

Strengthening quality: the universities' perspective

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Outline

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3. Institutional level
4. Implications for governance and management
5. Conclusions

1. Introduction: Quality assurance, why and how?

Quality assurance

One of the topics most discussed in higher education. Three main reasons:

1. Increased globalisation/internationalisation
 - ⇒ competition/cooperation
 - ⇒ International rankings
 - ⇒ mobility et recognition issues
1. The growing importance of ICT heightens these challenges and require greater international transparency

3. The need for greater transparency at national level, because of:

- ✓ The broadening of participation in higher education
- ✓ The spread of for-profit institutions, transnational education, etc.
- ✓ The growing cost of higher education and research
- ✓ The greater scope of institutional autonomy

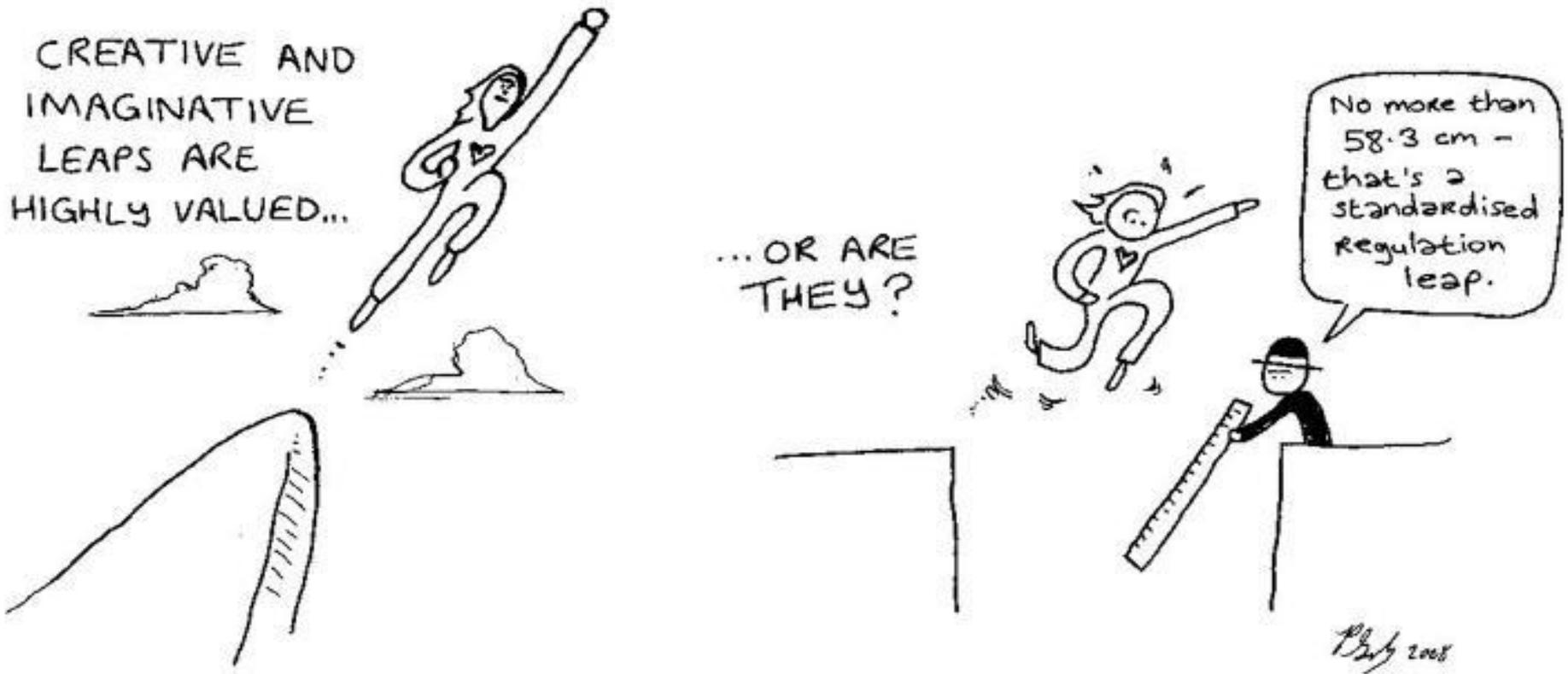
Quality assurance: the articulation of two levels

- Internal quality assurance (IQA), **the cornerstone** of any effective quality system
- External quality assurance (EQA), **independent** and with an **international outlook** – two conditions to ensure the credibility of the agency
- It is essential to conceive these two levels at the same time in order to ensure their complementarity

