

**The Role of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) in Improving Organisational  
Performance.**

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for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose –**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives on organizational performance, with an emphasis on how these initiatives are viewed and implemented in various industries and nations. The study sought to determine the extent to which D&I programs contribute to improved organisational outcomes such as employee engagement, innovation, and productivity, particularly in South Africa and other international settings such as the United States, India, Dubai, and Ghana. For the sake of this study, D&I initiatives were defined as organized organizational methods that promote equitable participation, representation, and inclusion of people from various backgrounds in the workplace.

### **Design/methodology/approach –**

A qualitative exploratory design was used, guided by an interpretivist ideology and primarily inductive methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants from diverse companies and industries, with a focus on human resources and diversity-related positions. Atlas.ti was used to conduct a thematic analysis on the data, which involved the systematic development and refinement of codes into subthemes and overarching themes to satisfy the research objectives.

### **Findings –**

The findings revealed that effective D&I programs have a favorable impact on organisational performance by promoting inclusive environments, improving cooperation, and generating innovation. Participants identified visible leadership commitment, constant communication, and alignment of D&I with organisational strategy as critical success factors. However, difficulties such as unconscious prejudice, inconsistent execution, and weak accountability systems have been recognized as impediments to ongoing growth.

### **Research limitations/implications –**

The study's sample size and regional coverage were limited, as it included participants from several countries but focused mostly on South African organizations. Nonetheless, the findings give useful insights into the strategic integration of D&I within organisational

systems in a variety of contexts, as well as a foundation for future study into sector-specific or quantitative validations of observed linkages.

### **Originality/value –**

This study adds to the current literature by providing empirical information on the relationship between D&I initiatives and organizational success in both South African and international settings. It demonstrates how inclusive practices may improve both employee experience and organizational outcomes, emphasizing the strategic importance of incorporating diversity and inclusion into leadership and operational frameworks.

### **Keywords**

Diversity and inclusion, organisational performance, qualitative research, thematic analysis, South Africa, international contexts.

### **Plagiarism Declaration**

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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**Table 1: List of Abbreviations List of Abbreviations and acronyms**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
AI Rationale for Subtheme Selection	Artificial Intelligence
APA 7	American Psychological Association Referencing System (7th ed.)
BBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
B-BBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
BEE	Black Economic Empowerment
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
D&I	Diversity and Inclusion
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EE	Employment Equity
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
FMCG	Fast-Moving Consumer Goods
GIBS	Gordon Institute of Business Science
GPT	Generative Pre-trained Transformer
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
ILT	Inclusive Leadership Theory
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Other
MBA	Master of Business Administration
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RBV	Resource-Based View
ROI	Return on Investment
RQ	Research Question
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SA	South Africa
SAJHRM	South African Journal of Human Resource Management
SET	Social Exchange Theory
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
SMME	Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UN	United Nations
UN SDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

# CHAPTER 1: DEFINITION OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE STATEMENT

## 1.1 Introduction and Problem Statement

In today's global business environment, diversity and inclusion (D&I) have developed from ethical concerns to strategic priorities that enhance organisational performance. As companies operate in increasingly multicultural markets, D&I initiatives are credited with improving innovation, decision-making, and employee engagement (Nkomo et al., 2023). However, despite growing interest, there is limited clarity on how these initiatives translate into measurable outcomes. The literature remains fragmented across industries and regions, highlighting the need for more context-sensitive research (Zhao et al., 2025).

Zhao et al. (2025) found that while diversity training, inclusive leadership, and workplace accommodations show promise, their effectiveness varies due to differences in organisational context and implementation maturity. Often, D&I programs are introduced for compliance rather than strategic integration, resulting in limited impact (Ding, 2023). Success depends on leadership commitment, organisational culture, and alignment with business goals. For example, Ding (2023) observed that inclusive leadership improves performance, but its effects are diminished in unsupportive environments.

The issue is not whether D&I can enhance performance this is conceptually accepted but rather how and under what conditions it delivers value. Nkomo et al. (2023) describe this as the "implementation gap," where theoretical support exceeds empirical understanding. Many organisations fail to achieve results due to poorly designed, executed, or measured D&I initiatives. Moreover, differing stakeholder perceptions executives, managers, and employees create misalignment that hinders success (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022).

This perceptual divide has practical consequences. Executives often view D&I as a strategic investment, while employees may see it as symbolic or compliance-driven, leading to reduced trust and engagement. Saba et al. (2021) highlight that unconscious bias, resistance to change, and weak leadership further undermine D&I efforts. These barriers call for a deeper exploration of the factors that enable D&I programs to succeed.

Recent research shows that when D&I is strategically embedded, it enhances creativity, adaptability, and innovation (Kundu & Mor, 2024; Parker et al., 2023). Inclusive organisations are more resilient and productive, but these benefits require intentional leadership and accountability. Despite evidence linking diversity to improved problem-solving and adaptability (Wadhwa & Aggarwal, 2023), the correlation with business performance remains inconsistent. Alshaabani et al. (2022) found improved employee satisfaction and productivity in D&I-focused firms, but results were not universal.

A major challenge is the lack of standardised metrics to evaluate D&I success. Without consistent benchmarks, organisations struggle to assess ROI or compare outcomes across sectors. Nkomo (2023) critiques existing tools for ignoring structural inequalities and contextual factors, limiting their effectiveness.

Leadership engagement and employee voice are essential. Kim and Lee (2023) established that inclusive leadership nurtures psychological safety, enhancing performance. Rodriguez and Nyarko (2024) argue that diversity policies are most effective when paired with inclusive decision-making and equitable advancement systems. These findings suggest that successful D&I requires both structural and behavioural integration.

This study aims to explore how D&I initiatives influence organisational performance and through which mechanisms. It will examine the experiences and perceptions of executives, managers, and employees to identify what makes D&I programs effective and sustainable. This aligns with Covington, Le, and Ngo's (2025) call for empirical, context-driven research linking D&I to innovation and performance.

Using a qualitative approach, the study will uncover cultural, structural, and human dimensions of D&I implementation often missed by quantitative methods. The findings will contribute to both academic theory and managerial practice by clarifying how inclusive cultures can be strategically cultivated to enhance performance.

Ultimately, while D&I is widely promoted as a business imperative, its implementation, measurement, and contextual adaptation remain underdeveloped. Addressing these gaps will help organisations move beyond symbolic gestures toward authentic inclusion practices that drive engagement, innovation, and competitiveness in the 21st century.

## **1.2 Research Contribution and Theoretical Rationale**

The link between diversity and inclusion (D&I) and organisational performance has become a focal point for both scholars and business leaders aiming to understand how inclusive practices contribute to long-term competitive advantage. While the theoretical foundations of D&I are well established, empirical evidence explaining the mechanisms behind its impact on performance remains inconsistent and fragmented (Zhao et al., 2025). This study pursues to address that gap by offering both theoretical insights and practical understanding of how D&I initiatives influence performance across different organisational settings.

### **1.2.1 Research Contribution**

**This research makes three key contributions to the academic discourse:**

First, it advances existing literature by offering a more contextual and process-driven view of how D&I initiatives affect organisational outcomes. Much of the current research treats diversity as a static demographic factor, overlooking its dynamic and relational nature (Nkomo et al., 2023). This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how inclusion is experienced and enacted by individuals at various organisational levels, providing a richer understanding of its role in shaping engagement, innovation, and performance (Hampson & McKinley, 2023).

Second, it addresses a persistent gap in identifying which elements of D&I initiatives are most critical for driving success. Previous studies (Okatta et al., 2024; Ding, 2023) suggest that training, leadership commitment, and equitable policies are linked to improved outcomes but their effectiveness depends heavily on context and employee involvement. This research investigates how these components interact, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of leadership inclusivity and employee engagement. For instance, Elamin and Aldabbas (2024) found that diversity management enhances creativity through engagement, but further exploration is needed to understand how this unfolds across sectors.

Third, the study contributes methodologically by applying a qualitative exploratory design in a field dominated by quantitative, survey-based research. As Kundu and Mor (2024) note, such methods often fail to capture the complexity and causality behind D&I outcomes. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study uncovers the underlying social dynamics and employee perceptions that influence

the success or failure of D&I efforts offering insights that are both theoretically grounded and practically relevant.

### **1.2.2 Theoretical Rationale**

This study is anchored in four key theoretical frameworks: the Resource Based View (RBV), Social Identity Theory (SIT), Institutional Theory, and Social Exchange Theory (SET). Together, these provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how D&I functions as both a strategic asset and a social process.

The Resource Based View posits that organisational performance stems from leveraging unique internal resources such as diverse human capital and innovation capacity for competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Kundu & Mor, 2024). Diversity, when effectively managed, enhances adaptability and creativity. However, RBV also emphasises that diversity alone is insufficient; it must be supported by inclusive leadership and culture to unlock its full potential (Kim & Lee, 2023).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explains how individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, which can lead to ingroup bias and exclusion. If unmanaged, these dynamics can hinder collaboration and performance (Shore et al., 2018). Inclusive leadership plays a vital role in mitigating these effects by fostering psychological safety and shared identity, enabling employees to contribute beyond demographic boundaries (Kim & Lee, 2023; Parker et al., 2023).

Recent developments, such as Inclusive Leadership Theory (Carmeli et al., 2023), highlight how leaders who are open, accessible, and appreciative of diverse perspectives build trust and encourage idea sharing. This environment boosts creativity and innovation. Studies by Rodriguez and Nyarko (2024) and Atta and Zaman (2024) support this, showing that inclusive leadership strengthens the link between diversity and performance by promoting equity and belonging.

Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) adds another layer by examining how organisational norms, structures, and external pressures shape D&I practices. Many organisations adopt D&I initiatives to meet societal expectations or regulatory requirements. However, without genuine leadership support, these efforts risk becoming symbolic (Ng & Sears, 2022). This study explores how employees perceive the authenticity of D&I efforts and how institutional pressures interact with organisational culture to influence outcomes.

Finally, Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains how inclusion affects employee attitudes and behaviours. When employees feel respected, valued, and treated fairly, they are more likely to reciprocate with higher engagement and discretionary effort (Alshaabani et al., 2022). Inclusive environments foster psychological contracts that drive commitment, innovation, and performance (Mor Barak et al., 2022).

Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of D&I. RBV highlights its strategic value; SIT and Inclusive Leadership Theory explain the interpersonal dynamics; Institutional Theory situates D&I within broader societal and organisational contexts; and SET clarifies how inclusion translates into motivation and performance.

By integrating these perspectives, this study develops a robust conceptual framework that moves beyond demographic metrics to view D&I as a set of interconnected organisational capabilities. The qualitative approach will reveal how these theories manifest in practice, contributing to both scholarly knowledge and actionable strategies for leaders aiming to build inclusive, high performing organisations.

Grounded in the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, this study is positioned at the intersection of leadership theory, organisational behaviour, and performance management within the context of diversity and inclusion (D&I). The literature review reveals persistent knowledge gaps summarised in the table 2 below particularly around how specific D&I components such as leadership commitment, training, and policy enforcement influence organisational outcomes (Zhao et al., 2025). By aligning these gaps with the study's research questions and emerging qualitative themes, this research aims to generate contextually rich insights into how D&I initiatives shape employee engagement, innovation, and organisational culture across various levels and geographies (Ding, 2023).

Recognising that perceptions of D&I often differ between executives and employees (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022), the study incorporates **Contingency Theory** as an additional lens to explain how leadership effectiveness and inclusion outcomes are influenced by contextual factors such as organisational structure, culture, and leadership style. This theoretical positioning strengthens the conceptual foundation of the study and ensures that the forthcoming empirical analysis is directly aligned

with the identified gaps in both academic literature and practical application regarding the D&I performance relationship.

Although the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4 and the discussion in Chapter 5 are usually developed later in the research process, table 2 was purposefully placed in Chapter 1 to demonstrate the planned alignment between the literature-based research gaps and the empirical themes that emerged from the data. Its early inclusion gives the reader a clear visual roadmap of how the study moves from finding holes in previous scholarship to filling them through data analysis. In this sense, the table serves as a structural bridge, indicating how the research problem, literature review, and later empirical findings are conceptually linked, despite the fact that particular thematic results are only presented in later chapters.

**Table 2: Summary of knowledge/research gaps identified**

<b>Knowledge/Research Gap (from Literature Review)</b>	<b>Linked Theme(s) from Data Analysis</b>
Lack of understanding of the effects that particular D&I elements such as leadership, training, and policy enforcement have on performance and engagement in diverse organisational contexts (Zhao et al., 2025).	Theme 1: Leadership, Governance & Policy Theme 2: People Practices (Recruitment & Talent Pipelines) Theme 3: Training, Coaching & Awareness
Inadequate empirical data regarding the difficulties in implementing D&I at various organisational levels and geographical locations (Ding, 2023).	Theme 4: Operational Constraints & Implementation Barriers Theme 5: Measurement, Compliance & Business Case
Executives and employees' perspectives on how diversity and inclusion affect innovation, creativity, and workplace culture are not aligned (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022).	Theme 6: Culture, Inclusion & Workplace Experience Theme 3 (crosslinked): Training, Coaching & Awareness – Innovation Aspects

### 1.3 Business Rationale

In today's global and highly competitive business environment, diversity and inclusion (D&I) have evolved from ethical considerations into strategic imperatives. Organisations are increasingly recognising that inclusive practices drive innovation,

adaptability, and resilience key capabilities in navigating dynamic markets, diverse customer needs, and rising stakeholder expectations around equity and fairness (Kundu & Mor, 2024; Parker et al., 2023). Integrating D&I into core business strategy is now associated with enhanced innovation, stronger employee engagement, and long-term financial sustainability (Alshaabani et al., 2022; Wadhwa & Aggarwal, 2023).

For business leaders, understanding how D&I influences performance is essential for making informed strategic decisions. Organisations that fail to manage diversity effectively risk lower productivity, disengaged employees, and reputational harm. In contrast, those that embed inclusion into their culture benefit from improved collaboration, creativity, and talent retention (Atta & Zaman, 2024; Kim & Lee, 2023). Research shows that inclusive organisations outperform their peers in innovation and adaptability, as diverse teams bring varied perspectives that lead to more effective problem-solving and decision-making (Parker et al., 2023).

Despite its strategic importance, many organisations struggle to convert D&I policies into measurable outcomes. Common challenges include resistance to change, unconscious bias, and inconsistent leadership support (Saba et al., 2021; Nkomo et al., 2023). These issues often result in D&I initiatives being treated as compliance exercises rather than integrated strategic efforts. Understanding how organisational context, leadership behaviours, and employee perceptions influence the success of D&I programs is therefore critical to aligning diversity efforts with business performance.

This study offers practical relevance for executives, HR professionals, and decisionmakers seeking evidence-based approaches to designing impactful D&I strategies. The findings will help identify best practices for building inclusive cultures that foster belonging, drive innovation, and strengthen competitive advantage (Rodriguez & Nyarko, 2024). In industries facing rapid technological change and demographic shifts, D&I enhances organisational agility by enabling firms to better understand and respond to diverse markets (Kundu & Mor, 2024).

From a governance and sustainability standpoint, D&I is increasingly viewed as a key component of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance. Investors and regulators are holding companies accountable for their inclusivity metrics, linking social equity to long-term value creation and corporate legitimacy

(Ahmad & Schroeder, 2023). As such, understanding the business impact of D&I is essential for sustaining growth, building stakeholder trust, and maintaining relevance in an era of heightened social awareness.

Ultimately, this research provides actionable insights for translating D&I commitments into measurable performance outcomes. By identifying the enablers, barriers, and organisational dynamics that shape D&I effectiveness, the study offers a strategic roadmap for embedding inclusion into the operational, cultural, and leadership fabric of organisations thereby enhancing both social impact and financial performance in the evolving global business landscape.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

In today's increasingly complex and competitive global economy, diversity and inclusion (D&I) have become essential pillars of organisational excellence and long-term sustainability. This chapter has demonstrated that while the strategic value of D&I is widely acknowledged in theory, significant gaps remain in understanding how these initiatives translate into measurable performance outcomes. Although prior research confirms that diversity enhances innovation, adaptability, and decision-making (Wadhwa & Aggarwal, 2023; Parker et al., 2023), many organisations struggle to realise these benefits due to weak implementation, inconsistent leadership support, and limited contextual insight (Nkomo et al., 2023; Okatta et al., 2024).

This study aims to address these gaps by contributing to both academic theory and practical management. The research builds on established frameworks namely the Resource Based View (RBV), Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Social Exchange Theory (SET) to examine how inclusivity functions as a strategic capability that drives sustainable performance. Through a qualitative approach, the study explores the human and cultural dimensions of D&I, offering deeper insights into leadership behaviours, organisational culture, and employee experiences. This responds to recent scholarly calls for more context rich, process-oriented investigations into how inclusion operates within organisations (Kundu & Mor, 2024; Kim & Lee, 2023).

From a business standpoint, the rationale for this research is both strategic and ethical. Organisations that embrace inclusive practices not only foster greater employee engagement and innovation but also build stronger reputations and

stakeholder trust critical assets in global markets (Ahmad & Schroeder, 2023; Kwon et al., 2024). Increasingly, inclusive cultures are linked to improved financial performance, customer satisfaction, and resilience during periods of uncertainty (Kulik & Roberson, 2022; Kalev & Dobbin, 2023). As markets, supply chains, and workforces become more diverse, organisations that effectively manage D&I are better equipped to anticipate customer needs, attract top talent, and mitigate reputational risks tied to inequity or exclusion (Randel et al., 2023).

The central aim of this study is not merely to confirm whether D&I influences performance, but to uncover how and under what organisational conditions these effects are realised. By examining the lived experiences of executives, managers, and employees, the research seeks to identify the critical success factors that transform D&I from a compliance driven initiative into a strategic enabler of innovation, engagement, and competitive advantage. The findings are expected to offer practical guidance for leaders and HR professionals on designing inclusive systems that foster belonging while advancing measurable business outcomes.

Ultimately, this research recognises that diversity without meaningful inclusion risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. For D&I to drive real organisational change, it must be embedded in leadership practices, strategic intent, and organisational culture. By contributing both theoretical depth and practical insight, this study aims to support the development of inclusive, high-performing, and socially responsible organisations capable of thriving in an increasingly diverse and dynamic global business landscape.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examined existing scholarship on diversity and inclusion (D&I) to contextualise its role in enhancing organisational performance. The review aimed to position the current study within broader academic discourse and identify key gaps that warranted further investigation. Over the past three decades, D&I has evolved from compliance driven policies to a strategic priority linked to innovation, adaptability, and competitiveness (Cox, 1993; Shore et al., 2011; Mor Barak, 2022). Increasingly, organisations have recognised D&I as both an ethical obligation and a performance-enhancing strategy, aligned with global governance frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and ESG standards (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Roberson, 2019).

Despite widespread adoption, the literature revealed inconsistencies in how D&I initiatives are implemented and evaluated across industries and regions (Zhao et al., 2025). While inclusive environments are associated with improved engagement, creativity, and productivity (Shore et al., 2018), the mechanisms linking D&I to measurable outcomes remain underexplored. Empirical studies have shown that diversity alone is insufficient; inclusion characterised by psychological safety and inclusive leadership is essential for unlocking the benefits of heterogeneous teams (Carmeli et al., 2010). The Resource Based View (Barney, 1991) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) offer theoretical grounding, suggesting that diverse human capital can be a source of competitive advantage when inclusively managed and that group belonging influences motivation and performance.

Recent developments, including demographic shifts and digital transformation, have further elevated the strategic relevance of D&I. The COVID19 pandemic accelerated remote work and highlighted the need for inclusive communication and leadership across dispersed teams (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022). However, many organisations continue to struggle with embedding inclusion into core practices. Structural barriers such as unconscious bias, limited accountability, and fragmented policy implementation persist (Sabharwal, 2014; Ding, 2023). These challenges underscore the gap between symbolic commitment and practical integration of D&I.

Moreover, research has identified a disconnect between executive perceptions of inclusion and employees' lived experiences (Agarwal, 2018). While leaders often express strong support for D&I, this enthusiasm does not always translate into meaningful change at the operational level. Zhao et al. (2025) emphasised the need for empirical clarity on how specific D&I practices such as leadership visibility, policy enforcement, and training impact performance. Three key research gaps emerged: (1) limited evidence linking D&I practices to tangible outcomes, (2) insufficient exploration of implementation barriers across organisational levels and contexts, and (3) misalignment between leadership and employee perspectives on inclusion and its effects on innovation and engagement.

