



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

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

Kusters, M.C.J.

Citation

Kusters, M. C. J. (2025, July 3). *Understanding teacher agency in universities: why and how lecturers shape and navigate university teaching practices*. ICLON PhD Dissertation Series. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4252685>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4252685>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 1 – The general introduction

Central to this dissertation is the concept of teacher agency and its critical role in research-intensive universities. Teacher agency is defined as the capacity of lecturers to actively shape their teaching practices and make decisions within institutional and societal constraints. However, the concept is complex and context-dependent, shaped by factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, beliefs, and professional identity, alongside organizational culture and societal expectations. The General Introduction highlighted that understanding teacher agency is crucial for empowering lecturers to create meaningful and equitable learning experiences. The chapters presented in this dissertation aimed to explore how university lecturers shaped and navigated their teaching practices within the dynamic landscape of academia, balancing the competing demands of teaching and research. This dissertation emphasized the need to go beyond conventional metrics of teaching quality, advocating for a deeper understanding of lecturers' decision-making processes. The outline of this dissertation included four studies: an exploratory investigation of lecturers' perceptions of agency, the development of a measurement tool tailored to university contexts, an analysis of agentic actions in teaching scenarios, and an exploration of the underlying beliefs shaping lecturers' teaching practices. Ultimately, the dissertation sought to contribute to institutional policies fostering a teacher agency culture. Recognizing the complexities of teacher agency provided valuable insights for supporting lecturers in their roles as educators, leading to improved teaching practices and overall quality of their teaching.

S

Chapter 2 – The exploratory study

This chapter focused on how university lecturers perceived their professional agency and their potential to act as change agents within their institutions. Through interviews with lecturers from various departments, the study identified three key aspects of professional agency: influencing at work, developing work

practices, and negotiating professional identity. Lecturers reported experiencing significant autonomy in designing courses but encountered challenges in influencing broader institutional policies and curriculum decisions. While lecturers expressed enthusiasm for educational development, they often lacked the time and institutional support to pursue meaningful changes.

The study revealed a disconnect between lecturers' personal aspirations for teaching and the structural limitations imposed by university policies, particularly in terms of professional development. Collaboration with colleagues was seen as an essential yet underutilized tool for improving teaching practices, with many lecturers feeling isolated in their efforts. Another key finding was the tension between research and teaching responsibilities, where research was often prioritized over teaching in career progression, leading to a lack of motivation for pedagogical innovation.

The chapter argued that for lecturers to exercise teacher agency, universities need to create spaces that value teaching and provide structured opportunities for professional development. Further recommendations included encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, offering incentives for innovative teaching, and fostering open communication between faculty and administration. Theoretically, the study emphasized the need for a context-dependent understanding of professional teacher agency. The results, therefore, proposed alternative dimensions highlighting the context-specificity: influencing university teaching, developing university teaching, and negotiating teacher identity.

Ultimately, this chapter stressed the importance of institutional recognition of lecturers' contributions to teaching to empower them to take on a greater role in educational change and thus continue to improve the quality of their teaching.

Chapter 3 – The methodological study

This third chapter outlined the development of context-specific teaching scenarios aimed at measuring and understanding teacher agency in universities. The study identified key challenges faced by lecturers, such as student engagement,

curriculum flexibility, and navigating administrative responsibilities. In the first phase, interviews with lecturers were conducted to identify realistic teaching dilemmas (*bumpy moments*), which were then used to create scenarios that reflected authentic university teaching experiences. Subsequently, a validation process was carried out with panels of experts to first establish the writing style of the scenarios and then with a second panel to assess the potential to elicit teacher agency. Finally, pilot interviews were conducted to test the usability of the scenarios. The set of scenarios served as a dynamic tool for eliciting teacher agency, helping lecturers reflect on their teaching practices and explore alternative strategies for navigating teaching challenges.

The chapter concluded by emphasizing the potential of scenario-based approaches in fostering reflective teaching practices and encouraging universities to integrate such tools into professional development programs. By providing a framework to examine the context-dependent nature of teacher agency, the study contributed to the empirical investigation of teacher agency from an ecological perspective.

