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Exploring teacher agency in universities: three types of agentic actions

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how university lecturers exercise teacher agency (i.e. the capacity to intentionally and constructively shape their teaching practices and professional development) is crucial for improving teaching quality and fostering professional growth. Agency encompasses lecturers' intentional, proactive efforts to navigate challenges, implement effective teaching strategies, and adapt to diverse institutional constraints and opportunities. This study explored how lecturers demonstrate agency through articulating deliberate intended actions, employing scenario-based interviews with 30 university lecturers to explore their strategies for addressing challenging teaching situations. Grounded in the ecological approach to teacher agency, this study identified three categories of agentic actions: Leading, Accommodating, and Supporting actions. These categories represent varied approaches to decision-making and adaptation in challenging scenarios, illustrating how lecturers navigate the cultural (norms, values, and beliefs), structural (institutional roles and relationships), and material (resources and physical conditions) elements of their teaching practices. The practical-evaluative dimension of the ecological model, which emphasizes the dynamic interplay between presently available resources and individual capacities, served as the analytical framework. The findings substantiated and extended the ecological approach by introducing a typology of agentic actions, offering empirically grounded insights into how lecturers exercise teacher agency within university teaching practices. This typology provides a structured framework for understanding teacher agency and offers actionable strategies to enhance lecturers' deliberate decision-making. By focusing on deliberate and context-sensitive actions, this study highlights the pivotal role of lecturers as active architects of shaping university teaching practices and navigating challenging teaching situations.

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Introduction

Lecturers have a central role concerning curricular and teaching innovations within research-intensive universities (Guerra et al. 2024). As experts in their field, they are expected to implement

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research-led educational innovations to improve teaching quality, while ensuring an inclusive learning environment (Van Dijk et al. 2020). Yet, how lecturers practice their profession is a complex process that involves their own beliefs and decisions about what constitutes good teaching, while simultaneously navigating structural conditions and disciplinary norms (Kusters et al. 2025). Navigating the interplay between personal beliefs, professional judgments, and contextual constraints directly relates to the concept of teacher agency: the ability to shape, negotiate, and transform professional practices (Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust 2015).

Building on conceptual and empirical research into teacher agency in school contexts, it is important to recognize that teacher agency is always situated within the opportunities and constraints of particular professional spaces (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Rushton and Bird 2024). Teacher agency is widely understood as a situated, multifaceted, and dynamic capacity enacted through intentional and constructive actions shaped by individual, social, and contextual factors (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015; Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust 2015). While these insights offer valuable foundations, the university teaching context brings distinct conditions that warrant closer investigation (cf. Evans 2020; Vähäsantanen et al. 2020). Unlike schoolteachers, whose roles are primarily focused on teaching, university lecturers must continually balance teaching with research and, in some cases, professional practice such as patient care. These structural differences complicate teaching-related decisions and shape both the opportunities and constraints under which agency is enacted (Cong-Lem 2024). Moreover, universities worldwide operate under global pressures of massification, internationalization, and marketization, which further challenge lecturers' professional autonomy (Carvalho and Videira 2019; Kusters et al. 2023; Sá and Amaral 2023). In this respect, the Netherlands provides a relevant case, as its research-intensive universities are strongly shaped by these same global dynamics (Jongbloed and Vossensteyn 2016). Situating our study within this wider international landscape underscores the need to examine teacher agency specifically in relation to university teaching practices, where lecturers negotiate between institutional demands, disciplinary norms, and their own pedagogical values.

Due to the dynamic and context-dependent nature of teacher agency, it is necessary to examine teacher agency specifically in the university teaching context. Such an examination is needed, on the one hand, to gain insight into the concrete actions lecturers undertake to shape their teaching practice and professional development in intentional and constructive ways. On the other hand, it is required to do justice to the situated character of teacher agency, acknowledging that understanding how agency manifests demands investigation within the particular contexts in which it is enacted. In addition, understanding lecturers' agentic actions can create greater awareness that lecturers themselves are the architects of their own practice and professional development (Durrant 2019). Empowering lecturers to implement innovative approaches fosters a culture of continuous improvement, which is beneficial for students' learning experiences (Huat and Shunmugam 2021; Martin and Dowson 2009; Van Vijfeijken et al. 2024). Therefore, this study investigates the agentic actions that university lecturers articulate in relation to challenging teaching situations. By focusing on how lecturers describe the ways they shape, negotiate, and adapt their teaching, the study seeks to generate a more precise understanding of teacher agency within the context of university teaching.

Defining teacher agency

Teacher agency is conditional for proactively responding to changing educational difficulties and anticipating and preparing for future challenges and opportunities (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Tao and Gao 2017). Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) argue that teacher agency is demonstrated when teachers can choose from various options in a particular situation and deliberately make decisions that align with the broader goals of the school. Conversely, agency is not demonstrated if teachers have no choices or adhere to routine behavior without considering alternatives. Although the study of Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) was conducted with teachers in

secondary schools, we see the relevance in the university teaching context because university lectures also encounter vibrant and complex educational environments that require adaptive responses (Van Dijk et al. 2023).

