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A neo-institutional framework for the appropriation of quality assurance in Moroccan public and public-private partnership universities

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Abstract

Quality assurance now rests, in most higher education systems, on national agencies that apply common standards. In Morocco, a single national framework applies to public universities and to universities created through a public-private partnership (PPP). Quality models do not explain why institutions subject to the same requirements apply them differently, and a documented search found no study comparing how universities of different legal status appropriate the same framework. This conceptual article therefore asks the following question. To what extent does a university's legal status shape the way it appropriates the national quality assurance framework? Legal status is understood as a set of constraints and resources, including funding, governance and the employment of teaching staff. We combine isomorphism, decoupling and institutional logics, observed through appropriation, quality culture and stakeholder salience. The framework distinguishes the formal from the actual level of quality assurance systems and places each system on a continuum from compliance to improvement. Five propositions and one rival proposition are derived. Formal structures should converge, whereas purposes should diverge, towards compliance in the public university, where the state logic is central, and towards improvement in the PPP university, unless the market logic leads mainly to signalling. Founding partners and fee-paying students are expected to weigh more on the system in the PPP university, and in both universities improvement should depend on leadership that translates external requirements into an internal project. The contribution is incremental and partly contextual. If corroborated, the propositions would invite reflection on a more differentiated national evaluation.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Higher education, Institutional logics, Decoupling, Appropriation, Quality culture, Stakeholders, Public-private partnership, Morocco.
JEL Classification: I23, I28, L33
Paper type: Theoretical Research

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1. Introduction

Over the past thirty years or so, quality assurance has become widespread in higher education. Brennan and Shah (2000) observed that within a decade almost all European countries had established national systems for assessing quality, mostly sponsored by the state, and that similar developments could be found in many other parts of the world. These systems share a common core, made up of an agency that manages the system, self-evaluation by institutions, peer review with site visits and a report on the results (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the need to regulate private institutions appears to have been the main trigger for creating national agencies in most countries, and several countries later made the accreditation of public institutions mandatory (Materu, 2007).

Morocco has followed this trend. The National Agency for the Evaluation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education and Scientific Research (ANEAQ), established by Law 80-12 of 2014, evaluates institutions and study programmes against a national reference framework adopted in 2019. These rules are now being revised. After Framework Law 51-17 of 2019 called for the regular evaluation of the education system (art. 53), Law 59.24 of February 2026 repealed Law 01-00 (art. 111), created the category of non-profit institutions of public utility, which may be set up through a public-private partnership (art. 26), and obliged every institution to create a self-assessment structure (art. 107). Draft Law 68.25, adopted by the Government Council in February 2026, amends the law on the agency.

This framework applies to institutions of different status. Of the four categories defined by Law 59.24 (art. 7), we compare two, namely public universities and universities created through a public-private partnership, referred to below as PPP or partnership universities. The latter are recognised by the State, but their governance, funding and recruitment practices set them apart. Private institutions, which fall under a different regime, are left aside (see Section 3). A single set of standards therefore applies to organisations that have neither the same resources nor the same priorities.

Do these universities appropriate the national framework in the same way? Quality models, such as Total Quality Management or the EFQM model, describe what an institution must do, but they do not explain why two institutions subject to the same requirements apply them differently. Agency theory, contingency theory and resource dependence offer other readings, and Section 2 explains why we did not retain them as the basis of our framework. What is needed is a theory that links organisations to their institutional environment.

Sociological neo-institutionalism meets this need. Martin (2019, p. 31) notes that neo-institutional theory has been widely used to theorise change in higher education institutions, and a recent scoping review shows that quality management is increasingly read through the lens of institutional isomorphism (Guil Gorostidi & Rubio-Arostegui, 2026), in studies that come mostly from Europe and the Americas. In Morocco, the available studies deal mainly with the difficulties of internal quality assurance in public universities (El Moufarej, 2025; Ouazzani Chahdi & Tahrouch, 2023), with the national system and its reform, analysed from documents (Benallouche et al., 2026; Benelmallam, 2026), or with the evaluations carried out by the agency (Hamdani & Kaaouachi, 2024; Oustous et al., 2021). Our documented search (see Section 2) found no study that compares how universities of different status appropriate the same national framework in Morocco or the Maghreb.

This article seeks to fill this gap. Our research question is the following. To what extent does a university's legal status shape the way it appropriates the national quality assurance framework? By legal status, we mean the legal regime of the university together with what it implies for funding, governance and the recruitment of teaching staff. Following Grimand (2012), we understand appropriation as the process through which actors interpret a management tool, adapt it and give it meaning in their own activity. The words 'to what extent'

are deliberate, since similar systems in both universities would be a result in its own right. The question breaks down into three sub-questions. What do the quality assurance systems of the two universities have in common, and does this convergence stem from the agency's requirements? How do actors appropriate these systems, and where do formal procedures and actual use diverge? How do the institutional logics, stakeholders and resources of each university explain these gaps and the differences between the two cases? Rather than presenting empirical data, we construct an analytical framework and derive from it five propositions and a rival proposition (Section 5.2), which will guide a comparative case study.

Several authors have already combined isomorphism, decoupling and institutional logics (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011), so our contribution is incremental. Firstly, we treat legal status as a filter through which the same framework may produce similar structures but different purposes, status being understood as a set of constraints and resources. Secondly, we identify two mechanisms through which this filter may operate, namely the weight of salient stakeholders and the role of leadership. Finally, we apply institutional logics to quality assurance in a Maghreb system, a contribution that is partly contextual (see Section 6.1).

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the methodological approach, Section 3 the Moroccan context and Section 4 the theoretical foundations. Section 5 sets out the framework and the propositions, Section 6 discusses them, and Section 7 concludes.

2. Methodological approach

This article is a conceptual article. It is not based on data, but follows an explicit approach. Gilson and Goldberg (2015) explain that conceptual papers have no data because they focus on integrating literatures and proposing new relationships among constructs. Such papers seek to bridge existing theories and to provide multi-level insights (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015), which is what our framework attempts for quality assurance.

Jaakkola (2020) distinguishes four types of conceptual articles, namely theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology and model. Our article is a model paper, which explains relationships between concepts and summarises them in a figure or in propositions (Jaakkola, 2020), as we do in Section 5. In the terms of Jaakkola (2020), quality assurance in higher education is our domain theory, that is to say the substantive area studied, and sociological neo-institutionalism our method theory, the conceptual system used to study it.

These choices rest on an interpretive stance. Thiétart (2025, pp. 22, 24) place epistemological paradigms on a continuum running from a realist orientation, which includes positivism and critical realism, to a constructivist orientation, which includes interpretivism and in which social reality is constructed through the intentions and interactions of actors (p. 26). We adopt this view because our question concerns the meaning that actors give to a quality assurance system, which the regulation imposing it does not fix in advance. This stance has a direct consequence for decoupling. The formal and the actual are levels at which the same practice can be observed, rather than two separate realities, one hidden behind the other. They correspond to what is stated in documents, what is implemented by those who run the system and what is experienced by academics, administrative staff and students. Our reasoning is therefore abductive. Abduction aims to propose theoretical conceptualisations that must then be put to the test (Thiétart, 2025, p. 80), and our propositions guide the fieldwork while remaining open to configurations that the framework did not anticipate.

This theoretical choice follows from our research question and was made against four other readings. Total quality management and the EFQM model are normative, and Houston (2007) shows that TQM imposes a cause-and-effect logic of command and control that privileges the values of managers and customers. Agency theory analyses the delegation of decision-making authority from a principal to an agent (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), which suits questions of

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control more than questions of interpretation. Contingency theory asks which structure allows an organisation to cope with its environment (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), whereas quality assurance structures may be adopted for legitimacy rather than efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Loose coupling (Weick, 1976) explains why change is difficult in universities, but not why universities under the same pressure respond differently according to their status. Resource dependence is not set aside, since its central idea enters the framework through the centrality of logics (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Neo-institutionalism, on the other hand, asks why organisations adopt the practices their environment expects and why what they claim to do may differ from what they actually do.

