

Teacher Agency for Change and Development in Higher Education: A Scoping Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper reviews 42 empirical studies on tertiary educators' professional agency, identifying five key practices: pedagogical innovation, research engagement, professional learning, curriculum change, and maintaining well-being. Teacher agency has been variably conceptualized as being influenced by internal and external factors, such as curriculum reforms, social relationships, personal identities, beliefs, and emotions. Individual capacities and enactment strategies, along with contextual conditions like leadership and support, are crucial for effective teacher agency. Implications for policy-making and teacher professional development to foster effective change are discussed, with a conceptual framework proposed for investigating teacher agency holistically in its complexity.

Keywords

educational change, teacher agency, review, higher education, professional development

Introduction

The ongoing wave of globalization has spurred nations worldwide to implement educational reforms aimed at elevating the quality of education. Within this context, the role of teachers as frontline workers has garnered increased emphasis and research attention, positioning them as agents of change (Fullan, 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2018). Extensive literature highlights teachers' ability to adopt, adapt, or resist new

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policies, thereby influencing the outcomes of educational reforms (Deng, 2021; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

Recent years have witnessed a substantial growth in literature exploring the concept of teacher agency. Despite this, the understanding of teacher agency remains dynamic and requires further reflection within the existing literature (Li & Ruppert, 2020). Teacher agency is inherently situated (Biesta et al., 2015), practiced within the constraints of local conditions. A significant professional distinction between university lecturers and primary or secondary school teachers lies in the former's responsibility to conduct research in their fields and educate adult learners (Pediaa, 2016). This study focuses on higher education teacher agency (HETA), encompassing academics working at the tertiary level, including teacher educators and university lecturers. Exploring HETA is vital as these professionals play a crucial role in producing research, educating the future workforce, and training teachers.

Understanding the significance of teacher agency in higher education is crucial for enhancing teaching practices, improving student learning outcomes, and contributing to the broader advancement of the academic field. Moreover, the evolving landscape of educational policies and practices necessitates a nuanced exploration of teacher agency in the context of higher education.

In response to this literature gap, our study adopts a scoping review approach to comprehensively map the existing literature, identify gaps, and re-examine the conceptualization of teacher agency. To the author's best knowledge, there has been one literature review on tertiary lecturers' professional agency by Hinostroza (2020). However, the current review significantly extends the existing literature in two key ways. Firstly, Hinostroza's review narrowly focuses on teacher educators in preservice teacher programs, overlooking university teachers in higher education generally. Secondly, the criteria used to identify papers focusing on teacher agency in the review are unclear. Our study expands the scope by examining university teachers or lecturers more broadly and applies more stringent criteria in paper selection (as detailed in the Method section). Two research questions guide our investigation:

- RQ1: What are the major themes emerging in previous research on teacher agency in the higher education context?
- RQ2: How has teacher agency in higher education been conceptualized and explained in previous literature?

Method

This study adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, ensuring a comprehensive and transparent approach throughout the review process. In the following subsections, we report on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the procedure for searching literature, and the methodology for determining the eligibility of the retrieved papers. Figure 1 illustrates the sequential stages involved in conducting the review.

