated the connection between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership, with a correlation of 0.36, a significance level of  $p < 0.01$ , and a confidence range ranging from 0.09 to 0.17. This finding lends credence to Hypothesis 2, which states that PIS is a positive moderator of the relationship between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership. Finally, regarding the control variables, while age showed negative significance, both length of service and qualification level were positively significant towards both the direct and mediating effects. It is noteworthy to add that the pathways for modeling the variables using the hypothesis were included in an earlier study [16], which was used to calculate the path coefficients while testing the mediating effects of the moderating models.

## 5. Discussion

The primary goal of this investigation is to find out the mediating effect of perceived institutional support on inclusive leadership and academic loyalty, as well as the impact of inclusive leadership on academic loyalty. The results of this investigation indicate strong backing for each hypothesis, as the derived outcome indicates that inclusive leadership is significant as well as having a positive impact on academic loyalty. This result is supported by previous research that has identified that when leadership is open, participative, and inclusive, employees become satisfied and feel happy to stay and work for the organization, thus resulting in loyalty [21,120,121].

This study's theoretical contributions are based on the underpinning theories of the OST and the SET. There have been studies that have investigated the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee loyalty within an organizational setting [10], the relationship between interpersonal trust, employee satisfaction, and employee loyalty [55,122], and the relationship between job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee loyalty [21,64,123,124]. However, no study has been identified to investigate the aggregate connection between PIS, academic loyalty, and inclusive leadership within an HEI context.

This study contributes to the available studies showing that inclusive leadership, as a situational support factor, enhances academic loyalty. Furthermore, the study advances research with its theory-based development of the PIS in HEIs by examining its potential intervening role in the connection between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership. This study's findings may pique scholars' interest in the significance of perceived institutional support to increase academic loyalty in HEI settings in terms of leadership and management.

The institutional and managerial implications of this research will help the leadership of HEIs recognize the impact of the loyalty of their academics. The first institutional/managerial implication is for the HEI management to understand that the leadership approach is a factor that affects academic loyalty. Therefore, leadership in HEIs should adopt an inclusive mindset. Additionally, regarding the highly competitive nature of higher education institutions (HEIs) in attracting and retaining outstanding academics, the stakeholders are responsible for ensuring that academics regard these institutions as helpful to make them dedicated and loyal to their institution of higher education. This can be done through their representatives or by appointing departmental heads. Leadership styles and methods make a significant difference; consequently, departmental heads are responsible for ensuring inclusiveness because that enables academics to gain insight into the institutional support that is available and readily accessible to them. This will assure the academics that their accomplishments will be considered, the efforts they put in will be appreciated, and their students' support will be appropriately recognized.

Furthermore, HEI management requires loyal academics who will stay to help the institution pursue and achieve its vision, mission, and objectives. Based on the reciprocity of the relationship exchange and relationship between performance and reward of Vroom's expectancy, OS, and SE theories [105], academics also require HEI management to be open, participative, and supportive of them to achieve their individual growth goals. As a result, where academics identify that the HEI supports them in achieving their individual growth goals and objectives, they will also be loyal to the HEI to ensure that it achieves its vision, mission, and objectives. Secondly, the additional implication for management is the duty that those in charge of higher education institutions are obligated to give and demonstrate to academics that the working conditions satisfy the academics' needs by providing them with opportunities for their continuous professional development in teaching, learning, and research activities. This will ensure increased dedication, commitment to their job roles, and loyalty to their HEIs. This is because when academics are not satisfied with their working conditions and are not psychologically safe, as they cannot perceive institutional support, their work focus diminishes and the likelihood for them to move to another HEI increases, thus reducing loyalty. The third implication for HEI management is that, from an HE perspective, their students' success, progression, and retention are paramount. Therefore, HEI management must ensure they retain their academics as they become assets to the establishment and promote the institution's profile and recognition. HEI management should ensure they provide a competitive work package that will motivate academics to remain loyal.

Some of this investigation's limitations should be emphasized to create the potential for future investigation. Foremost is the selection of research samples randomly done using academics' LinkedIn profiles. The choice of academics indicates good diversity. However, they were unevenly selected from different countries. Due to this, this study's findings may suffer from generalization to HEIs in any of the individual countries. Second, another limitation of the investigation is the number of variables used: one dependent, one core independent, one mediating, and three control variables. The choice of variables has been identified by basing the existing studies central to related studies on loyalty. This study, however, assumes that other variables may also affect the relationship with academic loyalty, and other variables, like employee empowerment, are suggested for further study. Some themes related to the research variables are given in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Some themes related to the research variables.

