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Understanding teacher agency in universities: why and how lecturers shape and navigate university teaching practices

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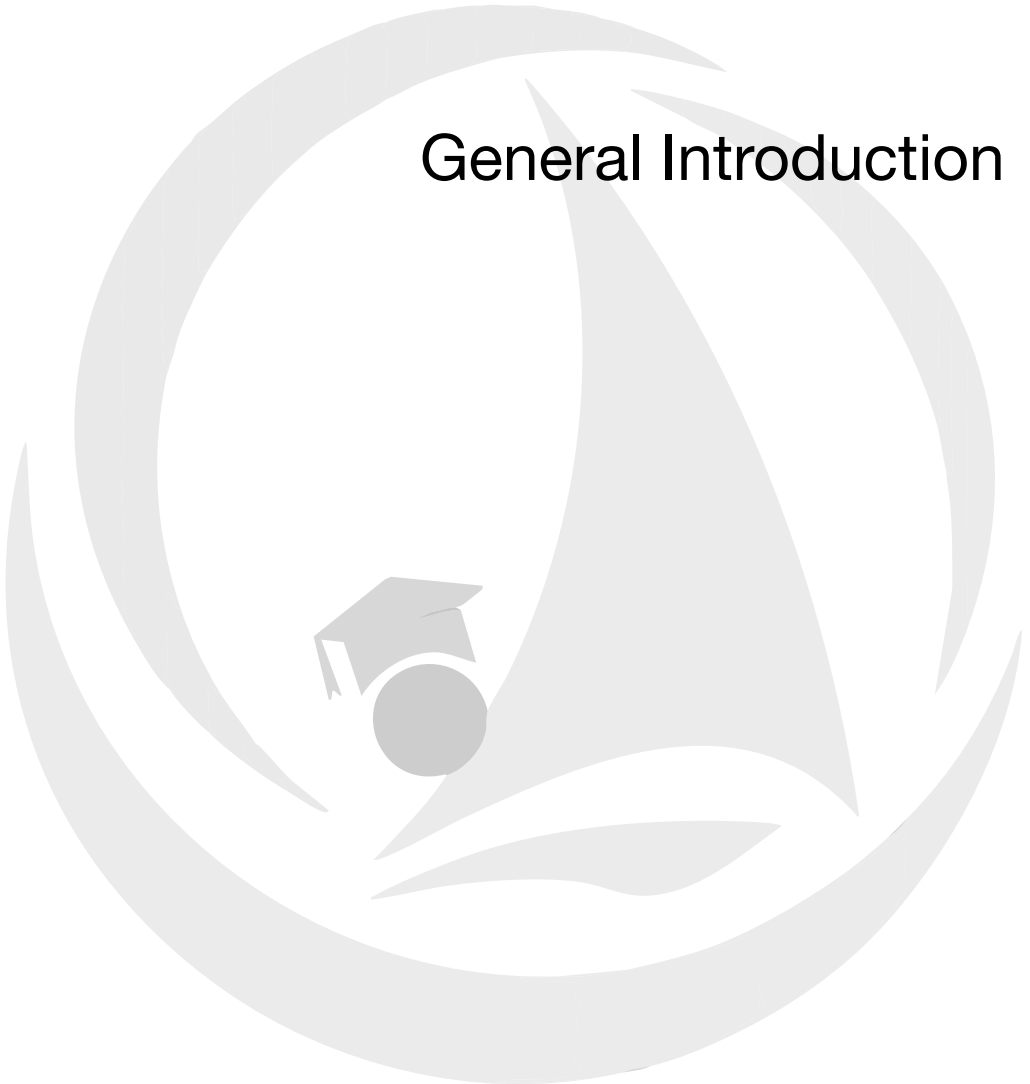
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Chapter 1

General Introduction



“It is the set of the sails, not [just] the direction of the wind, that determines which way we will go.” This quote, often attributed to Jim Rohn, highlights the power of choice and direction amidst external forces. Similarly, teachers, like sailors, navigate their professional journeys through various external influences. The metaphor emphasizes the capacity to steer toward meaningful directions, aligning closely with the concept of teacher agency.

