



Research paper

Relational dimensions of teacher agency: Five purposes for exercising agency in university[☆]Max Kusters^{a,*}, Elizabeth A.C. Rushton^b, Roeland van der Rijst^c, Wilfried Admiraal^d^a GION Education/Research, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands^b Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, United Kingdom^c ICLON Graduate School of Teaching, Leiden University, P.O. Box 905, Leiden, 2300 AX, the Netherlands^d Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo Metropolitan University, PO Box 4 St. Olavs Plass, N-0130, Oslo, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Understanding why academics exercise teacher agency is essential because university teaching takes place within complex, dynamic, and often constraining contexts that require purposeful decision-making. Teacher agency can be understood as the capacity to act purposefully and make informed choices within particular teaching practices. Using an ecological lens, we distinguish between *what agency is* and *what agency is for*. Scenario-based interviews with 12 university teachers from a Scottish university revealed why academics enact agency in university teaching. Findings show that academics use teacher agency to pursue a range of purposes: 1) navigating contextual structures; 2) moral and ethical purposes; 3) negotiating personal and institutional goals; 4) care and connection purposes; and 5) directing professional growth. This study also provides empirical insight into the relational, interpretive, and value-laden nature of teacher agency in a university.

1. Introduction

Teaching at university is a purposeful practice in which academics use their disciplinary knowledge to determine what counts as valuable knowledge, how it is taught, and how students are engaged in new ways of thinking within the domain (Van Dijk et al., 2023). The enactment of this practice, however, is continually mediated by institutional priorities and professional responsibilities (Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Hermansen & Lund, 2023). Academics are professionals with their own pedagogical beliefs, values, and aims, which shape how they interpret and implement these responsibilities (Kusters et al., 2025; Edwards et al., 2017). To navigate the often complex and sometimes conflicting demands of institutional objectives, student needs, and personal pedagogical commitments requires academics to make deliberate and informed decisions and to take action in pursuit of meaningful educational aims (Annala et al., 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2021). Understanding how and why academics make such decisions is especially important in contemporary university teaching, where shifting policy landscapes, changing student demographics, and heightened performance expectations place new pressures on academic work (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2020). Such intentional and deliberate decision-making within complex institutional

spaces can be grounded in the theory of *teacher agency*, i.e., the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct and navigate work and its conditions (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). This process is not merely practical but fundamentally interpretive and reflexive (Leijen et al., 2019). Academics interpret themselves in the situations they inhabit, and this self-understanding shapes how they interpret relational aspects such as students, colleagues, and institutional structures. Drawing on Kögler's (1996) concept of hermeneutic reflexivity, we can understand these interpretations as a dynamic in which academics critically reflect on the socially and power-laden schemes that shape the understanding of themselves and others. This hermeneutic reflexivity illuminates the nature of teacher agency by showing that professional action is grounded in value-informed judgment rather than merely procedural decision-making. Thus, teacher agency is entangled with interpretive complexity, which turns educational decision-making into a matter of self-understanding and the reflexive capacity to deliberately shape professional practices, conditions, and trajectories of professional growth (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2017). The present study examines these processes within the Scottish university context, where national and institutional shifts similarly shape the conditions under

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which academics enact their teaching responsibilities.

Hence, teacher agency can only be understood if we look beyond *what* academics do and also consider *how* and *why* they act in a certain way. Yet existing literature has largely concentrated on describing what forms agency takes and how it is enacted in practice, while offering far less insight into the *why*, i.e., the underlying purposes, motivations, and interpretive processes that guide academics' agentic work. Prior reviews note that questions of meaning, purpose, emotion, and relationality often remain underexamined, with the explanatory dimensions of agency receiving comparatively limited attention (Hinojosa-Paredes, 2020). Teacher agency is not merely about executing tasks; it encompasses the motivations, reasoning, and contextual interpretations that guide those actions. It involves navigating institutional structures, negotiating personal and professional values, and responding adaptively to shifting educational landscapes (Rom & Eyal, 2019). In this sense, teacher agency is dynamic and situated because individual histories, cultural expectations, available resources, and the broader socio-political environment shape it (Priestley et al., 2015). Thus, teacher agency involves more than action; it entails the intentional interpretation of one's role and responsibilities within the complexities of the university teaching landscape. This study aims to investigate the purposes for which university academics exercise teacher agency with particular attention to relational dimensions in teaching and the role of professional growth.

1.1. Ecological approach to teacher agency

This study is grounded in the ecological approach to teacher agency developed by Priestley et al. (2015), which conceptualizes agency as a situated, temporal, and dynamic achievement. This approach is particularly suited to our hermeneutic focus, as it foregrounds how actions emerge through the integration of past meanings, present evaluations, and projected aspirations. Rather than being a fixed personal trait, agency is viewed as something that teachers do, an emergent phenomenon shaped by the ongoing interplay of individual, cultural, and structural factors across time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). According to the ecological approach, teacher agency is enacted through the interaction of three temporal and relational dimensions. First, the *iterational* dimension refers to how past experiences, values, and professional histories inform current thinking and choices. Second, the *practical-evaluative* dimension focuses on how teachers make context-sensitive judgments and decisions in the present. Third, the *projective* dimension relates to teachers' aspirations, goals, and imagined futures that guide their actions (Priestley et al., 2015). This ecological approach frames teacher agency as both contextually structured and purposively enacted through reflection, negotiation, and future-oriented planning (Leijen et al., 2019). While the ecological approach was initially developed within a curriculum reform, 'Curriculum for Excellence' in Scottish compulsory school education, its emphasis on temporality, context, and complexity also provides a valuable foundation for studying teacher agency in university contexts (Cong-Lem, 2024). However, the three broad dimensions also present limitations, especially in universities, where the structure, culture, and professional roles of academics diverge from school settings. In particular, the ecological approach tends to treat relational dimensions – such as the emotional bonds, commitments, and relational orientations that anchor teachers' sense of security and professional purpose – as contextual circumstances rather than as constitutive processes through which agency is formed and enacted (Hardman, 2025).

Previous studies suggest that in research-intensive settings, academics often experience difficulty reconciling their diverse roles as teachers and researchers, which in turn shapes how they articulate and enact their teaching tasks (e.g., Elen et al., 2007). As Hardman (2025) notes, even seemingly minor instructional choices can reflect deeper alignments (or tensions) between teachers' professional lives and institutional practices. Such differences are shaped by how teachers

emotionally and interpretively engage with their roles, illustrating that agency is filtered through subjective meaning-making rather than applied uniformly across contexts (Cong-Lem & Nguyen, 2024; Truong & Nguyen, 2024). An academic's embraced teaching purpose is therefore frequently mediated by the way they negotiate their professional lives: whether they see themselves primarily as teachers, researchers, or as hybrid teacher-researchers, and how they navigate the often-divergent institutional incentives attached to each (see also Mori et al., 2021; Rom & Eyal, 2019; Vähäsantanen et al., 2019; Van Winkel et al., 2017). This negotiation gives rise to individual variation in the extent to which academics invest in and commit to teaching objectives. Here, teacher agency is a lens for understanding how academics make choices amid competing demands. Rather than being passive responders to institutional pressures, academics exercise teacher agency by interpreting and prioritizing teaching in ways that align with their beliefs and values (Kusters et al., 2025). Therefore, it is imperative to examine the purposes – i.e., to understand the *why* – that guide academics' decision-making. Alongside this, these choices clarify within a landscape of shifting and often fluid professional relationships. In universities, course structures, student cohorts, research collaborations, and institutional roles frequently change, making relational stability more elusive than in other educational contexts (Tormey, 2021). This fluidity means that academics must constantly renegotiate their pedagogical commitments and professional identities in response to evolving relational dynamics.

