

Employee Engagement and Quality Assurance Implementation in Theory and Practice in Ugandan Universities

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Abstract: Employee engagement and assurance implementation are crucial for the effective functioning of universities and other tertiary institutions in Higher Education. This article examines social exchange theory as its main theoretical framework and practical employee engagement applications in quality assurance policies within higher education institutions. Analyzing current literature and case studies explores how these concepts are applied to enhance university operations and improve overall performance. The study further identifies best practices, challenges, and the impact of engagement strategies. It explores quality assurance measures on employee performance and institutional success. The empirical data is taken from a doctoral study approved by UNCST reference SS-4248. A total of 182 participants were enrolled for the study where 141 responded to the self-administered questionnaire and 41 responded to the qualitative interviewee schedule from six Ugandan universities. The study findings show that there are several factors influencing employees' engagement in active production hence leading to higher performance in the production and management of an organisation. Influencing factors are those factors that affect some features of target objects. The legality or constitutionality of a policy challenged in such circumstances remains eminent. Technological changes alter the feasibility or relevance of an institution hence a new perception may be developed with employees' engagement assisted with technology and the administrative will of the top management of an institution. It is also important to note that discoveries alter public support hence economic and political conditions will change. However, there are several causes of policy failures; poor understanding of the problem, insufficient knowledge of the implementation context, unclear and even contradictory goals, and absence of political backing. As policy failure increases, in such circumstances any degree of successful implementation is unlikely to be observed. Therefore, the political environment must be supported by an economic environment that rewards participating entities in policy formulation and implementation stages of national reforms.

Keywords: policy failures, benchmarking, collaboration, and quality assurance policy.

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Introduction

Employees' engagement refers to the level of enthusiasm, commitment, and involvement that employees exhibit towards their work and organisation. Employee engagement is a human resources (HR) concept that describes the level of enthusiasm and dedication a worker feels toward their job. Engaged employees care about their work and the performance of the company, and feel that their efforts make a difference (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). Engaged employees are motivated, productive, and invested in achieving organisational goals. In this context of universities, engagement manifests through participation in academic and administrative tasks, collaboration with colleagues, and commitment to institutional mission. By focusing on the 5 Cs—

Care, Connect, Coach, Contribute and Congratulate—organisations can create an environment where employees feel valued, motivated and engaged (Editorial Team, 2024). While discussing employees' participation in quality assurance policy implementation, it is equally important to agree that employers must have model operands (operation) methods of work which is covered within the law.

The social exchange theory is one of the several theoretical frameworks that underpin the employees' participation in quality assurance policy implementation in Uganda. The practical implementation requires several strategies aiming at increasing staff involvement, satisfaction, and commitment to institutional goals. Social exchange theory (SET) is derived from economic exchange theory and explains human behaviour in social

exchanges (Ahmed, 2024). It posits that people do others a favour with a general expectation of some future benefit, but exactly when this will occur is often unclear. Therefore, SET assumes the existence of relatively long-term relationships of interest based on intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. Employees tend to take a long-term approach to social exchange relationships at work and expect to receive benefits from such relationships. Extrinsic benefits refer to those that employees receive from the organization for good performance, whereas intrinsic benefits refer to those that employees experience internally through performing well, such as self-efficacy (Fiorini et al 2018).

In the competitive realms of higher education, the performance of universities is closely linked to their ability to implement effective quality assurance (QA) practices and engage their employees towards policy implementation. Employees' participation and robust QA practices are essential for enhancing institutional performance and ensuring high levels of staff satisfaction (Manghani, 2011). There are strategies aiming to increase staff engagement that result from job satisfaction as employees and employers mutually benefit from engagement. These strategies often include professional development opportunities, clear communication channels, recognition programs, and participatory decision-making processes. Engaged employees are more likely to contribute positively to quality assurance efforts, leading to more effective implementation of quality standards (Ahmed, 2024). This article explores how employee engagement and quality assurance practices impact university performance and employee satisfaction, providing insights into their significance and implications for higher education institutions.