Teacher agency inhabits a central yet ambiguous place in educational discourse, embodying a blend of empowerment, professional autonomy, and decision-making authority in teaching contexts (Cong-Lem, 2021, 2024). Teacher agency is often used to refer to the capacity of teachers to actively contribute to shaping their teaching practices and conditions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). In academic and professional discourse, teacher agency is often portrayed as a prerequisite for educational reform, innovative pedagogy, and teaching and professional development (Annala et al., 2021). However, up to now, the term remains elusive, resisting precise delineation due to its multidimensional and context-dependent nature.

Teacher agency is sometimes perceived as a *fuzzy* concept shaped by the intricate interplay of multiple influencing factors. This *fuzziness* stems from the ambiguity and the dynamic interplay of individual characteristics such as self-efficacy, motivation, beliefs, and professional identity, as well as external influences like organizational culture and structure, and societal expectations (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Ursin et al., 2018; Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). As a result, teacher agency is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic construct that evolves within contexts and over time.

Acknowledging teacher agency as a concept shaped by individual characteristics, relational interactions, and contextual and temporal factors highlights the need to explore its multifaceted and evolving nature. Understanding teacher agency in this comprehensive way embraces the broader, nuanced contributions of teachers to the development of teaching practices. Consequently, teacher agency challenges traditional notions like “teacher quality” and calls for moving beyond reductive measures of teachers’ capacities. Instead, it emphasizes the dynamic, context-sensitive, and creative

ways teachers navigate professional decision-making, offering a more accurate reflection of the practices that contribute to the quality of teaching (Van Vijfeijken et al., 2024). Considering the ambiguous and multifaceted nature of teacher agency enables a better understanding of how teachers shape teaching practices. By recognizing the complexity of teacher agency, more effective and responsive professional development initiatives can be fostered to empower university lecturers to enhance their teaching practices in meaningful and contextually relevant ways.

The studies in this dissertation are conducted within the context of research-intensive universities to gain a deeper understanding of lecturers' teacher agency and the dynamics of university teaching practices. Throughout this dissertation, the term "lecturers" refers to tenured faculty members at research-intensive universities who have both research and teaching tasks. These dual demands of research and teaching pose challenges and add to the complexity of their role. Moreover, lecturers operate within a complex landscape shaped by institutional policies, disciplinary norms, and the diversity of the student populations. By investigating teacher agency in universities, we gain a deep understanding of the *theory* and *practice* behind *why* and *how* lecturers shape and navigate their teaching practices. This understanding helps to reveal how lecturers adapt to diverse student needs, integrate innovative teaching methods, and balance their teaching responsibilities with research expectations. Furthermore, it informs institutional policies aimed at fostering teaching practices and supports and empowers lecturers in developing practices that align with their beliefs, disciplinary norms, and the evolving demands of universities. Ultimately, understanding teacher agency provides valuable insights into lecturers' decision-making and adaptations to enhance the quality of their teaching. Accordingly, the introduction is structured in three parts: first, *Understanding teacher agency*, second, *Why lecturers shape and navigate teaching practices*, and third, *How lecturers shape and navigate teaching practices*. An overview of the (aims of the) four studies concludes the introduction.

1.1 Understanding Teacher Agency

Agency is a concept that has been explored from various disciplinary perspectives and is commonly understood as an individual's capacity to act purposefully and make deliberate decisions (Jääskelä et al., 2017; Ruan et al., 2020). The concept of agency is essential in understanding how people navigate personal, professional, and societal domains. Yet, interpretations of the manifestations of agency naturally vary across and within disciplines. In this introductory chapter, we first provide a synopsis of varying conceptualizations and paradigms of agency. Since the primary focus in this dissertation is on teacher agency, paradigms such as collective or group agency and learner or student agency are beyond the scope of this discussion. Consequently, this synopsis here is not a comprehensive representation of all theories of agency. Moreover, there is no chronological order in the presentation of the different paradigms, but a purposeful thematic arrangement that highlights the diversity and complexity of perspectives and, hence, provides a basis to understand the research questions and upcoming chapters.

The Social Cognitive Theory defines agency as an individual's capacity to influence their circumstances through intentional action (Bandura, 2001). Central to Social Cognitive Theory is the concept of self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to achieve desired outcomes. This belief drives motivation, cognitive strategies, and emotional regulation, which enables individuals to overcome challenges and adapt to their environment. Bandura (2001) frames agency within a model of triadic reciprocal causation, highlighting the interaction between personal factors, environmental influences, and behavior. This individual-centric view stresses the role of internal mechanisms, such as resilience and self-regulation, in fostering agency and achieving personal growth.

