

# **Being Underemployed is the True Test of Who You Really are - The Nexus of Underemployment and Employee Engagement: Evidence from Sri Lanka**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

As the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century geneses, the pathetic pecuniary climate is bringing a plethora of career opportunities to the frontline to discuss. Unlike previous recessions, the recent development of jobs holdups behind other economic gauges of a diminishing recession due to Covid-19. The economic downturn began world-wide during December 2007 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010) and it is continued due to pandemic even now. Indeed, unemployment remains stubbornly high- winged around 16% from 7.5% during this pandemic (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

There is escalating concern about the kind of job that graduates join and the greater likelihood that they will find themselves in underemployment conditions (James, 2021). Underemployment is one of the most critical socio-economic problems now a day. Underutilization of individuals in the work settings is considered as underemployment or over qualification in various literature (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011; Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). Underemployment is a prominent issue throughout the world (Abrahamsen, 2010; Peiro et al., 2010; Sam, 2020)). Due to the less reduced opportunities, rare alternatives of employment, the situation makes the individuals pursue a work even if it is not the place to put on the abilities and talents. In addition to that, individuals are in the position to accept the given job for them (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). Currently, in the pandemic, getting a job is the toughest task (Kengatharan, 2020). Further, the Sri-Lanka is a lower middle-earning country where individuals highly rely on government jobs even after graduation due to fewer opportunities in the private sector. According to Singam (2017), the unemployment rate in Sri Lanka is significant when compared to other emerging countries. In addition to that, we focus on comparatively recent graduates, broadly speaking those within five years of graduating, as the crucial alarm of policymakers and researchers has been on the impact of the growth of higher education on the labour market outcomes for graduates (Liyanage et al., 2017).

The higher education sector has to make everyone get expected job opportunities. Higher education is one of the sectors that is thriving throughout the world, with a growing need for an educated labour force in the face of decreasing resource availability and an expanding human capital resource globally. As a result, universities are recognized as the pinnacle entities regulating any emerging or industrialized country's higher education system. Highly educated people are more likely to be underemployed because they are more likely to be employed in positions that are not consistent with their degree (Weststar, 2009).

One of the critical factors of underemployment is the time gap between graduation and first job. It may disclose numerous aspects of graduate employment, such as the prominence of other skills required by graduates to reduce the time between graduation and first employment, exceedingly dignified recruitment processes used by the public sector in recruiting, which increases the waiting time for graduates, and employers' growing demand for prior work experience (Liyanage et al., 2017). The prime reason for all these problems is that recent graduates perceive themselves as overqualified (Lee, 2005).

Over qualification at work, thus, arises from superficial incongruities regarding their level of education, skills and proficiencies likened to the necessities required for the performance of their duties (Johnson et al., 2002). Underemployment based on subjective is defined by employees' perceptions that they desire or should have better occupations than the ones they have now (Feldman et al., 2002; McKee-Ryan et al., 2009). Employees who perceive themselves to be comparatively disadvantaged in contrast to a reference norm are less pleased with their work, less dedicated to the business, and more likely to resign (McKee-Ryan et al., 2009).

The employability of graduates from the Sri Lankan university system is now being debated (Liyanage et al., 2017). Further, it is also stated that graduates produced by the Sri-Lankan university system are reluctant to pursue a career somewhere else, and expect government opportunities (Kengatharan, 2020; Randiwela, 2012).

It is noted that female individuals tend to work more than males in the public sector irrespective of salaries and benefits due to their family commitments (Randiwela, 2012). In addition to that, individuals wish to work in the government sector due to its shorter working hours and high job security, thus, in turn, leading to greater job satisfaction among the graduates in Sri Lanka (Randiwela, 2012). At the same time, while waiting for the government job opportunity, youth are especially affected by this underemployment with lower quality jobs, working more hours than required and having informal working arrangements. Because of this, youth face many moral consequences (Ekanayake, 2012). Because of this, the researcher's investigation of graduate

underemployment highly includes recent graduates and persons in mid-career who are forced to take a lower-paying position rather than being unemployed in terms of age.

