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Designing an Innovative Human Resources Model in Higher Education Institutions in Iraq

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Abstract

The present study aims to design an innovative human resources model in higher education institutions in Baghdad. The study is applied in terms of its objective and utilizes a survey method. The research follows a qualitative approach. The statistical population of the study is divided into two general categories: (1) academic experts (professors in the field of public administration at universities in Baghdad) and (2) higher education managers in Baghdad (with a minimum of 10 years of managerial experience). The statistical population for conducting indepth interviews in the qualitative section was selected using a non-probabilistic purposive sampling method from among academic experts and managers of higher education institutions in Baghdad. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The research instrument in the qualitative section was interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The research findings indicate that five dimensions were extracted in the qualitative section, including (1) determining innovation strategies, (2) developing an organizational structure based on innovation, (3) enhancing organizational human capabilities through innovative behavior. (4) developing innovative systems and processes, and (5) enhancing organizational human capabilities through innovative behavior. The study recommends designing and implementing systematic training programs focused on improving creativity, problem-solving skills, and innovation. The study suggests implementing programs that include creativity workshops, idea exchange sessions, and training courses related to new technologies.

Keywords: Innovation, Human Resources, Innovative Human Resources, Higher Education Institutions.

1. Introduction

Strategic management literature identifies innovation as a crucial and vital factor for organizations, viewing it as essential for creating value and sustaining competitive advantage in today's complex and dynamic environment. Organizations with higher levels of innovation are more successful in responding to changing environments and developing new capabilities that enable them to achieve superior performance (Jotabá et al., 2022). The significance of human resource development in the context of higher education cannot be overstated. Faculty members, administrative staff, and institutional leaders must possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes aligned with the institution's mission to achieve academic excellence. Conversely, the critical role of communication, both internal and external, emerges as a key determinant in fostering a conducive

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environment for institutional growth and advancement. Beyond individual competency acquisition, the collaborative and effective exchange of ideas, information, and feedback within the educational community becomes central (Yang, 2023).

Innovation initiatives and actions are increasingly dependent on employees' knowledge, expertise, and commitment as inputs in the value creation process. Human resource practices serve as primary tools and methods through which organizations can influence individuals' skills, attitudes, and behaviors to perform their tasks and achieve organizational objectives (Aftab et al., 2023). The general policies of administrative systems in various countries emphasize fostering morale, innovation, creativity, and the dissemination of a culture of continuous improvement to enhance administrative dynamism. Employees are a critical source of innovation in most organizations, contributing an estimated 80% of new ideas (Kutieshat & Farmanesh, 2022). Consequently, examining innovation at the individual level, particularly in terms of innovative work behavior, represents a significant research area globally. Most of these studies have been conducted in the private sector, while the exploration of innovative work behavior in public sector organizations remains notably limited (Azizi et al., 2021).

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Despite numerous studies examining higher education management, there remains a significant research gap, particularly concerning innovative strategies, human resource development, and the critical role of communication within the higher education sector (Ibrahim, 2023). Furthermore, a key factor in improving higher education management is the development of high-quality human resources, which is intrinsically linked to the fundamental role of communication in fostering effective relationships within and beyond educational institutions. The evolving landscape of higher education necessitates adaptive strategies to navigate complexities, requiring a comprehensive approach that integrates human resource development and effective communication to ensure sustained excellence in educational institutions. The need to enhance the quality of higher education management has become imperative in response to demands for academic excellence, global competition, and the improvement of graduate quality (Mardon, 2024).

