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Reward Management Architecture and Employee Performance in Public Universities through Policies Processes Structures and Reward Categories

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Abstract. Reward practices are commonly studied as isolated mechanisms such as pay, incentives, or recognition, with limited attention to how reward policies, processes, structures, and categories operate as an integrated system. This study advances the concept of Reward Management Architecture (RMA) to explain how a coherent reward system influences employee performance in public universities. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted among 129 administrative staff from two public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between RMA dimensions and employee performance. All RMA dimensions recorded low mean scores (2.68–2.86), while employee performance indicators were also rated low (2.45–2.64). Strong positive correlations were observed between RMA components and performance ($r = 0.720–0.777$, $p < 0.01$). Regression results showed that RMA explains 78.9% of the variance in performance ($R^2 = 0.789$, $p < 0.001$), with reward structures ($\beta = 0.297$) and reward processes ($\beta = 0.268$) emerging as the strongest predictors. The findings indicate that employee performance is influenced more by the structural and procedural organization of rewards than by reward types. Interpreted through motivational and organizational theories, the study highlights the importance of fairness, clarity, and systemic coherence in reward management. The study contributes to human resource management literature by operationalizing RMA and offers practical insights for improving performance in public universities.

Keywords: Reward Management Architecture; Employee Performance; Reward Policies; Public Universities; Human Resource Management

1. Introduction

Reward systems are regarded as strategic instruments for aligning employee effort with organizational goals (Alkandi et al., 2023; Figueiredo et al., 2025; Førland & Roxå, 2024; Meirinhos et al., 2023). Foundational motivation theories such as those advanced by Maslow (1943) and Montuclard et al. (1960) established that recognition, compensation, and meaningful work conditions shape employee motivation and performance. Later, equity considerations proposed by Adams (1963) and goal clarity

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emphasized by Locke (1968) reinforced the view that fair and structured rewards guide behavior toward higher productivity. Ideally, therefore, organizations design reward systems not merely as payment mechanisms but as coherent managerial arrangements that sustain motivation, commitment, and performance over time.

Extant literature, however, often treats rewards as discrete practices namely salary, bonuses, recognition, or intrinsic incentives rather than as an integrated system. Studies by Kuvaas et al. (2017), Elsafty & Ragheb (2020) show that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards influence employee outcomes differently, while Zainal et al. (2022), Marghany & Elmohandes (2025) emphasize the importance of fair reward processes for retention and satisfaction. These contributions are valuable but fragmented; they examine components of reward management in isolation. As a result, the systemic configuration through which reward policies, processes, structures, and categories interact to influence performance remains underexplored in human resource scholarship.

Within higher education, employee performance is increasingly linked to service quality, research output, and institutional competitiveness. Zeng & Honig (2017) demonstrate that fair compensation and recognition enhance staff commitment in universities, while Sendawula et al. (2018) show that motivation practices improve engagement in public service institutions. Universities, as knowledge-driven organizations, depend heavily on the discretionary effort of both academic and administrative staff. Effective reward management is therefore not peripheral but central to institutional effectiveness and sustainability.

Empirical evidence from developing countries reveals that inadequate reward practices are associated with employee dissatisfaction, turnover, and industrial unrest. Wassem et al. (2019) and (Matolo et al., 2019) report that poor remuneration and opaque reward systems contribute to declining employee morale in public institutions. In Kenya, recurring staff strikes and delayed salary payments in public universities, widely reported by national agencies and scholars such as Otiende et al. (2024) and Praxedes Khatenje Lusambili et al. (2025), reflect deeper challenges in how rewards are organized and administered. These contextual realities highlight the need to examine reward management beyond compensation levels and toward systemic design.

Despite numerous studies confirming a relationship between rewards and performance (Bijleveld et al., 2023; Miah & Adha Hafit, 2021; Nguyen & Prentice, 2022; Thneibat et al., 2025), four gaps persist. First, a conceptual gap exists because rewards are rarely theorized as a management architecture comprising interrelated dimensions. Second, a contextual gap remains in understanding reward systems within public universities in Sub-Saharan Africa, where bureaucratic structures and resource constraints shape HR practices. Third, a methodological gap arises from prior studies focusing on single reward variables rather than testing a comprehensive model that integrates policies, processes, structures, and reward categories simultaneously.

