

# BUSINESS REVIEW

# THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM AND THE ISSUE OF PERFORMANCE: WHAT PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS? CASE OF SIDI MOHAMMED BEN ABDELLAH UNIVERSITY

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose**: The aim of this article is to understand the perception of stakeholders of university performance, its determinants, actors and influencing factors.

**Theoretical Framework:** The literature review shed light on the current state of the Moroccan university, namely its issues and challenges, while emphasizing the concept of performance in the complex university environment.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** In the course of this research, we mobilized a qualitative approach based on a single case study, namely the Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in the city of Fez.

**Findings:** The analysis of stakeholders' perceptions and expectations revealed the existence of several factors influencing the university's performance: the quality of the internal environment and its ability to guarantee the quality of training, the integration of graduates into the job market, scientific production, the search for funding through contracts, research projects, motivation of researchers through the reimbursement of publication costs for their scientific research in indexed journals, and good governance. Taken together, these factors are the main determinants of Moroccan university performance.

**Research, Practical & Social Implications:** The results of our research will be used by neighboring universities to improve their performance. It's not just a question of looking at financial indicators such as the commitment rate to judge whether the university is efficient. We need to go beyond this dimension to touch on others, because as long as its missions and stakeholders are plural, achieving performance remains utopian in terms of its dimensions.

**Originality/Value:** The article's originality lies in its treatment of the notion of performance in a rather complicated environment characterized by the proliferation of its stakeholders, making it difficult to assess in comparison with other establishments. This paper will be of great added value to universities that want to make performance one of their elementary objectives by referring first and foremost to the various factors that help generate university performance.

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### O SISTEMA UNIVERSITÁRIO E A QUESTÃO DO DESEMPENHO: QUAIS SÃO AS PERCEPÇÕES DAS PARTES INTERESSADAS? CASO DA UNIVERSIDADE SIDI MOHAMMED BEN ABDELLAH

#### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** O objetivo deste artigo é compreender a percepção das partes interessadas sobre o desempenho das universidades, seus determinantes, atores e fatores de influência.

**Referencial Teórico:** A revisão da literatura esclareceu a situação atual da universidade marroquina, ou seja, seus problemas e desafios, ao mesmo tempo em que enfatizou o conceito de desempenho no complexo ambiente universitário.

**Desenho/Metodologia/Abordagem:** No decorrer desta pesquisa, mobilizamos uma abordagem qualitativa com base em um único estudo de caso, a saber, a Universidade Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah, na cidade de Fez.

**Resultados:** A análise das percepções e expectativas das partes interessadas revelou a existência de vários fatores que influenciam o desempenho da universidade: a qualidade do ambiente interno e sua capacidade de garantir a qualidade do treinamento, a integração dos graduados no mercado de trabalho, a produção científica, a busca de financiamento por meio de contratos, projetos de pesquisa, a motivação dos pesquisadores por meio do reembolso dos custos de publicação de suas pesquisas científicas em revistas indexadas e a boa governança. Em conjunto, esses fatores são os principais determinantes do desempenho das universidades marroquinas.

**Pesquisa, Implicações Práticas e Sociais:** Os resultados de nossa pesquisa serão usados por universidades vizinhas para melhorar seu desempenho. Não se trata apenas de analisar os indicadores financeiros, como a taxa de comprometimento, para avaliar se a universidade é eficiente. Precisamos ir além dessa dimensão e abordar outras, porque enquanto suas missões e partes interessadas forem plurais, alcançar o desempenho continua sendo uma utopia em termos de suas dimensões.

**Originalidade/Valor**: The article's originality lies in its treatment of the notion of performance in a rather complicated environment characterized by the proliferation of its stakeholders, making it difficult to assess in comparison with other establishments. This paper will be of great added value to universities that want to make performance one of their elementary objectives by referring first and foremost to the various factors that help generate university performance.

**Palavras-chave:** Universidade, Sistema Universitário, Desempenho Universitário, Partes Interessadas, Percepções das Partes Interessadas, Fatores de Influência.

## EL SISTEMA UNIVERSITARIO Y LA CUESTIÓN DEL RENDIMIENTO: ¿QUÉ PERCEPCIÓN TIENEN LAS PARTES INTERESADAS? EL CASO DE LA UNIVERSIDAD SIDI MOHAMMED BEN ABDELLAH

#### **RESUMEN**

**Propósito:** El objetivo de este artículo es comprender la percepción que tienen las partes interesadas del rendimiento universitario, sus determinantes, actores y factores de influencia.