The literature on human resource management and innovation highlights several key dimensions essential for organizational success. Bahiroh and Imron (2024) emphasize that adapting technology in human resources, enhancing employees' digital competencies, talent management, and effective performance evaluation are crucial aspects of achieving organizational success in the digital era. They further argue that organizational adaptability to emerging phenomena necessitates flexible human resource management strategies (Bahiroh & Imron, 2024). Similarly, Morden (2024) asserts that modernizing higher education management is an essential process driven by rapid technological advancements, evolving educational approaches, and the changing global education landscape. His study explores innovative strategies, challenges, and opportunities in the modernization of higher education management systems (Mardon, 2024). In a related context, Chen et al. (2024) investigate how political connections assist firms in emerging markets by facilitating access to resources and knowledge and fostering collaborations with foreign partners. They highlight the importance of reconfiguring and acquiring resources and knowledge to capitalize on opportunities, particularly emphasizing the role of human resource slack and state ownership in corporate innovation processes. Their study suggests that firms integrating political connections with appropriate human resource slack significantly enhance their innovation potential, as state ownership reinforces firms' ability to access and leverage resources for corporate innovation (Chen et al., 2024). Furthermore, Al-Hariri et al. (2023) explore the interactive effect of workplace bullying and sustainable human resource management on innovative work behaviors, mediated by work engagement, in sustainable universities in Egypt. Their findings reveal that work engagement—comprising job enthusiasm, work commitment, and participation—partially mediates the relationship between sustainable human resource management and innovative work behaviors, while workplace bullying moderates this effect. Workplace bullying directly diminishes the impact of sustainable human resource management on both work engagement and innovative work behaviors, reducing the indirect influence of sustainable human resource management on innovation through engagement factors such as enthusiasm, dedication, and work participation. The study underscores the need to focus on sustainable innovation in universities and recommends the inclusion of all Egyptian universities in sustainability classification frameworks (Al-Hariri et al., 2023). These studies highlight the critical role of human resource innovation, digital transformation, higher education modernization, and sustainable management in fostering organizational growth and competitiveness.

The central issue is the prevailing perception in administrative environments that creativity and innovation are exclusive to the private sector, and that, unlike private organizations, public institutions do not require creativity and innovation in service

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delivery. Although the mission of public organizations, particularly higher education institutions, is centered on accountability and service provision, this perspective should not lead to merely meeting minimum expectations and demands. Studies indicate that limited research has been conducted on employee innovation within organizations, the lack of constructive engagement with academic and research institutions, the absence of critical thinking in administrative systems, and the inadequate support for employee initiative and innovation in public sector organizations—issues that are particularly relevant to the administration of government affairs in countries such as Iraq. Thus, the objective of this study is to provide a useful framework for fostering $\overline{p_{age} \mid 42}$ a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and processes that cultivate and enhance human resource creativity and innovation. A distinguishing feature of this model is its sensitivity to differences compared to other models and studies. Accordingly, this research seeks to employ an exploratory and mixed-method approach to first identify themes related to human resource innovation using thematic analysis, relying on open, axial, and selective coding, and subsequently present a comprehensive human resource innovation model for higher education institutions in Iraq.

2. **Methods and Materials**

Given that the objective of this study is to design an innovative human resources model in higher education institutions in Iraq, the research method is classified as exploratory-applied in terms of purpose. In terms of data collection timing, it is a cross-sectional study. Philosophically, the research follows an inductive-deductive approach. Regarding data collection methods and the nature of the study, it is survey-based. The thematic analysis method was employed in this research. The thematic method involves a qualitative approach aimed at identifying, classifying, and extracting concepts based on the perspectives of experts and relevant professionals.

In this study, the statistical population had to consist of experts and executive specialists to ensure the credibility of the interviews. The statistical population in the qualitative section was divided into two main categories: (1) academic experts (professors in the field of public administration at universities in Baghdad) and (2) higher education managers in Baghdad (with a minimum of 10 years of managerial experience). The statistical population for conducting in-depth interviews in the qualitative section was selected through a purposive non-probabilistic sampling method from among academic experts and managers of higher education institutions in Baghdad. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The sampling method used was snowball sampling, and a total of ten experts were interviewed. The data collection tool in the qualitative section consisted of semi-structured interviews. To ensure validity and reliability, Creswell's eight strategies for verifying research findings were applied.

3. **Findings and Results**

An examination of the average age of the experts surveyed revealed that university professors and academic experts had the highest age category, with an average of 45.20 years, while organizational managers had the lowest age category, with an average of 43.19 years. An analysis of work experience indicated that university professors and academic experts had the highest average work experience at 16.08 years, whereas organizational managers had a comparatively lower average work experience of 15.63 years. Among the participants in this study, six individuals held a Ph.D., and four held a master's degree.