1.2. Relational dimensions of teacher agency in universities

Academics sometimes describe a paradox in their work: while they experience high amounts of autonomy and professional freedom, they frequently feel isolated "like working on an island within the university" (Kusters et al., 2023). The ecological approach to teacher agency emphasizes that agency is situated and relational through cultural and structural factors (Priestley et al., 2015). However, it arguably underrepresents the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of relational agency that are particularly salient in university contexts. Specifically, the ecological approach treats relationality as part of the conditions that enable or constrain agency, rather than as a constitutive aspect of agency. It gives limited attention to how academics navigate professional roles and values through emotionally and ethically charged relationships with students, colleagues, and wider communities. As Hardman (2025) argues, such relationships are not merely contextual influences but active forces in the emergence of agency itself, shaping what becomes possible in each unfolding event. The underrepresentation of these relational and emotional dimensions has been taken up in other accounts. For example, Edwards (2005) conceptualizes *relational agency* as the capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with others in order to interpret and respond to shared problems. This capacity involves emotional engagement and interpersonal negotiation elements central to professional learning and pedagogical judgment. Similarly, Cong-Lem (2024) shows that in higher education, teacher agency is often exercised through emotionally invested practices, including caregiving, collegial support, and the negotiation of conflicting institutional demands. These relational dynamics are a central motivational and mediational source of agency in the university context.

Teaching in universities often involves navigating tensions between personal priorities (e.g., teaching and research), institutional expectations, student needs, disciplinary standards, and personal pedagogical values (Edwards, 2005; Engeström & Middleton, 1996). In these situations, agency is exercised through the ongoing negotiation of professional relationships and personal investments (Billett, 2009; Edwards & Mackenzie, 2006). For instance, responding to students' diverse needs, managing peer collaboration, or balancing collegial support with academic competition all require forms of agency that are situated in human connection (Bruner, 1996; Tormey, 2021). Based on these insights, we argue that for a more comprehensive description of teacher

agency in the university, knowledge of academics' relational dimensions is needed. Recognizing these relational dimensions helps to expand our understanding of teacher agency beyond structural positioning to include the lived, relational complexity of academic work (Leont'ev & Hall, 1978; Stetsenko, 2005). Therefore, in this study, we extend the ecological approach by exploring how relational dimensions shape and constitute the emergence of teacher agency across its three dimensions in university teaching.

1.2.1. Current study

Through academics' responses to challenging teaching situations, we show how academics' professional decision-making is deeply informed by their positionality, relationships, emotional commitments, and future-oriented aspirations (Edwards & D'arcy, 2004). In doing so, we elaborate on the ecological approach by examining the purposes for exercising agency in university teaching, with a focus on how these purposes are relational in nature. This perspective conceptualizes agency as a commitment to act with purpose in relation to others and to the values shared and contested within academic communities. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of agency in universities, where the complexity of academic roles demands not only strategic adaptation but also continuous negotiation of meaning and values through connections with students, colleagues, and institutional structures.

The gain of this study lies in its attempt to distinguish between what agency is and what agency is for. This study advances existing accounts of teacher agency by foregrounding purpose as a distinct analytic object and by theorizing how purposive orientations are constituted relationally within an ecological approach. While prior research has primarily focused on the conditions and enactment of teacher agency (Cong-Lem, 2024; Hinojroza-Paredes, 2020), our study introduces a hermeneutic perspective to focus on the interpretation of purposes, intentions, and values that inform academics' actions. Rather than merely examining how agency is enacted, we explore *why* academics make particular choices and what they aim to achieve through them. The research question guiding this study was: *For what purposes do academics exercise teacher agency, and how are these purposes constituted through the iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions, with particular attention to their relational aspects?*

2. Method

To explore the purpose-driven dimensions of teacher agency, this study employed a scenario-based interview approach, which is particularly effective for eliciting value-laden interpretations and decision-making in authentic contexts (Skilling & Stylianides, 2020). The interview protocol used 23 validated teaching scenarios developed in an earlier project (Kusters et al., 2024), and in this current study, participants were invited to select three scenarios from the full set to discuss during the interview. These scenarios were created using critical moments drawn from interviews with university lecturers across seven European research-intensive universities. The scenarios reflect recurring and complex issues in academic teaching, such as student preparation, workload tensions, conflicting expectations, pedagogical dilemmas, online interaction, and curriculum coherence. They were subsequently reviewed and refined by expert panels in higher education and teacher agency, who assessed recognizability, clarity of the dilemma, and their potential to elicit multiple legitimate responses. A pilot study with university lecturers further confirmed their usability and authenticity (Kusters et al., 2024). The complete set of 23 scenarios is provided in the appendix. Each participant was asked in advance to select scenarios that they personally identified with or found relevant to their own teaching practice. These pre-selected scenarios formed the basis for the interviews, allowing participants to engage with meaningful professional dilemmas that resonated with their experiences. During the interviews, participants were invited to explain how they would respond to each

scenario and, crucially, why they would take particular actions. Follow-up questions were used to probe the reasoning behind their decisions, drawing out the values, aims, and intentions guiding their responses. This approach emphasized a hermeneutic perspective on academics' educational purposes, ethical considerations, and long-term commitments, rather than focusing solely on immediate or reactive behaviors. The method facilitated a rich exploration of how academics navigate pedagogical challenges in ways that are both contextually grounded and purposefully directed.

2.1. Participants and data collection

Data were collected through individual scenario-based interviews with 12 academics from the Education Division of a Scottish university (see Table 1). Participants were recruited via a voluntary call distributed within the department. Interested lecturers contacted the first author directly. This department was selected because focusing on a single, coherent professional context strengthens the credibility of the study (Guba, 1981). Restricting contextual variation allowed us to attend closely to lecturers' beliefs and reasoning as they emerged in their everyday environment, rather than interpreting these through comparisons across divergent disciplinary cultures. This design supports the study's aim of developing a nuanced, emic understanding of how lecturers articulate and enact agency within their own teaching context.