In summary, the literature affirms the importance of D&I in driving organisational success but highlights the need for deeper, context specific inquiry. Much of the existing research remains conceptual, with limited empirical insight into how inclusion strategies translate into performance gains. This study responds to these gaps by exploring how leadership commitment, policy implementation, and inclusive practices interact to influence organisational outcomes. The following sections (2.2 to 2.5) expand on the theoretical foundations, empirical contributions, and research gaps that informed the study's methodological and analytical framework.

## **2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I)**

The conceptual underpinnings of diversity and inclusion (D&I) offer critical insights into how inclusive practices influence organisational performance. Over the past twenty years, a growing body of research has demonstrated that diverse and inclusive workplaces promote innovation, adaptability, and employee engagement (Ding, 2023; Elamin & Aldabbas, 2024). Theoretical frameworks such as the Resource Based View (RBV), Social Identity Theory (SIT), Inclusive Leadership Theory, and models of Organisational Justice and Psychological Safety collectively elucidate the mechanisms through which D&I contributes value to organisations. These perspectives converge on the notion that diversity yields performance benefits only when supported by inclusive leadership, equitable practices, and cultures grounded in trust.

### **2.2.1 Resource Based View (RBV)**

The Resource Based View (Barney, 1991) posits that organisations attain sustainable competitive advantage by cultivating resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and no substitutable. Within this framework, diverse human capital is considered a strategic asset, offering distinct perspectives and enhanced problem-solving capabilities (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). Ding (2023) observed that organisations integrating D&I into their strategic agenda were more responsive to globalisation and demographic shifts. Verawati et al. (2025) further demonstrated that inclusive leadership amplified exploitative innovation strategies, thereby mediating the relationship between workforce diversity and organisational performance. Supporting this, a study published in Nature (2025) found that gender balanced organisations exhibited higher levels of engagement and commitment, reinforcing RBV's assertion that inclusively managed diversity fosters enduring competitive advantage.

### **2.2.2 Social Identity Theory (SIT)**

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides a foundational lens for understanding D&I outcomes by examining how individuals derive aspects of their self-concept from group affiliations. In heterogeneous work environments, social categorisation can either facilitate cohesion or exacerbate exclusion, contingent upon the management of inclusion. Roberson (2019) highlighted that inclusive practices reduce intergroup bias by fostering fairness and shared objectives. Empirical evidence from the South African Journal of Human Resource Management (2025) indicated that inclusive leadership and ethnic diversity enhanced team performance by cultivating inclusive climates and promoting knowledge exchange. These findings affirm SIT's proposition that inclusion mitigates the adverse effects of social categorisation, transforming diversity into a catalyst for collaboration and innovation.

### **2.2.3 Inclusive Leadership Theory**

Inclusive Leadership Theory centres on leadership behaviours as the primary conduit through which diversity is translated into inclusion. Inclusive leaders demonstrate

openness, empathy, and fairness, thereby fostering trust and empowerment among employees (Carmeli et al., 2010). Atta and Zaman (2024) emphasised that sustained leadership commitment is vital for realising the benefits of diversity. A comprehensive meta-analysis (2024) confirmed that inclusive leadership significantly enhances job satisfaction, engagement, and creativity across sectors. Additionally, findings from BMC Psychology (2024) revealed that inclusive leaders improve workplace wellbeing by providing developmental feedback that meets employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Collectively, these studies underscore the pivotal role of leadership in embedding inclusion within organisational systems and translating D&I principles into tangible performance outcomes.

#### 2.2.4 Organisational Justice and Psychological Safety

Theories of organisational justice and psychological safety offer deeper insights into the relational dynamics underpinning inclusion. Organisational justice pertains to perceptions of fairness in decision-making and interpersonal interactions (Colquitt, 2001), which in turn foster commitment, cooperation, and trust (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015). In diverse settings, fairness signals respect for individual differences and strengthens inclusive climates (Alshaabani et al., 2022). Psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that individuals can express themselves without fear of negative consequences, is equally vital for team performance (Edmondson, 1999). Carmeli et al. (2010) found that teams characterised by high psychological safety exhibited greater creativity and adaptability. Together, these theories suggest that inclusive organisations not only value diversity but also cultivate fairness and trust, thereby enhancing innovation and performance.

#### 2.2.4 Theoretical Integration and Research Gaps

The integration of RBV, SIT, Inclusive Leadership Theory, and frameworks on Organisational Justice and Psychological Safety illustrates that D&I functions as both a strategic human capital asset and a relational capability. RBV highlights the value of diverse talent, SIT explains how inclusion mitigates group biases, and Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety theories emphasise the role of leadership in fostering inclusive environments. Despite these insights, several research gaps remain. Firstly, there is a paucity of empirical studies examining how inclusion mechanisms convert diversity into measurable performance outcomes (Ding, 2023).

Secondly, cross-cultural and industry-specific variations in D&I practices are underexplored (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022). Thirdly, discrepancies between executive perceptions and employee experiences of inclusion warrant further investigation (Elamin & Aldabbas, 2024). Addressing these gaps necessitates qualitative research into the interplay between leadership commitment, inclusive climates, and diversity policies in enhancing organisational performance.

In conclusion, these theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding the strategic and behavioural dimensions of D&I. The subsequent section (2.3) examines how diversity and inclusion are operationalised within organisational contexts and the implications for workplace practices and outcomes.

## **2.3 Diversity and Inclusion in Organisational Contexts**

The organisational discourse surrounding diversity and inclusion (D&I) has evolved significantly from compliance-based initiatives to strategic imperatives that shape organisational capability, employee experience, and innovation outcomes. Contemporary scholarship increasingly positions D&I not only as a moral and ethical responsibility but also as a source of competitive advantage when integrated across core organisational systems, including leadership, human resource practices, performance metrics, and organisational culture. This section explores the historical evolution of D&I practices, the multifaceted nature of diversity, key drivers of inclusion, contextual differences between developed and emerging economies, and the enduring challenges that hinder effective implementation.

### **2.3.1 Evolution of D&I Practices: From Compliance to Strategic Inclusion**

Initially, organisational D&I efforts were largely shaped by legal mandates and affirmative action policies aimed at addressing historical injustices and meeting regulatory standards (Nkomo, 2019). However, in recent years, the focus has shifted beyond mere representation to emphasise inclusion defined as the extent to which individuals experience meaningful participation, voice, and a sense of belonging within the workplace (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that representation alone yields limited organisational benefits unless accompanied by mechanisms that enable underrepresented employees to contribute effectively and advance professionally.

Recent academic and practitioner literature re-conceptualises D&I as an organisational capability requiring systemic integration. This entails aligning recruitment, performance evaluation, career progression, procurement, and leadership accountability into a cohesive strategy rather than treating them as isolated or symbolic efforts (Fitzsimmons, Özbilgin, Thomas, & Nkomo, 2023). This systems-based approach supports the growing emphasis on measurable outcomes, leadership development, and the establishment of employee resource groups as sustainable drivers of change (Harvard Business Publishing, 2021). Consequently, D&I is increasingly expected to be embedded within organisational strategy and monitored through both quantitative metrics and qualitative assessments.

Nkomo (2019)'s seminal work underscores the importance of addressing structural inequalities particularly those related to race and class within the strategic inclusion agenda. She cautions against the uncritical adoption of "best practice" models across different geopolitical contexts, arguing that such approaches may obscure deeper, locally embedded injustices (Nkomo, 2019). Her scholarship advocates for theoretically grounded and contextually nuanced approaches to D&I implementation.

### **2.3.2 Dimensions of Diversity: Demographic, Cognitive, and Experiential**

Diversity encompasses a wide range of dimensions. Traditional demographic categories such as gender, race and ethnicity, age, and disability remain central due to their legal relevance and historical associations with systemic disadvantage. However, recent literature increasingly highlights cognitive diversity variations in thinking styles, problem-solving approaches, and knowledge domains as a critical factor in enhancing creative performance (Qu et al., 2024). Cognitive diversity contributes to innovation particularly when organisations foster environments that support psychological safety and knowledge exchange.

Additional dimensions such as socioeconomic background, educational attainment, neurodiversity, and life experience are gaining scholarly attention for their potential to broaden talent pools and introduce unique perspectives essential for complex problem-solving (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023). For instance, disability and neurodiversity are no longer peripheral concerns but integral to inclusive talent strategies. Organisations that invest in accessible work environments and reasonable accommodations report improved employee retention and job alignment

(Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Kamalumpundi, 2024). These findings suggest that effective D&I strategies must embrace a comprehensive definition of diversity one that integrates visible demographic traits with cognitive and experiential differences to fully unlock innovation potential.

### **2.3.3 Drivers of Inclusion: Leadership, HR Policies, and Organisational Culture**

Empirical research consistently identifies three interdependent drivers of workplace inclusion:

1. Leadership commitment and role modelling,
2. Human resource systems aligned with inclusion goals, and
3. A culture that promotes psychological safety and inclusive everyday practices (Liu et al., 2024; King, 2024).

Inclusive leadership marked by traits such as curiosity, humility, and active sponsorship is positively correlated with employee wellbeing and the expression of diverse viewpoints (Liu et al., 2024). Leaders who visibly model inclusive behaviours and are held accountable through mechanisms such as diversity-related key performance indicators (KPIs) create environments conducive to scaling inclusion initiatives.

HR systems play a pivotal role in operationalising inclusion. Effective practices extend beyond isolated interventions and include bias-resistant recruitment processes, transparent promotion pathways, flexible work arrangements, and supplier development programmes that align procurement with social inclusion objectives (Harvard Business Publishing, 2021). Crucially, measurement frameworks must assess inclusion beyond demographic representation. Tools such as pulse surveys, belonging indices, exit interviews, and qualitative feedback mechanisms help identify exclusionary dynamics particularly in informal networks that influence career progression.

### **2.3.4 D&I Implementation in Emerging vs. Developed Economies: Contextual Nuances**

The implementation of D&I strategies varies significantly across institutional and socioeconomic contexts. In developed economies, regulatory frameworks, investor

expectations, and public discourse have driven the formalisation of D&I functions often through roles such as Chief Diversity Officers and structured reporting mechanisms (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023). These contexts typically support mature programme infrastructures.

Conversely, in emerging economies, D&I initiatives must navigate distinct challenges, including socioeconomic disparities, unequal access to education, and informal labour market structures. These factors necessitate tailored approaches to programme design and expected outcomes. Multinational corporations that transplant Western D&I models without contextual adaptation often encounter institutional misalignment and limited stakeholder engagement (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Nkomo, 2019).

Comparative studies suggest that context sensitive strategies such as prioritising skills development, inclusive supply chain practices, and local partnerships are more effective in environments where economic exclusion outweighs identity-based marginalisation (World Bank; Fitzsimmons et al., 2023). In such settings, framing D&I in terms of tangible business outcomes such as talent pipeline resilience or market access can enhance leadership buy-in and programme legitimacy.

### **2.3.5 Challenges and Barriers: Bias, Leadership Gaps, Tokenism, and Measurement Limitations**

Despite growing awareness and investment, D&I efforts continue to face substantial obstacles. Unconscious bias and structural inequities embedded in promotion and evaluation systems remain significant barriers to equitable opportunity (Nkomo, 2019). Leadership inconsistency where public commitments are not matched by resource allocation or accountability undermines programme credibility and slows progress (Harvard Business Publishing, 2021).

Tokenistic practices, such as hiring for optics without redistributing power or influence, can lead to isolation and disillusionment among underrepresented employees. Measurement challenges also persist relying solely on headcount metrics fails to capture whether diverse employees are meaningfully included in decision-making processes or informal networks that influence advancement

(McKinsey & Company, 2020; Fitzsimmons et al., 2023).

From a methodological standpoint, establishing causal links between D&I initiatives and organisational performance is complicated by attribution issues, time lags, and selection biases. Scholars advocate for mixed methods evaluation approaches that combine quantitative representation data with qualitative indicators such as belonging, voice, and psychological safety as well as intermediate outcomes like promotion velocity, retention rates, and idea generation (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Qu et al., 2024).

Finally, political and regulatory shifts in certain jurisdictions have led to the scaling back of visible D&I programmes, posing risks to continuity and trust an emerging concern highlighted in recent industry analyses (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023).

## **2.4 What has been done already in the field**

The conceptualisation of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) has progressed from being primarily a moral or compliance driven obligation to becoming a strategic lever for organisational success. A substantial body of empirical studies, meta-analysis, and industry reports affirms that well-structured D&I initiatives not only promote fairness and representation but also enhance innovation, productivity, and financial performance. Recent research has deepened this understanding by examining the mechanisms, contextual variables, and leadership dynamics that determine whether D&I efforts yield sustained organisational benefits.

### **2.4.1 Empirical Evidence Linking D&I to Organisational Performance**

A growing corpus of empirical research demonstrates a positive correlation between D&I and improved organisational outcomes across industries and geographies. Ding (2023) highlights that many organisations have embedded D&I into their core business strategies, linking inclusive practices to enhanced profitability and competitive positioning. For instance, Kaur and Arora (2020) found that a 1% increase in workforce diversity could lead to a 3–9% rise in sales, illustrating the tangible economic value of inclusive practices.

Further evidence from Atewologun and Sealy (2023) shows that gender and ethnic diversity at senior leadership levels is associated with improved organisational

reputation and decision-making quality. Diverse leadership teams are better equipped to navigate complex global markets and stakeholder expectations. Although gender underrepresentation in executive roles remains a challenge, notable progress has been made. Global firms such as Accenture, Barclays, BP, Deloitte, and Shell have been recognised for fostering gender diverse environments that drive innovation and attract top talent (Kaur & Arora, 2020).

McKinsey & Company (2020) further substantiates the strategic importance of D&I, reporting that companies in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity are significantly more likely to outperform financially. This reinforces the notion that diversity, when inclusively managed, contributes to superior organisational performance.

#### **2.4.2 Meta-analytic Contributions to Understanding D&I Outcomes**

Meta-analytic studies have been instrumental in synthesising diverse empirical findings into generalisable insights. Ding's (2023) review of cross-sectoral studies confirms that D&I initiatives yield stronger outcomes when supported by leadership accountability and inclusive organisational cultures. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is context-dependent, influenced by internal factors such as organisational norms and external variables including societal expectations and market maturity.

In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Okatta, Ajayi, and Olawale (2024) found that organisations implementing holistic D&I strategies experienced notable improvements in decision-making, innovation, and employee engagement. Leadership commitment emerged as the most influential factor organisations with leaders who actively champion diversity and model inclusive behaviours achieved more sustainable performance gains. This aligns with Liu et al. (2024), who emphasise that inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety and cultivates a collaborative, learning oriented workplace climate.

Makkonen (2022) adds further nuance by demonstrating that cognitive diversity differences in professional background, problem-solving approaches, and knowledge domains have a more pronounced impact on innovation than demographic diversity alone. This underscores the importance of promoting

functional and cognitive heterogeneity, particularly at decision-making levels.

In the public sector, Ding (2023) notes that contextual factors such as political structures, organisational culture, and bureaucratic constraints often mediate the relationship between diversity metrics and performance outcomes. Ng and Sears (2020) similarly conclude that the success of D&I initiatives depends on leadership engagement, robust HR infrastructure, and a supportive cultural environment. Collectively, these studies suggest that the effectiveness of D&I efforts is determined not merely by their existence, but by how they are implemented, institutionalised, and adapted to specific organisational contexts.

### **2.4.3 Theoretical Advances and Contextual Understanding**

Beyond establishing statistical correlations between diversity and organisational outcomes, contemporary scholarship increasingly seeks to understand the underlying mechanisms that determine the success or failure of D&I initiatives. Fitzsimmons, Özbilgin, Thomas, and Nkomo (2023) argue that D&I research has entered a more sophisticated phase one that incorporates critical theory, comparative international perspectives, and systems thinking. They propose that effective D&I outcomes require alignment across individual, organisational, and institutional levels.

Nkomo (2023) builds on this systems perspective by emphasising the importance of structural and contextual factors such as power dynamics, historical inequalities, and local labour market conditions in shaping the impact of inclusion efforts. She contends that transformative D&I strategies must be grounded in a nuanced understanding of societal structures that influence access, opportunity, and belonging, particularly within postcolonial and emerging economies.

Echoing this view, Byrd and Scott (2022) argue for the localisation and reflexivity of D&I practices avoiding perpetuating Western-centric assumptions. Their cross-national comparative study reveals that cultural dimensions such as collectivism, hierarchical norms, and socioeconomic disparities significantly influence both employee perceptions of inclusion and the organisational mechanisms that support it. These findings suggest that D&I models must be contextually adapted to be

effective across diverse global environments.

#### **2.4.4 Mechanisms Linking D&I to Innovation and Engagement**

Empirical research has identified several mechanisms through which D&I enhances organisational capability. Inclusive workplace climates foster psychological safety, allowing employees to express ideas without fear of marginalisation (Liu et al., 2024). This openness facilitates creativity and innovation, as diverse perspectives challenge conventional thinking and generate novel solutions (Makkonen, 2022; Qu et al., 2024).

Inclusive teams also exhibit higher levels of collaborative intelligence the capacity to synthesise diverse insights into actionable strategies which contributes to improved product development and responsiveness to customer needs. Leadership remains a central mechanism in this process. King (2024) highlights that inclusive leaders build trust, establish equitable participation structures, and ensure recognition of diverse contributions. Similarly, Atewologun and Sealy (2023) demonstrate that authentic leadership and active sponsorship of underrepresented groups significantly boost employee engagement and retention. These findings reinforce the view that D&I is not merely about demographic representation but about cultivating inclusive systems that leverage diversity as a strategic asset.

#### **2.4.5 Summary and Emerging Directions**

In summary, the expanding body of D&I research confirms that diversity, when strategically and inclusively managed, contributes to enhanced organisational performance, innovation, and employee engagement. However, the literature also underscores that these outcomes are highly context-dependent, shaped by leadership commitment, organisational culture, and enabling structural conditions. Meta-analyses by Ding (2023), Makkonen (2022), and Okatta et al. (2024) collectively affirm the robust yet complex relationship between inclusion and performance. Nkomo's (2023) critical lens adds depth by emphasising the need to confront enduring inequalities, privilege, and power structures to avoid superficial or symbolic D&I efforts.

Looking ahead, future research should deepen its contextual sensitivity by examining how cultural norms, national policy frameworks, and global value chains influence D&I practices. As suggested by Fitzsimmons et al. (2023) and Byrd and Scott (2022), adopting multilevel and comparative approaches will be essential for building a globally inclusive knowledge base one that moves beyond Westerncentric paradigms and reflects the lived realities of diverse organisational environments.

## **2.5 What has not been done in the field / Conceptual and Methodological Gaps in D&I Research**

Despite the rapid expansion of scholarship on diversity and inclusion (D&I), notable conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps persist. While the positive relationship between D&I and organisational outcomes such as performance, innovation, and engagement are widely acknowledged, the underlying mechanisms and contextual variables that shape these outcomes remain insufficiently explored (Ding, 2023; Garg & Sangwan, 2021). As a result, there is growing scholarly consensus on the need for more integrative, intersectional, and context sensitive approaches to D&I research.

### **2.5.1 Gaps in Understanding Diversity Typologies and Their Effects**

Although meta-analytic studies have consistently demonstrated that diversity contributes positively to organisational outcomes, the specific dimensions of diversity that most strongly influence performance, culture, and employee wellbeing remain ambiguous. Ding's (2023) meta-analysis of 37 quantitative studies revealed that contextual factors such as leadership commitment and training moderate the strength of the relationship between D&I and performance. This suggests that diversity alone is insufficient; it must be supported by systems that enable meaningful inclusion.

Similarly, Okatta, Ajayi, and Olawale (2024) found that leadership accountability plays a critical role in determining whether diversity initiatives translate into tangible improvements in innovation and decision-making. However, the literature has yet to clearly differentiate which diversity dimensions demographic, functional, or cognitive consistently yield the most significant organisational benefits.

Makkonen (2022) addressed this partially by distinguishing between demographic and cognitive diversity, concluding that diversity based on experience and knowledge has a stronger impact on creativity and innovation. Nonetheless, further research is needed to understand how these diversity types interact and how contextual moderators such as industry sector, organisational size, and cultural setting shape their effects. Garg and Sangwan (2021) advocate for studies that examine how various diversity dimensions collectively influence belonging, engagement, and performance. Extending this line of inquiry, Shore et al. (2021) propose a multilevel framework linking perceived uniqueness and belongingness to team cohesion and innovation, highlighting the need to explore employees' subjective experiences of inclusion an area that remains critically under-researched.