Addressing these gaps is significant for both theory and practice. Conceptually, framing rewards as a Reward Management Architecture advances human resource management theory by integrating dispersed reward constructs into a unified explanatory model. Practically, understanding which elements of this architecture most strongly influence performance can guide university administrators and HR managers in designing effective reward reforms, particularly in resource-constrained public institutions where financial rewards alone may be insufficient.

Accordingly, this study investigates how reward policies, reward processes, reward structures, and reward categories jointly influence employee performance in public

universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. By empirically testing the explanatory power of Reward Management Architecture, the study seeks to contribute a systemic perspective to reward management literature while offering actionable insights for improving employee performance in higher education institutions.

2. Methods

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to examine how Reward Management Architecture (RMA) influences employee performance in public universities (Abduh et al., 2022; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Festing & Tekieli, 2021; Maier et al., 2023). The design was appropriate for capturing perceptions of reward policies, processes, structures, and categories at a single point in time and for statistically modelling their relationship with performance outcomes. The study was conducted in two major public universities located in Nairobi County, Kenya, where recurring employee dissatisfaction and industrial unrest have raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of reward systems in public higher education institutions.

The target population comprised administrative employees working across key departments, including finance, human resources, procurement, academic registry, and student services. A simple random sampling technique was applied to ensure fair representation across senior management, middle-level management, and operational administrative staff. A total sample of 150 respondents was drawn proportionately from the two universities. Of these, 129 valid questionnaires were returned, representing an 86% response rate considered adequate for statistical analysis in organizational research.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on five-point Likert scale items. The instrument measured four dimensions of RMA: reward policies (fairness, transparency, clarity), reward processes (appraisal, frequency, procedural design), reward structures (team-based, individual-based, position-based arrangements), and reward categories (intrinsic, extrinsic, total rewards). Employee performance was measured using indicators such as service quality, target attainment, individual job achievement, and teamwork effectiveness. A pilot test was conducted with 15 respondents to assess reliability and clarity, yielding acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.7 across constructs).

Data were analyzed using SPSS through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized the extent to which RMA practices were embraced and the level of employee performance. Correlation analysis established the strength and direction of relationships between variables, while regression modelling determined the explanatory power of RMA dimensions on employee performance.

Table 1 Summary of Key Statistical Results

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Pearson r with Performance	Beta (β)	Sig. (p)
Reward Policies	2.72	1.53	0.720	0.224	0.000
Reward Processes	2.68	1.48	0.762	0.268	0.000
Reward Structures	2.83	1.56	0.747	0.297	0.001
Reward Categories	2.86	1.52	0.777	0.196	0.000
Model Summary (R^2 = 0.789, F = 116.061, p < 0.001)					

Source: Research findings (2026)

Table 1 indicate that all four dimensions of Reward Management Architecture were positively and significantly correlated with employee performance, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.720 to 0.777. Regression results show that reward structures (β = 0.297) and reward processes (β = 0.268) exerted stronger predictive effects on performance compared to reward policies (β = 0.224) and reward categories (β = 0.196). The overall model explains 78.9% of the variance in employee performance (R^2 = 0.789), demonstrating the substantial explanatory power of RMA in the context of public universities.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Extent of Reward Management Architecture Adoption in Public Universities

A detailed descriptive analysis was undertaken to assess how employees perceived the implementation of Reward Management Architecture (RMA) across the surveyed public universities. The analysis focused on four interrelated dimensions: reward policies, reward processes, reward structures, and reward categories. Across all dimensions, mean scores were consistently below the midpoint of the five-point Likert scale, signaling that respondents generally disagreed with statements suggesting that reward practices were effectively designed and implemented. This pattern indicates that the reward environment in the institutions was perceived as weakly institutionalized and lacking the systemic coherence expected of an effective reward management framework.

Reward processes registered the lowest mean score (M = 2.68, SD = 1.48), suggesting particular dissatisfaction with how rewards were administered. Employees indicated that appraisal mechanisms, frequency of rewards, and procedural clarity were not adequately defined or consistently applied. This implies that even when rewards were available, the pathway through which employees accessed them was perceived as opaque and unpredictable. Such perceptions undermine trust in the reward system and reduce its motivational capacity, especially in bureaucratic environments where procedural fairness is highly valued.