The corpus was compiled in two stages. We first gathered the foundational texts of neo-institutionalism and the main works on institutional logics, decoupling, appropriation, quality culture and stakeholders. We then searched Scopus and Google Scholar for studies of quality assurance in higher education published between 2000 and 2026, in English and French, starting from each component of the framework rather than from a single search string, before tracing the references of the texts retained. A text was retained when it shed light on at least one component of the framework. This is therefore not a systematic review, and we do not present a flow diagram, since the corpus aims at theoretical relevance rather than exhaustiveness (Jaakkola, 2020). The analytical corpus used in Sections 4 and 5 comprises 49 texts, of which twenty-three belong to organisation theory, twenty-two deal with higher education and quality assurance in other countries, and four with Morocco and the Maghreb. The reference list also includes methodological works, legal texts, statistics and the Moroccan studies used in Section 3. The corpus remains mainly English-language. To limit this bias, it includes studies of the Maghreb (Benjelloun, 2018, 2019), Lebanon (Khalil, 2021), Ghana (Oware & Mokoena, 2026; Tsevi, 2025) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Materu, 2007). Arabic-language sources are limited to legal texts, a limitation we return to in Section 6.3.

To check the gap we claim, we ran a documented search in Scopus on 23 October 2026, in titles, abstracts and keywords, for the period 2000–2026. Three queries combined quality assurance and higher education with, respectively, Morocco, the Maghreb or North Africa, legal status or partnership, and comparisons between public, private or partnership institutions. Of the 54 records, 2 were duplicates, and 36 were excluded on title and abstract, and 14 of the 16 texts sought in full were retained. None of them examines how universities of different status appropriate the same national framework in Morocco or the Maghreb. The comparisons by status are quantitative and concern other regions (Şencan & Karabulut, 2015; Mariano & Valenzuela, 2021; Serrano et al., 2026), while the qualitative institutional studies deal with private institutions only (Hodson et al., 2008; Khalil, 2021; Tsevi, 2025).

The framework was developed in three stages, each involving theoretical decisions. Theorising usually starts from an anomaly or a tension (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017), and ours lies between isomorphism, which predicts convergence, and the persistence of different practices under the same national framework. The contribution we seek is one of integration, which MacInnis (2011) describes as drawing connections between previously separate phenomena to offer a higher-order view of how they are related. In the terms of Corley and Gioia (2011), its originality is incremental rather than revelatory, and its utility is mainly scientific. In the first stage, we synthesised each theoretical strand. For decoupling, for instance, we kept the distinction between policy-practice and means-ends decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012), because a quality system may be fully implemented and still remain disconnected from improvement. In the second stage, we linked the concepts. We chose appropriation rather than implementation, since appropriation treats a tool as reinvented in use (Grimand, 2012), and stakeholder salience rather than resource dependence, because salience distinguishes power from legitimacy and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997). In the third stage, we derived propositions

and a rival proposition, and specified what would corroborate or contradict each of them (Section 5.2).

To evaluate the framework, we adopt the criteria of Whetten (1989), for whom a theoretical contribution must specify which factors are at play, how they are related and why, and under which conditions the reasoning holds. Table 1 shows where the framework answers each of these questions. The propositions are not hypotheses, since propositions involve concepts whereas hypotheses require measures (Whetten, 1989), although those of a conceptual paper should remain close to testable hypotheses (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Following Yin (2018), they guide data collection and analysis.

Table 1: Correspondence between Whetten's (1989) criteria and the components of the framework

Criterion	Question	Answer in the framework	Where
What	Which factors are at play?	Isomorphic pressures, institutional logics and their centrality, forms of decoupling, salient stakeholders, appropriation and quality culture	Sections 4.1–4.4, Table 3
How	How are they related?	Common pressures produce convergent structures. Status filters them through the central logic. Appropriation and salient stakeholders shape the gap between the formal and the actual. Two feedback loops close the framework.	Section 5.1, Figure 1
Why	What justifies these relations?	Search for legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), filtering of institutional complexity by organisational attributes (Greenwood et al., 2011), dependence on resources (Besharov & Smith, 2014), embedded agency (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008)	Sections 4.3, 4.5, 5.2
Who, where, when	Under which conditions does it hold?	Moroccan public and partnership universities under a common national framework, an agency with advisory powers, contextual conditions treated as rival explanations, transferability to the Maghreb	Sections 3, 5.1, 5.3

Source: Compiled by the authors.

3. Quality assurance in Morocco and the coexistence of different statuses

For a quarter of a century, Moroccan higher education was governed by Law 01-00 of 19 May 2000, which recognised only public and private higher education (art. 1). A third group of institutions emerged during the 2010s. These universities, referred to below as partnership universities, were set up as non-profit foundations in partnership between the State and private companies and placed under the pedagogical authority of the ministry (Pellegrini et al., 2020, p. 2). Decree No. 2-14-665 of 10 November 2014 exempted universities linked to the State by a partnership agreement from the three years of activity required for recognition (art. 2), but these universities had no category of their own in the law, and the ministry's statistics grouped them with the private sector (Pellegrini et al., 2020, p. 3). As late as 2024, the Court of Auditors considered that this framework of partnership still needed clarification (Cour des comptes, 2024, p. 73). Law 59.24, promulgated by Dahir No. 1.26.04 of 11 February 2026, repealed Law 01-00 (art. 111) and ended this ambiguity. Among its four categories of institutions (art. 7), it creates non-profit institutions of public utility, which may be set up by public legal persons or through a partnership between the public and private sectors. The State concludes contracts with them for training and research in priority areas, and their creation entails their recognition by the State as of right (art. 26).

This institutional partnership differs from the public-private partnership contracts of Law 86-12 of 24 December 2014, under which a public body entrusts a private partner, for a fixed period, with the design, financing, construction or operation of a facility or service (art. 1). Partnership universities are institutions in their own right.

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The two categories do not carry the same weight. In 2024–2025, public universities enrolled 1,102,364 students, or 88.2 per cent of all higher education students, whereas the universities and institutions created in partnership enrolled 28,696, or 2.3 per cent (Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation [MESRSI], 2025, p. 6). Since a public university groups several faculties and schools, we compare numbers of students and teachers rather than numbers of institutions. Yet the trend runs the other way. Between 2023–2024 and 2024–2025, enrolment fell slightly in public universities (−0.35 per cent) and rose by 21.1 per cent in the partnership category, although from a small base (MESRSI, 2025, p. 6). The number of students per permanent teacher, which leaves out part-time teachers paid by the hour, is about 63 in public universities and about 30 in the partnership category (MESRSI, 2025, p. 6).

The public category is not homogeneous either. In 2024–2025, 82.2 per cent of public university students were enrolled in open-access institutions (calculated from MESRSI, 2025, p. 17), and Ibourk and Ghazi (2026, p. 344) report about 104 students per teacher in open-access fields, against 23 in regulated ones. This is one reason why our framework takes the university as its unit of analysis and treats its institutions as embedded units (see Section 5.1).

In all categories, quality assurance rests on a national framework. The ANEAQ, established by Law 80-12 of 31 July 2014, evaluates public and private institutions and examines degree programmes with a view to their accreditation (art. 3). The accreditation decision does not belong to the agency, since its opinions are sent to the National Commission for the Coordination of Higher Education (CNCES), which takes the final decisions (Andersen & Koumaré, 2019, p. 10). The Court of Auditors describes its role with regard to private institutions as mainly advisory, since it can neither grant nor withdraw their authorisation, accreditation or recognition (Cour des comptes, 2024, p. 72). Draft Law 68.25 maintains this division of roles, as it asks the agency to give its opinion on accreditation at the request of the minister (art. 2).