On the other hand, employees who perceive themselves as overqualified than their job might cultivate withdrawal behaviour, disconnection in the job due to their reduction in positive attitudes. Sometimes, it may lead to leaving the organization (Erdogan et al., 2011). Since, employees stay in the government sector for prestige, job security and retirement benefits, fewer chances of leaving the job, may lead to less engagement level in the job. Because as an individual, people need a job, hence they accept the job although it is underemployment, as they need a job by, material and for social reasons including standard of living and social status (Brynin, 2002).

In addition to that, education and job matching helps to increase job performance (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009) and the well-being of employees. While employees compare their inputs such as education, skills, experience and expertise with outcomes such as recognition, pay, authority and responsibility, they get a sense of fairness. If it does not match, they feel unfair. The unfairness lead to an unhappy working environment thus leading to absenteeism. Hence, it can be said that the engagement level of development officers is questionable. Because, underemployment is experienced in managers (Feldman et al., 2002), academics, non-academics, retail workers (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009), medical-related technicians (Watt & Hargis, 2010), hospital staffs (Holtom et al., 2002), and professional technical workers (Kinicki et al., 2000; McKee-Ryan et al., 2009). Little attention was paid to development officers in this regard.

Getting a job in Sri Lanka is not an easy task. On the other hand, students graduating from the higher education system has rapidly increased (Kengatharan, 2020). Graduates are persons who have finished a university or college degree, often of three or four years duration, commonly referred to as a Bachelor's degree in this article. It is a revolution in the education sector as more than 15% of young people have attended higher education (McNay, 2005). Sri Lanka is also no exception for this. Therefore, immediately after passing out from university, people wait for jobs, if they do not get, then finally head to work as development officers through government appointments.

On the other hand, employment satisfaction occurs when a person believes that he has job stability, professional growth, and a good work-life balance. Satisfied labour has always been engaged labour (Kengatharan, 2020). Indeed, happy labour is preferable for just completing a job. While studying, the graduates fantasize about their future jobs. However, prior unemployed persons who have lately been hired as development officers are ubiquitous in all sectors of the public sector, regardless of their academic background, whether their existence is necessary or not. Despite having better academic Grade Point Averages, they serve as development officers. In addition to that, job stability for development officers is dubious these days because they work on a rotating basis and the majority of

them do not have formal titles. Because of these above-said reasons, the level of engagement of the employees would go down if these individuals perceive themselves as over-qualified. As per Gallup studies (2018), only 15% of the employees are engaged, other 85% of the employees are not engaged while they are doing the job. This gap makes the scholars raise the questions of what motivates the workers to engage and what not (Karatepe et al., 2019). This study would help to understand what does not motivate the workers to engage.

Nowadays, a hiring freeze is implemented by the various private sector due to the economic conditions. Thus, the graduates solely rely on government jobs. Although, it takes time from graduation and getting the first job (Jayakody, 2015). Hence, this situation leads to working in preferred or no preferred working settings. To yet, underemployment research has tended to stay inside disciplinary boundaries, with little attempts to bring together diverse views and conceptualizations with gender and age as moderators from across the whole spectrum of fields in which these phenomena of underemployment and employee engagement among development officers have been investigated as a new arena. Hence, the question is whether there is any nexus between underemployment and employee engagement.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

### **Underemployment and employee engagement**

Underemployment includes both relatively objective job features and the worker's subjective perception of the employment situation (Maynard & Joseph, 2008). As per Fieldman (1996), underemployment has five dimensions. They are a person possess more formal education than the job requirement, person involuntarily employed than the formal education, a person possesses higher skill and experience than job needs, person unwillingly engaged in employment and person earns fewer wages. The degree of underemployment varies by occupation (Abrahamsen, 2010).

