

The influence of the reward culture on client-led service innovation in academic libraries of Uganda

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Abstract

Purpose – Client-led service innovation has gained currency in academic libraries owing to ever-shifting client preferences. Library clients are interested in determining which services libraries should offer to meet their information needs. Several studies have investigated service innovation or improvement in libraries with an emphasis on client involvement. However, it is not clear whether the reward culture influences client-focused service innovation in the context of Uganda.

Design/methodology/approach – This multiple-case study triangulated data from a survey of 80 staff members, three semi-structured interviews conducted with three library heads, and data from institutional documents. Data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Findings – The results indicated that the financial reward culture did not influence client-led service innovation in any way; instead, non-financial rewards had an impact. Therefore, library managers need to appreciate that clients are no longer interested in financial rewards, but rather in non-financial rewards that have enduring value.

Originality/value – The study underscores the importance of client-led services in an information environment that has been invaded by industry 4.0 and calls upon librarians to use the opportunity to provide innovative services.

Keywords Client-led service innovation, Reward culture, Academic library, Innovation in academic libraries, Financial reward culture, Non-financial reward culture

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and background

Academic libraries are increasingly being tasked with proving their relevance within the higher education arena. Accordingly, they must improve service delivery through innovation (Chuang *et al.*, 2019; Yeh and Walter, 2016). In general terms, innovation goes beyond the introduction of new things and encompasses the improvement of old things through the use of new methods and knowledge, which is now considered a strategic resource (Skaalsvik and Johannessen, 2014; De Felice *et al.*, 2019). Such improvements have permeated organisations through the increased use of technologies such as mobile appliances in the execution of tasks and duties and the acquisition of new skills. Indeed, extant literature shows that information communication technologies (ICTs) have had a major impact on innovation in higher education institutions and, especially, in academic libraries (Chuang *et al.*, 2019; Islam *et al.*, 2015).

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ICT tools that may be deployed in the library include Web 4.0 tools and Library 4.0 tools, such as user-generated content, social networking, artificial intelligence, blogs, and wikis, to mention just a few. These are reported to ease work processes, allow expansive access, and improve services, while also enabling staff to learn from a multiplicity of sources (Msauki, 2021; Ugwu and Ekere, 2018). However, it is not only ICTs that have influenced innovation; other factors have been identified too.

There is a possibility that factors such as organisational values and culture, human resource practices, skills, knowledge, alliances (Yeh and Ramirez, 2016), and critical thinking, communication, and creativity skills have an impact on innovation (Hammond *et al.*, 2011; Hewko, 2022; Islam *et al.*, 2015, 2017). On the other hand, innovation comes with risk; therefore, Labrenz (2014) advises that rewards be introduced to encourage staff to come up with new ideas. The potential for loss as the most influential factor in risk-taking could explain why most libraries are averse to risk-taking. Manso (2011) proposes that since innovation is fraught with risk, rewards associated with it should be less restrictive.

Joint (2007) aver that, because of the conservative nature of work processes in the library environment, risk is considered low. However, high levels of risk are emerging from the environment that surrounds libraries, which is beleaguered by a technological onslaught (Casserly, 2004; Maidabino and Zainab, 2011; Sas *et al.*, 2021), financial risks, socio-cultural risks, and political risks (Horava, 2014; Kuzucuoğlu, 2014). The researchers suspect that the conservative nature of libraries, as mentioned by Joint (2007) could be the reason some academic libraries are not engaged in innovation or take a long time to adopt innovations. To overcome resistance, Smedley (2016) proposes that innovations be introduced in such a way that they are accepted, that is, by involving users in the initial stages and subsequently testing the products before implementation. However, if some scholars affirm that the environment is forcing academic libraries to change, why are some not responding? Is it possible that, rather than the environment surrounding the libraries forcing the academic libraries to change, the change is coming from within the libraries because of a dialogue between them and users?

Innovation is not a “nice thing” for academic libraries, but it is a must because library clients are very unpredictable and nowadays present with ever-changing needs that require versatile services (Wójcik, 2019). Academic libraries have to innovate continually to stay relevant in universities (Baker, 2016; Wójcik, 2019). Library clients are key in the management of service innovation. However, it is not clear whether libraries have a formal arrangement in terms of rewarding their efforts. Agarwal and Selen (2011) argue that symbiotic relationships between organisations and clients ensure the effective use of skills and knowledge, which – in most cases – results in innovation. It is therefore important that academic libraries communicate with their clients if a valuable and productive relationship is to be built and used to increase their competitive advantage.