### **2.5.2 Gaps in Linking Inclusion to Leadership, Culture, and Strategy**

Another significant gap in the literature concerns the integration of inclusion into leadership practices, organisational values, and executive structures. Garg and Sangwan (2021) argue that many D&I initiatives fail because they are treated as isolated HR interventions rather than embedded leadership and strategic practices. While leadership commitment is widely recognised as a key success factor (Okatta et al., 2024), there is limited empirical evidence detailing how specific leadership behaviours foster inclusive climates.

Liu et al. (2024) found that inclusive leadership enhances psychological safety and employee wellbeing, yet few studies have examined how accountability mechanisms such as diversity-related KPIs or inclusive performance evaluations contribute to long-term cultural transformation.

Moreover, the intersection of D&I and organisational culture remains underexplored. Nkomo (2023) critiques the global D&I discourse for its Western centric orientation, arguing that it often overlooks the influence of historical legacies, power structures, and socioeconomic inequalities on inclusion experiences in different regions. Byrd and Scott (2022) similarly highlight the scarcity of comparative, cross-cultural research, particularly in emerging economies where informal labour markets and socioeconomic disparities present unique challenges to inclusion. The lack of contextual nuance in existing literature limits the development of globally relevant

and theoretically robust models of inclusion.

### **2.5.3 Methodological Limitations and the Need for Qualitative Depth**

A significant methodological limitation in current D&I research is its predominant reliance on quantitative, cross-sectional survey designs. While these approaches are useful for identifying correlations, they often fail to capture the nuanced processes and meanings underlying inclusion experiences. Consequently, scholars have increasingly called for qualitative, phenomenological, and longitudinal methodologies to explore how inclusion unfolds over time and across organisational contexts (Nkomo, 2023).

Sansa et al. (2023) offered initial insights using a meta-analytic framework grounded in leader–member exchange theory, demonstrating that inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety in multigenerational organisations. However, their findings also underscore the need for qualitative inquiry to unpack the microlevel dynamics through which belonging and uniqueness are cultivated. Nishii (2021) similarly argues that inclusion should be examined through employees' narratives and lived experiences, as statistical models alone cannot adequately capture the emotional and relational dimensions of inclusion. Mor Barak (2023) advocates for combining largescale survey data with ethnographic and case study approaches to develop a more holistic understanding of how D&I initiatives shape identity, power relations, and organisational culture.

### **2.5.4 Gaps in Linking Inclusion to Employee Wellbeing**

Another underexplored area in D&I research is the relationship between inclusion and employee wellbeing, encompassing mental health, work–life balance, and career satisfaction. Although D&I is frequently associated with improved engagement and retention, empirical studies that directly measure wellbeing outcomes remain limited (Zhou & Kim, 2022). This gap is particularly concerning given rising levels of burnout, stress, and inequitable workloads among employees from marginalised groups navigating exclusionary environments.

Cho and McLean (2023) found that inclusive workplace climates positively influence

psychological wellbeing through enhanced perceptions of organisational support. However, most studies treat wellbeing as a secondary outcome rather than a central component of inclusion. Future research should adopt integrative frameworks that combine D&I with occupational health psychology to examine how belonging, recognition, and inclusive practices contribute to emotional resilience and mental health. Comparative studies are also needed to assess whether inclusive climates mitigate work-related stress differently across demographic and cultural groups.

### **2.5.5 Contextual and Cross-Cultural Research Gaps**

One of the most critical blind spots in D&I scholarship is the lack of Cross contextual and cross-cultural research. Ding (2023) and Nkomo (2023) note that the majority of empirical studies are conducted in North American and Western European contexts, limiting the generalisability of findings to other regions. Studies that do address emerging economies often focus on multinational corporations, leaving domestic organisations underrepresented and theoretical development constrained.

Syed and Özbilgin (2023) argue for transnational and intersectional research approaches that examine how local institutions, labour market structures, and cultural values mediate inclusion. They recommend comparative designs across industries and geographies to uncover how inclusion is enacted under different social contracts. Such research would advance Nkomo's (2023) call for contextually grounded D&I frameworks and contribute to the decolonisation of diversity management scholarship.

### **2.5.6 Synthesis and Implications for Future Research**

Taken together, the existing literature confirms that D&I positively influences organisational performance, innovation, and engagement. However, the mechanisms through which these outcomes are achieved remain insufficiently theorised. Leadership commitment, diversity typologies, and contextual sensitivity consistently emerge as key moderating factors, yet their interactions are poorly understood.

**To address these gaps, future research should pursue the following directions:**

1. Clarify causal mechanisms linking different diversity dimensions (e.g., cognitive, demographic, experiential) to performance and wellbeing.
2. Integrate inclusion into leadership theory by examining how leaders' values, behaviours, and accountability systems translate inclusion rhetoric into practice.
3. Adopt qualitative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods approaches to capture the lived experience and evolution of inclusion over time.
4. Investigate the D&I–wellbeing nexus across demographic and cultural contexts to understand how inclusion supports mental and emotional resilience.
5. Expand cross-national and comparative research to develop globally relevant and contextually responsive theories of inclusion.

By addressing these gaps, future scholarship can move beyond documenting diversity outcomes to uncovering the deeper organisational processes that sustain inclusive cultures. This study contributes to this agenda by examining how leadership, organisational culture, and contextual dynamics shape the effectiveness of D&I initiatives across diverse organisational environments.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In summary, the literature provides compelling evidence that diversity and inclusion (D&I) contribute significantly to organisational performance by enhancing innovation, employee engagement, decision-making quality, and corporate reputation (Elamin & Aldabbas, 2024; Alshaabani et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of D&I initiatives is contingent upon several contextual factors, including leadership commitment, organisational culture, and the specific dimensions of diversity being promoted (Ding, 2023; Makkonen, 2022). Despite notable advancements in research, critical gaps remain particularly in understanding how inclusion fosters belonging, how it affects employee wellbeing, and how leadership and structural dynamics shape D&I outcomes (Garg & Sangwan, 2021; Zhou & Kim, 2022; Nkomo, 2023). Addressing these gaps through more contextually grounded and methodologically diverse research is essential for building inclusive workplaces that

align ethical imperatives with sustainable performance.

The evolution of D&I from compliance-driven initiatives to strategic enablers of organisational success is well documented. When embedded effectively, D&I enhances creativity and resilience by leveraging diverse perspectives within inclusive environments (Javed et al., 2022). Fujimoto and Härtel (2023) emphasise that both demographic and cognitive diversity contribute to innovation, but their impact is maximised in cultures that prioritise openness and psychological safety. Thus, inclusion not diversity alone is the determining factor in whether differences become organisational strengths.

Leadership consistently emerges as the cornerstone of successful D&I implementation. Inclusive and authentic leaders foster trust, belonging, and shared purpose, thereby converting diversity into measurable organisational value (Liu et al., 2024). Sharma and Mann (2024) highlight that sustained leadership sponsorship is essential for embedding inclusion into organisational systems rather than allowing it to remain symbolic. Accountability mechanisms such as inclusive metrics and leadership KPIs are also critical for translating D&I commitments into tangible performance outcomes (Okatta et al., 2024).

Contextual adaptation remains a defining factor in the success of D&I strategies. Scholars such as Nkomo (2023) and Booyesen (2023) caution against the uncritical application of western centric inclusion frameworks, advocating instead for approaches that reflect diverse socioeconomic and cultural realities. Cross-national research (Syed & Özbilgin, 2023) reinforces the need for de-colonised and context-sensitive models that address the unique institutional challenges faced by organisations in emerging markets.

Nevertheless, methodological limitations persist. Most studies rely on cross-sectional designs, which constrain understanding of how inclusion evolves and how it influences wellbeing over time. Roberson and Perry (2021) advocate for longitudinal and qualitative research to uncover these dynamics. The underexplored relationship between inclusion and employee wellbeing also warrants deeper investigation, as the psychological dimensions of inclusion are central to sustained engagement and performance (Zhou & Kim, 2022).

In conclusion, diversity and inclusion are interdependent levers of organisational success. However, meaningful progress depends on leadership authenticity, contextual responsiveness, and a deeper focus on the lived experiences of inclusion. This study contributes to the evolving discourse by offering context sensitive insights into how D&I can be effectively implemented to advance both ethical integrity and strategic advantage.

## **CHAPTER 3: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTION**

Below is an overarching research question followed by 3 sub research questions that are also later discussed in detail. Research questions have also been linked to knowledge gap, interview questions and data collection tool as per consistency matrix annexure 1.

### **How do diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives affect organisational results, and what aspects affect how well they are implemented and perceived at work?**

This research question explores the link between D&I initiatives and organisational performance. Although literature supports a positive relationship between D&I and performance (Okatta et al., 2024), many studies lack detail on how these initiatives drive engagement, innovation, and cultural change. There's also limited insight into how organisational contexts influence the perception and success of D&I efforts (Zhao et al., 2025). This highlights the need to understand how employees across roles interpret D&I strategies and how these views shape performance outcomes.

#### **Sub Research Questions:**

##### **3.1 How do diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives influence employee engagement and organization performance?**

This question examines how D&I efforts directly or indirectly affect engagement and performance. Meta-analyses suggest D&I practices generally boost productivity and morale (Okatta et al., 2024), but comprehensive evaluations across industries and organisational sizes remain scarce. Moreover, research is limited on which elements such as leadership support, training, or policy enforcement most significantly impact these outcomes (Zhao et al., 2025).

##### **3.2 What are the primary obstacles organizations encounter when fulfilling diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies?**

This question addresses the challenges organisations face in implementing D&I. Common barriers include resource constraints, unconscious bias, and resistance to change. However, empirical data on how these challenges vary across organisational levels and regions is lacking (Ding, 2023). Understanding these

nuances is essential for designing adaptable D&I strategies that align with both business goals and employee needs.

### 3.3 How do executives and employees perceive the impact of diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies on creativity, innovation and workplace culture?

This question examines how perceptions shape the success of D&I programs. While executives often endorse D&I for its innovation potential, employee views on its real-world impact can vary. Vedres and Vasarhelyi (2022) highlight a research gap on how perceptual alignment or lack thereof affects D&I integration into daily operations.

These sub-research questions research questions, together with their themes and corresponding research gaps are presented on table 3 below. Although the full development of the thematic findings is reserved for Chapters 4 and 5, they are briefly introduced in Chapter 3 to illustrate how the chosen methodology is designed to structure and interpret the data. Their mention at this stage does not imply that the analysis was complete in this chapter; rather, it was brought after concluding chapter 4 and 5 to clarify the analytical trajectory of the study. This early reference helps to establish how the forthcoming themes will be conceptually linked to the research questions and the literature review.

**Table 3: Research Questions mapping to research gaps**

Knowledge/Research Gap (from Literature Review)	Research Question (RQ)	Linked Theme(s) from Data Analysis
Lack of understanding of the effects that particular D&I elements such as leadership, training, and policy enforcement have on performance and engagement in diverse organisational contexts (Zhao et al., 2025).	<b>RQ1:</b> What effects do diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs have on corporate performance and employee engagement?	Theme 1: Leadership, Governance & Policy Theme 2: People Practices (Recruitment & Talent Pipelines) Theme 3: Training, Coaching & Awareness
Inadequate empirical data regarding the difficulties in implementing D&I at various organisational levels and geographical locations (Ding, 2023).	<b>RQ2:</b> What are the main obstacles that companies face when implementing diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies?	Theme 4: Operational Constraints & Implementation Barriers Theme 5: Measurement, Compliance & Business Case
Executives and employees' perspectives on how diversity and inclusion affect innovation,	<b>RQ3:</b> What effects do D&I policies have on innovation, creativity, and	Theme 6: Culture, Inclusion & Workplace Experience Theme 3 (crosslinked):

creativity, and workplace culture are not aligned (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022).	workplace culture, according to executives and employees?	Training, Coaching & Awareness – Innovation Aspects
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## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

### **4.1 Choice of research design / Research Methodology and Design**

#### **4.1.1 Purpose of research design**

This research employed an exploratory design in order to investigate the impact of diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs on organisational performance. This approach was suitable for gaining insights into phenomena that were not yet fully understood (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Given the intricate and context specific nature of the correlation between D&I initiatives and organisational performance, this design facilitated open-ended inquiry and in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and organisational practices. This method aimed to reveal patterns, challenges, and best practices that might have been missed by quantitative methods.

#### **4.1.2 Philosophy**

The study employed an interpretivist approach, focusing on understanding the social world through the lived experiences of participants (Urcia, 2021). This approach aligned with the research goal of exploring the subjective meanings that executive managers and employees associated with D&I initiatives and how these initiatives influenced organisational outcomes. Interpretivism was considered appropriate because D&I policies and their effects were socially constructed and varied across different contexts (Saunders et al., 2019). This philosophical perspective enabled deep engagement with participants to capture the nuanced, lived experiences related to D&I initiatives.

#### **4.1.3 Approach Selected**

The study adopted a predominantly inductive method, extracting insights from the collected data rather than testing preexisting hypotheses (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, the construction of a full theory was constrained by time limitations. This method was deemed ideal for the investigative nature of the research, as it sought to uncover new insights into the impact of D&I initiatives on organisational performance, as noted by Hampson and McKinley (2023).

Given that the connection between D&I and organisational performance was an outcome not thoroughly theorised in the current literature, the inductive approach allowed for the discovery of overarching themes and frameworks through empirical data analysis (Dufour & Richard, 2019).

#### **4.1.4 Methodological Choices**

The study applied the approach adopted by Hampson and McKinley (2023), where a monomethod qualitative approach was utilized, relying on a single data collection method. This strategy was suitable since qualitative approaches provided in-depth, intricate understandings of participants' experiences. Qualitative research was chosen as it remained underutilized, which limited comprehension of the complex experiences of underrepresented groups despite the increased emphasis on diversity and inclusion in organisational contexts. Rezai et al. (2023) pointed out that an understanding of workplace inclusion from those with lived experiences was lacking, highlighting the need for more thorough qualitative inquiry.

By employing interviews and document analysis, the research investigated the mechanisms and reasons behind the impact of D&I initiatives on organisational performance. Using a monomethod ensured thoroughness and uniformity in data collection and analysis, which was essential for comprehending complex social phenomena (Saunders et al., 2019).

#### **4.1.5 Strategy**

This research was grounded in a qualitative framework that emphasized rich, contextual understanding of participants' perspectives. In-depth interviews served as the sole means of data collection, enabling the study to explore the underlying mechanisms and motivations through which diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives influenced organisational performance (Saunders et al., 2019). Relying on a single data source supported consistency and depth in both data gathering and interpretation, which was particularly valuable when examining complex social dynamics (Hampson & McKinley, 2023).

#### **4.1.6 Time Horizon**

The study used a cross-sectional time horizon, concentrating on data collection at a specific point in time, as also adopted by Wang and Cheng (2020). This approach was chosen because it focused on examining current experiences and practices related to D&I. While longitudinal studies were instrumental in monitoring changes over time and provided insights into the evolution of variables, cross-sectional designs offered immediate insights, which were particularly practical within limited time frames. This approach was evident in recent meta-analyses that synthesized findings from various study designs to inform organisational practices (Zhao et al., 2025). This method provided a detailed snapshot of the current impact of D&I initiatives on organisational performance.

### **4.2 Proposed Research Methodology**

#### **4.2.1 Population**

The population applied to all people, organizations, or entities that fulfilled the sample criteria for the research analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this context, the population included executives, mid to senior level managers, and human resources (HR) professionals employed in organizations that had adopted diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. This group was suitable because these individuals played a key role in the creation, execution, and evaluation of D&I practices and their effects on organisational performance.

The reason for selecting the population was the growing importance of D&I as a strategic priority for organizations and its proven impact on employee engagement and innovation (Roberson, 2019). This focus enabled the research to gather insights into both the design and practical results of D&I strategies. Additionally, by selecting individuals who were directly involved in these initiatives, the study ensured a thorough analysis of how D&I influenced performance outcomes like employee satisfaction, productivity, and organisational profitability (Roberson, 2019).

#### **4.2.2 Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis referred to the primary entity being examined in the study

(Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this research, the unit of analysis was the individual managers and specialists whose views were sought. However, the level of analysis was conducted at the organisational level, given the positioning of the research in Chapters 1–3. As such, the unit of analysis occurred at the micro level, whereas the level of analysis operated at the meso-level (Roberson, 2019). Specifically, the study examined how D&I initiatives were incorporated into organisational processes and how these practices influenced performance outcomes.

Choosing the organizational individuals as the unit of analysis aligned with the research objective to explore systemic D&I impacts rather than individual perceptions alone (Roberson, 2019). Analysing organizational people allowed for a comprehensive assessment of policies, practices, and performance indicators for the organizations they worked for. This choice also allowed for the exploration of organisational culture, leadership commitment, and the structural embedding of D&I principles. The individual level analysis provided a microlevel view of how D&I strategies aligned with business objectives and performance metrics, enabling broader applicability of the findings across organizations (Ohunakin et al., 2019).

#### **4.2.3 Sampling Method and Size**

To choose participants, a purposive sampling technique was employed. This nonprobability sampling method was suitable for research that sought to obtain insights from individuals who had specific knowledge and experience pertinent to the study (Etikan & Babatope, 2019). Given the specialized nature of D&I programs, purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of key stakeholders with firsthand experience.

The sample comprised individuals from organisations with established D&I programmes. The target sample size fell in the range of 12–14 participants, with no more than two respondents selected from any single organisation. This suggested that respondents were drawn from between 6–7 organisations, which was in line with Busetto et al. (2020)'s estimated number of people to be interviewed. This sample size was well-suited for a phenomenological study, facilitating in-depth interviews and enabling comparison and contrast of respondents' perspectives (Guest et al., 2020). This approach ensured sufficient representation of different organisational contexts while allowing for thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020). Furthermore, choosing participants from various industries improved the study's external validity

by capturing differences in the implementation of D&I strategies.

The table 4 below shows the actual target sample for this study, which consisted of 13 participants (P1-P13) from 12 organizations (AL). This composition ensured participation across a wide range of industries, facilitating interindustry comparison and increasing the diversity of opinions. The inclusion of many participants from the same organisation (Organisation L) facilitated intra-organisational triangulation and provided greater insight into shared organisational experiences linked to D&I efforts.

**Table 4: Target Sample**

Organisation	Respondent
A	P1
B	P2
C	P3
D	P4
E	P5
F	P6
G	P7
H	P8
I	P9
J	P10
K	P11
L	P12
L	P13

**Actual Sample**

The **table 5** below provides a complete profile of the 13 persons who took part in the study. Participants from six countries which are South Africa, the United States, India, Dubai, and Ghana represented a wide range of businesses, including manufacturing, engineering, healthcare, aviation, cleaning services, logistics, and marketing and advertising. Participants primarily held human resource and diversity related positions, such as HR Managers, D&I Leads, and Compliance Officers, ensuring that respondents had the necessary experience to provide educated views regarding organizational diversity and inclusion strategies. This cross-industry and cross-country representation expanded the study's potential for comparative analysis and increased the validity of findings through varied organizational viewpoints.

**Table 5: Actual Sample Details (Number of samples = 13)**

Participant	Country	Industry Sector	Organisation	Role
P1	USA	Manufacturing	A	HR Manger
P2	SA	Healthcare	B	HR Manager
P3	SA	Manufacturing	C	D&I Lead
P4	India	Engineering	D	HR Vice President
P5	Dubia	Engineering	E	HR Officer
P6	SA	Aviation	F	HR & D&I
P7	Ghana	Cleaning Services	G	HR Executive
P8	SA	Marketing and Advertising industry	H	HR & D&I
P9	SA	Logistics	I	Compliance and D&I
P10	SA	Manufacturing	J	HR Business Partner
P11	SA	Manufacturing	K	HR Manager
P12	SA	Engineering	L	HR Executive
P13	SA	Engineering	L	HR Manger

#### 4.2.4 Measurement Instrument

The measurement instrument was a semi-structured interview guide. The method was appropriate as it allowed for open-ended inquiries and provided valuable insights into individuals' subjective encounters, opinions, and driving forces (Busetto et al., 2020). This approach further aimed to strike a balance between maintaining consistency across interviews while providing the flexibility to explore emergent themes (Busetto et al., 2020).