Chapter 4 – The typology of actions study

This chapter examined the specific agentic actions taken by lecturers when confronted with the challenging teaching scenarios developed in Chapter 3. Using scenario-based interviews, the study categorized actions into key themes such as curriculum adaptation, student engagement, and pedagogical innovation. Lecturers demonstrated varying manifestations of agency, from minor adjustments to their teaching methods to substantial course redesigns.

Based on the participants' responses to the scenarios, a typology of agentic actions was developed, grounded in the ecological model of teacher agency. The study identified three distinct categories of agentic actions: Leading, Accommodating, and Supporting. These categories reflected diverse approaches to decision-making and adaptation when navigating challenging teaching scenarios.

An important implication of this study was the role of reflective practice in enhancing teacher agency, as lecturers who regularly assessed their teaching effectiveness were more likely to implement meaningful changes. Challenges such as workload pressures, lack of institutional incentives, and resistance to change from colleagues were highlighted as significant barriers to agency. The chapter suggested that fostering an environment that encouraged experimentation, and collaboration could help lecturers take greater ownership over their teaching.

Recommendations included professional learning communities, mentorship programs, and institutional recognition of innovative teaching efforts. The chapter concluded that a more holistic approach to supporting lecturers' teacher agency was necessary to cultivate a culture of ongoing teaching development in universities.

Chapter 5 – The underlying beliefs of agentic orientations study

This chapter explored the underlying beliefs and motivations that shaped lecturers' teaching practices through the exercise of teacher agency. The study found that lecturers' decisions were influenced by a complex interplay of personal values, professional aspirations, and institutional expectations. While some lecturers were deeply committed to student-centered approaches and pedagogical innovation, others prioritized research commitments or career advancement considerations.

In this chapter, a range of beliefs was identified, including a passion for subject matter, a desire to foster student success, and institutional pressures related to performance evaluation and funding. Applying the typology of agentic actions (from Chapter 4) uncovered the underlying beliefs that shaped lecturers' actions. The findings revealed that lecturers often employed multiple actions depending on the specific context, suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding of agentic actions. As a result, the study identified three distinct groups of shared agentic orientations: Accommodating & Supporting, Leading, Accommodating

& Supporting, and Leading. These groups illustrated how lecturers responded to challenges in different ways.

Further analysis revealed that each group embodied shared beliefs about teaching and learning, namely, Inclusivity and Equity for the first group, Responsibility and Collaboration for the second, and Change and Innovation for the third. This study underscored the complex interplay between university lecturers' beliefs and their agentic orientations when navigating challenging teaching situations.

This chapter advocated for professional development programs that acknowledged these diverse beliefs and provided tailored support to help lecturers align their teaching practices with their professional goals. Strategies such as reflective practice, peer mentoring, and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration were recommended to enhance lecturers' agency. Ultimately, the study emphasized the importance of fostering an institutional culture that valued and supported diverse teaching approaches, enabling lecturers to exercise agency in ways that enhanced both their professional fulfillment and the quality of teaching.

Chapter 6 – The general discussion and implications

The final chapter synthesized the findings of the dissertation and discussed their implications for university teaching and policy. It highlighted the need for institutions to actively support teacher agency through policies that recognized and rewarded teaching excellence alongside research achievements. The chapter emphasized that fostering teacher agency required a multi-faceted approach, including professional development opportunities, supportive leadership, and collaborative teaching cultures.

It also addressed the shortcomings of the methods currently used to evaluate lecturers, which often failed to capture the complexity of lecturers' contributions to teaching. In this dissertation, it is suggested that integrating teacher agency principles into professional development programs could lead to more engaged

lecturers who were better equipped to meet the challenges of the modern university landscape.

Recommendations included offering structured opportunities for lecturers to reflect on their teaching practices, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and ensuring that teaching innovations were recognized and rewarded at the institutional level. The chapter concluded by emphasizing the importance of placing teacher agency at the center of how lecturers need to be acknowledged. Using teacher agency as a framework for evaluating lecturers provides an authentic, holistic, and actionable measure of teacher quality. By supporting and prioritizing teacher agency, universities could better recognize and reward lecturers across all dimensions of their teaching roles, aligning evaluations with the core goals and values of the university.