Biesta and Tedder (2007) further emphasize the importance of contextual factors in shaping teacher agency. They argue that agency is not an inherent individual trait but rather an attainable outcome that is influenced by the specific contexts in which teachers operate. Thus, teacher agency is not a fixed characteristic but rather a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by individual capacities, past experiences, future aspirations, and contextual conditions (Biesta and Tedder 2007; Priestley et al. 2012).

Building on this understanding, Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) developed the ecological approach to agency, which suggests that agency is enabled or constrained as part of teachers' active involvement within their specific professional contexts. This understanding underscores teachers' capacity to bring about change within their professional settings by strategically navigating and leveraging their contextual environment through deliberate actions to achieve their objectives. In other words, teachers are often faced with situations in or outside the classroom in which they constantly consider whether or not to adapt their lessons and teaching. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) provide a framework for understanding how these considerations are achieved, later refined by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015), that includes three dimensions: *iterational*, *projective*, and *practical-evaluative*. The iterational dimension emphasizes the influence of past experiences on teachers' agency. It recognizes that teachers' actions and decisions are often shaped by their previous encounters. The projective dimension focuses on teachers' future-oriented aspirations. It highlights the importance of setting goals and envisioning desired outcomes to guide teacher agency. Lastly, the practical-evaluative dimension represents the present, emphasizing teachers' capacity to make practical and deliberate judgments among alternative possible actions and available resources. Consequently, the outcome of the dynamic interaction among these dimensions is that teachers make deliberate, context-sensitive choices. Teacher agency arises from the interplay between past experiences, future aspirations, and present evaluations, which collectively influence the actions teachers take. The ecological model provides a valuable lens to understand these outcomes, framing them as the result of complex, contextually situated interactions.

The ecological approach to teacher agency is an acknowledged and comprehensive theoretical model that has been used in both quantitative (e.g. Ghiasvand, Jahanbakhsh, and Sharifpour 2023; Leijen, Pedaste, and Lepp 2020) and qualitative (e.g. Pantić 2015; Rushton and Bird 2024) research to understand the formation of teacher agency shaped by the three temporal dimensions: past, present and future. However, research has not yet considered how lecturers at universities enact agentic actions using the ecological approach. Previous studies have focused primarily on teachers in secondary school and teacher education settings, leaving a gap in the literature as to how university lecturers demonstrate agency in their teaching practice. This gap highlights the need for further exploration of how university lecturers navigate and enact teacher agency within the ecological model, offering new insights for understanding teacher agency, substantiated from a university context.

By eliciting lecturers' agentic actions, we can provide practical, empirically based insights to explore and potentially extend the applicability of Priestley and colleagues' (2015) theoretical model of teacher agency. In short, we give substance to the model from a university teaching perspective by researching lecturers' agentic actions. To explore agentic actions, it makes sense to focus on the present, i.e. the practical-evaluative dimension, since actions are always an interplay between the agent (with its histories and goals) and the present context (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Agentic actions

A recent development in literature on human agency is the rising attention for teacher agency in school settings (e.g. Cong-Lem 2021; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). A common thread

among agency theories from their inception to the present is the notion that agentic behavior involves intentional and deliberate actions taken by individuals to achieve specific outcomes (e.g. Bandura 2001; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Engeström 2011). To illustrate, Vygotsky (as cited in Engeström 2011, 605) described these intentional actions as follows:

> The person, using the power of things or stimuli, controls his own behavior through them, grouping them, putting them together, sorting them. In other words, the great uniqueness of the will consists of man having no power over his own behavior other than the power that things have over his behavior. But man subjects to himself the power of things over behavior, makes them serve his own purposes and controls that power as he wants. He changes the environment with the external activity and in this way affects his own behavior, subjecting it to his own authority.

The passage lays the foundation for understanding the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. This dimension emphasizes how individuals, through their interactions with the environment, actively shape their behavior. In the context of teacher agency in university, this involves examining how lecturers navigate and influence their teaching environment to achieve desired outcomes. The practical-evaluative dimension thus offers insights into the dynamic interaction between individuals and their contexts (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015).

Examining teacher agency through this lens of the practical-evaluative dimension reveals the complexities and nuances of how lecturers demonstrate agency. Lecturers are not passive recipients of external influences, but rather active participants who constantly evaluate and adjust their actions based on the context. This dynamic interaction involves a constant interplay between the lecturers' intentions and the constraints or opportunities provided by the environment (Cong-Lem 2024). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define the practical-evaluative dimension as the capacity to make judgments and decisions, given three elements which describe how people act: *cultural, structural,* and *material*. The cultural element of the practical-evaluative dimension involves the symbolic patterns and discourses that guide individuals' normative commitments and understandings of their environment. The structural element pertains to the broader institutional structures that provide constraints and opportunities for action. The material element involves the tangible resources and physical conditions that impact individuals' capacities to make and execute judgments (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015).

Furthermore, as Leijen, Pedaste, and Lepp (2020) describe, it is the evaluation of a professional situation – through the lens of cultural, structural, and material elements – that results in agentic actions. In the current study, we shared short written scenarios with lecturers that addressed aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension, with each scenario highlighting how lecturers can actively and deliberately shape their responses to various situations. To understand how lecturers express agentic actions across the three elements of the practical-evaluative dimension, we will develop a typology of actions. This typology will help categorize and better understand the various ways lecturers demonstrate agency, providing a structured framework for understanding how teacher agency in universities is achieved.

