Research paper

University lecturers as change agents: How do they perceive their professional agency?

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ABSTRACT

The delicate balance between teaching and research in university makes professional agency an imperative topic to be studied in teacher development research. The importance of teacher agency for professional development and sustainable educational change is increasingly recognized. This interview study highlights lecturers' experiences regarding ways to influence and develop their teaching practices. Lecturers stated that they would like to do more educational development. Findings also indicate that the concept of professional agency should be adapted to the particular context of university teaching. Our study therefore provides a more specific interpretation of professional agency applied to teaching.

1. Introduction

Educational development in university teaching will be promoted in a more sustainable way if university lecturers take their role as change agents (Priestley et al., 2012). For this, teachers' knowledge and teaching skills are highly important (Evans, 2017, pp. 17−36), but not sufficient (Vähäsantanen, 2015). The ability of teachers to make choices and implement actions to effect change is often referred to as teacher agency (Cong-Lem, 2021). Thus, educational change agents also need strong teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), which can be seen as a particular form of professional agency as defined by Vähäsantanen et al. (2019). In this definition, professional agents are able to 1) influence their work, 2) develop work practices, and 3) negotiate professional identity. However, in current literature the components of 'teacher agency in university teaching' have not yet been described. Consequently, it is unclear what constitutes agency in university and how lecturers can become change agents.

Understanding how components of teacher agency are perceived in a university context will enable us to better support lecturers in taking on a role as educational developers and contributing to teaching quality in their programs. To embark on work with lecturers to promote agency, it first needs to be clear how it is perceived by them. That information is not available in university teaching practice. In this study, we take an 'emic' perspective and study lecturers' perspectives on their own teaching in order to get an in-depth understanding of teacher agency in university.

1.1. Teacher agency

Different conceptualizations of teacher agency have been presented. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) have built on the theoretical traditions in the conceptualization of professional agency at work. They argue that professional agency applies when professionals exercise influence, make choices or defend perspectives that impact their professional identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, 2014).

Toom et al. (2015) note that teacher agency has been identified in the literature as active involvement in designing and directing the professional working environments. This makes teacher agency a key element for continuing professional development and school development. For example, Durrant (2019) defines teacher agency as teachers' ability to prepare and implement educational changes, and to direct and constrain their decision making in educational settings. Related to this definition, Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2017) define agency as the ability to act purposefully, which

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implies will, autonomy, freedom and choice. Applied to teaching practice, agency refers to the ability of teachers to act according to their own goals independently of the rules and directives of their immediate environment.

Biesta et al. (2015) describe agency from an ecological perspective in which they distinguish three dimensions. The 'iteration' dimension reflects that agency should reactivate an individual's past achievements and understandings selectively. The iteration aspect in teacher agency depends on personal beliefs, capacity, and values informed by experiences and daily interactions with colleagues (Leijen et al., 2019). The 'practical evaluative' dimension centers on the present within which a teacher acts out of agency, with the present period relying on past and expected future experiences. The 'projective' dimension projects a teacher's intentions to change their future based on past and present goals. Leijen et al. (2019) emphasize that these include not only professional goals, but also personal long-term goals. These dimensions influence a teacher's capacity and willingness to make desirable professional changes.

The common factor in the above teacher agency definitions is that agentic teachers can propose changes in their work environment. This is manifested in critical involvement in education, and a willingness to develop and influence one's own teaching practice as well as of others, and act from one's own professional identity, beliefs, and values (Biesta et al., 2015; Brodie, 2019, pp. 1—14; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In line with this view, Vähäsantanen et al. (2019) distinguish three components of professional agency (i.e., *influencing at work*, *developing work practices*, and *negotiating professional identity*) in their study of different professional groups in Finland. These components are therefore useful for identifying the agency of academics.

Teacher agency is considered a particular form of professional agency; therefore, it is not clear how these three components are perceived in the university teaching practice. Consequently, we cannot apply the three components proposed by Vähäsantanen et al. (2019) indiscriminately in university teaching practice. We will first need to investigate how these components are perceived by lecturers. Only by knowing how the components are perceived and interpreted can we explore how to support lecturers in building the capacity to adjust or reject recently established procedures and programs. As a result, *lecturers as change agents* can affect outcomes of change initiatives at the national and organizational level (Tao & Gao, 2017). In the next section, we first explain each component and explore the implications for university teaching practice. Then, the context and aim of our study are discussed in more detail.

1.1.1. Influencing at work

Influencing at work consists of two overlapping subcomponents: a) 'decision making at work', and b) 'being heard at work' (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). 'Decision making at work' refers to how decision making takes place and how the work is carried out, regulated and reformatted. Making decisions allows professionals to influence their work, ideally from their own professional beliefs (Biesta et al., 2015; Brodie, 2019, pp. 1—14). In the second subcomponent ('being heard at work'), agency involves expressing ideas that are truly heard and acknowledged. Such actions can include voicing opinions and taking positions on both individual and collaborative work practices. Thus, *influencing at work* includes being able to make decisions to make sure one's own work and opinions are taken into account in the workplace (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). Moreover, Annala et al. (2021) state that agency in curriculum change is supported more if teachers are involved in the decision-making process underlying an innovation; they take on

their role as change agents. Involving teachers in decision making contributes to a stronger sense of agency on their part.