Objectives

1. To analyze the theoretical frameworks underpinning employee engagement and quality assurance in higher education institutions.
2. To evaluate the practical implementation of employee engagement strategies and quality assurance policies in universities.
3. To identify the impact of employee engagement and quality assurance practices on university performance and employee satisfaction.

Methodology

The article presents empirical evidence on employees' engagement in quality assurance policy implementation in universities. The main participants were university teaching staff and non-teaching staff in administrative units. A total of 182 participants were enrolled for the doctoral research in management and policy study. That is 141 participants responded to a self-administered questionnaire and some 41 participants responded to the interviewee schedule. The descriptive survey design of employee quantitative and qualitative methods was significant because the study was aimed at human resource behaviour and employer management. The university staff were treated as delegated representatives of the employer to serve the clients who were students and other stakeholders. In this study, it is significant to establish that several theories including models were reviewed and further review of other theories waits for the findings to be aligned to theory and practice employees' engagement in quality assurance policy implementation in universities.

Theory for the Study

Social Exchange Theory (SET), developed by sociologists George Homans and Peter Blau, posits that social interactions and relationships are based on reciprocal exchanges of resources, where individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Ahmed, 2023). This theory emphasizes the importance of perceived fairness and mutual benefits in maintaining and strengthening social relationships. Homans once summarized the theory by stating that social behaviour is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as the symbols of approval or prestige. Persons who give much to others try to get much from them, and persons who get much from others are under pressure to give much to them (Tittenburn, 2012).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) speculates that the relationships between employers and employees are based on mutual benefits and obligations. Social exchange theory is a concept based on the notion that a relationship between two people is created through a process of cost-benefit analysis. In other words, it's a metric designed to determine the effort poured in by an individual in a person-to-person relationship (Ahmed, 2023). It provides a framework for understanding how employee engagement and quality assurance practices are influenced by the perceived value and reciprocity in the employer-employee relationship. According to SET, employees are more likely to be engaged and satisfied when they perceive that their contributions are valued and that there is a fair exchange of resources and support from the organization. Social Exchange Theory (SET) serves as a foundational framework for understanding the dynamics of relationships, including those within the workplace. At its core, this theory revolves around the principles of reciprocity, perceived value, and social equity. This theory helps in examining how engagement strategies and assurance practices impact employee attitudes and behaviours in universities.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are presented according to the suggested objectives of the study.

To analyze the theoretical frameworks underpinning employee engagement and quality assurance in higher education institutions

In the context of quality assurance (QA) policy implementation in Ugandan universities, SET (social exchange theory) suggests that employee engagement is influenced by the perceived reciprocity and mutual benefit derived from their involvement. Employees are more likely to be engaged and committed to QA initiatives if they believe that their contributions are recognized and rewarded appropriately. This involves both tangible rewards (e.g., financial incentives, promotions) and intangible rewards e.g., professional recognition, and personal satisfaction (Ahmed, 2023). Some control variables are influential in determining the key influencing factors of an object. Such factors are public opinion, economic conditions, new scientific findings, technological changes, interest groups, NGOs, Business lobbying and political activities which must be considered by top management and other policymakers within the education system of the country. The economic condition, technological changes and political activities appear to rank higher among the control variables. The annual gross salaries

of employees remain influential to enhance employees' engagement in policy implantation.

Table 01 presents shows that 85.1% of employees earn a gross annual salary of less than \$10,000. That is 33.3% earn less than \$3333 or Uganda Shillings 11,998,800= at an average of 1M per month. While a science teacher in secondary schools paid by the government earns Ug.Sh. 4,000,000 per month equivalent to 48,000,000= or US\$13,333=. The salary disparities appear in public and private universities country-wide. The private universities have not diversified their income hence they depend on students' tuition fees. The public university employees not on the government payroll also suffer the same humiliation of poor economic conditions that affect their level of engagement in research, teaching and community outreach. They earn salaries from private students enrolled in government universities. This creates 85.1% of employees earning less than US\$10000 annual gross salary.