Current study

The current study focuses on teaching practices in universities. In line with the ecological approach to teacher agency, we conceptualize teaching as a professional space where lecturers encounter challenges that require them to make deliberate, context-sensitive choices. Our focus is on how lecturers articulate intended agentic actions in challenging situations related to decision-making within university teaching practices. By concentrating on teaching as a specific context, the study aims to provide a sharper lens for identifying and categorizing agentic actions. This focus allows us to capture the ways lecturers actively shape their teaching practices in challenging situations and refine the ecological approach to teacher agency from the perspective of university teaching. The guiding research question is: What agentic actions do university lecturers articulate in the context of teaching?

Method

This scenario-based research design utilizes realistic, context-specific scenarios to explore how participants respond to and engage with complex situations. Scenario-based research is particularly useful in examining dynamic processes, such as lecturers' agentic actions, because it immerses participants in vivid, authentic decision-making contexts that mirror real-life university teaching challenges (Ghamrawi, Shal, and Ghamrawi 2025; Skilling and Stylianides 2020). The study utilizes a set of 23 scenarios previously developed and validated by Kusters et al. (2024). The 23 topics of the scenarios consisted of a short outline of a situation, between 70 and 170 words, based on real-life challenges of lecturers in their teaching practice. The topics are brief but comprehensive enough that lecturers are able to identify with them. This scenario-based approach allows us to investigate how lecturers articulate teacher agency by describing informed and deliberate choices in response to challenging teaching situations. In the interviews, the lecturers describe their intended actions, which serve as an indicator of how they conceive exercising agency in navigating complex teaching situations.

Participants

The participants in this study were 30 lecturers working in 9 different research-intensive universities across the Netherlands. We used purposive, criterion-based sampling to recruit experienced lecturers from research-intensive universities. The lecturers were selected based on their expertise in their respective fields and their experience in teaching. We deliberately focused on lecturers with at least five years of teaching experience to ensure that participants had substantial familiarity with the complexities of university teaching and could draw on a breadth of professional experience when responding to the scenarios. All participants were tenured lecturers with PhD degrees, and their activities involved lecturing or teaching small group seminars to students, research, administrative responsibilities, and, for participants from the Faculty of Medicine, this also included patient care (see Table 1).

This study obtained ethical approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee [anonymized for peer review]. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study. The participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time until four weeks after the data collection. Any identifiable information was anonymized during the data analysis and reporting stages to protect the participants' privacy.

Data collection and procedure

Data collection involved conducting scenario-based interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted individually, with 25 interviews conducted in person and the remaining 5 online at the participant's request. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted a maximum of 60 min.

Table 1. Participants' position within the faculty.

Faculty	Social and Behavioral Sciences *n*	Law *n*	Business and Society *n*	Science *n*	Medicine and Health *n*	Full sample *n*
Position						
Assistant prof.	8	2	2	1	–	**13**
Associate prof.	–	3	2	–	–	**5**
Full prof.	2	2	2	–	–	**6**
Postdoc.	2	–	–	1	–	**3**
Other	–	–	–	–	3	**3**
Total	**12**	**7**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**30**

Note. $N = 30$. Faculty of Medicine and Health has different designations for academic positions.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written consent before the interview began.

Before the interview sessions, a set of 23 scenarios (adopted from Kusters et al. 2024) was sent to the participants, each time in random order to avoid order bias in the selection of scenarios. Participants were asked to select five scenarios they most identified with, ensuring engagement with the scenarios prior to the interview. During the interview session, participants were presented with these scenarios. Each interview, conducted by the first author, covered two to five scenarios.

During the interview, the interviewer first checked with the participants whether the five scenarios were still relevant and whether they could identify with the scenario. Second, participants read the scenario aloud. Then, participants listed all the solutions they could think of and explained why certain solutions were or were not appropriate. This step was crucial for extracting the *deliberations* that led to intended *action*. Finally, if no more solutions and considerations were mentioned, a new scenario was presented. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent. The audio recordings were later transcribed verbatim, capturing the participants' responses and discussions in detail.

Data analysis

The unit of analysis was the lecturers' intended action statements in response to the scenarios. We treated these intended action statements as the primary data segments for coding, independent of the particular scenario in which they were elicited or the identity of the lecturer. This response-centered approach aligns with vignette-based methodology, where the analytical focus lies on the kinds of actions participants articulate, rather than on the distribution of responses across scenarios or individuals (cf. Skilling and Stylianides 2020).

The analyses consisted of a deductive phase to assign agentic actions to the practical-evaluative dimension, followed by an inductive phase to typify agentic actions (see Figure 1). The interviews were coded by the first author in consultation with the other authors. Any discrepancies were discussed with the research team until consensus was reached.