**Metodología:** La revisión bibliográfica arroja luz sobre el estado actual de la universidad marroquí, concretamente sobre sus problemas y retos, al tiempo que hace hincapié en el concepto de rendimiento en el complejo entorno universitario.

Conclusiones: El análisis de las percepciones y expectativas de las partes interesadas reveló la existencia de varios factores que influyen en el rendimiento de la universidad: la calidad del entorno interno y su capacidad para garantizar la calidad de la formación, la integración de los titulados en el mercado laboral, la producción científica, la búsqueda de financiación a través de contratos, los proyectos de investigación, la motivación de los investigadores mediante el reembolso de los gastos de publicación de sus investigaciones científicas en revistas indexadas y la buena gobernanza. En conjunto, estos factores son los principales determinantes del rendimiento de las universidades marroquíes.

Implicaciones de la Investigación: Los resultados de nuestra investigación servirán a las universidades vecinas para mejorar su rendimiento. No se trata sólo de fijarse en indicadores financieros como la tasa de compromiso para juzgar si la universidad es eficiente. Hay que ir más allá de esta dimensión para tocar otras, porque mientras sus misiones y partes interesadas sean plurales, alcanzar el rendimiento sigue siendo una utopía en cuanto a sus dimensiones.

**Originalidad/Valor:** La originalidad del artículo radica en su tratamiento de la noción de performance en un entorno bastante complicado y caracterizado por la proliferación de sus stakeholders, lo que dificulta su valoración en comparación con otros establecimientos. Este trabajo será de gran valor agregado para las universidades que quieran hacer del desempeño uno de sus objetivos elementales, refiriéndose en primer lugar a los diversos factores que contribuyen a generar el desempeño universitario.

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**Palabras clave**: Universidad, Sistema Universitario, Rendimiento Universitario, Partes Interesadas, Percepciones de las Partes Interesadas, Factores de Influencia.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The university is confronted with a multitude of constraints, and is more than ever called upon to take up the challenges posed by the evolution of the Moroccan economy and society in an ever-changing global context. It is challenged to put in place management mechanisms and instrumentation, able to complement its actions with controls by orienting them towards performance and the emergence of an area of management autonomy.

To this end, the university must meet the requirements of performance measurement and management. This imposing framework requires action at various levels. In this case, it involves questioning the system of governance with a view to delimiting the powers between state regulation and the university management system, that of the institutional information system for university steering and evaluation, and that of control to guarantee management autonomy enabling compliance and performance to be reconciled.

In this sense, a number of major constraints are affecting the organization and operation of universities, notably the phenomenon of massification and its implications for both teaching and organization, the growing need for human and financial resources to meet current and future requirements linked to the university's traditional and new missions, and the imperative to act on the cultural level prevailing within the community of university actors to meet new expectations. Similarly, the organizational implications of the changes underway with regard to the issue of performance in its relationship with questions of autonomy and control is finding its place within the university. To this end, this article will present a number of factors that have a major impact on the organization and management of universities. So, what are the constraints like in Morocco's public universities? What are its specific characteristics, in the light of the atypical nature of the public sector and the quest for performance?

In this article, we present the current state of the Moroccan public university, highlighting its constraints and emphasizing the principle of performance in this institution of atypical dimensions. In this context, we believe that the quest for and achievement of performance is the main challenge, materializing in the overcoming of obstacles and other parameters yet to be discovered.

With the support of an exploratory analysis based on a qualitative study, we seek to understand the phenomenon of performance from the point of view of the stakeholders of Sidi

Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, focusing on the main actors, determinants and influencing factors that will enable us to make a decision on the performance issue.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

The various analyses currently available of the present and future situation of the Moroccan University demonstrate the constraints and challenges it faces. These analytical controversies emphasize the constraints and requirements for the university to adapt to environmental changes, in order to rigorously carry out its missions and provide a congruent response to the expectations of its various stakeholders.