Reward policies followed closely with a mean of 2.72 (SD = 1.53), reflecting concerns about fairness, transparency, and clarity in formal reward guidelines. Respondents reported limited awareness of existing reward policies and doubted whether these policies were equitably enforced across departments and staff categories. The absence of clear communication regarding reward entitlements and criteria appears to have contributed to uncertainty and perceptions of favoritism, which may erode morale and organizational commitment.

Although reward structures (M = 2.83, SD = 1.56) and reward categories (M = 2.86, SD = 1.52) scored slightly higher, their means still indicate inadequate adoption. Employees expressed that team-based, individual-based, and position-based reward arrangements were not clearly differentiated, and that intrinsic and extrinsic reward options were limited or inconsistently applied. This suggests that the diversity and alignment of rewards with employee roles and expectations were insufficient to foster motivation and engagement.

Collectively, these findings portray an environment where reward elements exist but lack integration into a coherent architecture. The low adoption across all dimensions implies that the universities have not developed a structured reward ecosystem capable of reinforcing performance expectations. The descriptive results therefore provide an important foundation for understanding why employee performance indicators were also found to be below expected standards.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics on Adoption of Reward Management Architecture

RMA Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Reward Policies	2.72	1.53
Reward Processes	2.68	1.48
Reward Structures	2.83	1.56
Reward Categories	2.86	1.52

Source: Research findings (2026)

Table 2 shows that all four dimensions of Reward Management Architecture recorded mean scores below 3.0, indicating general disagreement among respondents regarding the effective implementation of reward systems. Reward processes and policies were rated lowest, highlighting procedural and governance weaknesses, while structures and categories, though slightly higher, still reflect insufficient institutionalization. The relatively high standard deviations further indicate variability in employee experiences across departments, reinforcing the perception of inconsistency in reward practices within the universities.

3.2. Descriptive Assessment of Employee Performance

Employee performance in the surveyed public universities was assessed using five operational indicators closely linked to administrative effectiveness: service quality, reduction of customer complaints, efficiency in service delivery, attainment of assigned targets, and teamwork effectiveness. These indicators were selected because administrative staff in universities directly influence student services, academic support functions, records management, and institutional responsiveness. The descriptive results revealed consistently low mean scores across all indicators, suggesting that respondents perceived their performance as falling short of expected institutional standards.

Service quality recorded the lowest mean score (M = 2.45, SD = 1.25), indicating that employees felt the services delivered to students, faculty, and external stakeholders were not consistently meeting quality expectations. This may reflect delays in processing requests, inaccuracies in documentation, or lack of responsiveness to stakeholder needs. In administrative contexts, perceived low service quality often signals operational inefficiencies and diminished employee motivation, both of which affect institutional reputation and stakeholder satisfaction.

Similarly, the indicator on reduction of customer complaints yielded a low mean (M = 2.55, SD = 1.41). This suggests that complaints from students and academic staff regarding administrative services were not significantly declining. Persistent complaints typically indicate systemic performance challenges, including slow service delivery, communication breakdowns, or procedural bottlenecks. The variability captured in the standard deviation further implies that experiences differ across departments, pointing to uneven performance standards within the universities.

Efficiency in service delivery also reflected low agreement (M = 2.47, SD = 1.51), reinforcing the perception that administrative processes were time-consuming and less streamlined than expected. Employees indicated that serving individual clients often required longer time than desirable, which may be linked to low morale, inadequate motivation, or unclear performance expectations. The indicators on meeting assigned targets (M = 2.60, SD = 1.54) and teamwork effectiveness (M = 2.64, SD = 1.58) were

slightly higher but still below the midpoint, suggesting that collaborative performance and goal attainment were not optimal.

These descriptive findings reveal a pattern of underperformance across key administrative functions. The consistently low scores across all performance indicators provide empirical justification for investigating organizational factors that may be constraining performance. In this context, the weak adoption of Reward Management Architecture becomes a plausible explanatory factor for the perceived low levels of employee effectiveness in the institutions.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics on Employee Performance Indicators

Performance Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation
Service Quality	2.45	1.25
Reduced Customer Complaints	2.55	1.41
Service Delivery Efficiency	2.47	1.51
Meeting Assigned Targets	2.60	1.54
Teamwork Effectiveness	2.64	1.58

Source: Research findings (2026)

Table 3 demonstrates that all employee performance indicators recorded mean values below 3.0, indicating general disagreement that performance standards were being met. Service quality and service efficiency were rated lowest, highlighting operational challenges, while teamwork and target attainment, though relatively higher, still reflect suboptimal performance. The relatively high standard deviations suggest inconsistent experiences across departments, reinforcing the perception that performance effectiveness varies within the institutions and may be influenced by systemic organizational factors such as reward management practices.