2. The national level

External evaluation: six recommendations

1. Ensure the QA agency's international orientation
2. Ensure the independence of the evaluation panels
3. Promote a contextual and improvement-oriented evaluation



4. Carefully use standards, criteria, checklists and quantitative methods in general, because:

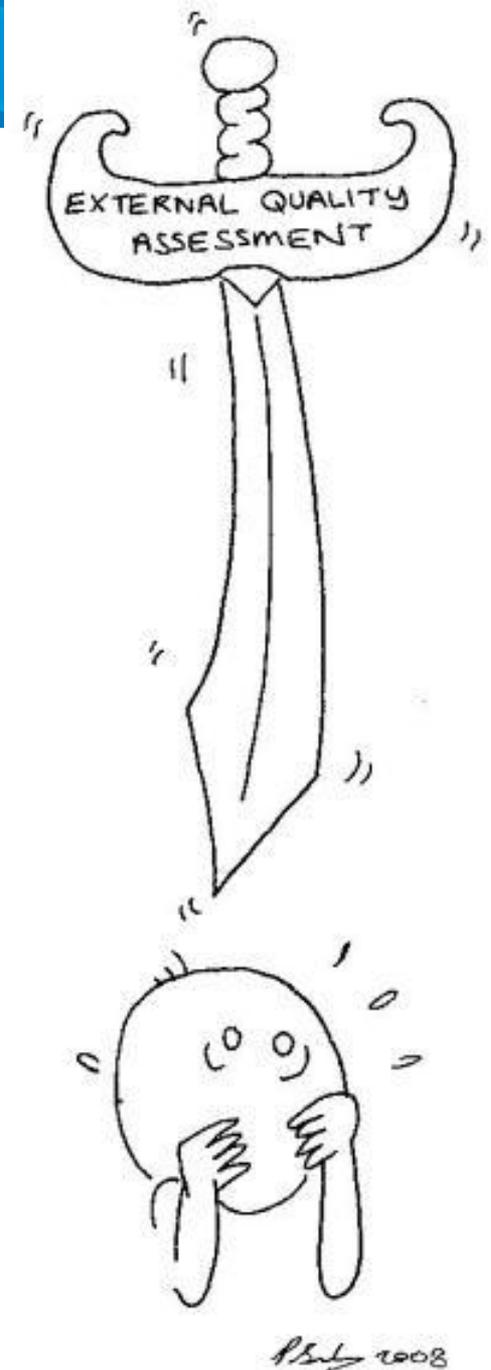
- ✓ They cannot capture the complexity of education and research activities
- ✓ They risk limiting diversity, development and change

5. Respect institutional autonomy, whilst insisting that the university implement quality assurance processes.

6. Analyse the impact of EQA in order to:

- ✓ Limit disproportionate costs and negative cost/benefits
- ✓ Avoid complicated and heavy-handed procedures and structures
- ✓ Coordinate the different types of evaluations to ensure an appropriate frequency of evaluations

Ensure a dialogue among all interested parties in order to avoid that IQA is perceived as a Damocles sword.