"In my view, attracting and retaining innovative talent plays a crucial role in developing innovative human resources. This process helps an organization attract talented and creative individuals and then retain them within the organization. Initially, an organization must determine its strategy for attracting innovative talent. This includes defining the necessary criteria for recruitment, utilizing innovative methods in the selection process, and leveraging appropriate communication networks to attract talent.

To attract and retain innovative talent, it is essential to provide a suitable work environment. This environment should offer the necessary facilities and equipment for creative and innovative work while fostering an organizational culture that supports creativity and innovation. Talented and creative individuals are eager for growth and development; therefore, appropriate training and career development programs should be designed for them. These programs may include training courses, creativity workshops, and resources for individual skill development.

To retain innovative talent, organizations must offer opportunities for career advancement and growth. This includes providing chances to participate in innovative projects, lead innovative teams, and achieve higher managerial positions.

Maintaining continuous communication with innovative talent and providing constructive feedback is also of great importance. Through ongoing communication, organizations can gather new ideas and suggestions from employees while encouraging their professional development through constructive feedback.

Moreover, I believe that encouraging collaboration and knowledge sharing can significantly contribute to the creation of an innovative and creative human resource base within an organization. This practice fosters a culture of collaboration, open communication, and free information flow. Encouraging collaboration and knowledge sharing strengthens the culture of teamwork within an organization. Instead of competition, employees are inclined toward cooperation and mutual engagement, sharing ideas, knowledge, and experiences with others. This collaborative culture creates a common platform for innovation and ideation.

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Collaboration and knowledge sharing allow individuals to access the knowledge and experiences of others, thereby expanding the existing knowledge base within an organization. This access enables employees to leverage these resources for ideation and innovation. Additionally, collaboration and knowledge sharing facilitate the development and reinforcement of communication networks within the organization."

By analyzing the identified codes (open codes) extracted from the reviewed interviews, the final step involved defining and naming the themes. The findings indicate that the most significant dimensions influencing the design of an innovative human resources model in higher education institutions in Iraq comprise five main aspects. These five dimensions include defining innovation strategies, developing an innovation-based organizational structure, fostering an innovative organizational culture, developing innovative systems and processes, and enhancing organizational human capabilities through innovative behavior. Each of these primary components consists of subcomponents, the classification of which is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Secondary Codes Derived from Primary and Open Codes Extracted from Conducted Interviews

Row	Secondary Codes Extracted	Primary and Open Codes Extracted
1	Attracting and Retaining Innovative Talent	Defining strategies for attracting innovative talent, determining required criteria for talent recruitment, using innovative selection methods, utilizing appropriate communication networks for talent acquisition, providing a suitable work environment, fostering an organizational culture that supports creativity and innovation, developing training and career growth programs, offering training courses and creativity workshops, providing opportunities for professional advancement, encouraging participation in innovative projects, leading innovative teams, achieving managerial positions, maintaining continuous communication, and providing constructive feedback to retain talent.
2	Encouraging Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing	Promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing, establishing a culture of open communication and free information flow, fostering a collaborative culture, creating a shared platform for innovation and idea generation, increasing access to knowledge and experiences, strengthening organizational communication networks for knowledge development, enhancing creativity and innovation through shared knowledge and experiences, and improving job satisfaction and motivation through knowledge sharing.
3	Innovative Performance Management	Identifying, evaluating, and encouraging innovative and creative performance, recognizing and developing innovative talents, setting innovative goals, developing new services and improving processes, creating innovative solutions to complex problems, and evaluating innovative performance.
4	Encouraging Idea Generation	Fostering a culture of ideation, establishing support structures, forming specialized teams in innovation, creating intellectual spaces for idea exchange, holding brainstorming sessions, encouraging external experiences, implementing reward programs for top ideas, providing career development opportunities, and establishing organizational feedback mechanisms.
5	Stimulating Creative Thinking	Creating an encouraging environment, promoting flexibility, enhancing adaptability to change, generating creative solutions, improving accountability, and fostering confidence in presenting creative ideas and proposals.
6	Professional Growth and Continuous Education	Developing innovative skills, providing technical training to employees, teaching creativity and problem-solving techniques, inspiring and modeling innovation, and fostering motivation and enthusiasm for creativity.
7	Providing a Flexible Organizational Structure	Encouraging creativity and innovation through organizational flexibility, forming agile teams and cross-functional collaboration, enabling trial-and-error processes, testing business models and implementing rapid changes, creating learning opportunities, facilitating organizational communication, and enhancing information flow and knowledge exchange.
8	Forming Multidisciplinary Teams	Establishing multidisciplinary teams, combining diverse expertise, experiences, and perspectives, exchanging knowledge and experiences, fostering organizational diversity and interaction in creative endeavors, discussing and addressing new challenges, and providing learning opportunities.
9	Technology-Driven Agility in Organizations	Enhancing technical capabilities, encouraging continuous learning, and fostering the ability to generate new ideas and innovative solutions.
10	Creating Internal and External Communication Networks	Exchanging knowledge and experiences, leveraging external expertise, fostering collaboration and mutual engagement, integrating diverse specialties and perspectives, and inspiring and motivating innovation.