Morocco's public universities are faced with a number of constraints. Despite the expansion of the higher education system since 1975, the development of the quality of the university system is hampered by massification and inadequate staffing levels and infrastructure. There are two dimensions to this problem, both of which depend directly on state financial allocations. Firstly, the state remains the main provider of funds to universities, which implies that this dependence on public financing reflects their low level of autonomy, which has a negative impact on their ability to develop their own resources and make the most of their material and human capital. Secondly, the index that compares the overall budget allocated to university higher education to national wealth remains below 1% throughout the period from 2001 to 2016, except during the years of implementation of the Emergency Program (2009-2012). This index even fell to a very low level in 2015, reaching 0.91% (Finance and Higher Education Department Laws - INE-CSEFRS processing, 2017).

This raises questions about the ability of universities to make good the shortfalls in infrastructure and staffing as part of the reform process, and to train graduates with the qualifications and skills needed to meet the expectations of all productive sectors, and to enable the Moroccan development model to meet the national and global challenges it faces.

In addition, the monitoring of administrative and pedagogical management performance depends on the existence of a global, harmonized information system that meets the requirements of student pathway management which is a basic condition of the LMD system.

Moroccan universities use the Apogee system, but only partially. This deprives the higher education system as a whole of the necessary information (historical data) to monitor the reform and track student mobility. This situation is further complicated by the lack of motivation on the part of the information system's end-users. These are just some of the factors

that explain this constraint, which is linked to the embryonic nature of the information system in most Moroccan universities.

Moreover, this context does not escape the difficult nature of defining and striving for performance. This difficulty can be apprehended through the particular context of the public sector, in this case the inherent characteristics of the university, the profusion of its activities and stakeholders and the specificity of acclimatization to adopt the congruent model of performance evaluation proving successful in the private sphere. It is largely uncertain, particularly in the non-market sector (Ouahraoui, 2015).

Indeed, the performance of universities is materialized by the scale of efficiency, quality of services rendered and competence in the use of mobilized resources (Bencheikh and Daanoune, 2017). This image refers to the offer presented by the management control system through its ability to evaluate it by means of its indicators. In this sense, should we only refer to financial performance and assume that the establishment is performing well, or should we focus on the rest of its aspects?

In this respect, financial performance doesn't seem so tricky as long as it interprets the results expected by the university. This classic understanding suggests that an organization's performance goes beyond the financial aspect to a panoply of aspects, ending up with organizational performance that touches every corner of the organization.

Furthermore, performance goes beyond the objective view to consider its other subjective facet (Lebas, 1995), which is linked to stakeholders' perception of the organization. Performance is only as good as their expectations. However, it is only meaningful if it is evaluated. It should be noted that its multidimensional allure can be traced, on the one hand, to the expectations of multiple stakeholders and, on the other, to its multiple angles, i.e., political, economic, technological, social and so on. This observation attests to its ambivalence.

Illustrated in a triangle (Winand & Zintz, 2017), performance encompasses three criteria: effectiveness, efficiency and relevance, respectively linked to objectives, results and means. By way of illustration, effectiveness assesses the link between the objective and the result obtained. Efficiency assesses the link between means and results. Relevance refers to the link between the means deployed and the objectives mobilized. Concisely, performance can be summed up as the fusion of these three parameters.

On the other hand, performance evaluation in the public sector encompasses the notion of the user, which makes the distinction between the private and public sectors. It involves measuring their expectations and satisfaction. Thus, the systems in place in public

organizations, particularly those that meet the standard of inserting the performance protocol, in this case in the university field, are not limited solely to measuring the financial profitability of their actions, but also to assessing the quality of services, user satisfaction and the acuity of public policies.

#### DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In order to validate the theoretical aspects, this section will focus on the methodological approach adopted, the sample chosen and the methods of data collection and analysis. Indeed, the present work is based on a qualitative study used to gain a deep understanding of complex interactions based on tacit processes (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). It will enable us to analyze the different perceptions of the stakeholders; in other words, the university's actors vis-à-vis the issues of the reality of the Moroccan university system and its performance.

To this end, we have focused on a single case study, that of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in the city of Fez. Our primary objective is to examine and understand an organizational process, rather than to explain relationships between variables. Similarly, the choice of this university places us in line with Yin (1984, p. 23), who states that the case study is "an empirical investigation that studies a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of information are used". Our aim is to understand the characteristics of the particular world of this university, with its own dynamics (Collerette, 1996).