The result for item 06 shows that management recognition is 75.3% and has a descriptive mean of 3.21 implying that recognition is significant. As mentioned by Ahmed, (2023) non-financial incentives such as professional recognition as promotion in ranks like lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, and professor is an important aspect of "Reciprocity and Mutual Benefit" in universities. However, several participants in high-top management submitted that "government leadership" has not allowed to recognise and promote employees because there is a financial implication. While asking the same question to private university leadership, it was reported that several employees in private universities do not meet the requirement for promotion in ranks. The requirement is all about, excellent teaching, excellent research and publication, and community outreach supervision. Several private universities have not created academic freedom or opportunities for employees to engage in research and publication. Publication costs in peer-reviewed journals are between US\$120 to US\$1000 per article where an employee earning \$277 per month cannot work for publication costs yet his family expenses demand more than his/her income (Kibaliwandu, 2024). It was further established that most private universities in Uganda do not show the professional ranks of their employees and salary scale. Those that show salary scales do not pay according to the displayed salary scales.

The SET presents "Perceived fairness and equity" SET underscores the significance of perceived fairness in social exchanges (Tugaineyo, 2024; Tittenburn, 2012). Employees' engagement in QA policy implementation is heavily influenced by their perception of fairness in how policies are designed, communicated, and enforced. If employees feel that the QA policies are applied equitably and that their input is valued, they are more likely to actively participate and support these initiatives. Conversely, perceptions of inequity or favouritism can lead to disengagement and resistance (Ahmed, 2023).

Item 12 in Table 01 below shows that 83% agree that communication is important in the QA implementation where employees and students need to receive feedback. This was identified as crucial when students-staff evaluation at every end of the semester reports were observed in the department of quality assurance directorates in 5 of 6 universities. This made significant evidence that 83.3% of Ugandan universities were committed to

giving feedback on students' evaluation of staff every semester (Kayondo & Kabukamosoke, 2020). However, another respondent argued that while students are being given feedback on their evaluation reports, research and projects are delayed by lecturers hence several students in Ugandan sometimes don't easily graduate in time because of failure to be given feedback on their research and projects.

The social exchange theory (SET) allows cost-benefit analysis where employees before investing much of their time and efforts always consider, "How much do I benefit from my commitment?" as such question remains unanswered, the employees may either voluntarily quit service or adapt absenteeism or part-time to other institutions to make ends meet. Ugandan lecturers are "fluid" they oscillate between several universities (Kibaliwandu, 2024; Tibarimbasa, 2010). According to SET, employees weigh the costs and benefits associated with their engagement in QA activities. In Ugandan universities, the perceived benefits of participating in QA policy implementation—such as improved institutional reputation, better working conditions, and enhanced career development opportunities—must outweigh the perceived costs, such as increased workload and potential stress. Effective communication of the benefits and support mechanisms can enhance employee willingness to engage (Kibaliwandu & Mwesigye, 2021).

The SET suggest that employees will play trust which is the critical role of institutions whose operations and culture are guided by the principles enshrined in the social exchange theory (Ahmed, 2023). Employees are more likely to engage in QA policy implementation if they trust the university administration and believe that the organization is committed to maintaining high-quality standards and supporting its staff. Building and maintaining trust through transparent processes, open communication, and consistency in policy application can foster a positive exchange relationship and boost employee engagement. The Ugandan universities failed in this respect to implore the SET.

Influence of Organizational Culture, the participatory approach of quality assurance policy implementation is likely to promote a culture of continuous evaluation and benchmarking. The organizational culture within Ugandan universities affects how SET principles are manifested in QA policy implementation. A culture that promotes collaboration, open dialogue, and shared goals enhances the reciprocity aspect of SET. Conversely, a culture characterized by hierarchical decision-making and limited communication may hinder effective social exchanges and employee engagement in QA initiatives.