Accordingly, a strong sense of agency could result from being able to make one's own work-related choices and express one's own opinions. The concept of teacher autonomy concerns the extent to which teaching practices are regulated and controlled by actors inside and outside university, including national resources and regulations. Conversely, the concept of teacher agency concerns teachers' ability and desire to build their agency within these frameworks, by adopting and adapting policies to influence specific practices (Priestley et al., 2015). Traditionally, a university has always been a place where teachers operate autonomously, and academics are given and experience a high degree of freedom (Andreescu, 2009). Even so, more than the experience of autonomy may be required for teachers to have a strong sense of influence in their work.

1.1.2. Developing work practices

The component *developing work practices* consists of two overlapping subcomponents: 'participation in shared work practices' and 'transforming work practices' (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). 'Participating in shared work practices' can take the form of commenting and voicing one's opinion in the workplace, as well as collaborating and participating in the organization's development programs. 'Transforming work practices' can refer, for example, to actions that challenge and problematize the current state of work. Or more proactively, to the creation of new ideas and practical solutions to change the way people work. *Developing work practices* thus involves trying out new ideas and proposing ways to improve collective work practices (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019).

Collaboration with colleagues and the conditions under which this occurs are regarded as a necessary requirement for providing stimulating and effective education. For example, Tigelaar et al. (2006) cites that observing colleagues and revisiting lessons together with colleagues are important reflection methods for developing teaching. However, results from Vähäsantanen et al. (2020) indicate that lecturers would like to work together, but that this is sometimes impossible, for example due to time and physical distance. Yet it is important to promote cooperation. Generating routines creates teamwork, allowing professional meanings to be quickly shared across professional practice boundaries (Edwards, 2005).

1.1.3. Negotiating professional identity

Negotiating professional identity consists of two overlapping subcomponents: 'professional identity' and 'constructing a professional career' (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). Professional identity should be understood as professional engagements, beliefs and values, as well as future career perspectives (Van Winkel et al., 2018). Professionals with a sense of professional agency believe that their choices are directed by their own purposes and interests, that they have control over their choices (Ketelaar et al., 2012), and that agency involves acting on one's moral beliefs and aspirations (Biesta et al., 2015; Van Lankveld et al., 2016). As working conditions change, there is a particular need to re-evaluate professional identity in light of changing tasks. Hinostroza-Paredes (2021) states that professionals are expected to manifest agency by acting on their career-related decisions, thus 'constructing a professional career'. Therefore, *negotiating professional identity* includes the ability to act according to one's own beliefs and values and to advance one's career (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019; Van Winkel et al., 2018). Yet identity formation does not depend solely on personal values, but is also influenced by the institutional culture.

The development and formation of teacher identity is highly

dependent on influences from the work environment (Van Lankveld et al., 2016). It is not easy for lecturers to find like-minded people in teaching practice because the organizational structures of a university consist of different departments. Hence, lecturers are more likely to work together because of similar research topics rather than because of a shared vision of teaching. The delicate balance between research and teaching is vital in how colleagues view teaching. For this reason, professional identity is important in agency research, because it could be a link between standing up for one's own values on the one hand and participating in the development processes of the university on the other (Van Lankveld et al., 2016). To maintain dedication on the part of lecturers and allow them to negotiate their professional identity, lecturers need sufficient opportunities to exercise agency within their institution. In an educational organization this means that lecturers have the opportunity to exercise their unique professional vision, effectively restructure the conditions and materials of their work, and express their views on social issues and organizational factors.

1.1.4. Professional agency in the university context

The three components described above are valid for various occupations, including in university, but not yet for lecturers' teaching practices specifically. These components make the concept of professional agency helpful in recognizing agency in work. However, the three components are generic and explained in the light of various contexts. It is, therefore, not possible to say with certainty that the indicators of a generic model can be recognized directly in a specific educational context. Therefore, it is vital to hold the components against the light of university educational practice so that the indicators do justice to the components.

A characteristic of academic work is that lecturers perform multiple roles, i.e., researching, teaching and possibly working in a clinical situation or practice context. In addition, lecturers often deal with administrative or managerial roles. These multiple roles have implications for the meaning of the three components of professional agency, showing that different academic tasks can be strongly interrelated or influence each other (e.g., in terms of time and task priority). Because in this study we want to investigate how lecturers manifest their agency in the teaching practice, we need a deep understanding of teachers' agency in teaching roles. To understand the ways lecturers in practice influence their work, develop their work practices, and negotiate their professional identity, we have taken an 'emic' perspective and investigated lecturers' perspectives on their own teaching and development. The research question is as follows: *Which characteristics of the three components of professional agency do lecturers identify in academic teaching practice?*

2. Method

We conducted an interview study to investigate lecturers' perspectives towards their teacher agency. The three components developed by Vähäsantanen et al. (2019) provided the framework for each interview. Within this general framework, participants were invited to provide their own stories either related to these components or not. This natural interview method combines theory-driven method with a completely open phenomenological approach (cf. Seidman, 2006).

