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Curáil agus Measúcháin  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment



## Leading Out 7

# Teacher Agency and Identity

Dr Derek Grant, Director,  
Curriculum and Assessment

# *Primary Curriculum Framework*

Teachers as **committed, skilful and agentic** professionals.





# Event Overview

	Item
10:00am	Welcome
10:15am	Teacher agency – What is it and why does it matter? Dr Janet Lord
11:15am	Table discussion
12:05pm	Panel discussion
12:35pm	Table discussion
12:50pm	Concluding remarks
1:00pm	Lunch

**An tSraith Seimineár Ag Treorú Amach Seimineár 7**  
25 Deireadh Fómhair 2022 | Óstán Gresham

**Leading Out Seminar Series Seminar 7**  
25 October 2022 | Gresham Hotel



# Teacher agency

Dr. Janet Lord

Manchester Metropolitan University

[j.lord@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.lord@mmu.ac.uk)

# Aims for today



Think about what agency is



Discuss where agency comes from



Consider what agency might make possible



Discuss implications for practice

Three  
questions  
borrowed  
from  
Priestley et  
al (2015)

What is teacher agency?

Where does teacher  
agency come from?

What does teacher  
agency make possible?

Question 1- what is teacher  
agency?

## What is teacher agency?

“Teachers achieve agency when they are able to choose between different options in any given situation and are able to judge which is most desirable, in the light of the wider purposes of the practice in and through which they act.” p 141

## What is teacher agency?

Not the same as autonomy  
(e.g. may just reproduce  
past patterns of behaviour).

# What is teacher agency?

## Bad and good agency.

- ‘Bad’ – e.g. act against policy intentions/act unprofessionally- it can be agentic to be subversive.
- Good agency could be exercised to (say) oppose actions/policies that are judged (professionally & reflexively) to be damaging to the educational needs of pupils.

# What is teacher identity?

Teacher identity can be defined as 'based on core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher; beliefs that are continuously formed and reformed through experience'

(Walkington, 2005:54)



Beliefs and values relating to the 'purpose of education'.

What is the purpose of education?

A usual answer ..... 'to produce outcomes'

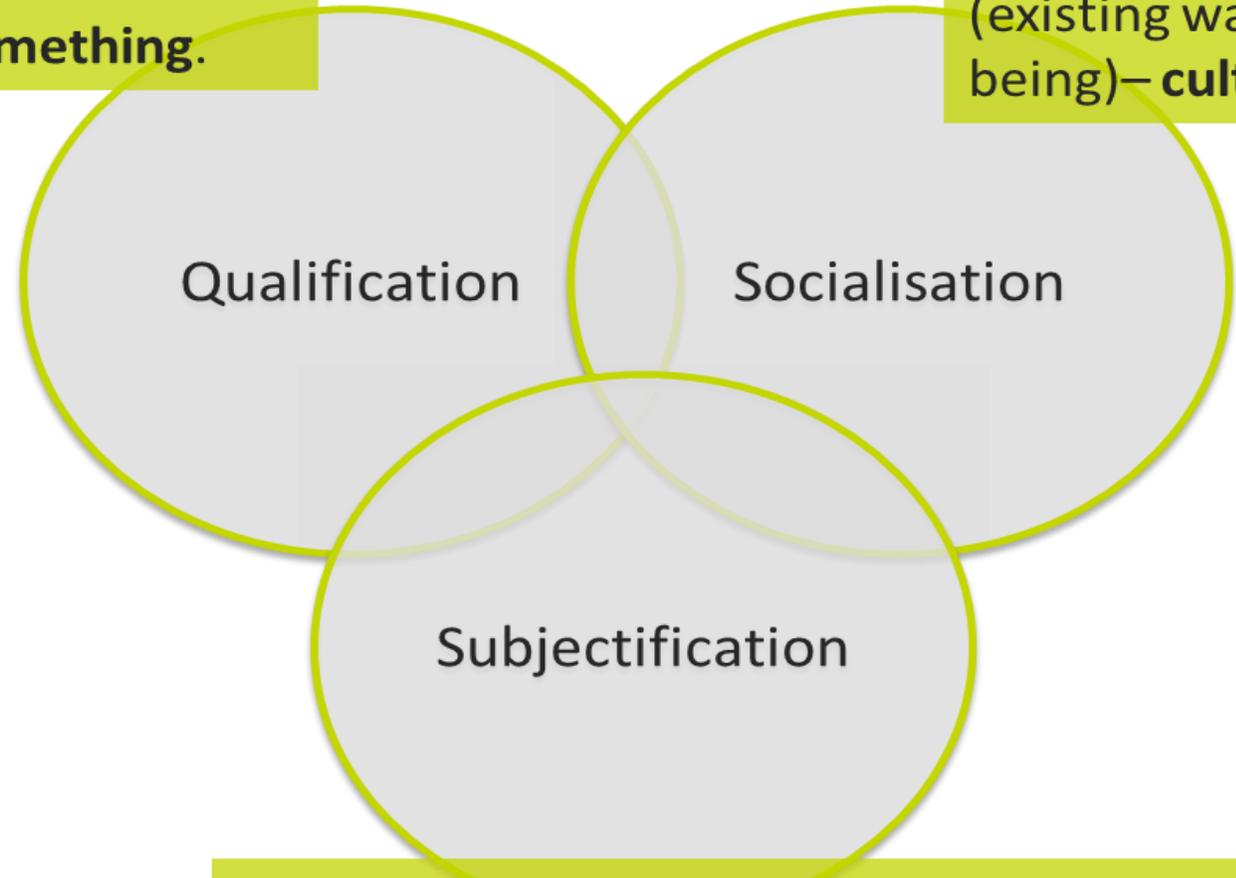
Values relating to the 'purpose of education'.