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11	Providing a Participatory Environment	Facilitating innovative idea development, offering online platforms and idea management systems, exchanging knowledge and experiences, encouraging collaboration, forming multidisciplinary teams, and fostering creative and innovative thinking.	
12	Facilitating Access to Educational Resources	Updating knowledge and skills, providing access to training courses, specialized books and articles, online resources, and educational videos, promoting self-learning and motivation, and enhancing creative and innovative thinking.	
13	Creating a Safe Environment for Idea Expression	Ensuring a sense of freedom and trust for innovators, encouraging idea expression in a safe environment, fostering collaboration, and supporting learning from failures.	Page
4	Trust and Acceptance of Employee Errors	Utilizing mistakes as learning opportunities, encouraging risk-taking, accepting errors as part of the innovation process, learning from failures, leveraging past mistakes for progress, fostering an open environment for ideasharing, and promoting knowledge exchange without fear of criticism.	
5	Knowledge and Experience Sharing	Establishing a learning culture, enhancing communication and interaction among innovators, discussing ideas, challenges, and solutions, sharing knowledge to foster innovation, and preventing redundant knowledge accumulation.	
6	Acceptance of Change and Innovation	Embracing change and technology, fostering motivation for innovation, creating an innovation-driven environment for transformation, increasing organizational capabilities through change, and developing creative and innovative human resources for transformation.	
7	Enhancing Creativity and Critical Thinking	Stimulating creative thinking, identifying innovation opportunities, solving complex problems, generating creative solutions, fostering adaptability, and increasing risk-taking mentality.	
8	Establishing a Transformational Leadership System	Encouraging idea generation and creativity, fostering openness to change, managing resistance to transformation, and cultivating an innovation-oriented culture.	
9	Developing a Mechanism for Attracting and Selecting Innovators	Recruiting innovative talents, collaborating with universities and research centers, organizing innovation-related events and competitions, utilizing social networks and talent discovery resources, prioritizing innovation-focused selection criteria, and creating a welcoming environment for innovation.	
)	Establishing a Reward and Incentive System for Innovation	Encouraging idea generation, fostering knowledge and experience sharing, supporting innovative experiments and successful outcomes, providing financial and technical resources, building innovation networks, creating collaboration opportunities within the innovation ecosystem, and facilitating an environment for experimentation and trial-and-error.	
1	Managing Innovative Projects	Establishing innovative project management processes, sharing human resources, allocating appropriate personnel to projects, securing experienced specialists for innovative initiatives, sharing knowledge among team members, fostering collaboration, defining common goals, assigning roles and responsibilities, and enhancing coordination and interaction among team members.	
2	Developing an Innovation Performance Evaluation System	Implementing performance assessment mechanisms, evaluating individual performance to identify strengths, weaknesses, and training needs, setting realistic and innovation-related objectives, emphasizing innovation and creativity in performance evaluation, and reinforcing innovation values within the assessment framework.	
3	Expanding the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Organizations	Automating processes, analyzing data and information, providing intelligent solutions, and enhancing human-AI interactions.	
4	Planning for Creativity Training and Development in Organizations	Implementing structured training programs for fostering individual creativity, increasing awareness and knowledge, applying creative techniques and problem-solving strategies, enhancing decision-making skills, and promoting various creative thinking models, including critical, dynamic, and lateral thinking.	
5	Developing Innovative Skills among Organizational Members	Enhancing creativity, fostering creative communication, utilizing innovation techniques and methodologies, strengthening problem-solving capabilities, promoting collaboration and interaction, and establishing networks for sharing ideas and knowledge.	
5	Continuous Evaluation of Innovative Performance	Encouraging improvement and development of innovative skills, promoting an innovation-oriented culture, reinforcing strategic organizational objectives, monitoring innovation systems and processes, assessing cooperation and knowledge sharing, and ensuring alignment with strategic goals.	
7	Developing Leadership Competencies in Innovation	Providing leadership training programs, developing creative leadership skills, managing change, fostering strategic leadership capabilities, and cultivating an innovation-supportive leadership environment.	
8	Providing Appropriate Feedback on Innovative Behaviors	Encouraging innovative behaviors, offering positive reinforcement, providing constructive feedback, and fostering an open and participatory environment.	
29	Utilizing Opportunities for International Collaboration	Establishing professional networks, collaborating with international organizations, accessing diverse educational resources, engaging with global markets, promoting international branding, leveraging global opportunities, and strengthening institutional positioning in the international arena.	_

