

# QA Agencies as Promoters of Quality Culture

ENQA Leadership Programme

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FINNISH EDUCATION  
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QQI  
Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann



aaq+  
swiss agency of  
accreditation and  
quality assurance



NOKUT

# The team

# Project outline

This project explored:

- ▶ How the **concept of quality culture is understood**;
- ▶ If/how **quality culture is explicitly promoted by the agencies** and what implicit actions do they undertake that may be supportive of it?
- ▶ Some of the **obstacles** to quality culture
- ▶ **The role of the agency** in promoting quality culture, and how can it collaborate and interact with the HEIs and perhaps other actors in this effort

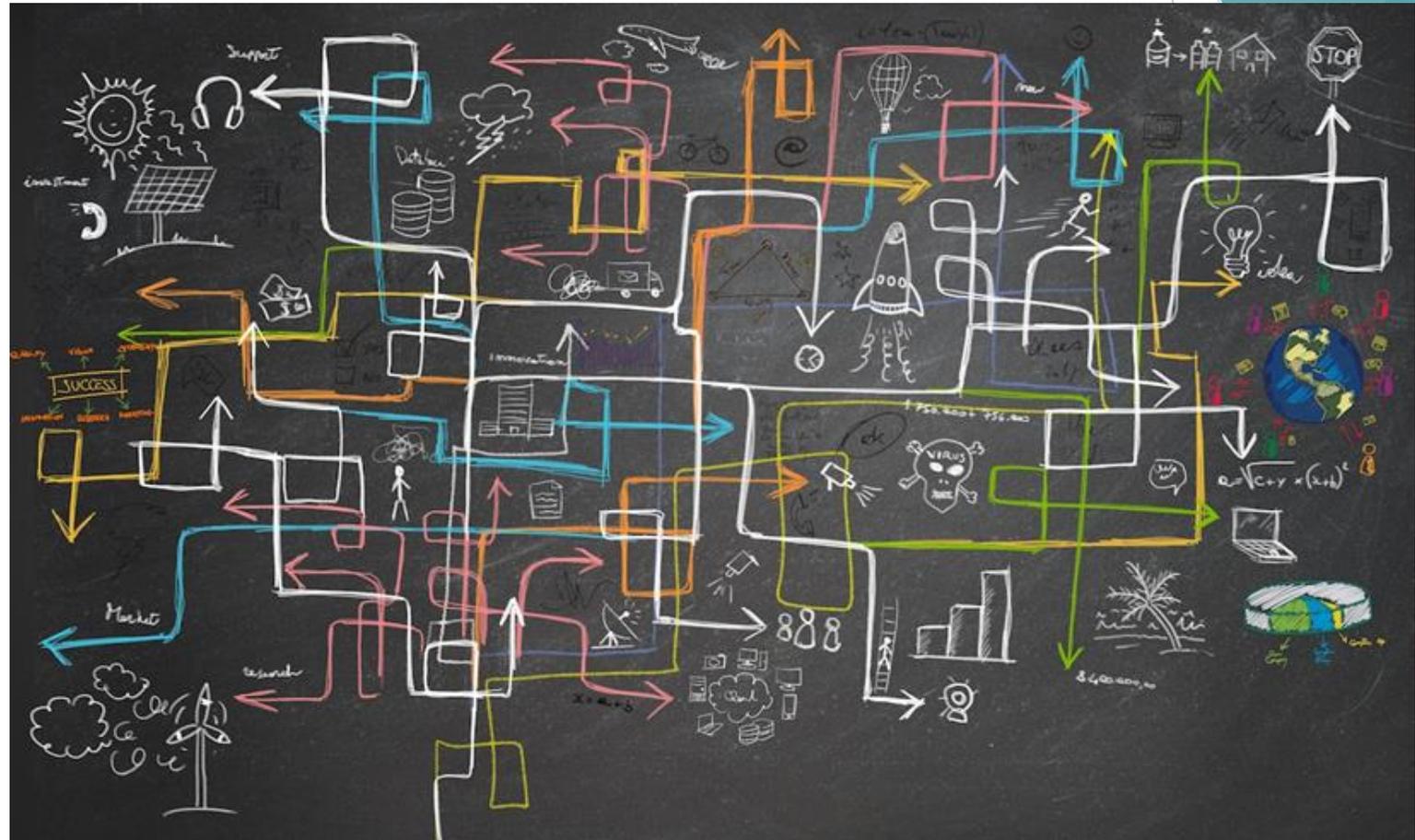
# Methodology

- ▶ Initial reflection among group on definitions and agency frameworks to consider scope and potential issues.
