

# Initial Person-Environment Fit Practices and Academic Staff Engagement in Private Universities in Uganda

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## Abstract

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Employee engagement is an important element for the sustained competitive advantage of organisations. Therefore, it is important to examine practices likely to enhance it among employees. This article examined the relationship between initial person-environment fit practices and academic staff engagement in private universities in Western Uganda. Particularly, the study examined whether the initial person-environment fit practices, namely recruitment, selection and socialisation, were significantly related to the employee engagement of teaching staff. The study was correlational, involving a sample of 222 academic staff from three private universities. Data was analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The results indicated that the model was appropriate, for the constructs were fit for structural modelling. Hypothesis test results revealed that recruitment, selection and socialisation were significantly related to employee engagement among teaching staff. It was concluded that the implementation of an appropriate recruitment and selection process, as well as the proper socialisation of new academic staff, promotes their work engagement in terms of absorption, dedication and vigour. Therefore, it was recommended that appointment boards and human resource directorates in universities implement appropriate recruitment and effective selection practices that promote academic staff engagement. Further, human resource directorates, deans of faculties and heads of departments should make an effort to socialise new teaching staff to promote work engagement among teaching staff.

**Keywords:** *Engagement; Person-environment; Recruitment; Selection; Socialisation.*

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## Introduction

Employee engagement today has increasingly become a common phrase in the workplace because it is viewed as a potent remedy for enhancing employee effectiveness (Jha et al., 2019). The concept of work engagement has gained enormous popularity as it is seen as a secret element for improving employee performance due to the fact that engaged employees are considered to be psychologically connected to their workplaces, hence work hard for the success of the organisation (Nanteza et al., 2023). Work engagement is vital for the performance of organisations and has been advanced as being critical to the success of organisations by enhancing their competitive advantage (Sekhar et al., 2018). Therefore, employee work engagement enhances employee productivity in organisations because the energy and focus inherent as a consequence of being engaged pushes individuals to achieve to the best of their abilities, which improves the quality of their job performance (Abun et al., 2020; Sonnentag, 2017). Engaged employees are a key resource to organisations for sustained competitive advantage. This has made employee engagement become a concept of focus in management circles for promoting organisational competitiveness (Turner, 2020). Therefore, work engagement is important for the effectiveness of organisations such as universities.

The concept of employee engagement encompasses the experience of strong energy while at work and feeling highly motivated. The concept relates to the energy inherent in an individual related to positive work behaviours and output (Green et al., 2017). Employee engagement involves an emotional commitment to the organisation and its goals, leading to a sense of purpose and meaning. This, in turn, fosters a positive work environment, encourages employee participation, and drives business success (Turner, 2020). Schaufeli (2017) contends that employee engagement is the fulfilling work-related state of mind exhibited by three traits, that is absorption, dedication and vigour of employees. Absorption is the state of mind involving the employee being happily absorbed in and concentrating on work with time passing rather quickly and experiencing difficulty of disentangling one's self from the work (Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021). Dedication denotes heavy involvement of individuals in their work with inner challenge, pride and inspiration (Linggiello et al., 2021). Vigour is the tendency of resilience in an employee despite workplace obstacles and high investment of effort in the job even when confronted with work challenges (Soelton et al., 2020).

The term employee engagement was coined by Gallup Research Group, an American analytics and advisory company, in the 1990s following 25 years of surveys involving employees and managers (Gallup Jr., 1991). Three specific behaviours exhibited by engaged employees are say, stay and strive (Bailey, 2022). The employees say (talk highly about the organisation to others both within and outside the organisation), stay (show a strong zeal to be part of the organisation) and strive (exert effort and become part of the agenda for the success of organisation) (Schaufeli, 2013). This means that it is important for the success of organisations because of the commitment it builds in employees. Nonetheless, employee engagement globally is a challenge. Firdinata and Hendriyani (2019) indicated that globally, generally 14 per cent of employees were actively disengaged while 17 per cent were highly disengaged. In Uganda, the situation is not any better. A survey carried out in 2018 by the Federation of Uganda Employers in conjunction with Makerere University showed that Ugandan workers from various sectors that were highly engaged were 49 per

cent, with 6 per cent disengaged and 45 per cent averagely engaged. This implies that those lowly engaged were 51 per cent (Musenze et al., 2020). Therefore, the larger percentage of Ugandan workers was lowly engaged to their jobs. The low engagement levels suggested that their productivity was low. The low engagement levels amongst Ugandan workers attracted this study to examine the relationship between the initial person-environment fit practices of recruitment, selection and socialisation in connection with employee engagement. As such, the study tested the following three hypotheses:

H1: Recruitment has a statistically positive significant relationship with the work engagement of academic staff in private universities in Western Uganda.