This classification highlights key strategies and actions required to foster innovation within human resources in higher education institutions. The table organizes the extracted codes into structured categories, emphasizing the importance of talent acquisition, collaboration, and performance management in creating an innovative work environment.

Table 2 presents the main dimensions of the research, which were derived from the secondary codes obtained from the primary and open codes extracted from the conducted interviews.

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Table 2. Main Dimensions of the Research Derived from Secondary Codes Obtained from Primary and Open Codes

Main Dimensions	Secondary Codes Extracted
Defining Innovation Strategies	Attracting and Retaining Innovative Talent
	Encouraging Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing
	Innovative Performance Management
	Encouraging Idea Generation
	Stimulating Creative Thinking
	Professional Growth and Continuous Education
Developing an Innovation-Based Organizational Structure	Providing a Flexible Organizational Structure
	Forming Multidisciplinary Teams
	Technology-Driven Agility in Organizations
	Creating Internal and External Communication Networks
	Providing a Participatory Environment
	Facilitating Access to Educational Resources
Fostering an Innovative Organizational Culture	Creating a Safe Environment for Idea Expression
	Trust and Acceptance of Employee Errors
	Knowledge and Experience Sharing
	Acceptance of Change and Innovation
	Enhancing Creativity and Critical Thinking
Developing Innovative Systems and Processes	Establishing a Transformational Leadership System
	Developing a Mechanism for Attracting and Selecting Innovators
	Establishing a Reward and Incentive System for Innovation
	Managing Innovative Projects
	Developing an Innovation Performance Evaluation System
	Expanding the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Organizations
Enhancing Organizational Human Capabilities Through Innovative Behavior	Planning for Creativity Training and Development in Organizations
	Developing Innovative Skills among Organizational Members
	Continuous Evaluation of Innovative Performance
	Developing Leadership Competencies in Innovation
	Providing Appropriate Feedback on Innovative Behaviors
	Utilizing Opportunities for International Collaboration

Figure 1 presents the final model obtained from the research indicators and secondary codes.

