



QQI

10 YEARS

The future of Quality Assurance – supplements or major surgery?

Professor Paul Giller

Emeritus Professor and former Registrar and
Senior Vice President Academic, UCC



Presentation outline

- 1. What is quality in education?
 - Drivers and stakeholders and definitions
- 2. Variation and typologies in quality assurance
 - Types of Quality Assurance systems and approaches
 - Level of international variation and the basic QA system
 - Institutional typology
- 3. How do we know QA works?
 - Benefits
 - Costs
 - Ongoing issues
- 4. The Future of QA?



1. What is quality in education?

- Defining quality continues to be difficult (e.g. Jarvis 2014)
- A first challenge is that ‘quality is in the eye of the beholder’; meaning different things to the many different stakeholders and being subject to a diversity of drivers



The diversity of stakeholders and drivers

Drivers

Internal Drivers

- Rankings and reputation
- Institutional strategy and culture
- Staff quality and expertise
- Research activity and culture
- Student quality
- Target degree standards

External Drivers

- QA agencies
- Supporting system infrastructure (NFQ)
- External Examiners
- Competitors and market forces
- National and international alignment of standards (e.g. ESG/Bologna, professional bodies)
- Government policy and legislation
- Scale of sector
- Ranking schemes
- Fiscal environment
- Media
- Evolving T&L and HE issues

Quality in Education

Stakeholders

Internal users

Students
Teaching and non-teaching Staff
Governing authorities

External parties

Government
Funding agencies
Assessors/Professional bodies
Academic disciplinary societies
Accreditors and QA agencies
Auditors
Employers
Prospective students
General public

Mutual influences



- A second challenge is that quality is a multidimensional concept, making a simple definition problematic
- Thirdly, quality is a dynamic concept, reflective of the larger educational, economic, political, and social landscape
 - the “quality ecosystem”

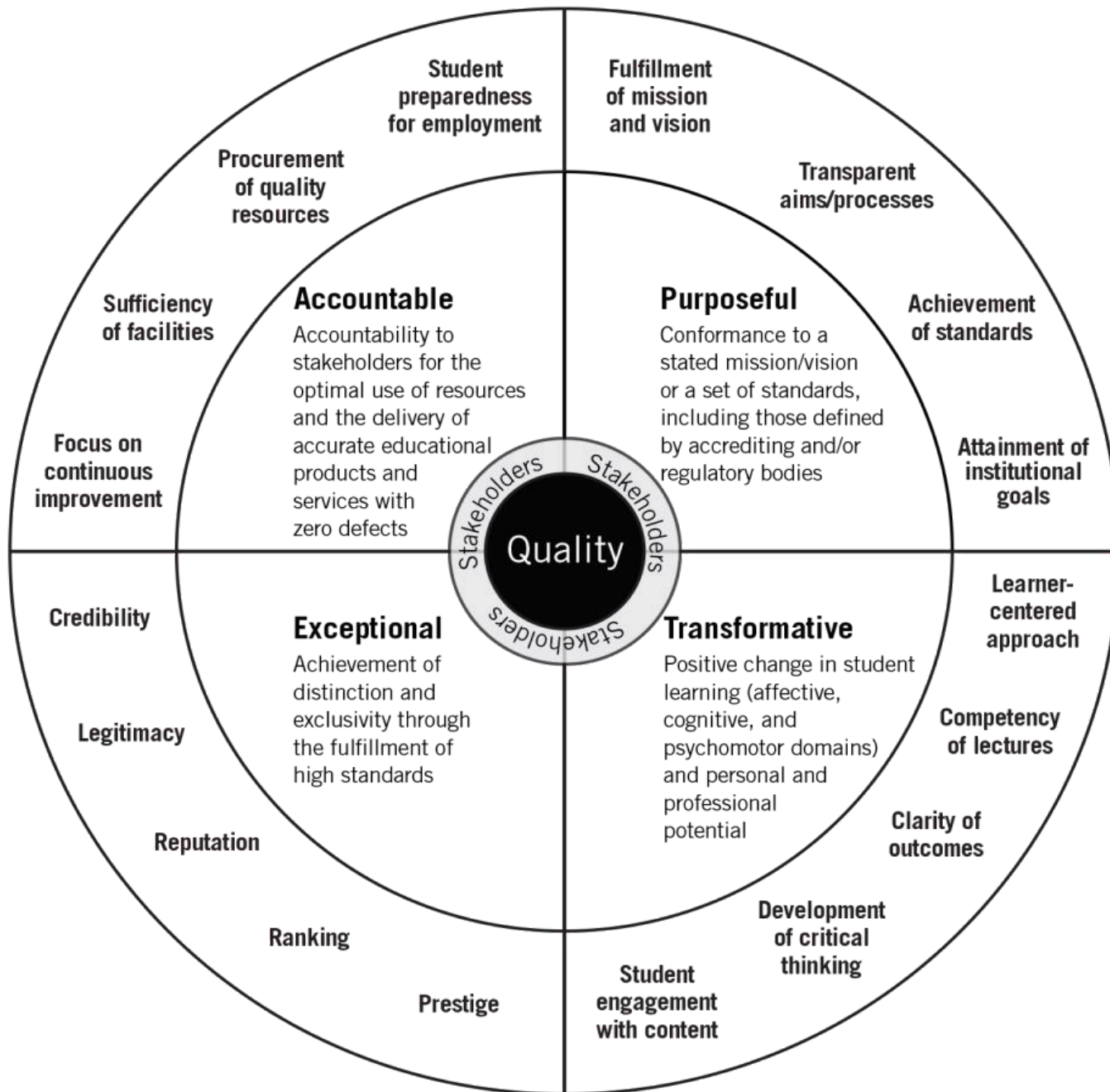
However a number of conceptual models have been proposed

