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

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Chapter 5

Teacher Agency in Universities: Exploring Underlying Beliefs and Agentic Orientations When Navigating University Teaching Practices



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Abstract

5 In times when universities are being redefined by rapidly changing technological, global, and cultural shifts, lecturers experience challenges aligning their pedagogical beliefs with shifting institutional and societal expectations. This alignment could be achieved by fostering teacher agency, which is briefly understood as the capacity of lecturers to act purposefully to influence their professional spaces and impact student learning. Through semi-structured and scenario-based interviews with 12 participants from a Scottish university, this study investigated how lecturers' beliefs and intentions about teaching and learning reflect their agentic actions in various teaching scenarios. Initially, the study identified three groups of shared agentic orientations: 1. *Accommodating & Supporting*, 2. *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting*, and 3. *Leading*, showing how they respond to challenges in distinct ways. Reflexive Thematic Analysis further revealed that each group embodied shared beliefs about teaching and learning, specifically: *Inclusivity* and *Equity* for the first group, *Responsibility* and *Collaboration* for the second group, and *Change* and *Innovation* for the third group. This study highlights the complex interplay between university lecturers' beliefs and agentic orientations in navigating challenging teaching situations. Additionally, the findings contribute to the ecological model of teacher agency by offering new insights into how lecturers' beliefs inform their actions in university teaching.

5.1 Introduction

In the rapidly evolving university landscape, where artificial intelligence, global competition, and internationalization are reshaping institutions, lecturers encounter complex challenges in their roles. Balancing effective pedagogy with personal values and shifting societal expectations has become increasingly demanding (Eggins et al., 2021). In this dynamic context, teaching approaches equip lecturers to address the varied needs of their students while navigating these broader institutional demands (Minnett-Smith & Davis, 2019). To effectively meet these challenges, lecturers require not only disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical skills but also the opportunity to exercise teacher agency. This empowers lecturers to align teaching with their pedagogical goals, personal values, and broader institutional objectives, creating coherent and purpose-driven educational spaces. Lecturers' ability to achieve agency, i.e., purposefully and deliberately navigating challenging teaching practices, is interrelated with their professional beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching and learning (Biesta et al., 2015). These beliefs are rooted in lecturers' professional experiences, backgrounds, and disciplinary perspectives.

Lecturers' beliefs about teaching and learning at universities are pivotal in deliberately shaping their practices (Norton et al., 2005; Pantić, 2015; Yang & Clarke, 2018). These beliefs influence not only how lecturers perceive their roles but also the ways they navigate and contribute to the teaching and learning process (Nguyen, 2020; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). By reflecting on their beliefs and engaging in collaborative practices, lecturers can create spaces of agency that empower them to critically adjust their practices. In the secondary school context, Rushton & Bird (2024) have previously argued that creating and navigating spaces of agency allows teachers to critically examine their beliefs and address the complexities of their practices. Spaces of agency are therefore created through opportunities for reflection and dialogic interaction, where teachers and lecturers critically examine their beliefs and adjust their practices to foster, for example, student-centered learning spaces (Yang & Clarke, 2018; Nguyen, 2020). It is within these spaces of agency that lecturers

reconcile external constraints with internal beliefs, positioning themselves as active agents of pedagogical transformation (Yang & Clarke, 2018). Moreover, lecturers' beliefs and their ability to exercise teacher agency are pivotal in bridging the gap between educational policies and the lived realities of teaching practices. Research highlights the need for lecturers to engage with reform initiatives critically, using their agency to reinterpret and implement policies in ways that align with their beliefs and students' needs (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017).

5 The interrelated nature of teacher agency and professional beliefs profoundly impacts teaching practices, particularly in institutions with diverse student populations and lecturers who bring in varied academic backgrounds, cultural perspectives, and levels of professional experience. As Oleson and Hora (2014) argue, teaching practices are shaped by a wide range of experiences, including lecturers' own time as students and academics. Compared to primary and secondary school teachers, for example, university lecturers frequently receive limited formal training in teaching methodologies and pedagogies prior to taking up their role (Oleson & Hora, 2014; Vreekamp et al., 2023). Thus, although university lecturers often bring valuable knowledge and skills from their experiences to their work practices, lecturers' knowledge and skills are not always informed by professional learning programs with a focus on teaching practices. To better understand the educational principles guiding their practices, it is necessary to examine the rationale behind lecturers' decision-making processes. In particular, understanding how lecturers' agentic actions, i.e., deliberate and purposeful actions, are influenced by their underlying beliefs.

In summary, investigating the relationship between lecturers' agentic actions and professional beliefs is necessary for understanding *how* and *why* university lecturers shape their teaching practices in a certain way (cf. Biesta et al., 2018; Norton et al., 2005). Therefore, to understand how lecturers respond to challenging situations, we examine in this study what beliefs (the *why*) underlie agentic actions (the *how*).