Three elements of agentic actions

In the initial phase of the analysis, the transcriptions of the interviews were thoroughly read to gain an overall understanding of the data. Subsequently, a coding scheme was developed to identify and label agentic actions in the participants' responses. The coding scheme focused on identifying actions that demonstrated agency according to the definition of Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015), where individuals saw multiple options to act and could deliberately weigh which option was most appropriate given the scenario. The coding scheme categorized agentic actions into three elements that align with the practical-evaluative dimension: the cultural element consisted of actions related to the norms, values, and beliefs that guide lecturers' actions. The structural element entails actions influenced by social structures, roles, and organizational aspects. Finally, the material element consisted of actions involving the use of tangible resources or environmental factors (see Table 2), resulting in a list of 96 labels distributed over the three elements.

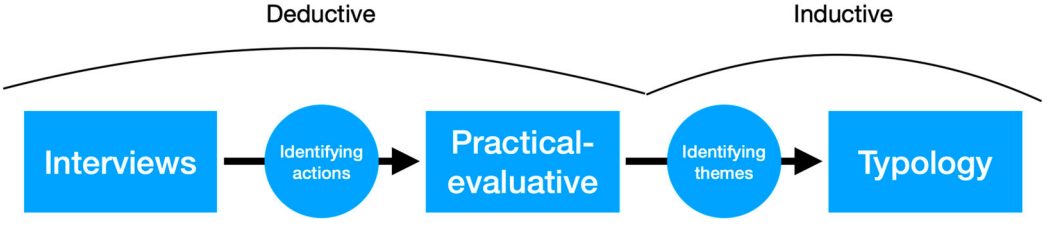

Figure 1. Deductive and inductive phases of analyses.

Table 2. Definitions of practical-evaluative elements.

Practical-evaluative dimension	Initial definition (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015)	Example from our data
Cultural	Ways of speaking and thinking, of ideas, values, beliefs, discourse and language, and encompass both inner and outer dialogue.	'When a colleague depends on me, make sure the work is done in such a way that the colleague is not disturbed.'
Structural	The social structures and relationships, roles, power and trust that contribute to the achievement of agency.	'Completing formalities takes extra time. I follow the protocol anyway because it doesn't take as much time, even if colleagues think otherwise.'
Material	The resources that promote or hinder agency and the wider physical environment in and through which agency is achieved.	'The amount of assignments that require feedback and the amount of feedback students receive is getting out of hand and therefore I critically assess what tasks are needed.'

Developing a typology of agentic actions

After identifying the 96 agentic actions, the data analysis involved conducting reflexive thematic analysis to categorize these actions in order to explore overarching themes (Braun and Clarke 2021). This analysis phase involved an iterative process of reading and rereading the labels and transcripts. The authors of this paper met regularly to discuss and refine the coding scheme and to ensure consistency in the coding process. The analysis involved identifying recurring themes in the second phase that emerged from the analysis in the first phase. The thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach. Initially, 96 labels were identified and categorized into three elements. The identified themes resulting from the reflexive thematic analysis of the labels formed the typology of agentic actions based on the three elements.

Results

In this study, we labeled agentic actions taken by lecturers (i.e. what lecturers stated they would do in a certain scenario) and categorized them into the three elements of the practical-evaluative dimension: cultural, structural, and material, based on the framework established by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015). These elements include the different actions lecturers apply to navigate between complex aspects of teaching practice. We identified three types of agentic actions: Leading, Accommodating, and Supporting. These categories are intended as overarching types rather than rigid or exhaustive groupings. We acknowledge that some actions could conceptually fit more than one type, reflecting the dynamic and context-dependent nature of teacher agency. In Table 3, the 96 labels distributed over the three elements and categorized into three types of agentic actions are shown. In the description of the results that follow below the table, we have tried to reflect the labels (i.e. lecturers' intended actions) as much as possible to demonstrate how individual actions belong to one of the elements.

Leading

Actions within the Leading category are characterized by taking control, leading, or making assertive decisions. These actions often involve directing others or setting standards to achieve specific goals.

Cultural

The cultural element of Leading was demonstrated when addressing colleagues directly and setting behavioral boundaries to create clear communication and expectations. To illustrate, Lecturer 1 addressed colleagues directly, set behavioral boundaries, and shared approaches to teaching to inspire others:

> Lecturer 1: ' … present the way you teach your own course format as a model. Change so that you start convincing that if colleagues then tailor their teaching to your approach, they will also do it that way, that you will get a

Table 3. Labels categorized into elements and types of actions.