Each interview, conducted by the first author, lasted up to 60 min and was structured around three teaching scenarios selected in advance by each participant. These scenarios were designed to reflect authentic challenges in university teaching and were chosen by participants based on relevance to their own professional experiences. During the interviews, participants were invited to respond to each scenario in depth, explaining how they would approach the situation and, crucially, why they would choose a particular course of action. There was ample time and space for participants to elaborate on their thinking, and follow-up questions were used to explore the reasoning, values, and intentions behind their responses. This approach enabled in-depth insights into how academics navigate complex professional dilemmas, revealing the purposes and philosophies that inform academics' actions. In line with the study's hermeneutic perspective, the interviews emphasized academics' educational aims, ethical commitments, and future-oriented thinking. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were shared with participants for review, with the option to amend or expand their responses. Two participants submitted additional comments via email, which were integrated into the final transcripts. The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (ICLON-IREC 2021-02). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and measures were taken to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study within four weeks of their

Table 1
Participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Brief description of academic role and experience
Amelia	Lecturer; program leadership responsibilities; 10+ years of university teaching experience.
Ava	Senior lecturer; 2 years of university teaching experience.
Emma	Lecturer; 5 years of university teaching experience.
Isabella	Lecturer; program leadership responsibilities; 3 years of university teaching experience.
James	Lecturer; 2 years of university teaching experience (mid-career).
John	Lecturer; program leadership responsibilities and doctoral study; 2 years of university teaching experience.
Mary	Lecturer; 4 years of university teaching experience.
Mia	Senior lecturer; 9 years of university teaching experience.
Michael	PhD researcher and teacher; 1 year of university teaching experience.
Olivia	Lecturer; 2 years of university teaching experience.
Sophia	Lecturer; 7 years of university teaching experience.
William	Professor; 25 years of university teaching experience.

interview. While identifying details were anonymized, participants were informed about the potential for indirect recognition within their institutional context.

2.2. Data analysis

The purpose of the analysis was to explore how academics articulate the *aims* behind their professional decisions and actions, in order to investigate teacher agency as a purposeful, value-driven practice. Guided by the study's hermeneutic perspective, the analysis focused on uncovering the intentions, ethical considerations, and long-term educational goals that shape how academics navigate complex teaching situations. Rather than treating agency solely as a reactive or contextually constrained phenomenon, we sought to examine what academics are striving for in their work, thus what they consider meaningful, desirable, and professionally valuable.

To address this aim, we conducted reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As the interviews were structured around scenarios selected by participants, the data were necessarily shaped by the scenarios they found most resonant or meaningful. In line with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we treated this influence not as a limitation but as an inherent feature of our interpretive dataset: the scenarios acted as prompts that oriented participants toward particular professional dilemmas, values, and relational concerns. Rather than analyzing the scenarios themselves, we analyzed how participants interpreted and reasoned through these situations. This approach ensured that the themes reflected participants' meaning-making, while acknowledging the role of scenario selection in shaping the responses generated. This approach was particularly well-suited to the study's interpretive orientation, as it facilitated close engagement with participants' meaning-making processes and supported the analysis of how values, beliefs, and aspirations are embedded in professional decision-making. The analysis began with familiarization through repeated engagement with the interview transcripts, including participants' additions and clarifications. This stage was primarily conducted by the first author, in regular consultation with the second author. Such immersion provided a detailed sense of how participants explained their actions, intentions, and purposes. Building on this, we generated initial codes inductively, paying close attention to moments where participants explicitly referenced why they would take particular actions, what outcomes they hoped to achieve, and how they positioned themselves in relation to institutional expectations, student needs, or broader educational purposes. These initial findings were shared with the third and fourth authors and discussed collectively.

From the codes, we searched for potential themes that captured shared patterns in participants' reasoning and collaboratively reviewed them in meetings with all authors to ensure that they reflected both the diversity and commonality of participants' accounts. Once the themes were stable, we defined and named them in ways that highlighted their interpretive focus on academics' values and purposes (see Table 2). Finally, we synthesized the themes into a broader account of purpose-driven agency.

The interpretive process was informed by Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological approach, which provided a lens to examine how participants' responses were shaped by the interplay of past experiences (iterational), present conditions (practical-evaluative), and future-oriented aspirations (projective). Our coding process was inductive, in line with reflexive thematic analysis. Neither the ecological dimensions nor the relational perspectives were used as deductive codes. Instead, these theoretical lenses informed our interpretation during theme refinement, helping us situate emerging inductive patterns within temporal and relational understandings of teacher agency. This framework was not used to pre-structure the data, but rather to support the reviewing, defining, and final synthesis of themes, enabling us to situate participants' articulations of agency within temporal dimensions.

Throughout, our own positionality as researchers and educationalists

Table 2
Codebook.

Theme	Definition	Purpose	Illustrative excerpts
1. Responsive adaptation to the context	Describes how participants adjust practices in response to contextual, structural, or institutional constraints.	Identifies how academics use agency to navigate challenges, adapt to changing demands, and modify teaching accordingly. <i>How do academics respond to challenges?</i>	<i>Probably I need to explore other means of encouraging my students to do the readings regularly.</i>
2. Moral and ethical reasoning	Describes participants' value-based or ethical judgement reflected in their teaching decisions.	Identifies how academics act in ways aligned with fairness, integrity, inclusion, or moral responsibility. <i>How do academics make ethically informed decisions?</i>	<i>I felt that in order to give them the best possible experience, I had to learn along with them.</i>
3. Negotiating between personal and institutional goals	Describes how participants balance their own pedagogical values with institutional rules, procedures, or expectations.	Identifies how academics interpret and sometimes flex policy to protect student wellbeing or maintain pedagogical integrity. <i>How do academics mediate tensions between personal commitment and institutional constraints?</i>	<i>It's about finding ways to extend the deadlines a little without putting pressure on the student.</i>
4. Care and connection	Describes participants' relational, emotional, or pastoral work with students and colleagues.	Identifies agency directed toward building trust, emotional support, and meaningful human connection. <i>How do academics express care as part of their teacher agency?</i>	<i>I've been trying to remind myself not to rush, to be more present with students.</i>
5. Self-directed professional growth	Describes how participants intentionally shape their professional development and long-term trajectory.	Identifies how academics use agency to pursue growth, further study, reflective development, or career direction. <i>How do academics take ownership of their professional lives?</i>	<i>My earlier experiences really shaped the direction of my PhD.</i>

in university settings was a reflexive resource. Our shared professional experience sensitized us to particular aspects of participants' meaning-making and helped us to recognize how institutional and pedagogical contexts shaped their accounts. At the same time, it required attentiveness to how our standpoint as academics influenced the analytic process, prompting us to engage in ongoing dialogue and critical reflection to ensure that our interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than our own professional perspectives.

3. Findings

This study aimed to elaborate the ecological approach by examining the purposes for exercising agency in university teaching, with a focus on how these purposes are relational in nature. While the ecological approach has traditionally focused on *how* agency is enacted across temporal dimensions, it shifts the focus toward *why* agency is enacted.

Through systematically analyzing the responses of academics to the scenario-based interviews, we identified five interrelated purposes that illustrate how academics used teacher agency to navigate challenging teaching situations in desired directions. Through the analysis, we determined that agency emerges through ongoing negotiations with students, colleagues, institutional cultures, and disciplinary communities. This reflects what Edwards (2005) has called relational agency, a capacity to align one's own actions with those of others in order to interpret and respond to complex situations.