2.1. Participants

Interviews were conducted with 35 lecturers (15 female, 20 male) from the seven departments of a research-intensive university in the Netherlands (see Table 1). The researchers recruited the lecturers through their own professional networks. We wanted to examine perceptions of lecturers with both teaching and research duties. Only lecturers with a PhD were included to exclude a sessional teaching staff who are often hired temporarily to teach exclusively. Two deviating cases were also included: two PhD candidates at the end of their doctoral studies with explicitly defined teaching tasks in their employment contracts. All participants had experience in teaching in small-group settings. In addition, most also had experience giving lectures. During the interviews, they were specifically asked about the context of teaching, i.e., working group or lecture. In order to obtain a representative sample of the population, program coordinators from different faculties were approached with a request to find suitable participants for this study, together with a flyer in digital form briefly explaining the purpose of the project. The coordinator sent a list of interested lecturers to the principal investigator, who then contacted the potential participant. A letter with more information - such as the procedure of the project - was sent along with the initial contact between researcher and lecturer.

This paper focuses on a group of lecturers who have explicit teaching duties in their employment contracts besides their research task, including assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors. Only three lecturers had less than five years of teaching experience, and over sixty percent of the participants had more than ten years' teaching experience (see Table 1).

2.2. Data collection

To explore characteristics of professional agency individual interviews with lecturers were conducted in Dutch. Each interview 1) took place online due to the measures concerning the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) lasted forty to 60 min; and 3) was recorded with the lecturer's permission. Ethical approval was given by the faculty's ethical review committee.

2.3. Interview procedure

In order to extract as much information as possible from the interviews open-ended questions were asked. We asked participants about their experiences in university teaching, being particularly interested in the three components of professional agency. We used three main questions for this purpose: 'How is the decision-making process regarding your teaching tasks?', 'What do you see as your responsibilities as a teacher?', and 'Why are you/are you not explicitly engaged in professional development of yourself in teaching practice?'. Follow-up questions were asked to receive further explanations, clarifications or summary of what has been said. In order to ensure integrity and protect the privacy of interviewees, certain precautions were taken: 1) consent was sought prior to the interview and recording, and interviewees had the right to stop the recording at any time; 2) care was taken to ensure that participants fully understood the purpose of the study, by checking for any ambiguities prior to the interview, and emphasizing that the interview recordings were for research purposes only; 3) the transcripts were treated anonymously — with the exception of the principal investigator — and the names of the participants were replaced with fictitious names in the report; 4) transcripts of the interviews and the results of this study were sent to interviewees on request.

2.4. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed in Atlas. ti by the principal investigator, in collaboration with the other authors. We conducted thematic analyses, based on the framework of

Table 1
Characteristics of participants and occupational status.

Gender and Occupational Status	Archaeology	Governance and Global Affairs	Humanities	Law	Medicine/University Medical Centre	Science	Social and Behavioural Sciences	Full sample	
	n	*n*	*n*	*n*	*n*	*n*	*n*	*n*	*%*
Gender									
Female	2	1	4	1	3	1	3	15	42.9
Male	1	1	4	2	3	9	–	20	57.1
Position									
PhD candidate	–	–	–	–	–	1	1	2	6.7[a]
Assistant prof.	2	2	4	1	dna	7	1	17	56.7[a]
Associate prof.	1	–	4	1	dna	2	–	8	26.7[a]
Full prof.	–	–	–	1	1	–	1	3	10[a]
Experience									
0−5	–	–	–	–	1	1	1	3	8.6
5−10	–	–	2	–	1	5	1	9	25.7
10−15	1	2	–	1	2	3	–	9	25.7
>15	1	–	6	2	2	1	1	13	37.1
Qualification									
UTQ	3	2	8	3	6	10	3	35	100
STQ	2	2	7	2	4	1	–	18	51.4

Note. N = 35. UTQ = University Teaching Qualification. STQ = Senior Teaching Qualification.
[a] Based on 30 participants (the Faculty of Medicine was excluded due to different designations for academic positions).

Vähäsantanen et al. (2019) to get lecturers' stories about each main component of their agency. The interview transcripts were coded with the three main codes (*influencing at work*, *developing work practices*, or *negotiating professional identity)* and the start of a new code was the start of a new coding unit. Each of the three main codes was described based on a list of indicators. This list was developed based on the first four transcripts and supplemented based on the next sets of four transcripts. This process continued until after the 15th transcript no new indicators were found (see Fig. 1). For the purpose of transferability, we provide thick descriptions of the citations in the results section below (Guba, 1981).