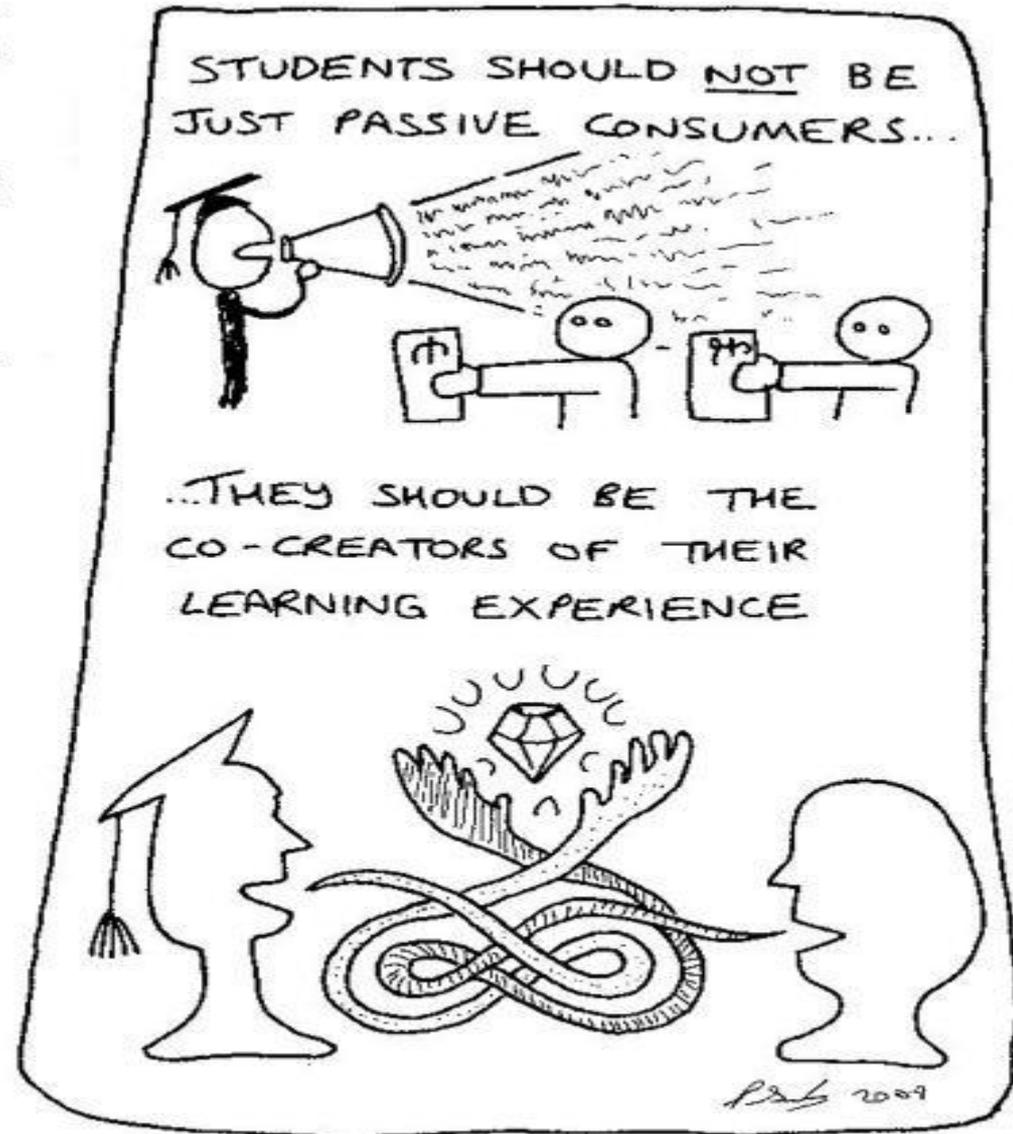
3. The institutional level, cornerstone of an effective QA system

