

Effect of Employee Reward Strategy on Job Satisfaction of Academic Staff in Public Universities in Kenya

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ABSTRACT: Job satisfaction among academic staff is critical to the effective delivery of university education and the achievement of institutional objectives. However, concerns regarding low job satisfaction among academic staff in Kenyan public universities continue to undermine teaching, research, and service delivery. This study examined the effect of employee reward strategy on the job satisfaction of academic staff in public universities in Kenya. The study was guided by Expectancy Theory and adopted descriptive and correlational research designs. The target population comprised 9,657 academic staff in 38 public chartered universities in Kenya, from which a sample of 384 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling. Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that academic staff were moderately satisfied with employee reward strategies ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.18$). Correlation analysis indicated a strong positive and significant relationship between employee reward strategy and job satisfaction ($r = 0.568$, $p < 0.05$). Regression results showed that employee reward strategy explained 32.3% of the variation in job satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.323$) and had a positive and statistically significant effect on job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.642$, $p < 0.05$). The study concludes that employee reward strategy is a significant determinant of job satisfaction among academic staff in public universities in Kenya. The study recommends that public universities strengthen both financial and non-financial reward strategies to enhance employee satisfaction and improve institutional performance.

KEYWORDS: Employee reward strategy, job satisfaction, academic staff, public universities.

1 INTRODUCTION

Job satisfaction is a critical factor in the effectiveness and performance of higher education institutions. Academic staff play a central role in teaching, research, innovation, and community service, making their satisfaction essential for achieving university objectives and maintaining the quality of higher education (Mgaiwa, 2021). Job satisfaction refers to the positive emotional state that results from an employee's evaluation of their job and work experiences. It is influenced by various factors including compensation, career advancement opportunities, work environment, interpersonal relationships, and work-life balance (AlMarzooqi et al., 2025).

Employee job satisfaction has been associated with higher productivity, stronger organizational commitment, lower turnover intentions, and improved service delivery outcomes (Masuku et al., 2025). Consequently, universities increasingly recognize the importance of creating work environments that support the professional and personal needs of academic staff. According to Kipara (2025) satisfied academic staff are more likely to contribute effectively to teaching, research, and institutional development, thereby enhancing overall university performance.

Despite its importance, job satisfaction among academic staff in Kenyan public universities remains a concern. Studies have reported dissatisfaction associated with remuneration, promotion practices, career advancement opportunities, and other human resource management practices (Maina, 2020; Barasa et al., 2025). Such dissatisfaction has implications for employee commitment, retention, and the quality of educational services provided by universities. While previous studies have identified multiple factors influencing job satisfaction, reward-related practices continue to receive significant attention due to their direct influence on employee motivation and perceptions of fairness.

Employee reward strategy comprises the policies and practices used by organizations to compensate and recognize employees for their contributions (Griep et al., 2024). These rewards may include both financial rewards such as salaries, bonuses, and allowances, and non-financial rewards such as recognition, career development opportunities, and employee benefits (Li, 2025).

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Effective reward strategies have been associated with improved employee motivation, commitment, retention, and job satisfaction (Gedney, 2021).

Although reward strategies have been widely studied in organizational settings, limited empirical evidence exists regarding their influence on the job satisfaction of academic staff in Kenyan public universities. This study therefore sought to establish the effect of employee reward strategy on job satisfaction among academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

2 STATEMENTS OF THE PROBLEM

Academic staff are a critical resource in higher education institutions and play a central role in achieving university objectives through teaching, research, and community service. However, job satisfaction among academic staff in Kenyan public universities remains a major concern, with implications for employee commitment, retention, and the quality of university education (Maina, 2020; Barasa et al., 2025). Studies have reported dissatisfaction arising from inadequate remuneration, limited promotion opportunities, constrained career growth, and other human resource management challenges. For instance, Likoko and Barasa (2022) reported that 73.4% of teaching staff were dissatisfied with their jobs, while 77.9% indicated that their pay did not correspond with their experience and workload.

Persistent job dissatisfaction among academic staff has contributed to low morale, reduced commitment, turnover intentions, and migration of skilled academics to institutions offering better employment conditions (Mwashila, 2018). Failure to address these concerns may negatively affect teaching quality, research productivity, institutional performance, and employee retention in public universities (Barasa et al., 2025; Kipara, 2025).

Although several studies have examined factors influencing employee satisfaction, empirical findings on the relationship between reward strategies and job satisfaction remain inconclusive. While some studies report a positive relationship between rewards and job satisfaction, others report weak or insignificant effects (Akafo & Boateng, 2015; Mefi & Asoba, 2021; AL-Maaitah et al., 2021). Furthermore, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the influence of employee reward strategy on the job satisfaction of academic staff in Kenyan public universities. This study therefore sought to establish the effect of employee reward strategy on the job satisfaction of academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

3 GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To establish the effect of employee reward strategy on the job satisfaction of academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

4 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

H0: Employee reward strategy has no significant influence on the job satisfaction of academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

5 LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Theoretical Review - Expectancy Theory

This study was anchored on Expectancy Theory developed by Vroom (1964). The theory posits that employee motivation is influenced by the expectation that effort will lead to improved performance and that performance will result in valued rewards. According to the theory, employees are motivated when they believe that their efforts will be recognized and rewarded appropriately.