H2: Selection has a statistically positive significant relationship with the work engagement of academic staff in private universities in Uganda.

H3: Socialisation had a statistically positive significant relationship with the work engagement of academic staff in private universities in Uganda.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical review

The person-environment (P-E) fit theory, with its roots in the in person-environment interaction theory advanced by Lewin in 1935, informed the study investigations. The fundamental assumption of fit is that outcomes are a function of the interaction between individuals and their environments, where good fit typically results in positive outcomes for the individual (Kristof, 196). Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006) advanced that the person-environment fit theory comprises person-vocation (PV), person-organisation (PO), person-group (PG), person-job (PJ) and person-person (PP), which are related to the five stages of employment: pre-recruitment, recruitment, selection, socialisation or orientation, and long-term tenure. The conjecture in the P-E fit dimensions is that they are highly or lowly salient at different stages in an individual's career, with PV being relevant prior to thinking about becoming part of an organisation and PJ and PP fit being relevant at the job search level. PJ and PO are visible during the selection process, while PO and PJ are salient during socialisation. All five fit forms are relevant during long-term tenure and determine the employees' positive or negative work attitudes (Dimopoulos et al., 2021; Edwards & Billsberry, 2010). The P-E fit dimensions show the need for congruence between the individual and the work environment. Hence, matching the characteristics of the employee is very important at all stages of employment and leads to positive work dispositions such as employee engagement (Lahlouh et al., 2019). The P-E fit theory suggests that at different stages of employment, including recruitment, selection and socialisation, matching the fit of an employee is very important. Therefore, P-E fit theory was the basis for relating the initial P-E fit practices of recruitment, selection, and socialisation with employee engagement.

### Recruitment and employee engagement

Recruitment is searching for potential employees in ample numbers and quality to facilitate the selection of the most suitable candidates to fill the job needs of an organisation (Georgia et al., 2013). With recruitment, an organisation is able to attract the maximum number of applicants with the requisite qualifications (Dash, 2018). The recruitment

process enables attracting and engaging candidates the organisation needs (Armstrong, 2010). Scholars such as Angundaru et al. (2016), Budriene and Diskiene (2020), Gill (2007), Jani and Balyan (2016), Karumuri (2017), Lewis (2019), O'Bryan and Casey (2017), Onday (2016), Sivapragasam and Raya (2017) and Shilpa (2013) reported the existence of a positive association between recruitment and employee engagement. However, the literature above revealed contextual gaps, as all the previous studies were conducted in foreign contexts. This highlighted the need for a study in the Ugandan context that addresses the local specifics that differed from those in other settings.

## **Selection and employee engagement**

Selection encompasses determining the extent to which the attributes (competencies, experience, qualifications, education and training) of job candidates match the person specification (Almeida & Fernando, 2017). An evidence-based selection process that facilitates the employment of candidates that possess a higher level of calibre, are devoted to work and are focused on achieving their regular and extraordinary tasks leads to hiring individuals likely to be engaged with their job roles (Kerdpitak & Jermstittiparsert, 2020). In their reviews, Budriene and Diskiene (2020), Karumuri (2017), Lewis (2019), O'Bryan and Casey (2017), Onday (2016) and Shilpa (2013) indicated that selection is positively and highly related to employee engagement. Similarly, in their empirical studies, Gill (2007), Jani and Balyan (2016), Kerdpitak and Jermstittiparsert (2020), Nawaz et al. (2020) and Sivapragasam and Raya (2017) reported that selection was positively and significantly linked to employee engagement. However, Vuong and Suntrayuth (2020) established that selection had no significant relationship with employee engagement. While the literature above suggests that scholars had made an effort to examine the link between selection and employee engagement, methodological and empirical gaps have emerged. At the methodological level, a number of scholars carried out reviews, hence the need for more primary data on the same. At the empirical level, the study by Vuong and Suntrayuth (2020) came up with findings contrary to those of other scholars, as it reported that selection had no significant relationship with employee engagement, whereas other studies found that a significant relationship existed. This empirical gap suggested that the importance of selection varied in different contexts and organisations, which called for this study.