Interestingly, Raju *et al.* (2007) argued that for libraries to overcome the status quo of looking for a solution after users have made demands, they should have a department that is specifically charged with issues to do with innovation. As a result of this proposition, libraries have realised that they must be proactive in terms of client demands and changes. Key to service improvement is the provision of knowledge and the ability to utilise that knowledge to provide a better service. This indicates that although other factors are important, the quality of staff and their attendant skills form the bedrock of innovation. Staff should have the ability to recognise knowledge that can be used to improve or solve an organisational problem and possess adaptive expertise that can be applied to any situation that arises (Fahrani *et al.*, 2023; Groff, 2013).

There is an urgent need to provide services that are forward-looking and will be able to satisfy users. A good service in a library implies that clients can access the right information at the right time. Albrecht and Zemke (2002) noted that service provision is based on three major factors: a service strategy that includes a client charter; customer-driven systems; and

customer-friendly staff. The three tenets of service provision are evident in the library environment. Firstly, libraries have strategies that support most of the activities that take place. For instance, university and departmental strategic plans provide direction for service provision. Secondly, the systems – such as the circulation and discovery systems – are all run on the premise that clients are served well and satisfactorily. Lastly, the clients or patrons drive the library services, and this is usually achieved through communication and collection of views, which are then translated into actual services.

However, the realisation of these three objectives needs a committed workforce that is motivated to gravitate towards goal actualisation. The motivation of staff requires a culture that comprises supportive policies, practices, and rewards (non-financial and financial) that can propel staff towards exceptional performance, self-actualisation, and fulfilment (Alajmi and Alasousi, 2019). Service culture has been summed up by Ostrom *et al.* (2010) as entailing the recruitment of competent staff with the right attitude towards work; training and continuous development; and continuous communication between staff and users to understand their needs better and co-create services with them.

Staff should have the knowledge and capability to combine existing knowledge with new knowledge to deliver cutting-edge services. Academic libraries, whose main objective is to support learning and research, should craft avenues whereby they engage clients to understand their needs and what needs to be done to satisfy them. Dwindling budgets demand that only those services that clients want should be initiated and nurtured. The researchers are of the view that users attach value only to something that makes their experience in the library worthwhile and which they probably consider an innovation.

The debate on innovation is underscored by the availability of staff competencies to deliver the required service (Dost *et al.*, 2016; Liao and Chuang, 2007). Scholars such as Gul and Bano (2019) and Schopfel (2018) state that libraries are embracing new technologies and services to better serve their clients. Digital transformation of services is supported by disruptive technologies and processes which influence customer experience, innovation and efficiency of services (Anuradha, 2018). Therefore, academic libraries should not only focus on innovation but all the attendant facets that include reward, human development, culture and human resources (Anuradha, 2018). It should be noted that new competencies and skills in most cases are enforced with rewards that are commensurate with the effort.

Problem statement

Clients of academic libraries include staff, users, and researchers; these determine how the library establishment is managed. The need to change library services continuously in conformity with client needs is increasingly gaining currency in academia. Clients come with unique requests that can be met only by libraries' designing services specific to them. Change, though good, requires libraries to reward staff and library users who contribute to this change. However, libraries are currently underfunded, and staff decry dwindling budgets. During a meeting with head librarians, the majority expressed their inability to reward clients who had participated in service innovation initiatives. Additionally, some expressed their incapacity to promote, give recognition, reward, and train their staff (Librarians' Round Table Meetings, 2015). Employee performance was therefore below expectations. The disparities in service quality among university libraries was another issue brought up; certain libraries offered more sophisticated services and had better staff academic profiles than others (Lwanga and Ngulube, 2019).

Several studies have investigated service innovation or improvement in libraries with an emphasis on client involvement (Islam *et al.*, 2015; Ugwu and Ekere, 2018; Scupola and Nicolajsen, 2010; Chuang *et al.*, 2019). For instance, all these have explored service innovation in libraries in different countries other than Uganda. Their major findings have mostly pointed to the following issues: libraries need to collect information and knowledge from

users continuously to satisfy user needs; moreover, libraries should capture and integrate user knowledge with what the library knows to provide responsive services. However, it is not clear whether the influence of a reward culture on client-focused service innovation was adequately covered in these studies.