Evaluating the Practical Implementation of Employee Engagement Strategies and Quality Assurance Policies in Ugandan Universities

In the realm of higher education, the effectiveness of quality assurance (QA) policies and employee engagement strategies are crucial for maintaining academic standards and fostering a productive work environment. Ugandan universities, like many institutions globally, face the challenge of effectively implementing these strategies to enhance educational quality and staff satisfaction (Suleiman, 2023). The practical implementation of employee engagement strategies and QA policies in Ugandan universities, assessing their effectiveness, challenges, and areas for improvement calls for collegiality (Kibaliwandu, Mwesigye & Maate, 2020). The existing literature shows that oneness among

employees and fellow African community members is being eroded because of competition interests and corruption at different levels of administration (Nakinaalwa, 2023). Accountability and transparency are major quality assurance anticipated outcomes.

Quality assurance policies in Ugandan universities are designed to ensure that academic programs meet established standards and continuously improve. These policies typically encompass areas such as curriculum design, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and institutional governance. They are intended to promote academic excellence and accountability, ensuring that institutions provide quality education to students (NCHE, 2014). The university employees are key implementers of the quality assurance policy when engaged to actively participate in QA policy implementation. Engaged employees as those who are fully physically, cognitively and emotionally connected with their work roles, work harder through increased levels of discretionary effort and are highly committed (N Achonga, Matagi & Emuron, 2022). The flow chart showing policy adaptation, implementation and evaluation or review provides insight for policymakers, top university management and university employees (table 02) above. Employee engagement is an administrative activity where specific terms, such as intellectual engagement, organisational engagement, motivation and organisational commitment must get meaning within the team at work (CIPD Discussion Report, 2021). In universities, we discuss employee engagement where they perform based on intellectual capabilities, knowledge and skills. They follow policies interpreted at the institutional level, national and globally accepted through benchmarking.

Employee engagement strategies aim to increase staff involvement, satisfaction, and commitment to institutional goals (CIPD Discussion Report, 2021). These strategies often include professional development opportunities, clear communication channels, recognition programs, and participatory decision-making processes. Engaged employees are more likely to contribute positively to QA efforts, leading to more effective implementation of quality standards. As mentioned above, results show that 19.1% of employees are PhD holders, while 27.7% are PhD on track, 46.8% have master's degrees and 6.4% still hold bachelor's degrees in science or arts (Kibaliirwandi, 2024). The State of Higher Education report shows that 344 employees are PhD holders, 1199 are Master's degree holders and 181 hold Bachelor's degrees in the six universities that participated in the study (NCHE, 2019). This implies that 20% are PhD holders, 69.5% hold master's and 10.5% hold bachelor's degrees. These statistics correlate hence sample was a true representation of the population under study. As participants argue that teaching, research and community outreach are core activities for universities, there is a need for a staff development program to benefit employees (NCHE, 2014).

Effective implementation begins with the development and clear communication of QA policies. In Ugandan universities, policies are often formulated by academic and administrative leaders and then disseminated through various channels, including meetings, memos, and internal platforms (Mwesigye & Kibaliirwandi, 2024). However, the effectiveness of this communication can vary. Some institutions may struggle with ensuring that all staff members are adequately informed and understand the implications of QA

policies. As Table 02 above shows the process of policy adaptation and implementation in universities, communication is important in employee engagement and implementation (Kibaliirwandi, 2024).

Professional development is a key component of employee engagement and is essential for the successful implementation of QA policies. Ugandan universities often offer training programs aimed at enhancing staff skills and knowledge related to QA practices (NCHE, 2014). These programs are designed to equip employees with the necessary tools and understanding to contribute effectively to quality assurance efforts. The challenge lies in ensuring that these programs are accessible, relevant, and regularly updated to reflect current standards and practices (Dolcini, 2021).