3.3. Relationship Between Reward Management Architecture and Employee Performance

Reward Management Architecture (RMA) meaningfully explains variations in employee performance, both correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted. Pearson correlation coefficients revealed strong and statistically significant positive relationships between each RMA dimension and employee performance. The coefficients ranged from $r = 0.720$ to $r = 0.777$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating that improvements in reward policies, processes, structures, and categories are consistently associated with higher levels of perceived performance among administrative staff. These strong correlations suggest that reward practices are not peripheral but central to how employees evaluate their own effectiveness within the universities.

Among the four dimensions, reward categories demonstrated the highest correlation with performance ($r = 0.777$), closely followed by reward processes ($r = 0.762$) and reward structures ($r = 0.747$). Reward policies, although still strongly correlated, recorded the lowest coefficient ($r = 0.720$). This pattern indicates that while formal policies are important, employees respond more strongly to how rewards are experienced in practice through the types of rewards available, the procedures used to allocate them, and the structural arrangements governing their distribution.

Multiple regression analysis provided further insight into the predictive power of RMA. The overall model was statistically significant ($F = 116.061$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 78.9% of the variance in employee performance ($R^2 = 0.789$). This high explanatory power suggests that the combined dimensions of RMA form a robust

framework for understanding performance outcomes in public universities. Such a large proportion of explained variance is uncommon in organizational behavior studies, underscoring the strength of the integrated RMA model.

Examining the standardized beta coefficients reveals important nuances. Reward structures emerged as the strongest predictor of performance (β = 0.297), followed by reward processes (β = 0.268), reward policies (β = 0.224), and reward categories (β = 0.196). These results indicate that employees are most influenced by how rewards are structurally arranged whether based on teams, individuals, or positions and how the reward process is operationalized through appraisals and procedures. The comparatively lower effect of reward categories suggests that the presence of intrinsic or extrinsic rewards alone is insufficient without clear structural and procedural support.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that employee performance in public universities is better explained by the coherence and functionality of reward management architecture than by the mere existence of rewards. The results emphasize that organizational design elements clarity of structure and transparency of process play a more decisive role in motivating performance than the specific reward items offered. This underscores the strategic importance of viewing rewards as an integrated management system rather than as isolated incentives.

Table 4 Correlation and Regression Results for RMA and Employee Performance

RMA Dimension	Pearson r	Beta (β)	Significance (p)
Reward Policies	0.720	0.224	0.000
Reward Processes	0.762	0.268	0.000
Reward Structures	0.747	0.297	0.001
Reward Categories	0.777	0.196	0.000
Model Summary	$R^2 = 0.789$	F = 116.061	$p < 0.001$

Source: Research findings (2026)

Table 4 shows that all RMA dimensions have strong positive correlations with employee performance and significant predictive power in the regression model. Reward structures and processes exhibit the highest beta values, indicating their dominant influence, while reward categories, despite having the strongest correlation, show a comparatively smaller predictive effect when all variables are considered simultaneously. The high R^2 value confirms the substantial explanatory strength of the integrated RMA model in understanding performance outcomes in public universities.

3.4. Interpreting Reward Management Architecture Through Motivational and Organizational Theories

The findings collectively demonstrate that weak adoption of Reward Management Architecture (RMA) corresponds with low levels of perceived employee performance, while strong statistical relationships confirm that improvements in RMA dimensions significantly predict performance outcomes. This pattern aligns closely with equity considerations proposed by Adams (1963), which posit that employees evaluate their effort relative to the fairness and transparency of organizational rewards. The low mean scores on reward policies and processes suggest perceived inequities and procedural opacity, conditions that Adams argued would reduce motivation and productivity. Employees who doubt the fairness of reward allocation are less likely to invest discretionary effort in their work.

The prominence of reward processes and structures as stronger predictors of performance resonates with goal-setting principles advanced by Locke (1968). Locke emphasized that clarity of expectations and feedback mechanisms are essential for performance improvement. In this study, dissatisfaction with appraisal procedures and unclear reward pathways indicates that employees lack clear performance–reward linkages. When employees do not understand how performance translates into rewards, goal commitment weakens, and performance declines. The results thus support the view that structured and transparent reward procedures are essential for translating goals into outcomes.

