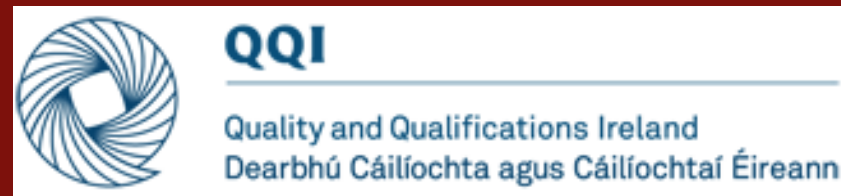


# Accountability and Quality Improvement

If You Think There's a Simple Solution, You Don't Understand the Problem

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2nd QQI Conference on Quality Enhancement  
Dublin – 15 December 2016



# Outline

- Quality in higher education
- Accountability and “The New Public Management”
- Measuring quality – The proxy problem
- Improving quality – The incentive problem
- Assessment for accountability vs. improvement
- Is there a way forward?
- Discussion

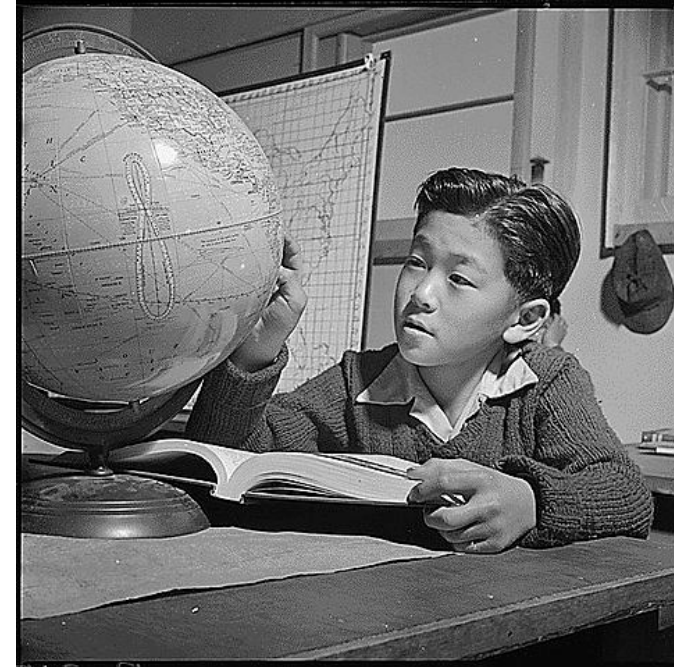


Quality in Higher Education

# **A GLOBAL HOT TOPIC**

# A Global Hot Topic

- A major concern of...
  - Governments
  - Consumers
  - Other stakeholders
- Driven by...
  - Cost escalation
  - Global competition in a knowledge economy



# A Global Hot Topic



## **QUALITY IN THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE** **What is it? How Should it be measured? Who decides?**

U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine  
December 2015

<http://sites.nationalacademies.org/PGA/bhew/qualityeducation/index.htm>

# Accountability and “The New Public Management”

## Traditional accountability

- Finances
- Fairness
- Use of power

Enforced by rules & regulations

## New accountability

- *Performance*
- Less regulation of process
- Higher expectations for outcomes

Less concern with how goals are achieved

But how to measure performance and promote improvement?

# WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “QUALITY” IN HIGHER EDUCATION?



Broad participation

A high-quality student  
experience

Quality of teaching

Quality of scholarship

External engagement  
by academic staff

Research &  
innovation

Engagement with  
community & society

Internationalisation

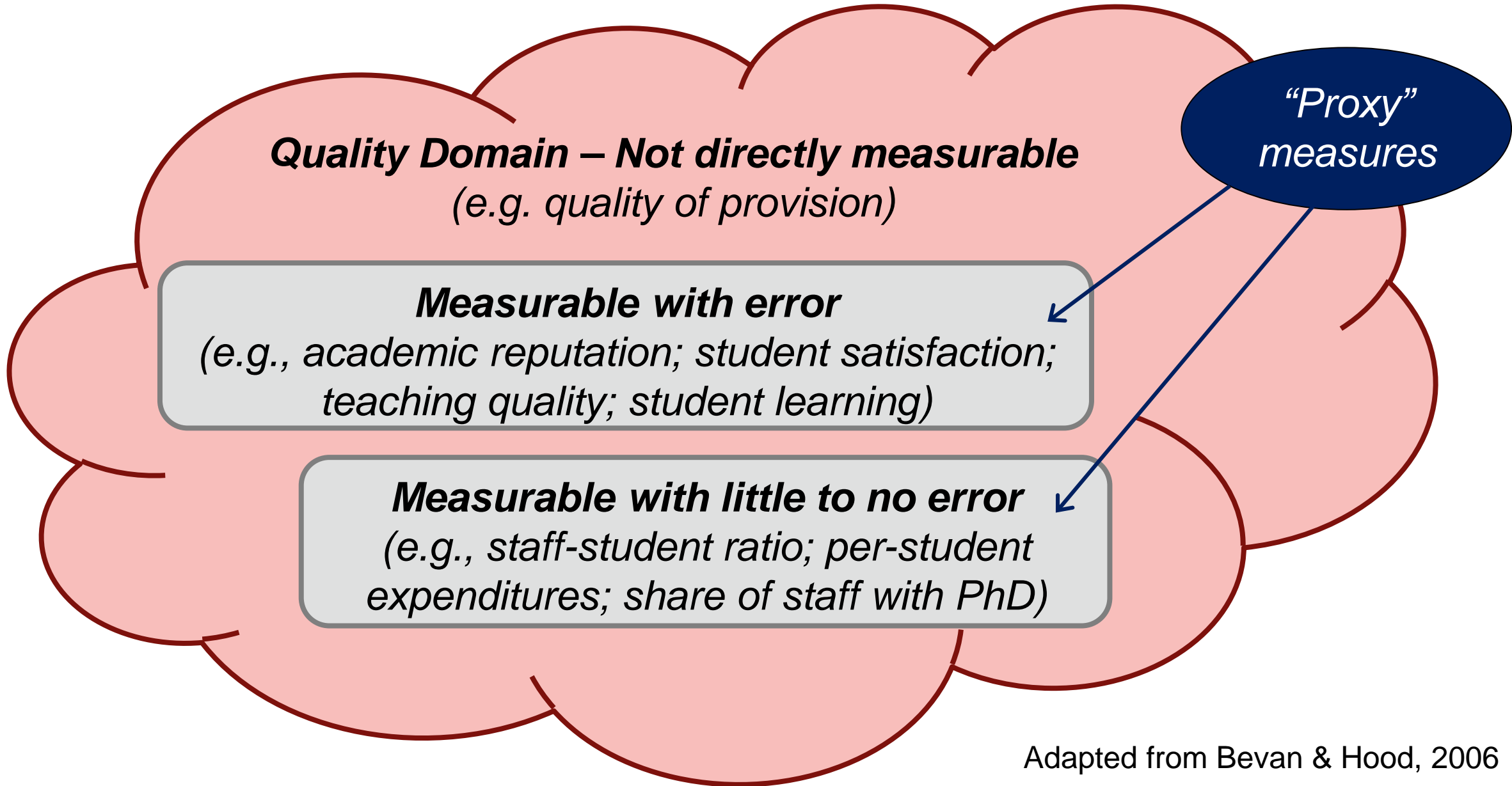


**We can probably agree on a list of quality dimensions**

How to measure them is another matter entirely

Consider an example...





Adapted from Bevan & Hood, 2006

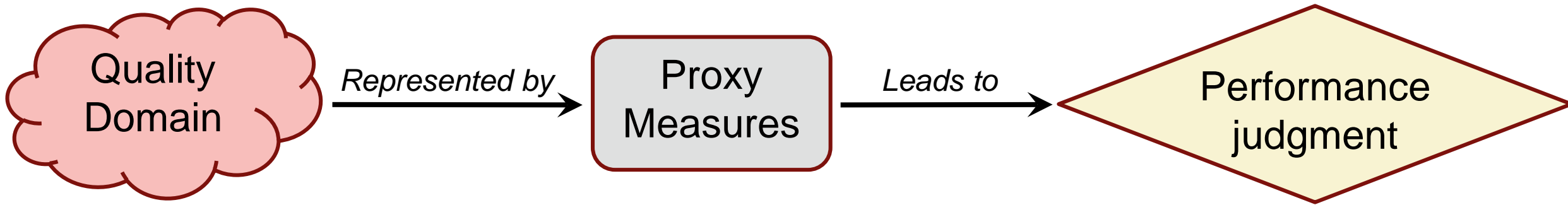
# The Proxy Problem

- Proxies are often poor approximations
  - Especially true in cases like higher education
- Minimizing measurement error often compromises fidelity to the broader quality domain