3. Results

We present the research findings by evaluating the three components of professional agency (i.e., *influencing at work, developing work practices,* and *negotiating professional identity*) against university teaching practice. Therefore, we have outlined indicators for each of the three categories and renamed these as *influencing university teaching, developing university teaching*, and *negotiating teacher identity*. Each indicator in Fig. 1 is explained, in most cases through a necessarily shortened quote from a participant. This section looks in greater depth at how the three components are interpreted in the academic context.
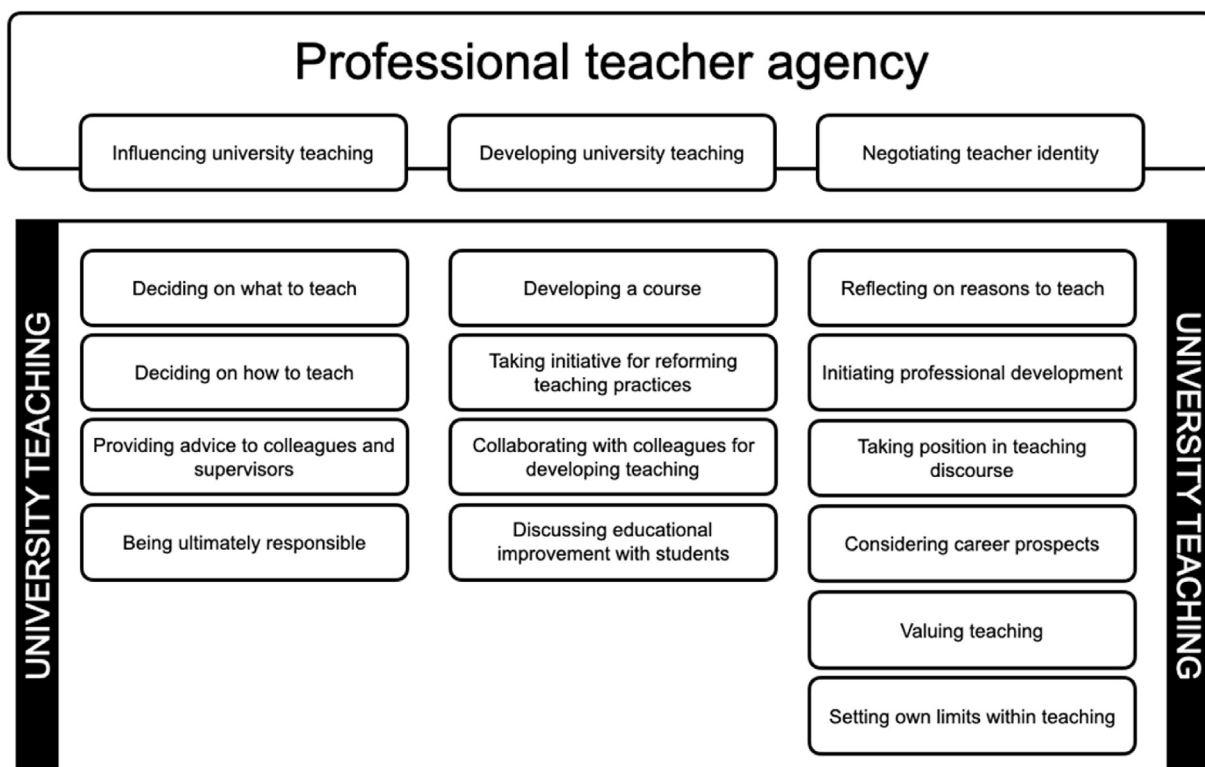

Fig. 1. Indicators of teacher agency in university teaching.

3.1. Influencing university teaching

Lecturers feel they have a great deal of control in their teaching practice. This influence is often linked to the freedom they have in teaching, i.e., freedom to design a course. The lecturers stated that they experience having influence because they are the ones who are *deciding on what* and *how to teach*. Generally, the curriculum is set by, for example, the Director of Education, but the lecturer is responsible for content, teaching approach, learning assignments, and assessment. Most lecturers are also active in various other roles such as administration (program chair, exam committee member, etc.) in which they also experience different forms of influencing. With regard to teaching practices, course programs and schedules are usually predetermined, but there is a lot of freedom as far as content is concerned. As Patrick states:

… So about bureaucratic work processes, for example, staff members should record the grades and the department wants a signed piece of paper. Well, this is a 1999 procedure, you can keep saying how much time it takes, how annoying it is. But nothing is ever done about it. It is irritating and I have no influence on it. … But within our institute, we actually have quite a lot of freedom when it comes to content. If you want to give a course on your own research, you can. If you want to emphasise certain points and it's not weird accents or crazy politically coloured things, you can. That's the freedom you have, even in organizing the tests.