The socio-cultural perspective on agency proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) defines agency as a temporally embedded process, a dynamic and ongoing activity that unfolds over time. Agency is conceptualized through three interrelated dimensions: the iterational dimension, which draws on past habits, experiences, and traditions; the projective dimension, which involves aspirations and future possibilities; and the practical-evaluative dimension,

which focuses on navigating and responding to the contingencies of the present. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) situate agency at the intersection of structure and autonomy, illustrating how individuals engage with, reproduce, and transform social structures over time. This relational and temporal perspective highlights the cultural, social, and temporal dynamics that shape human action. Building on this foundational understanding of agency, researchers can explore its application across various domains to gain deeper insights into how individuals interact with and influence professional spaces. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) further developed the concept of agency in professional contexts, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual subjectivity and socio-cultural environments. Professional agency is a dynamic process of negotiating identity, workplace roles, and socio-cultural constraints (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Ursin et al., 2018; Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). Adopting a subject-centered socio-cultural perspective, this perspective assumes that individuals both shape and are shaped by their professional spaces. This perspective integrates insights from educational sciences, psychology, sociology, and other social sciences to show how professionals exercise agency in learning, identity development, and organizational transformation.

Toom et al. (2015) specified the professional agency framework by focusing on teacher agency, defining it as the capacity of teachers for intentional, contextually situated action. Emphasizing the situational and relational aspects of agency, Toom and colleagues (2015) highlight how teachers navigate between personal values, professional beliefs, and systemic demands. Agency, in their perspective, is constructed through interactions with institutional structures, colleagues, and students. Toom et al. (2015) stress the importance of empowering teachers to align personal and professional goals with institutional requirements, thereby fostering pedagogical innovation and meaningful educational practices.

Priestley et al. (2015) extend the understanding of teacher agency through an ecological model, which situates agency within a dynamic interplay of individual, structural, and cultural factors. Unlike purely individualistic or temporal approaches, their model emphasizes that agency is not an inherent trait or capacity, but rather an emergent phenomenon influenced by the interactions between teachers and their environments. Central to the ecological model is the

recognition that teacher agency is contextually situated and mediated by social structures, material resources, and cultural norms within schools and broader educational systems. By acknowledging this complexity, the ecological model highlights the importance of fostering environments that enable teachers to exercise agency through reflective practice, collaboration, and access to supportive structures. This approach provides a holistic framework for understanding how teachers navigate systemic challenges, enact meaningful change, and contribute to the transformation of educational practices.

Though distinct, the perspectives outlined above share common themes. All emphasize agency as a contextually embedded process, influenced by individual capacities, interactions, and contexts. While Bandura (2001) highlights the role of internal mechanisms and self-efficacy, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) focus on the temporal and relational dynamics of agency. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) and Toom et al. (2015) examine agency through a professional lens, exploring how agency manifests in workplace and educational settings, and Priestley et al. (2015) enrich this understanding by framing agency as an emergent, ecological phenomenon. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of agency as a critical concept for navigating and transforming complex environments. The context of these theories lies mainly in primary and secondary education. Since university teaching differs to some extent from primary and secondary education due to its unique disciplinary-specific structures (Annala et al., 2021), the next section discusses why lecturers need agency in university teaching practices.

1.2 Why Lecturers Shape and Navigate Teaching Practices

In the dynamics of university teaching, lecturers need to adapt and refine practices to address the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing educational landscape. Consequently, understanding why lecturers shape and navigate teaching practices is important because it provides critical insights into the decision-making processes and the contextual factors influencing their approaches. As key agents of knowledge generation and dissemination, university

lecturers play a critical role in both academic progress and societal development (Dall’Alba, 2005). Lecturers contribute to the three core missions of the university: research, teaching, and service (Cummings, 1998). As universities strive to meet societal demands, lecturers are expected to innovate their teaching practices to address emerging societal challenges.

