

Between Accreditation and Amanah: Institutional Isomorphism and Governance Reform in Contemporary Islamic Higher Education Systems Globally

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ABSTRACT

Previous research explained institutional convergence under accreditation and discussed *amanah* as an ethical value, but rarely examined how both shaped governance reform across Islamic higher education systems. This study examined how accreditation affected governance and when *amanah* mediated conformity, adaptation, or ceremonial compliance. It used qualitative document analysis and compared official accreditation rules, governance policies, strategic plans, and evaluation reports from Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. The findings showed that accreditation increased institutional legibility by requiring educational activity to be translated into targets, reports, and reviewable evidence. Similar pressures produced different governance responses because institutions assigned responsibility, linked mission to evaluation, and followed up weaknesses in different ways. *Amanah* became institutionally meaningful when it entered procedures that required identifiable actors to explain decisions and address documented failures. The study developed *amanah*-mediated institutional isomorphism to explain why comparable accreditation structures generated different governance outcomes. It also proposed mission-sensitive governance, under which external standards remained connected to the educational purpose of Islamic universities. Accreditation strengthened accountability when evidence supported explanation and correction, but its contribution remained limited when institutional visibility developed faster than responsibility to mission.



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INTRODUCTION

A university may pass an accreditation review and still leave its academic life largely untouched. The committee meets, the report is finished, and evidence can be produced when assessors request it. What remains uncertain is whether teaching changes or whether a weak decision can be questioned outside the quality office. That uncertainty matters because accreditation now reaches far beyond periodic quality checks. It has become consequential precisely because the distance between formal assurance and educational practice is often difficult to detect within the institution itself. Recent synthesis of quality-management research likewise shows that quality assurance can reshape governance and academic routines without guaranteeing equivalent change in core practice (Guil Gorostidi & Rubio-Arostegui, 2026).

National systems increasingly require universities to make decisions and results traceable. UNESCO IESALC's recent mapping of 146 countries places external quality assurance within the broader architecture of higher education governance (UNESCO IESALC, 2026). Accreditation therefore does not merely record institutional performance. It helps define the form in which performance becomes visible. A curriculum becomes a set of outcomes. Claims of improvement must

be recast as evidence that an assessor can verify. Once these forms become tied to recognition or public credibility, universities reorganize around them. Reporting routines multiply, and quality units gain authority because they control the data through which the institution is judged. Those who manage evidence can then influence which problems receive attention and which achievements count as credible, even when they hold little formal authority over teaching or research priorities. This can improve coordination. It can also narrow attention to what travels easily through an audit, so the capacity to present quality begins to stand in for quality itself. Research on university performance systems shows that such reforms can alter control processes while producing organisational responses that remain ambiguous (Pilonato & Monfardini, 2020).

Islamic universities encounter this pressure while answering to more than regulatory recognition. Their public identity also rests on a religious and educational mandate that is not exhausted by compliance. The use of knowledge and institutional authority is expected to carry moral responsibility. Recent Islamic governance research connects *amanah* with accountability, transparency, and responsibility to stakeholders rather than reducing it to personal virtue (Ashraf-Khan & Hossain, 2021). That expectation concerns not only conduct but also the rules through which universities exercise power. These demands can support one another. Accurate reporting may protect students, while sound financial oversight can prevent misuse. Conflict appears when standards adopted to support the mission begin to determine it instead. Such a reversal may happen gradually and without any open abandonment of religious identity.

The fact that otherwise different systems build similar quality offices and review routines is difficult to explain as a simple triumph of efficiency. Institutional isomorphism offers a way to read that convergence because organisations often adopt accepted arrangements when regulation, professional expectations, and uncertainty make departure costly. Comparative research in Nordic higher education shows that institutions with different legal forms can still move toward shared organisational arrangements under common policy pressures (Holmén & Ringarp, 2023). Coercive pressure is visible where recognition or resources depend on compliance. Normative pressure grows through professional standards and accepted expertise, while mimetic pressure appears when universities borrow models from institutions regarded as successful. These distinctions remain useful, although they do not by themselves explain how a university with an explicit religious mission interprets an external demand.

A quality system may look mature while its influence on core academic decisions remains slight. Formal arrangements can secure legitimacy even when their connection with daily work is weak. Research on hybrid universities similarly shows that performance systems can promise clarity while producing persistent ambiguity in their organisational use (Vakkuri & Johanson, 2020). This variation is where *amanah* becomes analytically important. *Amanah* is commonly translated as trust, but that rendering is too thin for institutional analysis. It concerns responsible use of authority and fidelity to what has been entrusted. Institutionally, it asks whether a decision can be justified and challenged by those who bear its consequences. A mission statement cannot answer that question. Neither can a public claim of Islamic identity. *Amanah* becomes visible when it changes procedure or limits discretion. Religious language can coexist with opaque governance, while an audit practice borrowed from a global quality regime may still protect an educational responsibility.