The interview guide included open-ended questions as outlined in the consistency matrix (Annexure 1). As per Annexure 1, the interview guide was directly linked to the study's research questions, which were aligned to the research gaps articulated in Chapters 2 and 3. In this way, the research attempted to demonstrate construct validity by showing the theoretical line of sight underpinning the data collection tool. Nine interview questions were provided in Annexure 1.

Finally, in response to the request for more context-specific and perception-driven research (Nkomo, 2023), the study investigated how D&I projects were perceived across different organizational environments. It sought to uncover the multifaceted realities of inclusion efforts by involving both executives and employees, with a focus on how leadership styles, structural dynamics, and workplace culture influenced them. This strategy enhanced the study's value by linking real-world viewpoints to strategic outcomes, ensuring that the research not only addressed current gaps but also promoted the creation of more effective, inclusive policies.

The interview questions were validated through a pilot study with a few participants to pressure test the interview guide and ensure alignment with research objectives under field conditions before implementation (Aung et al., 2021).

**The table 6** below showed a clear alignment of knowledge gaps, research questions, and data driven themes. RQ1 (Performance & Engagement) bridged research gaps in leadership, policy, and training effectiveness with emerging themes such as leadership responsibility, talent practices, and awareness initiatives. RQ2 (Implementation Barriers) addressed empirical gaps in execution obstacles, with interview data emphasizing managerial resistance, logistical constraints, and measurement difficulties as key themes. RQ3 (Innovation & Culture) demonstrated how views of diversity and inclusion influenced creativity and cultural cohesion, including topics on inclusion, cross-cultural collaboration, and innovative learning through training.

**Table 6: Interview schedule mapped to knowledge gaps, research questions, interview questions, and derived themes**

<b>Knowledge Gap (from Literature Review)</b>	<b>Research Question (RQ)</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Linked Theme(s) from Data Analysis</b>
Lack of understanding of the effects that particular D&I elements such as leadership,	RQ1: What effects do diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs have on corporate performance and	Q1: What effect do you think D&I projects have on your company's employee engagement?	Theme 1: Leadership, Governance & Policy Theme 2: People Practices

<p>training, and policy enforcement have on performance and engagement in diverse organisational contexts (Zhao et al., 2025).</p>	<p>employee engagement?</p>	<p>Q2: Which particular D&amp;I initiatives have helped to boost performance? Q3: How do policies, training initiatives, and leadership impact the success of D&amp;I efforts in your organisation?</p>	<p>(Recruitment &amp; Talent Pipelines) Theme 3: Training, Coaching &amp; Awareness</p>
<p>Inadequate empirical data regarding the difficulties in implementing D&amp;I at various organisational levels and geographical locations (Ding, 2023).</p>	<p>RQ2: What are the main obstacles that companies face when implementing diversity and inclusion (D&amp;I) strategies?</p>	<p>Q1: What obstacles does your company face when implementing D&amp;I strategies? Q2: How do these challenges differ across organisational levels? Q3: Do cultural or regional factors influence the success of D&amp;I initiatives?</p>	<p>Theme 4: Operational Constraints &amp; Implementation Barriers Theme 5: Measurement, Compliance &amp; Business Case</p>
<p>Executives and employees' perspectives on how diversity and inclusion affect innovation, creativity, and workplace culture are not</p>	<p>RQ3: What effects do D&amp;I policies have on innovation, creativity, and workplace culture, according to executives and employees?</p>	<p>Q1: How do executives in your organisation perceive the impact of D&amp;I on creativity and innovation? Q2: Do employees share the same views as executives</p>	<p>Theme 6: Culture, Inclusion &amp; Workplace Experience Theme 3 (crosslinked): Training, Coaching &amp;</p>

aligned (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022).		on D&I's impact? Q3: What effect does D&I have on workplace culture?	Awareness – Innovation Aspects
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#### 4.2.5 Data gathering process

Data collection involved a combination of virtual and in-person interviews with participants. This hybrid approach ensured accessibility while maintaining the depth of qualitative engagement (Archibald et al., 2019). A virtual platform like MS Teams, with its built-in AI functionality, allowed for instant transcript generation immediately after each interview. This further meant that transcripts could be checked for accuracy while the interview was still fresh in the researcher's mind. Another benefit of virtual interviews was the elimination of issues related to the geographical dispersal of respondents, which could have posed a challenge if only face-to-face interviews were conducted. This potentially improved the heterogeneity of the sample.

Professional networks and trade associations were used to attract participants. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded (with participants' permission) for transcription and analysis. The data gathering process was conducted only after ethical clearance had been obtained and also involved ensuring participant confidentiality and data security through anonymized transcripts and secure data storage (Saunders et al., 2021).

#### 4.2.6 Analysis Approach

The most appropriate method for examining the effects of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) on organisational performance was the use of qualitative data analysis techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research. The qualitative data were used for exploration through a thematic analysis approach, which entailed identifying, examining, and summarizing core themes that could be differentiated both within and across transcripts and data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

**The six-step analysis approach according to Braun & Clarke (2006) was**

**applied as follows:**

- Understanding the facts by transcribing and thoroughly reviewing the material multiple times.
- Initial coding to identify significant features.
- Searching for themes across interviews and organisational documents.
- Reviewing and refining themes for relevance and consistency.
- Identifying and labelling themes to capture their core meaning.
- Creating the final report with thematic analysis interpretations.

In the analysis of this qualitative data, coding was the process through which the data were broken down into component parts that were eventually labelled (Bryman, 2021). This approach required a robust and systematic process to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis.

**4.2.7 Quality Controls**

The quality of data collection became a concern and a prominent issue among social researchers and policy makers (Bryman, 2021). Therefore, to ensure the quality of data collected on the effects of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) programs on organisational success and performance, several strategies were implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings.

As outlined by Busetto et al. (2020) and Saunders et al. (2021), the following measures were used to improve data validity and reliability in qualitative research on D&I outcomes:

- Triangulation – The validity of the results was increased by using a variety of data sources and methodologies (e.g., surveys, interviews, and document analysis). This was done carefully to ensure participants from different organisations did not collude in their responses.
- Bias – Potential bias was eliminated by maintaining impartiality and avoiding leading questions or subjective influence during data collection and interpretation. A diverse range of organizations, individuals, and demographics was included to enhance the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the findings.
- Pilot Testing – A pilot study was conducted to refine data collection tools and improve dependability and clarity.
- Member Checking – Respondents were given the opportunity to review their

transcripts to ensure the written record accurately reflected the interview.

#### 4.2.8 Limitations

**A number of limitations were acknowledged, as noted below:**

- **Purposive/Judgmental Sampling** – While purposive sampling ensured experienced participants, the research was prone to subjective judgment, which increased bias in sample selection and limited the generalizability of conclusions (Etikan & Babatope, 2019).
- **Self-Reporting Bias** – Participants may have presented D&I practices in a more favorable light, potentially based on assumptions rather than reality (Saunders et al., 2021).
- **Cross-Sectional Design** – Since the study collected data at a single point in time, it was not possible to monitor changes over time as would be feasible in a longitudinal study (Bryman, 2021).
- **Accessibility of Interview Respondents** – Given the time frame, the accessibility of HR executives and Managing Directors/CEOs may have affected the completion of data collection (Saunders et al., 2021).

Although this study offered valuable insights into D&I practices, it had several limitations. Purposive sampling may have restricted transferability and induced bias, even though it aimed to select knowledgeable individuals (Etikan & Babatope, 2019). Due to social desirability bias, self-reporting may have produced overly positive results (Saunders et al., 2021). The cross-sectional design limited the ability to track changes over time (Bryman, 2021). These limitations highlighted the need for more extensive, long-term research methods in future studies.

#### 4.2.9 Privacy and Ethical Considerations

Privacy and ethical concerns were crucial to this study, especially given its qualitative nature. Participants were thoroughly informed about the study's objectives, scope, and potential implications through detailed consent forms. These forms explicitly clarified their rights, including the opportunity to withdraw at any time without penalty, ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary and informed. This strategy aligned with ethical research norms that valued autonomy and transparency

(Hampson & McKinley, 2023).

Furthermore, all collected data were kept confidential and stored securely, with identifiable information anonymised or pseudonymised to protect participant privacy. Ethical approval was obtained beforehand, and interview techniques were designed to minimize lengthy or distressing processes. It was critical in D&I research to ensure that participants felt psychologically comfortable when discussing potentially sensitive or personal experiences. Tomaszewski et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of ethical sensitivity in qualitative research, especially when dealing with issues of identity, equity, and organisational culture.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDING/RESULTS

### Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative data analysis, which aimed to investigate the influence of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives on organizational performance. The research was carried out with Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software that allowed for systematic coding, categorization, and the creation of subthemes and overarching themes. During this phase, interview transcripts were carefully analysed to uncover patterns, correlations, and repeating topics important to the research objectives.

A combination of manual interpretation and computer-assisted coding was used to improve the analysis's rigour and transparency. Atlas.ti's advanced coding functions helped to organise data into relevant subthemes and themes, allowing for systematic interpretation while eliminating potential researcher bias. This approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which promotes the discovery of both semantic and latent meanings in participant replies. It also adheres to the concepts described by Nowell et al. (2017), who emphasize the significance of systematic coding techniques and reflexivity in guaranteeing credibility and trustworthiness in theme analysis.

While Atlas.ti's data management and visualisation capabilities provided some analytical neutrality, researcher interpretation was nevertheless critical in ensuring that codes and themes authentically reflected participants' actual experiences. The combination of automated and interpretive procedures increased the trustworthiness of the findings, allowing the study to strike a balance between technical help and human understanding. This is consistent with Vaismoradi et al. (2016)'s argument that careful thematic formulation improves the depth and coherence of qualitative research findings. The themes and subthemes developed by this analysis are presented and explored in the following sections, using direct participant quotations to highlight crucial discoveries.

## Description of participants and context.

This section gives an overview of the participants and the circumstances in which the study was conducted. It outlines the study's contributors' professional responsibilities, industry representation, and levels of expertise, providing insight into their relevance to diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies. By summarizing these participant characteristics and their organizational contexts, the section lays the groundwork for understanding the findings in the context of D&I deployment across industries.

## Description of Participants and Exposure to D&I Environment

**Table 7** provides further information about the participants in this study, which was first introduced in Chapter 4. The table summarizes the participants' professional responsibilities and duration of exposure to diversity and inclusion (D&I) contexts. All 13 participants had more than two years of experience in D&I related settings, thus each had a solid understanding of the principles, techniques, and issues connected with organizational D&I activities. The majority of participants held managerial or specialist positions directly related to human resources or diversity and inclusion leadership, which provided important insight into both the strategic and operational dimensions of inclusion practices. This extensive exposure increased the trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring that participants could draw on long term, real-world experience with D&I programs and organizational change initiatives.

**Table 7: Actual sample exposure Details**

Participant	Role	More than 2 years exposure in D&I environment
P1	HR Manager	Y
P2	HR Manager	Y
P3	D&I Lead	Y
P4	HR Vice President	Y
P5	HR Officer	Y
P6	HR & D&I	Y
P7	HR Executive	Y

P8	HR & D&I	Y
P9	Compliance and D&I	Y
P10	HR Business Partner	Y
P11	HR Manager	Y
P12	HR Executive	Y
P13	HR Manger	Y

All 13 participants (100%) had more than two years of experience in diversity and inclusion (D&I) settings. This is an important discovery since persistent exposure to D&I initiatives is predicted to considerably improve participants' awareness of the long-term impact of such programs on organizational culture and performance.

### Data Saturation Test

The results of the data saturation test on the consolidated codes are presented below. They demonstrate that coding saturation was achieved after **13 semi-structured interviews**. As shown in the data saturation test curve, the number of new unique codes identified decreases sharply after the first few interviews, indicating that subsequent interviews produced minimal new information. This suggests that sufficient data were collected to comprehensively capture the key patterns and themes emerging from participants' responses.

The steep decline in unique codes after the sixth interview and the plateau observed from the tenth onward confirm that **data saturation** was achieved. This indicates that additional interviews would have likely produced redundant insights, validating the adequacy of the 13 interviews conducted for this study.

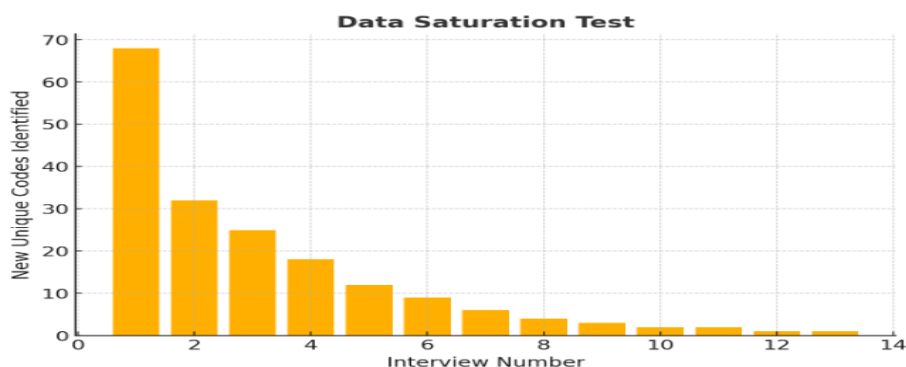


Figure 1: Data saturation test on consolidated codes

## Presentation of Results

The findings in this chapter address the research questions raised in Chapter 3, which arose from the research gaps noted in Chapter 2. The findings are organized according to the primary research questions, with each section focusing on themes and subthemes that arose from the qualitative analysis. Interview transcripts were systematically coded in Atlas.ti, and relevant codes were grouped into sub-themes and overarching themes via a thematic analysis procedure.

This structured approach allowed for a clear interpretation of participants' experiences and viewpoints, ensuring that the findings appropriately reflected their attitudes on diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs and their impact on organizational performance. Each theme and subtheme are backed with selected participant quotations to increase credibility and depth of understanding.

## Summary of Counts

**Table 8** shows the distribution of codes, subthemes, and themes based on data analysis across the three research questions. A total of 160 first-line codes were generated and then refined into 110 consolidated codes using Atlas.ti's systematic coding procedure. Of these, 52 codes related to Research Question 1 (RQ1), 34 to RQ2, and 24 to RQ3. These were then divided into 30 subthemes 12 under RQ1, 10 under RQ2, and 8 under RQ3 from which eight overarching themes were formed. This hierarchical coding technique ensured that the theme structure accurately represented the relationships between data segments as well as the major study focus on diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs and their impact on organizational performance.

**Table 8: Code counts by research question (RQ)**

Category	Total	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Total first line codes	160	70	50	40
Total consolidated codes	110	52	34	24
Number of codes by RQ	110	52	34	24
Subthemes by RQ	27	12	8	7
Themes by RQ	8	3	2	3

The table 9 below provides a detailed analysis of the subtheme counts based on the themes created for each research question. This provides a more detailed picture of the thematic structure, demonstrating how subthemes were spread within the primary themes associated with each study topic. The breakdown clarifies the relative emphasis and depth of data coverage across themes, building on the higher-level description provided in the previous table.

**Table 9** shows that the analysis identified 12 subthemes under Research Question 1, 10 under Research Question 2, and 8 under Research Question 3. The distribution shows that Research Question 1 created the most subthemes, indicating a broader conceptual scope, whilst the remaining questions produced fewer but more specialized theme patterns. This variety reflects the different depths and complexities of discoveries across the three research fields.

**Table 9: Breakdown of Subthemes by Theme**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Subtheme count</b>
<b>Research Question 1</b>	<b>12</b>
– Theme 1: Leadership, Governance & Policy	4
– Theme 2: People Practices (Recruitment & Talent Pipelines)	5
– Theme 3: Training, Coaching & Awareness	3
<b>Research Question 2</b>	<b>10</b>
– Theme 1: Measurement, Compliance & Business Case	4
– Theme 2: Operational Constraints & Implementation Barriers	6
<b>Research Question 3</b>	<b>8</b>
– Theme 1: Culture, Inclusion & Workplace Experience	5
– Theme 2: Training, Coaching & Awareness (Innovation aspects)	2
– Theme 3: Leadership, Governance & Policy (Cultural leadership)	1

The following table 10 presents the arrangement of subthemes according to their respective themes, which are further classified under each research question. A three-tier hierarchical numbering system has been applied to enhance clarity and facilitate cross-referencing between themes and subthemes. The table also includes corresponding code counts for each research question, theme, and subtheme, providing a quantitative overview of the data distribution and the relative emphasis placed on each thematic area during the analysis.

As shown in **Table 10**, the distribution of code counts shows that Research Question 1 generated the most codes, suggesting its broader analytical reach and subject

diversity. In contrast, Research Questions 2 and 3 yielded fewer but more concentrated codes, indicating a more in-depth investigation of certain organizational and behavioral dimensions of diversity and inclusion (D&I). This variety reflects the varying emphasis and complexity of participant responses to the research questions.

**Table 10 Subthemes arranged by theme with code counts**

#	Description	Code Count
<b>1.</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION 1</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>1.1</b>	<b>Theme 1: Leadership, Governance &amp; Policy</b>	<b>18</b>
1.1.1	Subtheme 1: Leadership Commitment & Role Modelling	6
1.1.2	Subtheme 2: Policy Design & Deviation Controls	5
1.1.3	Subtheme 3: Communication & Inclusion Messaging	4
1.1.4	Subtheme 4: Long-term Program Framing & Patience	3
<b>1.2</b>	<b>Theme 2: People Practices (Recruitment &amp; Talent Pipelines)</b>	<b>20</b>
1.2.1	Subtheme 1: Talent Pipelines & Succession Continuity	5
1.2.2	Subtheme 2: Recruitment Practices that Drive Performance	6
1.2.3	Subtheme 3: Apprenticeships & Early Career Initiatives	3
1.2.4	Subtheme 4: Retention & Absorption Measurement	3
1.2.5	Subtheme 5: Inclusion Practices that Improve Belonging	3
<b>1.3</b>	<b>Theme 3: Training, Coaching &amp; Awareness</b>	<b>14</b>
1.3.1	Subtheme 1: Team Bonding & GWP Effects on Engagement	5
1.3.2	Subtheme 2: Coaching for Managers & Awareness Programs	6
1.3.3	Subtheme 3: Unconscious Bias & Sensitisation Workshops	3
<b>2.</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION 2</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Theme 1: Operational Constraints &amp; Implementation Barriers</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1.1	Subtheme 1: Resistance & Mindset Barriers	6
2.1.2	Subtheme 2: Recruitment Shortages in Specific Functions	4
2.1.3	Subtheme 3: Logistics & Availability Constraints	3
2.1.4	Subtheme 4: Ethics & Fairness in Selection	3
2.1.5	Subtheme 5: Client/Stakeholder Buy-in Constraints	2
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Theme 2: Measurement, Compliance &amp; Business Case</b>	<b>14</b>
2.2.1	Subtheme 1: Measurement & Metrics Challenges	5
2.2.2	Subtheme 2: Local Compliance Drivers (BEE/EE)	4
2.2.3	Subtheme 3: Public/Consumer Pressure & Procurement Alignment	5
<b>3.</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION 3</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.1</b>	<b>Theme 1: Culture, Inclusion &amp; Workplace Experience</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1.1	Subtheme 1: Cross-cultural Collaboration Dynamics	4
3.1.2	Subtheme 2: Age & Generational Diversity Effects	3
3.1.3	Subtheme 3: Storytelling & Narratives to Foster Creativity	4

3.1.4	Subtheme 4: Cultural Acclimatisation & Greetings	4
3.2	<b>Theme 2: Training, Coaching &amp; Awareness (Innovation Aspects)</b>	6
3.2.1	Subtheme 1: Coaching Midlevel Leaders to Role Model	3
3.2.2	Subtheme 2: Education & Awareness Driving Innovation	3
3.3	<b>Theme 3: Leadership, Governance &amp; Policy (Cultural Leadership)</b>	3
3.3.1	Subtheme 1: Ethical Leadership & Cultural Sensitivity	3

### Conventions applied

Certain editorial and ethical guidelines were applied to the participant quotations and supporting commentary offered in this chapter. To guarantee confidentiality and study integrity, participants' names, organisations, and any identifiable references to specific locations or business situations were anonymised. Minor editorial changes were also made to improve clarity and readability, including the removal of repetitive words, filler expressions, and incomplete sentences that did not change the sense of the participant's response. In addition, brief contextual clarifications were provided in brackets as needed to facilitate understanding while keeping the authenticity of participants' voices and the veracity of the data presented.