In this exploratory study, we collected data using semi-structured interviews with 12 university stakeholders, namely: Head of the Scientific Research and Cooperation Department, Teacher-researcher *FSJES* Council member, *FLS* Union, USMBA Vice-President, Head of the Financial Affairs Department of the USMBA Presidency, *ENS* Teacher-researcher, *ENSA* Teacher-researcher, FSJES Teacher-researcher, Secretary General of the USMBA Presidency, Head of the Contracts Department of the USMBA Presidency, General Manager of the USMBA Innovation City, Head of the Commitment Department of the USMBA Presidency.

The study period was spread over 5 months. The average duration of interviews was 1h 30 min. As for data analysis, we used a hybrid analysis based on both manual techniques and Nvivo 10 software. The presentation of the results will respond to the research question and reflect the actual situation of USMBA stakeholders regarding the issue of university performance.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we aim to analyze university stakeholders' perceptions of the following aspects of the university environment: key stakeholders of university performance, factors influencing the management system and university performance and determinants of university performance.

### **Key Stakeholders of University Performance**

In order to identify the stakeholders who have a direct influence on university performance, we contacted 12 sectioned stakeholders and posed the following question: "Who are the key stakeholders in the university's performance? As a result, the responses and perceptions of the informants are heterogeneous. We present some of them as follows:

"The actors that influence the University's performance are the legislative system in force (laws and procedures), the supervisory ministry, academic staff (teachers/researchers) administrative staff and socio-economic partners." (Head of the Scientific Research and Cooperation Department).

"(...) when we talk about actors or stakeholders and the environment, we're talking about the systemic approach. The issue at stake in the university case concerns teaching and scientific research, so through the systemic approach the university is a system built by several internal and external stakeholders who influence performance. Internally, there are three main actors: the teacher, the administrator and the student. The university cannot succeed without an efficient administration to manage and support it. On the other hand, teaching cannot succeed without the involvement of students. And I believe that these three actors must work in parallel to make the university product more effective. So we all need to work towards a single concept that sums up this relationship: improving university quality and performance in order to achieve national and international competitiveness via international rankings. And as far as the other stakeholders are concerned, I believe that this awareness must be disseminated among all external actors, because if we're looking for regional socioeconomic development, the university must be considered as a key actors in this regional and national development, producing qualified skills for the job market and also for developing ideas and finding solutions to the major problems linked to the nation's inclusive development." (Teacher-researcher, FSJES Council member).

"We have internal stakeholder groups, primarily students and staff, and external groups from the socio-economic environment, with all its components, and of course the supervisory authorities (ministry, newly-created evaluation agency, etc.). It appears that the performance indicators produced by the university are only intended for the supervisory authorities (during the 2009-2012 emergency program, we had begun to clarify this aspect. But just after this program was abruptly terminated, without even an evaluation, this page was turned). Whereas performance indicators must also be produced for these various internal and external stakeholder groups." (USMBA Vice President).

"The three actors are the student, the teacher and the manager, in addition of course to openness to the socio-economic environment, which is lacking in our university, which remains largely inward-looking." (Teacher-researcher, ENSA).

The sum of the informants' answers led us to draw up the graph below, which includes all the stakeholders essentially responsible for university performance. It emerges that the central actor in university performance is the teacher-researcher, with a 27% share. This is followed by university managers with 20%, which also explains why they play such a decisive role in the quest for university performance. All in all, the views of the actors interviewed point to the following observations:

### Finding no. 1: Key stakeholders in university performance

The central actor in university performance is the teacher, but university managers also play a decisive role in the quest for university performance.

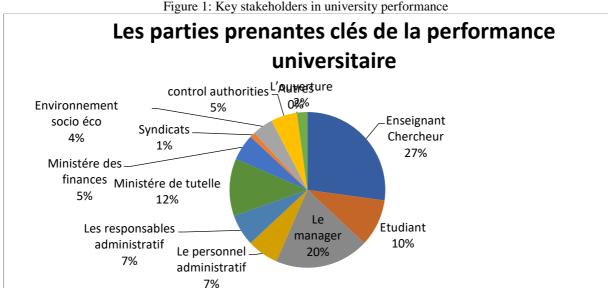


Figure 1: Key stakeholders in university performance

Source: Prepared by the authors.