Gert Biesta (2010) – domains of socialization, subjectification, qualification

This typology may help to orient actions

Gaining knowledge, skills, dispositions etc. needed to **go on and do something.**

Becoming part of **society** (existing ways of doing and being)– **culture** and **tradition.**



Becoming more **autonomous** and **independent** in thinking and acting... the **opposite** of socialisation?

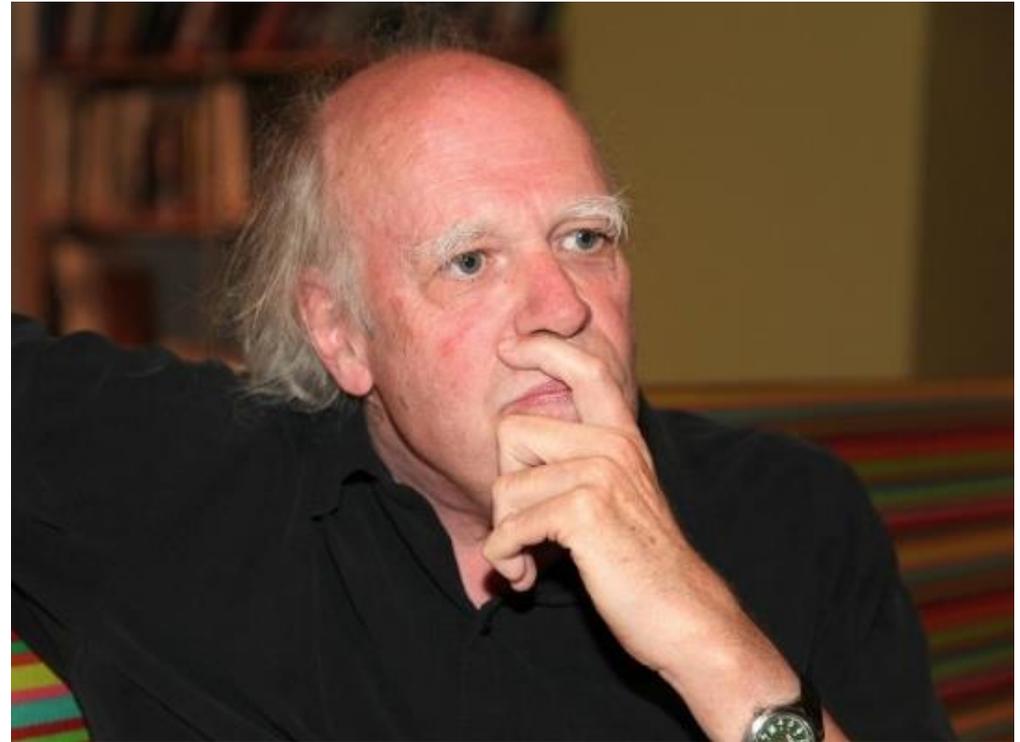
Values relating to the 'purpose of education'.