The low ratings on employee performance indicators further reflect Herzberg's distinction between motivators and hygiene factors as articulated by Montuclard et al. (1960). Herzberg argued that dissatisfaction arises when organizational systems fail to provide adequate working conditions, while true motivation stems from recognition and achievement. The weak implementation of reward categories and structures in the universities suggests the absence of both hygiene factors (fair systems) and motivators (recognition mechanisms), leading to reduced service quality, inefficiency, and poor target attainment observed in the findings.

Moreover, the results lend support to Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow (1943), particularly the idea that employees seek fulfillment beyond basic compensation. The relatively weak effect of reward categories compared to structures and processes indicates that the mere presence of intrinsic or extrinsic rewards is insufficient. Employees appear more concerned with whether the reward system acknowledges their status, contribution, and professional growth in a structured manner, reflecting higher-level needs for esteem and self-actualization rather than basic financial incentives.

The strong explanatory power of RMA ($R^2 = 0.789$) also reflects contemporary human resource management arguments that organizational systems, rather than isolated practices, drive performance. Kuvaas et al. (2017) emphasize that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards affect outcomes differently depending on how they are embedded within organizational practices. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2019) and Plangger et al. (2022) argue that reward effectiveness depends on systemic fairness and clarity. The present findings empirically validate these claims by demonstrating that integrated reward architecture explains a substantial proportion of performance variation in a public sector context.

Importantly, the dominance of reward structures in predicting performance challenges the traditional emphasis on reward types found in studies such as Lisi (2022), Alam & Kamal (2024), which prioritize intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. The evidence here suggests that employees in bureaucratic institutions such as public universities respond more to how rewards are organized team-based, individual-based, or position-based than to the nature of the rewards themselves. This insight extends reward management theory by highlighting the structural dimension as a critical motivational mechanism.

The contextual realities of Kenyan public universities characterized by strikes, dissatisfaction, and administrative inefficiencies, as noted by Chemjor (2025) and Arnold & Nyaribo (2025), provide a practical backdrop to these theoretical interpretations. The study demonstrates that performance challenges in such institutions cannot be addressed by salary increments alone but require a redesign of the entire reward management architecture. Integrating policies, processes, structures, and categories into a coherent system emerges as a theoretically grounded and empirically supported pathway for enhancing employee performance in public higher education.