### 5.1 Research Question 1: What effects do diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs have on corporate performance and employee engagement?

This section presents the findings related to Research Question 1, which sought to explore the perceived impact of diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs on organisational performance and employee engagement. Data were obtained from 13 participants (P1–P13) across diverse industries and countries, including South Africa, the United States, India, Dubai, and Ghana. Using Atlas.ti, the analysis identified three key themes: **Leadership, Governance and Policy; People Practices;** and **Training, Coaching and Awareness** each supported by subthemes derived from participant responses. The findings reveal that leadership commitment, inclusive talent management practices, and targeted training initiatives play a pivotal role in driving engagement, innovation, and overall organisational performance.

### **5.1.1 Theme 1: Leadership, Governance and Policy**

Participants across industries emphasised the central role of leadership commitment and governance structures in embedding D&I principles into everyday business practice. Strong leadership visibility, clear policies, and consistent communication were identified as essential for translating D&I objectives into measurable organisational outcomes.

#### **5.1.1.1 Subtheme 1: Leadership Commitment and Role Modelling**

Most participants agreed that leaders' actions set the tone for inclusion. Where leaders actively model inclusive behaviours, employees feel empowered and valued, which enhances engagement and productivity. As one participant explained:

*"Our leadership team leads by example. When employees see executives taking part in D&I discussions and training, it sends a message that inclusion is not optional it's part of who we are."* (P4, India, Engineering)

Another participant added:

*"Having leaders who genuinely listen and act on inclusion feedback helps everyone feel like they belong. It creates psychological safety, and people give their best at work."* (P2, South Africa, Healthcare)

These responses suggest that leadership behaviour directly shapes organisational culture and engagement. Companies with inclusive leaders tend to experience stronger collaboration, reduced turnover, and higher innovation levels.

#### **5.1.1.2 Subtheme 2: Policy Design and Deviation Controls**

Participants noted that well-defined policies and accountability mechanisms are vital for ensuring fairness in recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation.

*"Policies help to keep the process fair. When everyone knows what's expected, there's less room for bias in decision-making."* (P11, South Africa, Manufacturing)

This sentiment was echoed by others who observed that deviation controls, such as audits and transparent reporting, strengthened employee trust. Structured governance frameworks ensure that inclusion remains measurable and consistent, thereby enhancing organisational credibility.

### **5.1.1.3 Subtheme 3: Communication and Inclusion Messaging**

Communication emerged as a recurring enabler across industries. Many participants stated that regular internal messaging and visible campaigns reinforce D&I values.

*“We share success stories of diverse teams that achieved great results. It keeps people inspired and reminds every one of the importance of inclusion.”* (P8, South Africa, Marketing & Advertising)

In organisations where communication was transparent, employees reported feeling more aligned with company values and engaged in achieving shared goals. Consistent messaging also helped reduce misconceptions about D&I, particularly in multicultural workplaces.

### **5.1.1.4 Subtheme 4: Long-term Program Framing and Patience**

Participants observed that D&I is a long-term journey that requires sustained effort and patience.

*“You can’t expect instant results. It takes time for people to unlearn biases and embrace inclusion. But when done right, it transforms the culture.”* (P9, South Africa, Logistics)

Organisations that approached D&I as an evolving strategic priority rather than a short-term project demonstrated greater stability in employee morale and engagement outcomes.

## **5.1.2 Theme 2: People Practices (Recruitment and Talent Pipelines)**

This theme relates to how inclusive people practices influence workforce performance and retention. Participants agreed that fair recruitment, effective talent development, and equitable retention mechanisms are key drivers of organisational success.

### **5.1.2.1 Subtheme 1: Talent Pipelines and Succession Continuity**

Several participants noted that developing internal talent pipelines and succession programs supported workforce diversity and reduced dependency on external hires.

*“We identify high-potential employees from underrepresented groups early and give*

*them development opportunities. It improves performance and succession readiness.” (P3, South Africa, Manufacturing)*

Such initiatives not only enhanced internal mobility but also improved employee loyalty and performance consistency.

#### **5.1.2.2 Subtheme 2: Recruitment Practices that Drive Performance**

Recruitment practices were highlighted as a direct link between D&I and organisational competitiveness.

*“When recruitment panels are diverse, decisions are more balanced and the quality of hires improves. It’s visible in team performance.” (P5, Dubai, Engineering)*

Participants agreed that inclusive recruitment strengthened the talent pool and improved representation across departments.

#### **5.1.2.3 Subtheme 3: Apprenticeships and Early Career Initiatives**

Early career programs were frequently mentioned as mechanisms for nurturing future talent and enhancing organisational reputation.

*“Our apprenticeship program helped us attract young people who bring fresh ideas. It’s boosted engagement across all age groups.” (P7, Ghana, Cleaning Services)*

These programs were associated with innovation and higher workforce morale, particularly in technical and industrial sectors.

#### **5.1.2.4 Subtheme 4: Retention and Absorption Measurement**

Retention measurement was another critical area. Participants linked retention rates to D&I effectiveness, noting that inclusive workplaces tend to retain top talent longer.

*“When people feel included, they stay longer and perform better. We track that through our annual engagement and retention metrics.” (P1, USA, Manufacturing)*

Organisations that monitored inclusion outcomes systematically showed measurable performance gains, demonstrating that engagement and retention are tangible indicators of D&I success.

#### **5.1.2.5 Subtheme 5: Inclusion Practices that Improve Belonging**

Belonging emerged as a central component of engagement.

*“It’s about creating an environment where everyone feels they can contribute. That sense of belonging is what keeps people motivated.”* (P12, South Africa, Engineering)

This suggests that inclusion is not only an ethical obligation but also a strategic lever for unlocking discretionary effort and creativity.

### **5.1.3 Theme 3: Training, Coaching and Awareness**

Participants widely agreed that training and awareness initiatives underpin long-term behavioural change and foster inclusive cultures. Structured training was seen as critical for breaking down biases and aligning employee attitudes with organisational goals.

#### **5.1.3.1 Subtheme 1: Team Bonding and Group Work Practices**

Collaborative learning and teambuilding exercises were identified as effective in enhancing engagement and performance.

*“After our D&I workshops, team relationships improved. People understood each other better and worked together more effectively.”* (P6, South Africa, Aviation)

Participants indicated that improved team cohesion translated into higher productivity and reduced workplace conflict.

#### **5.1.3.2 Subtheme 2: Coaching for Managers and Awareness Programs**

Managerial coaching emerged as a vital enabler of inclusive leadership.

*“Managers are trained to identify unconscious bias and support team members fairly. It’s changed how people lead and communicate.”* (P10, South Africa, Manufacturing)

These programs built leadership empathy, which participants linked to greater trust and engagement among employees.

#### **5.1.3.3 Subtheme 3: Unconscious Bias and Sensitisation Workshops**

Workshops on unconscious bias were implemented across multiple organisations, with participants reporting noticeable shifts in workplace dynamics.

*“The bias awareness sessions opened our eyes. We started recognising*

*microaggressions and addressing them constructively.*” (P13, South Africa, Engineering)

Such awareness interventions fostered mutual respect and improved interpersonal relationships, creating a more inclusive environment that enhanced performance outcomes.

#### **5.1.4 Summary and Interpretation of RQ1 Findings**

The findings for Research Question 1 reveal a clear connection between D&I initiatives and improved organisational performance and engagement. Leadership commitment and consistent governance frameworks establish trust and accountability. Inclusive people practices, particularly in recruitment, retention, and succession enhance workforce stability and productivity. Meanwhile, training and coaching initiatives drive the cultural transformation necessary for long-term inclusion.

Across industries and countries, participants consistently described D&I as both a **moral imperative and a strategic performance driver**. Organisations that invested in sustained leadership visibility, transparent policies, and targeted employee development experienced stronger engagement, innovation, and retention outcomes.

### **5.2 Research Question 2: What are the main obstacles that companies face when implementing diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies?**

This section presents the results related to Research Question 2, which aimed to identify the primary barriers organisations encounter when implementing diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. The analysis revealed two main themes which are **Operational Constraints and Implementation Barriers** and **Measurement, Compliance and Business Case** each containing several subthemes. The responses were consistent across industries, suggesting that while organisations recognise the strategic value of D&I, structural and behavioural challenges often hinder effective implementation.

#### **5.2.1 Theme 1: Operational Constraints and Implementation Barriers**

Participants highlighted various operational, cultural, and structural barriers that impede the full integration of D&I initiatives. These included resistance to change, limited resources, logistical constraints, and external stakeholder pressures.

#### **5.2.1.1 Subtheme 1: Resistance and Mindset Barriers**

A major challenge identified was employee and managerial resistance rooted in deep-seated mindsets. Several participants explained that some employees perceive D&I as compliance-driven or unnecessary, rather than as a strategic organisational priority.

*“Some people still think D&I is about ticking boxes for compliance, not about real inclusion. That mindset makes it difficult to gain buy-in.”* (P2, South Africa, Healthcare)

*“There’s this belief that inclusion threatens existing power structures. You can sense silent resistance even when people don’t say it outright.”* (P4, India, Engineering)

These perspectives show that organisational culture plays a key role in determining the pace of D&I adoption. A lack of mindset transformation reduces engagement and often results in superficial program implementation.

#### **5.2.1.2 Subtheme 2: Recruitment Shortages in Specific Functions**

Participants from manufacturing and engineering sectors reported persistent difficulties in attracting diverse talent in technical roles.

*“It’s not always unwillingness to hire diversely it’s the lack of available qualified candidates in certain technical fields.”* (P11, South Africa, Manufacturing)

*“In engineering, especially senior roles, there’s a shortage of women applicants. It’s an industrywide problem.”* (P5, Dubai, Engineering)

These shortages highlight systemic challenges within talent supply chains, particularly in Stem related sectors. They also suggest that some industries face structural barriers beyond organisational control, which can limit diversity outcomes.

#### **5.2.1.3 Subtheme 3: Logistics and Availability Constraints**

Operational and logistical issues, especially in geographically dispersed organisations, were frequently cited as barriers.

*“We operate in multiple regions, and it’s not easy to deliver training or awareness programs consistently. Time zones, costs, and workload all get in the way.”* (P6, South Africa, Aviation)

Such logistical limitations hinder program consistency and reduce employee participation, thereby affecting the sustainability of D&I efforts.

#### **5.2.1.4 Subtheme 4: Ethics and Fairness in Selection**

Balancing equity and meritocracy was another recurring challenge. Several participants mentioned that employees sometimes questioned the fairness of appointments made under D&I targets.

*“Some employees feel that D&I targets compromise merit. It causes tension if not managed carefully.”* (P12, South Africa, Engineering)

*“The ethical aspect is tricky. We want inclusion, but we also have to ensure the best candidate gets the job.”* (P1, USA, Manufacturing)

These tensions reflect the complexity of maintaining fairness perceptions while advancing inclusion objectives. Without transparent communication, such perceptions can erode trust and reduce employee engagement.

#### **5.2.1.5 Subtheme 5: Client and Stakeholder Buy-in Constraints**

A few participants reported that limited client or external stakeholder understanding of D&I created indirect barriers to implementation.

*“Clients sometimes don’t see the value of D&I, especially in sectors like logistics where performance is measured purely by efficiency.”* (P9, South Africa, Logistics)

*“When senior customers don’t prioritise inclusion, it makes it harder to justify time and investment internally.”* (P8, South Africa, Marketing and Advertising)

These findings indicate that successful D&I adoption requires not only internal commitment but also alignment with external stakeholders’ expectations.

#### **5.2.2 Theme 2: Measurement, Compliance and Business Case**

The second major theme addressed the absence of reliable metrics, compliance pressures, and the challenge of establishing a convincing business case for D&I.

### **5.2.2.1 Subtheme 1: Measurement and Metrics Challenges**

Participants across multiple industries admitted that measuring the impact of D&I remains difficult.

*“We don’t have standard indicators for inclusion, so we rely on engagement surveys and turnover data, which don’t tell the full story.”* (P3, South Africa, Manufacturing)

*“Without measurable KPIs, it’s hard to track progress or prove the value of D&I to management.”* (P10, South Africa, Manufacturing)

The lack of consistent metrics makes it difficult for organisations to demonstrate the tangible business benefits of inclusion initiatives, weakening executive support.

### **5.2.2.2 Subtheme 2: Local Compliance Drivers (BEE/EE Requirements)**

South African participants discussed the dual role of compliance frameworks such as Employment Equity (EE) and Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). While these frameworks drive accountability, they can also limit creativity in implementation.

*“Our D&I is largely driven by compliance. The focus is on meeting BEE targets rather than changing mindsets.”* (P11, South Africa, Manufacturing)

*“Compliance helps to formalise D&I, but it shouldn’t be the only motivation otherwise, once the targets are met, the commitment fades.”* (P12, South Africa, Engineering)

This duality suggests that while compliance promotes accountability, it may also lead to a transactional approach that limits authentic culture change.

### **5.2.2.3 Subtheme 3: Public, Consumer, and Procurement Pressures**

A small number of participants mentioned that external pressures, such as consumer expectations and supplier diversity requirements, also shaped D&I strategies.

*“Our multinational clients expect us to demonstrate inclusion in procurement. It’s becoming a business requirement.”* (P5, Dubai, Engineering)

*“Public perception matters when the company is seen as inclusive, it strengthens our brand.”* (P8, South Africa, Marketing and Advertising)

These pressures were viewed as both motivators and stressors, as companies balanced authentic commitment with reputational considerations.

### 5.2.3 Interpretation of RQ2 Findings

The findings indicate that the most significant obstacles to D&I implementation are cultural resistance, skills shortages, limited resources, and the difficulty of quantifying inclusion outcomes. Across industries, employees and managers often approach D&I with varying degrees of understanding and motivation. Where leadership commitment is inconsistent, programs are perceived as symbolic rather than strategic.

Furthermore, compliance frameworks, though valuable for accountability, can unintentionally narrow the focus to numerical representation rather than cultural transformation. In highly regulated environments, such as South Africa's manufacturing and engineering sectors, participants expressed concern that compliance overshadows creativity and genuine inclusion.

Logistical and operational challenges especially in dispersed organisations also limit training reach and employee participation. The ethical balance between diversity goals and merit-based selection remains sensitive, requiring careful communication and transparent evaluation processes.

External stakeholder influence adds another layer of complexity: while consumer and procurement expectations reinforce the business case for inclusion, they can also generate pressure to demonstrate results rapidly, potentially undermining authentic change.

### 5.2.4 Summary of RQ2 Findings

Overall, Research Question 2 reveals that **the primary barriers to D&I implementation are both structural and cultural**. Resistance from employees and leadership, insufficient talent supply, and weak measurement frameworks all restrict the depth and sustainability of D&I programs. Compliance-driven approaches encourage accountability but risk superficial adoption if not complemented by genuine cultural commitment.

The findings suggest that organisations that succeed in overcoming these barriers are those that combine **strategic intent, leadership visibility, and measurable impact tracking**. Cross-industry comparisons indicate that while context-specific challenges vary, the underlying need for mindset change, leadership alignment, and data driven evaluation remains universal.

### **5.3 Research Question 3: What effects do D&I policies have on innovation, creativity, and workplace culture, according to executives and employees?**

This section presents the findings related to Research Question 3, which explored how D&I policies influence innovation, creativity, and workplace culture across industries and geographies. Data from 13 participants (P1–P13) revealed that D&I policies foster innovation by enhancing collaboration, encouraging knowledge exchange, and creating psychologically safe environments. Three main themes emerged: **Culture, Inclusion and Workplace Experience; Training, Coaching and Awareness (Innovation Aspects);** and **Leadership, Governance and Policy (Cultural Leadership)**. Together, these themes demonstrate that inclusive cultures and leadership practices significantly enhance creativity, problem-solving, and overall organisational adaptability.

#### **5.3.1 Theme 1: Culture, Inclusion and Workplace Experience**

This theme captures the influence of inclusive workplace cultures on creativity, collaboration, and overall innovation. Participants consistently noted that D&I initiatives positively shaped team dynamics, cross-cultural understanding, and employee belonging, all of which fuel creative problem-solving.

##### **5.3.1.1 Subtheme 1: Cross-cultural Collaboration Dynamics**

Participants observed that diverse teams brought multiple perspectives to problem-solving, leading to more innovative outcomes.

*“When teams have people from different backgrounds, the ideas are richer. We find solutions we would never have thought of otherwise.”* (P3, South Africa, Manufacturing)

*“Cultural diversity has helped us think beyond our normal way of doing things. It forces creativity because you have to understand different ways of working.”* (P5, Dubai, Engineering)

These insights highlight that cross-cultural collaboration improves innovation by integrating different experiences and viewpoints. Organisations that embraced team diversity saw tangible benefits in efficiency and innovation output.

### **5.3.1.2 Subtheme 2: Age and Generational Diversity Effects**

Generational diversity was mentioned as another source of innovation and learning. Participants emphasised that younger employees introduced fresh ideas, while older colleagues contributed experience and structure.

*“The younger generation is more tech-savvy, while senior employees bring wisdom. When they collaborate, it creates balance and new ways of thinking.”* (P7, Ghana, Cleaning Services)

*“We’re seeing more intergenerational teamwork, and it’s improving how we approach challenges and make decisions.”* (P10, South Africa, Manufacturing)

These responses illustrate how generational inclusion supports creative tension that enhances innovation and performance.

### **5.3.1.3 Subtheme 3: Storytelling and Narratives to Foster Creativity**

Storytelling emerged as a subtle but powerful D&I tool to build connection and inspire creative thinking.

*“We use storytelling sessions where people share personal experiences. It makes us realise we have more in common than we think and sparks new ideas.”* (P8, South Africa, Marketing & Advertising)

Storytelling helped build empathy and break down silos, enabling creative collaboration through shared understanding.

### **5.3.1.4 Subtheme 4: Cultural Acclimatisation and Workplace Belonging**

Acknowledging and respecting different cultural practices such as greetings, customs, and celebrations was reported to strengthen inclusivity and morale.

*“Simple things like greeting in someone’s language or recognising their holidays make a huge difference. It shows respect and makes people open up.”* (P9, South Africa, Logistics)

Such gestures reinforced psychological safety and belonging, which participants linked to higher levels of creativity and engagement.

## **5.3.2 Theme 2: Training, Coaching and Awareness (Innovation Aspects)**

Participants described how continuous training and awareness programs contributed

to innovative thinking by enhancing openness, empathy, and collaboration.

### **5.3.2.1 Subtheme 1: Coaching Mid-level Leaders to Role Model Innovation**

Midlevel leaders were seen as crucial catalysts for embedding inclusive innovation. Participants indicated that coaching helped them promote diverse perspectives and idea sharing within teams.

*“Coaching helped our managers to encourage new ideas rather than shutting them down. It created an environment where everyone could contribute.”* (P12, South Africa, Engineering)

This practice not only encouraged innovation but also enhanced leadership accountability for fostering creative team environments.

### **5.3.2.2 Subtheme 2: Education and Awareness Driving Innovation**

Training and awareness initiatives were also credited for improving employees' capacity for critical thinking and collaboration.

*“Our awareness programs made people more openminded. It's not just about culture, it's about how we solve problems together.”* (P1, USA, Manufacturing)

*“After the inclusion workshops, brainstorming sessions became more productive because people felt safer to share ideas.”* (P6, South Africa, Aviation)

These statements show that training promotes psychological safety, which, in turn, supports creativity and continuous improvement.

### **5.3.3 Theme 3: Leadership, Governance and Policy (Cultural Leadership)**

Participants frequently highlighted that leadership tone, behaviour, and policy reinforcement significantly shaped organisational culture and innovation outcomes.

#### **5.3.3.1 Subtheme 1: Ethical Leadership and Cultural Sensitivity**

Ethical leadership was identified as a core enabler of cultural transformation and innovation.

*“Leaders who are fair and empathetic encourage people to speak up. That's where new ideas come from when people feel heard.”* (P4, India, Engineering)

*“Our leaders take time to understand cultural differences before making decisions. It's created mutual respect and openness.”* (P11, South Africa, Manufacturing)

Leaders who demonstrated cultural sensitivity and authenticity fostered a workplace climate of trust and experimentation, both of which drive innovation.