Each theme demonstrates how agency is exercised as a deliberate, relational, and future-oriented act of meaning-making. For clarity, we describe each purpose separately in the following paragraphs. This structure is an analytical and narrative choice; the purposes are analytically distinguishable yet empirically intertwined, and we do not wish to suggest any hierarchy or precedence. The themes include: 1) Agency for responsive adaptation to institutional contexts; 2) Agency for moral and ethical reasoning in professional practice; 3) Agency for negotiation between personal values and institutional goals; 4) Agency for care and connection in teaching; 5) Agency for self-directed professional growth (see Fig. 1).

Together, these themes demonstrate how academics exercise teacher agency through a process of purposeful professional judgment, a form of relational reasoning that connects past experiences, current evaluations, and future aspirations in the moment of decision-making. Relational agency, in this sense, operates as a connective thread that links individual action to meaning-making and the broader purpose of teaching. In what follows, we elaborate on each of these themes and illustrate them through participants' reflections on challenging teaching scenarios. Table 3 shows the distribution of these five purposive themes across participants. While all participants expressed forms of agency, not all articulated every purpose explicitly. The themes represent analytically constructed categories, and their occurrence varied depending on each academic's responses. This variation reflects the situated and selective nature of how agency is expressed in reflective practices.

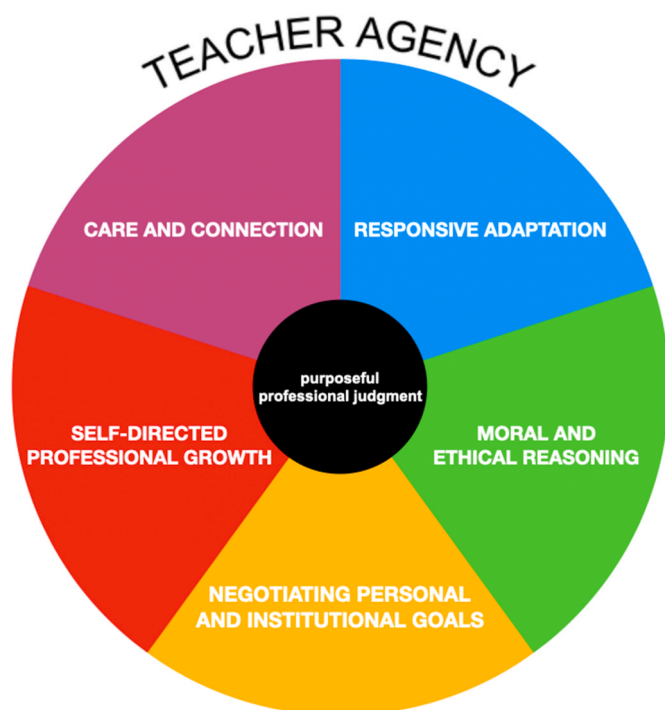


Fig. 1. Five interrelated purposes of agentic actions.

3.1. Responsive adaptation

The first theme highlights how academics utilized teacher agency to navigate contextual structures. Academics described how they would adapt to students' needs and shifting institutional demands. The in-situ decision reflects that academics make context-sensitive judgments about how to act within given constraints. James reflected on teaching across different national contexts, explaining:

"Across [various countries], I have this observation that students often don't do the assigned readings before class ... providing video tutorials was my kind of solution. But I'm also questioning the use of videos, because sometimes I feel like they reveal the content that will be presented during the session. I don't want to reveal the whole content ... Probably I need to explore other means of, you know, encouraging my students to do readings regularly."

This example illustrates how agency works through an ongoing process of reflection, experimentation, and reassessment. A closer look reveals that such decisions are not isolated or purely reactive. Instead, they are shaped by prior teaching experiences across different educational systems and cultural expectations. Namely, in the excerpt, James situates his thinking within teaching experiences gained across different national settings, and this comparative perspective shapes how he evaluates and refines strategies to encourage student preparation. James' accumulated observations about students' reading habits inform both the perceived problem and the range of acceptable solutions. At the same time, this response is also oriented toward the projective dimension. James expresses concern about the pedagogical consequences of relying on video tutorials and reflects on the longer-term goal of cultivating student autonomy and engagement with preparatory work. The desire to find "other means" of encouraging this behavior reveals an anticipatory, future-oriented stance.

All twelve academics in this study articulated how they utilized their agency to navigate contextual and structural challenges in their teaching practices. John, for example, described arriving in a new institutional context with minimal handover or orientation materials, which left him feeling as though he was establishing a program from the ground up. He mentioned:

"... The culture here, when I arrived, was very much that [of] working in that island or what I used to call a silo ... that was totally alien to me ... In my previous jobs, we were always working together, constantly reflecting on the program. So I thought: we need to create that here. We had to use university structures things like staff-development days, the program review, even getting a bit of support from the dean, to create spaces to get people in the same room working together"

In response, he made in-situ decisions to reconstruct necessary structures independently. While these actions were shaped by the immediate demands of the unfamiliar context – which reflects an in-situ, context-sensitive response to institutional constraints (practical-evaluative) – they were also grounded in prior leadership experience and professional values (iterational dimension), which provided a foundation for understanding what effective collaboration could look like. Additionally, John's efforts were directed toward building a more integrated and cooperative program culture (projective dimension), revealing how long-term aspirations guided moment-to-moment decisions. This interaction illustrates that even seemingly spontaneous decisions are rooted in accumulated experience and oriented toward future goals.

In general, this theme illustrates how relationality shapes teacher agency, as academics adapt to students' lived realities, collegial dynamics, and the desire to build inclusive, responsive relationships that remain sensitive to shifting educational and socio-political contexts.

Table 3
Overview and distribution of academics across themes.

Theme	Amelia	Ava	Emma	Isabella	James	John	Mary	Mia	Michael	Olivia	Sophia	William
Agency for responsive adaptation to the context	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Agency for moral and ethical reasoning	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Agency for negotiation between personal and institutional goals				X		X		X	X	X	X	
Agency for care and connection		X	X	X	X				X		X	X
Agency for self-directed professional growth	X	X	X		X		X		X			X

3.2. Moral and ethical reasoning

The second theme illustrates how academics argue they enact teacher agency through moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. Participants described an ongoing evaluative process through which they aligned their actions with personal values, pedagogical commitments, and institutional constraints. This aligns with the practical-evaluative dimension of the ecological approach, which emphasizes how individuals make situated judgments about what is both possible and appropriate. Mary described this reflective process:

“I felt that in order to give them [the students] the best possible experience, I had to learn along with them. All of the course materials, the reading, even the study guide, I inherited from someone else ... It was really the support of others that was the solution. Going out and seeking help and asking people: Does it take you all weekend to reply to 30 posts? Do you reply to all of them?”