The content of these requirements is set by the national reference framework adopted by Decree No. 2-19-16 of 23 July 2019. It comprises five domains, fifteen fields, thirty-eight references and 146 criteria, which cover governance, training, research, student support and services to society (Decree No. 2-19-16, 2020, pp. 205–211). Its annex defines an institution as any public or private institution of higher education or research (p. 205), and no criterion varies with status. The same text asks each institution to develop a quality assurance policy integrated into its strategic management (p. 206), and Law 59.24 now obliges every institution to create a structure in charge of regular self-assessment (art. 107). The two universities we study therefore face the same requirements, although their application to partnership universities is recent. The first institutional evaluations, launched in June 2020, concerned one institution in each of the twelve public universities, and a second series then targeted one institution in each of the five universities created in partnership with the State (Oustous et al., 2021, p. 214; Hamdani & Kaaouachi, 2024, p. 419).

Two recent Moroccan studies point to the risk that these requirements produce documents rather than change. Benallouche et al. (2026) observe that an approach centred on compliance may reduce quality assurance to administrative exercises of document production, and Benelmallam (2026) warns that an evaluation disconnected from budgets, contracts and council decisions is likely to remain documentary. Both studies are documentary, as their authors acknowledge (Benallouche et al., 2026; Benelmallam, 2026), and neither compares institutions of different status. Our framework is designed to support precisely this comparison.

Of the four categories defined by Law 59.24, our framework retains two, namely public universities and the non-profit institutions of public utility created through a public-private partnership (art. 26). Private institutions are left aside for two reasons. Firstly, our question concerns universities that combine a public mission with market resources, which Jongbloed (2015) describes as hybrid organisations steered at the same time by government regulation and

by market forces, and setting them against public universities follows the logic of theoretical replication (Yin, 2018). Secondly, private institutions fall under a different regime, since they are evaluated every four years to check that they still meet the conditions of their authorisation (art. 21), which would add another source of variation. Extending the framework to them remains an avenue for further research.

Table 2 summarises the differences between the two categories. Two points deserve emphasis. Partnership universities are relatively small, typically enrolling 2,000 to 3,000 students (McNamara, 2021, p. 11), and Morocco has explicitly supported them to accompany the internationalisation of its system (Buckner, 2022, p. 44). Their dependence on fees is real but partial, since about one student in five received a government grant in 2021 (McNamara, 2021, p. 14). This is why we treat status as a set of constraints and resources, including funding, governance and the employment of teaching staff, rather than as a mere legal form.

Table 2: Main features of the two categories of university retained

Feature	**Public university**	**Public-private partnership university**
Legal category	Public institution created by law, under the supervision and financial control of the State (Law 59.24, art. 9)	Non-profit institution of public utility, created by public legal persons or through a public-private partnership on the basis of specifications (Law 59.24, art. 26)
Link with the State	Possible contract-programmes based on strategic objectives and performance indicators (Law 59.24, art. 10)	Contracts with the State for training and research in priority areas (Law 59.24, art. 26)
Recognition of degrees	National diplomas issued on behalf of the State (Law 59.24, art. 2)	Recognition by the State as of right from creation (Law 59.24, art. 26)
Teaching staff	Civil servants, whose recruitment is set by the ministry (Benjelloun, 2018, p. 290)	Permanent staff providing at least 60 per cent of teaching hours, half of them doctors, as a condition of recognition before 2026 (Decree No. 2-14-665, art. 2)
Funding	State budget, with tuition absent or minimal in most programmes (Buckner, 2022, p. 43). Paid programmes are allowed in flexible-schedule and continuing education (Law 59.24, art. 81)	Mixed. Tuition fees, government grants for about one student in five (McNamara, 2021, p. 14), founding partners (Pellegrini et al., 2020, p. 2) and contracts with the State for priority training and research (Law 59.24, art. 26)
Tuition and student aid	State grants for deserving students (Law 59.24, art. 88)	Fees of MAD 30,000 to 114,000 a year in 2021 (McNamara, 2021, p. 14). Legal obligation to award scholarships, especially to students from needy families or with disabilities (Law 59.24, art. 92), and subsidised student loans (art. 88)
Students and permanent teachers (2024–2025)	1,102,364 students and 17,450 permanent teachers, about 63 students per teacher (MESRSI, 2025, p. 6)	28,696 students and 943 permanent teachers, about 30 students per teacher (MESRSI, 2025, p. 6)
Quality assurance obligations	Same obligations: Self-assessment structure (Law 59.24, art. 107) and national reference framework (Decree No. 2-19-16)	

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Status therefore changes more than a legal form, but other factors vary with it. Partnership universities are smaller and more recent than public universities, their disciplinary mix differs, and some institutions seek voluntary international accreditations or a place in rankings, which act as normative and mimetic pressures competing with those of the national agency (Khalil, 2021). Our framework does not seek to measure the specific effect of status. It aims to understand the mechanisms through which status may operate, and it treats the other factors as rival explanations (see Sections 5.1 and 6.1).

4. Theoretical foundations

Neo-institutionalism starts from the premise that organisations seek legitimacy, that is to say

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the approval of their environment, as well as efficiency. Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'. This idea runs through the concepts presented below. We present them by level of analysis, from the field to the organisation and then to the actors, and Section 4.5 explains how they fit together.

4.1. Isomorphism or structural convergence

The first concept, situated at the level of the field, concerns the similarity between organisations. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) begin with an observation. Organisations within the same sector often end up resembling one another, even when this similarity does not make them more effective. To explain this, they introduce the concept of the organisational field, which refers to 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). The field thus brings together resource providers, users, regulatory bodies and organisations offering similar services.

Within a field, competition is not solely about efficiency. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) point out that organisations compete for resources and customers, and also for political power and institutional legitimacy. This quest for legitimacy produces a homogenisation that the authors term institutional isomorphism.

Three mechanisms bring this about. Coercive isomorphism results from pressures exerted by organisations on which organisations depend, in particular the state. Mimetic isomorphism results from uncertainty, which drives organisations to imitate those they regard as legitimate. Finally, normative isomorphism results from professionalisation, which disseminates common norms through training and professional networks (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

These mechanisms apply well to quality assurance. National agencies and accreditation procedures exert coercive pressure, universities imitate the systems of recognised institutions, and quality assurance officers form a professional group with a common vocabulary and set of tools. Quality thus works as a device charged with social meanings, which serves as a condition of legitimacy before governments, agencies and external audiences (Guil Gorostidi & Rubio-Arostegui, 2026). In Hungarian universities, government pressure led to the adoption of quality frameworks, but implementation varied according to the characteristics of each institution (Csizmadia et al., 2008).

For our purposes, the implication is clear. Moroccan universities subject to the requirements of the ANEAQ should have very similar formal quality assurance structures. Isomorphism therefore explains the convergence. However, it does not explain the differences that may persist in practices.

4.2. Decoupling, or the gap between the formal and the actual

The second concept, which we situate at the level of the organisation, concerns precisely these differences. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that many elements of formal structure reflect institutional rules that function as rationalised myths and are binding on organisations. By incorporating these elements, organisations increase their legitimacy, their resources and their chances of survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, these myths are not always compatible with actual practice. To preserve both their legitimacy and their functioning, organisations therefore separate their formal structure from their day-to-day activities. Meyer and Rowan (1977) refer to this phenomenon as decoupling.

This decoupling is sustained by a logic of trust. External stakeholders accept the stated structure without scrutinising actual practices too closely (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A quality procedure may thus exist on paper without ever guiding decisions.

