Original Article

Assessing the Effect of Rewards on Academic Staff Performance in Uganda's Public Universities

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.7.4.2438

Date Published:

10 December 2024

Keywords:

Rewards, Academic Staff Performance, Teaching, Research, Community Service, Public Universities.

ABSTRACT

The persistent decline in academic staff performance at Uganda's public universities prompted this study to investigate the effect of rewards on their performance. Using an exploratory sequential research design, data were collected from 350 academic staff through self-administered questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and linear regression, alongside interviews with 13 academic staff, which were analyzed using content analysis. The findings reveal that while rewards are a statistically significant predictor of performance, their influence is modest, accounting for 7.6% of the variation in teaching performance, 12.5% in research performance, and 9.6% in community service performance. These results suggest that while rewards positively impact academic performance, their limited predictive power indicates that other factors play a more significant role. The qualitative findings supported the quantitative data, highlighting the importance of additional influences such as professional development, workplace environment, and institutional support. As a result, it is recommended that public universities not only strengthen reward systems but also adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses these other factors. This holistic strategy will help create a more conducive academic environment and ultimately enhance the overall performance of academic staff.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, academic staff performance has become a key determinant of institutional success and global rankings. With universities increasingly expected to contribute to societal development and foster knowledge production across multidisciplinary formats (Queirós, 2020), the performance of academic staff plays a pivotal role in achieving these goals. In Uganda, public universities face unique challenges in motivating their academic staff to excel in teaching, research, and community engagement. One central factor influencing this performance is the reward system. While reward structures are widely acknowledged as essential for improving employee performance in various sectors, their specific impact on academic staff in Uganda's public universities remains underexplored (Nsubuga et al., 2021). As such, the question of optimizing rewards to enhance academic staff performance is increasingly critical.

Previous studies have attempted to link rewards with staff motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational success across different contexts. Mwashila (2018) and Oladejo (2022) emphasize that an institution's effectiveness hinges on the motivation and capabilities of its workforce. Moreover, research has demonstrated a positive relationship between well-structured reward systems and enhanced job performance, especially when intrinsic and extrinsic rewards align with employee expectations (Kabwe, 2019; Mugisha et al., 2020). However, most of these studies have focused on the private sector or Western higher education institutions, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics play out within the unique setting of Uganda's public universities. The existing literature fails to address how the specific design and implementation of reward systems influence the multifaceted roles of academic staff in Ugandan universities, particularly in balancing teaching, research, and community service.

This study sought to bridge this gap by critically examining the effect of rewards on the performance of academic staff in Uganda's public universities. Specifically, it explored how different rewards—monetary and non-monetary—predict staff performance in their tripartite roles. By focusing on the Ugandan context, this research aimed to offer refined insights into how reward systems can be designed to motivate academic staff more effectively, improve their engagement in teaching, research, and community service, and ultimately enhance the overall performance of public universities. The findings of this study are intended to inform policymakers and university administrators about the key elements of a robust reward system that can contribute to both staff satisfaction and institutional success.

Statement of the Problem

Public universities in Uganda are expected to achieve high levels of academic staff performance by implementing well-structured reward systems that drive motivation, engagement, and retention, ultimately contributing to academic excellence and institutional success. Ideally, such reward systems should enhance staff satisfaction and performance, helping universities meet their academic and developmental goals. However, despite the recognized importance of reward systems in motivating employees, there is limited research examining their specific impact within the context of Uganda's public universities (Mugagga, & Bakkabulindi, 2017). This gap leaves the challenges and potential benefits of current reward structures poorly understood. While reward systems are widely acknowledged to improve employee performance and satisfaction (Nsubuga et al., 2021), their effectiveness in Uganda's public universities— where reward structures differ significantly from those in the private sector—remains inadequately documented (Nakabugo et al., 2020).

Evidence suggests that poorly designed reward systems may lead to low staff motivation, disengagement, and high turnover rates, resulting in inefficiencies and reduced institutional performance (Kyoshaba, 2017). If these issues are not addressed, public universities in Uganda may continue to face staff dissatisfaction and underperformance, which could undermine their ability to provide quality education and meet broader development objectives. This study aimed to address these critical gaps by investigating how reward systems influence the performance of academic staff in Uganda's public

universities. By doing so, the research sought to provide insights that would inform the development of more effective reward strategies, ultimately enhancing staff performance, institutional effectiveness, and overall educational outcomes in Uganda's higher education sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A robust reward system is crucial in enhancing staff performance in higher education institutions, serving as a foundation for internal marketing and fostering psychological empowerment among faculty members. This section critically reviews the literature on the relationship between rewards and academic staff performance, emphasizing the importance of a balanced reward system that integrates both intrinsic and extrinsic elements.