Patrick mentions here that there are some fixed bureaucratic procedures within the university that lecturers have no influence over. However, with regard to the design of their teaching, lecturers feel complete autonomy — here perceived by the lecturer as 'having influence'. Another example of experiencing influence is the emphasis lecturers put on having ample room to express opinions about teaching-related issues, and that lecturers' *providing advice to colleagues and supervisors* is also a way of experiencing influence. Kyle phrases this as follows:

I do think that you are listened to, because there are consultation bodies. … They go into great detail about how things went, what can be improved etc. So I think you can exert some influence also by providing colleagues with advice. If we want to expand it [the program]*, it will be considered. So I think you do have influence on what happens in the educational field.*

So, although lecturers generally feel they are listened to, they also mention the hierarchical 'layers' within the university. Aimee stresses it is easier to have influence in one layer than in another:

It is sometimes a bit unclear whom you should approach. There are many layers and the channels are not always clear, but I do think we are heard. Of course, something is not always done with it, cannot always be done with it. But I do think that the lines of communication are getting better and better … Yes, communication with teaching staff has improved over the past few years.

This example illustrates that although teachers can express themselves, it is not always clear to whom they had best to do so or what will be done with it. Finally, the indicator *being ultimately responsible* for the course or teaching was found. This means that teachers see responsibility as a form of influence because they have to make decisions about, for example, the content or final form of the exam.

3.2. Developing university teaching

Lecturers felt involved in the development, especially as they individually were *developing a course.* Since lecturers experience great freedom and ownership in their teaching practice, they all mentioned that they are *taking initiative for reforming teaching practices,* such as modifying teaching content. Kian states that he contributes to the development of education by designing his own courses, and therefore experiences ownership over his courses:

I have developed all courses myself. It's a pretty unique position there, we realise that too. … We come first, but that's also because [lecturers] *have ownership of their teaching. So if you hear 'go and teach that subject, I want you to teach this, here are your lecture notes etc.' - that's never going to generate the same energy and passion in innovation as when you yourself are given that autonomy and the space to develop.*

Although lecturers tend to emphasize that they enjoy the individual responsibility they have for a course, there is also a contradiction within their ideas about good teaching. Lecturers say that to improve teaching sharing ideas and experiences is useful, and therefore *collaborating with colleagues for developing teaching* is needed. Moreover, cooperation with colleagues is necessary for constructive alignment in a curriculum. It is therefore remarkable that lecturers such as Eleonor on the one hand appreciate the individual character of teaching, but on the other hand believe that cooperation is needed for improvement.

Yes, of course you have to collaborate, because you have to exchange experiences and I think you have to develop the curriculum logically together - it should hang together.

Furthermore, some lecturers report that they are willing to improve teaching, but do not have the time to do so. Heidi, for example, does not feel inhibited when it comes to developing education, and receives trust and freedom in this from her supervisor. However, this is not reflected in the time she gets for it. So, even if lecturers would like to make use of the freedom to further develop education programs, there is little or no time. The excerpt below shows that Heidi can have ideas and vision about the development of education, which counts as an indicator of agency in current study. However, it also shows that this cannot always be put into practice because no time is made available for it.

I do think that time is what is needed. When that obstacle is removed, so to speak, that space [to develop] *is definitely there, so I am not hampered in any other way. I do think that you are stimulated - sometimes I think, well, here I come again, over-enthusiastic and with an idea, and then I was actually stimulated to take it further. So actually, it's mainly the time and capacity that is, so to speak, limited.*

Finally, we believe that educational development requires structural reflection, such as measuring whether certain teaching techniques or approaches are useful. None of the participants reported this type of structural reflection on or evaluation of their courses, but nearly half of the participants indicated that judgments about the quality of a course are based primarily on student evaluations. For that reason, the indicator *discussing educational improvement with students* (Fig. 1) was included.

3.3. Negotiating teacher identity

Although we focus on the lecturers' teaching practice in this study, we are aware that they have other duties besides teaching, such as conducting research. The answer to the question 'why do you teach?' was largely twofold: either 'it is part of my job description' or 'I am a teacher; teaching gives me energy.' Therefore, we included *reflecting on reasons to teach* to explore the extent to which the lecturer identifies with being a teacher.