Bromley and Powell (2012) distinguish two forms of decoupling. In policy-practice decoupling, which corresponds to the original idea, rules are adopted but rarely enforced. Means-ends decoupling involves 'a gap between means and ends' (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 484), in which procedures are followed, data are collected and reports are drawn up, but these activities do not clearly contribute to the objectives they are supposed to serve. This second form develops when results are difficult to measure and the environment imposes multiple demands, two conditions that describe well the situation of a university facing an external quality assurance framework.

A distinction must, however, be made between decoupling and loose coupling. Weick (1976) demonstrated that educational organisations are, by their very nature, loosely coupled. Orton and Weick (1990) clarify the difference. A decoupled system comprises distinct units that do not respond to one another, whereas a loosely coupled system comprises distinct units that remain connected nonetheless. This distinction is useful. Indeed, not every discrepancy observed within a university necessarily stems from a 'facade' strategy. It may also be attributable to the organisation's ordinary structure.

Several studies have documented decoupling in quality assurance. Newton (2000, p. 155) reports that, in a British college of higher education, quality monitoring was described as 'feeding the beast', a ritual that supplies data to 'somebody up there' without necessarily improving the service to students. In Ghanaian public universities, Oware and Mokoena (2026) observe that audit structures are adopted without being integrated into day-to-day practices. They interpret this disconnect not as a failure, but as a rational response to conflicting demands within a context of limited resources. For their part, Papadimitriou and Westerheijden (2010) note that quality assurance undertaken voluntarily produces more visible effects than that which is carried out as a matter of obligation.

The coexistence of similar structures and varied practices is not a new idea. Meyer and Rowan (1977) already noted that organisations in the same sector tend to share a formal structure whilst their actual practices may differ widely, and Goodrick and Salancik (1996) showed that organisations conform to the core of institutional standards and pursue their own interests at the margins. Our framework seeks to clarify which attribute of the organisation orders this variation when all universities face the same national framework, and through which mechanisms it operates.

For our purposes, the implication is twofold. Firstly, the analysis of a quality assurance system must distinguish between what is stated and what is practised. Secondly, the gap between the two may relate to implementation or to outcomes. However, this decoupling does not yet explain why the gap might be greater in one university than in another. To answer this, we must turn to institutional logics.

4.3. Institutional logics and the role of status

The third concept, which also operates at the level of the organisation, explains why organisations subject to the same pressures respond to them differently. The concept of institutional logic was introduced by Friedland and Alford (1991). Thornton and Ocasio (1999, p. 804) define it as 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence'. In other words, a logic provides actors with principles of action, sources of legitimacy and criteria for judging what is appropriate.

Thornton et al. (2012) distinguish seven societal logics, including those of the state, the market, the profession and the corporation. In higher education, three of these dominate the literature (Cai & Mountford, 2022). The logic of the state prioritises the public interest, compliance with rules and public accountability. The market logic prioritises efficiency, competition and the satisfaction of students, who are viewed as customers. Finally, the academic logic prioritises

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autonomy, disciplinary expertise and peer recognition. According to Cai (2026), these three logics correspond to the three vertices of the higher education coordination triangle proposed by Clark (1983).

These logics rarely coexist without tension. Greenwood et al. (2011) use the term institutional complexity to describe the situation of an organisation faced with incompatible demands. They add a point that is essential to our discussion. These logics do not affect all organisations in the same way, as they are filtered through certain characteristics of the organisation, in particular its structure, ownership, governance and identity. The legal status of a university is precisely one such filter.

Several studies show how organisations manage this plurality. Battilana and Dorado (2010) examine hybrid organisations that sustainably combine multiple logics, and Pache and Santos (2013) show that such organisations can selectively borrow elements from each logic, a strategy they term selective coupling. Jongbloed (2015) describes European universities as increasingly hybrid organisations, caught between a public mission and market-based resources. In a German university that became a foundation, practices derived from the corporate logic were adopted only superficially, to reassure the authorities, whilst actual functioning remained rooted in the state logic (Conrath-Hargreaves & Wüstemann, 2019). A change in status can therefore lead to decoupling.

This perspective matters for our purposes, provided that the difference between the two statuses is not reduced to the presence or absence of a logic. Public universities are not sheltered from market pressures. Benjelloun (2019, p. 331) observes that, in Morocco and Tunisia, quality assurance has led public universities to compete as they internalise the required procedures, which increases their attractiveness and their ability to generate funds. The academic logic also remains strong in public universities through collegial bodies and the civil-servant status of academics. The distinction we draw therefore concerns the centrality of each logic, that is to say the degree to which several logics are treated as equally valid and relevant to the functioning of an organisation (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Since organisations respond to the actors on whom they depend for critical resources, centrality may vary between organisations of the same field (Besharov & Smith, 2014). In a public university, where the ministry decides how many professors may be recruited and teaching staff are civil servants (Benjelloun, 2018, p. 290), the state logic should remain central. In a PPP university, tuition fees and founding partners (see Section 3) should give the market logic a central place alongside the state logic, so that the same framework could serve different purposes.

We retain the three logics that dominate research on higher education. Thornton et al. (2012) also identify the logics of the family, the community, and religion. Because the institutional logics perspective does not assume in advance how many logics operate in a given setting (Thornton et al., 2015, p. 5), these logics could also be at work in the Moroccan context. We do not include them in our propositions, and we return to this choice among the limitations of the framework.

4.4. Appropriation, a culture of quality and stakeholders

The three preceding concepts explain the convergence of structures, the gap between the formal and the actual, and the divergence of purposes. It remains to be understood how actors engage with the system in practice, which is the question addressed by appropriation, the process by which actors interpret a management tool, adapt it and give it meaning within their own activity (Grimand, 2012). De Vaujany (2006) distinguishes a rational perspective, which views the tool as an instrument to be applied, a psycho-cognitive perspective centred on users' learning and a socio-political perspective centred on power, and Grimand (2012) adds a symbolic perspective, in which the tool supports identity and sense-making. Appropriation thus shifts the focus from structures to practice and complements the top-down reading of decoupling.

Transferring this concept to quality assurance requires some justification, since appropriation was developed for tools used within organisations, whereas the national framework is an external regulatory requirement. In our view, the framework enters the university through instruments that each institution must produce itself, namely a self-assessment structure, a quality policy and self-assessment procedures (Law 59.24, art. 107; Decree No. 2-19-16, 2020, p. 206). These instruments match the definition of a management tool given by Grimand (2012), who counts quality standards among his examples and shows that a tool may be activated mainly in discourse, to legitimise action in the eyes of stakeholders. This last use brings appropriation close to decoupling. The object of appropriation in our framework is therefore the internal translation of the national framework rather than the regulation itself.

This reading connects appropriation with two notions from the institutional literature. The inhabited institutions perspective places people, their interactions and their meaning-making at the centre of institutional analysis (Hallett, 2010), and quality work refers to the activities and practices through which higher education institutions address the quality of their educational provision (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Both remind us that routines and shared values offer no guarantee of aligned practices (Elken & Stensaker, 2018).

Quality culture offers a second framework. Schein (1990, p. 111) defines an organisation's culture as 'a pattern of basic assumptions' that a group has developed whilst learning to resolve its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. Applied to higher education, a quality culture combines a cultural element, made up of shared values and commitment, with a structural element, which encompasses procedures (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010), and leadership and communication link these two elements (Bendermacher et al., 2017). Procedures alone are therefore insufficient to create a quality culture.

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) cross the intensity of external rules with the degree of group control to obtain four ideal types. A responsive culture uses external demands as a means of self-improvement, a reactive culture endures them and prioritises compliance, a regenerative culture gives priority to an internal project, and a reproductive culture seeks above all to replicate the status quo. In our framework, the intensity of external rules refers to coercive pressure, whilst group control refers to the influence of the academic logic.