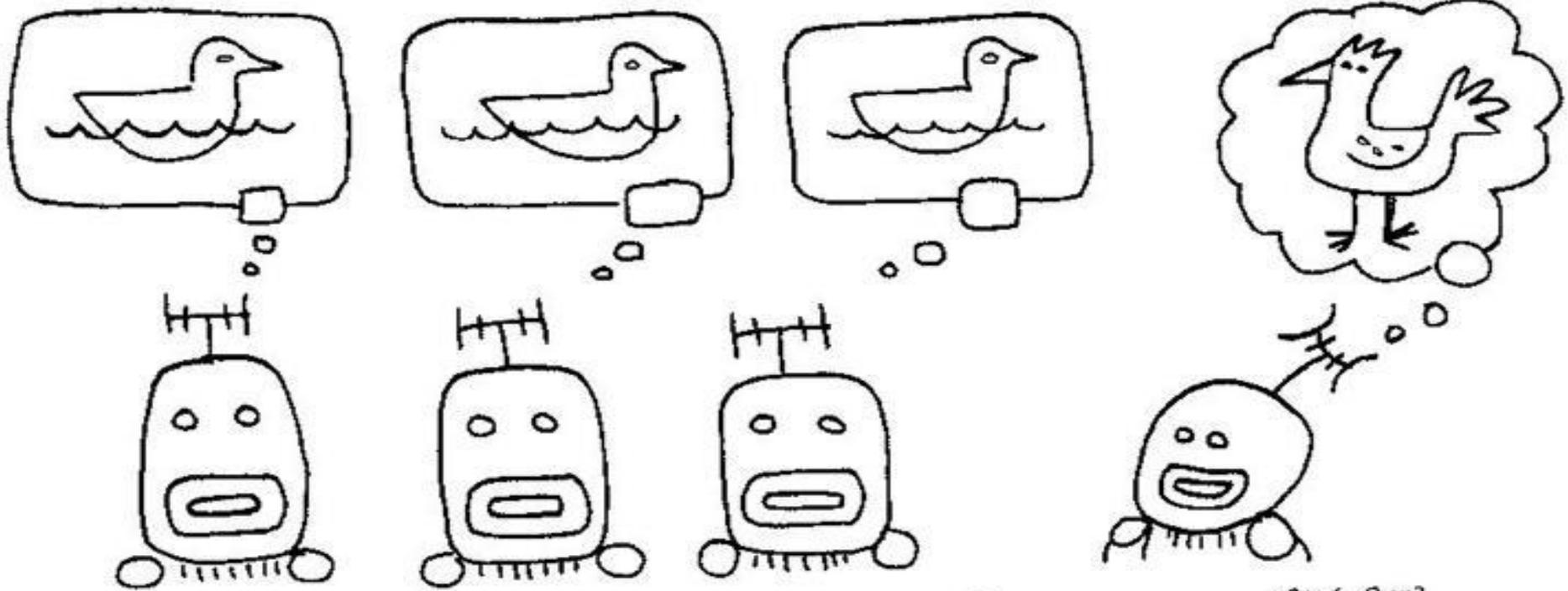
Trends in governance and management

- A professional management
 - A more robust university
 - Better able to respond to social demands
 - More active in the sector of innovation (spin off, etc....)
 - Better able to attract competitive funding
 - A unified institution rather than a federation of faculties – more dynamic, more strategic, more plus coherent
- ⇒ IQA is an essential governance and management tool

The characteristics of an effective IQA

An effective IQA involves the whole community: academic and administrative staff, students, alumni, external partners...





“ IF WE ARE ALL THINKING THE
SAME THING, WE'RE
PROBABLY NOT
THINKING. ”

An effective IQA recognises that the topic of quality assurance can generate tensions around definitions, frameworks, instruments and their use.

- An effective IQA is based on clear responsibilities and reporting lines across the institution, and on clear structures and decision-making processes
- An effective IQA is based on a management dashboard (data warehouse and performance indicators)
- An effective IQA ensures a follow-up of the external and internal evaluations

4. Implications for governance and management

IQA: Four key principles (related to good leadership)

1. IQA is a tool of strategic management:

- Create consensus about the mission and profile of the university
- Design an IQA that would support the institution's mission and objectives and its strategic orientations
- Identify appropriate starting points (pilot projects, building on existing mechanisms in certain disciplines, using current projects to build-in IQA)

2. Promote quality as a shared value – two possible approaches:

- Bottom-up, with limited involvement of the senior leadership
- Top-down (with or without the involvement of the agency)
- Main results to avoid:

Today the academics see the quality assurance processes as a burden with which they must comply. The academics do not feel ownership of the concept and feel detached from it in their everyday activities.

(an academic)

The main purpose of the quality system is to have a quality system!

(a dean)

3. Avoid bureaucratic procedures and focus on capacity for change and promotion of creativity and innovation:

- A combination of tools and in good number (not too much, not too little)
- That offer a common framework while providing flexible adaptation
- That are combined with staff development for academic and administrative staff
- That are based on a process of co-construction and co-ownership
- That ensure the use of results and a good governance of IQA and oversight:
 - ✓ Vice-rector/pro vice-chancellor responsible for IQA
 - ✓ Committees at the level of the university and the faculties

Recognise the complexity of the quality unit's role

- **Supportive role and providing expertise:**

The visits to departments and faculties made the difference. People felt listened to and were happy that someone from the central administration came to them. You can't imagine the amount of coffee I drank, the number of biscuits I ate and the stories I heard!

- **Coordination role:**

My main interactions are with the vice rector for quality, the head of pedagogical development with whom I brainstorm regularly and a senior planning officer, with whom I work on issues connected with institutional data performance

- **The quality officer – a cultural go-between:**

I do not know the national QA requirements and I do not want to know them. We have decided to avoid the question altogether. It is the QA officer's job to follow national developments. Our aim is to develop a quality culture adapted to the institution.