### **5.3.3.2 Subtheme 2: Policy Integration and Accountability**

Some participants emphasised the need for leadership to align D&I with organisational goals and accountability systems.

*“Inclusion should be part of every business strategy, not just HR. That’s when it starts to influence innovation.”* (P2, South Africa, Healthcare)

*“We include inclusion targets in performance appraisals for leaders it makes them take it seriously.”* (P10, South Africa, Manufacturing)

This reinforces the idea that accountability embedded in policy encourages leaders to treat D&I as a business enabler rather than a compliance function.

### **5.3.4 Interpretation of RQ3 Findings**

The findings for Research Question 3 reveal that D&I policies have a substantial positive influence on innovation, creativity, and organisational culture. Diverse and inclusive environments provide fertile ground for the exchange of ideas, problem-solving, and adaptive learning. Participants linked inclusion directly to team creativity and observed that cross-cultural and generational diversity stimulates new ways of thinking.

Training and awareness programs were instrumental in creating openness and psychological safety both necessary conditions for innovation. Coaching midlevel managers strengthened inclusive leadership behaviours, enabling idea sharing and collaboration. Ethical and culturally sensitive leadership also emerged as a key driver, setting the tone for inclusion and creativity.

Moreover, organisations that integrated D&I into their governance structures and leadership appraisals reported a more consistent link between inclusion and innovation outcomes. This indicates that when inclusion becomes an organisational value rather than an initiative, it strengthens the company’s capacity for innovation and long-term adaptability.

### 5.3.5 Summary of RQ3 Findings

In summary, the results demonstrate that D&I initiatives **enhance innovation and creativity by shaping inclusive, psychologically safe, and collaborative workplace cultures**. The influence of leadership, team diversity, and awareness programs is clear employees in inclusive environments are more willing to share ideas, challenge assumptions, and take creative risks.

Across countries and sectors, participants described D&I as a cultural asset that drives not only innovation but also organisational resilience and adaptability in an evolving global business environment.

### 5.4 Conclusion for RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3

This chapter presented the qualitative results and analysis of data collected from 13 participants representing a range of industries including manufacturing, engineering, aviation, healthcare, logistics, marketing, and cleaning services across several countries (South Africa, the United States, India, Dubai, and Ghana). The purpose of the analysis was to explore how diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives influence organisational performance, employee engagement, innovation, and workplace culture, while also identifying the barriers that affect their effective implementation. The findings were organised according to the three research questions, each supported by major themes, subthemes, and direct insights from participants.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that D&I initiatives have a **significant positive impact on organisational performance and employee engagement**, provided that they are supported by committed leadership, structured governance, and inclusive people practices. Participants consistently described visible leadership commitment and clear communication as critical enablers of engagement and cultural alignment. Inclusive recruitment, succession planning, and targeted training programs were found to strengthen retention and enhance productivity by creating equitable and trusting work environments.

At the same time, the study revealed that **operational and cultural barriers** continue to challenge D&I implementation. Resistance to change, insufficient awareness, and limited data driven measurement were among the most common

obstacles across industries. While compliance frameworks such as Employment Equity (EE) and Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) in South Africa encourage accountability, participants noted that they can also restrict creativity if D&I becomes merely target driven. Additionally, skills shortages in certain technical sectors and inconsistent stakeholder buy-in were identified as external constraints that hindered sustained inclusion progress.

Importantly, the findings showed that **D&I policies contribute meaningfully to innovation, creativity, and organisational adaptability**. Participants observed that cross-cultural and generational diversity broadened perspectives, leading to improved problem-solving and more innovative outcomes. Inclusive leadership, supported by continuous coaching and awareness programs, was shown to cultivate psychological safety an essential condition for collaboration and creativity. Organisations that embedded inclusion into leadership accountability systems reported stronger innovation cultures and more resilient teams.

In summary, the chapter highlights that **diversity and inclusion function as both a moral and strategic imperative**. D&I initiatives strengthen engagement, enhance collaboration, and drive long-term performance when treated as an integral part of organisational strategy rather than a compliance obligation. Leadership commitment, measurable outcomes, and continuous learning emerged as the key factors that differentiate successful D&I programs from symbolic efforts.

The following chapter, **Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion**, builds on these findings by relating them to existing literature, interpreting their implications for theory and practice, and presenting recommendations for organisations seeking to integrate diversity and inclusion more effectively into their strategic frameworks.

### **Top 2 subthemes per Theme for discussion in Chapter 6**

**The table 11** below shows the top two subthemes identified under each major theme across the three research questions addressed in this study. These subthemes were chosen based on their frequency and usefulness to thematic analysis using Atlas.ti. They are the most important topics of discussion in Chapter 6, where the findings will

be critically reviewed in light of current literature and practical implications for organizational diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts.

**Table 11: Top Two Subthemes per Theme for discussion in Chapter 6**

#	Description	Code Count
1.	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION 1</b>	<b>33</b>
1.1.	<b>Theme 1: Leadership, Governance &amp; Policy</b>	
1.1.1.	Subtheme 1: Leadership Commitment & Role Modelling	6
1.1.2.	Subtheme 2: Policy Design & Deviation Controls	5
1.2.	<b>Theme 2: People Practices (Recruitment &amp; Talent Pipelines)</b>	
1.2.1.	Subtheme 2: Recruitment Practices that Drive Performance	6
1.2.2.	Subtheme 1: Talent Pipelines & Succession Continuity	5
1.3.	<b>Theme 3: Training, Coaching &amp; Awareness</b>	
1.3.1.	Subtheme 2: Coaching for Managers & Awareness Programs	6
1.3.2.	Subtheme 1: Team Bonding & GWP Effects on Engagement	5
2.	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION 2</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1.	<b>Theme 1: Operational Constraints &amp; Implementation Barriers</b>	
2.1.1.	Subtheme 1: Resistance & Mindset Barriers	6
2.1.2.	Subtheme 2: Recruitment Shortages in Specific Functions	4
2.2.	<b>Theme 2: Measurement, Compliance &amp; Business Case</b>	
2.2.1.	Subtheme 1: Measurement & Metrics Challenges	5
2.2.2.	Subtheme 2: Public/Consumer Pressure & Procurement Alignment	5
3.	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION 3</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1.	<b>Theme 1: Culture, Inclusion &amp; Workplace Experience</b>	
3.1.1.	Subtheme 1: Cross-cultural Collaboration Dynamics	4
3.1.2.	Subtheme 4: Cultural Acclimatisation & Greetings	4
3.2.	<b>Theme 2: Training, Coaching &amp; Awareness (Innovation Aspects)</b>	
3.2.1.	Subtheme 1: Coaching Midlevel Leaders to Role Model	3
3.2.2.	Subtheme 2: Education & Awareness Driving Innovation	3
3.3.	<b>Theme 3: Leadership, Governance &amp; Policy (Cultural Leadership)</b>	
3.3.1.	Subtheme 1: Ethical Leadership & Cultural Sensitivity	3

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### Introduction

This chapter integrates the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5 with the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 2, in order to assess whether the results confirm, challenge, or extend existing research on diversity and inclusion (D&I) and its relationship to organisational performance. The discussion is structured around the three core research questions, following the thematic and sub-thematic framework established in Table 11. Drawing on theoretical models such as Inclusive Leadership, the Resource Based View (RBV), Social Identity Theory, Institutional Theory, and Organisational Justice, the chapter explores how D&I practices influence leadership dynamics, organisational culture, innovation capacity, and performance outcomes.

### Rationale for Subtheme Selection

The subthemes included in the discussion were selected based on their frequency and conceptual relevance during the data analysis process. For each research question, two subthemes per theme were chosen to reflect the most salient patterns in participant responses and their alignment with key theoretical constructs.

This approach ensures that the discussion remains focused on the most significant findings, offering a nuanced understanding of how D&I initiatives shape employee engagement, foster innovation, enhance leadership effectiveness, and contribute to overall organisational success.

### 6.1 Discussion: Research Question 1

**Research Question 1:** *What effects do diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs have on corporate performance and employee engagement?*

This section explores the interplay between the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2 and the empirical evidence presented in Chapter 5. The analysis is structured around the themes and subthemes outlined in Table 11, with two

subthemes per theme selected based on their coding frequency and conceptual relevance. Each subtheme is critically examined in relation to existing literature to assess whether the findings affirm, expand upon, or challenge theoretical assumptions. The discussion seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the results within both the organisational and South African sociohistorical context.

## **6.1.1 Theme 1: Leadership, Governance & Policy**

### **6.1.1.1 Subtheme 1: Leadership Commitment & Role-modelling**

Leadership commitment and role-modelling emerged as pivotal factors influencing the effectiveness of D&I initiatives. Participants consistently reported that when leaders actively embody inclusive behaviours such as demonstrating fairness, empathy, and engaging in diversity related activities employees perceive D&I efforts as genuine and strategically aligned. In contrast, the absence of such behaviours often led to perceptions of D&I as superficial or compliance oriented.

These findings corroborate the theoretical assertions of Liu et al. (2024) and Booyesen (2023), who argue that authentic leadership and visible sponsorship are essential for cultivating inclusive organisational cultures that foster engagement and innovation. Zhao et al. (2025) further emphasise that behavioural modelling by leaders, rather than mere rhetorical support, is the primary conduit through which policy is operationalized an insight reinforced by this study.

This research contributes to the literature by illustrating how leadership authenticity is expressed through microlevel actions, such as actively listening to employee perspectives, endorsing inclusive decision-making, and recognising diverse contributions in meetings. Within the South African context, where historical inequities persist, such inclusive leadership behaviours carry symbolic weight, often interpreted by employees as acts of reconciliation and trust building (Nkomo, 2023).

A research proposition arising from these findings is: *that the visibility and consistency of inclusive leadership behaviours are positively correlated with employee trust, engagement, and performance, thereby affirming and extending existing theories on leadership authenticity as a driver of D&I success.*

### **6.1.1.2 Subtheme 2: Policy Design & Deviation Controls**

The data indicate that robust D&I policies, underpinned by clear governance structures and deviation controls, are essential for sustaining inclusive practices. Participants noted that vague or poorly enforced policies allowed biases to persist, undermining perceptions of fairness. Conversely, organisations that implemented transparent accountability mechanisms such as scorecards, audits, and escalation protocols achieved more consistent and credible inclusion outcomes.

These findings align with the work of Okatta et al. (2024) and Zhao et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of structured accountability in effective D&I programs. This study extends existing theory by demonstrating that the manner in which deviation controls are applied significantly affects their impact. Participants expressed a preference for developmental approaches focused on learning and behavioural improvement over punitive compliance measures.

Moreover, respondents advocated for a hybrid policy design that integrates both quantitative metrics (e.g., representation targets) and qualitative indicators (e.g., climate surveys), thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of inclusion assessments. This approach builds on Vedres and Vasarhelyi's (2022) performance-based diversity models by incorporating employee sentiment as a critical dimension.

*A research proposition follows: D&I policies that incorporate developmental deviation controls and mixed performance indicators enhance perceptions of organisational fairness and employee engagement, thereby contributing to sustained inclusion outcomes.*

## **6.1.2 Theme 2: People Practices (Recruitment & Talent Pipelines)**

### **6.1.2.1 Subtheme 2: Recruitment Practices that Drive Performance**

Recruitment practices were identified as a key mechanism linking diversity inputs to organisational performance. Participants reported that inclusive recruitment strategies such as diverse interview panels, competency-based selection, and unbiased shortlisting led to the formation of high performing teams and elevated levels of employee engagement. Inclusive recruitment was also associated with increased innovation and customer responsiveness, attributed to broader cognitive and cultural representation.

These findings support the conclusions of Okatta et al. (2024) and Vedres and Vasarhelyi (2022), who argue that inclusive recruitment enhances problem-solving and adaptability through diversity of thought. This study extends the literature by identifying two contextual considerations: first, the need to redefine job specifications to value diverse career trajectories rather than traditional linear paths; and second, the recognition that inclusive recruitment alone cannot resolve systemic skill shortages in technical fields, necessitating broader ecosystem level interventions.

Thus, the findings expand upon Zhao et al. (2025) by positioning inclusive recruitment as the initial phase of a continuum that must be integrated with retention and development strategies to achieve sustainable performance outcomes.

A research proposition is proposed: *Inclusive recruitment practices, when embedded within a comprehensive framework of development and retention, positively influence organisational performance by enhancing innovation, engagement, and decision-making quality.*

#### **6.1.2.2 Subtheme 1: Talent Pipelines & Succession Continuity**

Participants emphasised the strategic importance of investing in diverse talent pipelines and succession planning to institutionalise inclusion and sustain performance improvements. Organisations that proactively developed and sponsored diverse successors were perceived as more resilient, equitable, and adaptable. In contrast, the absence of such initiatives often resulted in leadership homogeneity and disengagement among underrepresented groups.

These findings affirm the work of Ding (2023) and Liu et al. (2024), who argue that inclusive succession planning contributes to organisational innovation and resilience. This study extends existing frameworks by introducing the concept of experiential diversity valuing varied backgrounds and nontraditional career paths as a critical element of pipeline design.

Additionally, participants highlighted the significance of sponsorship active advocacy by senior leaders as more influential than mentorship alone, thereby reinforcing Zhao et al. (2025)'s assertion that structural support mechanisms accelerate inclusion.

A research proposition follows: *Organisations that implement structured, diverse talent pipelines and sponsorship-based succession planning demonstrate higher*

*retention and innovation performance, thereby validating and extending theoretical models of leadership inclusivity.*

### **6.1.3 Theme 3: Training, Coaching & Awareness**

#### **6.1.3.2 Subtheme 2: Coaching for Managers & Awareness Programs**

The findings underscore the critical role of sustained coaching and awareness initiatives in embedding D&I principles into everyday leadership practices. Participants highlighted that ongoing coaching fosters self-awareness, empathy, and the ability to lead diverse teams effectively. In contrast, short-term awareness sessions were deemed inadequate for addressing entrenched biases, aligning with Zhao et al. (2025), who argue that training must be reflective and iterative to facilitate meaningful behavioural change.

This study contributes to the literature by differentiating between sensitisation (raising awareness) and skills-based coaching (reinforcing inclusive behaviours). The latter was found to have a more enduring impact, particularly among middle managers who are instrumental in implementing inclusion at the operational level. These findings affirm Booyesen (2023)'s view that midlevel leaders are pivotal in driving cultural transformation, while extending the argument by demonstrating that coaching effectiveness is enhanced through contextual feedback and practical application.

A research proposition is advanced: *sustained, skills-focused coaching for managers enhances inclusive behaviours and strengthens employee engagement, thereby validating and expanding theoretical perspectives on leadership development as a catalyst for D&I outcomes.*

#### **6.1.3.1 Subtheme 1: Team Bonding & GWP Effects on Engagement**

The study reveals that inclusive team bonding and group work practices (GWP) significantly contribute to employee engagement and collaborative performance. Respondents identified everyday practices such as inclusive check-ins, equitable task distribution, and cross-functional collaboration as accessible yet impactful methods for fostering a sense of belonging. These findings support Syed and

Özbilgin (2023), who posit that belonging mediates the relationship between diversity and team performance.

This research extends existing theory by detailing microlevel inclusion practices that are often overlooked in broader studies. Participants described how culturally sensitive greetings, inclusive language, and recognition of diverse communication styles promoted mutual respect and reduced interpersonal friction. These insights affirm Okatta et al. (2024)'s assertion that relational inclusion enhances psychological safety, while enriching it by identifying specific, observable behaviours that operationalise inclusivity.

*A research proposition follows inclusive team bonding and daily group practices cultivate microclimates of belonging, which in turn enhance collaboration, engagement, and performance thus confirming and deepening theoretical understandings of inclusion mechanisms.*

#### **6.1.4 Summary of Research Question 1 Discussion**

The analysis across six subthemes affirms and extends the prevailing theoretical consensus that diversity and inclusion positively influence organisational performance and employee engagement provided they are supported by authentic leadership, structured governance, inclusive recruitment, intentional succession planning, sustained coaching, and inclusive team dynamics.

Confirmatory findings reinforce the importance of leadership authenticity (Liu et al., 2024; Booysen, 2023), policy accountability mechanisms (Zhao et al., 2025), and inclusive recruitment and coaching practices (Okatta et al., 2024).

Theoretical contributions emerge from context-specific insights, including the significance of experiential diversity, sponsorship driven development, behavioural micro practices, and continuous feedback loops in sustaining inclusive outcomes.

Collectively, the findings suggest that a holistic integration of leadership, governance, people practices, and inclusive behaviours fosters a culture of trust and engagement, ultimately driving innovation and enhancing corporate performance.

## **6.2 Discussion: Research Question 2**

**Research Question 2:** *What are the main obstacles companies face when implementing diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies?*

This section integrates the empirical findings from Chapter 5 with the theoretical perspectives reviewed in Chapter 2. The discussion follows the structure of Table 11, focusing on the two most prominent subthemes per theme. The objective is to assess whether the findings confirm, extend, or challenge existing scholarship, and to generate context-sensitive propositions for future research and practical application.

### **6.2.1 Theme 1: Operational Constraints & Implementation Barriers**

#### **6.2.1.1 Subtheme 1: Resistance & Mindset Barriers**

The findings reveal that entrenched resistance and legacy mindsets constitute some of the most persistent barriers to effective D&I implementation. Participants described resistance as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing overt opposition from individuals who perceive D&I as a threat to their status or resources, passive resistance expressed through symbolic compliance without behavioural change, and subtle micro- practices that perpetuate exclusion. These insights suggest that resistance is not a singular construct but rather a constellation of cognitive, emotional, and political behaviours that collectively hinder D&I progress.

This aligns with existing literature, particularly Ding (2023) and Nkomo (2023), who identify resistance as a critical impediment to inclusion. Ding (2023) explains how defensive reactions stem from perceived threats to group identity, a dynamic qualitatively affirmed by participants in this study. Zhao et al. (2025) further argue that managerial mindsets and implicit leadership theories often dilute the impact of formal inclusion initiatives, a view substantiated by the present findings.

This study contributes to the literature in two keyways. First, it introduces the concept of *covert resistance*, or symbolic alignment, wherein individuals publicly endorse D&I while privately maintaining exclusionary practices. This form of resistance is particularly prevalent in hierarchical organisations where open dissent may be discouraged. Second, the data highlight how structural ambiguity such as unclear role expectations, misaligned incentives, and unchanged promotion criteria

reinforces resistance by signalling that D&I is not genuinely embedded in organisational systems.

Participants identified several organisational touchpoints where resistance manifests: recruitment panels defaulting to familiar heuristics, promotion committees privileging cultural fit over diverse experience, and informal networks that exclude newcomers. These microlevel processes collectively form a 'resistance architecture' that is resilient to policy interventions alone.

A research proposition follows: *Resistance to D&I is primarily sustained by covert cultural and structural mechanisms including symbolic compliance, ambiguous incentives, and exclusionary micro practices and effective implementation requires concurrent interventions targeting both mindset and system design. This proposition extends current theory by emphasising the dual necessity of cultural transformation and structural redesign.*

#### **6.2.1.2 Subtheme 2: Recruitment Shortages in Specific Functions**

Participants consistently cited talent shortages in specific sectors particularly technical, engineering, and specialised operational roles as a major constraint to achieving D&I objectives. Even when organisations demonstrated strong intent and implemented inclusive recruitment processes, the external labour market often limited access to representative candidate pools for certain skill sets. This constraint was most pronounced in senior technical and engineering roles.

These findings confirm the observations of Okatta et al. (2024) and Liu et al. (2024), who argue that labour market dynamics significantly influence organisational diversity outcomes and that internal policy alone cannot address supply-side limitations. The study also nuances Zhao et al. (2025)'s governance focused perspective by illustrating that recruitment challenges are not solely attributable to internal bias but also to broader educational and sectoral pipeline deficits.

Beyond confirming existing theory, this study introduces a specific performance risk: when organisations pursue representation targets without parallel investment in capability development, employees from underrepresented groups may face heightened scrutiny and role overload. Participants described instances where rapid hiring into senior technical roles, absent adequate onboarding or mentoring, led to stress, isolation, and increased turnover ultimately undermining both inclusion and performance goals.

In response, participants advocated for a dual strategy: tactical inclusive hiring practices (e.g., blind shortlisting, diverse interview panels) complemented by strategic supply side interventions (e.g., apprenticeships, targeted scholarships, and long-term partnerships with educational institutions). This approach extends theoretical models that often focus on internal HR mechanisms by reintroducing ecosystem level solutions as essential complements.