- I highlight just two



A simple model based on Harvey and Green's (1993) inter-related concepts of quality in education
- These vary in relation to their internal or external focus





Conceptual model of Schindler et al (2015) illustrating both **central goals and outcomes** (inner quadrants) and **quality indicators** (outer ring) used to assess whether identified goals and outcomes have been achieved

Schindler, L., Puls-Elvidge, S., Welzant, H. and Crawford, L. 2015. Definitions of quality in higher education: a synthesis of the literature. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 5(3), 3-13.



2. Types of QA systems

Over three decades, educational quality assurance developed into well-institutionalized regulatory field

But a consistent dilemma or tension exists:

- ❖ Should quality assessment systems be designed to promote continuous improvement in education
- Or
- ❖ Should quality assessment systems focus on accountability of institutions and systems

Traditionally four broad approaches to quality assurance (e.g. Harvey and Williams 2010):

Accreditation; Audit; Assessment; External Review of service and outcomes standards.

To these could now add: **Enhancement focused** and **Risk-based** approaches

The object of attention of QA ranges from the learner, through the programme or subject, to the institution and even the QA system itself

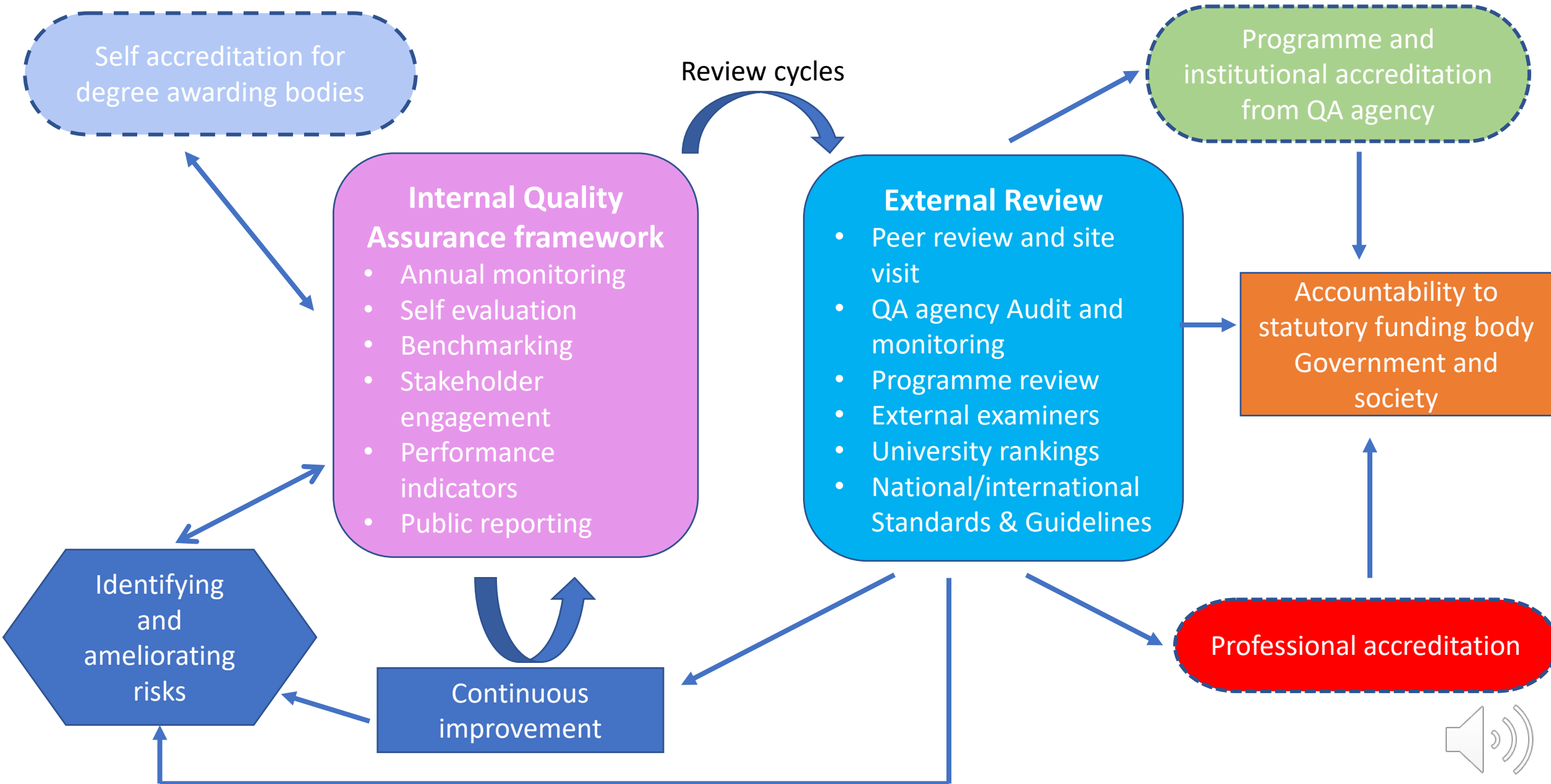


Differences between QA approaches in different countries due to several issues:

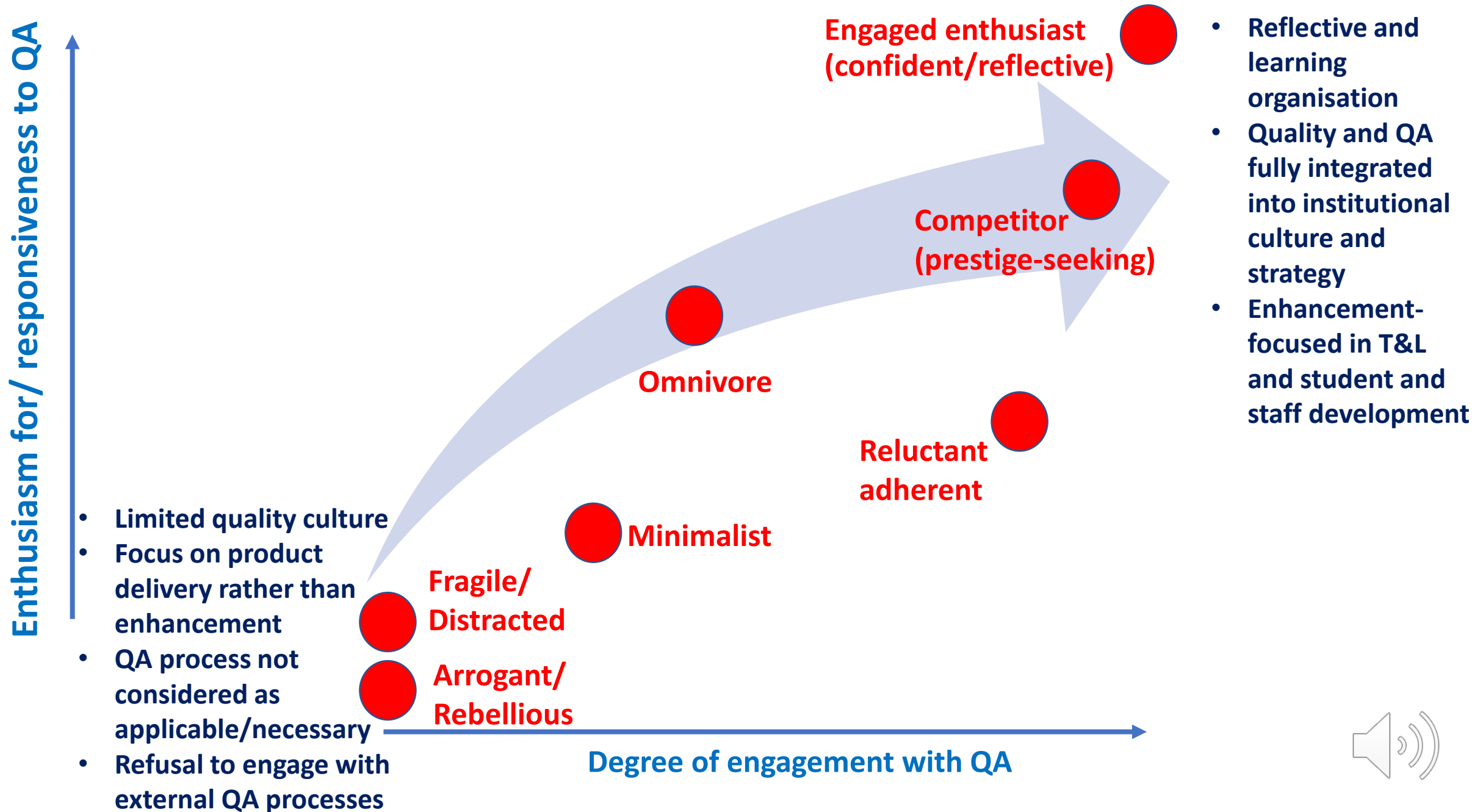
- 1) Degree of maturity of the educational system
- 2) Cultural differences affect how 'quality' and 'level' are defined
- 3) Data is not available in the same form, and opinions differ on which indicators of quality should be used to measure it
- 4) Basic elements of the structure of educational systems and individual programmes differ
- 5) National variation in educational objectives and societal values



