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Teacher agency in universities: exploring underlying beliefs and agentic orientations when navigating university teaching practices

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ABSTRACT

University lecturers face challenges aligning their teaching beliefs with evolving institutional and societal demands. This study explores how teacher agency – briefly defined as lecturers' capacity to act purposefully to influence their teaching practices – could support this alignment. Semi-structured and scenario-based interviews with 12 participants at a Scottish university revealed three shared agentic orientations related to navigating teaching practices: (1) *Accommodating & Supporting*, (2) *Leading, Accommodating & Supporting*, and (3) *Leading*. These agentic orientations reflect distinct responses to teaching challenges. Within these three groups, lecturers expressed common beliefs about teaching, namely (1) *Inclusivity* and *Equity*, (2) *Responsibility* and *Collaboration*, and (3) *Change* and *Innovation*. The study provides empirical insights into the dynamic, context-dependent nature of teacher agency and shows how lecturers' beliefs support their approach to teaching. It frames teacher agency as a heuristic for understanding the conditions that enable lecturers to act with agency.

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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 pedagogy with personal values and shifting societal expectations has become increasingly demanding (Eggin, Smolentseva, and De Wit 2021). To meet these challenges, lecturers require besides disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical skills, the opportunity to achieve teacher agency, and to align teaching with their pedagogical goals, personal values, and broader institutional objectives, creating coherent and purpose-driven educational spaces (cf. Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). Therefore,

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genuine quality in university teaching is not simply about transmitting knowledge or achieving favorable student evaluations. Rather, genuine quality lies in lecturers' ability to achieve agency, i.e., purposefully and deliberately navigating challenging teaching practices, which is interrelated with beliefs about what constitutes teaching and learning (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). Teacher beliefs are guiding assumptions that shape how lecturers perceive and enact their roles in teaching and learning, acting as a lens through which lecturers interpret information, make pedagogical decisions, and engage with their institutional spaces. As Kanuka, Smith, and Luth (2025) emphasize, beliefs are deeply interwoven with identity and practice, influencing both instructional behavior and openness to change. Research consistently shows that these beliefs impact how lecturers interpret student needs and reconcile external expectations with personal teaching philosophies.

Lecturers' beliefs about teaching and learning at universities are pivotal in deliberately shaping their practices (Norton et al. 2005; Pantić 2015; Yang and Clarke 2018), because beliefs are based on evaluation and judgment (Pajares 1992). These beliefs influence how lecturers navigate and contribute to the teaching and learning process (Nguyen 2020; Samuelowicz and Bain 2001). By reflecting on beliefs and engaging in collaboration, lecturers can create spaces of agency that empower critical adjustment of practices (Laiuori et al. 2025). From a secondary education perspective, Rushton and Bird (2024) have argued that creating and navigating spaces of agency enables teachers to critically examine beliefs and address practice complexities. Spaces of agency emerge through reflection and dialogic interaction, where teachers and lecturers critically examine beliefs and adjust practices to support student-centered learning (Nguyen 2020; Yang and Clarke 2018). It is within these spaces of agency that lecturers reconcile external constraints with internal beliefs, positioning themselves as active agents of pedagogical transformation (Yang and Clarke 2018). Moreover, lecturers' beliefs and ability to exercise teacher agency are pivotal in bridging the gap between educational policies and the lived realities of teaching practices (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the rationale behind lecturers' decision-making processes, particularly how their agentic actions – i.e. deliberate and purposeful actions – are informed by their underlying beliefs.

This study contributes to the literature on teacher agency from a university perspective by empirically exploring how lecturers' beliefs inform lecturers' intentional actions in challenging teaching situations. Building on and extending previous conceptualizations (e.g. Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015), this study provides a more integrated understanding of teacher agency as not incidental or arbitrary, but as a deliberate, value-driven process aimed at improving education. Investigating the relationship between lecturers' agentic actions and professional beliefs is necessary for understanding *how* and *why* university lecturers shape teaching practices (cf. Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2018; Norton et al. 2005). Therefore, to understand how lecturers respond to challenging situations, this study examines the beliefs (the *why*) that underlie agentic actions (the *how*).

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 students, rather than being passive implementers of external policies or curricula (Vähäsantanen, Saari-
nen, and Eteläpelto 2009; Vähäsantanen et al. 2018). The ecological approach to teacher agency, as developed through research on how teachers engaged with curriculum reform in Scottish schools, conceptualizes agency as emerging from the dynamic interaction between teachers and their professional space (Biesta and 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, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). This approach emphasizes that teacher agency develops over time and across different contexts, considering three dimensions: the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 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 practices. The iterative 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 and Mische 1998; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 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. (Forthcoming) 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 iterative) 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.