Recognition and reward systems are important for motivating employees and acknowledging their contributions to QA efforts (RIU, 2024). Employees who get recognized tend to have higher self-esteem, more confidence, more willingness to take on new challenges and more eagerness to be innovative (Nkumba University, 2014). In Ugandan universities, recognition may come in the form of awards, promotions in academic ranks, or public acknowledgement. However, the effectiveness of these systems can be inconsistent, and there may be a lack of formal mechanisms for recognizing individual or team contributions to QA. The National Council for Higher Education provides guidelines for how performing university staff should be professionally ranked as lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors and professors (Makerere University, 2006). When presenting a fast track record for ranks must be considered to compare to the new version of university employees. Teaching experience, research and publication, community engagement or outreach are major areas for which promotion in ranks shall be considered for employees (Kibaliirwandi & Mwesigye, 2018; NCHE, 2014).

Engaging employees in decision-making processes related to QA policies can enhance their commitment and participation. Some Ugandan universities have implemented participatory approaches, such as involving staff in QA committees or feedback sessions. Nonetheless, the extent of employee involvement can vary, and there may be limitations in the opportunities provided for staff to influence QA policy development and implementation.

However, there are several challenges that affect the practical implementation of employee engagement strategies and QA policies in Ugandan universities. These include limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, resistance to change, and a lack of alignment between policy objectives and institutional practices. Additionally, issues such as insufficient training, unclear communication, and limited recognition can hinder effective engagement and policy implementation. There is a need for expanding and diversifying professional development opportunities. This will help staff stay current with QA practices and improve their skills. Investing in training programs and workshops that address both technical and soft skills can foster a more competent and engaged workforce.

QA practices streamline processes and identify areas for improvement, leading to more efficient administration and resource utilization. This can result in cost savings and better allocation of resources, contributing to overall institutional performance.

Table 01: Descriptive Statistics table

Item #	Item/statement	SD	D	M	A	SA	Mean (X)	Std. Dev
Item 04	The working environment has improved, and staff can execute their duties	N=07 0.7%	N=15 10.6%	N=40 28.4%	N=47 34.8%	N=36 (25.5%)	3.74	0.893
Item 06	Employee recognition by Management is highly satisfying	N=7 5.0%	N=28 19.9%	N=51 36.2%	N=38 27%	N=17 12.1%	3.21	1.054
Item 07	promotion in professional ranks is well articulated in the HR manual	N=5 3.5%	N=29 20.6%	N=29 20.6%	N=47 33.3%	N=31 22%	3.50	1.150
Item 08	This institution ensures job security for employees	N=9 6.4%	N=22 15.6%	N=38 27%	N=46 32.6%	N=26 18.4%	3.41	1.147
Item 09	Delegation has improved and leadership team is observed within	N=3 2.1%	N=16 11.3%	N=47 33.3%	N=48 34%	N=26 18.4%	3.6	1.089
Item 12	Feedback is given on quality assurance and other related policies	N=10 7.1%	N=14 9.9%	N=34 24.1%	N=39 27.7%	N=45 31.2%	3.65	1.217
Item 14	Staff morale in executing duty for productive work is high	N=6 4.3%	N=22 15.6%	N=53 37.6%	N=49 34.8%	N=11 7.8%	3.26	0.961
Item 15	The progress on my duty is satisfying in this institution	N=6 4.3%	N=22 15.6%	N=41 29.1%	N=36 29.1%	N=36 25.52%	3.50	1.151
Item 16	Employees use creative problem-solving in handling clients' problems	N=4 2.8%	N=11 7.8%	N=38 27.0%	N=44 31.2%	N=44 31.2%	3.80	1.057
	The gross annual salary in the USA \$ where US\$1:3600 Ug.sh	< \$3333	Bt'n \$3333 & \$ 6666	Bt'n \$6667 & \$10,000	\$10,000 & 13,888	> \$13,889	X	
Item B7	Employees' Gross annual salary in the USA \$ where US\$1:3600 Ug.sh	N=47 33.3%	N=53 37.6%	N=20 14.2%	N=10 7.16%	N=8 5.7%	2.12	1.136

Key: SD=Strongly Disagree, D=disagree, M=moderately agree, A=Agree, and SA= strongly Agree.