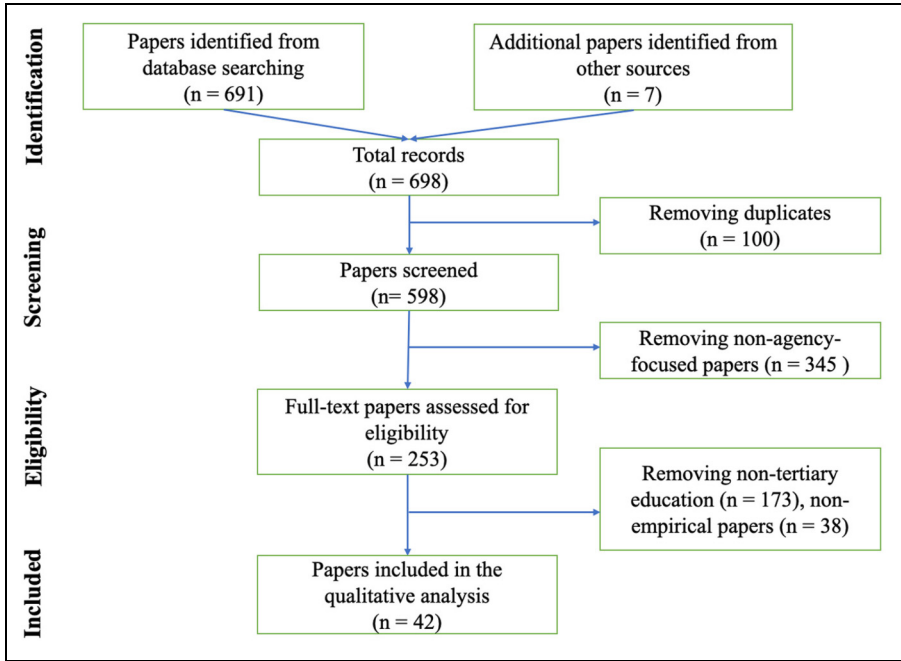


Figure 1. Flowchart of paper selection process.

Literature Search, Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

An extensive search for relevant literature was conducted on Web of Science and Scopus databases, involving literature published up to July 2021. Since this review is exploratory in nature, we did not limit the search by time. The oldest study that mentioned teacher agency in our literature search dated back to 1993. We applied several inclusion criteria: (1) being an empirical journal article, (2) being agency-focused, (3) having university teachers/lecturers as participants, and (4) being published in English-language journals. Accordingly, book chapters, theses, and reports were not included in this review.

To ensure that papers are focused on teacher agency as a theoretical concept, two specific criteria were established for their evaluation. First, the term “agency” must be mentioned in either the title, abstract, or keywords. Second, the article must provide a conceptualization of teacher agency. This helps to filter papers that mention agency as an everyday term rather than a theoretical concept.

A manual search for literature was also carried out on major education journals to complement the initial search involving: *Teachers and Teaching*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *Journal of Education for Teaching*, and *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, *Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, *Teaching in*

Higher Education, and Studies in Higher Education. The selection of these journals was based on their prominence and focus on publications related to teacher education and higher education.

The retrieved articles had their titles and abstracts initially screened against the inclusion criteria for explicitly ineligible papers. Full text was subsequently retrieved for the remaining articles whose components were carefully reviewed before making our final decision on their eligibility. The process resulted in a total of 42 papers ultimately selected for further analysis to produce the findings in this review.

Data Analysis

We employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to scrutinize the content of the selected papers, utilizing the support of NVivo Software Mac version 1.7.1—a professional tool for qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Following the six-step process guided by Braun and Clarke (2012), we first imported the full-text files of the chosen papers into NVivo, carefully reviewing their content to acquaint ourselves with the data. Subsequently, we read each paper, coding relevant information into initial codes within NVivo.

In the third phase, the preliminary codes were grouped into more abstract categories, reflecting “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and representing some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Moving to the fourth stage, existing categories and subcategories were further refined and organized by using NVivo’s drag-and-drop feature to place subcategories under the appropriate categories. During the fifth stage, we defined, labeled, and selected themes for the report based on the meaningful connections among the categories, ensuring their relevance and distinctiveness. In the final stage, we compiled the report based on the identified themes. Table 1 displays the coding system generated from the findings of the studies included in this review.

Findings

RQ1: What Are the Major Themes Emerging in Previous Research on Teacher Agency in the Higher Education Context?

In addressing the initial research question (RQ1), the data analysis uncovered three pivotal themes central to understanding HETA research: purposefulness, motivational source, and enactment of HETA. First, HETA encompasses purposeful actions undertaken by university teachers, such as implementing policies, innovating classroom practices, and enhancing their professional competencies. Secondly, the source of agency pertains to the motivational factors, whether internal or external, and the conditions that either trigger or amplify their agency. Third, the enactment of agency signifies the process through which university teachers employ diverse means and

Table 1. Hierarchy Table of Higher Education Teacher Agency Coding.