This example illustrates how Mary's response is motivated by her ethical and pedagogical concerns about what she feels her students deserve and how she can act responsibly as a teacher. It exemplifies relational agency (Edwards, 2005), where agency is achieved through the development of common knowledge and shared moral orientation, enabling collective action that no individual actor could accomplish independently. This excerpt reveals how in-situ decisions, such as reaching out for peer support and adjusting workload expectations, are shaped by Mary's accumulated experience and professional norms (iterational dimension). Her instinct to question inherited materials and practices indicates a deeper pedagogical reflexivity informed by prior knowledge and a sense of ethical responsibility. Simultaneously, these decisions are oriented toward future possibilities (projective dimension). By striving to “give them the best possible experience,” Mary is not only responding to immediate challenges but actively working toward an envisioned ideal of more responsive and student-centered teaching. This moral and pedagogical aspiration drives her moment-to-moment judgments and negotiations with institutional realities. Mary exemplifies how teacher agency is shaped through relational engagement, as peer dialogue, student-centered commitments, and a shared search for pedagogical integrity support her ethical reasoning. Taken together, this example illustrates how moral reasoning emerges through the interaction of accumulated experience, present conditions, and future intentions. Mary's agency is not just about adapting, it is about adapting *with purpose*, guided by values, and oriented toward the kind of teaching and learning environment she seeks to create.

3.3. Negotiation between personal and institutional goals

The third theme shows how academics use teacher agency to navigate tensions between their personal values and institutional expectations. Academics described using their professional judgment to interpret and occasionally bend rigid institutional policies in order to better serve students' needs, especially when formal processes were perceived as overly bureaucratic or emotionally burdensome. This kind of situated negotiation reflects how academics reconcile their teaching purposes with the formal requirements of institutional policy. One example from Olivia:

“You might have quite rigid rules about deadlines and how long you can grant an extension for ... and so often it's about trying to find ways of extending the extensions a little bit without putting the student under undue pressure to disclose what can be very personal information. We had a student whose son had serious mental health problems. For her to go through the process of producing documentary evidence ... it was just traumatizing her for a second time.”

This example illustrates how Olivia's agentic action centers on interpreting and navigating institutional rules. Although her response takes shape within the moment, is not made in isolation. It reflects Olivia's accumulated experience and her familiarity with institutional processes (iterational dimension), drawing on prior encounters with institutional processes and a developed sensitivity to the emotional costs of rigid bureaucracy. In addition, Olivia envisions and works toward a more compassionate and student-centered educational practice (projective dimension), one that respects students' dignity and well-being, even within constrained systems. Olivia illustrates how relationality shapes teacher agency, as her decision to adjust institutional rules is informed by past interactions and emotional sensitivity to a student's distress.

Here, agency emerges as a negotiation grounded in the past, responsive to the present, and guided by a vision for a more supportive academic culture. Olivia's ability to interpret policy flexibly demonstrates how teacher agency can serve as a bridge between institutional structures and professional convictions, allowing academics to shape procedural decisions in desired directions.

3.4. Care and connection

The fourth theme highlights how teacher agency is exercised through acts of care and connection with students, colleagues, and the wider academic community. Rather than framing teacher agency solely in terms of problem-solving or instructional decision-making, many participants emphasized its relational and emotional dimensions. This reflects the practical-evaluative aspect of the ecological approach, as academics make deliberate, situated choices to prioritize empathy, presence, and connection within the university. Emma mentioned:

“I remember saying, what about the students and young people? As all these decisions are being made, are we actually asking those most affected by them? It meant a lot to me that eventually, their voices were included. We all have a voice within, and it's all valued rather than just thinking, ‘Oh, it's teachers,’ and then what about the receivers, the people it's supposed to make a difference to?”

Emma's intervention only becomes agentic because it is taken up relationally – through dialogue, listening, and eventual inclusion of student voices in decision-making processes. The agentic outcome (student inclusion) is not produced by Emma alone, but through a relational configuration in which shared attention to a common moral object – those most affected by institutional decisions – reorients collective action. In this sense, agency is constituted through relational alignment around what matters, rather than through individual intent alone.

Michael reflected on the impact of institutional growth on their ability to sustain connection:

"I've been trying to remind myself not to rush, to be more present with students, even as class sizes grow. It's about preserving that time and connection. I've seen in other cultures how people take the time to stop and talk, and there's a sense of happiness in that. I want to bring some of that into my own practice"

These reflections emphasize agency as a pastoral and relational practice expressed in everyday choices to resist institutional pressures that can erode attention and care for students. While these decisions appear in-situ, such as slowing down, preserving time for conversation, or amplifying student voices, they are supported by deeper professional values and prior experiences (iterational dimension). Additionally, these choices reflect an orientation toward an imagined future (projective dimension): a university culture that centers empathy, mutual recognition, and dialogue as integral to teaching and learning. The effort to maintain connection, even amidst rising workloads and expanding class sizes, is not just a response to current demands, but an intentional move toward student-centered academia.

In these moments, teacher agency is visible in what academics *do* and *what agency is for*. By exercising agency for care and connection, academics challenge dominant narratives of productivity and standardization (cf. Macfarlane, 2021), reaffirming the relational core of teaching as central to educational quality and integrity.

3.5. Self-directed professional growth

The fifth theme illustrates how academics use teacher agency to actively shape their own professional development. Several participants described pursuing further education, such as doctoral study, to meet institutional expectations while also deepening their disciplinary understanding and enhancing pedagogical practice. These decisions reflect the projective dimension of the ecological approach, as academics envision future roles, identities, and contributions to their fields. Mary mentioned:

"I continued working part-time as a research assistant while beginning my PhD, which was situated in the field of education. My focus was built directly on the insights I gained from previous roles [...]. These experiences helped shape my academic interests and informed the direction of my doctoral work. Afterward, I took on a postdoctoral fellowship [...] and it deepened my understanding of educational systems. This trajectory led to my current role as an academic [...]. Throughout my PhD, I also taught in initial teacher education, and I also taught on some of the other modules. I contributed to the same program and other programs at the university. So very much my academic beginnings have all been at [this university]."

This example highlights how self-directed growth is shaped by future aspirations, past roles and experiences (iterational dimension), such as working as a research assistant and identifying pedagogical needs relevant to current teaching responsibilities. These prior experiences informed Mary's choice of focus areas and dissertation topic, showing how professional trajectories are rooted in accumulated knowledge and reflection. This is also reflected in this quote from Ava:

"My path into academia has been shaped by my earlier experiences as a primary school teacher in [another country]. That foundational training still informs my teaching philosophy today. After moving to the UK, I pursued a master's degree, initially with the aim of improving my teaching prospects. However, during that time, I discovered a growing interest in research, which led me to pursue a PhD. Since then, I've gradually moved into university teaching, contributing to multiple modules and incorporating my research into my teaching practice, making both my teaching and research more meaningful and contextually grounded"

These cases show that professional development is shaped by prior experience and relational influences such as earlier teaching, collegial guidance, and team collaborations, which inform how academics

interpret and pursue their future roles. In this way, self-directed development emerges as a personal commitment embedded in relationships and future-oriented reflection, through which academics reshape their professional roles and practices over time. The academics used available structural supports to make informed, strategic decisions within a particular set of opportunities and constraints. The selection of a dissertation topic that bridges theoretical inquiry and practical teaching needs exemplifies how immediate professional contexts shape and are shaped by self-initiated development. Ultimately, academics use teacher agency to plan developmental pathways that are both personally meaningful and professionally impactful.