Basic Quality Assurance System (EHEA)



Institutional typology – behaviour, orientation and engagement of HE institutions re QA



- 3. How do we know QA works?

- Quality assessment costs money, time and goodwill,
So, what additional quality has been added above and beyond normal academic practices associated with the professional enhancement of teaching and research?
- Sufficient evidence exists to assert that overall results of the introduction of Quality Assurance have been positive.



Benefits of QA

- + Enhanced quality of programmes/processes, new formal standards and quality levels;
weeding out bad provision**
- + Positive effect on internal governance structures, contributing to strategic management
- + External quality assurance has helped professionalize quality processes within institutions.
- + Retention rates, graduation rates, level of final awards, graduate employment seem to have improved where performance data is subject to evaluation (e.g. in the UK system)**
- + Evidence of improvements in pedagogical practices and collaboration, student advising and learning communities (e.g. in the US)
- + Provided system-wide information on best practices and common problem areas**
- + Greater opportunities for cross-border movement by students
- + External QA system very effective way to make things happen {at national and institutional level}**
- + Transparency in system, publicly available information on quality and standards increased trust of general public



Costs of QA - Real or perceived drawbacks in QA systems

- **Issues of financial cost and increased bureaucratic burden on institutions and programmes.**
- Questions on the independence and trustworthiness of QA arrangements and their ability to satisfy public/political demands for transparency and accountability of standards
- **External QA can be an institutional risk**
- **Opportunities for game-playing, window-dressing and deceptive practices by institutions**
- Moderation of the critical nature of quality statements and recommendations in published reports.
- **Quality assurance and accreditation systems tend to be conservative, imposing particular models, certain 'canonized' curricula, as well as established delivery modes**
- Issues resulting from the limited connection between institutional quality and its regulatory consequences (e.g.funding)
- QA strengthened position of central administration and it has contributed to managerial power



- But also other issues raise questions around validity of QA systems
- **Grade inflation** (how can this be explained if QA process working?)
[Has the quality of the graduate declined despite the increase in the proportion of top grades]
- How could quality have been maintained in face of **oft-stated chronic underfunding of sector**.
[Why have we not been able to detect an expected decline in quality under worsening of staff:student ratios and reduced funding per unit student FTE]
[are we really measuring/assessing actual educational quality?]
- **Geopolitical pressures** e.g. Brexit, Russian invasion of Ukraine, raising doubts about agreed values in EHEA
- **Rise in online and remote education** and threats to **academic integrity**



- So much has changed over 30 years of QA and yet still using many of the same methodologies and principles introduced at the start

e.g. recent modest updating of ESG

- Sense is that it is right time to re-evaluate current QA systems in Ireland, as is happening elsewhere
- What might the features of a renewed QA system be?



4. Possible future developments? Just a few ideas

- Ideally QA should be internally driven process by Engaged Enthusiast institution to improve and learn, to deliver best education, research and service.
- Effective internal quality culture requires a clear institutional autonomy and > trust from government
- The QA system should be more relaxed about knowing everything, forward looking and less burdensome
- Diversity of QA approaches to match the diversity of institution, their strategy, history, activities etc (Move away from a one size fits all system – may require legislative change)
- Include additional elements for assessment e.g. Green Agenda, Sustainability; Institutional Values; supported by additional specialist agencies in QA process (e.g. EPA)
- Develop a more thematic, strategic QA system with horizontal (all at once review) rather than vertical (sequential institutional reviews) cycles (or combination in 'T' shaped system).
- Also needs institutions to be more altruistic - sharing best practice for the good of entire system.
- ...



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- Are there exemplars – guiding images – we might look toward?
 - Scotland; Finland, Australia?
 - What can be learnt from other areas that use QA – e.g. Industry
 - What is the future of Quality Assurance?
 - supplements or major surgery?
 - Time will tell!



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