Lecturers are tasked with implementing innovative teaching strategies that align with 21st-century skills, for example, which require substantial time for preparation, planning, and execution, and designing alternative assessments aimed at enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes (Ujir et al., 2020). A major shift in the last decade is digitalization, which has received much attention in recent years due to the digital transformation taking place within universities (Fernández et al., 2023). The shift to blended and online learning demands that lecturers adapt their teaching methods, a transition that can pose considerable challenges for fostering student engagement (Wang et al., 2024). At the same time, massification (i.e., increasing student numbers) alongside administrative responsibilities, such as course coordination and managing student activities, further complicates teaching practices (Macfarlane, 2010; Noui, 2020).

Structural and ideological changes have impacted universities in a number of ways, which can be attributed to the entry of neoliberalism in universities. Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has had a profound impact on universities, influencing governance, funding, and the design of education systems (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Sá & Amaral, 2023). In the current neoliberal climate, Western universities tend to emphasize competitiveness and efficiency over critical thinking, creativity, and the role of education in fostering critical citizens (Giroux, 2010). The rise of neoliberal policies has transformed universities by introducing corporate managerial practices focused on efficiency and revenue maximization. Consequently, universities have expanded their student enrollment to increase tuition income (Ball, 2012; Sá & Amaral, 2023). This shift reflects a broader trend of treating education as a market commodity, in which universities respond to consumer demands rather than prioritizing purely educational considerations (Furlong, 2012). To illustrate, quality assurance frameworks, such as the National Student Survey and Teaching Excellence

Framework (Marshall, 2023), prioritize measurable outcomes like student satisfaction, retention rates, and employability (Giroux, 2010; Sá & Amaral, 2023). Lecturers must align their teaching methods with institutional quality benchmarks, often focusing on survey feedback and rankings, while balancing innovation with accountability. The commodification of universities positions students as consumers, emphasizing measurable effectiveness (Ball, 2012; Sá & Amaral, 2023). As a result, lecturers are expected to deliver engaging, high-impact learning experiences while meeting consumerist expectations, demonstrating tangible outcomes such as graduate employability and skill development.

Related to the entry of neoliberalism in universities, global massification has led to a more diverse student body, encompassing a wide range of demographics, socioeconomic backgrounds, and learning needs (Giroux, 2010). This diversity enriches the learning environment but also demands more inclusive teaching practices. Lecturers are expected to employ teaching strategies to cater to a wide range of capacities and expectations, including differentiated instruction and culturally responsive pedagogies. Addressing individual student needs requires additional time and effort, particularly for students who lack traditional academic preparation (Dias, 2014; Giroux, 2010). The expansion of universities is essential from the standpoint of equality. Fortunately, universities are no longer just for the elite. However, the growing student population places significant pressure on lecturers, who must balance increased teaching and administrative demands while maintaining high-quality instruction and meaningful student interactions (Kenny, 2017).

To contribute to teaching development, lecturers are pivotal in implementing institutional strategies for quality enhancement, equity, and technological innovation. As the primary link between institutions and students, lecturers negotiate policies and strategies in practice (Furlong, 2012). Lecturers balance institutional goals with pedagogical values and beliefs, requiring lecturers to achieve agency. The interplay between institutional expectations and why lecturers shape and navigate teaching practices sets the stage for exploring how lecturers navigate their teaching practices to balance strategic objectives with their professional beliefs and contextual realities.

1.3 How Lecturers Shape and Navigate Teaching Practices

University lecturers are central in leveraging their expertise and capacities to create meaningful changes that enhance teaching practices and outcomes (cf. Heikonen et al., 2020). Lecturers' contributions to the teaching practice extend beyond the classroom and often involve innovative curriculum design and improving teaching methodologies (Van Dijk et al., 2020). Thus, how lecturers shape and navigate teaching practices should be an integral part of the evaluation of teacher quality. However, traditional methods of assessing lecturers, such as Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET), often fail to capture this broader impact. Instead, SET provides a narrow and sometimes misleading perspective on lecturers' teaching expertise (Hornstein, 2017). SET functions more as a customer satisfaction metric rather than as an accurate measure of teaching quality, relying on subjective judgments and inconsistent criteria (Spooren et al., 2013; Stroebe, 2020; Uttl et al., 2017). SET ratings are often influenced by personal biases and fail to account for the complexities of teaching contexts, including class size, subject matter, and the diversity of student needs. Additionally, these evaluation tools rarely provide constructive feedback, limiting opportunities for professional growth (Hendry & Dean, 2002). A narrow focus on quantitative measures diminishes the recognition of lecturers as professionals who reflect on, adapt, and innovate their practice. Instead, it is more important to examine how lecturers engage in teaching and contribute to teaching development. Teacher agency provides a holistic perspective on lecturers' expertise, highlighting their capacity to make informed, purposeful decisions in specific contexts.