Research has not dealt well with this overlap. Studies of accreditation often show how quality regimes standardize universities, but much of the evidence still comes from general higher education rather than Islamic institutions. Recent Indonesian research identifies continuing quality-assurance problems in Islamic higher education, including weak integration between academic, spiritual, and governance aims (Wulandari et al., 2025). Work on Islamic governance has developed the language of *amanah* and related ethical principles, yet it less often traces those values into routine university decisions. A recent PTKIN case study shows that Islamic values become more consequential when they are tied to concrete personnel and governance practices rather than retained as general principles (Andriani et al., 2026). The unresolved issue is therefore not whether Islamic values and accreditation can coexist. It is how their relationship changes the way authority is organised and reviewed.

A comparison across Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia allows this unresolved relationship to be examined under different regulatory conditions. Their systems differ in how strongly quality assurance is centralized and how much responsibility is left to universities. Even so, each converts quality into documentary evidence and recurring internal review. The article asks how these accreditation regimes reshape governance in Islamic universities and when *amanah* alters the direction

of that change. Qualitative document analysis is appropriate because official rules and institutional reports show what universities formally authorize and what they are prepared to make visible across these four systems over time. Research on institutional logics in higher education supports this attention to how external demands are interpreted inside organisations rather than simply imposed on them (Cai & Mountford, 2022).

The article develops *amanah*-mediated institutional isomorphism to explain why comparable pressures do not produce identical governance. Accreditation can deepen responsibility when it supports disclosure and makes institutional decisions answerable to mission. It becomes thinner when universities build structures mainly to secure recognition while leaving difficult choices untouched. The contribution is not an Islamic rejection of global standards. It is a distinction between reform that changes how authority is exercised and conformity that merely improves how the institution appears. Accreditation and *amanah* are therefore neither opposites nor natural partners. Their relationship must be built through governance within each institutional setting. Recent research on Muhammadiyah universities similarly shows that religious authority, academic autonomy, and quality assurance can coexist in hybrid arrangements rather than collapse into one institutional logic (Jaenudin & Victorynie, 2026).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed qualitative document analysis with a comparative approach. The analysis focused on accreditation and governance provisions contained in official regulatory and university documents. Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia were selected purposively because they represent different regulatory settings for Islamic higher education and provide sufficient public documentation. The institutional cases were UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, International Islamic University Malaysia, International Islamic University Islamabad, and the Islamic University of Madinah. These universities were not treated as representatives of their national systems. National documents were used to examine accreditation arrangements, while university documents were used to identify how selected institutions formally responded to those arrangements. Institutional isomorphism and *amanah* served as the analytical framework. Qualitative document analysis is appropriate for this purpose because official texts can be treated as data while their provenance, purpose, and limits remain part of the interpretation (Morgan, 2022).

Data were collected from the official websites of accreditation agencies, government bodies, and the selected universities. The search prioritised documents published or still in force between 2017 and August 2026. The main data consisted of accreditation regulations, quality assurance policies, governance rules, strategic plans, and performance or evaluation reports. Documents were selected purposively. Only full-text materials with a clear institutional source, identifiable publication date, and direct relevance to accreditation, quality assurance, governance, or institutional mission were included. Promotional news, undated webpages, duplicate files, and claims without supporting documents were excluded. Academic publications were used to define the concepts and discuss the findings, but they were not treated as evidence of institutional practice. The final corpus was documented by country, institution, document type, and year. This staged treatment of documentary material is consistent with recent guidance that emphasises preparing, extracting, analysing, and distilling documentary evidence in relation to its institutional context (Dalglish et al., 2020).

The data were analysed thematically, following recent guidance that stresses consistency between analytic claims, coding practice, and the form of thematic analysis used (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Each case was examined separately before comparison across countries and institutions. Four themes guided the analysis, namely accreditation pressure, documented changes in governance, the institutionalisation of *amanah*, and institutional responses to external standards. The presence of *amanah* was interpreted at declarative, procedural, and evidential levels. Declarative presence referred to official statements of values or mission. Procedural institutionalisation was identified when the principle appeared in rules, assigned responsibilities, or review procedures. Evidential institutionalisation required a documented record of implementation or corrective action. Cross-case comparison was then used to identify recurring similarities and relevant differences. Comparative document analysis has been used similarly to examine how accreditation standards vary across formally comparable systems (Azzam et al., 2021). Conclusions were limited to documented governance arrangements and reported institutional responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Accreditation as a Technology of Institutional Legibility