This interpretation, however, calls for some qualification. Academics do not passively accept quality frameworks. Teelken (2012) interviewed academic staff in ten universities in the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and interpreted her findings through three concepts, symbolic compliance, professional pragmatism and formal instrumentality, which range from keeping managerial measures at a distance to accepting them without a critical perspective. The quality culture on display may therefore mask purely symbolic compliance.

Stakeholder salience provides the third framework. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) explain that managers pay varying degrees of attention to actors according to their power, legitimacy and urgency, an actor holding all three being described as definitive and one holding only legitimacy as discretionary. This framework helps to identify who actually directs a system. The configuration of stakeholders, however, changes with status. In a PPP university, founding partners and fee-paying students occupy a position that has no equivalent in a public university, since organisations respond to the demands of the actors on whom they depend (Besharov & Smith, 2014).

4.5. Levels of analysis and the place of agency

The framework draws on six concepts, which raises the question of their compatibility. We do not give them equal standing. Neo-institutionalism, with isomorphism, decoupling and institutional logics, forms the core of the framework, whereas appropriation, quality culture and stakeholder salience serve as tools for observing, within each university, what this core leads us to expect. Two arguments support this hierarchy. Firstly, the institutional logics perspective

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was designed as a metatheory that can support research at multiple levels of analysis (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 106), and Besharov and Smith (2014) explain the place of logics within an organisation by factors that lie in the field, in the organisation and in individuals. Secondly, neo-institutionalism is less foreign to the micro level than its later development suggests, since Meyer and Rowan drew on Goffman to describe ceremonial management (Hallett, 2010; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The borrowed concepts also share the assumptions of the core. Mitchell et al. (1997) adopt the definition of legitimacy proposed by Suchman (1995), and appropriation treats the meaning of a tool as constructed through its use (Grimand, 2012), in line with the interpretive stance set out in Section 2.

This hierarchy also answers the charge of determinism, which Oliver (1991) already described as a lack of attention to the self-interest and active agency of organisations. Oliver proposed five strategic responses to institutional pressures, namely acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance and manipulation, and related the choice among them to the cause, constituents, content, control and context of these pressures. The institutional logics perspective rests on the principle of embedded agency, in which decisions result from the interplay between individual agency and institutional structure (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 103), and Besharov and Smith (2014) identify practices through which leaders can influence the way logics combine. Elken and Stensaker (2018), drawing on research on institutional work, likewise consider that actors take an active part in creating, maintaining and disrupting the institutions they inhabit. For our framework, actors may comply with the national framework, keep it at the surface or translate it into an internal project. The leadership that Proposition 5 places at the heart of the improvement orientation is one form of this agency.

Table 3 summarises the level at which each concept operates, its function in the framework and the propositions it supports. Without the three observation tools, which show whose demands count, how actors use the instruments and which orientation results, Propositions 4 and 5 in particular could not be observed.

Table 3: Articulation of the concepts by level of analysis

Level of analysis	Concept and main references	Function in the framework	Propositions
Field	Isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)	Explains why the formal structures required by the national framework converge	P1
Organisation	Institutional logics and their centrality (Thornton et al., 2012; Besharov & Smith, 2014)	Explains how status filters the same requirements and orients the purpose of the system	P3, P3-R
Organisation	Decoupling and loose coupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Orton & Weick, 1990; Bromley & Powell, 2012)	Qualifies the gap between formal procedures and their actual use	P2, P3-R
Organisation	Stakeholder salience (Mitchell et al., 1997)	Identifies the actors whose demands lead to changes in the system	P4
Actors	Appropriation (De Vaujany, 2006; Grimand, 2012)	Describes how actors interpret and use the internal instruments of quality assurance	P2, P5
Actors	Quality culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Loukkola & Zhang, 2010)	Characterises the resulting orientation, from compliance to improvement	P2, P5
Across levels	Strategic responses, embedded agency, institutional work and recoupling (Oliver, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Hallett, 2010)	Links the action of actors to institutional pressures, through translation and feedback	P5, feedback loops

Source: Compiled by the authors.

5. The analytical framework and research propositions

5.1. Presentation of the framework

The concepts outlined above are brought together in the framework presented in Figure 1. For the sake of clarity, it is presented in three stages that are read from left to right. This reading order should not, however, be taken as a one-way causal chain, since two feedback loops, discussed at the end of this subsection, run in the opposite direction.

The first stage concerns the field. Both types of university belong to the same organisational field and are subject to the same pressures, exerted by the supervising ministry and by the ANEAQ. These pressures are coercive, through legislation, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications. They are also normative, through experts and professional quality networks. Finally, they are mimetic, through the imitation of universities perceived as benchmarks.

The second stage concerns status. Legal status acts as a filter, in the sense of Greenwood et al. (2011), for whom the pressures arising from institutional complexity do not affect all organisations equally. It shapes the centrality of logics. The state logic is central in public universities, whereas the market logic gains centrality alongside it in PPP universities, and the academic logic is present in both. Two mechanisms then translate these logics into decisions, namely the weight of the most salient stakeholders and the action of leadership.

Status is not, however, the only factor at work. Size, age, disciplinary mix, resources and voluntary accreditations vary together with status, and the framework places these contextual conditions beside the status filter as rival explanations, to be examined before any difference is attributed to status (Yin, 2018), rather than as moderating variables, a notion that belongs to quantitative designs.

The third stage concerns the system. Each university establishes a quality assurance system, which we analyse on two levels. The formal level encompasses what is stated, namely policies, procedures and governing bodies. The actual level encompasses what is practised, namely established practices, the fate of the data produced and the changes observed. The gap between these two levels constitutes the decoupling. This may relate to implementation or to outcomes. Finally, each system is situated on a continuum ranging from compliance to improvement, which can be clarified using the typology developed by Harvey and Stensaker (2008).

Not every gap between the formal and the actual level, however, amounts to decoupling. To avoid reading any discrepancy as a facade, the analysis distinguishes four patterns, summarised in Table 4. Organisations facing the same pressures decouple in different ways, intentionally when there is information asymmetry with their stakeholders and in an emergent way when stakeholder expectations compete (Crilly et al., 2012). Procedures may also be followed without serving their ends (Bromley & Powell, 2012), and a gap may simply reflect loose coupling, in which units are distinct but remain responsive to one another (Orton & Weick, 1990). This distinction matters because loose coupling is rarely defined or operationalised in higher education research (Elken & Vukasovic, 2019).

The continuum between compliance and improvement summarises the dominant purpose that actors attribute to the system. It does not replace the typology of Harvey and Stensaker (2008), which then qualifies the culture within which this purpose takes shape. We also acknowledge that the axis carries a normative charge. Compliance is not a failure in itself, since it fulfils a legitimate function of accountability towards the State and society. To limit this bias, the position of each system is inferred from observable indicators, namely the use of self-assessment reports in decisions, the follow-up of external recommendations and initiatives that go beyond what the national framework requires.

Two feedback loops complete the figure. The first runs from the systems back to the field, since the agency reports to the supervising ministry and forwards evaluation reports to the institutions concerned (Law 80-12, art. 3), so that evaluation results can feed back into the requirements.