It is critical that rewards – including recognition, reassignments, promotions, training, and pay – be streamlined in the library policies. Currently, there appears to be a discrepancy between the reward and the amount of effort expended while executing tasks and duties. It seems that staff are motivated to use their knowledge and operate efficiently, but it is not clear whether they are rewarded for introducing innovations in collaboration with clients. Against this background, the researchers of this study investigated the influence of the reward culture and client-led service innovation in selected academic libraries in Uganda. The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) To what extent do non-financial rewards influence client-led service innovation in academic libraries?
- (2) Can financial rewards influence client-led service innovation in academic libraries?

Methodology

A multi-method research strategy involving the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) was adopted after ethical clearance was obtained by the University of South Africa's Policy on Research Ethics. The target population of the study included three purposively selected academic libraries in Uganda. Two of the three universities were public universities, while one was a private university. The amount of time the institutions had been in operation was a significant factor in the inclusion process. The theory was that the older the institution, the older the culture, and the likelihood of a more sophisticated method of doing things (Lwanga and Ngulube, 2019).

The three universities were purposively selected out of twenty-seven academic libraries that were fully registered with the Consortium of Uganda University Libraries (CUUL), a body that regulates the operations of all university libraries. CUUL is a nonprofit organisation that brings together university libraries to manage and strengthen library and information services in Uganda. CUUL organises workshops and trainings for academic librarians to improve skills and a better understanding of information access and management. It must expand its scope from agitating for access to information and advocate and include service innovation rewards for clients and staff.

The survey used a self-administered questionnaire to gather data from the 80 staff members at the three libraries, all of whom were qualified in library and information science. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the heads of the three selected libraries to get data on management and policy issues within their respective libraries. Data from institutional documents including human resource manuals, strategic plans, budgets, ministerial documents, and library procedures and guidelines, were triangulated with data from the questionnaires and interviews to enhance validity and improve interpretation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. To analyse the quantitative data, SPSS version 26.0 software was used to generate percentages. Qualitative data was thematically analysed following the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Findings

The response rate to the questionnaires was 70 (87.5%) and three library heads were interviewed. Data from strategic documents supplemented the questionnaire and interview data. The major findings are presented according to the themes of the research questions.

Non-financial reward culture

Four questions were asked to understand the idea of a non-financial incentive culture and client engagement in service innovation and the responses are captured in Table 1. Firstly, in determining the connection between non-financial rewards and service innovation initiated by clients, the following percentages were noted. A total of 37% disagreed, 33% were not sure, while 30% agreed. Generally, the respondents indicated that they disagreed with the statement that a non-financial reward culture negatively influenced client service innovation.

Secondly, in ascertaining whether a clear reward policy existed, the responses were as follows: 41.5% disagreed, 41.5% were not sure and 17% agreed to the statement. The results suggested a negative disposition towards the statement, while many respondents were not sure whether such a policy existed. In relation to whether clients that introduced innovations in collaboration with the library were given recognition, the responses were as follows: 47% disagreed, 25% were not sure, while 28% agreed. As in the case of the previous question, most of the respondents viewed the statement in a negative light, while a large number indicated that they were not sure whether clients that introduced innovations together with library staff were recognised. Lastly, in questioning whether information collected from users was used to improve services, 22% opposed, 11.5% were not sure and 66.5% responded in the affirmative. Most staff conceded that the library collected information from users to innovate.

Overall, the results indicated that most respondents were of the view that non-financial rewards did not influence service innovation.

Financial reward culture and client-led service innovation

Financial rewards were assessed using three questions that focused on monetary rewards, such as money and allowances. The first question was of a general nature, investigating financial rewards and how they promoted innovation that was proposed by library clients. Responses indicated that 42% disagreed, 23% were not sure, while 35% consented. The results emanating from this first question indicated a negative influence, with more staff disagreeing with the statement.

Concerning whether there were allowances set aside to encourage library staff to collect information from users, 60% disagreed, 27% were not sure while 13% concurred. More than half of the total number of respondents disagreed with the question, indicating that there were no incentives set aside for this activity. In addition, 27% of the respondents were not sure which could have suggested a disconnect between a reward culture and service innovation. It was also possible that the incentives were not very clear or satisfying since 13% that agreed were aware of the existence of the rewards and it is probable that they had benefited from the allowances.