In higher education, reward systems are pivotal for motivating employees to excel and improve their performance. Heinonen et al. (2023) emphasize the role of reward systems in driving academic performance and satisfaction, noting that such systems not only motivate staff but also contribute to psychological empowerment—an essential factor for overall effectiveness. Similarly, Alkandi (2023) explored the impact of rewards in Saudi industrial sectors and found an insignificant direct effect on employee performance. While the context differs, the study underscores the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards—such as salaries, incentives, and recognition—in motivating and retaining staff. Nzimande et al. (2023) further reinforce this idea, arguing that a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards is critical for improving motivation, performance, and retention in higher education.

Adanne (2023), in a study at the University of Abuja, found that staff valued recognition and support from supervisors. However, clarity regarding performance expectations, and a clear link between promotions, pay increases, and performance, were essential for improving outcomes. The study's reliance on quantitative methods, however, limited its ability to capture nuanced staff experiences and attitudes. In contrast, Isaeva, & Aliyev (2023) used qualitative methods to explore how higher education staff in Azerbaijan conceptualize excellence. Their findings highlighted the importance of reward systems in achieving teaching excellence, showing the value of qualitative approaches in capturing deeper motivations and perceptions. Similarly, Førland, & Roxå (2023) found that qualitative methods were effective in exploring how rewarded status impacts teaching culture, suggesting that such methods are better suited to understand the socio-cultural dynamics influencing staff performance.

Xu (2021) examined the role of stressors in teacher engagement and highlighted the importance of job satisfaction in managing stress and promoting effective teaching. The study revealed that inadequate support leads to frustration and disengagement among teachers, reinforcing the need for qualitative approaches to capture the complexities of these experiences. Abebe, & Assemie (2023) similarly argue that balanced work-life integration and strategic human resource management are essential for enhancing academic staff engagement. They emphasize that adequate compensation and benefits are crucial for fostering staff commitment and improving service quality.

Despite the acknowledged importance of reward systems, higher education institutions face several challenges in human resource management. Ogunode, & Emmanuel (2023) identify barriers such as inadequate funding, ineffective capacity-building programs, and political interference. Thonapop (2023) also highlights that limited resources prevent staff from fulfilling their roles effectively. Meanwhile, Khan (2023) points out that job dissatisfaction often stems from inadequate wages and a lack of professional respect. To address these issues, a well-designed, fair, and competitive pay system, aligned with performance standards, is essential for improving job satisfaction, motivation, and retention (Khan, & Christensen, 2021). Janke (2023) further underscores the need to reform academic reward systems to institutionalize meaningful change.

Research productivity is another key component of academic staff performance. Gamoran (2023) discusses the tension between research and practice, emphasizing the need for research incentives that cater to intrinsic motivations, such as autonomy, creativity, and innovation. Masinde, & Coetzee (2023) argue that current research incentive systems

often fail to meet these intrinsic needs, which diminishes their effectiveness. Studies by Heng (2020) and Natividad-Franco, & Cruz (2023) echo these findings, stressing the need for clear research policies and adequate funding to support research productivity. Ogunode, & Ndayebom (2023) identify similar challenges in Nigerian universities, calling for improvements in budgeting, capacity-building, and workforce planning.

Moreover, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to engage with their communities and demonstrate social responsibility. Bowman (2023) and Janke et al. (2023) argue that integrating community engagement into promotion and tenure guidelines is crucial. Taxt (2023) found that researchers are often motivated by the societal impact of their work rather than monetary rewards, underscoring the importance of supportive structures for community engagement. Karisdohir (2023) identifies internal and external barriers to academic collaboration, while Godonoga, & Sporn (2023) emphasize that social responsibility has evolved into a core function of higher education institutions, influenced by both institutional factors and national policies.

In conclusion, the literature reveals that a well-designed reward system—comprising both intrinsic and extrinsic components—is critical for enhancing academic staff performance in higher education institutions. Such systems improve motivation, job satisfaction, and research productivity. However, challenges like inadequate funding, ineffective management practices, and barriers to community engagement must be addressed to maximize the positive impact of reward systems on academic performance.

Research Hypotheses

- Hypothesis H0: Rewards do not predict the teaching performance of academic staff in public universities in Uganda.

- Hypothesis H0: Rewards do not predict the research performance of academic staff in public universities in Uganda.