Expectancy Theory is founded on three key components: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. Expectancy refers to an employee's belief that increased effort will improve performance. Instrumentality refers to the belief that good performance will be rewarded, while valence denotes the value an employee attaches to the expected reward (Lawler & Suttle, 1973; Lunenburg, 2011). Employees are therefore likely to exert greater effort when they perceive a clear connection between effort, performance, and desirable outcomes.

The theory is relevant to this study because employee reward strategies are designed to compensate and recognize employees for their contributions. Academic staff are more likely to experience job satisfaction when rewards such as salaries, benefits, recognition, and career development opportunities are perceived as fair and linked to their performance. Expectancy Theory therefore provides a useful framework for explaining how reward strategies influence the job satisfaction of academic staff in public universities.

5.2 Empirical Review

Empirical studies consistently identify employee reward strategy as an important determinant of job satisfaction. Recent studies indicate that financial rewards, including salaries, allowances, bonuses, and other forms of compensation, positively influence employee motivation and job satisfaction (Mefi & Asoba, 2021; Griep et al., 2024). Similarly, AL-Maaitah et al. (2021) found that

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reward-related practices significantly influence employee attitudes and workplace outcomes, while Barasa et al. (2025) reported that effective human resource practices contribute to improved job satisfaction among university academic staff in Kenya.

In addition to financial rewards, non-financial rewards such as recognition, career advancement opportunities, supportive work environments, and professional development have been found to enhance employee job satisfaction (Pushpasiri & Ratnayaka, 2020; Amadi, 2024; Masuku et al., 2025). These findings suggest that an effective reward strategy should integrate both financial and non-financial incentives to promote employee satisfaction and organizational commitment.

However, empirical findings remain inconclusive. While most studies report a positive relationship between reward strategies and job satisfaction, Akafo and Boateng (2015) found no significant relationship between rewards and job satisfaction. These contrasting findings suggest that the effectiveness of reward strategies may depend on contextual and institutional factors, thereby justifying further investigation within the Kenyan public university context.

Although existing studies provide valuable insights, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the influence of employee reward strategy on the job satisfaction of academic staff in Kenyan public universities. This study therefore sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining the effect of employee reward strategy on job satisfaction within the Kenyan public university context.

6 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a positivist research philosophy and employed descriptive and correlational research designs. The designs were appropriate for describing employee reward strategies and examining their relationship with job satisfaction among academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

The target population comprised 9,657 academic staff drawn from 38 public chartered universities in Kenya (CUE, 2023). The academic staff included graduate assistants, tutorial fellows/assistant lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, and professors. A sample of 384 respondents was determined using Slovin's formula and selected through stratified random sampling. The unit of analysis was the public university, while the unit of observation was the academic staff.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed from existing empirical literature. The questionnaire captured information on employee reward strategy and job satisfaction. Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the data.

Inferential statistics comprising Pearson correlation and simple linear regression analysis were used to test the study hypothesis and determine the relationship between employee reward strategy and job satisfaction. The following simple linear regression model was applied:

$$JS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 ERS + \epsilon$$

Where:

JS = Job satisfaction of academic staff

β_0 = Constant term

β_1 = Regression coefficient

ERS = Employee reward strategy

ϵ = Error term

7 RESULTS

7.1 Respondent Characteristics

The respondents comprised a mature and experienced academic workforce. Most respondents (60.3%) were aged between 45 and 64 years, while 20.6% were aged between 65 and 70 years. Gender distribution was nearly balanced, with 51% male and 49% female respondents. The majority (76.5%) held PhD qualifications, while 23.5% possessed Master's degrees. In terms of academic rank, Senior Lecturers constituted the largest proportion (40.8%), followed by Lecturers, Associate Professors, and Professors. These findings indicate that the respondents were adequately qualified and experienced to provide reliable information on employee reward strategies and job satisfaction in public universities.

7.2 Employee Reward Strategy Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive results for employee reward strategy. The aggregate mean score was 2.93 (SD = 1.18), indicating moderate satisfaction with reward practices among academic staff in public universities. The findings show relatively low satisfaction with salary adequacy (M = 2.2), salary fairness (M = 2.1), paid leave structure (M = 2.4), and retirement plans (M = 2.5). In contrast, respondents expressed relatively higher satisfaction with salary revision practices (M = 3.6), medical cover (M = 3.5), leave allowances (M = 3.6), and bonus payments (M = 3.3). Overall, the findings suggest that although some reward practices are

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viewed positively, concerns remain regarding remuneration and long-term employee benefits. These findings are consistent with previous studies which reported that reward strategies significantly influence employee attitudes and workplace outcomes (AL-Maaitah et al., 2021; Mugo & Makhamara, 2022).