Themes of HETA	Level 3 – categories	Level 2 – subcategories	Level 1 – examples of initial codes
Purposes	Pedagogy	Teaching Assessment Material development Curriculum design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching for test-taking or language learning purposes (Liyanae et al., 2015) Developing teaching materials (Bao et al., 2020) Implementing formative assessment (Verberg et al., 2016; Xu & Harfitt, 2019) Designing English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses (Huang, 2019) Conducting research to support one's own and colleagues' teaching practices (Tao & Gao, 2017; Yang, 2018; Yang & Clarke, 2018) Online micro-course professional development (Howard, 2021) Balancing professional work and life (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009) Writing group (Carr et al., 2020) Reflection interventions to develop teacher agency (Vu, 2018, 2020) Changing existing practices and reimagining education (Green & Pappa, 2021; Huang, 2019) Demonstrating empathetic behaviors and attaining emotional rewards (Miller & Gkonou, 2018) Documented instances of resistance against unfavorable working conditions as a means of safeguarding one's well-being (Phan & Hamid, 2017)
	Research		
	Professional learning	-	
	Instigating curriculum changes Maintaining well-being and resilience		
Motivational Source	External	Educational change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English language education reform (Liu et al., 2020) ESP language education reform policy (Deng, 2021)

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Themes of HETA	Level 3 – categories	Level 2 – subcategories	Level 1 – examples of initial codes
		Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitioning from teaching other foreign languages to teaching English as a foreign language (Iran, 2019) • Learner community: sense of responsibility toward students (Phan & Hamid, 2017) • Collegial collaboration (Carr et al., 2020; van Lankveld et al., 2017)
		Professional development (PD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement with the wider professional communities • PD interventions (Vu, 2018, 2020)
		Public health emergency events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid19 pandemic (Badiozaman, 2021; Thumvichit, 2021)
	Internal	Cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs and attitude (Halai & Durrani, 2018; Kitade, 2015; Nguyen, 2020; Ollerhead, 2010) • (Prior) experiences (Leibowitz et al., 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017; Xu & Fan, 2022) • Theoretical and pedagogical content knowledge (Bao et al., 2020; Yang, 2018) • Awareness (Halai & Durrani, 2018; Kitade, 2015) • Reflection (Banegas & Gerlach, 2021; Hinojosa-paredes, 2021; Vu, 2018, 2020; Yang & Clarke, 2018) • Identity (Kayi-aydar, 2019b; van Lankveld et al., 2017) • Emotion and emotional labour (Benesch, 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Ruan & Zheng, 2019) • Well-being (Phan & Hamid, 2017)
Enactment	Manifestations/ forms		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive, restricted agency, multifaceted, relational, situational (Annala et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009) • Transformative agency (Englund & Price, 2018)

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Themes of HETA	Level 3 – categories	Level 2 – subcategories	Level 1 – examples of initial codes
Means		Personal competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive and reactive agency (Xu & Fan, 2022) Explicit and covert agency (Deng, 2021) Ostensible and occlusive agency (Damşa et al., 2021) Various types of knowledge (e.g. theoretical, pedagogical content knowledge), skills (e.g. curriculum design, assessment, resilience) and self-regulated strategies (Badiozaman, 2021; Ollerhead, 2010; Ruan & Zheng, 2019; Yang, 2018)
		Relational resources	
Mode		Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help seeking and collaboration (Damşa et al., 2021) An individual's innovative, transformative or creative practice (Green & Pappa, 2021; Ruan & Zheng, 2019; Ruan et al., 2020)
		Collective	
Contextual factors		-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration working toward shared goals (Englund & Price, 2018; Jeannin, 2017; Tao et al., 2020) Leadership (Ruan et al., 2020) Workload (Phan & Hamid, 2017) Power relations (Kayi-aydar, 2019a) Societal pressure (Liyanage et al., 2015)
Outcomes	Pedagogical innovation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online teaching pedagogy (Badiozaman, 2021)
	Professional development		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pedagogical and cultural knowledge, beliefs and research capacities (Vu, 2020; Yang, 2018)
Well-being and professional resilience	Curriculum changes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New shared professional practices (Green & Pappa, 2021) Curriculum change (Kim & Lee, 2020)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional adaptability and resilience (Badiozaman, 2021; Mccune, 2021)

resources to achieve their goals. It is essential to note that a single study may encompass or report on multiple themes, and the categorization serves primarily for organizational and analytical purposes.