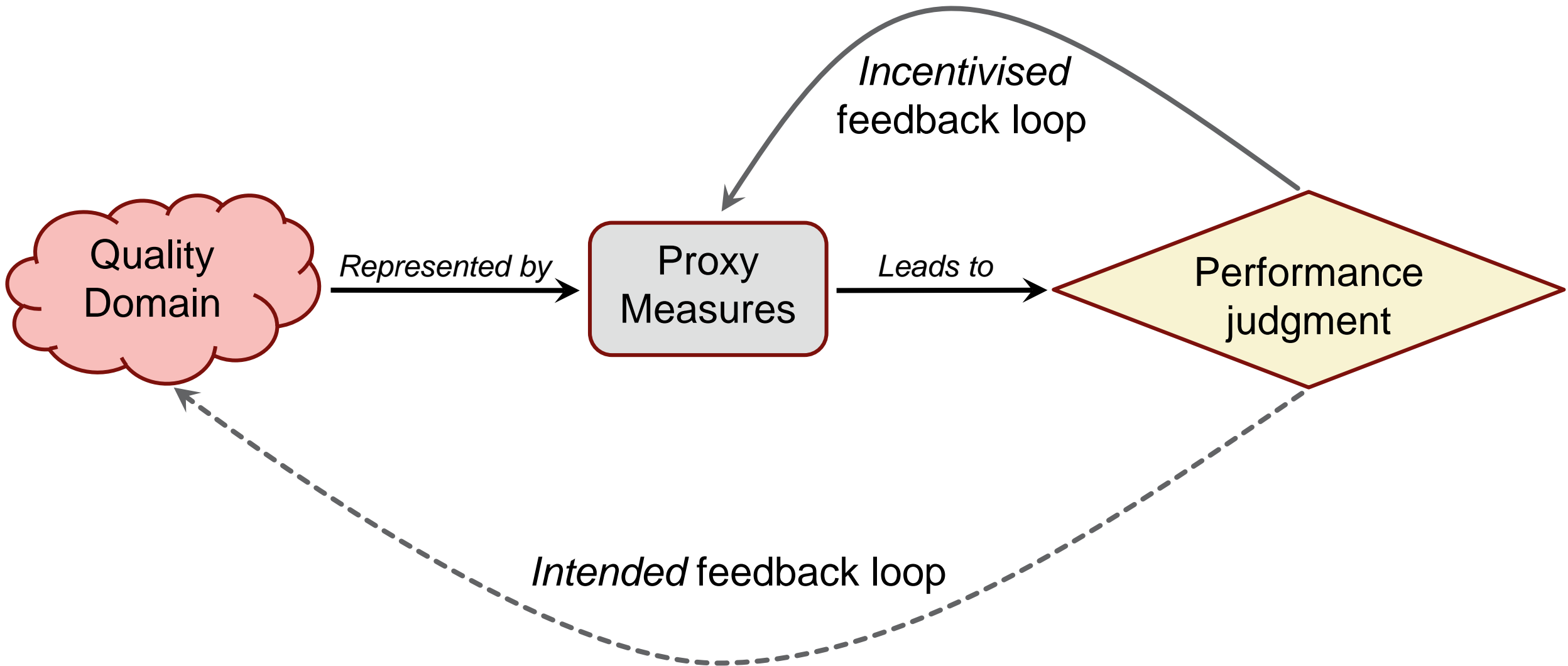


# A BASIC PERFORMANCE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL



*So far, so good. But let's think about the behavioural implications*







# A problem of goal displacement

“A system of performance rewards linked to precise measures is not an incentive to perform well; it is an incentive to obtain a good score.”

(March, 1984)

# It's About *More than Measurement*

- The key design challenge of a performance-based quality regime is not choosing **the right measures** (a *technical* problem)
- It is ensuring that the system motivates **the right behaviour** (an *alignment* problem)
- Very difficult when proxy measures are linked to high-stakes rewards and sanctions
  - Many more ways to do it wrong than right



Is there a way out of this dilemma?

**WHAT IF WE PUT IMPROVEMENT AT THE CENTER?**





# Assessment for Accountability vs. Improvement

“Accountability requires the entity held accountable to demonstrate, with evidence, conformity with an established standard of process or outcome. The associated incentive for that entity is to look as good as possible, regardless of the underlying performance. Improvement, in turn, entails an opposite set of incentives. Deficiencies in performance must be faithfully detected and reported so they can be acted upon.”

(Ewell, 2009)

# Ewell's “Two Paradigms of Assessment”

	Assessment for Improvement Paradigm	Assessment for Accountability Paradigm
<b>Strategic Dimensions</b>		
<i>Intent</i>	Formative (Improvement)	Summative (Judgment)
<i>Stance</i>	Internal	External
<i>Predominant Ethos</i>	Engagement	Compliance
<b>Application Choices</b>		
<i>Instrumentation</i>	Multiple/Triangulation	Standardized
<i>Nature of Evidence</i>	Quantitative and Qualitative	Quantitative
<i>Reference Points</i>	Over Time, Comparative, Established Goal	Comparative or Fixed Standard
<i>Communication of Results</i>	Multiple Internal Channels and Media	Public Communication
<i>Uses of Results</i>	Multiple Feedback Loops	Reporting

SOURCE: Ewell, 2009

# Assessing “student engagement” is strongly rooted in the improvement paradigm



Student engagement represents a new approach to the quality question

# What is Student Engagement?

The extent to which students are exposed to and participate in **effective educational practices**

- Educationally purposeful activities and practices
- Empirically linked to desired outcomes



# A New Perspective on Quality



Student engagement represents a shift in how we think about what matters in the student experience

- From satisfaction (happiness) to quality of educational experiences
- Strong focus on *behaviour* rather than attitudes and opinions

# Why is it Important to Measure Student Engagement?

- Outcomes information alone is insufficient to guide improvement
- *Diagnostic* information is needed
  - Identify areas of strength and weakness to understand the outcomes
  - Target interventions
  - Monitor progress

# NSSE, ISSE, & More



- US & Canada
- More than 1,600 colleges and universities 2000-2016
- 90% repeat participation

- Adaptations in...

- Australia

- China

- Ireland

- Korea

- New Zealand

- South Africa

- United Kingdom

- Experimentation

- Chile, Denmark, Indonesia

*New report  
out today!*



# EXAMPLES OF NSSE DATA USE





## A closing question for discussion

What would an improvement-focused accountability system look like?



# Discussion