As described in the introduction, agentic lecturers are prepared to develop both teaching and themselves along a career path. Therefore, *initiating professional development* was seen as an indicator of teacher agency. Several lecturers referred to the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) or Senior Teaching Qualification (STQ), authorized by the university as a way to engage in professional development. The UTQ is compulsory in the Netherlands for everyone teaching at a university. In this program, lecturers have to take a number of mandatory courses on, for example, educational design, constructive alignment, or assessment and feedback. In addition, they write a portfolio about their own development, which forces lecturers to take a stance in educational views. Therefore, *taking position in teaching discourse* was considered an indicator of professional development. Arthur gives an example of how the UTQ helped him to reflect on his own discourse and forced him to look at other possibilities in teaching:

> *The UTQ forces that a little. When I started the UTQ, I thought it was all nonsense. I do know how to teach, but when you do* [the UTQ], *you discover things that you are forced to look at in other ways. That earlier you took for granted, so that's good.*

In addition, various refresher courses are offered regularly by the department and the university's education expertise centre. Nicolas refers to this as his way of professional development as a teacher:

> *Yes, there are many courses you can go to. Lately I have not done that as much, but I used to go to all kinds of courses, and then I found it interesting to think about other ways of filling in my lessons. So that's a kind of development. I think it's a bit gradual and automatic.*

A third way often mentioned in relation to professional development was reflecting on the lecture yourself. An example of professional development through reflection is given by Lola:

> *I am someone who always wants to be better, so that goes a bit automatically. Very often, when I travel back from work, I sit in the train, and I think, what didn't I do right? It's just that I don't always consciously think about next year; would I do it this way, would I do it differently next year? I write that down, it's my nature.*

A fourth group that could be distinguished were lecturers who indicated that they had actually not done anything about professional development for a long time, but were forced to think again about their lessons due to the online teaching situation. Arthur argues that the adjustment to his teaching, forced by the pandemic, caused him to rethink his pedagogy:

> *I am now warmed up by this online situation due to Covid and use more digital means. I see a very big advantage of iPad lectures: the notes that you write during the lecture are just stored and you can make them available for the students and also for yourself. I would really like to go back to physical classes for the interaction. But I'm now also thinking of developing perhaps a hybrid form with a chalkboard and a screen, so that I can do things in the room with the iPad. And I hadn't actually thought of that before.*

In conclusion, most lecturers indicated that they are no longer as consciously engaged in professional development as they were. This may be due to their years of teaching experience.

Negotiating professional identity also implies that professionals make choices to advance their own careers that match their future goals which is also described by Vähäsantanen et al. (2019). Therefore, our interviews also covered career opportunities for lecturers, with an emphasis on teaching. What prevails in the answers is that excellent research is still more conducive to a career move than excellent teaching. *Considering career prospects* is therefore an indicator of *negotiating professional identity*. It seems that *valuing teaching* inhibits some in their ambitions to further develop teaching, to advance their careers they are better off focusing on bringing in projects and publications. On the other hand, it seems that teaching careers at universities are in motion and it is increasingly possible to make career moves as a teacher as well. An example within this university is the Teachers' Academy (TA), which offers grants to innovative educational proposals. Alicia is one of the TA fellows, and gives her view on career prospects and valuing teaching:

> *At this university* [higher recognition for lecturers on other skills than research] *is starting a bit now. It started with the educational leadership course, because we wanted to pay more attention to that. Something was set in motion with TA. I still don't think it's really beneficial for individual careers - although it is said that also with the STQ a movement was started. I think that if you want to get on within the university, so assistant or associate professor, it does not help to teach a lot or to teach innovatively. You will have to show excellent research. So the number of publications is very important.*

When asked about their views on teaching and learning, lecturers generally talked about education in terms of how it should be for the student, i.e., on a micro level. The following excerpt from Jack shows that he believes in educating students to become valuable employees, in addition to teaching content matter and communication skills. He strives to do this in a safe learning environment.

> *Interviewer: What do you see as your responsibility as a teacher?*

> *Jack: First of all, a safe climate for all pupils, safe and equal. I try to treat students as equally as possible. I think respectful treatment of students is necessary. A second part is in the skills I want to teach my students — to be constructively critical citizens. And so they must be able to think soundly and independently. Then of course I also want to teach them, so to speak, the content of the profession. That, of course, is another thing. And I want to teach them to communicate with the outside world. So, yes, in essence, they have to write a lot. Well, presentations too, the element of standing there and how the idea that you have can be put into words. Those are the most important components, I think.*

Isabelle adds that her beliefs changed. She is concerned with the shift from transfer of knowledge toward facilitating student learning:

> *I've thought about it a lot and over the years I've changed my mind, because I've always found it very important to transfer knowledge. Recently I've come to think it's my job to have pupils work with the material in all kinds of ways and with different working methods …*

So, they have to make their own assignments, they have to present lectures, they have to discuss with each other. I think it is actually very important to teach them a critical attitude to texts, to sources, and to collecting sources. I would actually like to impart knowledge to them as well, but I think it's more important that they know where to find that knowledge and how to use it critically. So I see it as my responsibility to facilitate their learning.

Some lecturers, such as Noemi, included in their response ideas about the purpose of education in a bigger picture, for example, educational development at institutional policy level. This then also takes into account the impact of their own teaching on that of their colleagues. So, it is not only about what happens in the classroom at that moment, but also about consequences for the future. Noemi argues:

I focus a lot on academic skills, but also on self-regulation skills, so they can plan well, that kind of thing. I also feel that I have responsibilities towards my colleagues. That means that if I teach my subject well and deliver the students well at the end of the semester, the colleague who teaches the subject after that can build on that. And above all, I must not increase the workload of my colleagues making them have to put things right. Again, workload is the big problem, so I have to make sure that how I function as a teacher also serves our organisation and what others do in their subjects.