Type of reward culture	Statement	Disagree	Not sure	Agree
Non-financial rewards	Non-financial rewards promote innovation that is initiated by clients	37%	33%	30%
	The reward policy is very clear on client-led service innovation	41.5%	41.5%	17%
	The library users who help libraries to improve their services are recognised	47%	25%	28%
	The library collects information from users on how best to improve their services	22%	11.5%	66.5%

Source(s): Table by authors 2023

Table 1.
Percentages associated with client-led service innovation and a non-financial reward culture

In seeking to understand whether clients' participation in service innovation is driven by allowances, results showed that 72% of the respondents disagreed, 18% were not sure and only 10% concurred as shown in Table 2. Majority of respondents disagreed with the assertion that allowances motivate clients' participation in service innovations despite a few individuals that were in support of the claim. There is a possibility that the few that supported the assertion are the ones that are involved in service innovations therefore they tend to be privileged. The results depict that individuals that were not sure were slightly above those that agreed, which could indicate that communication was insufficient to promote awareness among staff and library clientele.

Next, the study explored the data collected from the interviews of the three head librarians. To situate client engagement in library activities, informants made the following remarks:

Case one:

Clients drive the services and operations of the library largely through dynamic engagement such as surveys and communication through which constructive feedback is collected.

Case two:

My staffs through several avenues engage clients to find out what needs to be improved, introduced or removed from the library menu. Can one do anything without consulting whether formal or informally our stakeholders? They are very important members of our community.

Case three:

Any suggestions that library collects from users and then we turn it into meaningful services.

All three key informants intimated that there were no clear rewards attached to client-led service innovation and, hence, staff enjoyed only the psychological satisfaction of making these innovations. The following statements confirmed this:

Case one:

For us staff we get satisfaction from seeing our programmes well attended and for the clients we recognise them by saying thank you to them since the budget does not extend to them.

Additionally, they pointed out that their clients derived satisfaction from seeing their suggestions implemented. The following comments were made:

Case two:

For clients when they see what they proposed being effected, they achieve psychological satisfaction, although sometimes we do recognise their input.

Case three:

I can say that rewards are largely non-financial comprising recognition and psychological satisfaction. . . . Implementation of a client's suggestion is a reward and in fact that's why in some

Type of reward culture	Statement	Disagree	Not sure	Agree
Financial reward culture	Financial rewards promote innovations that are proposed by library clients	42%	23%	35%
	There are allowances set aside to encourage library staff to collect information from users	60%	27%	13%
	Clients participate in service innovation because of the allowances they are promised	72%	18%	10%

Source(s): Table by authors 2023

Table 2. Percentages relating to the financial reward culture and client service innovation

surveys the services are rated highly. . . . Much as the library uses client suggestions to improve service, there is no budget line for such proposals.

The foregoing discussion reveals that recognition and psychological satisfaction influenced client-led service innovation. Table 3 highlights the strategies used in client-led service innovation.

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Discussion of findings

Libraries are increasingly looking for ways to improve their services, especially in view of the dwindling budgets mentioned by Ugwu and Ekere (2018) and the pervasive nature of ICTs in work processes. In recent times, clients or users have become a core asset in organisations because of the knowledge that is enshrined or embedded in them (Islam et al., 2015; Lwanga and Ngulube, 2019; Scupola and Nicolajsen, 2010). For a long time, libraries have referred conservatively to users as “patrons”, whose interests they cared about, without necessarily involving them in most activities. Libraries have now realised that for changes to be meaningful, users must be involved – especially with the onslaught of new technologies and services. The integration of industry 4.0 into academic libraries implies that user generated content and enhanced user experience is a reality that academic libraries must deal with (Hwalima and Khanye, 2021). The kind of users and their attendant needs have changed from those that wait for new services to be introduced; users nowadays actively look for new ways to satisfy their information needs.