5.1.1 The ecological model of teacher agency

Teacher agency refers to teachers actively shaping their teaching spaces, making informed decisions, and taking purposeful action in response to the complex demands of teaching. It emphasizes teachers as active agents who can influence their work conditions, teaching practices, and ultimately, the learning experiences of their students, rather than being passive implementers of external policies or curricula (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009; Vähäsantanen et al., 2018). The ecological approach to teacher agency, as developed and refined through research on how teachers engaged with curriculum reform in primary and secondary education in Scotland, conceptualizes agency not as a fixed trait or an isolated quality. Instead, teacher agency is understood as emerging from the dynamic interaction between teachers and their professional space (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). It is dynamic and relational, shaped by the surrounding context, such as policies, school culture, and student needs, as well as the teacher's personal experiences, beliefs, and aspirations (Biesta et al., 2015). This approach emphasizes that teacher agency develops over time and across different contexts, considering three dimensions: the iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions (Priestley et al., 2015). These three dimensions conceptualize teacher agency as an interplay of past experiences (iterational), future aspirations (projective), and present adaptability (practical-evaluative), enabling teachers to navigate and shape their professional contexts effectively. The iterational dimension reflects how teachers' past experiences shape their current practices, using routines and past strategies as resources for present decisions. The projective dimension highlights teachers' ability to set future goals, envision desired outcomes, and plan changes in their teaching methods or classroom culture. The practical-evaluative dimension focuses on teachers' real-time decision-making, where they navigate immediate challenges, balance resources, and adapt to their context, integrating past insights and future aspirations to address present needs. The dimensions are interconnected and should be understood as a "chordal triad" that together constitute teacher agency. This triadic relationship forms a dynamic and responsive approach to teaching (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015).

Agentic actions

The role of agentic actions in teaching stresses the strategic and adaptive nature of lecturers' responses to challenging teaching situations. Agentic actions illustrate the responsive nature of teaching, where lecturers draw on personal narratives and professional experiences to align their actions with specific educational outcomes. Kusters et al. (under review) described a typology of intended agentic actions lecturers demonstrate when navigating challenging teaching situations, i.e., *Leading* (setting the norm), *Accommodating* (placing others' needs above their own), and *Supporting* (creating a conducive learning space). *Leading* actions are characterized by taking control and making assertive decisions, often directing others or setting standards. *Accommodating* actions involve prioritizing others' needs and ideas over one's own. *Supporting* actions are encouraging and constructive, promoting a conducive and collaborative learning space. While this typology of agentic actions offers insights into lecturers' responses to challenging teaching situations, it does not explain how lecturers apply these actions across different contexts and over time. Additionally, although the typology sheds light on present actions (the practical-evaluative), it does not illustrate how these actions are shaped by past professional experiences (the iterational) or future-oriented goals (the projective). This current study provides a deeper exploration of the underlying beliefs and purposes that drive lecturers' agentic actions, as these foundational elements shape not only how actions manifest in the present but also how they evolve across contexts and time.

5.1.2 Underlying beliefs of agentic actions

The underlying beliefs and purposes that shape lecturers' actions are central to understanding their agentic actions in teaching. These beliefs are not incidental but are integral to the practices, choices, and motivations that lecturers bring into their work. Drawing on the ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), lecturers' actions in the present (practical-evaluative) are interrelated with their habits (iterational) and aspirations (projective) within the institutional framework (Biesta et al., 2018). The ecological model illustrates that lecturers'

practices are shaped by both their experiences and the goals they set within the constraints and affordances of their teaching spaces.

The concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) further stresses how lecturers' beliefs and actions are deeply embedded within the structures of their institutions. *Habitus*, as a system of ingrained dispositions, is shaped by factors such as socio-cultural background, educational experiences, and professional space (Lefstein et al., 2020). Although *habitus* can be adapted to new settings, it often reinforces existing norms unconsciously, perpetuating certain educational practices without deliberate intent. In this way, lecturers' choices and strategies are deeply embedded in the institutional contexts, which include policies, structural supports, and professional relationships that shape agency and decision-making processes (Biesta, 2022; Gonzales, 2015; Vähäsantanen, 2014). According to Leijen et al. (2020), reflective practices allow lecturers to connect their experiences and habits to institutional contexts, fostering a deeper understanding of their teaching philosophies and actions. Consequently, beliefs serve as the foundation for agentic actions, guiding lecturers in their decision-making and allowing them to navigate the complex demands of university teaching. Therefore, teacher agency plays a pivotal role in this process, as it enables lecturers to navigate institutional demands while shaping and reshaping their professional identities (Li & Ruppap, 2021). By doing so, they align their practices with evolving educational expectations and foster meaningful change.