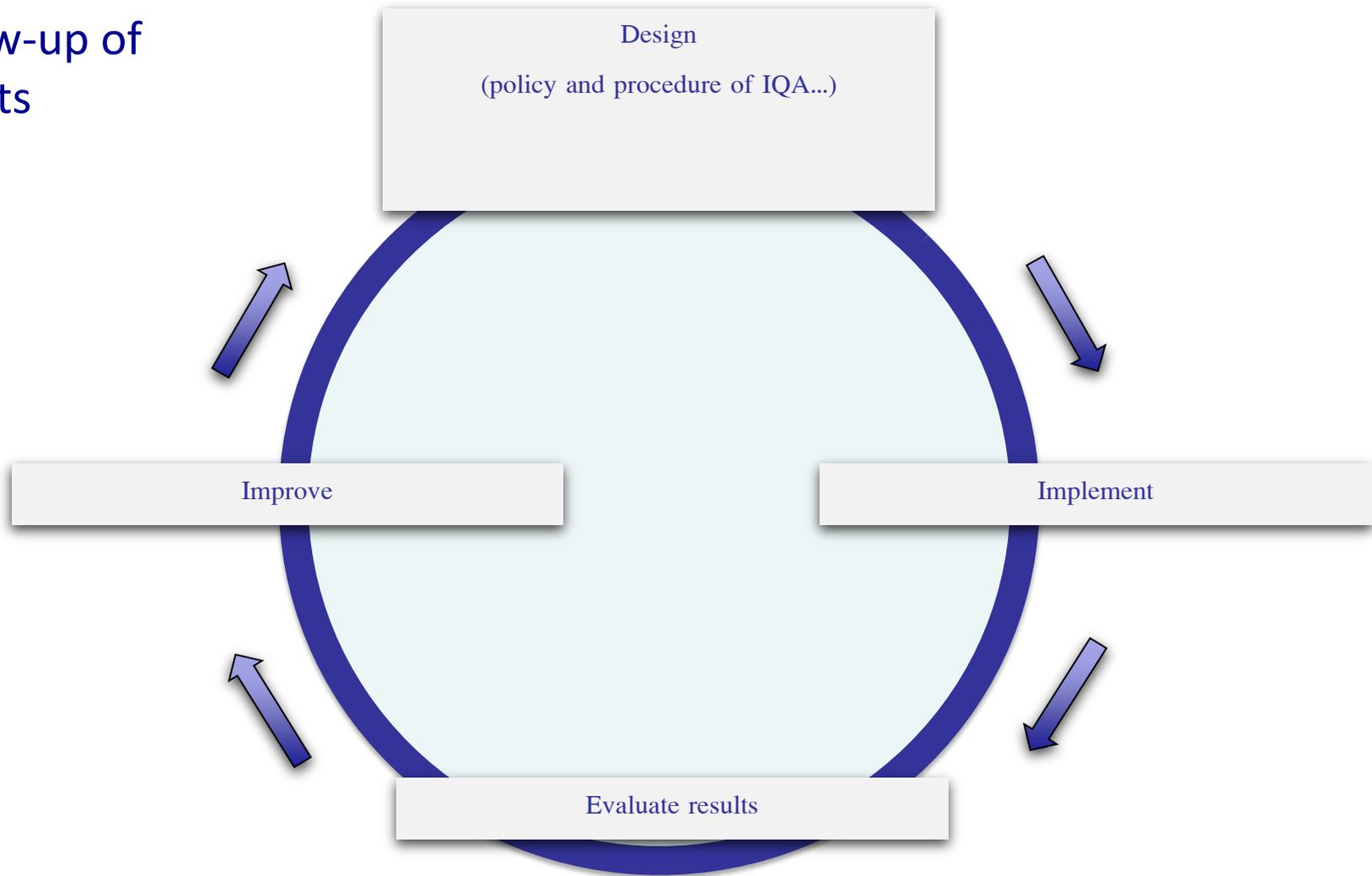
(an academic staff)

- **And:**

- ✓ Collect et analyse results

- ✓ Monitor: identify problems (but not the solutions)

4. Ensure the follow-up of results



Key aspects of IQA

The most successful internal QA systems are:

- Closely linked to institutional strategies
- Grounded in effective internal decision making processes and structures
- Context-sensitive: take into account different organisational/disciplinary cultures
- Not punitive but developmental
- They reflect institutional autonomy and self-confidence
- They reflect commitment of institution to its staff and students

5. Conclusions

Conclusions: some general remarks

- QA landscape is in constant development
- Reflects the state of higher education in general
- Challenges for external QA:
 - To stay relevant to universities in a changing context
 - To support institutional diversity and creativity
 - To support autonomous institutions

Conclusions: lessons learnt

- Development of internal quality processes is essential to institutions:
 - If done well, it will be a positive factor of change and improvement within institutions
 - It will ensure that external QA is supportive
- **Key conditions:**
 - Focus on articulation between external and internal QA
 - Ensure national dialogue of all key actors

EUA studies

EUA : www.eua.be

Improving Quality, Enhancing Creativity (2009)

<http://www.eua.be/activities-services/publications/eua-reports-studies-and-occasional-papers.aspx>

Examining Quality Culture Part 1 (2010)

http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/Examining_Quality_Culture_-_Part_1.pdf?sfvrsn=4

Examining Quality Culture Part II (2011)

http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications/eua_eqc_ii_web.pdf?sfvrsn=2

Examining Quality Culture EQC Part III (2012)

http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/Examining_Quality_Culture_EQC_Part_III.pdf?sfvrsn=2