Purposeful HETA. Prior studies have delved into HETA as a purposeful and context-specific phenomenon. Depending on their professional context, tertiary educators have exhibited agency for five primary purposes: innovating pedagogies, conducting research, advancing professional competencies, maintaining resilience, and instigating curriculum changes.

Pedagogical Innovation. First, HETA is often characterized as educators' endeavors to implement or innovate their teaching methodologies, incorporating new pedagogies, materials, and/or forms of assessment. A study by Phan and Hamid (2017) showcased four Vietnamese EFL educators actively applying a communicative teaching approach to enhance learner autonomy, adapting it to local conditions. Similarly, Nguyen's (2020) investigation into Vietnamese lecturers' beliefs and practices regarding active learning revealed pedagogical modifications over three semesters as their beliefs evolved.

In settings with limited resources, university teachers frequently exercise their agency to modify or create teaching materials, aiming to achieve educational goals. Bao et al. (2020) explored how Chinese language university teachers at a Belarussian university adapt or create materials to address local students' needs. Kitade's (2015) study highlighted instances of HETA in implementing educational technologies, where teachers successfully overcame challenges.

Assessment, alongside instruction, represents another crucial area where teacher agency plays a significant role. Liyanage et al. (2015) reported on the dilemma faced by Mongolian EFL university teachers, specifically regarding whether teaching should prioritize test-taking or language learning. Despite navigating institutional regulations, social expectations, students' beliefs, and local constraints, the teachers advanced their own agenda. In a context where teaching quality is linked to student achievement, many university teachers in the study prioritized teaching for examination purposes. Similarly, Xu and Harfitt (2019) explored the feasibility of assessment for learning in large classes. The study's participants, lecturers at a Chinese university, demonstrated agency by introducing new activities, such as organizing teacher-student conferences and utilizing technology for assessment practices.

Professional Learning and Development. Transitioning to the second subtheme, the focus shifts to professional learning and development interventions aimed at cultivating HETA. These interventions employ diverse strategies, including encouraging university teachers' self-reflection, engagement in new pedagogical activities, and collaborative practice. For example, in a study by Vu (2018), a professional development program was implemented, where Vietnamese tertiary lecturers reflected on their past pedagogical experiences. The results underscored that reflective practice played a

crucial role in enhancing university teachers' agency in their classroom practices. In a subsequent study by Vu (2020), a similar professional development project involved lecturers from eight universities in Vietnam, revealing that educators emerged as more knowledgeable, intercultural, and inspirational agents in their classrooms.

Furthermore, Verberg et al. (2016) investigated the impact of participation in a program on HETA within the context of formative assessment practices. Three nursing instructors were recruited, forming pairs with their assessors to create three dyads. The findings pointed to varying degrees of agency demonstrated by participants throughout the project and in their utilization of feedback from assessors.

Research Engagement. In the existing literature, the third significant purpose of HETA is linked to the endeavor of conducting research within the domain of HETA. This facet plays a crucial role in supporting university academics as they fulfill their responsibilities, assist colleagues, and advance their professional development.

Examining specific instances, Tao and Gao (2017) presented a case study featuring Qian, who engaged in research on his own teaching practices. Qian's efforts resulted in the transformation of findings into a model that proved beneficial to his colleagues. Similarly, Yang (2018) illuminated the experiences of Linda, who leveraged HETA in conducting research to support her instructional practices. This undertaking, in turn, contributed significantly to shaping Linda's pedagogical beliefs.

Curriculum and Institutional Change. Another dimension of teacher agency involves instigating curriculum or structural changes within their educational context, a task that often proves challenging. Annala et al. (2021) highlighted in their study that university educators often experienced a sense of powerlessness when attempting to alter predetermined curriculum structures imposed by policymakers. The authors noted that academics displaying a sense of powerless agency expressed a strong desire to contribute to the university community, which was perceived as a hub for research and teaching. However, these individuals lacked the requisite status or space to effectively execute agency within the established framework (Annala et al., 2021, p. 10).