Furthermore, Samuelowicz and Bain (2001) investigated lecturers' orientations to teaching, finding that their practices are guided by deliberate orientations rooted in educational beliefs and goals, rather than mere reactions to situations. In exploring agentic actions in challenging teaching situations, the connection between personal beliefs, contextual challenges, and adaptive strategies becomes evident (Biesta et al., 2015; Li & Ruppap, 2021). Eliciting agentic responses provide a means to understand how lecturers interpret their roles, adjust to evolving expectations, and pursue objectives that align with their vision of education. The inquiry into lecturers' agentic responses is vital for comprehensively understanding teacher agency, as it interweaves experience,

orientation, and aspiration into a cohesive framework that explains how lecturers navigate their professional landscapes.

In conclusion, understanding teacher agency among university lecturers requires examining their responses to challenging teaching situations, which offers contextualized insights into their backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations. These agentic responses reveal the beliefs, motivations, and intentions guiding their actions and show how they make sense of their roles, adapt to changes, and align actions with specific goals. Investigating responses highlights the ways lecturers navigate challenges, employ strategies, and pursue aspirations, providing a comprehensive view of their professional practices and teacher agency. This study is centered on the research question: *What shared beliefs about teaching do university lecturers express, and how are these reflected in their agentic orientations?*

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5.2 Method

A scenario-based approach to interviews was used to gather responses from lecturers regarding real-life challenging teaching scenarios, adopted from Kusters et al. (2024). These 23 scenarios were developed and validated through a multi-method study to ensure they accurately represent university teaching practices. The scenarios were validated to effectively elicit teacher agency, and designed to be relatable to lecturers, allowing lecturers to identify with multiple scenarios (Kusters et al., 2024). The scenario-based method allows participants to engage with hypothetical but realistic scenarios, providing insights into their perceptions, decision-making processes, and behavioral responses in a controlled manner. By using these scenarios, the study aimed to elicit authentic and contextually relevant responses, ensuring the validity and applicability of the findings to real-world teaching practices. This method is particularly effective in capturing complex dynamics and nuanced reactions, making it suitable for examining lecturers' experiences and strategies in navigating teaching challenges. In addition, a semi-structured interview approach was used to investigate lecturers' reasonings for

starting or sustaining a career in academia and what motivates and moves them to be engaged in teaching.

5.2.1 Data collection

Data collection involved conducting interview sessions with 12 participants (Table 5.1), all from the Education Division of a Scottish university. Each session was structured into two distinct parts: an in-depth semi-structured interview and a scenario-based interview, with each lecturer presented with three scenarios of participants' choice. Overall, each interview session lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. The semi-structured interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was guided by a framework focused on participants' professional backgrounds and motivations for pursuing or continuing a career in academia. The interviews started with questions about participants' life and professional histories, including their previous (teaching) experiences, current roles, and key career milestones. Open-ended questions encouraged reflections on memorable teaching moments, challenges, and pivotal events shaping their careers, aiming to uncover the deeper motivations and values underlying their commitment to academia. In addition, future-focused questions were asked about aspirations, planned changes in their academic roles, and long-term career plans so that both past experiences and future goals were examined holistically. Then, the scenario-based interview, which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, explored the participants' responses to various university teaching situations. The interviews were transcribed verbatim upon completion for further analyses. The transcripts were shared with the participants, and they were invited to provide any revisions or additions. Two participants indicated that they wanted to provide additional comments by email. These comments were added to the transcript.

The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (ICLON-IREC 2021-02). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and precautions were taken to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study up until four weeks after data collection.

Table 5.1*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Position	Years of university teaching experience	Classification
Amelia	Program Director and Lecturer	11	Mid-Career Academic
Ava	Senior Lecturer	2	Early Career Academic
Emma	Lecturer	5	Early Career Academic
Isabella	Program Director and Lecturer	3	Early Career Academic
James	Lecturer	2	Mid-Career Academic
John	Program Director, PhD Student, and Lecturer	2	Transitional Academic
Mary	Lecturer	4	Early Career Academic
Mia	Senior Lecturer	9	Mid-Career Academic
Michael	PhD Student and Lecturer	1	Transitional Academic
Olivia	Lecturer	2	Early Career Academic
Sophia	Lecturer	7	Mid-Career Academic
William	Professor	25	Experienced Academic

Identifiable information was anonymized during data analysis and reporting to safeguard participants' privacy. However, participants were informed of the possibility of recognition, particularly within the institution, despite efforts to ensure anonymity.