On the other hand, employee engagement is defined as 'the harnessing of organizational members' identities to their work roles; through engagement, employees utilize and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances' (Kahn, 1990). Employee engagement, according to Riordan (2000), is dependent on three psychological variables in the workplace: meaningfulness, psychological safety, and availability. Meaningfulness refers to the inherent value that workers place on job performance. It is impacted by the jobs that employees undertake as well as the responsibilities that they play (May et al., 2004). The sense of safety refers to whether one sees the freedom to be authentic in one's job function. The perceived quality of interpersonal interactions that workers have at work is its major factor (May et al., 2004). Finally,

availability refers to employees' perceptions about whether they have the physical, cognitive, and emotional resources required to fully engage in their job tasks. It is primarily affected by individuals' views of the number and quality of available resources, as well as their level of participation in activities outside of work (May et al., 2004; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). These three factors, taken together, determine whether employees are more engaged or disengaged (Kahn, 1990).

In fact, engaging employees in the workplace is a mounting concern (Pech & Slade, 2006). It is said that inadequate employment opportunities lead to adverse effects on personal and mental health (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Winkelmann, 2009) lower self-esteem (Este & Tachble, 2009; Friedland & Price, 2003).

It occurs when workers identify themselves as overqualified for their jobs; as such, these employees feel and experience themselves as overqualified and having more education or skills than their jobs require (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Maynard & Joseph, 2008), hence leading to family's health (Dean & Wilson, 2009) and lower satisfaction in marital nexus (Zvonkovic, 1988). Further, overqualification gives personal frustration and dissatisfaction (Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Kengatharan, 2020) and those who think that they are overqualified suffer from psychological distress, which leads to less engagement in jobs.

This issue can be seen through the lens of person-job fit theory, which stresses the compatibility of individual knowledge, skills, and talents with work needs (Zhou et al., 2015). Person-job fit is an offshoot of the person-environment fit theory that describes a better match between employee and work characteristics (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Numerous studies suggest that employees whose personal beliefs align more closely with the ideals of their job description demonstrate higher levels of citizenship behaviour just like engagement ([Farzaneh et al., 2014](#)). As per Zhao and Han (2015), employees who match well with the job is ready to dedicate themselves to their works which lead to greater satisfaction and employee motivation, which in turn to higher job involvement. Moreover, they involve in creativity through extensive job involvement (Kim et al., 2010). This person-job fit gives positive work outcomes and attitudes only (Krist of Brown & Johnson, 2005). But if there are any discrepancies between employees' skills and abilities and their job requirements, that will provide negative work and mental outcomes. However, little is known, and the link between over qualification and work satisfaction in emerging nations remains unknown (Feldman et al., 2002; Kengatharan, 2020). The higher their relative deprivation from overqualification, the greater their sense of disappointment and, as a result, unhappiness with their work (Sam, 2020). It argues that inconsistency between what one has and what one feels causes bad feelings, and this has been taken to explain the claimed link. Because, it was already understood that overqualification reduced the happiness of employees, which reduces the level of job involvement due to less empowerment (Erdogen & Bauer, 2021). Hence, it is hypothesized as follows;

*H1: Underemployment negatively relates to employee engagement*

### **Effect of gender differences on underemployment and employee engagement nexus**

Although we have hypothesized that underemployment is negatively related to employee engagement, it is also possible that the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement may vary based on the gender of individual employees. According to observations, there is a gender disparity in graduate unemployment. According to statistics from the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey (2018), the graduate unemployment rate is 9.1 percent, with male and female rates of 5.1 percent and 13.2 percent, respectively. In fact, gender is a subsystem of social practices (Banihani et al., 2013). When gender is taken into account, it has a significant influence in determining labour market behaviours and outcomes for both men and women. As everyone knows, South Asian countries value traditional gender role orientation highly on males (Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006).

More than that, the perception of employment is different from male to female. In fact, men are usually more conscious and achievement-oriented than women (Grewal et al., 2003; Sharma et al., 2012). It is considered that while having overqualification, males do not engage much in work as they are highly conscious of achievement. More than that women put a higher priority on family roles than their work roles. It is said that women participation in work is lower. Hence, the level of consideration on work and the extent to which engage in the job will also be comparatively lower. In addition to that, women tend to view themselves as a member of the interdependent group, while men consider themselves as independent (Cross & Madson, 1997). Therefore, men, expect employment opportunities that suit them a lot.