In addition, Noemi states that although she is very aware of her role as teacher, it is necessary to set her *own limits within teaching*. She argues that there is room for a good deal of interaction with students during a lecture, but to protect herself limits it outside the course:

I'm not someone who's going to spend half an hour telling a story. There are always dialogues, but I also use a lot of game elements to make it all a bit more interactive and of course I have to play an active role in that. There is a limit. For me there is a clear limit as regards sending emails, knocking on doors and the like; to protect myself a little, I indicate my limits very clearly.

4. Discussion

This paper focuses on understanding teacher agency in universities from the perspective of lecturers. The three components *influencing at work*, *developing work practices*, and *negotiating professional identity*, from the framework on generic professional agency used by Vähäsantanen et al. (2019), have been investigated in a university teaching practice. Although we succeeded in coding all relevant interview fragments to fit the three components of professional agency, there were also fragments in which more than one component could be found. In those cases, the authors decided in consultation what the core of the answer was and assigned the corresponding code. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that there can be overlap in a fragment, which indicates that it is not a one-component whole but dynamic. This could mean that the components are intertwined; thus, measuring the individual components gives a distorted or incomplete result. Despite this observation, we managed to give the components a specific framing in university teaching practice.

Our findings indicate that the three components can indeed be applied in this context, but the generic perspective does not yet do justice to the agency to be experienced in university teaching. For a

more appropriate designation of our specific interpretation, the components *influencing university teaching*, *developing university teaching*, and *negotiating teacher identity* are introduced. An 'emic', context-specific approach should expose how lecturers in their role as teachers, with their knowledge and skills, take on their role as change agents.

4.1. Influencing university teaching

Although lecturers experienced having a great deal of influence, this did not extend beyond their own teaching. The degree of influence seemed to be determined by their formal position, and therefore we believe that a generic approach to agency does not do justice to teacher agency. The results from Vähäsantanen et al. (2020) support this view, as they found that the degree of perceived influence depends on academic position. Moreover, Annala et al. (2021) emphasize that not only position, but also professional level (i.e., university, community, and individual level) should be taken into consideration when agency is discussed. Comparable conclusions can also be drawn from our results. Lecturers indicated that they experienced having influence within their own courses (i.e., individual level) but hardly at community and university level. In our study we were not interested in formal positions but specifically in lecturers' teaching practice, because we wanted to investigate how lecturers, rather than formal educational leaders, perceived their role as educational change agents.

4.2. Developing university teaching

Lecturers did feel they contributed to the development of their teaching practices. For example, teachers indicated that they developed courses and evaluated these using student evaluation forms. Vähäsantanen et al. (2020) also found that academics contributed greatly to the development of their own work practices. Again, a generic approach may give a distorted picture of teachers actually taking on their role as educational developers because, given our results, this development was mostly individual and did not go beyond course design. Edwards (2005) argues that in order to support educational development and constructive alignment within programs collaboration between colleagues should be fostered. Interestingly, the lecturers in our study agreed that educational development is best accomplished in collaboration with colleagues, but indicated that they did not have time to participate in joint teaching and development activities. From our results it seems that collaboration in teaching among colleagues is not yet part of the university's teaching culture.

4.3. Negotiating teacher identity

Although lecturers indicated that they valued teaching, they did not feel professional development needs. Every lecturer in this study had completed the mandatory UTQ, but a structural program to develop as a lecturer is rare in this university. Participants thought that the low participation in professional development activities may be due to the lack of appreciation for good teaching. Still, according to Van Lankveld et al. (2016) participation in staff development programs is conducive to strengthening teacher identity, even for experienced lecturers. Indeed, a professional identity implies that professional obligations are aligned with beliefs and values, which can be expected to result in a high level of commitment to the work (Van Winkel et al., 2018).

Also, career prospects through teaching were rated lower than prospects through research. Lecturers felt that other tasks, such as research and valorisation, are considered more important than

teaching, making investments in teaching and teacher development unattractive. In contrast, Vähäsantanen et al. (2020) indicate that academics were positive about their career prospects. The difference with our results may be that the participants in Vähäsantanen et al. (2020) talked about all aspects of their jobs, whereas our study focused on teaching.

5. Practical implications

It is beneficial to all stakeholders within a university if lecturers are able to show agentic behaviour beyond a single course, and take on their role as agents of change. For lecturers the main goal of promoting agency is not only to have skills and knowledge, but also to be able to assume their role as agents of change in educational practice. This requires teacher agency. Lecturers' perceptions about their agency as explored in this study have implications for the university work context. For the main issues, where there is still room for improvement given our results, there are the following practical implications: 1) influence on departmental level; 2) collaboration with colleagues; 3) emphasis on developing an identity as a teacher. 4) finally, we hold the results against the international university context.