Table 4 summarizes how each purposive orientation intersects with the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions of teacher agency. It provides an analytic model of how academics draw on past experience, make situated judgements in the moment, and orient action toward future aspirations across the five orientations.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study show that university teacher agency is fundamentally interpretive, reflexive, and relational. Agency emerges through relational mechanisms such as joint sense-making and shared moral orientation. In several interviews, academics' intended actions became possible through dialogue with colleagues, alignment with students, or the recognition of relational obligations. Thus, academics do not simply react to their institutional environments; they interpret

Table 4
Purposive orientations across ecological dimensions of teacher agency.

	Iterational	Practical-evaluative	Projective
Responsive adaptation	Prior teaching experiences across different national contexts; accumulated observations about students' preparation	Context-sensitive judgements; reflection, experimentation, and reassessment	Cultivating student autonomy and engagement; building a more integrated and cooperative program culture
Moral and ethical reasoning	Inherited course materials and established practices; professional values and accumulated experience	Situated judgements about what is possible and appropriate; seeking support of others through peer dialogue	"The best possible experience" for students; more responsive and student-centered teaching
Negotiation between personal and institutional goals	Familiarity with institutional rules and processes; sensitivity to the emotional costs of rigid bureaucracy	Interpreting and occasionally bending rigid policies; protecting students from undue pressure to disclose personal information	A more compassionate and student-centered educational practice; a more supportive academic culture
Care and connection	Deeper professional values and prior experiences; experiences of how people "take the time to stop and talk"	Deliberate choices to prioritize empathy, presence, and connection; dialogue, listening, and inclusion of student voices	A university culture that centers empathy, mutual recognition, and dialogue; student-centered academia
Self-directed professional growth	Insights gained from previous roles; earlier teaching experience and training shaping interests	Strategic decisions within a set of opportunities and constraints; pursuing further study alongside teaching responsibilities	Deepening disciplinary understanding and enhancing pedagogical practice; incorporating research into teaching practice

themselves in relation to others, structures, and practices. In line with [Kögler's \(1996\)](#) concept of hermeneutic reflexivity, these interpretations involve critically engaging with the social and institutional frameworks that shape professional lives and pedagogical choices. Thus, teacher agency emerges as *self-understanding-in-relation*, i.e., a positional, situated process rather than a purely individual one. Although we presented the five purposes separately in the Findings to preserve their analytical clarity, the themes intersect in practice, revealing how academics draw simultaneously on ethical, emotional, relational, and developmental commitments when exercising agency. This means that exercising teacher agency is a dynamic, value-laden process through which academics reflect on who they are, what they stand for, and how they want to shape their educational contexts ([Eteläpelto et al., 2013](#)). These findings suggest that agency in the university must be understood as an interpretive achievement as much as a behavioral or structural one. Academics engage in a continuous negotiation between personal and professional commitments, mediated by emotionally and ethically charged relationships with students, colleagues, and institutional systems. These negotiations are also visible within the wider neoliberal restructuring of academic life, where productivity metrics, standardized procedures, and heightened expectations increasingly shape how academics understand and enact their roles. As [Macfarlane \(2021\)](#) argues, contemporary university cultures emphasize individual responsibilities, grant capture, and intensified output expectations, reshaping academic norms and subtly redefining what counts as legitimate professional behavior. The purposive forms of agency identified in our study can be seen as situated responses to these pressures: academics work to preserve relational, ethical, and developmental commitments even as institutional environments encourage efficiency, standardization, and competitive performance. In this way, teacher agency is entangled with the formation of professional lives and with the moral purposes that make teaching meaningful (see also [Mori et al., 2021](#); [Van Winkel et al., 2017](#)).

4.1. Relationality and purpose

Using an ecological lens ([Priestley et al., 2015](#)), extended with relationality ([Cong-Lem, 2024](#); [Edwards, 2005](#)), we explored to what purpose academics argue to enact agency. In line with [Tormey \(2021\)](#), this view frames teaching as a moral and emotional practice shaped by care and responsibility. The findings from our study provide empirical support for conceptualizing agency in the university as a process of navigating complexity through purposeful professional judgment. To articulate this contribution as more than a thematic categorization, we reframe the five purposes as purposive orientations of teacher agency. We treat purposive orientations explicitly as a second-order analytic construct rather than as themes alone, and offer a conceptual synthesis to clarify what is theoretically different after this paper. Purposive orientations extend ecological accounts by foregrounding the normative and relational directionality of agency (what agency is for) alongside temporality and context (how agency is achieved). Finally, we clarify the relationship among the five orientations: they are analytically distinguishable yet empirically co-present, and we argue they are relationally co-constitutive rather than hierarchical or sequential. The five identified purposes, i.e., responsive adaptation, ethical reasoning, negotiation of institutional and personal goals, care and connection, and self-directed growth, illustrate how agency is enacted as a deliberate and relational process to reconcile competing demands while staying true to educational values. Thus, teacher agency might not reside solely within human intentionality, but within “immanent events” – i.e., complex moments in which affect, material conditions, past experiences, and future aspirations co-emerge ([Hardman, 2025](#)). As [Hardman](#) illustrates, agency unfolds not simply through what a teacher decides but through the convergence of heterogeneous elements such as tools, institutional histories, emotional intensities, and material affordances that shape what becomes possible in that moment. In this view, teacher agency is

about what unfolds through situated entanglements of academics, tools, spaces, and histories which are multiple and non-linear, going beyond “what the academic does” ([Rushton & Bird, 2024](#)). This complements our hermeneutic approach by highlighting how agency is distributed across relational and material configurations. This observation highlights that the ecological approach's dimensions (iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective) are actively integrated by academics through situated and relational reasoning, rather than being applied in prescriptive categories.

Therefore, the current study also raises the possibility that existing ecological accounts underemphasize the relational dimensions of agency. While the initial ecological approach acknowledges social and structural influences, our findings demonstrate that interpersonal relationships are active spaces for constituting teacher agency. This emphasis on relationality is consistent with [Annala et al.'s \(2023\)](#) analysis of academic agency during curriculum change in higher education, which highlights how agency emerges through dynamic structural-agent processes shaped by collegial relationships and collaborative networks. Their study shows that academics' room for manoeuvre is intertwined with supportive professional communities and the capacity to negotiate shared understandings within their departments. Our findings particularly show how academics used relational judgment to respond to student needs, interpret institutional policies, and sustain collegial support. These results are consistent with [Edwards' \(2005\)](#) account of relational agency as a process of aligning actions with others to respond to shared problems, and with [Edwards' later work](#) showing how such alignment depends on recognizing “what matters” for others in the practice, navigating institutional demands, and building the common knowledge needed to act jointly on complex professional objects ([Edwards, 2020](#)). As such, our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how agency is socially mediated and emotionally grounded in university contexts. Our research provides further empirical evidence for the ways in which agency can be understood as relational, multiple and non-linear spaces, where educators (in this case university academics) are able to identify, move between and create spaces of agency by drawing on different relational resources ([Rushton & Bird, 2024](#)).