It can be seen, female employees, wish to work in the public sector than males due to job security in Sri Lanka irrespective of salary level (Randiwela, 2012). Further, comparatively, the expectation of decisional autonomy in the organization is higher for men, while women consider organizational pride while they work than autonomy (Sharma et al., 2012). Many studies show that female graduate unemployment is significantly greater than male graduate unemployment. In Sri Lanka, female graduates have a poor likelihood of finding work. As a result, male graduates will have greater career options (Ismail, 2011).

Not only that, males highly prioritize job-related responsibilities than women (Martins et al., 2002). In this case, they expect great responsibilities at work than women. Therefore, it seems, underemployment may lead the men to emotionally depleting conditions, thus the achievement of

goal and engagement will be questionable. When it comes to working security, some female graduates abandon their employment after marriage owing to family commitments (Gardiaavasam et al., 2017). Female labour force participation with engagement is low, and they indicate that marriage, family obligations, or reproductive roles are not plausible explanations for the labour force difference between males and females (Mitra & Verick, 2013). Hence, the female engagement level seemed to be low hypothetically. As men focus on individual career achievement than women, if it is not achieved, they get emotional exhaustion easily (Bem, 1981). It leads to the emotional loss of men. Hence, the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement will get stronger for men than women. Hence, it is hypothesized as follows;

*H2: The nexus between underemployment and employee engagement is stronger for male employees than female employees.*

### **Effect of age on the underemployment and employee engagement nexus**

As we have hypothesized that underemployment is negatively related to employee engagement, it is also possible that the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement will vary based on the age group of individual employees. Collectively, there is the middle-aged workforce in the workplace settings. Diversity in age may create dissimilarities among the workers. The middle-aged group has challenges in employee engagement, thus, may lead to problems for employers. Though various age groups have variations in commitment levels in the organization (Riordan, 2000), it is difficult to manage various groups of employees.

Age has a significant association with the employability of people in Sri Lanka (Gardiyawasam et al., 2021). Not only have that, but age group either younger or older of employees also made a greater impact on satisfaction. It is commonly assumed that cognitive capacities deteriorate with age. The active use of cognitive problem solving, on the other hand, is thought to delay the loss of cognitive abilities related to ageing (Hertzog et al., 2008). Empirical data suggests that spatial perspective-taking capacity declines with ageing (Zancada-Menendez et al., 2016). However, age effects are not always evenly evident across dimensions and sizes.

For example, in particular situations, participants of all ages did equally well on array rotation tasks, whereas younger subjects performed better on perspective in employee outcomes (Herman, 1960). Furthermore, while particular spatial abilities tend to decline with age, self-assessed spatial ability assessments appear to be constant across age groups (Borella et al., 2014).

In fact, young employees are motivated positively towards engagement level. Hence it can be said that, for younger workers, engagement is high than middle-aged workers (Avery & Mackey, 2007). Although the young employees get a job that they expect, they try to develop strong friendships

among the group. Even though, the level of dissatisfaction is high for younger employees regards the job. It is said that the younger generation has the dilemma in accepting the mismatching job, though they accept if for social statuses and the scarcity of job opportunities around (Randiwela, 2012). As Avery & Mackey (2007) stated that the satisfaction may vary based on the age level of employees that satisfaction, in turn, leads to employees investing more in their roles in working settings. On the other hand, if they are not satisfied, which lead to devastating results for younger people than the older one. Since the young employees are achievement-oriented, looking for promotional opportunities and career development than the middle-aged group, it might lead them to exhaustion in the job (Liao et al., 2004). This dissatisfaction and exhaustion lead to a lower level of engagement of employees. Hence we can say that the young age group affect the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement is stronger than middle-aged employees. There is an insignificant difference is identified in the age group with underemployment in Sri Lanka (Gardiyawasam et al., 2021). Since the previous researches have not identified the moderating effect of age group on the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement among Sri Lankan development officers, this study focuses on identifying this.

*H3: The nexus between underemployment and employee engagement is stronger for employees with a younger group than the middle-aged group.*

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection**

To test the proposed hypotheses, the researcher surveyed 549 development officers from the District Secretariat office, Municipal Council, Water Supply, Electricity Boards, Schools, Building Department, Educational Department, Health Department, Pradhesiya Sabha and Provincial Council around Sri-Lanka using the Convenient Sampling method. 600 questionnaires were distributed, among that 567 were returned. The response rate of the returned questionnaires were 94.5%. However, 549 questionnaires were only usable.