Understanding how lecturers shape teaching practices is necessary for fostering the quality of teaching (Van Dijk et al., 2020). Lecturers' actions in response to specific situated challenges and opportunities in their teaching context give insight into lecturers' capacity to make informed decisions, take innovative actions, and foster continuous professional development (Hadar & Benish-Weisman, 2018). Furthermore, teacher agency drives individual and institutional progress, fostering innovation and empowering lecturers to shape their work conditions (Datnow, 2012; Priestley et al., 2015). Recognizing this

impact substantiates the need to embrace teacher agency as a quality, moving beyond narrow evaluation metrics and adopting more holistic approaches to assessing and supporting lecturers. By valuing lecturers' professional judgment and encouraging continuous development, universities can create a culture of learning and excellence that benefits both lecturers and students (Ferman, 2002). Teacher agency emphasizes a more dynamic understanding of lecturers' roles, highlighting the capacity to influence their environment and continually improve through deliberate decision- and meaning-making (Ursin et al., 2018).

Ultimately, when lecturers have the capacity and support to make purposeful decisions, they are better equipped to design dynamic and inclusive learning experiences. Teacher agency is essential for redefining and improving teaching quality in universities. It enables lecturers to respond thoughtfully to challenges, explore new approaches, and contribute to the broader missions of their institutions. As noted, commonly used evaluation methods fall short of dignifying "how lecturers take action." Therefore, a holistic way in which to assess lecturers' actions within different teaching situations is more appropriate. However, correctly evaluating actions that shape and navigate teaching is challenging.

Challenges in Measuring Teacher Agency

Measuring teacher agency presents unique challenges due to the dynamic, context-dependent, and temporally embedded nature of the concept (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Unlike static traits or behaviors that can be universally defined and quantified, teacher agency is a fluid construct that evolves and is shaped by the interplay of specific spatial and situational factors (Rushton & Bird, 2024). These characteristics make it difficult to make generic, definitive statements about teacher agency without accounting for the contexts and timeframes in which it is expressed (Kusters et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires both an understanding of the specific difficulties involved and the development of tailored solutions.

The manifestations of agency are not uniform across individuals or settings, nor is it consistent within the same individual over time. A lecturer's capacity to act purposefully and make decisions is influenced by factors such

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as institutional culture, policy mandates, available resources, and the specific demands of students (Leijen et al., 2024). For example, agency among lecturers in a department with supportive leadership may manifest as increased creativity, while agency among lecturers in a department with systemic challenges may manifest as resilience and adaptability. There is thus a need for measurement tools that take these contextual differences into account (Cong-Lem, 2021). To address this, measurement frameworks must be designed to explicitly capture the contextual nature of agency. This involves empirically investigating lecturers' agentic actions and considerations in their daily professional contexts. To ground the understanding of agency in the lived realities of teaching, researchers must examine how lecturers navigate diverse teaching challenges, the intentions behind their actions, the beliefs guiding their choices, and the impact of institutional expectations and cultural dynamics.

Teacher agency is dynamic and shaped by personal development, professional experiences, and external conditions. It is further influenced by factors such as perceptions of leadership styles, cultural norms, and systemic changes, including educational reforms or societal crises (Annala et al., 2021; Green & Pappa, 2020; Priestley et al., 2015). For example, a lecturer's sense of agency may differ early in their career compared to after years of experience. Additionally, expressions of agency can vary based on the teaching context. In large, diverse lecture settings, agency might involve using active learning strategies, such as technology-based polling or real-time discussion platforms, to engage all students in a heterogeneous group, while in more homogeneous groups, it may involve fostering personalized discussions and peer collaboration to address specific challenges.

To measure teacher agency while accounting for its context-dependent nature, it is essential to use flexible and adaptive tools that accommodate diverse contexts. These tools should include both core aspects of agency and context-specific challenges (Annala et al., 2021; Lau et al., 2023). By empirically investigating how agency manifests in particular events and designing tools that reflect dynamic teaching practices, researchers enable a more accurate and nuanced measurement of teacher agency (Skilling & Stylianides, 2020; Toom, 2019). Integrating context-specific situations further clarifies how external

affordances interact with personal beliefs and values to shape agency. This focus ensures a holistic understanding of teacher agency, revealing not only the individual efforts of teachers but also the systemic factors that enable or hinder them.