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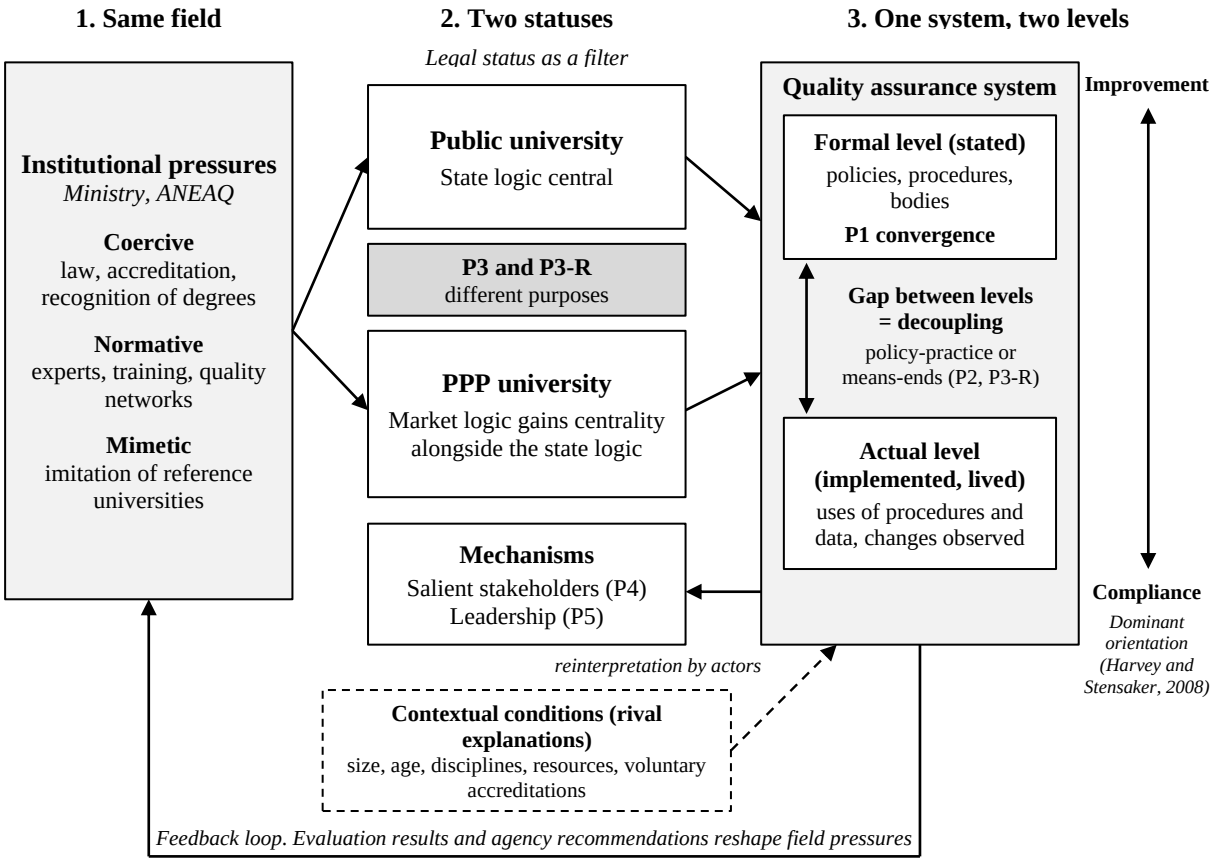
The second runs from the actual level back to the mechanisms. Actors reinterpret the system as they use it, which can alter the weight of stakeholders or the room for manoeuvre of leadership, and such processes can recouple practices that had long remained ceremonial, at the cost of turmoil within the organisation (Hallett, 2010).

Table 4: Distinguishing forms of gap between the formal and the actual level

Pattern	What is observed	Indicators in the field	References
Intentional decoupling (‘faking it’)	Formal structures displayed for the agency, with leaders aware that they are not used	Gap acknowledged by management, documents produced only ahead of evaluations, recommendations without follow-up	Meyer and Rowan (1977), Crilly et al. (2012)
Emergent decoupling (‘muddling through’)	Gap produced by competing expectations, without a shared reading of the requirement	Units giving different meanings to the system, local adjustments without central coordination	Crilly et al. (2012)
Means-ends decoupling	Procedures applied and data produced, without effect on the ends pursued	Self-assessment reports completed but not used in decisions, indicators collected without changes	Bromley and Powell (2012)
Ordinary loose coupling	Units that remain distinct but responsive, with delayed or partial uptake	Procedures adapted by units, with feedback reaching the centre over time	Orton and Weick (1990), Elken and Vukasovic (2019)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Figure 1: Analytical framework



Source: Developed by the authors, based on DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Meyer and Rowan (1977), Bromley and Powell (2012), Greenwood et al. (2011), Thornton et al. (2012), Mitchell et al. (1997), Harvey and Stensaker (2008) and Hallett (2010).

The framework is accompanied by three dimensions of observation. The formal structure of the system corresponds to the formal level. Implementation and appropriation by the actors correspond to the actual level. Governance and the configuration of stakeholders correspond to the mechanisms of the second stage. Legal status does not constitute an additional dimension, since it is what these three dimensions are intended to explain.

The framework takes the university as its unit of analysis. Moroccan public universities, however, bring together open-access faculties and professional faculties and schools whose intake is set by the ministry (Benjelloun, 2018, p. 289), and the agency evaluates institutions and programmes (Law 80-12, art. 3). The comparison therefore follows an embedded design, in which each university is a case and its institutions are embedded units, selected according to the logic of theoretical replication (Yin, 2018).

5.2. Research propositions

The framework enables us to formulate five propositions and one rival proposition. In the sense defined by Yin (2018), a proposition guides the collection and analysis of data in a case study rather than being a hypothesis intended for statistical testing. For each proposition, we give its rationale, and Table 5 states what is observed, the pattern expected in each university and what would contradict it. Proposition 1 answers the first sub-question set out in the introduction, Propositions 2 and 4 the second, and Proposition 3, its rival, Proposition 4 and Proposition 5 the third.

Proposition 1. Subject to the same requirements of the national framework, the public and the PPP university display convergent formal quality assurance structures on the elements that this framework requires, namely a self-assessment structure, a quality policy and self-assessment procedures.

This proposition stems from coercive isomorphism, which results from the pressures exerted on organisations by those on which they depend (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The elements it lists are required of all institutions by Law 59.24 (art. 107) and by the national reference framework (Decree No. 2-19-16, 2020, p. 206). The Romanian case shows how far a single set of rules can push convergence, since private institutions that had to follow rules designed for the public sector ended up copying state universities (Proteasa et al., 2017). If the common elements predate the requirement or come from voluntary standards, convergence would instead stem from mimetic or normative pressures, which Khalil (2021) identifies as the main drivers in private business schools.

Proposition 2. The gap between formal procedures and their actual use is wider where actors attribute an external compliance purpose to the system than where they attribute an internal improvement purpose.

This proposition draws on the distinction made by Bromley and Powell (2012) and on the finding that quality assurance undertaken voluntarily produces more visible effects than that carried out as an obligation (Papadimitriou & Westerheijden, 2010). To prevent it from becoming self-fulfilling, its two components are established separately. The purpose is identified in the discourse of management and in strategic documents, and the gap by comparing what is stated, what is implemented and what is experienced, for instance through the use of self-assessment reports in decisions. Each gap is then qualified with the criteria of Table 4, so that ordinary loose coupling is not mistaken for a facade.

Proposition 3. Legal status helps determine which institutional logic is central. In the public university, where the state logic is central, the quality assurance system is expected to be oriented mainly toward compliance with the national framework. In the PPP university, where the market logic gains centrality alongside the state logic, it is expected to be oriented mainly toward improving the services valued by fee-paying students and founding partners.

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This proposition lies at the heart of the framework and rests on the centrality of logics discussed in Section 4.3. In the public university, the state logic governs funding, posts and the status of teaching staff, which should orient quality assurance towards the proof owed to the supervising authority and the agency. In the PPP university, founding partners and tuition fees give the market logic a weight it does not have in the public sector, which should orient the system towards the services that fee-paying students and partners value. Its formulation remains cautious, since legal status varies together with other factors, such as funding and internationalisation.