The Indonesian documents do not merely ask universities to state that quality systems exist. IAPT 4.1 requires a self-evaluation report and a performance report, while its assessment framework links institutional planning to measurable targets and evidence of mission differentiation (BAN-PT, 2025). UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta has placed similar forms of visibility inside its own planning system. Its 2025–2029 strategic plan connects institutional priorities with performance indicators, and annual reports record progress against those targets (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2025, 2026). Comparative work on external quality assurance in Asia likewise shows that systems sharing review objectives can differ substantially in governance arrangements and stakeholder roles (Hou et al., 2022). The documents cannot show how these arrangements are experienced in classrooms or meetings. They do show that activities become easier to recognise institutionally after they have been converted into an approved category and supported by a record. Institutional legibility refers to this process through which complex activity is simplified into forms that an authorised body can classify and assess. Cross-national comparison of institutional quality evaluation reaches a similar point, showing that review systems can differ in design while still converging around verifiable evidence (Özcan et al., 2022).

Legibility still says little about educational quality (Kadir, 2025b). A complete record can show that a review occurred, but it cannot establish that the review changed teaching or that those affected could question the decision. The available documents therefore support a narrower conclusion. Accreditation expands the formal visibility of university activity. Whether that visibility becomes meaningful depends on what happens after evidence is produced. Without access, explanation, and follow-up, the record may satisfy review while leaving the underlying practice largely beyond scrutiny. This caution is consistent with evidence that quality-assurance implementation may combine formal compliance with ceremonial practice, leaving room for decoupling between approved arrangements and everyday work (Khalil, 2021).

IIUM shows why institutional legibility cannot be reduced to direct external control. Self-accrediting status allows the university to accredit most of its own programmes, but the work remains tied to MQA requirements and is carried through internal committees, assessor reports, and Senate decisions. Part of the evaluative burden has moved inside the university rather than disappeared. The formal role of units that assemble evidence has consequently widened, although the documents do not prove that these units possess greater influence in every academic decision. Their work becomes harder to bypass when programme approval or review depends on evidence they prepare. Indonesia presents a related movement through a different structure. UIN Jakarta's planning and reporting documents connect targets, annual performance, and later institutional decisions, so documentary capacity becomes part of routine governance rather than an occasional response to visitation. Such arrangements may make authority easier to examine, but only when evidence can trigger explanation and correction. Accreditation-induced legibility contributes to governance reform at that point. Otherwise, it remains an improvement in how the institution is presented, not necessarily in how responsibility is exercised. An Indonesian Islamic higher education case similarly describes internal quality assurance as a recurring cycle of evaluation and improvement rather than a one-off accreditation exercise (Setyoningrum et al., 2023). Evidence from Colombia further shows that accreditation policy can generate isomorphic pressures without producing uniform change across university functions (Suárez-Landazábal, 2023).

2. Amanah-Mediated Institutional Isomorphism

The IIUM Student Assessment Policy does more than place *amanah* in a statement of values. It assigns responsibility for assessment to identifiable offices and academic actors, links that responsibility to student rights, and requires anomalies to be reported. In this document, *amanah* has a procedural form because it changes what the university and its members are formally expected to do. Research in an Islamic university context similarly shows that stated Islamic integration becomes analytically meaningful when it can be traced into formal curriculum and teaching materials, although implementation may remain uneven (Budiyo et al., 2024). The policy does not prove that these duties are followed consistently, but it does show more than symbolic use of religious language. This reading

also accords with Islamic education management research that treats *amanah* as a responsibility attached to institutional leadership rather than a general moral label (Alauddin, 2021).

The comparison becomes less straightforward outside IIUM. UIN Jakarta places Islamic integration, public benefit, and accountable governance within its 2025–2029 strategic plan, then reports progress through institutional performance indicators. This creates a documented link between mission and reporting, but the available material does not show that *amanah* itself shaped the design of those indicators (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2025, 2026). Research on quality-management transformation in Islamic higher education likewise emphasises that governance improvement depends on sustained institutional processes rather than mission language alone (Yudiawan & Himmah, 2023). IIUI presents a different evidentiary pattern. Its institutional review connects Islamic values with governance and records a follow-up system in which departments submit improvement plans that are monitored by the quality assurance directorate (International Islamic University Islamabad, 2025). Here, responsibility is visible in procedure and reported follow-up, although the documents do not rely on *amanah* as an explicit organising term. These cases should not be ranked as stronger or weaker expressions of Islamic governance because the difference may also reflect unequal public disclosure. The broader higher-education literature likewise shows that competing institutional logics can shape how performance information is used, which helps explain why formal quality systems do not translate into a single governance response (Grossi et al., 2020).