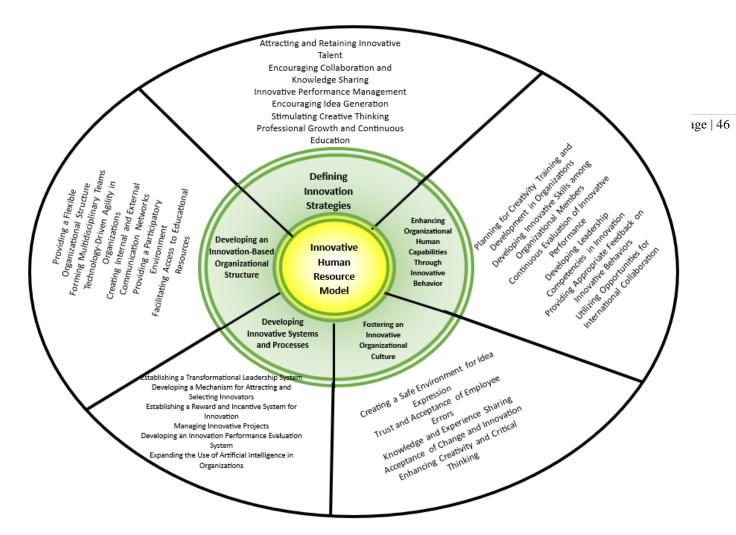


Figure 1. Final Model of The Study

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of designing an innovative human resources model in higher education institutions in Iraq. Through thematic analysis, five dimensions were extracted, each consisting of various components. These dimensions include defining innovation strategies, developing an innovation-based organizational structure, fostering an innovative organizational culture, developing innovative systems and processes, and enhancing organizational human capabilities through innovative behavior.

In explaining these findings, it can be stated that human resource management has a significant relationship with the determination of innovation strategies. This relationship depends on several key factors: talent development, as innovative human resources help identify and attract creative and talented individuals to organizations. These individuals can propose new and innovative ideas to improve processes and products. The innovative human resources model promotes a culture within the organization that supports innovation by creating an environment where employees feel free to present ideas and be creative. This culture facilitates the implementation of innovation strategies. The model emphasizes the importance of continuous education and development, enhancing employees' skills and knowledge to enable their participation in innovation processes and the discovery of new solutions. Bahiroh and Imron (2024) conducted a comprehensive literature review to identify key factors related to innovative human resource strategies in the digital transformation era. The innovative human resources model identifies and attracts individuals with creative and innovative characteristics. These capabilities foster innovative behavior among employees. The model also emphasizes the continuous development of skills and knowledge by providing training

programs and learning opportunities, equipping employees with the necessary skills for creative thinking and innovation, and enhancing their competencies (Bahiroh & Imron, 2024).

The innovative human resources model contributes to fostering an organizational culture that supports creativity and innovation. Employees working in a supportive and encouraging environment are more likely to adopt innovative behaviors. One of the critical aspects of innovative behavior is taking risks and experimenting with new ideas. The innovative human resources model helps employees develop risk-taking abilities and learn from mistakes as learning opportunities. The model provides employees with the opportunity to participate in decision-making and innovation processes, which increases their sense of ownership over projects and innovative ideas. Performance evaluation and reward systems in the innovative human resources model are designed based on innovative behaviors, which further motivates employees to develop and improve innovative ideas. Chen et al. (2024) examined how political connections help firms promote innovation in emerging markets by facilitating access to necessary resources and knowledge and establishing collaborative relationships with foreign partners (Chen et al., 2024).

In interpreting the study's findings, it can be stated that organizational structure has a strong relationship with innovation. This relationship is linked to several key factors, as innovative human resources contribute to creating a culture of creativity that the organizational structure must support. Structures that allow employees to freely share and act upon ideas create an environment conducive to innovation.

Based on the study's results, the following recommendations are proposed for higher education institutions:

Developing Educational and Professional Development Programs: Higher education institutions should design and implement structured educational programs focused on enhancing creativity, problem-solving, and innovation skills. These programs may include creativity workshops, idea exchange sessions, and training courses related to new technologies. By continuously acquiring new knowledge and skills, employees can actively participate in the institution's innovation culture.

Facilitating Teamwork and Collaborative Work Environments: Institutions should create spaces and platforms that encourage collaboration and participation among faculty and staff. These spaces may include creative meeting rooms, open areas for team interactions, and digital tools for collaboration. Encouraging teamwork can facilitate the generation of innovative ideas and strengthen a culture of collaboration.

Establishing Reward Systems to Recognize Creativity: Higher education institutions should develop reward systems specifically focused on innovation and creativity. These systems should be designed to identify, acknowledge, and reward innovative ideas and successful contributions from faculty and staff. Such measures not only enhance employee motivation but also emphasize the significance of innovation in the institution's organizational culture.

Managing Change and Creating a Safe Space for Experimentation: Innovative higher education institutions should foster an environment where employees feel free to experiment with new ideas, even if some may fail. Providing institutional support through regular meetings to review ideas and progress, as well as encouraging learning from failures, can help cultivate a culture that promotes initiative and innovation.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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