5.2.2 Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, where transcripts of the collected data were uploaded to organize and categorize the information systematically. We coded the responses to the scenarios using the typology of agentic actions consisting of *Leading*, *Accommodating*, and *Supporting* actions (Kusters et al., under review). This analysis showed that lecturers tended to deploy a similar combination of agentic actions in varying situations, which we have identified as *agentic orientation*. In this way, we distinguished three groups of lecturers with similar approaches when navigating challenging teaching practices (see Table 5.2). These three groups are lecturers with a 1) *Accommodating* &

Table 5.2

Agentic Orientations Classified by Majority Agentic Actions

Pseudonym	Leading actions	Accommodating actions	Supporting actions	Agentic orientation
Amelia	9	2	-	Leading
Ava	-	4	4	Accommodating & Supporting
Emma	8	-	2	Leading
Isabella	-	5	8	Accommodating & Supporting
James	3	3	5	Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting
John	5	4	4	Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting
Mary	-	3	6	Accommodating & Supporting
Mia	-	6	7	Accommodating & Supporting
Michael	1	4	4	Accommodating & Supporting
Olivia	5	1	-	Leading
Sophia	4	3	3	Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting
William	6	3	3	Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting

Supporting orientation, 2) *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* orientation, or 3) *Leading* orientation. Then, from the transcripts, we created narrative profiles of around 500 words per participant, providing an overview of their career paths and motivations, and teaching beliefs and aspirations. Finally, we conducted a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2021) of each group of lecturers with similar agentic orientations (i.e., the three groups described above). By conducting RTA, we examined the narratives to code the beliefs of each individual in each group. In this way, we described underlying beliefs and linked these to their agentic orientations.

5.3 Findings

In this section, we present the findings that led to the formation of three groups, each characterized by a distinct agentic orientation and shared underlying beliefs. Once the lecturers were categorized based on their agentic orientations, a process

of RTA identified shared beliefs within each of the previously established groups. Three groups of lecturers with distinct orientations were identified. Within the three distinct groups of lecturers, shared beliefs were identified that align with and further define their orientations. These are as follows:

- The *Accommodating & Supporting* oriented lecturers shared beliefs about *Inclusivity* and *Equity*;
- The *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* oriented lecturers shared beliefs about *Responsibility* and *Collaboration*;
- The *Leading* oriented lecturers shared beliefs about *Change* and *Innovation*.

5

To illustrate orientations, we share quotations which highlight specific agentic actions taken by lecturers. Following this, we demonstrate how the narratives of each group with a particular orientation reveal common beliefs that further define and unify their orientation. For instance, within the group of lecturers who had an *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation, lecturers often used equivalents of words such as “inclusion” and “inclusivity.” Whereas lecturers who had a *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* used equivalent words such as “together” and “collaborating” and *Leading* orientation used words such as “improving” and “innovating.”

Identifying similar agentic orientations

Our analysis revealed further nuances and understandings within the typology of agentic actions in response to challenging teaching situations. While a broad framework for agentic actions exists, the manifestation of these actions varied among *individual* lecturers, depending on the specific context and challenges they encountered. Rather than a single, uniform type of agentic action, we found a multifaceted interplay where lecturers employed a combination of agentic actions when facing multiple scenarios.

From the data, we identified three distinct categories of agentic action, which we labeled “agentic orientations.” First, the *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation was identified in the narratives of Ava, Isabella, Mary, Mia, and Michael. An *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation is characterized by prioritizing the

needs and preferences of colleagues and students over personal or professional needs in every scenario. It involves showing flexibility, adapting to institutional requirements, and collaborating effectively to maintain a cooperative workspace. The accommodating aspect demonstrates a willingness to adjust one's practices or preferences for the greater good, while the supporting aspect emphasizes fostering positive and conducive learning spaces that aim for a harmonious and productive educational or professional setting where all community members feel valued and supported.

Second, the *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* orientation was identified in the responses of James, John, Sophia, and William. This orientation is similar to the above, but lecturers with this orientation also explicitly stated "setting the norms" in situations. This orientation integrates assertive leadership with flexibility and compassion across various scenarios. It involves taking proactive and decisive actions to advocate for others, especially when institutional policies or rigid frameworks may not align with their specific needs.

Third, the *Leading* orientation was identified in the narratives of Amelia, Emma, and Olivia. These lecturers emphasize being progressive and mention that they strive to raise the standard. Lecturers who have a *Leading* orientation are assertive and proactive in almost all scenarios and stress the importance of balancing institutional demands with a strong commitment to providing good education.