### Factors Influencing the University's Management System and Performance

We focused on the factors impacting USMBA's performance, by asking the following question: "In your opinion, what are the factors influencing the management system and university performance?". Through this question, we seek to collect the different points of view of the same respondents around the constraints and opportunities of the Moroccan university environment capable of influencing their performance. The informants' answers reveal that:

Internal and external environmental constraints:

The answers provided for this first factor include the following:

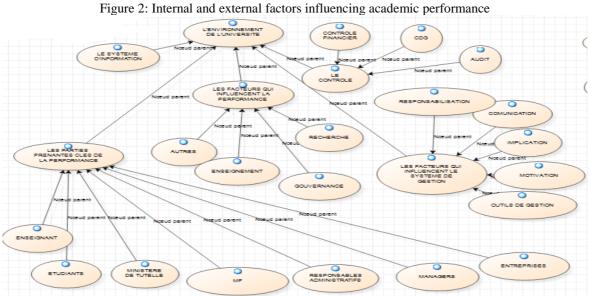
"Among the university's external stakeholders is the socio-economic environment, with all its components. The major constraints it poses for university performance can be summed up as a lack of understanding of the university's role and, above all, of what it can contribute in terms of development." (USMBA Vice President).

"Internally: skills not matched to tasks and lack of information, motivation and ongoing training. And externally: Student demographics and overstaffing, and the university's autarky and isolation from their environment." (Head of the Contracts Department of the USMBA Presidency).

"(...) internally, there are constraints linked to the problems of student strikes and also the lack of involvement of some staff members in university management. In my opinion, this is linked to the lack of a motivating organizational chart that will be a framework that can involve and motivate administrative and technical staff. There's also the voluntary departure of teachers, which has caused problems in terms of staffing levels, teaching quality and university performance, especially as most of the teachers who have left are post-graduate professors with a scientific background built up through years of teaching and research experience." (Secretary General of the USMBA Presidency).

"Externally, we don't have any mechanisms for financing companies, and if they do exist, they're not clear, because in developed countries, there are clear mechanisms to help universities obtain external financing. The constraints of the internal environment are poor governance and training problems. These elements can influence the university's performance." (General Manager of the USMBA Innovation City).

There are countless internal and external factors influencing the university's performance. However, computer processing using Nvivo10 software has enabled us to code all the factors influencing USMBA's performance. The diagram below is as follows:



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Through the informants' answers about the constraints of the university environment, we summarized their perception to the following points: the region's involvement in the university's development, the university's involvement in development, staff motivation, communication, information retention, mismatch between skills and tasks, over-enrolment of students, teaching quality, involvement of internal and external stakeholders, governance, funding, training and management tools (integrated management information system, organization chart, management control, internal audit, BSC, NICT, etc.).

These are all factors that can influence the university's performance, which shows that the manager's role is crucial in managing these key success factors in order to take advantage of the potential that both the internal and external environment can offer to university performance.

Opportunities provided by the environment

The answers to this second factor included the following:

"The opportunities offered by the environment are manifold: The major orientations for improving and matching the initial and continuing training offer, opportunities for internships and the integration of graduates, orientations for innovation research to solve problems that may arise during the development of the various components of this environment and the funding of innovation research, (...)." (USMBA Vice President).

"We can take advantage of these programs to train administrative and teaching staff, and even seek to establish cotutelle relationships for the supervision of our students through internships in common research fields." (Secretary General of the USMBA Presidency).

"University performance indicators must be produced for all internal and external stakeholders. The factors that influence the management system and university performance are directly related to the various stakeholders, their interactions with the university and the services they offer them." (USMBA Vice President).

When we analyzed the different points of views of the interlocutors concerned, we noticed that the majority of them consider that the USMBA has not been able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by its environment, and that this depends, on the one hand, on the university itself and, on the other, on reasons external to the university. Among the opportunities offered, we find internships and integration of graduates, orientations for innovative research, funding for innovative research, international mobility programs, communication and cooperation with the environment, diversification and adaptation of the educational offer to the needs of the job market, and local and regional partnerships.

**Abdellah University** 

Finding no. 2: Factors influencing the university's management system and performance

The study of constraints and opportunities in the university environment leads us to the following observation: The performance of the Moroccan university is influenced by internal and external environmental factors, and it is up to managers to make efforts to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the environment to create a synergy conducive to the development of both the university and the region.

### **Determinants of Academic Performance**

To understand the determinants of university performance, we asked the actors the following question: "In your opinion, what are the determinants of university performance?"