With the changing landscape in education, and especially higher education, information-seeking has changed, with most libraries moving away from being places to becoming spaces that can be accessed remotely. This essentially means that libraries must closely and continuously engage their users, who include patrons, service providers and strategic alliances or development partners. This change can be achieved only by involving clients in the day-to-day running of libraries through some kind of motivation. Ugwu and Ekere (2018) note that in libraries, clients are not rewarded as they are in commercial services. Libraries are cash-strapped and therefore reluctant to reward clients for every innovation they suggest. Moreover, libraries still believe that clients have no choice but to come and use their resources. However, the internet has changed the way that client’s access and use information resources, with many more preferring to read from the comfort of their own home. Van Reenen (2010) succinctly pointed out that the role of the librarian is to meet users’ current needs and then anticipate and plan to meet their future needs. This can be achieved only when staff collaborate with the users to find out what users’ needs are. Van Reenen (2010) further lamented that most libraries can afford to meet only the current needs of users. If academic libraries are to do all that is required of them, they will need to find innovative ways of

Construct	Case one	Case two	Case three
Client-led service innovation strategies	Training Communication Student–staff engagement Strategic alliances	Student–staff engagement Communication – Strategic alliances	Training Communication Strategic alliances Student–staff engagement
Reward culture	Recognition and psychological satisfaction	Psychological satisfaction and recognition	Psychological satisfaction and recognition

Source(s): Table by authors 2023

Table 3. Non-financial reward culture and client-led service innovation strategies

working within the limited funding they have, including finding less expensive ways of rewarding both staff and clients.

In the study, the researchers posed seven questions to the respondents, four of which focused on non-financial rewards, while three targeted a financial reward culture.

Non-financial reward culture and client-led service innovation

To put the questions in context, the staff were asked whether they collected information from clients. A total of 66.5% of the responses affirmed hence indicating that academic libraries depended on clients for feedback on their various activities. The feedback was collected through surveys, meetings, and training, which included client and/or patron orientation programmes and library exhibitions. Empirical data indicated that there was communication between the clients and staff of the library. In terms of the processes, resources and value theory, communication is a key component of the innovation cycle. There must be intra- and intercommunication if an organisation is to marshal all the resources at its disposal to innovate. Although there was evidence that communication occurred, heightened communication would most likely have resulted in more innovation. Considering the activities that the different cases mentioned, such as training, student engagement, strategic alliances, and communication, it can be deduced that communication was achieved.

The remaining responses to three statements were disconfirmatory, namely “users are recognised” (47%), “reward policy is clear” (41.5%) and “non-financial rewards motivate customers to innovate together with library staff” (37%). These results indicated that although information was collected from users, there was no policy to guide the activity and, hence, no reward culture was in place to support it. This could suggest that it was not done regularly, but only haphazardly, as, and when required. This might also indicate that there was no institutional commitment to collect information and, therefore, staff were not held accountable for not collecting information from users. Nevertheless, knowledge was exchanged and recombined, and many innovations might have been introduced. However, the researchers argue that had a clear policy existed, perhaps even more innovations would have taken place. It is important to note that humans are known to pursue goals if they expect their efforts to be rewarded. In this case, with no policy in place, staff might have been reluctant to engage in activities that had a bearing on service innovation. Nevertheless, there was an indication that customer engagement took place in the form of workshops, user orientations, users’ being members of library committees, notice boards and strategic alliances. In such interactive spaces (example of “ba”), users exchanged views and knowledge pertaining to library-related improvements.

Rewards such as recognition were found across the board, indicating that there was some form of recognition in all three cases investigated. Staff were given recognition through use of memorandums, reports and, in some cases, letters of commendation. Recognition was most pronounced in case three, followed by case one and, lastly, case two. All three cases mentioned psychological satisfaction for both staff and clients because of having participated in an innovative activity. The researchers noted the emphasis on psychological satisfaction as a reward, perhaps because universities were grappling with financial constraints. This is in line with studies (Adhikari, 2010; Bladek, 2019) which noted that universities are underfunding libraries, information technology laboratories and classrooms. As a result, all three cases mentioned psychological satisfaction since no one could deny them that.

Among the non-financial rewards mentioned, recognition took centre stage. This indicates that libraries need to institutionalise recognition in such a way that staff feel motivated to work towards achieving it. Nevertheless, there was a need to include clients’ efforts in the library policies so that they know what is expected. User information, being a core area of organisational improvement, needs to be included in the key deliverables of

staff. The fact that psychological satisfaction was a much-sought-after reward could be regarded as a disadvantage to the libraries: Libraries should rather try to find out what really motivates staff and then concentrate on those aspects. The researchers are of the opinion that only then would staff be willing to work hard to improve their libraries. Most importantly, because everyone is expected to innovate, no one is held accountable for ensuring that innovations are achieved. Only if academic libraries in the future have dedicated sections that are charged with undertaking innovations, held accountable, given the latitude to take risks and provided with the resources to innovate will they ensure that service innovations occur frequently.