Conclusion and Recommendations

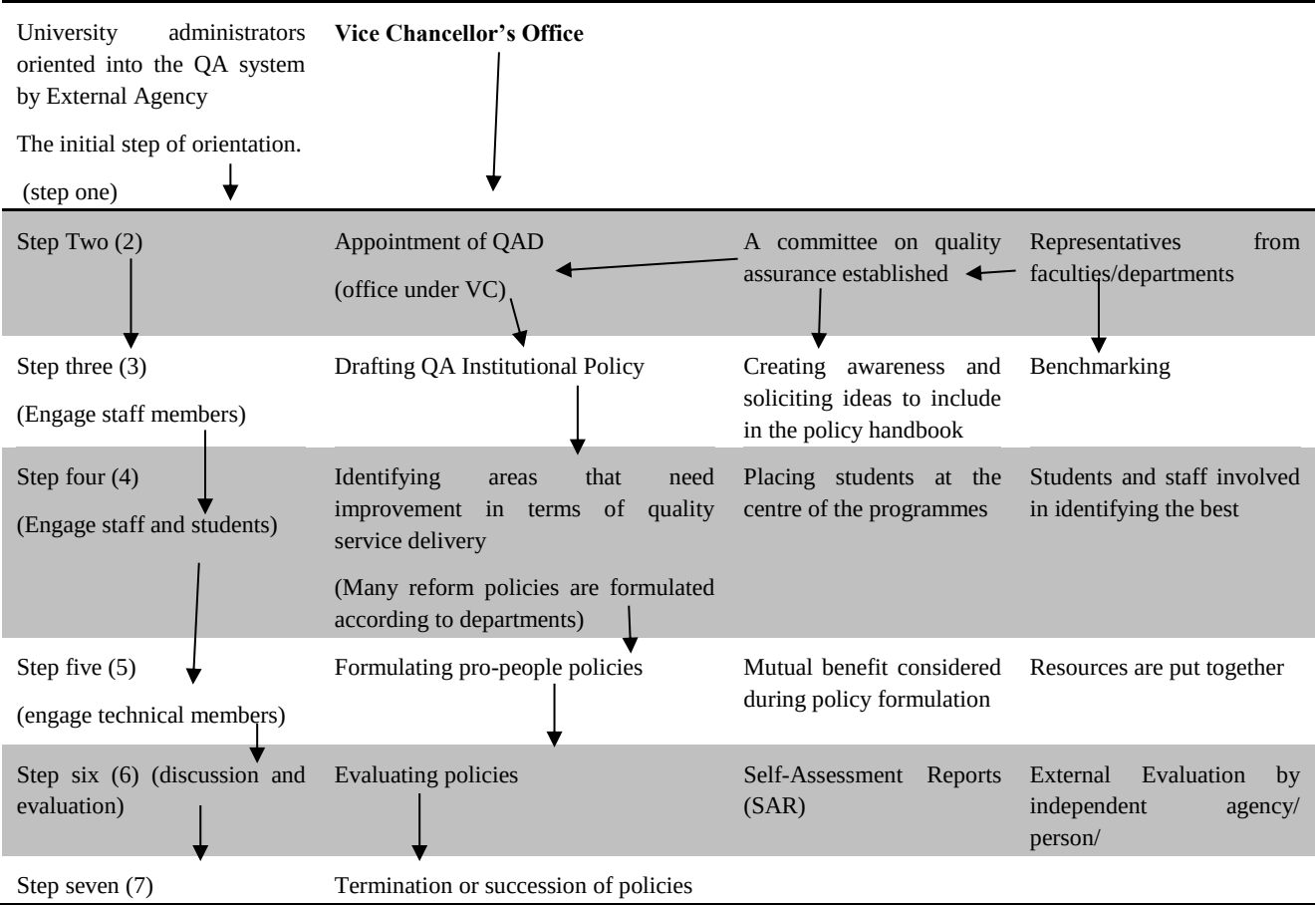
Social Exchange Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding employee engagement in quality assurance policy implementation in Ugandan universities. By focusing on reciprocity, fairness, cost-benefit analysis, trust, and organizational culture, universities can enhance employee involvement and commitment to QA processes. Addressing these aspects through strategic management practices can lead to more effective implementation of QA policies and improved overall quality in higher education institutions. The argument is in line with John Thibaut Homans' postulations that "explain the relationships between people through reinforcement mechanisms, whereby the behaviour of social actors is reinforced by reward and inhibited by punishments (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). While universities and other tertiary institutions require academic staff to research and publish, engage in community outreach, and teach effectively, it is important to enhance salary structure according to ranks and qualifications. Enabling a work environment where employees are able to identify themselves with employers and institutions is pertinent for employee engagement.