To test the suggested hypotheses, the researcher has applied structural equation modelling with a partial least squares procedure for clear cut results as this usually revert back with complex moderation and mediation outputs (Hair et al., 2013). Data accuracy were checked, no values are outside of the specific range were spotted. Mean, standard deviation and the correlation seemed to be suitable for the data set. In addition to that, no inconsistent responses were detected.

### **Measures**



The researcher has used multi-item scales for the latent variables in the above-said model. The response rate for the questions ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The present study had followed the questions of Bolino & Feldman (2000), for underemployment. Employee engagement was measured by using an 11 item scale developed by Saks (2006). All these scales were measured in five-point Likert scales. Cronbach alpha of these questions is above 0.7. Further, a researcher has grouped employees based on age in order to identify the moderation effect. Here the female and male respondents are respectively 270 and 279 which are relatively the same.

### **Multi-group Analysis**

In testing the proposed moderating variables, the researcher has utilized Multi-Group Analysis since this is especially useful for testing discrete groups (Eberl, 2010). The researcher has divided the data into two sub-samples as per moderating variable (Male and Female & Based on age). Here, MGA focuses on the coefficient and its directions. Invariance measurement was established. Path-coefficient of subsamples of the certain nexus differ. The researcher has followed the procedure to test the significance of group differences through bootstrapping (Henseler, 2007) as PLS path modelling is better in distributional assumptions (Henseler et al., 2009).

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

### **Measurement model Evaluation**

The variables which have been utilised in this study is formative. Thus, they need to fulfil the non-parametric criteria (Chin, 2010). They are factor loading should be greater than 0.7 of every variable, CR (Composite Reliability) should be above 0.7 and AVE (Average Variance Extracted) should surpass 0.5. These variables have met the requirement, which is shown in Tables I & II.

In addition to that, the correlation of the latent variable is less than 0.9, which have met the requirement of discriminant validity. Further, VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) is also within the accepted range (<10) (Chin, 2010). Hence, the measurement model is accepted for structural model and hypothesis testing.

*Table I: Table I Construct's Mean, Standard Deviation, Reliability and Validity*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std.</b>	<b>CrA</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>	<b>UE</b>	<b>EE</b>
<b>Under</b>	4.36	0.68	0.914	0.929	0.595	<b>0.771</b>	

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**Employment**

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<b>Employee</b>	3.13	0.92	0.796	0.853	0.500	<i>-0.511</i>	<b>0.707</b>
<b>Engagement</b>							

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*Note: CrA = Cronbach's Alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted; Italic diagonal figures (bold) are the square root of AVE, italic figures show the correlation between constructs*

*Table II. Path coefficient, T statistics, p-value and confidence interval (CI)*

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<b>Proposed paths</b>	<b>Path coefficient</b>	<b>T statistics</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>Bias</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>97.5%</b>
<b>UE-EE</b>	-0.511	7.322	0.000	-0.003	-0.615	-0.327
<b>Gender-EE</b>	0.091	2.871	0.040	-0.007	-0.125	0.286
<b>Age-EE</b>	0.317	2.335	0.020	-0.011	0.021	0.559

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### **Structural model Evaluation**

There are a few criteria to be met in PLS in the structural model. Coefficient determination ( $R^2$ ), multi-collinearity (VIF) and Stone-Geisser  $Q^2$  redundancy.  $R^2$  focuses on the impacts of variables, which is 0.26. It seems that variability in Engagement is decided by underemployment by 0.261%. Further, all  $Q^2$  is above zero, and VIF is below the threshold value of 10. Thus, this research has offered predictive relevance from  $R^2$  and no issues in multi-collinearity.