Financial reward culture and client-led service innovation

Libraries have moved away from the traditional way of referring to users as “patrons” and “readers”, now referring to them as “clients” (Van Reenen, 2010; Fauchelle, 2017). Clients are those users who pay to use the service: In this case, students pay registration fees, which include library fees, and researchers pay fees to access the libraries. Because of this, they expect to receive good service that meets their current and latent needs; ideally, this service should be commensurate with what they have paid in terms of fees. Three statements yielded negative responses, which indicated that the financial reward culture did not influence client-led service innovation in academic libraries. This view is supported by Fledderus (2015) and Gheduzzi *et al.* (2021) who averred that clients do not want to participate in service improvement. This could suggest the absence of a financial reward culture, especially in connection with client-led service innovation.

Although other studies have shown that compensation was a significant predictor of innovation in the workplace (Mensah *et al.*, 2023), the evidence from the current study shows that allowances were not a major incentive for staff to innovate. This might have been because of the absence of a budget for this activity. It was clear from the discussions that clients were considered important about service improvement. What was not clear, however, was whether there were guidelines or client service charters that described client? expectations versus the library’s expectations. In view of the results collected, it was clear that there was communication, especially between staff and clients, but there was no mention of payment. There was evidence from the interviews that, rather than providing constructive criticism, clients engaged in abusive and vindictive exchanges. As a result, in cases one and two, communication channels such as suggestion boxes were disregarded. The use of e-mail and telephone calls was preferred, with all libraries claiming that clients communicated with them through those channels. Surprisingly, social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, were not commonly used in all the cases investigated. Yet these are resources that the library could capitalise on, given that many of its users are young and probably use IT frequently. Consequently, it has been argued that information technology tools can go a long way in improving communication and other services in libraries. For instance, libraries could consider putting current awareness notices and lists of new books on social media, rather than putting them up on physical notice boards in the library.

The researchers concluded that, firstly, clients did not place any importance on co-creation because there were no rewards attached to it. Secondly, clients and staff did not exert themselves because they knew that there were no financial rewards attached to doing so. Nonetheless, those that were motivated by the non-financial reward culture, especially psychological satisfaction, and recognition, participated for the sake of it. Clients were not sure that their submission would be considered useful since there was no binding policy. Consequently, they did not engage in service innovation with staff. Although there were a few service innovations, the researchers are convinced that there would have been many more if the libraries had had clear client service charters in place.

The researchers therefore conclude that client engagement is still a new phenomenon in academic libraries in Uganda and needs to be supported by a well-thought-out regulatory framework that will hold both parties accountable.

Implications of research findings for policymakers

A reward culture is mainly driven by policies prevalent in institutions. From the conclusions above, policymakers should communicate explicitly the availability of rewards to both staff and clients. Rewards related to the client should be captured in a client service charter and disseminated widely. A review of a reward culture could be considered to align practices with rewards that possess high valence and instrumentality. There is also a need to have knowledge management and innovation policies that link with the reward systems available at universities.

Implications of research findings for practitioners

From the conclusions above, there are several implications for practitioners. Academic libraries should carefully embark on a fact-finding investigation regarding a reward culture, knowledge management practices and service innovation. Recognition of staff should be embraced at departmental level to maintain a high level of satisfaction among staff. Staff should be encouraged to participate in multidisciplinary teams to formulate well-focused solutions to institutional challenges. Group rewards could be introduced to motivate them. Client service charters should be formulated/developed and followed to ensure that clients know what is due to them.