Accommodating & Supporting orientation

Lecturers with an *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation (i.e., Ava, Isabella, Mary, Mia, and Michael) strive for conducive learning spaces in which sometimes the needs of others take priority over one's own when navigating challenging teaching practices. We show here how *agentic actions* are deployed with an *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation in navigating teaching scenarios. An example illustrates how Michael balances the university's regulations with his personal educational values to support students in achieving their goals. It shows how he navigates between institutional guidelines and his belief in providing the best possible assistance to help students succeed:

There's no one set answer, of course [on how to help students] but I would always first and foremost give the student the opportunities to say what's going on, what he or she wants to say, and help the student finish the course. So even if that means extending deadlines, offering a second or third retake for a paper or whatever. There are some university rules that I do avoid to help students.

Michael demonstrates accommodating behavior by recognizing that the conventional approach (adhering strictly to university guidelines) is not suitable for this particular situation. As a result, Michael supports the student by offering an additional retake, thereby showing flexibility and a willingness to adapt to the student's needs.

5

Beliefs about Inclusivity and Equity

The lecturers with an *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation (i.e., Ava, Isabella, Mary, Mia, and Michael) shared beliefs rooted in a commitment to inclusivity and equity. Their language frequently revolved around terms like “inclusive,” “social justice,” “equity,” “critical pedagogy,” “students’ needs,” “responsiveness,” and “decolonizing,” reflecting a shared focus on promoting diverse and inclusive educational spaces. These kinds of words were manifested in how these lecturers describe their teaching, interact with students, and collaborate with colleagues, demonstrating their commitment to inclusivity and equity in practical, relational ways. This finding is illustrative in how they incorporate these beliefs into both their pedagogy and career paths, particularly by centering the needs of marginalized and underrepresented groups, such as Indigenous communities and students with disabilities. Through these shared beliefs, the lecturers align their work with broader goals of equity and support for social justice initiatives. An illustration of Ava moving into an academic career:

I came to [university] with the idea of earning a master's degree so I could return home and teach English, expanding my opportunities for a teaching career. In my view, teaching English was the perfect way to provide minority students with better opportunities. But then I found out that there are other ways of

continuing to be a teacher. The PhD path opened up that door for me building that confidence in how I want to do it that works for me and that works for the students.

An illustration of why Mary sustains a career in academia:

And it fits the other program that I teach in the Master of Education. I really want to change in that way as well, by opening up my theoretical understanding of the director, who has a very, very sensitive and specific way of dealing with topics through a social justice lens. And, you know, I really want to change and I want to broaden my understanding of those issues because I have valued a very strong decolonizing element in my courses which I have this hunger for learning new theoretical methodologies that I can then take into my own program to make the program more inclusive.

The beliefs reflected in these narratives reveal that education is viewed as a catalyst for fostering inclusion. This focus on social justice and equity suggests that these lecturers view their roles as not merely transmitting knowledge but also addressing systemic inequities in education.

Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting orientation

Lecturers with a *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* orientation (i.e., James, John, Sophia, and William) alternate different types of actions depending on the situation. This indicates that the same lecture could vary in approach across different scenarios and, at times, even within a single response to a particular scenario, as illustrated by John:

So one of the ways that I've done that was as through, you know, I went to the dean, I got some time and money for lunch and getting people together. And so they could then, as I see, start doing I suppose a SWOT analysis of what was going well on the program, what needed to happen next in terms of development [...] So for me, I think my solution is to get people talking and creating a sense of responsibility and accountability, that is very much shared and in a way that everybody is heard.

Taking the initiative to secure resources and organize a team discussion demonstrates leadership. Encouraging an open conversation where everyone can share feedback and take responsibility fosters a collaborative and supportive space by promoting shared responsibility.

Beliefs about Responsibility and Collaboration

The lecturers with a *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* orientation shared beliefs focused on responsibility and collaboration. Their language frequently revolved around terms like “collaborating,” “responsibility,” “committed,” “collegiality,” “together,” “shared duty,” “importance,” and “contribute to.” Their narratives demonstrate how they understand and apply these concepts, both in their interactions with students and colleagues and in their broader professional commitments. Responsibility is understood not just as a personal obligation but as a shared duty, and collaboration is framed as an essential strategy for addressing the challenges of education in today’s world. In essence, these lecturers’ work underscores the belief that education is most effective when it is a collaborative process rooted in shared responsibility, where all lecturers, students, and other community groups work together to achieve common educational goals. As John argues, fostering collaboration, shared responsibility, and accountability is essential to improving standards and creating better learning spaces:

My mantra was always that none of us are as good as all of us. You know, I used to use that in school quite often. You know, if we’re working together. And what I also think happens is when you’ve got folk collaborating together, then you also raise expectations. And standards also rise as well, because everybody’s keen to up the game, as it were. So for me, as program director, bringing folk together is putting the student learning experience at the center of everything we do.

Additionally, William states that true educational impact requires cooperation beyond the classroom:

And I think, therefore, other agencies and organizations can teach young people

on their own, but they can do so much more powerfully in cooperation with educators, that only works in cooperation. So there is a role for an educator here, so that not to lose sight of the educator would be a complete mistake. Yeah, but to lay the responsibility of the educational process at the door of the teacher is also absolutely a fundamental mistake.