## **Socialisation and employee engagement**

Socialisation is the ongoing process by which new employees are made to understand the culture of the workplace and the people therein to chart the way forward on how to relate with them (Fu et al., 2017). Socialisation helps new employees understand the mission, vision and values of the organisation they have joined (Hewitt et al., 2004). Organisational socialisation enables newcomers to adjust to the tasks at hand and become socially integrated, leading to important job outcomes such as engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2018). This most likely leads to employee engagement. In their study, Villavicencio-Ayub et al. (2014) reported that organisational socialisation positively and significantly correlated with the work engagement of employees. Accordingly, a good adjustment to the organisation as a result of the implementation of a socialisation process led to higher levels of employee engagement. Relatedly, Albrecht et al. (2015) and Ongel (2012), in their reviews, indicated that socialisation led to employee engagement. Also, McGee (2015) and Mmako and Schultz

(2016), in their empirical studies, reported the existence of a strong positive correlation between socialisation and higher levels of employee engagement. Overall, a literature search suggested that limited studies had been carried out on socialisation and employee engagement. Indeed, Saks and Gruman (2018) indicated that much less is known about how socialisation determines employee engagement among new workers. This literature gap made it essential for this study to be carried out.

## Methodology

### Research design and sample

This study employed the correlational research design, which sought to ascertain relationships between initial person-environment fit practices and employee engagement among teaching staff. The correlational research design was adopted because it would enable the researcher to collect data for establishing relationships between two or more variables in the same population (Queirós et al., 2017). Therefore, the findings of a correlational study enable the researcher to determine the degree to which two variables change together. Since correlational studies are quantitative in nature, the study adopted a quantitative approach; hence, the data was analysed using quantitative methods. Data was collected from a sample of 222 academic staff from three private universities in South Western Uganda namely Bishop Stuart, Ibanda, and Kampala International, Western Campus.

### Measures of constructs

The study examined the relationship between employee engagement (dependent variable) and person-environment fit (independent variable). Employee engagement was assessed through three components: absorption (ABS), dedication (DED) and vigour (VIG). Person-environment fit was measured through three dimensions: recruitment (REC), selection (SEL) and socialisation (SOC). The measurement scales used were based on existing research, with recruitment and selection adapted from Mugizi and Nuwatuhaire (2019) consisting of six and seven items, respectively. Socialisation, adapted from Haueter et al. (2003), comprised seven items, while vigour, dedication, and absorption, based on Schaufeli et al. (2006), consisted of six, five, and six items, respectively. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very untrue) to 5 (very true), allowing participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

### Validity and reliability

To establish whether the results obtained on the constructs were fit for structural modelling, a structural assessment model was done to ascertain the validity and reliability of the data collected using SmartPls 3 for structural equation modelling. Validity was determined using average variance extracted (AVE) and heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) for discriminant validity and reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and composite reliability (CR). The data was further tested for collinearity using value inflation factor (VIF). The validity results follow in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *Heterotrait monotrait (HTMT) discriminant validity assessment*

| Employee Engagement | AVE   | Absorption  | Dedication | Vigour        |
|---------------------|-------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| Absorption          | 0.552 |             |            |               |
| Dedication          | 0.748 | 0.443       |            |               |
| Vigour              | 0.506 | 0.655       | 0.705      |               |
| Person-Job-Fit      | AVE   | Recruitment | Selection  | Socialisation |
| Recruitment         | 0.530 |             |            |               |
| Selection           | 0.530 | 0.827       |            |               |
| Socialisation       | 0.575 | 0.505       | 0.697      |               |

The results in Table 1 revealed that the constructs explained variations in the items because AVE values exceeded the 0.5 threshold (Purwanto, 2021). Discriminant validity was also established using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, a reflective test that ensures concepts and measurements in the same model are independent, confirming that each construct's indicators accurately measure the intended construct (Sarstedt et al., 2019). The HTMT correlations met the discriminant validity conditions, with all values falling below the 0.90 limit (Hair Jr et al., 2021). This confirmed the validity of the measures. Having established the validity of the measures through these tests, the results were deemed suitable for further analysis.