In summary, understanding and fostering teacher agency in universities is essential for the continued development and success of universities. Teacher agency serves as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation, professional growth, and educational quality. It enables lecturers to deliver dynamic, student-centered learning experiences while contributing to institutional development and student success. As universities face new and complex challenges, prioritizing teacher agency will be key to maintaining educational excellence and ensuring that universities remain a transformative force for individuals and society. We argued that recognizing the multidimensional nature of teaching at universities cannot be adequately captured by student evaluations alone. Instead, it requires a formative approach that accounts for the dynamic and complex nature of teaching. Evaluating lecturers through the lens of teacher agency provides a meaningful framework for this purpose. In this introduction, we highlighted both the inherent complexity of the concept of teacher agency and its potential for deeper exploration. Given the nuanced and context-specific nature of teacher agency, there is a pressing need for a measurement instrument that reflects these dynamics. The evolving university landscape calls for a nuanced understanding of teacher agency, particularly in terms of how and why lecturers shape and navigate teaching practices in this dynamic landscape.

1.4 Research aims

This dissertation aims to enhance our understanding of why and how university lecturers shape and navigate their teaching practices, thereby contributing valuable insights into teacher agency. Four studies were conducted to explore: (1) current manifestations of professional teacher agency among university lecturers, (2) how an assessment tool can be developed to capture the context-

1 dependent nature of teacher agency, (3) what kind of agentic actions lecturers employ in university teaching practices, and (4) the role of underlying beliefs about teaching and learning in shaping and navigating these practices. The first study was designed to investigate whether lecturers' agency was visible and to gain an initial understanding of what is occurring in universities. Thus, we set up the following study:

1. An exploratory interview study to explore how university lecturers perceive their professional agency.

While the findings were promising, we observed that a generic framework, such as the professional agency theory (Vähäsantanen et al. 2020), was too broad to fully capture the dynamic nature of teacher agency. We noticed that in order to capture the context-specific dimensions of agency, we need to include specific teaching situations in exploring teacher agency. Consequently, we adopted the ecological model (Priestley et al., 2015), which provides a more nuanced perspective on teacher agency. Since this model was originally developed in the context of curriculum reform in Scottish secondary schools, further adaptation and exploration were required to apply it effectively to the university teaching context. Therefore:

2. A methodological study was conducted to develop a set of context-specific teaching scenarios that elicit teacher agency in universities.

After designing and validating the scenarios, we conducted the third and fourth studies, utilizing the scenarios as tools for scenario-based interviews.

3. This scenario-based study explored responses to teaching scenarios to develop a typology of agentic actions.

Once we had a framework of agentic actions, in the final study we examined why and how lecturers navigate university teaching practices.

4. A combination of semi-structured and scenario-based interviews explored what kind of beliefs were underlying the typology of agentic actions.

With these four studies, we aim to contribute theoretical insights into the nuanced and context-dependent nature of teacher agency in university teaching. By systematically exploring how university lecturers perceive, enact, and

navigate teacher agency, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between beliefs, considerations, intentions, and contextual influences in shaping teaching practices. This dissertation not only advances theoretical frameworks, such as the ecological model of teacher agency, but also offers practical implications on how university lecturers can be supported to critically engage with and adapt their teaching in diverse and dynamic teaching spaces.

1.5 Outline of this dissertation

This dissertation contains six chapters. The next four chapters include the studies described in the previous paragraph. In the final chapter, the findings of all four studies are summarized and discussed. Together, the chapters contribute to the research aim of understanding why and how university lecturers shape and navigate their teaching practices, thereby contributing theoretical insights into teacher agency. See Figure 1.1 for an overview of this dissertation.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TEACHER AGENCY IN UNIVERSITIES			
CHAPTER	CONTEXT	DESIGN	TOPIC
2	LEIDEN UNIVERSITY	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	PROFESSIONAL TEACHER AGENCY
3	12 UNIVERSITIES	MULTIMETHOD STUDY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • study 1: Semi-structured interviews • study 2&3: Comparative Judgement • study 4: Pilot 	DEVELOPING SET OF SCENARIOS
4	9 UNIVERSITIES	SCENARIO-BASED INTERVIEWS	TYPOLOGY OF AGENTIC ACTIONS
5	STIRLING UNIVERSITY	SEMI-STRUCTURED and SCENARIO-BASED INTERVIEWS	UNDERLYING BELIEFS OF AGENTIC ACTIONS
GENERAL DISCUSSION TEACHER AGENCY IN UNIVERSITIES			