Client-led service innovation was achieved through strategies such as strategic alliances, training, student and staff engagement and communication. Client engagement is mainly underscored by the participatory philosophy that upholds engagement of stakeholders in key decision-making, which is in line with studies (Somerville and Howard, 2010; Somerville and Nino, 2007; Randhawa *et al.*, 2017; Caputo *et al.*, 2019). All these studies concur that participatory initiatives that involve clients in service innovation have a far-reaching impact on service improvement. The knowledge economy has placed several demands on the traditional library, including online services and self-service. For these to be designed appropriately/effectively, it is imperative that clients be brought on board to discuss and agree on services to be supported. The results of the study under review indicated that a financial reward culture did not in any way influence client-led service innovation; instead, non-financial rewards were influential. However, what came up clearly was the ambiguity of the policy as regards a reward culture and client-led service innovation. The researchers therefore recommend the following:

- (1) The dichotomous relationship between staff and clients' needs must be clearly stipulated in the form of a client charter. This could probably indicate the library service standards, including what the staff and clients could do and what to expect in terms of rewards.
- (2) The reward policy should specify what kind of rewards will be extended to clients.
- (3) The reward policy should be communicated widely so that staff know and understand the terms of engagement.
- (4) A culture that supports creativity, collaborative working and co-creation should be fostered, thereby improving service innovation.
- (5) Intra- and inter-firm creativity should be supported by nurturing informal communication and engagement.

- (6) Lastly, collaborative work that underscores knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition, which encourages innovation, should be promoted.

General recommendations for a reward culture in academic libraries

A reward culture generally constitutes beliefs, norms and artefacts that control the way organisations compensate efforts of staff or ensure that staff work hard to achieve set targets and goals. The latter can be in the form of policies and operational guidelines that are written down or implied. In the cases investigated, different university libraries had human resource manuals that guided their reward culture. The two public libraries had slightly different reward cultures, indicating that culture differed from institution to institution, despite their belonging to the same sector.

The study examined key respondents, both senior staff and other lower-ranking staff. The senior staff had access to some rewards that junior staff did not have access to – or did not even know about. This meant that some staff might not even have known what was due to them. It is common for rewards to be pegged to position, so it is likely that some positions – especially senior ones – had more rewards than others. Hence, the researchers recommend that a baseline survey be carried out to ascertain the views of staff regarding the reward culture in their individual institutions. Thereafter, data could be collated to determine which rewards are more compelling to library staff than others.

Conclusion

For a long time, libraries have conservatively referred to users as “patrons”; and while they have cared about their patrons’ interests, they have not necessarily involved them in most activities. Today’s users are different and so are their attendant needs: they no longer wait for new services to be introduced, but actively seek new ways of satisfying their information needs. [Jain \(2013\)](#) claims that clients are essential to library services, hence the need for clear client relations. Therefore, with regard to the term “client service innovation”, it is important to mention the synergistic relationships between staff and clients in aspects involving innovation ([Ugwu and Ekere, 2018](#)). It is incumbent upon librarians to embrace the opportunities provided industry 4.0 to integrate client-led services into their libraries.

The findings from this study clearly showed that university policies had not included rewards in connection to service innovation with clients. Nevertheless, key respondents did mention that clients were informally rewarded through recognition, but above all, most were happy to see their recommendations effected.

Firstly, the researchers concluded that academic libraries need to come up with client charters that show the relationship between them and the clients they serve. Secondly, a policy regarding the rewards needs to be drafted and communicated to all stakeholders so that everyone is aware of what is due to them. Thirdly, adequate resources and value should be attached to client service innovation. Lastly, the researchers concluded that a financial reward culture did not influence client-led service innovation, probably because it was not catered for in the reward policy.

Along similar lines, [Lesneski and Nelson \(2015\)](#) argues that library staff have to adopt critical thinking skills and bolster their communication, collaborative and creative skills if change is to happen. These objectives can be achieved only when staff collaborate with the users to find out what their needs are. Few studies have shown that rewards actually improve client engagement ([Esson et al., 2012](#)).

The transition to digital libraries presents both opportunities and problems for rewards-based methods. There may be several effects on rewards strategies when libraries move towards digital media. The future of library rewards will depend on how well user needs,

economic viability, and intellectual property rights are balanced (Anuradha, 2018; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2006; Kibithe and Naibe, 2023; Patra and Sahoo, 2022). Thus, libraries could consider categorisation of clients as a key factor in determining future rewards. For example, for the digital natives, those born after 1980 and are open to change (Taylor and Keeter, 2010), and more inclined towards social rewards such as pleasure, satisfaction and gratification (Liu *et al.*, 2018) and these must be factored into the reward approach. Academic libraries will need to find innovative ways of working within their limited budgets to reward clients in less costly ways.

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Further reading

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