A research proposition follows: *Inclusive recruitment strategies will only sustainably enhance representation and performance in technical domains if organisations simultaneously invest in upstream pipeline development and on the job capability support. This proposition extends existing theory by integrating labour market realities into organisational D&I strategy.*

## **6.2.2 Theme 2: Measurement, Compliance & Business Case**

### **6.2.2.1 Subtheme 1: Measurement & Metrics Challenges**

A recurring barrier identified by participants relates to the limitations of current measurement systems in capturing the full scope of inclusion. While organisations reported strong capabilities in tracking demographic representation, they acknowledged significant gaps in assessing inclusion related dimensions such as organisational climate, psychological safety, equitable career progression, and inclusive behaviours. Without these metrics, leaders struggle to evaluate the effectiveness of D&I interventions, and investments risk being perceived as lacking accountability.

These findings affirm the arguments of Sharma and Mann (2024) and Zhao et al. (2025), who contend that simplistic metrics contribute to “diversity fatigue” and superficial compliance. This study adds empirical depth by revealing fragmented ownership of measurement across HR, compliance, and transformation functions, inconsistent data collection practices, and a lack of integration between quantitative and qualitative indicators.

A key contribution of this research is the emphasis on actionable, mixed method measurement frameworks. Participants advocated for the integration of employee experience surveys, inclusion focused 360degree feedback, representation dashboards, and narrative case studies to create a comprehensive measurement

ecosystem. Qualitative data such as employee stories and exit interviews were found to uncover barriers that demographic metrics alone could not detect, such as lateral career moves that obscure promotion inequities.

Additionally, the study highlights the political dynamics of measurement. When data expose uncomfortable realities (e.g., pay disparities), organisational willingness to disclose and act on such findings varies. Some participants reported instances of data suppression and defensive reporting, which undermined credibility and stalled progress.

A research proposition follows: *The absence of integrated, mixed method inclusion metrics with clear cross functional ownership constitutes a major barrier to D&I implementation. Establishing unified measurement frameworks that combine quantitative and qualitative indicators is essential for translating D&I efforts into verifiable business outcomes. This proposition confirms existing literature and extends it by foregrounding integration and data governance as critical enablers.*

#### **6.2.2.2 Subtheme 2: Public/Consumer Pressure & Procurement Alignment**

Participants noted that external pressures, such as consumer expectations, investor scrutiny, and regulatory mandates, play a significant role in shaping organisational D&I agendas, albeit with mixed effects. While external scrutiny can elevate the strategic importance of D&I and mobilise resources, it may also prompt reactive, surface level responses aimed at optics rather than substantive change. Respondents described cycles of public attention leading to high-profile but short-lived actions (e.g., diversity statements, temporary targets) that lacked deeper governance or behavioural transformation.

These findings support the work of Nkomo (2023) and Zhao et al. (2025), who caution that stakeholder pressure can both drive and distort D&I efforts. This study extends the literature by identifying procurement and supplier diversity as under-utilised yet powerful levers for systemic inclusion. Participants emphasised that aligning procurement strategies with D&I principles through supplier development and diverse sourcing enhances organisational impact and internal credibility. When procurement remains homogenous, internal D&I efforts are perceived as inconsistent, fostering employee scepticism.

Moreover, participants observed that compliance regimes such as BBBEE and Employment Equity in South Africa influence organisational priorities but may

inadvertently encourage box ticking behaviours. The practical implication is that organisations must translate external compliance into internally meaningful practices, for example, by embedding supplier diversity into innovation and resilience strategies rather than treating it as a standalone compliance requirement.

A research proposition follows: *External stakeholder pressure and procurement misalignment can simultaneously accelerate and distort D&I implementation. Aligning procurement and supply chain strategies with internal inclusion objectives enhances organisational credibility and generates broader innovation and resilience benefits.* This proposition extends existing theory by positioning procurement as a strategic lever for systemic D&I impact.

### 6.2.3 Summary of Research Question 2 Discussion

The analysis of Research Question 2 confirms that barriers to D&I implementation are multifaceted, encompassing cognitive and cultural resistance, external labour market limitations, measurement inadequacies, and the complex influence of external stakeholder pressures. These findings validate key theoretical perspectives (Ding, 2023; Zhao et al., 2025; Okatta et al., 2024) while offering several important extensions:

- **Covert resistance and symbolic compliance** are particularly prevalent in hierarchical and historically unequal contexts, necessitating nuanced, system-level interventions beyond mind-set-focused campaigns.
- **Supply-side constraints** in technical fields underscore the need for employer-education partnerships and long-term pipeline development to complement internal HR strategies.
- **Measurement frameworks** must evolve beyond demographic tracking to include integrated, mixed method dashboards governed by clear accountability structures.
- **External pressures**, while potentially catalytic, risk promoting superficial responses unless procurement and supplier diversity are strategically aligned with internal D&I goals.

Taken together, these insights suggest that overcoming the barriers identified in RQ2 requires a coordinated strategy that integrates cultural transformation, structural redesign, measurement reform, and ecosystem level engagement.

The next section (Research Question 3) will explore how D&I practices that successfully navigate these barriers influence innovation, creativity, and workplace culture.

### **6.3 Discussion: Research Question 3**

**Research Question 3:** *How do diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies influence innovation, creativity, and workplace culture?*

This section discusses how the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5 correspond with the theoretical and empirical foundations established in Chapter 2. Each theme and its top subthemes are examined in relation to prior studies to determine whether the results confirm, extend, or challenge established theory. The discussion also highlights contextual insights derived from South African organisations operating in multicultural and cross-functional environments.

#### **6.3.1 Theme 1: Culture, Inclusion & Workplace Experience**

##### **6.3.1.1 Subtheme 1: Cross-cultural Collaboration Dynamics**

Participants described cross-cultural collaboration as both an enabler and a test of inclusion. When teams were intentionally diverse and supported by inclusive leaders, collaboration produced creative problem-solving, mutual learning, and higher morale. However, when unmanaged, cultural misunderstandings and communication barriers limited information sharing and slowed decision-making.

These findings confirm the **Social Identity Theory (SIT)** perspective in Chapter 2, which argues that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, influencing intergroup dynamics and collaboration (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; as applied by Nkomo, 2023). The study supports Ding (2023) and Booyesen (2023), who highlight that well managed diversity enhances innovation through exposure to varied perspectives, while poor management reinforces ingroup bias and silo behaviour.

This study extends existing theory by revealing that *cultural collaboration benefits depend on structured facilitation*. Participants noted that inclusive meeting protocols rotating facilitation, multilingual summaries, and active translation of unspoken norms acted as “cultural bridges” that increased creativity and efficiency. Such practices operationalise the **Resource-Based View (RBV)** of D&I as an internal capability that yields sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Liu et al., 2024).

Moreover, collaboration dynamics were shaped by **psychological safety**, confirming Edmondson’s theory as cited in Chapter 2: employees contributed innovative ideas only when interpersonal risk was low. Teams that perceived their managers as fair and approachable demonstrated greater information sharing and ideation.

*A research proposition follows, namely that structured facilitation and psychologically safe cross-cultural collaboration mechanisms mediate the positive relationship between workforce diversity and innovation performance, confirming and extending SIT and RBV perspectives within multicultural contexts.*

#### **6.3.1.2 Subtheme 4: Cultural Acclimatisation & Greetings**

The study found that simple cultural acclimatisation behaviours greeting rituals, recognition of linguistic differences, and respect for varied social customs had a profound symbolic effect on inclusion and innovation. Participants described how such gestures cultivated belonging, reduced social distance, and encouraged open idea exchange. These micro-inclusion practices were repeatedly linked to stronger team cohesion and creativity.

This finding confirms **Organisational Justice Theory** and the **Psychological Safety Model** discussed in Chapter 2, which posit that perceived fairness and interpersonal respect underpin engagement and innovation (Colquitt et al., 2021; Booyesen, 2023). By honouring diverse cultural norms, leaders signal procedural and interactional justice key predictors of voice behaviour and creativity.

Furthermore, the results validate Parker (2023)’s argument that cultural micro rituals function as inclusion cues that build trust and authenticity. Participants emphasised that inclusive greetings, cross-cultural celebrations, and language sensitivity transformed the work environment from “formal and transactional” to “collaborative and expressive.” This aligns with **Social Exchange Theory (SET)**: employees

reciprocate respect and recognition with higher engagement and creative contribution (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

The study extends these theoretical linkages by illustrating how micro rituals act as *low-cost innovation catalysts*. By increasing relational warmth, they shorten the cognitive distance between diverse actors and facilitate spontaneous ideation.

A research proposition follows *namely that cultural acclimatisation practices such as inclusive greetings and recognition of local customs strengthen psychological safety and reciprocal trust, thereby enhancing innovation and creativity within diverse teams, confirming and extending organisational justice and SET frameworks*.

### **6.3.2 Theme 2: Training, Coaching & Awareness (Innovation Aspects)**

#### **6.3.2.1 Subtheme 1: Coaching Midlevel Leaders to Role Model**

The results demonstrated that coaching midlevel leaders to role-model inclusion had a significant multiplier effect on innovation and workplace culture. Participants observed that when midlevel managers embodied inclusive behaviours such as equitable decision-making and open dialogue teams displayed higher engagement and problem-solving creativity. Conversely, when these managers lacked inclusion competencies, D&I messages from senior leadership lost credibility.

This confirms the **Inclusive Leadership Theory** discussed in Chapter 2 (Carmeli et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2025), which emphasises humility, accessibility, and fairness as drivers of psychological safety and innovation. It also supports Booyesen (2023) and Nkomo (2023), who argue that midlevel leaders are the cultural intermediaries translating strategic intent into behavioural reality.

The study extends these theories by identifying *coaching continuity* as a differentiator. Participants noted that single workshops produced temporary awareness, whereas ongoing coaching cycles embedded behavioural consistency. This echoes **Institutional Theory**, which frames sustained mentoring as a mechanism for institutionalising new norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; as adapted by Kundu & Mor, 2024).

Furthermore, findings reinforce **Social Exchange Theory**, showing that when managers invest in inclusive relationships, employees reciprocate with higher creativity and discretionary effort. Coaching thus functions as both a developmental and relational mechanism that converts D&I from policy to practice.

A research proposition follows *namely that **continuous coaching of midlevel leaders to role-model inclusive behaviour institutionalises psychological safety and innovation, confirming Inclusive Leadership and Institutional Theory while extending them through emphasis on coaching continuity as a sustaining mechanism.***

### **6.3.2.2 Subtheme 2: Education & Awareness Driving Innovation**

Participants highlighted that education and awareness initiatives especially those integrating D&I with innovation and strategy training significantly influenced creative thinking and openness. Employees who underwent such programmes reported greater willingness to challenge assumptions and propose novel ideas, connecting inclusion directly to organisational learning.

This finding confirms the **Resource-Based View (RBV)** presented in Chapter 2: knowledge diversity and inclusive learning environments constitute strategic assets that foster sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Liu et al., 2024). It also aligns with Ding (2023), who demonstrated that awareness interventions expand cognitive flexibility, enhancing creativity.

The study extends the literature by identifying *contextual integration* as critical: programmes linking inclusion principles to practical innovation projects produced stronger outcomes than generic diversity training. This reflects Kundu & Mor (2024)'s assertion that experiential learning fosters innovation by combining empathy and problem-solving.

Moreover, participants noted that awareness campaigns anchored in storytelling sharing experiences of exclusion and resilience evoked emotional engagement that translated into creative collaboration. This supports **Social Identity Theory's** emphasis on narrative reframing to reduce ingroup bias and extend collective identity.

A research proposition follows, *namely that **education and awareness initiatives that combine experiential learning and narrative storytelling drive innovation by enhancing empathy, cognitive flexibility, and collective identity, confirming and extending RBV and SIT frameworks.***

### **6.3.3 Theme 3: Leadership, Governance & Policy (Cultural Leadership)**

#### **6.3.3.1 Subtheme 1: Ethical Leadership & Cultural Sensitivity**

Ethical leadership and cultural sensitivity emerged as the unifying elements connecting inclusion to sustainable innovation. Participants described ethical leaders as those who act consistently with organisational values, demonstrate moral courage, and respect cultural plurality in decision-making. Where leaders embodied these traits, employees felt psychologically secure, trusted leadership intentions, and engaged in creative risk-taking.

This finding confirms the **Ethical Leadership Theory** and **Organisational Justice framework** discussed in Chapter 2 (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Colquitt et al., 2021). Ethical leadership fosters fairness perceptions and trust, which in turn enhance engagement and innovation (Booyesen, 2023; Zhao et al., 2025). It also aligns with **Institutional Theory**, which holds that ethical norms legitimise organisational practices and ensure their longevity.

The study extends existing theory by contextualising ethical leadership within multicultural South African organisations, where moral and cultural pluralism requires situational sensitivity. Participants noted that cultural empathy understanding religious holidays, communication styles, and sociohistorical context served as both an ethical and performance imperative. Leaders who integrated cultural awareness into ethical decision-making improved not only inclusion outcomes but also cross-market relationships and reputational capital.

Moreover, findings illustrate that ethical and culturally sensitive leadership is a prerequisite for **innovation legitimacy** employees only innovate freely when leadership behaviour exemplifies fairness and respect. This connection between ethics and creativity complements Ding (2023)'s and Parker (2023)'s findings that moral consistency enhances creative confidence.

A research proposition follows, *namely that ethical and culturally sensitive leadership enhances organisational innovation and trust by embedding fairness, empathy, and legitimacy into D&I governance structures, confirming and extending Ethical Leadership and Institutional Theory.*

#### **6.3.4 Summary of Research Question 3 Discussion**

The findings related to Research Question 3 collectively affirm that diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies contribute meaningfully to innovation, creativity, and workplace culture through multilevel mechanisms involving organisational culture, leadership practices, and learning processes.

The study confirms that cross-cultural collaboration and acclimatisation support established theories such as Social Identity, Organisational Justice, and Psychological Safety, which link inclusive environments to enhanced innovation. Coaching and educational initiatives further validate Inclusive Leadership and Resource-Based View (RBV) frameworks by demonstrating that diverse knowledge bases and supportive leadership behaviours foster creative outcomes. Ethical leadership, as observed in the data, reinforces the relevance of Organisational Justice and Institutional Theory in sustaining cultures of innovation.

Beyond these confirmations, the study extends existing theoretical models in several important ways. It identifies micro-inclusion rituals such as culturally sensitive greetings and inclusive language as behavioural mechanisms that catalyse innovation, thereby adding granularity to D&I frameworks. The emphasis on coaching continuity and experiential learning enriches Inclusive Leadership Theory by introducing process-oriented dimensions that deepen its practical application. Furthermore, the observed link between ethical leadership and the legitimacy of innovation efforts expands Ethical Leadership Theory into multicultural and post-transformation organisational contexts.

In conclusion, the results demonstrate that diversity and inclusion serve as enablers of innovation and cultural adaptability when embedded within ethical, learning-oriented, and relationally inclusive systems. The dynamic interplay between organisational culture, developmental training, and ethical leadership provides the mechanism through which D&I initiatives translate into sustained creative performance and long-term competitive advantage.

## Conclusion of Discussion

The table below summarizes research questions, themes, and subthemes where theory was confirmed or extended. This connects the discussion to the theoretical contributions covered in the following chapter. The findings corroborate major concepts such as Inclusive Leadership, Organizational Justice, the Resource-Based View (RBV), and Social Identity Theory while extending them with South African contextual insights.

Themes such as leadership commitment, policy design, and cross-cultural collaboration spawned significant theoretical extensions in the form of hidden opposition, experiential diversity, and micro-rituals of inclusion. Other areas, such as team bonding, awareness training, and ethical leadership, mostly verified long-held assumptions about inclusiveness, fairness, and performance.

Overall, the findings show that authentic leadership, governance, learning, and cultural inclusion all work together to embed D&I in organizational systems, laying the groundwork for the following chapter's examination of theoretical and practical contributions.

**Table 12: Findings compared to theory for all Research Questions**

#	Research Question (RQ)	Theme (T)	Sub-theme	Findings	Results against theory
1.1.1	<b>RQ1: What effects do diversity and inclusion (D&amp;I) programs have on corporate performance and employee engagement ?</b>	Leadership, Governance & Policy (T1)	Leadership Commitment & Role-Modelling (ST1)	Authentic leadership behaviours (fairness, empathy, visible inclusion) foster employee trust, engagement, and performance.	<b>Confirmed &amp; Extended</b> – Supports Inclusive Leadership and Social Identity Theory; extends by highlighting South African contextual symbolism of inclusion.
1.1.2			Policy Design & Deviation Controls (ST2)	Structured governance and developmental deviation	<b>Extended</b> – Builds on Organizational Justice and Institutional

				controls strengthen fairness and engagement perceptions.	Theory by integrating developmental feedback and mixed qualitative quantitative indicators.
1.2.1		People Practices – Recruitment & Talent Pipelines (T2)	Talent Pipelines & Succession Continuity (ST1)	Sponsorship based, diverse succession planning enhances retention, innovation, and organisational adaptability.	<b>Confirmed &amp; Extended</b> – Affirms RBV and Inclusive Leadership Theory; extends with concept of “experiential diversity.”
1.2.2			Inclusive Recruitment Practices (ST2)	Inclusive recruitment improves engagement and innovation when linked to development and retention strategies.	<b>Extended</b> – Expands RBV by positioning recruitment as part of a systemic inclusion continuum.
1.3.1		Training, Coaching & Awareness (T3)	Team Bonding & Group Work Practices (ST1)	Inclusive team bonding and group work create belonging, improve collaboration, and enhance engagement.	<b>Confirmed</b> – Supports Organisational Justice and Psychological Safety theories.
1.3.2			Coaching for Managers & Awareness Programs (ST2)	Sustained, skills-based coaching enhances inclusive behaviours, empathy, and engagement.	<b>Extended</b> – Confirms Inclusive Leadership Theory; extends by distinguishing between sensitisation and skills-based coaching.
2.1.1	<b>RQ2: What are the main obstacles companies face when implementing D&amp;I strategies?</b>	Operational Constraints & Implementation Barriers (T1)	Resistance & Mindset Barriers (ST1)	Covert resistance and symbolic compliance hinder authentic D&I implementation; structural ambiguity reinforces bias.	<b>Extended</b> – Builds on Social Identity and Institutional Theory by identifying “covert resistance” and the need for concurrent cultural and

					structural interventions.
2.1.2			Recruitment Shortages in Technical Functions (ST2)	Labour market limitations restrict access to diverse talent in technical roles.	<b>Extended</b> – Confirms RBV; extends by linking D&I outcomes to national skill pipeline constraints and capability development needs.
2.2.1		Measurement, Compliance & Business Case (T2)	Measurement & Metrics Challenges (ST1)	Lack of integrated, mixed-method D&I metrics undermines accountability and progress tracking.	<b>Confirmed &amp; Extended</b> – Supports Zhao et al. (2025) and Sharma & Mann (2024); extends by adding the governance integration dimension.
2.2.2			Public/Consumer Pressure & Procurement Alignment (ST2)	External pressures drive short-term compliance; aligning procurement with inclusion strengthens impact and credibility.	<b>Extended</b> – Expands Institutional Theory by positioning supplier diversity as a lever for systemic inclusion.
3.1.1	<b>RQ3: How do D&amp;I policies influence innovation, creativity, and workplace culture?</b>	Culture, Inclusion & Workplace Experience (T1)	Cross-cultural Collaboration Dynamics (ST1)	Structured facilitation and psychological safety mediate the link between diversity and innovation.	<b>Confirmed &amp; Extended</b> – Confirms SIT and RBV; extends with cultural-bridge mechanisms that operationalise inclusion.
3.1.2			Cultural Acclimatisation & Greetings (ST2)	Cultural rituals, greetings, and language sensitivity foster belonging, trust, and creativity.	<b>Extended</b> – Confirms Organisational Justice and Social Exchange Theory; extends by identifying micro-rituals as innovation catalysts.
3.2.1		Training, Coaching & Awareness	Coaching Midlevel Leaders to Role-	Coaching midlevel leaders	<b>Extended</b> – Confirms Inclusive

		(T2)	Model Inclusion (ST1)	institutionalises inclusion, strengthens culture, and enhances innovation.	Leadership and Institutional Theory; extends via emphasis on coaching continuity.
3.2.2			Education & Awareness Driving Innovation (ST2)	Experiential and storytelling-based learning connects inclusion with innovation and creativity.	<b>Extended</b> – Confirms RBV and SIT; extends by integrating empathy and narrative learning as innovation enablers.
3.3.1		Leadership, Governance & Policy (T3)	Ethical Leadership & Cultural Sensitivity (ST1)	Ethical and culturally aware leadership builds trust, fairness, and creative confidence.	<b>Confirmed &amp; Extended</b> – Confirms Ethical Leadership and Organizational Justice theories; extends by contextualising for multicultural environments.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the key insights from the study by linking the empirical findings with the theoretical framework established earlier. Its aim is to consolidate the evidence in a way that directly addresses the research questions, clarifies the organisational conditions under which diversity and inclusion (D&I) create value, and situates the findings within both scholarly and practical contexts. The discussion begins with the main conclusions drawn from the data analysis, followed by an outline of the study's theoretical and practical contributions. It then acknowledges the research limitations and offers recommendations for future inquiry. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the significance of the study for understanding the evolving role of D&I in contemporary organisations.