- Hypothesis H0: Rewards do not predict the community service performance of academic staff in public universities in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed methods approach using an explanatory sequential design, where quantitative data were collected first, followed by qualitative data to provide deeper insights. The quantitative phase utilized a survey design to gather data from a diverse group of academic staff across four public universities in Uganda. This design was chosen to capture a broad and representative sample of academic staff, focusing on institutions established before 2011 to ensure historical and regional representation. The accessible population consisted of 1,994 academic staff members: 1,477 from Makerere University, 242 from Mbarara University of Science and Technology, 160 from Busitema University, and 183 from Gulu University (Gulu University, 2019; Makerere University, 2019; Mbarara University of Science and Technology, 2019). The target sample size of 404 was determined using Cochran's formula for sample size calculation (Chaokromthong, & Sintao, 2021). Out of the 404 questionnaires distributed, 350 were returned, yielding a response rate of 87%. To ensure representativeness, a stratified random sampling technique was employed, stratifying the colleges, faculties, and departments, followed by a systematic sampling process within each stratum (Adamu, & Mohamad, 2019; Babbie, 2011).

For the qualitative phase, 13 academic staff members from the four universities were interviewed. These interviewees were purposively selected to provide insights into specific areas of interest based on the quantitative results. Quantitative data were organized, processed, and analyzed using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, standard deviations, and percentages were computed, along with inferential statistics, particularly regression analysis, to test hypotheses. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis, allowing for an in-depth exploration of themes that emerged from the interviews. This comprehensive, sequential

approach enabled a detailed examination of the data, enriching the overall findings of the study.

FINDINGS

Test of Hypothesis 1

The study sought to test the null hypothesis that rewards do not predict the teaching performance of academic staff in public universities in Uganda. To examine this, indices were generated from descriptive statistics to measure both teaching performance and rewards. These indices were then regressed, with teaching performance as the dependent variable and rewards as the predictor. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Rewards as a Predictor of Teaching Performance of Academic Staff Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig	Beta
1	.276[a]	.076	.073	.39281	25.903	0.000	0.276

a. Predictors: (Constant), Rewards

Source: Field data, 2024

The regression results in Table 1 show that the correlation coefficient (R) is 0.276, indicating a positive but weak relationship between rewards and teaching performance. The R Square value of 0.076 means that only 7.6% of the variation in teaching performance is explained by rewards, implying that other factors play a more significant role. The Adjusted R Square of 0.073 further confirms that rewards, while associated with teaching performance, do not strongly predict it.

The model's F-statistic of 25.903 and p-value of 0.000 suggest that the relationship between rewards and teaching performance is statistically significant, despite the weak association. The Beta coefficient of 0.276 indicates that for each unit increase in rewards, teaching performance improves by 0.276 standard deviations, showing a positive effect of rewards on teaching performance.

Given the p-value, the null hypothesis, which states that "rewards do not predict the teaching performance of academic staff," is rejected. However, with an R Square of only 0.076, it is clear that rewards explain only a small portion of the variance in teaching performance. While rewards are statistically significant, they are not a strong predictor, and other factors likely play a more prominent role in influencing teaching performance.

The qualitative interviews revealed nuanced perspectives on the relationship between rewards and teaching performance, complementing the quantitative findings. Many academic staff expressed that while rewards positively influence their motivation, they are not the sole driver of teaching performance. One senior lecturer remarked, "*Rewards are important, but they only scratch the surface when it comes to what motivates us to excel in teaching.*" This sentiment echoes the statistical finding that rewards account for only 7.6% of the variation in teaching performance, suggesting that intrinsic factors like passion for the profession and institutional support play more significant roles. Another respondent added, "*Teaching goes beyond financial incentives; our commitment is driven by a sense of responsibility to our students and the desire to see them succeed.*"

Several interviewees also emphasized the limitations of the existing reward systems. A junior lecturer explained, "Th*e current rewards are often not timely or commensurate with the effort put into teaching, which limits their impact.*" This aligns with the regression results, where the Beta coefficient showed only a modest improvement in teaching performance for each unit increase in rewards. Furthermore, some respondents highlighted the need for non-monetary recognition, with one participant stating, "*Appreciation and professional development opportunities are far more motivating than just financial bonuses.*" These qualitative insights underline the weak yet statistically significant relationship between rewards and teaching performance, suggesting that a broader range of factors should be considered to enhance teaching outcomes effectively.