Underlying beliefs of agentic actions

The underlying beliefs and purposes shaping lecturers' actions are central to understanding agentic actions in teaching. These beliefs are not incidental but are integral to the practices, choices, and motivations that lecturers bring into their work. Following Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015), we conceptualize beliefs as part of the iterational dimension of teacher agency, accumulated experiences, values, and dispositions that shape how lecturers interpret challenges and make pedagogical decisions. Beliefs are not static; beliefs interact with present judgments (practical-evaluative) and future aspirations (projective). Lecturers draw on beliefs to make decisions in the moment while projecting them into future goals. The outcomes of these actions can reinforce, challenge, or reshape beliefs. From an ecological perspective, this dynamic reflects a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment. Lecturers act within spaces and are also shaped by them. Beliefs serve as interpretive frameworks for navigating roles and evolve through reflective practice.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* further emphasizes that beliefs and actions are embedded in institutional structures. Habitus, shaped by socio-cultural background, education, and professional setting (Lefstein et al. 2020), often reinforces existing norms unconsciously. As a result, lecturers' choices are embedded in institutional contexts, policies, structures, and relationships that influence agency and decision-making (Biesta 2022; Gonzales 2015; Vähäsantanen 2014). Reflective practice allows lecturers to connect personal experience with institutional context, deepening their understanding of teaching philosophies (Leijen, Pedaste, and Lepp 2020). Thus, beliefs ground agentic actions and support navigation of the complex realities of university teaching. Teacher agency enables lecturers to respond to institutional demands while shaping their professional identities (Li and Ruppap 2021) and aligning practices with evolving educational expectations.

Furthermore, Samuelowicz and Bain (2001) found that lecturers' practices are guided by deliberate orientations rooted in beliefs and goals, rather than reactive responses. In challenging situations, the connection between beliefs, context, and adaptive strategies becomes apparent (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Li and Ruppap 2021). Studying agentic responses helps reveal how lecturers interpret roles, adapt to expectations, and pursue educational goals. This inquiry integrates experience, orientation, and aspiration into a framework explaining how lecturers navigate their professional landscapes.

In conclusion, understanding teacher agency among university lecturers involves examining their responses to challenges, offering insights into their beliefs, motivations, and strategies. These responses highlight how lecturers make sense of their roles, adapt, and pursue goals. This study adopts an 'emic' perspective, focusing on the lived experiences and meanings lecturers assign to their beliefs and agency within a shared context. Studying a single department enables an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of shared beliefs, avoiding the limitations of external frameworks. The central research question is: *What shared beliefs about teaching do university lecturers express, and how are these beliefs reflected in their agentic orientations?*

Method

The scenario-based interview approach was used to gather responses from lecturers regarding real-life challenging teaching scenarios. A set of 23 scenarios used for this

study was 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 approach is an established qualitative research method and allows participants to engage with hypothetical but realistic scenarios, providing insights into their perceptions, decision-making processes, and behavioral responses in a controlled manner (Skilling and Stylianides 2020). 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 them to be engaged in teaching.

Data collection

Data collection involved conducting interview sessions with 12 participants (Table 1), all from the Education Department 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 min. The semi-structured interview lasted between 20 and 30 min 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 min, explored the participants' responses to various university teaching situations. The interview 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.

Table 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

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. 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.

Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, where transcripts of the collected data were uploaded to organize and categorize the information. We coded the responses to the scenarios using the typology of agentic actions consisting of *Leading*, *Accommodating*, and *Supporting* actions (Kusters et al. [Forthcoming](#)). While we were open to identifying other codes, all responses could ultimately be captured within this typology. Although it provided a useful framework for interpretation, its ambiguity in some cases required careful consultation among the five authors to reach consensus on the categorization of lecturers' responses. After coding each response using the typology of agentic actions, we analyzed the frequency and distribution of each type of action per person to determine which were most common. The analysis showed that lecturers tended to deploy a similar combination of agentic actions in varying situations, which we have identified as *agentic orientation*.