What is a meaningful balance between domains?

This question highlights the critical role of judgment in the achievement of agency

## James Gee –identity as lens

”Being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person,’ in a given context...” (2001, p.99)



# Gee's lenses

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NATURE

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INSTITUTIONAL

---

DISCOURSE

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AFFINITY



# Nature Identity

- A state developed from forces in nature.
- For example, a teacher may be obsessively organized, almost neurotically so, and this state may be seen by some people as a fixed, internal, neurological state – the ‘nature’ of the individual.
- The teacher’s behaviours are treated by other people in terms of Nature identity, a ‘matter of nature’ or the ‘nature’ of the individual.

# Institutional identity



That which is in some way 'authorized' by the authorities within institutions – so for example, a teacher's institutional identity is authorized by the department as well as by the authorities of the school where they are first employed.

# Discourse identity



An individual teacher may be witty, competent, inspiring, or whatever. The source of this trait is through discourses with other people such as colleagues and children; a teacher can only have a 'witty' identity if they interact with other rational people.

It is through this interaction that the individual is recognized as and becomes defined as witty; the characteristic is not innate, but socially constructed.

“Hiya miss!”

Discourse and institutional  
identity



# Affinity identity

Concerns shared experiences; the source of the identity is the practice of 'affinity groups'. A group that has 'allegiance to, access to a participation in specific practices that give each of its members the requisite experiences' .

Being a trainee teacher for example, may comprise attending lectures and seminars; sitting up all night planning lessons; sharing worries about observations; going to parties, and so on.



Question 2 – where does  
teacher agency come from?

# Where does teacher agency come from?

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Not *just* individual capacity – necessary but not sufficient. Skills, knowledge, strong professional belief sets.

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A culture of performativity (and what goes with it) might militate against the development of agency.

# Where does teacher agency come from?

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Cultural and structural issues need to be considered too – where do the skills/knowledge come from? Past experiences heavily influenced by cultures and structures of past professional contexts.

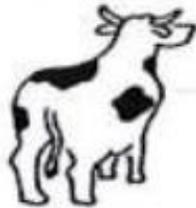
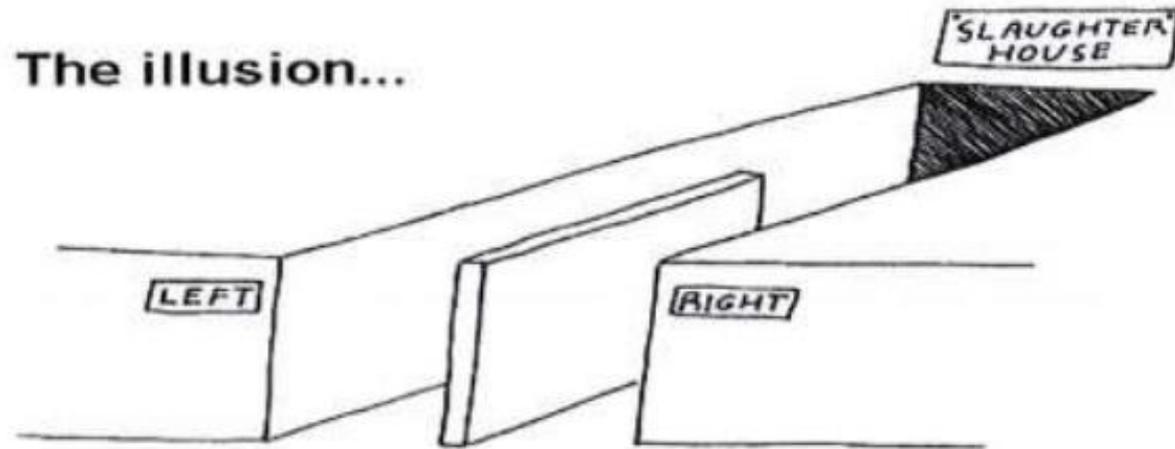
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It may be that historical cultures and structures limit the possibilities of teachers to develop agency.