Our findings also hold practical implications for academic development. Following [Vreekamp et al. \(2024\)](#), although many professional development programs emphasize teaching techniques or discrete competencies, their effectiveness is influenced by a constellation of factors, including practical relevance, collaboration, reflection, and contextual support. These findings align with an understanding of teacher agency as interpretive, reflexive, and relational, suggesting that professional development should not be limited to skills training but should foster richer forms of professional inquiry and interaction. Professional development should focus on creating spaces where academics can critically reflect on their purposes, share and test interpretations with colleagues, and practice exercising judgment in complex situations. Structured opportunities for dialogue, scenario-based reflection, and collaborative inquiry can help academics surface the values and commitments that guide their teaching, while mentoring and peer-support structures can strengthen their capacity to act with purpose in relation to students, colleagues, and institutional expectations. In this way, professional development can nurture, besides pedagogical techniques, the relational and ethical dimensions of agency that sustain meaningful teaching in universities. In addition, a study conducted in the school context by [Oolbekkink-Marchand and colleagues \(2022\)](#) shows that agency is achieved when aligned institutional conditions support personal resources. For university practices, this could mean creating “stimulating interplays” between academics' professional ambitions and organizational structures, for instance by recognizing, rewarding, and further cultivating the collaborative practices in academic teaching. Our findings suggest that fostering teacher agency requires promoting environments that value dialogue, recognize the emotional labor involved, and create opportunities for sustained collaboration. These results also

further extend the ecological approach by responding to the normative question: *agency for what?* While prior research has primarily explored how agency is enacted, our study shows that academics act with specific educational purposes in mind. This result emphasizes the idea that teacher agency is not only about responding to complexity but about doing so in ways that are ethically coherent and professionally purposeful.

By eliciting responses from academics which invited them to identify what, how and why they navigate professional situations, this study contributes new insight into how agency operates in in-situ decision-making. We showed that decision-making is a relational process and that purpose drives teacher agency. This study provides a hermeneutic explanation of how agency enables a situated reasoning process aimed at educational transformation.

4.2. Limitations and directions for future research

While this study offers new insights into how academics exercise teacher agency in relational and purposeful ways, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from a single university division within a single national context, which may limit the transferability of the findings. Although the scenario-based method elicited rich and context-sensitive data, the institutional culture and disciplinary orientation of the University department may have shaped participants' interpretations and values in specific ways. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of disciplines, institutions, and cultural contexts to explore how teacher agency manifests across diverse academic environments. Moreover, complementary methods could illuminate how agency unfolds in-situ. Ethnographic approaches and shadowing could capture real-time decision-making and relational negotiation in everyday academic work, including informal interactions with colleagues and students. The analysis of teaching artefacts (e.g., course materials, assessment designs, feedback practices, meeting notes, and institutional documents) could further show how purposive orientations are enacted through material and organizational arrangements.

Second, the study focused on reflective, self-reported responses to hypothetical teaching scenarios rather than direct observation of actual classroom decision-making. While this approach captured participants' professional reasoning and values, it may not fully reflect how agency is enacted in actual, embodied practice. Future research could incorporate ethnographic methods or longitudinal designs to investigate how teacher agency unpacks dynamically over time and across different moments of professional life. For example, [Hardman \(2025\)](#) suggests that agency might best be understood as a quality of events. This ontological shift invites future studies to investigate "immanent events" where agency emerges. Such an approach could enrich understanding of how agency is distributed and felt in moments of uncertainty, resistance, or connection that are not always fully conscious or verbally articulated.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of teacher agency in university contexts by demonstrating its relational and purpose-driven nature. Through a scenario-based methodology, we explored how academics make deliberate decisions that appear in-situ but are, in fact, deeply informed by their professional histories, pedagogical values, and aspirations for future practice. Drawing on and extending the ecological approach, our findings reveal that teacher agency in the university is a relationally mediated process.

Across the five dimensions we identified – responsive adaptation, moral and ethical reasoning, negotiation of institutional and personal goals, care and connection, and self-directed professional growth – teacher agency emerges as a form of purposeful professional judgment. This judgment is not exercised in isolation but through ongoing negotiation with students, colleagues, institutional structures, and one's own

evolving sense of their professional life. The study reveals that relational dynamics, whether through collaboration, emotional labor, ethical commitments, or care, are fundamental to the enactment of teacher agency. By emphasizing the interaction between the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions of teacher agency within real-life teaching scenarios, this study offers a university-specific elaboration of the ecological approach. It highlights how relational spaces constitute teacher agency. This study reinforces the view that academics are active agents whose professional judgments, shaped by personal values and relational contexts, are central to the design and development of meaningful university teaching.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Max Kusters: Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Elizabeth A.C. Rushton:** Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Roeland van der Rijst:** Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Wilfried Admiraal:** Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Grammarly in order to check the text for sentence structure and grammar. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Appendix. 23 scenarios ([Kusters et al., 2024](#))

1. Students' personal problems

I'm a lecturer at this university. During one of my courses, I noticed that one of my students had been struggling in class for some time. The student was not meeting the deadlines, seemed unmotivated, and hardly interacted with other students. I had a conversation with the student, and she told me that things were going badly at home and that was why she couldn't keep her attention in class. I knew I had to come up with a solution.

2. Workload

As a lecturer, I experience constant pressure to teach, conduct research, publish articles, and attend conferences. It feels like a constant struggle to get everything done within the tight deadlines set by the university. I am aware that this pressure is a result of both the high standards set for university teachers and our own passion for the job. I

feels like there are never enough hours in a day, and at times I feel overwhelmed. I know I have to come up with a solution.

3. Coherence between courses

One of the things I appreciate most about teaching at the university is the freedom I have to develop my own courses and shape my teaching in the way I feel best. I take pride in developing courses that can inspire and challenge my students, and I enjoy creating a unique learning experience for them. At the same time, sometimes it seems my colleagues and I are all working on our own "island". It seems that this individual freedom comes at the cost of a lack of coherence and consistency across the curriculum. So I knew I had to come up with a solution.

4. Technical issues

Well, in time, I arrived in class to get everything ready for my lecture. However, the computer was very slow in starting up and eventually crashed completely. While my students entered the class, I tried to restart the computer. My heart rate accelerated as I watched the clock tick away and realized how much time we were losing. I realized how dependent on technology we are nowadays! I knew I had to come up with a solution.

5. Student expectations

As a lecturer, I notice that students increasingly expect individual feedback and guidance. Students' expectations seem to have changed since my own student days, and this puts additional pressure on me as a lecturer. I appreciate that students value feedback and guidance. I understand that this is a crucial part of their learning process, and I do my best to meet their expectations. But one day, I felt completely overwhelmed by the large number of emails I received from students who asked for feedback or a one-on-one meeting. So I knew I had to come up with a solution.