Employee engagement and quality assurance practices play a crucial role in shaping university performance and employee satisfaction. Engaged employees contribute to enhanced productivity, innovation, and job satisfaction, while effective QA practices improve academic standards, institutional reputation, and operational efficiency (CIPD discussion report, 2021; Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). By integrating engagement strategies with QA practices, universities can create a positive and productive work environment that supports both institutional goals and employee well-being. This holistic approach not only drives institutional success but also fosters a supportive and fulfilling workplace for all staff members (Bowden, 2021).

The practical implementation of employee engagement strategies and quality assurance policies in Ugandan universities presents both opportunities and challenges. By focusing on improving communication, enhancing professional development, developing robust recognition systems, fostering inclusive decision-making, and addressing resource constraints, universities can better align their practices with quality assurance goals and improve staff engagement (Makerere, 2006; RIU, 2024). A concerted effort in these areas can lead to a more effective and sustainable approach to quality assurance and employee engagement, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of higher education standards in Uganda. It is important for university administrators to show that they care for employee's needs, build relationships (connections), guide employees to be the best (coaching), encourage employees to contribute through mind and action during decision-making (contribution), and appreciate of congratulate best performers (Congratulate) which is important in celebrating every milestone (Editorial Team, 2024).

Creating formal and consistent recognition systems that acknowledge and reward staff contributions to performance efforts can boost morale and motivation. By recognizing and rewarding employees, organisations create an environment of appreciation and acknowledgement. This, in turn, cultivates a sense of belonging and encourages teamwork. When employees feel valued and appreciated, they are more likely to collaborate effectively, share knowledge, and support one another (Amoatema & Kyeremeh, 2016). Employee recognition programs provide vital support for motivating and engaging employees. They acknowledge and reward hard work, increasing job satisfaction and productivity. These programs also contribute to employee retention and improve overall performance by inspiring employees to excel and fostering teamwork (Chaney, 2023). This can include regular awards, performance reviews, academic rank promotion, and public acknowledgement of achievements. Public acknowledgement may include hosting professors' research projects on university websites, hosting successful research projects on university websites, and staff lists appearing on websites. Encouraging broader staff involvement in QA policy development and decision-making processes can increase engagement and ownership. Establishing inclusive committees and feedback mechanisms can provide employees with a sense of participation and influence. Therefore, employee recognition is important because it shows you're paying attention and keeping your team's best interests in mind. It contributes to a positive work environment that helps reduce turnover and stress. Follow along to learn four key benefits of recognizing your team (Wren & Writer, 2024).

Table 02 Effective implementation of quality assurance policy in universities



Source: Kibaliwandu, 2024

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