### 7.2 Principal Conclusions

The study set out to examine how diversity and inclusion influence organisational performance, with particular attention to employee engagement, innovation, and workplace culture. The findings indicate that diversity alone does not automatically lead to performance gains. Instead, it is the practice of inclusion manifested through leadership behaviours, people process, and organisational routines that unlocks the potential benefits of diversity. This distinction echoes the growing consensus in the literature that diversity is a structural reality, whereas inclusion represents an organisational capability (Roberson, 2019). Accordingly, the research supports the view that the true performance driver is not workforce composition per se, but the extent to which individuals experience belonging, fairness, and psychological safety.

**First**, the study finds that inclusive leadership is a critical factor in fostering employee engagement and organisational cohesion. Participants consistently reported that employees respond more positively to leaders who demonstrate transparency, fairness, accessibility, and follow-through, rather than those who merely endorse diversity rhetorically. When inclusion was modelled authentically, employees expressed higher levels of trust, commitment, and willingness to contribute discretionary effort. These findings align with Shore et al. (2018), who argue that

inclusive leadership acts as a behavioural bridge between diversity and organisational performance. This research adds nuance by showing that employees react not to policy statements but to everyday behaviours they can observe and interpret.

**Second**, the study highlights persistent challenges in implementing D&I initiatives, stemming from structural, cultural, and capability related barriers. While most organisations in the sample had formal D&I policies, gaps in strategic alignment, measurement systems, managerial capability, and resource allocation led to inconsistent execution. In several cases, inclusion remained aspirational rather than operational. These findings corroborate Ahonen et al. (2023), who note that symbolic compliance rather than practice-based reinforcement is the primary failure point in D&I work. The study therefore concludes that D&I initiatives falter less due to poor intentions and more due to weak institutionalisation.

**Third**, the research confirms that inclusion fosters creativity and innovation by creating environments where employees feel safe to share ideas, challenge assumptions, and engage in constructive dialogue without fear of judgement or exclusion. Participants described how psychologically safe teams exhibited greater flexibility, stronger problem-solving skills, and openness to experimentation. These findings are consistent with Nishii (2019), who identified inclusion climate as a predictor of team creativity. However, this study extends prior work by identifying specific interactional practices such as rotating speaking roles, intentional recognition, and shared learning rituals as mechanisms that enable innovation.

**Taken together**, the findings suggest that demographic diversity alone cannot guarantee performance advantages. Without deliberate systems, accountable leadership, and interactional practices that amplify voice, diversity risks becoming neutral or even negatively experienced. The overarching conclusion is that inclusion is not a peripheral element of D&I; it is the central enabling force that transforms diversity from a symbolic concept into a productive organisational asset.

### **7.3 Theoretical Contribution**

This research offers a substantive contribution to organisational theory by

reconceptualising diversity and inclusion (D&I) not merely as ethical imperatives or compliance requirements, but as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that shape organisational performance, employee engagement, identity regulation, and innovation. Through the integration of multiple theoretical lenses including the Resource-Based View (RBV), Social Identity Theory (SIT), Social Exchange Theory (SET), Inclusive Leadership Theory, and psychological safety literature the study presents a comprehensive, practice informed framework that positions inclusion as a strategic organisational capability rather than a discrete human resources initiative.

**First**, the study extends the Resource-Based View by demonstrating that diversity, while often regarded as a valuable organisational asset, does not inherently satisfy RBV's criteria for sustainable competitive advantage unless activated through inclusive practices. Traditional RBV scholarship emphasises resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 2021). However, the findings reveal that demographic diversity alone lacks strategic utility unless embedded within repeatable, organisation-wide inclusion mechanisms. Inclusion is thus reframed as a dynamic capability that enables firms to unlock and mobilise the latent potential of diverse human capital shifting the analytical focus from resource possession to capability enactment.

**Second**, the research reinforces and expands Social Identity Theory by illustrating how inclusion mitigates identity threats and fosters employee engagement. SIT posits that individuals derive psychological security and motivation from positive group affiliations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Empirical data from this study show that perceptions of fairness, voice, and belonging cultivate identity safety, which in turn elicits higher levels of engagement, loyalty, and discretionary effort. Conversely, diversity without inclusive behaviours engenders alienation and disengagement, even when representation goals are met. These insights extend SIT by emphasising that identity alignment in diverse organisations is driven not by demographic similarity, but by relational and structural signals of inclusion.

**Third**, the study enhances the explanatory power of Social Exchange Theory in the D&I context. SET suggests that individuals' contributions are shaped by perceived reciprocity, fairness, and mutual benefit (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The findings underscore that inclusion is interpreted through tangible exchange behaviours such

as equitable workload allocation, transparent decision-making, consistent leadership conduct, and fair access to development opportunities rather than through formal policy declarations. When these exchanges are perceived as genuine and equitable, employees respond with trust, commitment, and sustained cooperation. When perceived as symbolic or inconsistent, emotional withdrawal and reduced contribution ensue. Inclusion thus emerges as a form of social currency through which organisations communicate respect and value.

**Fourth**, the study advances Inclusive Leadership Theory by identifying leadership behaviour as the pivotal mechanism through which inclusion is either realised or undermined. While inclusive leadership is typically characterised by openness, accessibility, fairness, and appreciation of difference (Carmeli et al., 2010), this research adds operational clarity by identifying specific micro-practices such as rotating speaking opportunities, legitimising dissent, normalising feedback, and reinforcing inclusive team norms that signal belonging in everyday interactions. This moves the theory beyond abstract descriptors toward actionable behavioural guidance.

**Finally**, the study contributes to organisational culture and psychological safety literature by establishing inclusion as a foundational condition for creativity, team learning, and innovation. Psychological safety theory posits that individuals are most likely to share ideas when they feel protected from ridicule or reprisal (Edmondson, 1999). This research confirms that inclusive team norms such as shared decision-making, respect rituals, and transparent communication correlate with elevated levels of collaborative problem-solving and ideation. Importantly, inclusion is positioned not as a cultural byproduct, but as the behavioural substrate upon which psychological safety is built.

Collectively, these theoretical contributions position inclusion as a multidimensional construct that connects organisational resources (RBV), identity dynamics (SIT), relational exchanges (SET), leadership practices (Inclusive Leadership Theory), and innovation climate (psychological safety). The study proposes an integrative model in which inclusion functions as a performance enabling capability that aligns human, relational, and cultural systems. This directly addresses the gap identified in the literature review, which highlighted the tendency of prior research to treat diversity

and inclusion in isolation, without adequately exploring their interactive effects on organisational outcomes.

#### **7.4 Practical Contribution**

The findings of this study yield actionable insights for organisational leaders particularly executives, HR professionals, and line managers who shape workplace culture and influence performance outcomes.

**At the strategic level**, the study underscores the imperative for executives to reposition inclusion from a peripheral compliance obligation to a central organisational capability. Organisations that embedded inclusion into governance frameworks, leadership expectations, and performance metrics demonstrated stronger alignment and impact. Executives are therefore encouraged to integrate inclusion into core strategy, allocate sustained resources for capability development, and visibly model inclusive leadership. This approach signals that inclusion is not a temporary initiative, but a foundational operating principle.

**For HR leaders**, the study presents operational implications that call for a redesign of people systems. Inclusion must be embedded across the employee lifecycle from recruitment and performance management to succession planning, rewards, and development. The research reveals that organisations relying solely on representation targets or awareness campaigns often failed to generate meaningful change. HR's role is thus reframed from communicator to architect responsible for constructing the structural conditions that enable inclusion. This includes developing robust measurement systems that extend beyond headcount to capture indicators such as belonging, psychological safety, team learning, and career mobility.

**Line managers**, meanwhile, emerge as the critical agents in translating inclusion into everyday practice. Regardless of strategic intent or HR infrastructure, employees experience inclusion or exclusion primarily within their teams. Managers who demonstrated behaviours such as active listening, fair workload distribution, constructive feedback, and participatory decision-making were consistently associated with higher engagement and collaboration. Conversely, managerial neglect of these practices undermined inclusion efforts, even in supportive policy

environments. The implication is clear: managerial capability is not a supplementary element of D&I it is the mechanism through which it succeeds or fails.

**Overall**, this study reframes inclusion as a repeatable system of behaviour and governance, rather than a symbolic campaign or isolated project. Organisations that adopt this systemic perspective are better positioned to convert diversity into sustained performance, resilience, and innovation.

## 7.5 Limitations of the Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the interplay between diversity, inclusion, and organisational performance, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualise its findings.

**First**, the use of a qualitative, cross-sectional design enabled rich interpretive depth but limited the ability to establish causality or observe temporal dynamics. Given that inclusion is inherently relational and evolves over time, a longitudinal approach would have provided greater insight into the sustainability of inclusive practices particularly in the face of leadership transitions, cultural resistance, or shifting strategic priorities.

**Second**, the participant sample was predominantly composed of HR and D&I professionals, many of whom had direct responsibility for or emotional investment in the success of inclusion initiatives. While this ensured informed perspectives, it may have introduced positive reporting bias and limited the representation of alternative viewpoints such as those from operational staff, executives outside the people function, or employees who may have experienced exclusion more acutely. A more diverse sample, including sceptical or disengaged voices, could have revealed additional patterns of resistance or unintended consequences.

**Third**, although the study included participants from multiple countries and industries enhancing generalizability it sacrificed contextual depth. D&I operates differently across cultural, regulatory, and labour market environments. For instance, South African organisations face challenges rooted in historical inequities, while U.S. firms navigate litigation risks and identity politics. A single country or industry-specific focus might have yielded more nuanced insights into these contextual variations.

**Fourth**, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data, which carries inherent

risks related to memory recall, social desirability bias, and impression management. While participants often described organisational successes, these accounts were not substantiated with empirical data such as retention metrics, performance outcomes, or innovation indicators. A mixed-methods approach triangulating qualitative insights with internal analytics would have strengthened the evidentiary base.

**Finally**, the study focused on inclusion without explicitly examining exclusion. As scholars such as Mor Barak (2022) have argued, exclusion is not merely the absence of inclusion but a distinct organisational condition with its own antecedents and consequences. Future research that explores exclusion as an active dynamic may yield deeper understanding of the forces that undermine or reverse D&I efforts.

## **7.6 Recommendations for Future Research**

Building on the limitations identified, several avenues for future research are proposed to deepen and broaden the understanding of diversity and inclusion (D&I) in organisational contexts.

**First**, longitudinal and mixed-methods research designs are recommended to strengthen the empirical foundation of D&I scholarship. Such approaches would enable researchers to trace the long-term impact of inclusion practices on organisational outcomes such as retention, productivity, and innovation. By integrating qualitative insights with quantitative data such as employee surveys, behavioural observations, HR analytics, and performance metrics future studies could move beyond perception-based analysis to evidence-based validation.

**Second**, future research should investigate perceptual discrepancies across organisational hierarchies. This study revealed a recurring gap between leadership perceptions of inclusion progress and employee experiences of inconsistency or symbolic implementation. Exploring these gaps particularly between executives, middle managers, and frontline staff could illuminate where resistance, misalignment, or misunderstanding is most pronounced, and inform targeted interventions.

**Third**, sectors-specific studies are needed, especially in industries with historically

limited diversity pipelines, such as engineering, logistics, energy, and manufacturing. These sectors often require tailored inclusion strategies that extend beyond conventional HR frameworks. Research in these contexts could uncover innovative models of workforce development, including inclusive apprenticeships, supplier diversity partnerships, and technical bursary ecosystems.

**Fourth**, future inquiry should expand the scope of D&I research beyond internal organisational boundaries to examine its impact on external stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, and communities. As organisations are increasingly evaluated against ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) criteria, understanding how inclusion functions as an ecosystem capability could offer valuable insights into its broader social and economic implications.

**Finally**, microlevel experimental studies are encouraged to test the efficacy of specific inclusion practices. For example, interventions such as rotating meeting chairs, anonymous idea submissions, team storytelling rituals, or structured feedback formats could be empirically assessed for their impact on team voice, psychological safety, and knowledge sharing. Such studies would contribute to the development of validated, evidence-based inclusion interventions, moving the field beyond conceptual generalisations.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

This study reaffirms that diversity, while essential, is insufficient on its own to generate meaningful organisational value. It is the deliberate, consistent, and relational practice of inclusion that transforms diversity from a demographic attribute into a strategic capability. Inclusion shapes how individuals experience belonging, motivation, and psychological safety, thereby influencing whether they engage at the level of compliance, cooperation, or full commitment.

Where inclusion is embedded into leadership behaviours, people systems, and everyday interaction norms, organisations benefit from enhanced engagement, greater innovation capacity, and a more cohesive culture. Conversely, when inclusion is symbolic, inconsistent, or conditional, diversity remains under-utilised or

may even become a source of organisational tension.

The study contributes to both theoretical and practical domains by conceptualising inclusion not as a static condition, but as a dynamic system of behaviours, governance, and capability-building. It requires strategic sponsorship, structural integration, and managerial enactment. Inclusion cannot be relegated to policy documents or delegated to diversity officers.

it must be actively lived, reinforced, and measured across the organisation.

The research propositions created in Chapter 6 not only summarize the important findings of this study but also serve as a platform for future scholarly research. These propositions emphasize areas requiring additional empirical testing, contextual study, or theoretical clarification, providing a systematic starting point for scholars looking to extend, validate, or question the findings offered here.

In an increasingly diverse and complex global environment, organisations that invest in the capability of inclusion will be better positioned to adapt, innovate, and retain talent. The future of organisational performance will be shaped not by who organisations hire, but by how they enable every employee to participate, express themselves, contribute meaningfully, and feel a sense of belonging.

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## ANNEXURES:

### Annexure 1: Consistency Matrix linking knowledge gap to research questions, interview questions and Collection Tool

Knowledge Gap from Literature review	Sub-Research Question	Interview Questions	Data Collection tool
Lack of understanding of the effects that particular D&I elements such as leadership, training, and policy enforcement have on performance and engagement in diverse organisational contexts (Zhao et al., 2025).	What effects do diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs have on corporate performance and employee engagement?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What effect do you think D&amp;I projects have on your company's employee engagement?</li> <li>2. Which particular D&amp;I initiatives have helped to boost performance?</li> <li>3. How do policies, training initiatives, and leadership impact the success of D&amp;I efforts in your organization?</li> </ol>	Semi-structured interviews, employees focus
Inadequate empirical data regarding the difficulties in implementing D&I at various organisational levels and geographical locations (Ding, 2023).	What are the main obstacles that companies face when implementing diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What obstacles does your company face when implementing D&amp;I strategies?</li> <li>2. How do these challenges differ across organisational levels?</li> <li>3. Do cultural or regional factors influence the success of D&amp;I initiatives?</li> </ol>	Semi structured interviews, employees focus
Executives and employees' perspectives on how diversity and inclusion affects innovation, creativity, and workplace culture are not aligned (Vedres & Vasarhelyi, 2022).	What effects do D&I policies have on innovation, creativity, and workplace culture, according to executives, and employees?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do executives in your organization perceive the impact of D&amp;I on creativity and innovation?</li> <li>2. Do employees share the same views as executives on D&amp;I's impact?</li> <li>3. What effect does D&amp;I have on workplace culture.</li> </ol>	Semi-structured interviews, employees focus

## Annexure 2: Interview Guide

### RESEARCH INTERVIEW GUIDE

<b>Name:</b>	
<b>Student number:</b>	24080544
<b>Programme:</b>	Master of Business Administration (General Management)
<b>Research Topic</b>	The Role of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) in Improving Organisational Performance
<b>Course Name</b>	Research Project

#### 1. Interview Guide

<b>Research Question (RQ)</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
RQ1	<p>4. What effect do you think D&amp;I projects have on your company's employee engagement?</p> <p>5. Which particular D&amp;I initiatives have helped to boost performance?</p> <p>6. How do policies, training initiatives, and leadership impact the success of D&amp;I efforts in your organisation?</p>
RQ2	<p>7. What obstacles does your company face when implementing D&amp;I strategies?</p> <p>8. How do these challenges differ across organisational levels?.</p> <p>9. Do cultural or regional factors influence the success of D&amp;I initiatives?</p>
RQ3	<p>10. How do executives in your organisation perceive the impact of D&amp;I on creativity and innovation?</p> <p>11. Do employees share the same views as executives on D&amp;I's impact?</p> <p>12. What effect does D&amp;I have on workplace culture.</p>

Please note that this information is purely for the researcher's reference and will not be used to identify any individual or their organisation by name or provide personal information that may reveal the identities of either or both. The proforma Letter of Informed Consent outlines the protection provided to respondents (and by implication their organisations).

### Annexure 3: Letter of Informed consent

#### Informed consent letter:

*I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA.*

*I am conducting research on diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices and their impact on organisational performance. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how organisations implement D&I strategies and how these influence key performance outcomes such as employee engagement, innovation, and profitability.*

*Our interview is expected to last about one hour and will provide valuable firsthand insights into how D&I initiatives are experienced, evaluated, and supported within your organisation. The findings from this research may contribute to improved strategic approaches to diversity and inclusion across industries.*

***Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.*** *Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and all data will be reported without identifiers. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.*

*Researcher name: Research Supervisor Name:*

*Email Email : 24080544@mysigbs.co.za, colinstuartrowley@gmail.com*

*Phone Phone :*

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Annexure 4: Ethical Clearance

**Ethical Clearance Approved** External Inbox x

**Masters Research** <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za>

to me, Masters ▾

**Gordon Institute  
of Business Science**  
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance  
Approved**

Dear Themba Baloyi,

Please be advised that your application for **Ethical Clearance** has been approved.  
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.  
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.



[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

## Annexure 5: Copyright Declaration Form

### 25.1 COPYRIGHT DECLARATION FORM

Student details			
Surname:	██████	Initials:	██████
Student number:	24080544		
Email:	24080544@mygibs.co.za		
Phone:	082 380 8626		
Qualification details			
Degree:	MBA	Year completed:	2025
Title of research:	GIBS The Role of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) in Improving Organisational Performance		
Supervisor:	Colin Rowley		
Supervisor email:	colinstuartrowley@gmail.com		
Access			
<input type="checkbox"/> A.	My research is not confidential and may be made available in the GIBS Information Centre and on UPSpace.		
I give permission to display my email address on the UPSpace website			
Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> B.	My research is confidential and may <b>NOT</b> be made available in the GIBS Information Centre nor on UPSpace.		
Please indicate embargo period requested			
Two years	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Please attach a letter of motivation to substantiate your request. Without a letter embargo will not be granted.	
Permanent	<input type="checkbox"/>	Permission from the Vice-Principal: Research and Postgraduate Studies at UP is required for permanent embargo. Please attach a copy permission letter. Without a letter permanent embargo will not be granted.	
Copyright declaration			
I hereby declare that I have not used unethical research practices nor gained material dishonesty in this electronic version of my research submitted. Where appropriate, written permission statement(s) were obtained from the owner(s) of third-party copyrighted matter included in my research, allowing distribution as specified below.			
I hereby assign, transfer and make over to the University of Pretoria my rights of copyright in the submitted work to the extent that it has not already been affected in terms of the contract I entered into at registration. I understand that all rights with regard to the intellectual property of my research, vest in the University who has the right to reproduce, distribute and/or publish the work in any manner it may deem fit.			
Signature:		Date:	19 October 2025
Supervisor signature:		Date:	28 October 2025