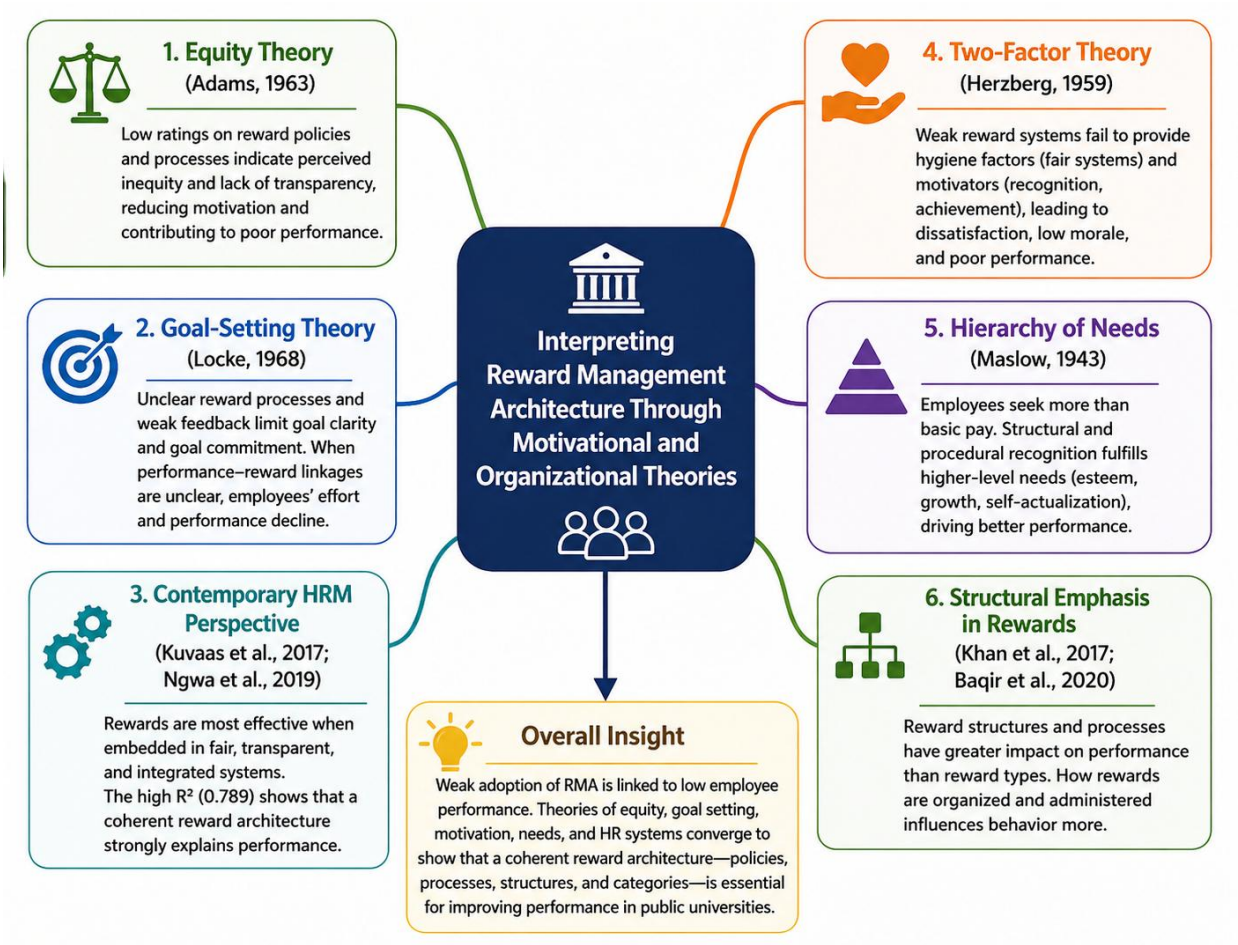

Figure 1 Mind Map of Reward Management Architecture Interpreted Through Motivational and Organizational Theories

Figure 1 visualizes how Reward Management Architecture (RMA) in public universities can be interpreted through major motivational and organizational theories. The diagram links low adoption of reward policies and processes to perceived inequity. Employee performance is influenced less by the types of rewards offered and more by how rewards are structured, administered, and embedded within a coherent organizational system.

4. Conclusions

The study demonstrates empirically that weak adoption of Reward Management Architecture (RMA) corresponds with low perceived employee performance in public universities. Descriptive findings show that all RMA dimensions recorded mean scores below the Likert midpoint namely reward processes (M = 2.68), reward policies (M = 2.72), reward structures (M = 2.83), and reward categories (M = 2.86) indicating limited institutionalization of coherent reward systems. Similarly, employee performance indicators were rated low, including service quality (M = 2.45), service efficiency (M = 2.47), reduced customer complaints (M = 2.55), meeting targets (M = 2.60), and teamwork effectiveness (M = 2.64). Correlation results confirmed strong positive relationships between RMA dimensions and performance ($r = 0.720–0.777$, $p < 0.01$). Regression analysis further revealed that RMA explains 78.9% of the variance in employee

performance (R^2 = 0.789, F = 116.061, p < 0.001), with reward structures (β = 0.297) and reward processes (β = 0.268) exerting stronger effects than reward policies (β = 0.224) and reward categories (β = 0.196).

The discussion interprets these findings through major motivational and organizational theories. Perceived weaknesses in reward policies and processes reflect inequity concerns consistent with J. Stacy Adams, while unclear procedural linkages between performance and rewards weaken goal commitment as explained by Edwin A. Locke. The inadequate presence of both hygiene and motivator elements aligns with Frederick Herzberg, and the limited effect of reward categories compared to structures and processes reflects higher-order motivational needs described by Abraham Maslow. Collectively, the findings suggest that employee performance in public universities is influenced more by how rewards are structured and administered than by the mere availability of rewards.

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on perceptual measures from administrative staff in two public universities within one county, which may restrict generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, include academic staff, and examine additional organizational contexts across regions or countries. Further studies may also integrate qualitative approaches to explore how reward structures are experienced in practice and test the Reward Management Architecture model in private sector institutions or other public organizations.

Declaration of conflicting interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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