Analysis of agentic orientations

The grouping process of the agentic orientations followed a set of guiding criteria applied in a stepwise and interpretive manner. First, we considered the dominance of a particular agentic action type by examining which actions were used most frequently by each lecturer across three scenarios. For example, if *Leading* actions appeared noticeably more often than *Accommodating* or *Supporting* actions, the lecturer was categorized as having a *Leading* orientation. Alternatively, when two categories appeared in nearly equal proportions while the third was absent or minimal, we interpreted this as a combined orientation, such as *Accommodating & Supporting*. In cases where all three types were used with comparable frequency, this suggested a hybrid *Leading, Accommodating & Supporting* orientation. This approach allowed us to make sense of both quantitative patterns (number of types of action) and qualitative nuances in lecturers' responses. When categorization was not evident (e.g. Amelia and Emma, [Table 2](#)), the five authors discussed these cases to interpret the patterns in light of the surrounding narrative and scenario context, allowing for reflexive judgment and mutual agreement. The following example illustrates how we interpreted patterns of agentic actions: Amelia had nine coded *Leading* actions, two *Accommodating* actions, and no *Supporting* actions. Her responses often described decisive actions in classroom dynamics and direct challenges to institutional constraints. While she occasionally acknowledged others' perspectives (*Accommodating*), her dominant mode was setting the norm, hence she was categorized as *Leading*. In this way, we distinguished three groups of lecturers with similar approaches when navigating challenging teaching practices (see

Table 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

Table 2). These three groups are lecturers with a (1) *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation, (2) *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* orientation, or (3) *Leading* orientation.

Analysis of underlying beliefs

Following the grouping of agentic orientations, we created narrative profiles of around 500 words per participant, providing an overview of their career paths and motivations, and teaching beliefs and aspirations. To investigate the underlying beliefs, we conducted Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun and Clarke 2021) of each group of lecturers with similar agentic orientations. RTA was led by the first author, in regular consultation with the second author and through periodic discussions with the other authors. Coding was conducted in iterative cycles, with early interpretations discussed and refined. Reflexivity was maintained by checking how our own assumptions shaped coding decisions, particularly in relation to lecturers' expressed beliefs. By conducting RTA, we examined the lecturers' narratives to code their beliefs. The codes were developed inductively, guided by the data, and applied to each lecturer's responses. Next, we grouped similar belief codes across individuals within the same agentic orientation, identifying patterns of shared meaning. This process allowed us to develop thematic descriptions of the core beliefs characterizing each group. In this way, we associated underlying beliefs with distinct agentic orientations.

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*.

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, which we named *agentic orientations*.

Three distinct agentic orientations were found. 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 they want to say, and help the student finish the course. So even if that means extending deadlines, offering an extra retake for a paper or whatever. Some university rules 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.

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 initially pursued a master's to teach English and create better opportunities for minority students. But I discovered other ways to teach. The PhD path built my confidence in shaping education in a way that works for both me and my students.

An illustration of why Mary sustains a career in academia:

In the Master of Education program, I aim to broaden my understanding of social justice and decolonizing approaches. I have a deep hunger for new theoretical methodologies that make my courses and 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:

I went to the dean, I got some time and money for lunch and getting people together. And so they could then start talking about what was going well on the program, what needed to happen next in terms of development [...] So, my solution is to get people talking and creating a sense of responsibility and accountability that is very much shared and 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. And whatever I think happens when you have people working together, you also raise expectations because everybody wants to do their best. So for me, as program director, bringing people 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:

To lay the responsibility of the educational process solely at the door of the teacher is also a fundamental, critical, and absolute 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:

We can't release class grades until all grading is complete. I'd have no hesitation in addressing this issue, but it's important to recognize that missed deadlines often stem from pressure. The key is identifying struggles early and offering guidance to help manage workloads.

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.

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. [Forthcoming](#)), we examined the beliefs underlying lecturers' agentic actions, offering insights into their orientations towards 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. It is important to note that while certain beliefs were most commonly associated with specific groups in this study, there were similarities among the groups, indicating a spectrum of beliefs that shaped multiple orientations, rather than each group having unique beliefs. Thus, our aim here is not to present a fixed model of agency based on fixed group distinctions, but to illustrate how and why teacher agency was exercised dynamically, shaped by beliefs in specific situations. In the subsequent discussion, each agentic orientation and the lecturers' underlying beliefs are discussed.

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 (cf. Van Lankveld et al. 2017). 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.

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 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 and 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. Laivuori et al. 2025; Ramsden et al. 2007). This is imperative in current trends in higher education, where collaborative, responsibility-focused teaching practices support transdisciplinary work (Eggins, Smolentseva, and De Wit 2021; Laivuori et al. 2025; Van Baalen, De Groot, and Noordegraaf-Eelens 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, De Groot, and Noordegraaf-Eelens (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.

Leading orientation

Lecturers with a *Leading* orientation articulated beliefs about change and innovation in their teaching practices. This adds to Yang and Clarke’s (2018) findings, highlighting 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. (2018) highlight professional agency as the capacity to influence work, engage in collaborative practices, and continuously negotiate one’s professional identity. Such agency-driven behaviors position lecturers as active agents capable of shaping and adapting reforms to fit specific needs of educational contexts. Through 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, Pedaste, and Lepp (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, lecturers enact and model transformative practices that can advance educational quality. 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.