### **Hypotheses Testing**

To test the hypothesis in this research model, the researcher has utilized 549 questionnaires. The researcher has confirmed that the path coefficient is significant  $p < 0.05$  (Chin, 2010). In order to test the moderating effect, the researcher conducted MGAs. First MGA was conducted for gender, male ( $n=270$ ) and female ( $n=279$ ) and for age group, 25-40 and above 40. These hypotheses were confirmed in the significance of the path coefficient. Hypothesis 1 (H1) confirmed that there is a negative nexus between underemployment and employee engagement ( $\beta = -0.511$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates due to underemployment, the engagement level among development officers is reduced.

### Moderation effects in hypotheses

Hypothesis 2 (H2) indicated that the effect of underemployment on employee engagement is stronger for men than women. As can be seen in Table II below, there is a significant difference (female;  $\beta = -0.513$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and for males;  $\beta = -0.561$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between men and women in the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement among development officers. Although, the path coefficient difference between males and females,  $\beta = 0.048$  is insignificant ( $p > 0.05$ ) as per the parametric test. Hence, this hypothesis is not accepted. Therefore, it reveals that though there is an impact of gender on the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement, it does not consider females or males.

Table III: Multi group analysis for gender

	Path coefficient original	Path coefficient Mean	Std Deviation	t-value	P-value
UE-EE	-0.513	-0.563	0.098	5.217	0.00
<b>(Female)</b>					
UE-EE	-0.561	-0.623	0.100	5.621	0.00
<b>(Male)</b>					

Hypothesis3 (H3) indicated that the nexus between underemployment on employee engagement is stronger for the younger age group (25-40) than the middle age group of employees (40 and above). As per table IV given below, there is a difference (age 25-40;  $\beta = -0.512$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and for above 40;  $\beta = -0.442$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) between different age groups on the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement among development officers. Although, the path coefficient difference between these two age groups,  $\beta = 0.070$  is insignificant ( $p > 0.05$ ) as per the parametric test. Hence, this hypothesis is not accepted.

Table IV: Multigroup analysis for age category

	Path coefficient original	Path coefficient Mean	Std Deviation	t-value	P-value
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<b>UE-EE</b>	-0.512	-0.578	0.095	5.370	0.00
<b>(25-40)</b>					
<b>UE-EE</b>	-0.442	-0.493	0.277	1.598	0.11
<b>(above 40)</b>					

## DISCUSSIONS

The study disclosed that underemployment is negatively, significantly related to employee engagement. Our findings are also consistent with the previous studies and person-job fit theory (Bolino & Feldman2000; Cesário & Chambel, 2017; Feldman &Turnley, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Verhaest and Omev, 2006). Thus, we can say underemployment is pervasive and which lead to negative job-related attitude in organizations across the globe.

In contrary to our expectations, the results of multi-group analysis of gender effects on the underemployment and employee engagement nexus has shown insignificant results on gender differences. This insignificance of gender differences results also comply with the studies (McGoldrick & Robst, 1996; Watt & Hargis, 2010) and contradicts previous studies (Jefferson & Preston, 2010; Jensen & Slack, 2003). Thus, although underemployment can be prevalent for males, females, and the effect of multi-group do not have an impact on it. It can be seen, it is a common issue for males and females in the country, which cannot be avoided in terms of gender. Further, it can be realized that all individuals feel the same way about the underemployment among the development officers.

The effect of the age group also marked the insignificant differences in the underemployment and employee engagement nexus. These findings comply with the previous studies (Kraimer et al., 2009; Watt & Hargis, 2010). It can be concluded that the perception of various age group employees towards underemployment and employee engagement does not differ. The way both of the group sees is almost the same as older workers are also experiencing underemployment.

### Theoretical and practical implications

This study also has practical and theoretical implications. The researcher can provide a few implications from the findings. With regard to theoretical implications, first, a multitude of studies on underemployment have been done in the West to date. However, researchers in poor nations have taken a haphazard approach to study the nexus of underemployment and employee engagement this

study has integrated the person-job fit theory between underemployment and employee engagement in the Sri-Lankan context. In addition to that, it also contributes to the inadequate understanding of the antecedents of employee engagement, that is, underemployment with the use of age and gender as moderators among development officers and this study is using these two as moderators among these variables is quite new for Sri-Lankan context. Secondly, this study extended the generalizability of the level of employee engagement to an eastern country, like Sri Lanka. The study then concentrated on a developing and labour-intensive country, Sri Lanka, and therefore provides a geographical addition. In a similar line, the study contributes to methodology by proving the validity of the measures employed, which were created in various cultural contexts.