Proposition 3-R (rival). The market logic orients the PPP university's system toward signalling to students, families and partners (labels, voluntary accreditations, rankings) rather than toward improvement, which produces a means-ends decoupling at least as wide as in the public university.

The market logic does not necessarily lead to improvement. It may also push a university to signal its quality to those who pay. In Ghana, private institutions seek foreign affiliations that the regulator does not require, because such links enhance their image and credibility (Tsevi, 2025). In Thailand, semi-elite private institutions seek national and international accreditation to gain legitimacy and recognition (Praphamontripong Kanwar, 2025, p. 101). Proposition 3 and its rival are told apart by the use made of evaluation results. Changes in internal practices support Proposition 3, whereas a use centred on external communication, through labels, rankings or promotional material, supports the rival proposition.

Proposition 4. The stakeholders who combine power and legitimacy differ by status. In the PPP university, founding partners and fee-paying students are expected to hold both attributes, and their demands are expected to lead more often to changes in the system. In the public university, this position is expected to be held by the supervising ministry, the agency and collegial academic bodies.

This proposition applies the framework of Mitchell et al. (1997), for whom salience is the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims. Stated in general terms, the claim that stakeholders who combine power and legitimacy carry more weight would merely restate this definition. The proposition therefore predicts which stakeholders hold these attributes under each status, and it relies on an observation distinct from the attributes themselves, namely the demands that have actually changed the system.

Proposition 5. In both universities, an improvement orientation requires leadership that translates external requirements into an internal project that engages the academic community. Status is expected to shape the means available to leadership (contractual authority in the PPP university, negotiation with collegial bodies and tenured staff in the public university) more than the need for such translation.

This proposition draws on Bendermacher et al. (2017) and on Kezar and Eckel (2002), who show that change strategies that run counter to an institution's culture are unlikely to succeed, and it corresponds to the responsive mode described by Harvey and Stensaker (2008). In a newly created private university in Syria, Hodson et al. (2008) observed clear changes in staff participation each time a new senior management added its weight to the quality agenda. Unlike Propositions 3 and 4, this proposition applies to both universities.

These propositions are interlinked. Propositions 1 and 3 are in tension, since isomorphism suggests a convergence of structures, whilst institutional logics suggest a divergence of purposes, which the rival proposition allows to take the form of signalling. Propositions 2, 4 and 5 specify the mechanisms through which the gap between the formal and the actual widens or narrows. Full convergence, purposes included, would be a result in its own right.

Table 5: Research propositions, expected patterns and criteria of refutation

No.	Theoretical anchor	What is observed	Expected in the public university	Expected in the PPP university	What would contradict it	Rival explanation
P1	Isomorphism	Existence and date of creation of the quality structure, policy and procedures	Required elements present	Same elements, possibly with voluntary standards	A required element missing, or similarity predating the requirement	Cooperation projects, international accreditations
P2	Decoupling	Use of self-assessment reports, follow-up of recommendations, fate of data	Wider gap where compliance is the declared purpose	Same expectation	Same gap whatever the purpose	Ordinary loose coupling, lack of resources
P3	Institutional logics	Purpose stated in strategic documents and by management, destination of evaluation results	Compliance, reports for the supervising authority and the agency	Improvement of services	Same purpose in both cases	P3-R, size, age
P3-R	Institutional logics, decoupling	Use of evaluation results for external communication	Not applicable	Results used mainly for image	Results followed by internal changes	P3
P4	Stakeholder salience	Who sits on bodies, who decides, which demands led to a change	Ministry, agency, collegial bodies	Founding partners, fee-paying students	Demands of these actors without effect, or identical configuration	Personal influence of a leader
P5	Quality culture, leadership	Quality project led by management, staff participation, reported changes	Translation through collegial negotiation	Translation through hierarchical authority	Improvement without translation work	Culture of a discipline, pressure of an accreditation

Source: Compiled by the authors.

5.3. Conditions for the validity of the framework

According to Whetten (1989), it is necessary to specify where and when the framework applies. It concerns universities subject to the same national regulatory framework, within a system where the state remains the principal regulator. It also presupposes the coexistence of several statuses within the same field. Outside these conditions, for example, in a system without a national agency or one that is entirely private, the reasoning would need to be revisited.

Three further conditions should be made explicit. The first concerns the power of the agency. Its opinions are passed on to the national coordination commission, which takes the final decisions (Andersen & Koumaré, 2019, p. 10), and the agency operates under the supervision of the ministry (Benjelloun, 2018, p. 291). Where an agency's decisions directly condition an institution's right to operate, coercive pressure would be stronger and the convergence expected in Proposition 1 more marked. The second condition concerns the stakes of evaluation, since accreditation applies to programmes rather than to the university as a whole (Law 80-12, art. 3) and institutional evaluation has proceeded in successive waves covering a limited number of institutions (Oustous et al., 2021, p. 214). The third condition concerns autonomy. The narrower a university's room for manoeuvre, as for public universities subject to the general rules of public institutions (Benjelloun, 2018, p. 290), the less its leadership can turn external requirements into a project of its own, which bears directly on Proposition 5.

Within these limits, the framework could be transferred to other Maghreb systems. In the region, quality assurance agencies were created under the supervision of governments (Benjelloun, 2019, p. 325), and North African countries have encouraged private and semi-private universities as well as public-private formulas alongside public universities (Benjelloun,

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2019, p. 327). Applying the framework elsewhere in francophone Africa would require checking, system by system, whether these conditions hold.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical contributions and rival explanations

Our framework is not the first to bring these concepts together. Greenwood et al. (2011) note that decoupling has been studied as a way of coping with institutional complexity, while Bromley and Powell (2012) expect means-ends decoupling to be more frequent where the effects of actions are difficult to measure and where the environment is fragmented. Nor is legal status absent from earlier work. Goodrick and Salancik (1996) found that hospitals of different ownership used their discretion differently where standards were uncertain, and Conrath-Hargreaves and Wüstemann (2019) showed that a change of status could lead to decoupling (see Section 4.3). The comparisons by status identified in Section 2 are quantitative. In these studies, status explains the adoption of practices or separates the groups being compared. It is more rarely treated as a filter that sets which logic is central and, through it, the purpose of a system that all universities must adopt.

Our contribution therefore lies elsewhere, and it remains incremental in the sense set out in Section 2. Firstly, following Greenwood et al. (2011), we treat legal status as the filter through which the same national framework may produce similar structures but different purposes. Secondly, we identify two mechanisms through which this filter may operate, namely the weight of salient stakeholders and the role of leadership, and Propositions 4 and 5 tie both of them to status. Finally, we apply institutional logics to quality assurance in a Maghreb system. This choice matters because studies of higher education that draw on institutional theory have mostly dealt with isomorphism, whereas institutional logics have rarely been applied (Cai & Mountford, 2022). This last contribution is partly contextual.

The framework must also be set against rival readings, which predict differences without giving status any role. A capacity reading expects the gap between the formal and the actual to depend on resources. In Ghanaian public universities, older and larger universities engaged with audits more authentically than newer universities with fewer resources, and leaders who saw audits as developmental worked to reduce decoupling, whereas those who saw them as symbolic compliance accepted it (Oware & Mokoena, 2026), which is consistent with Proposition 2. Applied to Morocco, the capacity reading does not point in a single direction, since public universities are older and larger, whereas partnership universities have about half as many students per permanent teacher (see Section 3). A disciplinary reading expects differences to follow fields of study, as in the Lebanese business schools studied by Khalil (2021). Our framework differs from these readings on two points. They predict differences of degree, with more or less decoupling, whereas the framework also predicts a difference of direction, towards compliance in one case and towards improvement or signalling in the other (Propositions 3 and 3-R). They also leave open why formal structures should converge whilst their use diverges.