**Table 2:** *Reliability and collinearity*

| Person Job-Fit | $\alpha$ | CR    | VIF   |
|----------------|----------|-------|-------|
| Absorption     | 0.837    | 0.881 | 1.663 |
| Dedication     | 0.888    | 0.922 | 2.358 |
| Vigour         | 0.799    | 0.858 | 1.627 |
| Recruitment    | 0.846    | 0.885 | 1.821 |
| Selection      | 0.772    | 0.847 | 1.851 |
| Socialisation  | 0.875    | 0.904 | 1.935 |

The reliability results presented in Table 2 confirmed the internal consistency of the items measuring the constructs, with Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and composite reliability (CR) values exceeding 0.70 for all constructs, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability. In testing reliability, CR was also carried out because of Cronbach's alpha limitation of assuming that all indicator traits are the same in the population, lowering reliability values. Composite reliability is liberal because it takes into account outer traits of the indicator variables (Hair Jr et al., 2021). In addition, the test results presented in Table 2 revealed no evidence of high correlation (collinearity) between the independent variables, as indicated by variance inflation factor (VIF) values less than 5, the standard threshold for detecting collinearity (Hair Jr et al., 2021). This suggests that the independent variable, person-job fit factors (recruitment, selection and socialisation), could independently predict the dependent variable, employee engagement of teaching staff (in terms of vigour, dedication and absorption), without issues of multicollinearity

## Data analysis method

The study employed partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 3 software, leveraging its ability to develop models showing linkages between variables. SmartPLS facilitated the examination of causal relationships by illustrating the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. Specifically, SmartPLS helped elucidate the measurement models of the constructs (Tables 1 and 2), the relationships between indicators and constructs (Figure 1) and the linkages between constructs and variables. Given that the sample size exceeded 100 ( $n = 222$ ), PLS-SEM was deemed suitable for testing the proposed relationships (Hair Jr et al., 2021) between initial person-environment fit practices and employee engagement among teaching staff.

## Findings

### Demographic attributes

The study participants' attributes (Table 3) showed a majority of males (72.1%), with the modal age group being 30–40 years (55.4%). Most participants held postgraduate qualifications (75.2%), and the majority were assistant lecturers (38.7%). Additionally, the largest group had worked for 5–10 years (39.2%), indicating a consistent profile among the participants.

**Table 3:** Demographic attributes of the study participants

| Variables       | Categories                    | Frequency | Per cent |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Sex             | Male                          | 160       | 72.1     |
|                 | Female                        | 62        | 27.9     |
|                 | Total                         | 222       | 100.0    |
| Age groups      | Less than 30 years            | 30        | 13.5     |
|                 | 30–40 years                   | 123       | 55.4     |
|                 | 40–50 years                   | 50        | 22.5     |
|                 | 50 years and above            | 19        | 8.6      |
|                 | Total                         | 222       | 100.0    |
| Education Level | Diploma                       | 1         | 0.5      |
|                 | Bachelor's degree             | 54        | 24.3     |
|                 | Postgraduate qualifications   | 167       | 75.2     |
|                 | Total                         | 222       | 100.0    |
| Position        | Teaching Assistant            | 59        | 26.6     |
|                 | Assistant Lecturer            | 86        | 38.7     |
|                 | Lecturer                      | 54        | 24.3     |
|                 | Senior Lecturer               | 18        | 8.1      |
|                 | Associate Professor/Professor | 5         | 2.3      |

|                                |                    |     |       |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|-----|-------|
|                                | Total              | 222 | 100.0 |
| Years worked at the University | Less than 5 years  | 89  | 4.1   |
|                                | 5–10 years         | 87  | 39.2  |
|                                | 11 years and above | 46  | 2.7   |
|                                | Total              | 222 | 100.0 |

### Structural equation model

To examine the causal relationships between the independent and dependent variables, a structural model (Figure 1) was developed, illustrating the factor loadings of the indicators for each construct and the relationships between the variables. The model results, presented in Figure 1 and Table 4, include the beta ( $\beta$ ) coefficients representing the strength and direction of the relationships between constructs, p-values indicating the significance of these relationships, and R-squared ( $R^2$ ) values representing the proportion of variance explained. Additional results, including t-test statistics and adjusted  $R^2$  values, are provided in Table 4.