With regard to practical implications, no less prominently, it makes several practical implications. A slew of studies contends that overqualification has negative consequences for both overqualified employees and employers, including increased withdrawal behaviours, poorer health outcomes, lower organizational commitment, deviant behaviours, counterproductive work behaviours, poor employee wellbeing, and higher intentions to turnover (Harari et al., 2017; Kengatharan, 2020; Liu et al., 2015; Luksyte et al., 2011). As a result, it is incumbent on administrators, practitioners, and legislators to implement the best human resource management strategies in order to mitigate the negative effects of overqualification (Kengatharan, 2020). Sri-Lankan government and policymakers should consider hiring an ample amount of graduates with high calibre for the position of development officers. They should focus on the expectations of graduates after graduation and with government sectors' need as the consequences of hiring ample amount of graduates simultaneously left them with less or no work, hence it reduces the engagement level of them. Relevant ministry should contemplate the country's vision while hiring unanimously as it reduces the expectations of graduates and does not fit with needs. Policymakers can make use of the skills and knowledge of the graduates while they join and try to optimize the human resources in the government sector. Having this sort of successful channelling would encourage workers to work harder and be more devoted to the organization's goals (Alvi et al., 2014). Relevant authorities have to have a clear strategy in adjusting expectations of high calibre employees, to foster their knowledge and to make it persistent contributors in the organizations without loss of satisfaction, energy, enthusiasm and engagement. Employees' emotional stability may be improved via regular emotional training, which improves their performance and dedication to the job (Zeidner et al., 2008). In addition to that employees who works as development officers either male or female, no matter, there is no effect. Further, moderating effect of the age category is also having an insignificant impact. Hence, respective bodies have to consider all the levels of employees regardless of gender and age group while appointing for positions. Policymakers should reform and replace the policies regarding employment. Policies should be based on the youth populations of Sri Lanka in order to create socio-economic growth. Having some sessions for information sharing, paths

to career development could enhance the level of engagement of individuals (James, 2021; Kengatharan & Kunatilakam, 2020; Mayuran & Kailasapathy, 2020)

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study, like most others, also have limitations. First, this study used a sample from development officers who are from Sri Lanka. Further, data were collected convenient basis from various district employees. Therefore, the generalizability of this finding is slightly difficult as the various background of people participated. More sample size can be utilized further in future and the place of the employee can be utilized as moderator. Second, we investigated the impact level of underemployment on employee engagement only. The predictor level of underemployment on employee engagement is 26%. Other predictors considering emotional intelligence.

Third, this study is based on a cross-sectional study. In order to test the causal nexus among these variables, a longitudinal study should be conducted. Fourth, this study focused on development officers from the government sector. In future, research can be done in the apparel industry, telecommunication industry, airline industry, food industry and so on, which lead to the external validity of these findings. Fifth, this study has revealed age and gender do not moderate the nexus between underemployment and engagement. Thus, these aspects in moderation should be subjected to additional research.

### **CONCLUSION**

Underemployment is a highly relevant topic right now and has become a social issue (Cesário et al., 2017). The primary goal of this present study was to analyze the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement with the moderating viewpoint of gender and age among the Sri-Lankan development officers. Finding has revealed that there is a moderate negative nexus between underemployment and employee engagement, which is in line with the previous studies carried out globally (Feldman, 1996). Further, this study tested gender and age as a moderator among these two variables with MGA. Surprisingly, the results have shown that there is an insignificant moderator effect of gender and age among these development officers, which is quite new results in this context.

This study contributed to the forthcoming literature in the following way. This will be the only study focused on development officers' perception of underemployment and job engagement in a wide arena. Further, it shed light regards on age and gender differences and their effect on the underemployment and job engagement study, which gave insignificance results. It added value to the existing literature by studying the nexus between underemployment and employee engagement research among the development officers, whom the related study was a lack in Sri-Lankan perspective.

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