Amanah-mediated institutional isomorphism is therefore best treated as a conditional interpretation rather than an automatic consequence of Islamic identity. Accreditation encourages universities to adopt familiar review structures, but mediation can only be claimed when an institution's mission can be traced into the way responsibility is assigned and later examined. The evidence in these cases is strongest at the procedural level. IIUM explicitly connects *amanah* with assessment duties, UIN Jakarta links mission to planning and performance reporting, and IIUI documents corrective follow-up after review. A Saudi higher education case also shows that academic quality is mediated by organisational subcultures, cautioning against assuming that a formal quality arrangement operates uniformly across an institution (Aldhobaib, 2022). The documents examined here do not establish how consistently these arrangements shape everyday decisions. They do, however, distinguish declared value from authorised responsibility (Kadir, 2026). *Amanah* matters when an external requirement becomes a duty that identifiable actors must explain and, where a documented weakness appears, address.

3. Mission-Sensitive Governance Beyond Compliance

UIN Jakarta's 2025–2029 strategic plan places international standing beside Islamic knowledge integration and public benefit, yet these commitments do not receive the same operational treatment. Targets related to institutional performance are attached to detailed indicators and recurring reports, whereas the educational meaning of integration remains stated more broadly. Saudi research also shows that accreditation and ranking pressures can lead universities to revisit institutional aims and academic practices rather than simply add external labels (Aburizaizah, 2022). IIUM's quality documents address the problem from another direction. Internal review remains tied to national quality requirements, but the university also requires programmes and academic processes to be examined against institutional purpose. Read together, these materials suggest selective adaptation (Kadir, 2025a). External standards are accepted, but their institutional use is not entirely detached from the university's stated purpose. The adaptation remains incomplete when mission appears in planning yet has weaker criteria for review than targets associated with external standing.

Recognition and international accreditation can support academic mobility, stronger programmes, and institutional resilience. A stronger external profile may also create resources for mission-based teaching and community engagement. Mission-centred higher education research cautions against treating the pursuit of prestige as equivalent to mission loss (Orphan, 2020). Research on internationalisation in the Middle East and North Africa likewise shows that international engagement can widen student opportunity and institutional leverage, so external visibility should not be treated as inherently opposed to mission (Yousef, 2024). Comparative analysis further shows that internationalisation can serve different national and institutional rationales rather than a single prestige logic (Kapfudzaruwa, 2025). The concern is not ambition itself. Risk appears when performance review repeatedly rewards what is externally visible while mission-specific responsibilities remain difficult to

assess or correct. The documents reveal that imbalance in formal planning, although they cannot establish how far it shapes daily academic choices.

Mission-sensitive governance begins when institutional purpose affects both evaluation and follow-up. A university does not preserve its mission simply by placing Islamic language beside accreditation targets. Mission must help determine which results matter and who is responsible for correcting weak performance. Recent document-based research in higher education likewise stresses alignment between institutional policy, ethical commitments, and operational practice rather than policy adoption alone (Humble, 2025). This gives *amanah* an organisational consequence. The educational responsibility accepted by the institution becomes something that decision makers must explain through the same governance processes used to demonstrate quality. IIUM's attempt to place institutional purpose within internal review and UIN Jakarta's effort to connect Islamic integration with strategic planning point in that direction, although neither documentary record is sufficient to prove consistent implementation. Mission sensitivity is present where external standards are selectively adapted so that formal review remains answerable to the university's educational purpose. Without this connection, quality assurance may improve institutional visibility while leaving the direction of institutional responsibility unresolved.

CONCLUSION

Accreditation has become more than a mechanism for confirming minimum academic quality in Islamic higher education. Across the cases examined, it also shapes how universities record performance, assign responsibility, and present themselves to regulators. This process increases institutional legibility, but it does not produce identical forms of governance. Its effects depend on how each institution translates external standards into internal rules and follow-up. *Amanah* becomes relevant only when it moves beyond official language and enters procedures that require identifiable actors to explain decisions and respond to documented weaknesses. Accreditation and *amanah* are therefore neither competing systems nor natural partners. Their relationship is determined by whether quality assurance strengthens institutional responsibility or merely improves the appearance of compliance.

The article contributes the concept of *amanah*-mediated institutional isomorphism to explain why similar accreditation structures may lead to different governance outcomes. It also proposes mission-sensitive governance as a way of keeping external standards connected to the educational purpose of Islamic universities. Accreditation can support integrity and public accountability, but mission must also influence what is measured, how weak performance is interpreted, and which failures require correction. The documentary evidence used here reveals authorised structures and reported responses, not the consistency of everyday practice. Even so, the comparison shows that the credibility of Islamic higher education will depend less on how efficiently institutions reproduce accreditation requirements than on whether those requirements make authority more answerable to the educational mission entrusted to it.

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