6. Students differ in prior knowledge

I walked into the classroom, ready to start my subject's introductory lecture. It was the first lecture of the new academic year. First, I did a small recap of the basics, assuming these were still familiar to the students, and then introduced some new definitions and concepts. However, as I looked around the room, I noticed that many of my students struggled to keep up with the content. Some of them just stared blankly at their notes; others flipped desperately through their textbooks; only a few students were able to keep up. To verify whether students indeed struggled to keep up, I asked which of the students were familiar with the basic concepts. It turned out that there was a large variety with regard to their prior knowledge. For some, the new concepts were easy to understand, but for others, even the basic information was completely new. When I realized these differences in students' prior knowledge, I knew I had to come up with a solution.

7. Unprepared students in lecture

The third lecture of my course was about to begin. As usual, students had to read an article to prepare for the lecture. During the lecture, there was little response to my questions. Only the few students who always actively participated made any attempt to answer my questions. When I tried to involve others in the discussion, I didn't succeed. I asked who had read the article I had sent in advance, but it turned out that only a handful of students had prepared as instructed. I realized that most students had not prepared for the lecture, so I knew I had to come up with a solution.

8. Students' views on teaching quality of colleague

As a lecturer, 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. However, I am told by students from other groups that their instructor is often poorly prepared, cannot provide appropriate answers to questions, and has already failed to meet the promised review deadline a couple of times. I hesitate to bring this up with my colleague: on the one hand, I do not think it is my responsibility, but on the other hand, my professionalism tells me that students have the right to a quality education. So I know I have to come up with a solution.

9. Educational re-design

As a lecturer, I'm ambitious to keep improving my teaching and engage my students more, but constraints from the curriculum and my department hinder what I can achieve. There is no real incentive to improve teaching, nor are proper facilities provided. Still, I see it as part of my job to constantly look for ways to improve my teaching, so I know I have to come up with a solution.

10. Implementing changes in course

I'm teaching a new course in which I want to experiment with some new teaching methods. However, the university requires me to send in the course description and grading procedures far in advance because of the long and tedious procedures for creating the study guide. Since I am currently busy teaching other courses, I feel hampered in implementing these innovations. On the one hand, I see it as my duty to further develop my teaching; on the other hand, I feel that my current teaching also deserves full attention. I know I have to come up with a solution.

11. Students' unexpected questions

The students were in their seats, and I welcomed everyone. Before I actually began the lecture, a student raised her hand and asked a question unrelated to the lecture's topic. However, when I listened to the question, I found it an interesting question nonetheless, and, as I appreciated the idea that the student asked the question, I wanted to accommodate the student. I knew I had to come up with a solution.

12. Balancing professional responsibilities

I value the personal mentoring of my students, as I believe personal attention contributes significantly to their success and well-being. I enjoy taking the time to have one-on-one meetings with my students and provide individual feedback, but I find that this becomes increasingly difficult as my student numbers increase. I find myself in a tight spot and have to make choices between my mentoring role and other duties, such as teaching and research. I struggle with this balance, so I know I have to come up with a solution.

13. Lecture preparation

At the last moment, I had taken over a lecture from a colleague. When I started with the lecture, I soon realized that important slides were missing. I felt like I was thrown into the deep sea without a life jacket. I hadn't had enough time to prepare the lecture because my colleague hadn't saved all the slides. This frustrated me because I knew how important it was to provide students with a well-structured and organized lecture. I knew I had to come up with a solution.

14. View on teaching

It was the first time my colleague and I taught a particular current course. To prepare for the course, we divided the topics among ourselves. Beforehand, I was very excited to teach the course with my

colleague. However, I discovered that we held completely different views on what good teaching entails. Conflicts arose over things like whether class attendance would be compulsory, the amount of feedback we would give, the method of grading, etc. These were long and exhausting debates; discussions ran high, and we struggled to understand each other. I knew I had to come up with a solution.

15. Interaction in online teaching

I stared at my computer screen in frustration as I tried to lead an online discussion with my students. I found it hard to feel the same energy and connection as I did in the physical classroom. I missed the spontaneous conversations, body language, and in-person conversations with my students. I felt isolated and uncomfortable in this new environment. Still, I didn't want to give up because I felt I should be able to teach my classes properly even in this situation. So, I knew I had to come up with a solution.

16. Administrative tasks in thesis supervision

As a lecturer, I find the administrative hassle surrounding thesis supervision particularly time-consuming and frustrating. It feels like it never ends. I have to fill out all kinds of forms, keep track of deadlines, prepare reports, answer countless emails, and attend meetings. It seems more like an administrative job than supervising students. I would like to spend more time giving feedback and guidance to students instead of being stuck in a bureaucratic system. It is time for a more efficient way of working. I know I have to come up with a solution.

17. Controversial topics in course

I taught a course that included some highly contested and controversial topics. I knew that these topics could lead to heated debates and even division among the students in class. Although I felt I was usually well-able to lead class discussions about sensitive issues, it seemed to become increasingly difficult to maintain an atmosphere of respect and understanding in class. What I feared did indeed happen: students felt attacked, and discussions got out of hand. I knew I had to come up with a solution.

18. Being overwhelmed as a new lecturer

As a starting lecturer, I felt overwhelmed. The first period of teaching felt like a big pandemonium, full of challenges, like supervising students, preparing and delivering courses, and doing that in an inspiring way. Although I understood that it is normal to experience these challenges and I still had to build routines, it also felt like I was thrown into the deep end, and I had no idea where to start or how to manage all of these tasks. I knew I had to come up with a solution.

19. Taking offense at joke

A student came up to me after the lecture. He said he felt offended by a joke another student had made during class. I felt uncomfortable because I was not aware of this situation, but I knew it was important to create a safe learning environment where students feel safe and free to express themselves. I took the student's concerns seriously because he was genuinely upset. I knew I had to come up with a solution.

20. Unmotivated students

I have been teaching at this university for several years now and have encountered many difficult students, but I had never experienced a class like this one before. Many students seemed uninterested in the material. Some students were sleeping; others were looking at their phones or talking to each other. When I asked who was interested in the subject,

only a few hands went up. When I realized that the subject did not interest students at all, I knew I had to come up with a solution.

21. Change of job position

I have accepted the position of educational director and find it difficult to be the manager of former colleagues. I feel I am in an awkward position and don't really know how to handle this situation. It occurs to me that my attitude toward my former co-workers has changed and that I am struggling to make choices that affect them. I want to find a way in my new role and find the right balance between collegiality and leadership. Still, I notice from the side of colleagues and myself that there is friction because of my new role. I know I have to come up with a solution.

22. Pedagogical choices

As a lecturer, I feel I need to continuously develop. This means that I have to use new pedagogical approaches. But I'm reluctant to change my pedagogical choices too drastically, since I am afraid that the students will not understand it and therefore will not perform as well. I still want to keep looking for ways to improve my teaching and challenge my students without disadvantaging them through poor teaching, but traditional ways of teaching feel more comfortable and may be safer. I know I have to come up with a solution.

23. University rules

I'm an enthusiastic and dedicated lecturer, but I feel restricted by the rules and requirements of the university where I work. I have to follow a strict protocol for deviating from an exam date. Currently, a good student of mine is unable to take the exam due to personal circumstances. I want to accommodate her by offering another date, but because of all the rules of the university, she has to take the retake. Neither of us wants that, so I know I have to come up with a solution.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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