Testing Research Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis of the study aimed to test whether rewards predict the research performance of academic staff in public universities in Uganda. Specifically, the null hypothesis stated that rewards do not have a significant predictive effect on research performance. To test this hypothesis, an index measuring research performance was generated and regressed against the index for rewards. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Rewards as a Predictor of Research Performance of Academic Staff

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig	Beta
1	0.354	0.125	0.122	0.47212	35.682	0.000	0.354

The regression results in Table 2 offer valuable insights into the relationship between rewards and research performance. With a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.354, the data suggests a moderate positive relationship between the two variables. This indicates that as rewards increase, research performance improves among academic staff, though the strength of this relationship is not particularly strong. The R Square value of 0.125 shows that rewards account for 12.5% of the variation in research performance, meaning other factors likely play a more significant role in influencing research productivity.

The Adjusted R Square of 0.122, which is only slightly lower than the R Square, further supports the modest yet consistent contribution of rewards to research performance. The F-statistic of 35.682, coupled with a p-value of 0.000, confirms that the overall model is statistically significant, implying that the positive relationship between rewards and research performance is not due to random chance. The Beta coefficient of 0.354 indicates that for each unit increase in rewards, research performance improves by 0.354 standard deviations, reinforcing the idea that rewards positively impact research output.

In summary, the results led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, which stated that rewards do not predict research performance. While rewards are a statistically significant predictor of research performance, the relatively low R Square value indicates that they account for only a moderate portion of the variance. This suggests that while rewards have a positive influence, other factors likely play a more substantial role in determining the research productivity of academic staff in public universities in Uganda.

The qualitative interviews provided valuable context to the quantitative findings regarding the relationship between rewards and research performance. Several respondents acknowledged that rewards have a positive impact on their research output, though many emphasized that the influence is limited. As one professor explained, *"Rewards help to motivate, especially when they come in the form of grants or research allowances, but they aren't the only factor driving our research efforts."* This reflects the regression findings where rewards accounted for only 12.5% of the variance in research performance. A recurring theme was that personal ambition and institutional support, such as access to research facilities and time allocations, play crucial roles in boosting research productivity.

Moreover, some interviewees noted frustrations with the current reward system. A senior researcher commented, *"While rewards are appreciated, they often come too late or are insufficient compared to the work put into conducting and publishing research."* Another academic staff member echoed this concern, stating, *"The rewards system doesn't necessarily encourage long-term research; it feels more transactional and less about fostering a research culture."* These sentiments align with the Beta coefficient of 0.354, which suggests that rewards have a positive but moderate impact on research performance. Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the notion that while rewards do contribute to research performance, they are not the primary driver, and more comprehensive support systems are necessary to sustain high levels of research output.

Testing Research Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis of the study aimed to assess whether rewards predict the community service performance of academic staff in public universities in Uganda. Specifically, the null hypothesis posited that rewards do not have a significant effect on community service performance. To evaluate this, an index measuring community service performance was generated and regressed against the index for rewards. The results of this regression analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Rewards as a Predictor of the Community Engagement of Academic Staff

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig	Beta
1	0.310	0.096	0.093	0.40251	28.001	0.000	0.310

The results in Table 3 indicate a moderate positive relationship between rewards and community service performance, with a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.310. This suggests that as rewards increase, academic staff are likely to show improved community service performance, although the strength of this relationship is not particularly high. While rewards do have a positive impact, the relationship is modest and suggests other variables play a significant role.

The R Square value of 0.096 implies that rewards account for approximately 9.6% of the variance in community service performance, meaning the majority (90.4%) of the variation is explained by other factors not captured in this model. The Adjusted R Square value of 0.093 further supports this, indicating that rewards still explain about 9.3% of the variance after adjusting for the number of predictors. Though the effect size of rewards is modest, they remain a meaningful contributor to community service performance.

The F-statistic of 28.001, with a significance level of 0.000, shows that the model is statistically significant, affirming that the relationship between rewards and community service performance is unlikely to be due to chance. The positive beta coefficient of 0.310 confirms that higher rewards are associated with better community service performance. In conclusion, rewards significantly predict community service engagement among academic staff, but other factors also play a substantial role, underscoring the need for a holistic approach to enhancing community service efforts.

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the modest relationship between rewards and community service performance as indicated by the quantitative findings. Several respondents recognized that rewards can be an incentive for participating in community service, yet they emphasized that intrinsic motivation and institutional values often play a larger role. One senior lecturer noted, "*Community service is a core part of our academic duty, and while rewards are appreciated, they are not always the driving force. Many of us engage in these activities because we believe it is our responsibility to give back to society.*" This reflects the R Square value of 0.096, which shows that rewards account for only 9.6% of the variation in community service performance.