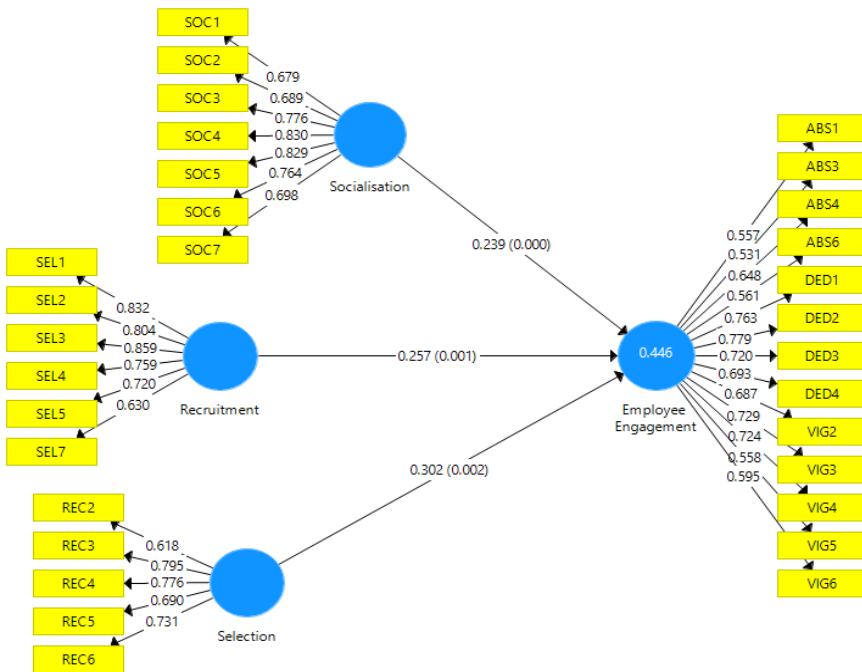


Figure 1: Structural equation model findings

The factor loadings in Figure 1 show that the construct of selection had six out of seven items loading highly, and socialisation had all seven items loading highly. For absorption and dedication, four out of six and four out of five items loaded highly respectively, while for vigour, five out of six items loaded highly. Recruitment had six out of seven items loading highly, while selection had six out of seven loading highly, and socialisation had all the items loading highly. The factors loading highly loaded above the minimum validity



value of 0.50 when using factor analysis (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Therefore, the retained items are valid measures of their respective constructs.

**Table 4:** Structural equation model predictions

|                                 |                     | Beta  | T Statistics | P Values |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-------|--------------|----------|
| Recruitment                     | Employee Engagement | 0.257 | 3.219        | 0.001    |
| Selection                       | Employee Engagement | 0.302 | 3.176        | 0.002    |
| Socialisation                   | Employee Engagement | 0.239 | 3.694        | 0.000    |
| R <sup>2</sup> = 0.446          |                     |       |              |          |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.442 |                     |       |              |          |

The results in Figure 1 and Table 4 show that the hypotheses (H1- H3) to the effect that recruitment ( $\beta = 0.257$ ,  $t = 3.219$ ,  $p = 0.001 < 0.05$ ), selection ( $\beta = 0.302$ ,  $t = 3.176$ ,  $p = 0.002 < 0.05$ ) and socialisation ( $\beta = 0.239$ ,  $t = 3.694$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ) have a statistically positive significant relationship with employee engagement were supported. Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> suggested the three factors, namely recruitment, selection and socialisation, contributed 44.2% (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.442) to employee engagement. This implied that 55.8% of the variation in employee engagement of teaching staff was a result of factors other than those analysed, such as other job-fit factors which, according to the person-environment (P-E) fit theory include long-term tenure factors that might be individual and organisational. The respective beta values ( $\beta$ s) indicate that selection makes the most significant contribution to employee engagement, followed by recruitment and socialisation, respectively. Thus, optimising selection processes will yield the greatest returns in enhancing employee engagement, surpassing the effects of recruitment and socialisation.