	Leading *Actions characterized by taking control, leading, or making assertive decisions, often directing others or setting standards.*	**Accommodating** *Actions involve accommodating, or prioritizing others' needs and ideas over one's own.*	**Supporting** *Actions are supportive, encouraging, or constructive, promoting a conducive and collaborative environment.*
Cultural	• Addressing the colleague directly • Setting behavioral boundaries • Balancing rigor and accessibility with students • Communicating expectations • Communicating decision-making process and involving community groups	• Accommodating the student • Acknowledging the situation • Asking clarifications from students • Listening to the student's concerns • Seeking help from experiencers • Seeking help from colleagues • Resolving arguments, reducing tension • Evaluating the situation for concerns of problems • Taking responsibility for tasks with colleagues	• Being empathetic towards students • Encouraging academic attitude • Encouraging attendance • Encouraging mutual respect • Developing personal relationships with students • Collaborating in curriculum development • Committing to personal improvement • Providing support • Supporting interaction among students • Communicating guidelines clearly • Discussing with colleagues and community groups • Engaging with colleagues and students • Using conflict situation as learning opportunity
Structural	• Advocating for policy changes • Initiating a redesign of policy • Planning strategically to comply with deadlines • Redesigning policies and procedures • Reducing bureaucracy • Negotiating working hours and conditions • Participating in decision-making • Highlighting bureaucratic processes perceived as negative • Reporting problems to authorities • Adapting teaching to own needs • Implementing structured workload management • Coordinating meetings • Attributing problems to a supervisor • Delegating to reduce work pressure	• Adjusting deadlines for students • Arranging alternative dates to accommodate student • Simplifying assessment procedures • Accepting that the job includes fewer desirable tasks • Following protocol	• Focusing on positive aspects of change • Informing authorities concerning a conflict • Approaching the exam committee for guidance
Material	• Applying for grants to support enable innovation • Developing a new study program • Innovating own course • Redesigning a program • Redeveloping modules • Implementing strategies to reduce workload • Prioritizing feedback tasks • Balancing tasks to actively managing workload • Being able to say 'no' • Intervening to solve conflict • Being creative with interpreting the rules • Limiting appointments • Scheduling check-ins	• Adapting teaching methods so that lecture can continue • Adjusting the teaching method based on preparation • Adjusting the lecture • Being flexible in addressing students' questions • Coordinating with different groups • Discussion to resolve conflict between groups • Adjusting time investment • Arrive early to be prepared for unexpected problems • Deviating from the rules to accommodate student	• Asking students for help • Engaging students with teaching methods • Improvising so that lecture can continue

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Leading *Actions characterized by taking control, leading, or making assertive decisions, often directing others or setting standards.*	**Accommodating** *Actions involve accommodating, or prioritizing others' needs and ideas over one's own.*	**Supporting** *Actions are supportive, encouraging, or constructive, promoting a conducive and collaborative environment.*
• Scheduling feedback • Scheduling time to prepare teaching • Simplifying assessment procedures • Giving more responsibilities to students • Having backup plans to avoid failure • Implementing peer learning • Enhancing teaching through personal growth • Investing in professional development • Making own schedules • Integrating preparatory sessions • Integrating reading assignments into assessable tasks • Summarizing articles as a group activity • Taking a management course • Making changes to reduce administrative overload	• Implementing various teaching methods • Using appropriate methods • Using alternative resources • Using digital tools • Using online platforms • Using reminders via learning platforms • Utilizing existing materials • Utilizing technology	

very good teaching program. And you can do that by sharing success experiences, just in the corridor or at lunch, and then boasting very positive student evaluations and telling them all what you're doing. So trying to inspire and enthuse colleagues to go your way.'

Thus, by openly sharing successful teaching experiences with colleagues in informal settings, lecturers can inspire others to adopt similar approaches. Other ways in which the cultural element of Leading was demonstrated were through clear communication and expectations. Lecturers encouraged transparent dialogue and created an environment where norms were clearly defined and shared. All in all, this type of actions balanced academic rigor with inclusiveness, reflected the university's values and ensured transparency, openness and shared goals within the educational environment.

Structural

The structural element of Leading was reflected in a proactive approach to initiate changes, for instance, by advocating for policy changes and initiating policy redesign. For example, Lecturer 2 advocated for policy changes by using their position within the organization to influence institutional procedures:

Lecturer 2: 'You can use your power in the organization by, for example, putting the problem of inconsistency in the program on the agenda in the education committee to make sure that, yes, a solution must be found for this, and pointing this out in the teachers' consultation, that you feel that there are inconsistencies, that this bothers you, and that you start thinking with colleagues about what we are going to do about this.'

This proactive approach to leadership may also involve actions such as initiating policy redesigns, reducing bureaucracy, and strategically planning to meet deadlines. Reporting issues and participating in decision-making processes are key elements in leading structural change, ensuring institutional efficiency and better working conditions.

Material

The material element of Leading was demonstrated by optimizing teaching practices through innovation, workload management, personal and professional development, and strategic adjustments

to reduce administrative burdens. Leading through the material element was illustrative by a quote from Lecturer 3 when they applied for grants to secure resources, thereby reducing workload and supporting innovation:

> Lecturer 3: 'The resources you [as a lecturer] have are not that great, but you can, for example, try to get more money by writing grant applications yourself so you can hire student assistants from that to reduce the workload.'

This material element was also shown when Lecturers took initiative by redesigning study programs, enhancing educational materials, and implementing effective workload management. This proactive leadership on the material aspect may thus function as an important driver for resource management and ensures continuous improvement in the learning environment.

Accommodating

Accommodating actions involve prioritizing others' needs and ideas, often over one's own. These actions are geared towards creating a supportive and inclusive environment for students and colleagues.