Implications

Quality teaching goes beyond effective content selection or high student satisfaction scores. It hinges on the lecturers' ability to achieve agency in ways that align with their professional beliefs, institutional goals, and evolving student needs. Our study highlights that agentic actions appear in different forms and stem from lecturers' capacity to shape practices and navigate challenges. Without the ability to make intentional, belief-driven decisions, lecturers risk becoming passive implementers rather than adaptive, engaged professionals. High-quality teaching emerges when lecturers respond deliberately and thoughtfully to challenges, whether by supporting students, leading pedagogical change, or fostering collaboration, depending on situations and the professional judgments of lecturers (Carbone et al. 2019; Laivuori et al. 2025). Therefore, ensuring lecturers are able to achieve agency should be a key priority for universities.

Given these findings, policymakers must rethink how they evaluate and support teaching quality. We argue that institutions should move beyond student evaluations as primary metrics and instead adopt frameworks that assess and cultivate agency-driven teaching. This could include peer and self-reflection, using challenging teaching scenarios (Kusters et al. 2024) to help lecturers refine their teaching philosophy and demonstrate how their agency shapes pedagogical choices. Quality teaching should not be measured solely by student feedback but by how, through reflective practices, lecturers adapt strategies to diverse needs and complex educational contexts.

Lecturers who experiment with new methods or lead educational innovation may initially receive mixed student reactions, but that does not necessarily equate to lower teaching quality (Stroebe 2020). Our findings show that lecturers exercise agency through deliberate, belief-driven choices that may not always align with short-term student preferences but contribute to deeper learning and pedagogical progress. Therefore, assessing lecturers' teaching quality should focus on how deeper educational outcomes are prioritized over immediate student satisfaction, recognizing that the complexity of learning cannot always be reduced to easily measurable preferences (Uher 2022). For instance, those lecturers adopting a *Leading, Accommodating, & Supporting* approach emphasize collaboration, interdisciplinary engagement, and critical thinking skills essential for long-term success but not always reflected in immediate student feedback. Similarly, lecturers with an *Accommodating & Supporting* orientation prioritize inclusivity and adaptability, which may challenge students initially but foster equitable and engaging learning environments. Evaluating teaching quality needs to

move beyond short-term satisfaction metrics to consider how agency-driven approaches shape student development, institutional innovation, and sustainable learning outcomes (Marshall 2022; Stroebe 2020).

Limitations and future research

This small-scale study, conducted within a single institution, benefits from consistent conditions that enhance internal validity. Teacher agency is inherently dynamic and context-dependent, and our focus on a single department offers a nuanced understanding of how lecturers exercised agency in a specific setting. Examining agency within a defined departmental context allowed us to capture subtle, everyday expressions of agency, attributing them primarily to individuals rather than organizational differences across universities or departments. This ‘emic’ perspective offers in-depth insight into how lecturers navigate their specific teaching environments and enact agency. However, the study’s limited geographical and institutional scope restricts the generalizability of its findings. Future research should include multiple institutions and diverse departments to enhance generalizability and validate findings across varied educational settings.

A second limitation is the exclusive focus on one department with an educational orientation, which shapes how teaching and learning are conceptualized and enacted. Department-specific characteristics may have influenced the forms of agency and underlying beliefs observed, as different disciplines have distinct pedagogical traditions, epistemologies, and institutional expectations. Future studies should investigate how lecturers’ agency and beliefs manifest across different academic disciplines.

A third limitation relates to the scenario-based design. Scenarios focused on a single situation, enabling participants to reflect deeply and articulate their beliefs and actions more clearly than they might in real life. While this approach allows for focused exploration of specific aspects of agency, teaching typically involves managing multiple, simultaneous challenges. As such, participants’ responses may have been more deliberate than the responsive decision-making required in actual practice. Observational studies could assess whether scenario-based responses align with real-world behaviors. A mixed-methods approach combining scenarios with classroom observation would offer a richer understanding of how lecturers navigate authentic, complex teaching situations.

To conclude, this study advances the understanding of teacher agency by showing how lecturers’ beliefs serve as both foundation and driver of their agentic actions. Our findings show that teaching depends on the intentional, belief-informed decisions lecturers make as they respond to evolving educational demands. Teacher agency is therefore not a random expression for personal gain, but rather an expression of professional considerations for the benefit of high-quality education. Institutions must therefore rethink support structures and evaluation metrics to empower reflective, adaptive, and innovative teaching grounded in teacher agency.

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