# Agency and structures

**How much do 'agency' do we have?**

The illusion...



...of free choice. .?

**How much does the structure  
determine our behaviour?**

Question 3 - What does teacher agency make possible?

# What does teacher agency make possible?

- It is NOT the case that high levels of agency will result in high test scores or higher overall measured performance of the education system.
- The main thing that good teacher agency does is help to make the system more intelligent.
- NB Some systemic solutions to issues work on the basis that individuals do not actually matter – teacher-proofing. No intelligent engagement is needed. e.g. central definitions of outputs, oppressive inspection/control regimes, naming and shaming

# Why might systemic solutions not be desirable?

They can be unintelligent – don't respond in intelligent ways to new ideas and the changing world we work in

Some of the systems that may be put in place only work because of the intelligence/agency of teachers working in and within the systems for the benefit of our young people

Agency contributes to making teaching a meaningful profession (job satisfaction)

Priestley et al  
2015.

*Teacher agency, if it works well, thus has the capacity to make the operation of the educational system, both at the systemic level and the individual and collective level of teacher practice, more intelligent, and therefore more able to engage with the complexities and the uniqueness of the here and now in meaningful and purposeful ways. p149.*

Of course

Doing this requires engagement (both individual and collective) from teachers

Requires more from those with the responsibility for creating the conditions that shape teacher agency

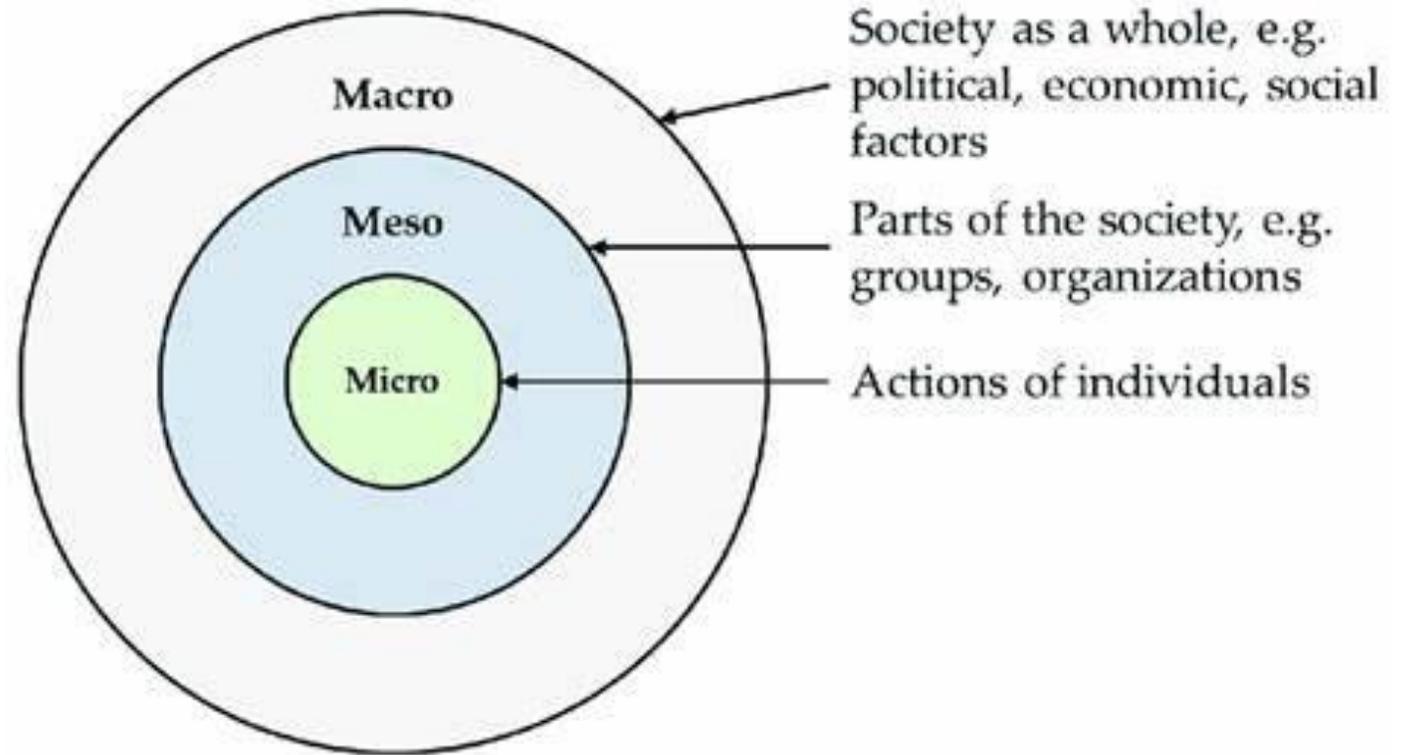
How to  
encourage  
agency  
(and  
relationships)