Cultural

The cultural element of Accommodating was demonstrated when the lecturer acknowledged the student's situation and showed sensitivity to the students' cultural and personal backgrounds. Cultural accommodating was demonstrated when Lecturer 4 showed sensitivity to the needs of colleagues, providing feedback in a timely manner to support their progress:

> Lecturer 4: 'If I saw [feedback] as an administrative task, a kind of bureaucratic obligation, I would be more likely to put it off or not do it at all … However, if a colleague really needs the feedback to move on, I would feel guilty for holding up that colleague.'

These culturally Accommodating actions reflect a commitment to empathy and support in the workplace, creating an environment where colleagues' needs are prioritized over personal convenience, thereby fostering collaboration and shared responsibility.

Structural

The structural element of Accommodating was concerned with adapting institutional structures by accommodating individual needs through flexible deadlines, alternative arrangements, and adjustments to ensure inclusivity and support for colleagues and students. Structural accommodation was demonstrated by Lecturer 5 when they adjusted deadlines for students with legitimate reasons, even when institutional rules suggested otherwise:

> Lecturer 5: 'If you notice that there is something wrong with that student and he has not shown up twice … then according to the rules, you should not give him a grade. But if there really is something, I think you just shift the deadline for that student.'

This flexibility in adjusting structural policies showcases a leadership approach that prioritizes student well-being and fairness while navigating institutional constraints. All in all, structural accommodating actions by lecturers involve making intentional adjustments to institutional structures and practices to meet the diverse needs of students. These actions aim to balance institutional expectations with individual circumstances, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity while maintaining educational standards, even if it requires thoughtful deviation from institutional guidelines.

Material

The material element of Accommodating, includes being flexible in addressing students' questions, using appropriate methods, and adapting material resources to better suit the needs of the classroom. Lecturer 6 formulated this as follows:

> Lecturer 6: 'Sometimes that leads to me giving up my own research time to be there for that student, because after all, education takes priority.'

This type of action was illustrative of lecturers prioritizing education by adjusting their own research time to be available for students. By adapting resources, seeking help to share responsibilities, and using digital tools, lecturers ensure that material and time constraints are managed to benefit the students, showcasing a flexible and supportive teaching environment.

Supporting

Supporting actions are those that encourage, construct, and promote a healthy and collaborative environment. These actions are aimed at fostering a supportive culture among students and colleagues.

Cultural

The cultural element of Supporting includes being empathetic to students and encouraging an academic attitude, which contributes to a supportive environment. Supporting culturally was illustrated by Lecturer 7, who emphasized empathy and a commitment to creating a positive learning environment for students, even within personal and academic boundaries:

> Lecturer 7: 'If it's an academically motivated problem, it's much easier for us to intervene to help students … We can give advice and offer empathy, but yes, I think there are limits to how much you can do, but you do what you can to create a fine learning environment for students.'

This demonstrates a leadership approach that fosters mutual respect, personal relationships, and academic encouragement, creating a collaborative and empathetic educational environment. Ultimately, the cultural element of supporting students through empathy and academic encouragement fosters a collaborative learning environment where lecturers value personal relationships.

Structural

The structural element of Supporting focus on fostering a positive and efficient organizational environment. Structural support was demonstrated by Lecturer 8, who advocated for students by arranging additional exam opportunities when necessary, showing flexibility in navigating institutional policies:

> Lecturer 8: 'If I were responsible for that exam, yes, I would arrange a student's third attempt. Officially, I believe that has to go through the exam committee, but I would have no problem arranging that on my own.'

This action illustrates a commitment to supporting students by ensuring fair access to assessments and resolving institutional challenges for student success. In summary, the structural element of supporting students emphasizes creating a flexible environment where lecturers actively navigate institutional policies to pursue a supportive learning environment.

Material

The material element of Supporting refers to collaboration and adaptability to enhance the educational process. Material support was demonstrated by Lecturer 9, who adapted their teaching methods to ensure effective learning continued despite time constraints:

> Lecturer 9: 'So I see myself then just shifting didactics to make that impact on those students optimal.'

By improvising and adapting instructional methods, lecturers create a dynamic and responsive learning environment, ensuring that material resources and time are utilized effectively to support students' learning experiences. Ultimately, materially supporting students involves collaboration and adaptability, where lecturers adjust teaching methods and optimize resources to create an effective learning environment.

Discussion

Typology of agentic actions

With this study, we aimed to empirically investigate how university lecturers described their agentic actions in response to challenging teaching scenarios, drawing on Priestley and colleagues' (2015) theoretical ecological model. The findings of this study help clarify the complexities of teacher agency within the university context, reinforcing and extending the theoretical perspectives presented by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) and Biesta and Tedder (2007). The guiding research question was: What agentic actions do university lecturers articulate in the context of teaching? This resulted in a typology of agentic actions into Leading, Accommodating, and Supporting across the cultural, structural, and material elements of the practical-evaluative dimension, providing a nuanced understanding of how lecturers navigate and shape their teaching environments. It is important to note that this typology captures the modes of agency that lecturers articulated in their intended actions. In practice, lecturers may also refrain from acting agentically – for example, by following, resisting, or struggling – yet our analytical focus was on deliberate, constructive responses to challenging teaching situations.