In addition to individual efforts, the concept of collective or relational agency emerges as a potent force in transforming professional practices and instigating institutional changes. Examining collective agency, Green and Pappa (2021) conducted a study involving eight teacher educators at two Finnish universities. Their findings concluded that "collective agency occurs in the shared development of routine practices and the transformation of EFL education, and in responding to shifts in power dynamics" (p. 1). This research underscores the significance of collaborative efforts in initiating broader changes to professional practices and institutional structures.

Well-Being and Professional Resilience. Beyond the established objectives of HETA, encompassing roles like teaching and research, university educators also wield agency to safeguard their well-being and resilience within professional contexts (e.g., Badiozaman, 2021; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Phan & Hamid, 2017). For instance,

Miller and Gkonou (2018) illustrated in their research how university educators willingly and actively undertook a caregiving role for their students, gaining emotional rewards in return. Nevertheless, in more demanding environments characterized by heavy workloads, meager salaries, and inadequate acknowledgment, educators might opt to resist implementing new changes as a protective measure for their well-being (Phan & Hamid, 2017).

HETA Motivational Sources. The second prominent theme centers on the origins or influential sources that prompt university lecturers to modify their current professional practices. This theme can be further categorized into two groups: external factors and internal factors. The former explores how change initiatives form the basis for teachers' efforts to instigate change, while the latter investigates how teachers' personal beliefs, identities, emotions, and interpretations of external factors shape the agency of university educators. While presented as distinct subthemes, previous literature often explores them in conjunction with one another or in relation to their interplay.

External Factors. Educational reform is frequently cited as the predominant external force propelling HETA. Prior studies on HETA often concentrate on educational change initiatives at national or institutional levels (Annala et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Tran, 2019; Xu & Fan, 2022), societal events such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Damşa et al., 2021; Thumvichit, 2021), and professional development interventions (Englund & Price, 2018; Vu, 2018).

Another significant motivational force for HETA stems from professional relationships. University lecturers frequently act assertively to meet their students' needs. For instance, in Phan and Hamid's (2017) study, the sense of responsibility toward their students underpinned the agency of Vietnamese university lecturers in adapting macro policies to suit their classroom needs. Similarly, Benesch (2018) demonstrated in her study how tertiary language teachers in the US resisted their institution's punitive regulations on students' plagiarism, while the university teachers in Miller and Gkonou's (2018) study displayed "investment in their relationships with students, which is often enacted through agentic demonstrations of caring" (p. 55).

Collaboration and communication with other colleagues serve as additional sources of HETA. As noted in Xu and Fan's (2022) research, teacher participants often engaged in intentional discussions with colleagues, which not only helped them design tasks but also improved their understanding of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and tasks. Collaborative practices also facilitate the development of HETA by generating new insights for teaching practices. Englund and Price (2018) argued that "transformative agency emerges when teachers are given the opportunity to analyze, envision, and redesign their practice collaboratively" (p. 192). In another study by Carr et al. (2020), a professional writing group was found to provide a mediational space for a group of teacher educators to further develop their identity and agency.

Internal Factors. Beliefs are widely acknowledged as a significant factor driving HETA. Halai and Durrani's (2018) investigation delved into the professional agency of Pakistani teachers, encompassing those in universities, with a particular emphasis on fostering peacebuilding within their classrooms. Their research unveiled that these educators perceived social cohesion issues as peripheral to their primary instructional duties, thereby showcasing their pedagogical agency in imparting knowledge about the subject to students. The incongruence in beliefs between teachers and learners also caught the attention of university educators, presenting them with opportunities to cultivate fresh perspectives (Kitade, 2015). In contrast, Deng's (2021) study stands out as one of the few examinations that underscore the detrimental consequences of teachers' beliefs. Deng specifically highlighted instances in which Chinese university teachers exercised their agency to resist local curriculum reforms.

Identity stands out as another common source attributed to HETA (e.g., Huang, 2019; McCune, 2021; Tao & Gao, 2017). Huang's (2019) research, focusing on 13 Taiwanese university academics teaching English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses, underscores the role of identity in shaping pedagogical decisions. Likewise, Tao and Gao (2017) investigated how eight university educators in China exercised agency in their professional development, aligning their trajectories with identifiable patterns rooted in their identity and prior experiences. Ruan et al. (2020) further contributed to this understanding by revealing that Chinese lecturers' agency in enhancing classroom effectiveness was deeply rooted in their self-perception, encompassing their ought-to selves, actual selves, and ideal selves.