Figure 1.1
Overview of this Dissertation

1 In Chapter 2, an exploratory interview study is presented, focusing on understanding university lecturers' perceptions of their professional agency and their roles as change agents in teaching. The study investigates lecturers' experiences in three core areas of professional agency: influencing university teaching, developing university teaching, and negotiating teacher identity.

The guiding research question is: What are the characteristics of professional agency as identified by lecturers in the academic teaching context? This inquiry is structured to explore the extent of lecturers' influence on teaching practices, the collaborative and individual efforts in educational development, and the negotiation of professional identity within institutional frameworks. To address these questions, the study employed a qualitative research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews ($n=35$) with university lecturers across multiple departments. The interviews, conducted in Dutch, lasted 40–60 minutes each, and thematic analysis was applied using a framework developed by Vähäsantanen et al. (2019). Key themes were coded based on indicators of influencing work, developing practices, and identity negotiation, with iterative refinement ensuring comprehensive coverage.

In Chapter 3, a multimethod research study is presented that aims to develop scenarios as tools for understanding and measuring teacher agency in universities. The central research question guiding this study is: In what ways can representative scenarios be developed to measure teacher agency in universities? Four sub-questions addressed specific dimensions of this inquiry:

1. What themes of university teaching are representative for scenario development?
2. Should scenarios be framed in first- or third-person perspectives, and should they feature open- or closed-ended formats?
3. How do experts evaluate scenarios' likelihood of eliciting teacher agency?
4. To what extent do scenarios resonate with lecturers and elicit multiple solutions?

To explore these questions, four interconnected studies were conducted using a combination of qualitative interviews, expert panels, and pilot testing:

- **Study 1** involved interviews with university lecturers ($n=28$) to identify

“bumpy moments” in teaching that require agentic responses. These moments were analyzed to generate 24 themes, forming the basis for scenario development.

- **Study 2** engaged an expert panel ($n=37$) to evaluate scenarios for their narrative perspective and design. First-person, open-ended scenarios were found to be the most effective.
- **Study 3** used another expert panel ($n=13$) to assess the likelihood of specific scenarios eliciting teacher agency. Qualitative feedback informed refinements to scenario content and design.
- **Study 4** piloted the scenarios with university lecturers ($n=30$) through think-aloud sessions. Participants provided multiple solutions to scenarios, confirming their utility in eliciting teacher agency.

In Chapter 4, a scenario-based study is presented, examining the agentic actions demonstrated by university lecturers within teaching contexts. The study aims to explore the following research question: What agentic actions do university lecturers articulate in the context of teaching? Specifically, the study focuses on identifying how lecturers’ actions align with the cultural, structural, and material dimensions of the ecological model’s practical-evaluative framework.

To investigate this question, we employed a qualitative research design featuring 30 lecturers from nine research-intensive universities in the Netherlands. Data were collected through scenario-based interviews using the set of 23 pre-validated scenarios from Chapter 3, reflecting real-life teaching challenges. Each participant selected scenarios they identified with and described the actions they would take in response, enabling the study to analyze deliberate and intentional actions that reflect teacher agency.

In Chapter 5, a qualitative research study is presented, investigating the interplay between university lecturers’ beliefs and their agentic actions in teaching contexts. This study aims to address the research question: What shared beliefs about teaching do university lecturers express, and how are these reflected in their agentic orientations? To explore this, the study employed a scenario-based approach combined with semi-structured interviews, involving 12 participants from the Education Division of a Scottish university. Participants engaged with

the 23 validated scenarios (Chapter 3) that reflected real-life teaching challenges, followed by interviews exploring their professional beliefs and motivations. The typology of agentic actions from Chapter 4 was used to categorize how lecturers shaped and navigated scenarios with agentic orientations.

Finally, Chapter 6 provides a compendium and general discussion of the findings of the studies from the previous chapters and then concludes with theoretical and practical implications arising from the findings of this dissertation.