The complexity of understanding and investigating teacher agency arises from the various dimensions that influence how lecturers exercise their agency (Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust 2015). Teacher agency is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but rather involves a dynamic interplay of cultural, structural, and material factors, which are informed by the past experiences and aspirations of individuals. This complexity is reflected in the diverse ways lecturers navigate their roles and responsibilities. For instance, a lecturer might take a leading role in one context to set an example for students, while in another context, the same lecturer might choose to support or accommodate students instead. Various factors, including the specific needs of the student group, the educational setting, and the broader institutional environment influence the decision to lead, accommodate, or support. Therefore, we stress that the typology presented in this study – Leading, Accommodating, and Supporting – should be understood as non-hierarchical and non-normative. This means that these categories are not ranked or evaluated in terms of their effectiveness or desirability. Instead, they represent different modes of agentic action that lecturers might employ based on the context.

Leading actions

The Leading actions observed in this study align with the idea that proactive and assertive actions are important for increasing a culture in which the participation of lecturers in decision-making and taking responsibility for enhancing teaching practice is supported. These findings align closely with the emphasis on transformational and empowering leadership styles (Koeslag-Kreunen et al. 2020). Proactive and assertive actions are essential components of transformational leadership, which Koeslag-Kreunen and colleagues (2020) identify as particularly effective in supporting team learning behaviors. Transformational leadership, characterized by challenging the status quo and stimulating intellectual engagement, encourages lecturers to actively participate in decision-making and take responsibility for enhancing teaching practices (Ghamrawi, Shal, and Ghamrawi 2024). These actions, particularly within the cultural element, highlight the importance of clear communication and inclusive decision-making processes. This supports the notion that lecturers who engage in assertive leadership can foster an environment of openness and transparency, ultimately contributing to a respectful and structured teaching atmosphere (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). Furthermore, the structural and material elements of Leading actions demonstrate lecturers' capacity to influence and improve institutional policies and resource management. This proactive approach emphasizes the importance of strategic planning and resource allocation in facilitating innovative teaching practices (Ghiasvand, Jahanbakhsh, and Sharifpour 2023).

Accommodating actions

Accommodating actions which prioritize the needs of others aligns with the dynamic and context-dependent nature of teacher agency. This approach involves adapting to the ever-changing classroom environment and student needs, as described by Biesta and Tedder (2007). These accommodating actions underscore the importance of empathy, flexibility, and adaptability in addressing students' diverse needs and fostering an inclusive educational environment (Green et al. 2020). By adjusting deadlines, simplifying assessments, and integrating flexible teaching methods, lecturers demonstrate a commitment to creating an inclusive and responsive learning experience (Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011).

This finding is interesting because accommodating actions may promote inclusive education. The review study by Miller et al. (2020) found that teachers employed various instructional strategies and differentiation techniques to support inclusive education. These strategies included flexible grouping, peer mentoring, and tailored curricular assistance, which are similar to the accommodating actions of adjusting deadlines and simplifying assessments. By implementing these approaches, educators can ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, can access and engage meaningfully with the curriculum (Miller et al. 2020).

Moreover, accommodating actions can have a profound impact on student engagement and motivation (Martin and Dowson 2009). When students perceive that their individual needs are acknowledged and addressed, they are more likely to feel valued within the educational setting. This can lead to increased participation and engagement in their learning, contributing to a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment. The study by Martin and Dowson (2009) supports this by emphasizing that relationships and care provided by teachers, are central to student motivation and engagement. In particular, students' sense of being respected and valued by teachers is consistently linked to higher motivation and achievement.

Supporting actions

Supporting actions aimed at fostering a collaborative and conducive environment highlight the critical role of beliefs in teaching and learning practices (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). Namely, cultivating such an environment involves encouraging reflective practice among lecturers, which helps them align their teaching methods with their beliefs and effectively support student learning. By investing in professional development and encouraging active participation, lecturers create an environment conducive to continuous improvement and innovation (Gokpinar-Shelton and Pike 2022). In addition, Martin and Dowson (2009) noted that teacher support, particularly in supporting student autonomy, enhances curiosity, and a desire for challenge.

The relevance of this finding can be found in (derivatives of) Problem-Based Learning (PBL) education, where lecturers' supportive actions are an important feature, as lecturers function as facilitators of learning more than dispensing knowledge (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). PBL is a student-centered teaching approach that emphasizes real-world problem-solving, self-regulation, and teamwork. At some Dutch universities, PBL is used as a comprehensive teaching method, while at all universities, PBL is incorporated into smaller teaching activities, such as seminars, in addition to large-scale lectures. PBL requires students to engage deeply with the material, collaborate with peers, and actively participate in their learning process. Consequently, lecturers should use their agency to take on their supportive role because without adequate support from lecturers, students might struggle with the self-directed nature of PBL. To illustrate, Amerstorfer and Von Münster-Kistner (2021) found that positive student-teacher relationships in PBL foster a relaxed learning environment where students feel respected and valued. The findings from our study, therefore, align with and extend existing literature, reinforcing the importance of supporting actions in fostering a collaborative and healthy educational environment.