First, if lecturers want to have a say at the departmental level, we recommend participating in educational development projects and collecting data in order to expose problems. Examples of ways to collect data include mid-term evaluations, questionnaires to evaluate the use of a specific pedagogy (e.g., hybrid learning), and regular student evaluations at the end of a course. For even deeper insights into students' learning, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning could be implemented. In this way, lecturers can suggest educational developments justified by their own data. Managers should take the suggestions seriously and feed these back to the teaching staff. In this way everyone feels heard and involved in policies that are broader than just their own practice.

Second, lecturers should be given time to collaborate with colleagues on educational development, because this would lead to a greater sense of teacher agency. For example, as Tigelaar et al. (2006) argue, reviewing lessons together with colleagues is a constructive way to implement or propose valuable developments. What emerged from some of the interviews in our study is that lecturers appreciated the fact that because of the Covid pandemic and online teaching lecturers were joining forces to create courses together. This cooperation could be a lasting change in departments. Developing lessons together - even beyond courses - contributes to ownership, innovation, and constructive alignment. This collaboration could be organized, for example, in a community of learners with a group of lecturers working collectively to solve a common research question or problem.

Third, lecturers who identify with their role as a teacher are emotionally attached to teaching, and are committed to this role (Van Lankveld et al., 2016). To further develop teacher identity, it is important that lecturers continue to work on their professional development. Staff professional development can ensure that lecturers develop a pedagogical language that gives them a sense of credibility and authority as experts within their department (Van Lankveld et al., 2016). Taking courses offered by the university is a good example, because a teacher identity develops by interpreting and re-interpretating the type of teacher one wants to be (Van Lankveld et al., 2016). Teacher trainers can help to provide educational principles that lecturers can use and make their own. Additionally, educational leaders must recognize how lecturers experience the professional development they rely on to implement national and local reforms, and providing lecturers with rich, creative learning experiences that lead to mastery (Brodie, 2019, pp. 1–14).

Finally, our results have implications for universities globally. The context of the current study was a research-intensive university in the Netherlands. Lecturers face a delicate balance between teaching and research in the Netherlands and worldwide. Lecturers are expected to excel in research and adapt their teaching to a rapidly changing society, as well as to meet the demands of international students (Taylor, 2004). This requires lecturers to take charge of their teaching practice, further develop it, and ensure their own professional development. These lecturers continually develop themselves as teachers, are willing and able to innovate their teaching, and are empowered to adopt or reject policies. The findings of this study offer insight into how teacher agency can be examined in universities to understand how lecturers can influence and develop their work practices.

6. Limitations and future research

Overall, our study aimed to gain insight into perceptions of lecturers' professional teacher agency in university, and some limitations should be mentioned here. In the current study, lecturers were interviewed once. This means that their perceptions might be influenced by events or experiences that occurred just before the interview. More interviews per lecturer can give a more stable picture of their perceptions. In addition, no data have been collected about how these perceptions manifest in teacher practice. Follow-up research could include more data sources to further insights into agency in teaching practice.

Furthermore, the findings of our study may have limited generalizability because of convenience sampling, which may have resulted in participants with relatively positive attitudes toward teaching. Nevertheless, we used convenience sampling because we wanted to have rich descriptions of how teachers in higher education perceive their teaching practice.

Another limitation of this study is the underrepresentation of early-career lecturers. Although Vähäsantanen et al. (2020) found no effect of age in their questionnaire study, we still see reasons to believe that long teaching experience is associated with higher feelings of teacher agency, feelings partly based on the development of teacher agency through previous professional experiences (Priestley et al., 2015). Thus, the degree of agency in our sample may be overestimated. Beginning lecturers might lack agency because they feel overwhelmed by the workload and feel little support from the environment (Adams & Rytmeister, 2001; Remmik et al., 2011). Therefore, future research could address the development of teacher agency through different career stages.

Finally, this study took place within one research university. Therefore, our results should be interpreted with caution as results for other universities may be different. A follow-up study could consider doing measurements at different universities to determine whether organizational structures are impeding or promoting teacher agency.

7. Concluding remarks

This paper focuses on the teaching aspect of professional agency, exploring its characteristics in lecturers describing their teaching practice. Through qualitative interview data we investigated teacher agency in relation to lecturers, and how this can be characterized. The study contributes to our understanding of teacher agency. Now that we have directions on how the three components of professional agency are expressed in university teaching practice, our understanding of this concept has increased. These results add to the growing body of research indicating that it is becoming possible to recognize teacher agency and provide a more detailed understanding of the three components of professional agency of

specific interpretation in university teaching practice. Thanks to a relatively large sample of lecturers from seven departments, the use of a validated framework, and intensive consultation among the authors, we were able to propose implications for how to support lecturers in developing as educational change agents.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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