> "In my opinion: the quality of the training offered and its adaptation to the needs of the national economy and the country's priorities; the number of graduates integrated and absorbed by the job market; the quality of the scientific research carried out by a university and its adaptation to the needs of the population." (Head of the Scientific Research and Cooperation Department).

> "A good management control system with true university autonomy." (Mission manager of the USMBA Presidency).

> "In my opinion, the determinants of the Moroccan university's performance are: good management and governance, motivation and training of administrative and teaching staff, and the involvement of the university's various stakeholders around a common development project for the university, of course via a participatory approach based on contractualization and the elaboration of a project with realistic objectives and also with indicators to measure the realization of this project in order to carry out an objective evaluation at the final level of the contract." (Head of the Financial Affairs Department of the USMBA Presidency).

> "In my opinion, it's all the decisions taken by the university's actors that determine the level of university performance, because we mustn't ignore the principles of good management, namely the participative approach, communication, motivation, accountability and transparency in management. In my opinion, all these are considered to be the ingredients of university performance." (Secretary General of the USMBA Presidency).

For most of those interviewed on this point, it is essential that university organizations be managed by competent university managers, with extended management prerogatives, framed by innovative legislation, guaranteeing autonomy, and enshrining the principle of responsibility and accountability.

### Finding no. 3: The determinants of university performance

We note that, on the one hand, the majority of actors interviewed consider that the determinants of performance are corollary to the management and governance style adopted by

managers. On the other hand, some of those interviewed attach importance to the choice of the right development project for the university by the tutelle via its ad-hoc commissions, and the implementation of this development plan via well-defined training, research-innovation and governance strategies, involving the various actors who interact with the university, and finally the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of these strategies.

In sum, performance is the keystone of the academic field. It is both a challenge to be met and a goal to be achieved. It has to be said that the very notion of performance has been amalgamated from the outset, and its use in the university is no exception. The particularity of its contour lies in its delicate definition in a field with diverse actors with, in particular, heterogeneous interests.

Admittedly, the configuration of the Moroccan university system has undergone considerable development in recent years, but performance is a legitimate but thorny quest.

Indeed, to understand the essence of performance, we need to define the internal and external environment of the university, which is a complex system involving several components and roles. This means deciding on the nature of the university's missions and raison d'être, the inadequacy of its information system and the quality of its human resources. The complexity of financing condemns it to heteronomy, given the plurality of its establishments and the projects invested in, which are essentially aimed at the success and fulfillment of its students, considered to be its basic output. In the same sense, the region's need to develop the university is keenly felt. The university has a duty to contribute to local development, given the region's many assets, including a remarkable agricultural and industrial zone, good infrastructure and a rich heritage.

At the same time, the university's performance is enhanced by the drive to improve and diversify its training offering and international agility. Without forgetting, however, the role of the manager, who must be a leader, a liaison officer and a regulator.

These are all factors that depend on performance. It's not a question of making an inventory of them, but rather of learning from them and taking them scrupulously into account to improve pedagogical quality, the student's ability and the manager's will.

### **CONCLUSION**

This article analyzes the perceptions of university stakeholders regarding performance. The aim was to identify and understand the actors involved, the factors influencing performance and its determining parameters. The study revealed that the majority of actors are convinced of the need to

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forge contractual relationships with the university's environment, based on a "win-win" logic and aimed at improving the triptych of internal actors-academic institution-external actors.

Its contribution discerns the stakeholder approach, which seeks to identify the university's actors and their degree of influence on performance, and to understand and explain their perceptions of the multidimensional and still subjective principle of university performance. It was also necessary to identify the parameters of the university system capable of supporting the performance of the Moroccan university.

To this end, it is up to the university to develop a monitoring and management control function, and to equip it with the necessary means and instruments (such as dashboards) to develop and steer its relations with both its internal and external environments. It is legitimate to agree that the university is influenced by a panoply of contingency factors, and that it is up to managers to multiply their efforts to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the environment, in order to create a synergy conducive to the development of both the university and the region.

The results of our research will be used by neighboring universities to improve their performance. It's not just a question of looking at financial indicators such as the commitment rate to judge whether the university is efficient. We need to go beyond this dimension to touch on others, because as long as its missions and stakeholders are plural, achieving performance remains utopian in terms of its dimensions.

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