The underlying message is that education thrives when responsibility is shared and collaboration is embraced. The lecturers' practices reflect a fundamental belief that success in teaching, learning, and leadership is not achieved through isolated efforts but through a collective process. These narratives suggest that the path to achieving educational goals and addressing challenges lies in working together, whether among students, faculty, or the broader community emphasizing that joint effort leads to better outcomes for all involved.

Leading orientation

Lecturers with a *Leading* orientation (i.e., Amelia, Emma, and Olivia) take control, make assertive decisions, and direct others. Their actions often involve setting standards, providing clear guidance, and driving the group toward specific goals. Olivia demonstrated the *Leading* orientation by clearly articulating her expectations, as shown in the following statement:

I'm often saying, you know, we can't release the grades until we can't release grades for the whole class until you've finished your grading or something like that. So yeah, I think this is one where I would have no hesitation in bringing it up and demanding that things be done. But I think you have to again accept that there are reasons why people fail to meet deadlines, and it's often because they're under pressure. So it's finding out, trying to catch it early so that if somebody needs some guidance to get their work to manage their own workload.

Olivia takes control of the situation by asserting that grades cannot be released until all grading is completed. She provides clear guidance, demands adherence to deadlines, and shows a willingness to address issues assertively.

Beliefs about Change and Innovation

The lecturers with a *Leading* orientation shared beliefs centered around change and innovation. Their language frequently revolves around terms like: “educational reform or change,” “(organizational) development,” “transformational teaching,” “furthering teaching,” “making impact,” “creating systems,” and “refining.” Their narratives emphasize an ongoing commitment to transforming teaching and introducing novel approaches in response to shifting needs. By driving change through their teaching, these lecturers actively innovate within their fields, continually adapting and reimagining educational processes to ensure they remain effective and forward-thinking. Olivia, for example, stressed that she takes personal responsibility for continuously improving her teaching by refining course content and valuing a cycle of innovation.

I see it as my responsibility to put time and energy into the preparation of my classes and constantly look for ways to improve and innovate my teaching. [...] I'm at a point with the, I mean, I completely rewrote it in the first year I taught it was just completely changed. And then, this year, I changed the learning outcomes and the assessment to fit better with each other. And next academic year, I probably want to run it pretty much as it is so that I've just got that repeat experience and then make some more judgments about how to change things.

In addition, Emma mentioned how she aims for ensuring effective implementations of new initiatives.

I want to make sure the chief examiners feel supported as I initiate changes in the committees. Formalizing the process by introducing clear functions, support, and training for the chief examiners, will help everything run more smoothly. The key is for me to take the lead in organizing and guiding this transition.

In these narratives, the lecturers reflect beliefs about change and innovation, where their leadership and teaching are driven by a commitment to transform teaching practices. Both Olivia and Emma emphasize the importance of adapting to new challenges and introducing novel approaches to enhance both teaching and learning. Lecturers with this *Leading* orientation actively engage with shifting

educational landscapes, challenging conventional models and pushing for reforms that address the evolving needs of students, lecturers, and educational systems as a whole. Their work demonstrates that innovation is not an isolated activity but a continuous process, requiring both vision and the ability to lead change.

5.4 Discussion

This study sought to explore *how* and *why* lecturers navigate challenging teaching situations. *How* refers to the agentic orientations, and *why* to lecturers' beliefs. Drawing on the ecological model of teacher agency developed by Priestley and colleagues (2015), this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how university lecturers navigate teaching practices in an agentic manner. By utilizing the typology of agentic actions (Kusters et al., under review), we examined the beliefs underlying lecturers' agentic actions, offering insights into their orientations toward challenging teaching scenarios. This approach not only maps lecturers' actions but also offers an explanatory framework for understanding the rationale behind lecturers' deliberate choices. Namely, our findings showed how lecturers' beliefs are reflected in their agentic orientations, suggesting that lecturers with similar beliefs tend to adopt similar approaches to teaching. This means that beliefs shape how lecturers perceive – or have *awareness* (Nguyen, 2020) – and respond to teaching challenges, influencing their choices and actions in practice. These beliefs act as a lens through which lecturers interpret their professional spaces, guiding their agentic orientations. Similarly, Yang and Clarke (2018) found that reflection on teaching practice revealed underlying beliefs, which enhanced teacher agency. In other words, lecturers' agentic orientations are closely tied to their belief systems, which inform their ability to navigate complex and dynamic educational contexts in a deliberate and purposeful manner.