S/N	Themes	References
1	Employee involvement	[10,123,125]
2	Job satisfaction	[54,126,127]
3	Job empowerment	[128,129]
4	Teaching methods	[130–133]
5	Learning methods	[134–137]
6	Bibliometric study on learning	[130–136]
7	Organizational culture	[18,48,138,139]
8	Mediating effect	[10,27–29,48,76,77,140]
9	Sustainable education	[12,15,24,26,86,141–143]
10	Sustainable leadership	[13–15]

The present study also posits that sustainable education would be enhanced by having institutional support and leveraging digital tools to achieve sustainability practices, i.e., smart building automation, building information modeling, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) as well as shifting most educational activities to the digital space [136,137,141,142]. Third, an in-depth analysis could be obtained by utilizing the mixed research method or by collecting qualitative data on how institutional support is perceived and its impact on inclusive leadership to influence academic loyalty. Finally, this study engaged academics from different countries to have a wider spectrum of HEI practices. The investigators suggest conducting another country-based research to further validate and corroborate the results of this investigation by replicating it in one country to compare it with the results of this study.

Thus, further studies on the aspects of inclusive leadership in HEIs that can be looked at can be localized to the European setting or the African setting. In the African environment, for instance, perceived institutional support can be applied to the leadership style, as seen within the Igbo setting in the eastern parts of Nigeria, with different recognized leadership styles, such as “Igwebuike” [144–146], which implies ‘strength in unity’ in Igbo language. Hence, future studies could be considered on various localities, countries, and ethnicities on inclusive leadership in HEIs. Additional areas to consider in future studies include the influence of KPIs and other metrics in measuring performance in HEIs, as well as preparing bibliometric studies in this area in relation to institutional support in HEIs.

Based on the control variables and the results, further studies should be conducted on the effect size of the coefficients obtained on the mediators. It is noteworthy to add that the research population was administered the questionnaires after the completion of the research instruments. As a result, it is recommended that future studies consider an alternative approach to the selection of respondents. Additionally, this study considers age a limitation because its effects were controlled. The study assumes the age of the respondents may influence loyalty and perception of institutional support based on their life experiences, thus considering age as an area to explore in future research.

## 6. Conclusions

With the rising desire for qualifications from universities and other HEIs, and the need to attain sustainable education as globalization increases, it becomes imperative to understudy the institutional support in higher education institutions (HEIs). This investigation explores the impact of perceived institutional support on academic loyalty and inclusive leadership in HEIs. Perceived institutional support was theorized to serve as a mediating variable in the correlation between inclusive leadership and academic loyalty. Using the sampled global academics randomly selected online from different HEIs through LinkedIn, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to assess the suitability of



the dataset and the research variables. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to estimate the relationship between the models. The study's findings provided evidence in favor of the first hypothesis of the research, which stated that inclusive leadership has a favorable effect on academic loyalty. Similarly, the research outcomes provided evidence to support the second hypothesis, which stated that perceived institutional support has a mediating beneficial impact on the influence of inclusive leadership on academic loyalty. According to the findings, a positive relationship exists between academic loyalty and inclusive leadership. While a positive association exists between PIS and academic loyalty and inclusive leadership, there is also an inference that institutional support exists.

The contributions made to knowledge from this study are given herein. The results of this investigation are helpful to every HEI stakeholder in formulating policies to improve upon, having applicable impacts with increased productivity, achieving targets in terms of key performance indicator (KPI), and improving institutional performance. This study is useful to stakeholders in higher education institutions (HEIs) in formulating relevant policies to improve the productivity and performance of their institutions. This paper is of high significance as it presents an original work on applying SEM to investigate the influence of perceived institutional support on academic loyalty and inclusive leadership in HEIs. It portrays areas where teacher support can be enhanced to improve institutional performance, thereby meeting the KPIs. Policies on sustainable higher education can also be considered from the perspective of the HEI employees to enhance the teaching profession. Additionally, the originality of this study indicates that the role of perceived institutional support for academics is significantly important and provides valuable support for academics to overcome their professional developmental challenges. As a result, rather than continuing to focus on the performance and productivity of academics, stakeholders in HEIs should refocus on the leadership structures, patterns, and styles to ensure academics are aware of the support available to them for their development, which will encourage their loyalty and retention to the institution.

The study also presents some limitations, highlighting the need for future research opportunities. Firstly, the selection of research samples was randomly done using academics that have profiles on the professional social media platform, LinkedIn. The choice of academics indicates good diversity; however, they are unevenly selected from different countries. Due to this, the results of this investigation may suffer from generalization to HEIs in any of the individual countries. Secondly, another limitation of this investigation is the number of variables used: one dependent, one core independent, one mediating, and three control variables. Thirdly, examining the behavior in one country rather than many countries could be investigated in further studies. Fourthly, collecting qualitative data or engaging in a mixed research method would provide an in-depth analysis of how institutional support is perceived and its impact on inclusive leadership to influence academic loyalty. Fifthly, further study is recommended on the mediating effect which the perceived support has on student retention in HEIs. Lastly, future research is recommended in applying SEM using other learning, research, and training variables in HEIs.

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