- ▶ Conducted a **literature review** to gain a broader and more critical understanding of the concepts and what has been considered/researched to date.
- ▶ Developed **survey** on quality culture to identify contemporary international trends and differences in definitions, understandings of, and approaches to QC. Circulated to LDP participants.
- ▶ HEI perspective important. Considered (and rejected) survey of HEIs. **Conducted analysis of external audit reports** on quality culture to gain:
  - ❖ An institutional perspective (self-evaluation);
  - ❖ A reviewer perspective;
  - ❖ An agency perspective (evaluation criteria and ENQA reports).
- ▶ Triangulated and discussed results of three methodologies to determine conclusions.

# Main findings - literature

## Definitions

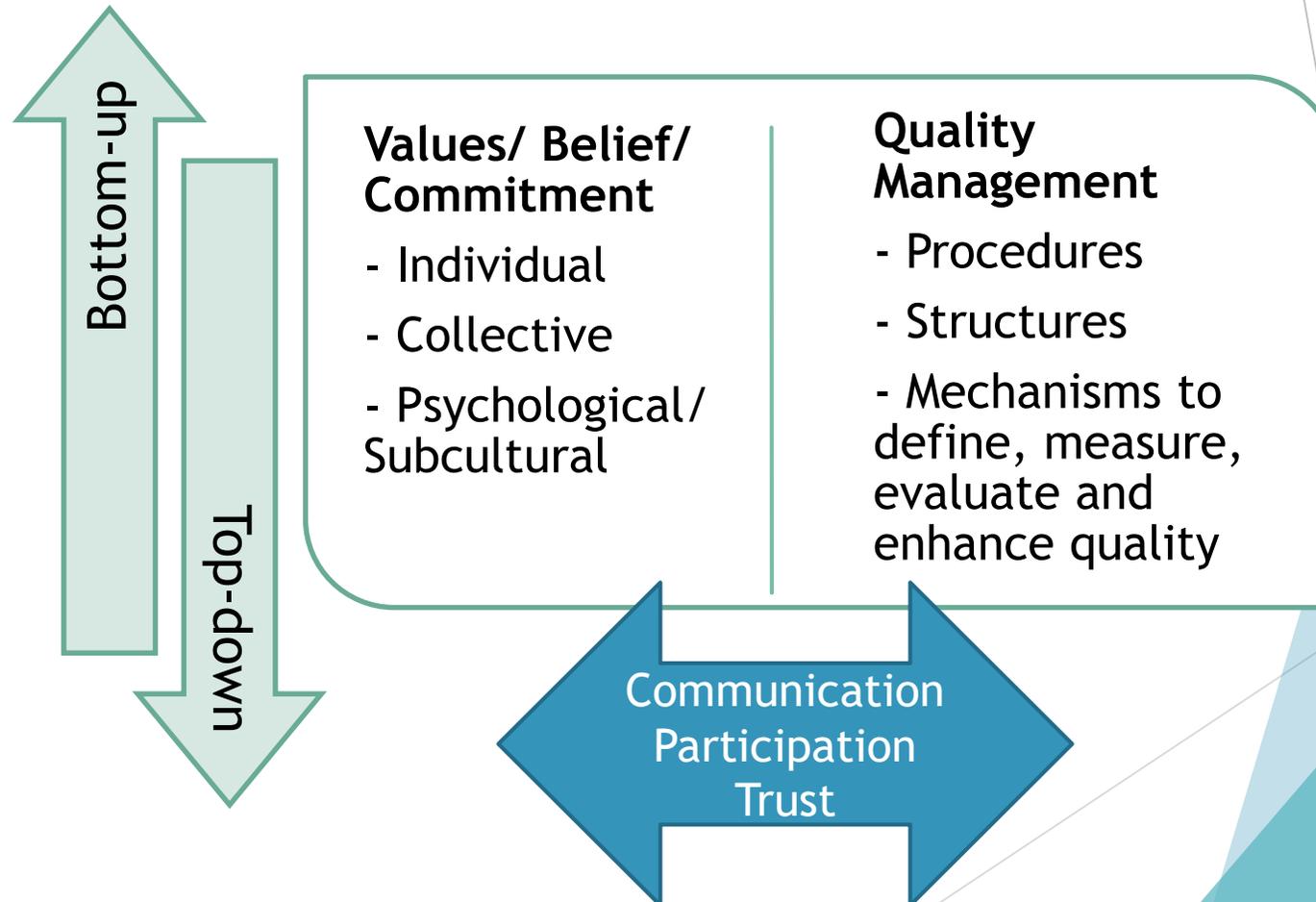
- ▶ “Quality” - contested/relative
- ▶ “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language!”