Understanding the interplay between individual beliefs, professional goals, and systemic contexts is important for supporting lecturers as they navigate the complexities of their roles. As outlined in the introduction, university lecturers face

increasing demands to innovate teaching and address global and local challenges. These findings provide insights into the complex ways in which lecturers enact teacher agency, illuminating the various dimensions and motivations behind their actions. Rather than approaching teacher agency as a normative concept, one that invites judgment as “good” or “bad,” our perspective encourages a more nuanced understanding, including how lecturers create spaces to exercise agency and the underlying beliefs and values that inform and shape their decisions. Within this space, lecturers balance diverse and often competing demands. In the subsequent discussion, each agentic orientation and the lecturers’ underlying beliefs are discussed.

5

5.4.1 Accommodating & Supporting orientation

Lecturers with an *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation articulated beliefs about inclusivity in their teaching, consistently placing students’ needs above personal preferences or fixed institutional structures. This approach reflects a teaching philosophy focused on flexibility and adaptability to foster inclusive educational spaces, aligning with Miller et al.’s (2020) emphasis on inclusive, agentic actions. Rather than merely reacting to challenges, these lecturers proactively adopt inclusive strategies, creating supportive, conducive spaces that encourage participation. The scoping review by Miller et al. (2020) describes how teachers in K-12 grades (ages 5-18) promote inclusion by using differentiated instruction and flexible grouping to meet diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. Teachers tend to integrate multiple learning modalities and center on students’ strengths and interests. Additionally, teachers advocate for resources and policy changes to support inclusive practices, often challenging traditional, segregated schooling and deficit-based views of disability. The review highlights how teachers continually adapt their methods in response to classroom dynamics, emphasizing a flexible and responsive approach essential for creating an inclusive, supportive space. This aligns with our findings, suggesting that the observations of Miller and colleagues (2020) may hold relevance for our context. By drawing on these shared insights, we can better understand our own findings within the university context.

Moreover, the *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation observed in our study is not merely instructional tactics but is embedded in the lecturers' professional identity, shaping how they approach challenges and adapt to meet diverse needs. These orientations show that inclusivity for these lecturers extends beyond actions and becomes a core aspect of their identity as lecturers, aligning with Li and Ruppap (2021), who argue that professional development for lecturers should be structured to foster an "inclusive teacher identity," and emphasize developing a philosophy that sustains inclusivity through reflexivity.

Similarly, Pantić (2015) highlighted the role of teacher agency in promoting social justice, further reinforcing this integrated view of professional identity and inclusivity. By prioritizing students' needs over their own (accommodating) and creating an encouraging, collaborative space (supporting), lecturers demonstrate both a purposeful commitment to inclusivity and the reflective capacity to adapt within their social contexts. This integration of accommodating and supporting actions into their teaching orientation reflects the broader ethical and professional imperatives that Pantić (2015) sees as essential for fostering agency in social justice. Therefore, our findings suggest that this agentic orientation functions as a foundational mechanism for enacting inclusive beliefs, embedding these practices deeply within their professional identities and teaching philosophies in a way that is both intentional and adaptive.

5.4.2 Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting orientation

Lecturers with a *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* orientation articulated beliefs about responsibility and collaboration in their teaching practices. These findings appear to be rooted in a perspective that emphasizes collaboration and holds that community groups bear a collective responsibility to optimize collective outcomes. Moreover, lecturers who follow this orientation see it as their duty to exhibit constructive actions when circumstances require such leadership. These beliefs about responsibility and collaboration resonate with the insights of Minett-Smith and Davis (2019), who discuss how team-teaching (i.e., a collaborative teaching approach where multiple instructors share responsibility for planning, delivering, and assessing a course) fosters a culture of shared

responsibility and mutual support among lecturers. Team-teaching requires lecturers to embrace a collective sense of duty toward both students and colleagues. This approach shifts responsibility from an individual obligation to a shared endeavor, where lecturers support one another and work collaboratively toward common educational goals, reinforcing values like “collaboration” and “collegiality” (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019). In brief, educational goals are more effectively achieved when lecturers work collaboratively, highlighting that cohesive team engagement is essential to reaching learning objectives. These findings imply that education thrives through shared responsibility, where informal leadership and mutual accountability foster effective collaboration in teaching.

In addition, lecturers who model collaboration and leadership skills set a standard of professionalism and interpersonal effectiveness within teaching spaces, which not only enhances their own teaching approaches but also positively influences their colleagues and students (e.g., Ramsden et al., 2007). This is imperative in current trends in higher education, where collaborative, responsibility-focused teaching practices support transdisciplinary work (Eggins et al., 2021; Van Baalen et al., 2021). With a growing focus within universities on bridging disciplines to tackle complex societal issues, lecturers with a *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* orientation see shared responsibility as essential to effective teaching. Van Baalen et al. (2021) emphasize that transdisciplinary success hinges on mutual accountability, adaptability, and co-creation. By fostering this culture, lecturers not only improve student outcomes but also exemplify the collaborative mindset essential for addressing today’s interdisciplinary challenges. This approach emphasizes that lecturers’ commitment to shared responsibility is pivotal, in addition to their intention to take a leadership role in fostering collaboration at universities.