Macro

Meso

Micro

# Macro Meso Micro levels of analysis



# What does it mean in practice?

Macro – tight prescription or guiding framework?

Meso – input regulation- guidance for practitioners as they enact the curriculum; output regulation- inspection/audit activity. These contribute to shaping the cultures of schools

# Micro level

Micro level – quite often I come across a ‘tell us what to do attitude’

If a bird has been in a cage for a decade and suddenly finds the door open, I should not be surprising if the bird does not wish to leave (Eisner, 1992, p 617)

Is it dangerous for teachers- have the conditions outside the cage been addressed ?

# Implications for practice

Purposeful leadership

Clear view of the structures that facilitate and hinder professional working

Networks that have a clear focus on purpose and process

Collegiality and relationships as key

# Implications for practice

Time – always an issue in schools

Hierarchy; dissent often not welcomed

Barriers such as timetable; silos

And...

Leaders' agency is an issue too – the promotion of meaningful agency should be considered across all levels of an educational system.

# References

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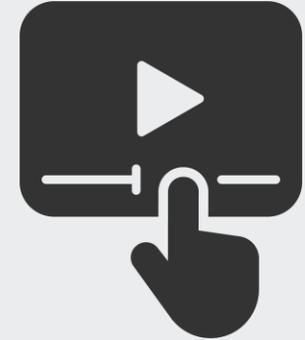


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## Teacher Agency Video



Dr Siobhán Keenan Fitzgerald,  
Education Officer



# Teacher Agency Activity

- What qualities, beliefs and dispositions do agentic **teachers** hold?
- What are the qualities and features of a **school** that supports teacher agency?
- What are the qualities and features of a **system** that promotes teacher agency?



# Teacher Agency

- Video plays here



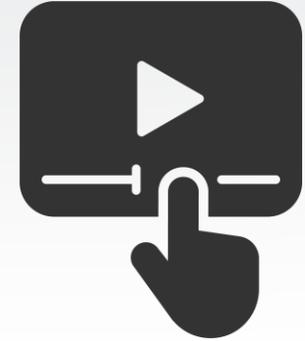
# Teacher Agency Activity

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# Teacher Agency Activity – 40 minutes