# Main findings - literature

## Definitions

- ▶ Quality culture and quality assurance are not the same thing.
- ▶ There is no one (correct) quality culture.
- ▶ EUA Quality Culture Project



# Main findings - literature

- ▶ Most of the literature is focused on how institutions can promote quality culture. Difficult to establish causal link to agency activities.
- ▶ External QA can inhibit QC - compliance, reactionary, lack of buy-in.
- ▶ Strong emphasis on importance of institutional autonomy for developing QC. Also a sense that external QA should be symbiotic/responsive.
- ▶ Characteristics/drivers of QC include: (Blended) leadership; effective structures for communication/participation; empowerment/responsibility/accountability; data-driven reflection; motivational factors.
- ▶ Developing quality culture is synonymous with developing a self-critical, reflective and motivated community of practitioners.

# Main findings - survey

- ▶ 12 respondents from the Leadership Programme
- ▶ **Agency definitions of QC:**
  - ❖ 7 have an official definition of QC, others still define it but unofficially.
- ▶ **How QC is referenced in country/agency QA frameworks:**
  - ❖ All have a reference to QC in their country's or agency's framework
    - ▶ Evaluation criteria
    - ▶ Guidelines
    - ▶ Legislation
    - ▶ Other (strategy, training)
- ▶ **"Does the agency have a role in promoting QC?" All but one agreed!**
- ▶ **Do you promote QC? All but one.**
- ▶ **How agencies promote quality culture and if/how they know these methods are effective.**
- ▶ **If agencies evaluate QC, how it is assessed in practice. 9 do.**

# Main findings - reports

- ▶ 126 audit reports analysed (time frame: 2008-2020)
- ▶ Reference to Quality Culture within 103 reports (82 %)
- ▶ Four of the agencies (IQAA, FINEEC, NOKUT and AAQ) have defined QC in their evaluation criteria  
One of the agencies (QQI) evaluates consistency with guidelines (includes QC)
- ▶ Not always clear that judgements on QC are based on criteria v subjective impression. Sometimes commenting more on quality management.
- ▶ QC is frequently connected to positive findings and connected to enhancement areas.
- ▶ It seems as if QC is an ideal goal or state, within the agencies as well as within the HEIs, and that common characteristics are positive values related to ethical, moral, communicative and organisational high standards.

# How is the concept of quality culture understood in different contexts?

- ▶ Definition of QC → No universal definition of QC but shared ideas:
  - ▶ Primary responsibility of HEIs
  - ▶ Collective and individual commitment, responsibility, willingness/motivation
  - ▶ Linked to quality work/QA/QE
  - ▶ Promotion of a set of values and principles by HEIs (openness, transparency, participation..)

# How is quality culture promoted by agencies?



The primary responsibility for QC rests with the institution!



Are they effective?

Evaluation/Audit Enhancement Events  
Research Regulations/Guidance  
Communication/Transparency/Publication  
Statistics/ Benchmarking Dialogue  
Monitoring Modelling Behaviour  
Balance of Compliance/Enhancement  
Incentives Consultancy

# How can agencies collaborate and interact with HEIs?

- ▶ More provider-led enhancement activities
- ▶ More responsive methodologies
- ▶ However, potential challenges re regulatory role. Careful balance required - potential implications for consistency of treatment/favouring individual HEIs.

# Reflections

- ▶ Considering the deep-rooted and embedded nature of quality culture, **how can it be promoted by the external quality assurance agencies?**
- ▶ **Is an enhancement-led approach the way forward? Can control/compliance support the enhancement of quality culture in HEIs?**
- ▶ **Is the concept of quality culture too often mixed with the concepts of QA/QM/quality work? If quality culture is assessed, should there be more focus on the ‘soft’ aspects such as values in the assessments of QC?**
- ▶ **Considering its complexity, and that there is no universally shared ideal of quality culture, is quality culture a useful concept to be assessed as part of EQA?**



THANK YOU