## Discussion

The results of the study showed the existence of a positive and significant association between the three job-fit factors, namely recruitment, selection and socialisation, and employee engagement among teaching staff. These results align with the person-environment (P-E) fit theory, which suggests that various stages of employment, including recruitment and selection, influence employees' positive work attitudes (Dimopoulos et al., 2021; Edwards & Billsberry, 2010). Hence, when teaching staff experience a good fit, they are more likely to exhibit high levels of employee engagement. The findings were also consistent with those by previous scholars such as Angundaru et al. (2016), Budriene and Diskiene (2020), Gill (2001), Jani and Balyan (2016), Karumuri (2017), Lewis (2019), O'Bryan and Casey (2017), Onday (2016), Sivapragasam and Raya (2017) and Shilpa (2013), who revealed that recruitment was positively and significantly associated with workplace engagement. This congruence across studies reinforces the notion that effective recruitment practices play a crucial role in fostering employee engagement.

The findings of the study also agreed with the findings of previous scholars, including those by Kerdpitak and Jermstittiparsert (2020), Budriene and Diskiene (2020), Gill (2001), Jani and Balyan (2016), Karumuri (2017), Lewis (2019), Nawaz et al. (2020), O'Bryan and

Casey (2017), Onday (2016), Shilpa (2013) and Sivapragasam and Raya (2017), who reported a positive and significant association between selection and employee engagement. While Vuonga and Suntrayuth (2020) found no significant relationship between selection and employee engagement, the overwhelming consensus among previous researchers suggests that selection is indeed related to employee engagement. Therefore, it can be inferred that effective selection practices contribute to enhancing employee engagement.

Further, the results concurred with the findings of previous scholars such as Villavicencio-Ayub et al. (2014), who reported the existence of a positive and significant correlation between organisational socialisation and employee work engagement. They noted that effective socialisation facilitates employees' adjustment to the organisation, leading to higher levels of work engagement. Similarly, Albrecht et al. (2015), O'Bryan and Casey (2017) and Ongel (2012) indicated that socialisation led to employee engagement. Mcgee (2015) and Mmako and Schultz (2016) also reported a strong positive association between socialisation and higher employee engagement levels. These findings collectively suggest that organisational socialisation plays a crucial role in fostering employee engagement, and the results of this study contribute to reinforcing this consensus.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis revealed that selection has the most substantial impact on employee engagement, followed by recruitment and socialisation, respectively. This suggests that the selection process plays a critical role in fostering employee engagement, followed by the recruitment process, and then socialisation initiatives. These findings highlight the importance of optimising each of these stages to maximise employee engagement. Therefore, effective competitive selection promotes employee engagement. In addition, selection promotes employee engagement when the exercise involves evaluating the candidates' attitudes essential for the job and making background checks on the candidates, and when the immediate supervisor is involved. In addition, effective recruitment processes enhance engagement. This is especially so when the recruitment process is strictly based on merit and the job candidates are given sufficient relevant information about the institution when being recruited. The recruitment process also promotes academic staff engagement when the candidates are made to adequately understand the jobs they are seeking, their referees submit recommendations on their behalf, and reference checks are made on the candidates.

Further, through socialising new academic staff, their employee engagement is boosted. This is so because the socialisation process enables new staff to know the various departments in the institution, to learn the institution's history and to understand how their respective department and faculty operate, as well as to acquaint themselves with the values of the institution. Socialisation also enhances employee engagement when new employees are briefed on policies and rules, responsibilities, tasks and duties they have been hired for, and are briefed about how to obtain the resources needed to perform their jobs. Therefore, it was recommended that appointment boards and human resource directorates in universities should implement appropriate recruitment and effective selection practices that promote the employee engagement of teaching staff. Further,

human resource directorates, deans of faculties and heads of departments should make an effort to socialise new academic staff to promote the work engagement of teaching staff.

## Limitations of the Study

This study provides crucial insights in promoting employee engagement among teaching staff through person-job fit practices. However, its scope was limited to private universities in one sub-region of the country. Future research should aim to include public universities and expand to different or all regions of the country to enhance generalisability. In addition, this study only explored three stages of employment, namely recruitment, selection and socialisation, omitting pre-recruitment and long-term tenure stages. Future studies should investigate all aspects of person-job fit to determine their collective impact on employee engagement. Furthermore, this study solely employed quantitative methods, limiting the depth of analysis. Future research should incorporate qualitative data analysis methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the concepts.

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