Implications for theory and practice

The findings of this study empirically substantiate the ecological model of teacher agency by demonstrating how lecturers' articulated intended actions are shaped by and, in turn, shape their professional contexts. This study underscores the ecological model's utility as an analytical framework for examining teacher agency within university settings. Our results elucidate the constitution of teacher agency through the elements of the practical-evaluative dimension, revealing how these elements are manifested in the ways lecturers describe responding to scenarios that call for agency. Thus, in addition to understanding *what constitutes* teacher agency, it is now also evident *how* actions are manifested in scenarios that call for agency.

Furthermore, the typology of agentic actions offers insights into how lecturers navigate and shape their teaching environments. This typology can assist universities tailor their support systems and professional development programs more effectively, by either strengthening agentic actions that are already present or improving agentic actions that should be developed, both aimed at enhancing the overall educational experience. Namely, agentic lecturers are able to set an example or norm (Leading), put aside their self-interest for a wider purpose (Accommodating), or provide others with an enjoyable learning experience (Supporting). We describe below implications for policymakers, peers, and individual lecturers.

For policymakers, insights from this typology can help implement mentoring programs where experienced lecturers guide newer faculty members in developing their teaching strategies. Such mentorship initiatives can foster a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation, ensuring that lecturers are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students. Moreover, professional conversations within universities should be more about *how* and *why* lecturers participate in practices, rather than *what* they do. *What* reduces efforts to quantitative statistics, while *how* and *why* invite reflection and development. For peers, understanding agentic actions can promote a collaborative culture where different teaching strategies are shared and supported. Departments could, for example, establish regular peer-led workshops where lecturers demonstrate and discuss their leading, accommodating, or supporting strategies. These workshops can serve as platforms for sharing best practices, fostering innovation, and building a community of practice among educators. Finally, individual lecturers benefit significantly by reflecting on their own practices and seeking targeted professional development opportunities. By understanding their typology of agentic actions, lecturers can adapt their methods to be more effective in diverse situations. For example, a lecturer might attend a seminar on accommodating diverse student needs and then apply these strategies to better support students with varying learning styles. As Rushton and Bird (2024) demonstrated in the context of secondary education, teacher agency can be cultivated when teachers recognize and experience spaces for professional learning and development. Therefore, our typology, which categorizes three different types of articulated intended actions, helps illustrate how actions can be expressed and developed. Overall, applying the typology of agentic actions could provide insights which support the creation of more adaptive, supportive, and effective teaching environments in universities.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, we concentrated particularly on the practical-evaluative dimension because our aim was to characterize agentic actions. The focus on lecturers' actions in the present limits the results in information about the iterational and projective dimensions. Our focus on actions in the present provides a nuanced understanding of how lecturers navigate their teaching environments, demonstrating that agentic actions are context-dependent and reflective of the complexities inherent in teaching. However, given the three dimensions of the ecological model of teacher agency, actions are a result of past experiences and future aspirations of individuals. These dimensions (i.e. the iterational and the projective) are implicitly

reflected in the participants' responses but not explicitly inquired in our study. Therefore, now that we have established a typology of actions, we recommend that future research incorporate a broader approach that collects data on the iterational and projective dimensions, examining how different professional backgrounds and aspirations influence lecturer practices. Exploring how past experiences and future goals impact lecturers' actions will further enhance our understanding of the complexities involved in teacher agency.

Second, our study explored *intended* actions based on predetermined scenarios rather than *observing* real-life actions. Although this approach effectively exposed lecturers to challenging situations and allowed us to investigate lecturers' responses, it is important to recognize that intended actions may differ from actual practices. We therefore suggest that future research should consider using this typology of intended actions in observing real-life agentic actions to validate the typology in the teaching practice.

Third, because we adopted a response-centered approach, consistent with vignette-based methodology, our analysis concentrated on the types of actions articulated rather than on who produced them or in which scenario. This choice allowed us to develop a typology of agentic actions that encompasses different teaching situations. However, it also limited our ability to examine whether particular action types are more prevalent in specific teaching contexts. Future research could validate and extend our typology by systematically comparing the distribution of action types across different teaching settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides an understanding of the agentic actions lecturers demonstrate to navigate challenging teaching situations. We developed a typology of agentic actions in university teaching by categorizing lecturers' actions following the practical-evaluative dimension of the ecological model (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). This typology comprises Leading, Accommodating, and Supporting actions. The findings highlight how lecturers actively foster a supportive culture, promote collaboration, innovate courses, and address systemic constraints. The participants in our study demonstrated their agency in different ways to cope with challenging situations, with the aim of improving their teaching practice. This proactive stance enables them to create a more engaging and effective learning environment despite systemic pressures. Therefore, we argue that lecturers should be assessed, valued, and rewarded based on their teacher agency rather than on standardized student evaluations, which, as Stroebe (2020) argues, 'encourage poor teaching.' Furthermore, by incorporating our typology into the ecological model, we provide a clearer framework to identify and understand the various ways lecturers exercise their teacher agency. This, in turn, can guide universities in recognizing and fostering the true impact of lecturers' efforts on student learning and development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical Approval

Approval from ICLON Research Ethics Committee. Project number: IREC_ICLON 2021-02.

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