Table 1: Descriptive Results for Employee Reward Strategy

Employee Reward Strategy Item	Mean	SD
Salary paid by the university is satisfactory and adequate	2.2	0.9
Salary is fair in relation to assigned tasks	2.1	1.0
Salary revisions are guided by experience and workload	3.6	1.3
Satisfaction with year-end bonuses	3.3	1.4
Compensation for fieldwork, workshops, and conferences	3.2	0.9
Medical cover adequately meets employees' healthcare needs	3.5	1.3
Leave allowances are fairly awarded	3.6	1.9
Satisfaction with the paid leave structure	2.4	0.8
Retirement plans are well structured and reliable	2.5	1.1
Aggregate Mean	2.93	1.18

*SD = Standard deviation

7.3 Job Satisfaction Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive results for job satisfaction are presented in Table 2. The aggregate mean score of 3.31 (SD = 1.15) indicates a moderate level of job satisfaction among academic staff in public universities in Kenya. Respondents reported relatively high satisfaction with the challenge provided by their jobs (M = 3.9), the variety and interest associated with their work (M = 3.8), access to working tools and materials (M = 3.7), and their contribution to students' learning (M = 3.6). However, lower mean scores were recorded for promotion prospects (M = 2.2) and clarity of promotion criteria (M = 2.5), suggesting dissatisfaction with career progression opportunities. The findings imply that while academic staff derive satisfaction from the intrinsic nature of their work, concerns remain regarding career advancement and promotion processes. Similar concerns were reported by Likoko and Barasa (2022).

Table 2: Descriptive Results for Job Satisfaction

Job Satisfaction Item	Mean	SD
Independent thought and action	3.2	0.8
Personal growth and development	3.4	1.3
Contribution to students' learning	3.6	1.1
Challenge provided by the job	3.9	0.9
Sense of worthwhile accomplishment	3.5	1.2
Variety and interest in the job	3.8	1.0
Clarity of promotion criteria	2.5	1.4
Access to working tools and materials	3.7	1.2
Promotion prospects	2.2	1.0
Career advancement opportunities	3.2	1.5
Working relationship with colleagues	3.4	1.3
Aggregate Mean	3.31	1.15

*SD = Standard deviation

7.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 3 depicts the results of the Pearson correlation analysis between employee reward strategy and job satisfaction among academic staff in public universities in Kenya. The results reveal a positive and statistically significant relationship between employee reward strategy and job satisfaction ($r = 0.568$, $p < 0.05$). The findings indicate that improvements in employee reward strategies are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction among academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

Table 3: Correlation between Employee Reward Strategy and Job Satisfaction

Variable	1	2
1. Job Satisfaction	1	
2. Employee Reward Strategy	0.568**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

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7.5 Regression Analysis

Tables 4 and 5 present the results of the simple linear regression analysis conducted to determine the effect of employee reward strategy on the job satisfaction of academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

Table 4: Regression Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p-value
0.568	0.323	0.321	131.22	<0.001

Table 5: Regression Coefficients for ERS and Job Satisfaction

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p-value
Constant	1.404	0.211	—	6.660	<0.001
Employee Reward Strategy	0.642	0.056	0.568	11.455	<0.001

The regression results indicate that employee reward strategy significantly influences job satisfaction among academic staff in public universities in Kenya ($\beta = 0.642$, $p < 0.05$). The coefficient implies that a one-unit improvement in employee reward strategy results in a 0.642-unit increase in job satisfaction. The model explained 32.3% of the variation in job satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.323$). Consequently, the null hypothesis that employee reward strategy has no significant influence on job satisfaction was rejected.

The findings support Expectancy Theory, which posits that employees are more motivated and satisfied when they perceive a clear link between performance and valued rewards. The findings are consistent with those of Mefi and Asoba (2021), AL-Maaitah et al. (2021), Pushpasiri and Ratnayaka (2020), Griep et al. (2024), and Barasa et al. (2025), which reported that effective reward practices positively influence employee job satisfaction. However, the findings differ from those of Akafo and Boateng (2015), who found no significant relationship between rewards and job satisfaction.

8 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

8.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that employee reward strategy has a positive and statistically significant influence on the job satisfaction of academic staff in public universities in Kenya. The findings indicate that improvements in reward practices, including both financial and non-financial rewards, contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction among academic staff. Employee reward strategy was found to be a significant predictor of job satisfaction, supporting the proposition of Expectancy Theory that employees are more satisfied when their efforts are adequately recognized and rewarded.

8.2 Recommendations

Public universities in Kenya should strengthen their employee reward strategies by implementing fair, competitive, and performance-based reward practices. Particular attention should be given to improving salary adequacy, salary fairness, promotion opportunities, and retirement benefits, which recorded relatively low satisfaction levels. Universities should also enhance non-financial rewards through recognition programs, career development opportunities, and transparent promotion processes to improve the overall job satisfaction of academic staff.

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