However, some academic staff expressed that more structured and substantial rewards could enhance their commitment to community service. As one respondent explained, "*If community engagement were tied more closely to promotions or financial incentives, it would certainly push more staff to get involved in outreach projects.*" Others pointed out challenges related to time constraints and a lack of institutional recognition for these activities. One professor commented, *"There is a lot of emphasis on research and teaching, but community service is often overlooked, and without proper incentives or support, it becomes difficult to balance all three.*" These insights align with the Beta coefficient of 0.310, which indicates that rewards positively influence community service but are only part of a larger set of factors that affect engagement. The interviews suggest that while rewards contribute to community service performance, fostering a supportive institutional culture and recognizing community engagement as a valued component of academic work are equally important.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the study provide valuable insights into the relationship between rewards and the performance of academic staff in teaching, research, and community service. In testing the first hypothesis, the regression results show a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between rewards and teaching performance. With a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.276 and an R Square value of 0.076, it is evident that rewards explain only 7.6% of the variation in teaching performance. While rewards have some positive effects, the weak relationship suggests that other factors beyond rewards are more influential. This aligns with earlier research by Gohari et al. (2013), who found that while rewards can positively impact teaching performance, intrinsic motivators like passion and job satisfaction often play a larger role.

In contrast, scholars like George, & Jones (2012) have argued that external rewards, particularly monetary incentives, can have a more significant impact on teaching performance when coupled with clear expectations and support systems. This perspective suggests that the weak relationship observed in the current study might be due to inadequate institutional support for reward systems in public universities in Uganda. Therefore, the findings imply that while rewards are important, they alone are not sufficient to drive substantial improvements in teaching performance, calling for a more comprehensive approach to motivating academic staff.

The second hypothesis, which explored the relationship between rewards and research performance, revealed a moderate positive relationship, with a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.354 and an R Square value of 0.125. This suggests that rewards explain 12.5% of the variation in research performance, indicating a stronger relationship compared to teaching performance. Earlier studies, such as those by Bland et al. (2005), support this finding, emphasizing that rewards, particularly research grants and academic recognition, play a crucial role in motivating academic staff to engage in research activities. However, the relatively low R Square value still points to the existence of other significant factors influencing research productivity, such as institutional research support and individual passion for academic inquiry.

Moreover, several scholars, including Abreu et al. (2010), have criticized the overemphasis on external rewards for research, arguing that intrinsic motivation, such as intellectual curiosity and the desire for knowledge advancement, often outweighs the influence of financial or material rewards. The current study's findings suggest that while rewards do contribute to research performance, they are part of a broader set of influences that also include institutional policies, work environments, and personal drive. Therefore, the moderate relationship observed calls for universities to focus not just on rewards but also on fostering a supportive research culture that encourages academic staff to engage in meaningful and innovative research.

The third hypothesis examined the relationship between rewards and community service performance, revealing a moderate positive relationship with a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.310 and an R Square value of 0.096. These findings suggest that rewards account for 9.6% of the variation in community service performance, which is a modest contribution. Previous research by Elstad (2003) supports these findings, showing that while rewards can encourage community service participation, personal commitment to community engagement and institutional support systems are often more decisive. The modest relationship suggests that factors such as an individual's values, social responsibility, and the institution's culture of engagement are critical determinants of community service performance.

However, other scholars have argued that community service in academia should be more highly valued and integrated into reward structures to encourage greater participation. The findings from the current study imply that while rewards can incentivize academic staff to engage in community service, a more structured and supportive approach is necessary to foster meaningful community involvement. Institutions may need to re-examine how they prioritize and reward community service to align with the broader goals of academic engagement and societal impact.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the overall findings from the study highlight that while rewards play a significant role in predicting academic staff performance across teaching, research, and community service, their effect is modest. This is consistent with the perspectives of multiple scholars who emphasize the need for a multi-faceted approach to performance improvement that includes both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The relatively low R Square values across all performance areas suggest that factors beyond rewards, such as institutional support, personal motivation, and work environment, play a more substantial role in influencing academic staff performance. Therefore, the findings call for a more holistic approach to staff motivation, combining rewards with other supportive mechanisms to enhance academic performance.

In sum, the study contributes to the existing literature by reaffirming that rewards have a statistically significant but modest impact on academic staff performance. This aligns with earlier research but also highlights the need for further exploration of the non-monetary factors that drive performance. Public universities in Uganda, and similar contexts, may need to re-evaluate their reward systems and focus on creating an environment that fosters both intrinsic motivation and external recognition to improve overall academic staff performance across teaching, research, and community service domains.

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