The embedded design makes it possible to compare these readings with ours. If the gap between the formal and the actual follows the differences in resources between open-access and regulated-access institutions of the same public university (see Section 3), the capacity reading should prevail, and Proposition 3 would need revising. If institutions with comparable resources and fields differ from one status to the other, status gains weight.

The framework can also be read against Moroccan studies. Those discussed in Section 3 relate the documentary drift of quality assurance to an approach centred on compliance. El Moufarej (2025) reports a respondent in a public university for whom quality exists only on paper, and she concludes that internal quality assurance needs the support of heads of institutions. These diagnoses concern public universities and are consistent with Propositions 2 and 5. What the

framework adds is a comparative expectation. It predicts where such a drift should be strongest, and it leaves open the possibility that the PPP university avoids it only to turn quality assurance into a means of signalling (Proposition 3-R). El Moufarej (2025) also calls for a unified model of internal quality assurance for public universities, whatever their programmes and missions, whereas our framework suggests that a single model may still serve different purposes.

6.2. Implications for policy and management

These implications remain conditional, since the propositions have not yet been tested. If formal structures converge whilst purposes diverge, an evaluation centred on the presence of structures would say little about their use, and Brennan and Shah (2000) already noted that quality assessment linked to state rewards of formal status may not be compatible with improvement and institutional change. The agency could then give more weight to what happens after evaluation, such as the follow-up of recommendations. Its own guide points in this direction, since it states that the reference framework should not be seen as a standard to which institutions must conform scrupulously (ANEAQ, 2020, p. 9) and allows them to leave out some fields or add others, provided they justify their choice (p. 15). A differentiated approach would therefore not require a new framework. It could draw on the notion of fitness for purpose, in which quality is judged by the capacity of an institution to fulfil its own stated mission (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Differentiation already exists in other systems. In the Philippines, voluntary accreditation is carried out by different bodies for private and public institutions (Mariano & Valenzuela, 2021), and in Morocco, Benelmallam (2026) proposes a common core combined with specific objectives, so as to avoid comparisons that ignore the context of each university. Uniform rules have a cost, as accreditation often worked as a Procrustean bed for new ways of delivering education in three Central and Eastern European countries (Proteasa et al., 2017), but differentiation may in turn weaken the comparability that a national framework is meant to ensure. Its basis also remains open, since Oware and Mokoena (2026) recommend differentiating by capacity rather than by status.

For university management, the framework points to three levers that can be observed. The first concerns what becomes of evaluation. The agency's guide asks each self-assessment report to end with a four-year action plan validated by the bodies of the institution (ANEAQ, 2020, p. 16), and management can track the share of recommendations that lead to such actions and the share of actions completed. A recommendation turned into a budgeted action plan, assigned to a person in charge and followed up until closure becomes a tool of management control and organisational learning (Benelmallam, 2026). The second lever concerns participation. The guide recommends a self-assessment committee that represents teaching staff, administrative staff, students and, where possible, socio-professional partners (ANEAQ, 2020, p. 10), and it warns that strong involvement of the head combined with weak involvement of field actors produces a purely managerial, top-down quality culture (p. 12). The third lever is dialogue with teaching staff, whose means, according to Proposition 5, differ by status, through collegial bodies in the public university and contractual authority in the PPP university. The indicators proposed in Section 5.1 could help management to monitor its own system.

6.3. Limitations and avenues for further research

This study has several limitations. The first relates to its conceptual nature, since the propositions have not yet been tested. The second concerns status itself. Status varies together with size, age, funding and disciplinary mix, so its specific effect remains difficult to isolate. There is also a risk of reifying status, that is to say of treating a legal category as if it acted by itself. We have tried to limit this risk by defining status as a set of constraints and resources and

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by locating its effects in the action of stakeholders and leadership, but a single public university still brings together institutions whose resources and priorities differ widely.

The third limitation is theoretical. The core concepts of the framework were mostly built from North American and European organisations, from the Californian hospitals studied by Goodrick and Salancik (1996) to the American school observed by Hallett (2010), and their relevance to Morocco must be checked in the field. We have also left aside the logics of the family, the community and religion (Section 4.3), even though the institutional logics perspective does not fix in advance which logics operate in a given setting (Thornton et al., 2015, p. 5). The family logic, for instance, could enter through the families who pay tuition fees. Our corpus has a similar limit. It remains mainly English-language, the local literature is still small and largely documentary, and the Arabic-language sources we used are limited to legal texts.

Two further limitations concern the way the framework was built. The first is the risk of a theory-first framing, in which propositions derived before fieldwork lead researchers to find in the cases what the framework expects. The abductive stance, the criteria of refutation (Table 5) and the rival proposition reduce this risk without removing it. The second concerns our own position. The framework comes from the doctoral research of the first author, and both authors have previously studied a public open-access faculty, where students reported negative gaps between their expectations and their perceptions on all five dimensions of service quality (Aarab & Debbagh, 2026). This experience may lead us to expect less from the public university than from the PPP university, and part of the coding will therefore be checked by a second researcher.

These limitations open up several avenues for further research. The first is the comparative case study that our doctoral research is carrying out. It covers one public university and one university created through a public-private partnership, with their institutions as embedded units, and it collects data at the national and institutional levels through semi-structured interviews, documents and non-participant observation. Access is the main practical constraint, especially in the PPP university, which may regard documents on its quality system as strategic. Participants are guaranteed confidentiality, and the two universities are designated by codes so that they cannot be identified.

A second avenue would extend the framework to private institutions, whose evaluation every four years (Law 59.24, art. 21) would add a third regime to the comparison. A third avenue would measure quality culture on a larger number of institutions, for instance with the Quality Culture Inventory, which comprises six dimensions and 27 items (Hildesheim & Sonntag, 2020). Since this instrument was validated in German, in three German institutions, its use in Morocco would first require a translation into French and Arabic with back-translation, a pretest with academic and administrative staff, and a confirmatory factor analysis to check whether the six dimensions hold.

7. Conclusion

Universities subject to the same quality assurance framework may display the same structures and still use them for different purposes. This is the main theoretical result of the article. Isomorphism, decoupling and institutional logics had already been brought together, but rarely to explain why one national framework may be used differently by universities of different status. Our framework links them through legal status, understood as a set of constraints and resources that filters the logics at work in each university (Greenwood et al., 2011). Isomorphism accounts for the convergence of formal structures, decoupling for the gap between what is stated and what is practised, and the centrality of logics for the purpose that actors give to the system. The framework adds two mechanisms through which status may operate, namely

the weight of salient stakeholders and the action of leadership, and it states for each proposition what would corroborate or contradict it.

This result changes the way quality assurance can be assessed. If structures converge whilst purposes diverge, the presence of a quality policy, a self-assessment structure and written procedures says little about the use made of them. The question then shifts from whether a university complies with the national framework to what it does with it, and for whom. Compliance and improvement should not be read as two stages on a single path either, since the market logic may lead a PPP university towards signalling rather than improvement, as the rival proposition suggests.

These conclusions remain theoretical. The propositions have not been tested, the effect of status cannot be separated from that of size, age, resources and disciplines, and the theories we draw on were mostly developed outside the Maghreb. The next step is the comparative case study of a public university and a PPP university that our doctoral research is carrying out. The data will be coded along the three dimensions of the framework, each case will be analysed on its own before the two are compared, and the observed patterns will then be set against those expected in Table 5 and against the rival explanations discussed in Section 6.1.

If fieldwork confirms that one framework can serve different purposes, understanding these differences could help quality assurance serve improvement as well as compliance.

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