5.4.3 Leading orientation

Lecturers with a *Leading* orientation articulated beliefs about change and innovation in their teaching practices. This adds to the findings of Yang and Clarke (2018), who highlight the complexity of educational reform implementation,

emphasizing that while top-down policies set reform goals, individual teacher agency significantly influences how these reforms arrive in practice. Decisive, innovation-driven lecturers could thus be instrumental to sustainable educational reforms. Vähäsantanen et al. (2019) highlight professional agency as encompassing the capacity to influence work, engage in collaborative practices, and continuously negotiate one's professional identity. Such agency-driven behaviors position lecturers as not merely recipients of policy but as active agents capable of shaping and adapting reforms to fit the specific needs of their educational contexts. Through this agency, lecturers embody the potential for sustained, meaningful change within their institutions, facilitating reform processes that extend beyond the confines of top-down directives.

Leijen et al. (2020) expand on this by situating teacher agency within the ecological model that emphasizes the role of contextual factors and reflection, demonstrating that agency empowers lecturers to assess and transform their own practices critically. By engaging in reflective practices, lecturers adapt policies thoughtfully and reshape educational practices to better align with their evolving understanding of effective pedagogy. This capacity for reflective adaptation supports the development of lecturers as proactive leaders of change, enabling them to navigate complex educational demands and contribute meaningfully to sustained reform.

Furthermore, Cong-Lem (2024) described that lecturers' agency is integral to innovation and educational improvement. In higher education, agency is expressed through lecturers' active involvement in pedagogical innovation, curriculum redesign, and their ongoing commitment to student well-being and engagement. Effective change in this context depends on a combination of internal drive and external support structures, such as leadership encouragement. By exercising agency in this way, lecturers enact and model sustainable, transformative practices that can advance educational quality over time. In essence, leading lecturers embody a proactive and adaptable approach to educational reform, demonstrating that agency and innovation are intertwined in advancing sustainable educational practices.

5.4.4 Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the study was small-scale and conducted within a single institution, which enhances the internal validity of the findings because of consistent conditions. However, this limited geographical and institutional scope restricts the generalizability of the results to broader contexts. Future research could expand to include multiple institutes and varied departments to enhance the generalizability of the findings and validate the results across a range of educational settings. A second limitation concerns the scenario-based design. The scenarios were designed to focus on a single situation, allowing participants to thoroughly analyze and deepen their reflections and articulate their beliefs and actions more clearly and deeply than perhaps they could in real life. An advantage of this approach is that it offers a focused, manageable way to explore specific aspects of teacher agency in depth. However, teaching practice typically involves navigating multiple, simultaneous challenges rather than isolated events. Consequently, participants' responses in the scenario-based approach may have been more deliberate and over-considered compared to the quick, multifaceted, and responsive decision-making required in actual teaching practice. To address this limitation, observational studies of lecturers' actual teaching practices could assess whether their responses to scenarios align with their actions in real-world settings. Mixed-methods approach, combining a scenario-based approach with observations, would further enrich the understanding of how lecturers navigate complex, authentic teaching challenges.

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5.5 Conclusions

This study advances the literature on teacher agency in university settings by examining the role of beliefs in shaping agentic actions. Our findings offer an extended perspective on university teacher agency by revealing the underlying rationale that drives lecturers' agentic actions. Consistent with the temporality of teacher agency, as conceptualized by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), our

results indicate that enduring beliefs influence agentic actions in the present. This insight highlights the need to understand how past experiences and beliefs shape lecturers' current practices.

Through this study, we substantiated the interconnectedness of teacher agency and beliefs, aligning with findings from a study conducted in schools (Biesta et al., 2015). Furthermore, we extended empirical support for this relationship within university settings. Lecturers with strong beliefs about inclusivity not only hold these beliefs, but actively demonstrate them through accommodating and supporting actions. Also, lecturers who prioritize collaboration and responsibility similarly engage in actions that foster a sense of community, often taking on leadership roles to facilitate collective goals. Furthermore, lecturers who emphasize continuous improvement, particularly in the areas of change and innovation, frequently assume pioneering roles, driving forward new ideas and practices. These patterns shed light on bridging beliefs with agentic actions. By identifying the alignment between beliefs and actions, our findings suggest that beliefs are both a foundation and a catalyst for teacher agency, allowing lecturers to adapt to changing educational needs and ultimately enhancing lecturers' capacity to navigate and shape their professional landscapes.