**Table Discussion and post-its (20 mins)**



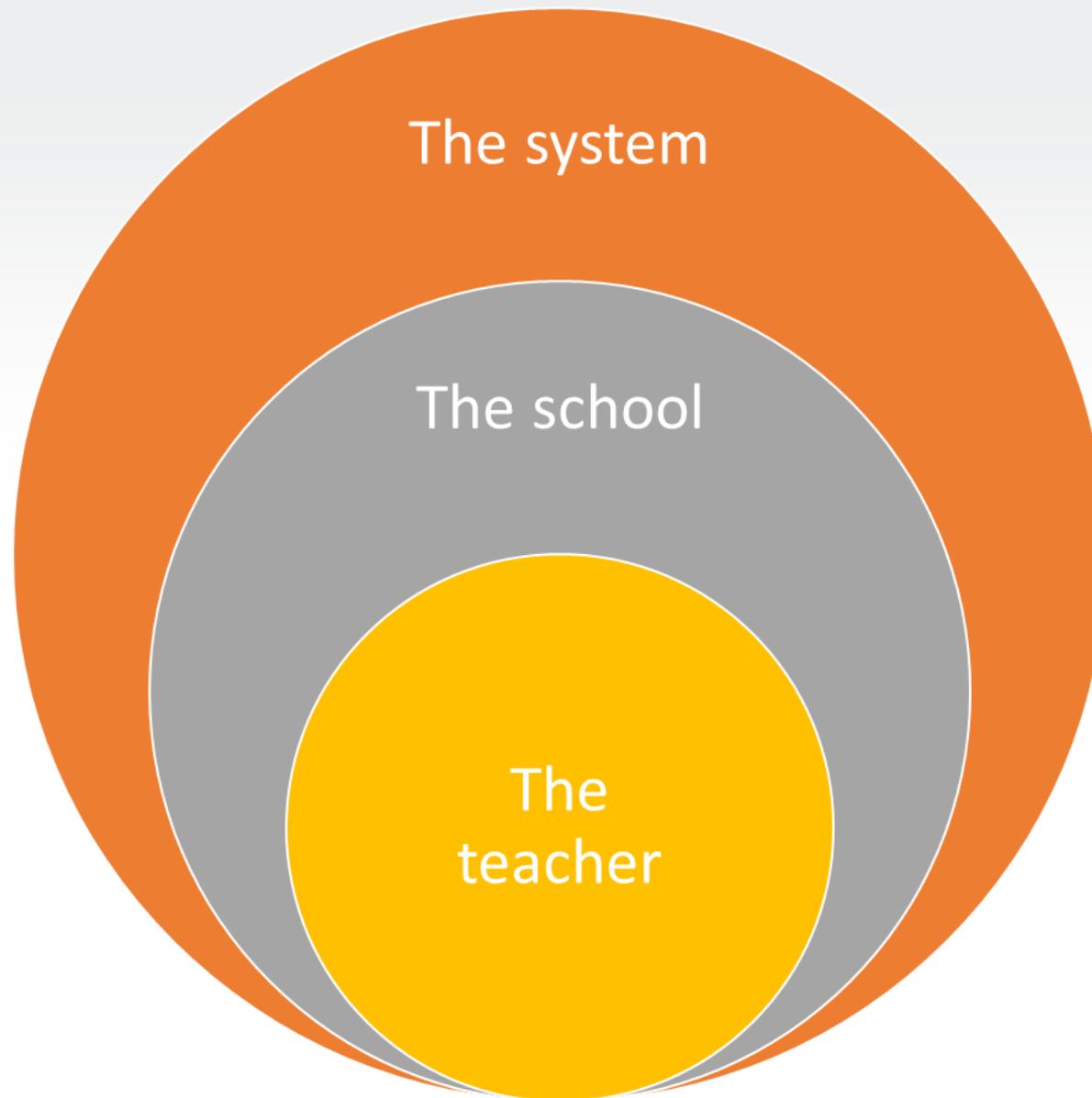
**Walkabout (10 mins)**

**Open forum (10 mins)**





# Towards an agentic profession





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## Panel Discussion

Conall Ó Breacháin  
Louise Tobin  
Deirdre McSweeney  
Noreen Fiorentini

# Enablers and Prohibitors

What are the key enablers and prohibitors for an agentic profession?

What are the key prohibitors for an agentic profession?

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 Add comment

What are the key enablers for an agentic profession?

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 Add comment



## Padlet Activity



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## Concluding remarks

Dr Patrick Sullivan, Deputy Chief Executive