Teachers also exercise their agency based on their interpretation of external factors such as regulations, resources, and constraints in the local context. Phan and Hamid (2017) conducted a study examining how macro-policies regarding learning autonomy in the Vietnamese context translated into classroom practices at the micro-level through the agency of university teachers. They concluded that the interpretation of policies and personal knowledge by university teachers played a pivotal role in determining how their professional agency manifested. Similarly, Vähäsantanen et al. (2009) underscored the significance of personal interpretation of local conditions in their exploration of Finnish HETA. They noted that "all the teachers exercised agency actively in terms of making decisions, based on their individual interpretation of the resources and constraints pertaining to their work" (p. 402). This emphasizes how teachers actively engage with and shape their professional practices by interpreting and navigating the external factors influencing their educational environment.

Teacher emotion is increasingly acknowledged as another source of agency. It has been reported in the previous research that university educators often actively exercise their agency to safeguard the well-being of both their learners and themselves (Leibowitz et al., 2012; Phan & Hamid, 2017). For instance, Benesch's (2018) exploration focused on tertiary language instructors in the US responding to institutional regulations regarding handling students' plagiarism. The study uncovered that participants, faced with mixed emotions, chose to resist the punitive

discourse advocated by the university, showcasing their agency in maintaining a balanced approach.

Similarly, Miller and Gkonou (2018) asserted in their examination of tertiary language teachers in the UK and US that teacher emotions are pivotal in shaping practice and identity. They highlighted the crucial role of the teacher-student relationship in influencing emotional labor and rewards. The authors challenged the negative connotations associated with emotional labor, advocating that “teachers’ agentive exercise of emotional labor can lead to emotional rewards” (p. 51). Recognizing emotion as a source of HETA underscores the necessity of acknowledging the affective and moral dimensions of teaching. The emotional experience of teachers in response to new policies or practices is as significant as their comprehension of the policies themselves and should not be overlooked.

HETA Enactment

Dynamic Forms or Manifestations of Teacher Agency. HETA can manifest in diverse forms, contingent on the educators’ purposes and intentions. Annala et al. (2021) unveiled seven distinct manifestations of HETA in their study, including progressive, oppositional, territorial, bridge-building, accommodating, and powerless agency. Notably, they observed that an educator might express more than one form of agency enactment in their work, aligning with Tran’s (2019) perspective that HETA is dynamic and nuanced, extending beyond mere resistance or accommodation to change (p. 544).

Moreover, in lieu of embracing new curriculum changes, educators, as observed in studies by Deng (2021), Englund and Price (2018), and Kim and Lee (2020), may opt to resist, negotiate, and/or transform their existing practices. This underscores the intricate and varied ways in which educators engage with their agency to navigate and shape the landscape of educational reforms in higher education. Nevertheless, teacher agency has been demonstrated to undergo transformations, transitioning from one manifestation to another—such as evolving from resistance to adaptability in response to new training or policies (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2020). Consequently, it is crucial to examine and support HETA continually from a developmental perspective.

Means of HETA. In the exercise of their agency, university teachers rely on a diverse array of personal and relational capacities. The significance of personal capacity, encompassing knowledge and various professional skills, has become evident. For example, Badiozaman (2021) underscored the importance of diverse knowledge and competencies, including assessment knowledge, communication skills, and resilience, in enabling university educators to effectively act as agents of change. Additionally, the self-regulated capacity, involving self-reflection, planning, monitoring, and seeking assistance, was identified as pivotal for effective HETA in Ruan and Zheng’s (2019) study.

On the social front, educators may also need to seek help and collaborate to tackle more challenging goals beyond their individual capacity (e.g., Jeannin, 2017; Ruan & Zheng, 2019; Xu & Fan, 2022). For instance, Jeannin (2017) concluded in his study, which interviewed six international lecturers about their adjustment to a new country, that “teachers’ agency and collegiality are crucial interrelated factors of adaptation” (p. 236). Ruan and Zheng (2019) also reported on the case of Zhou, who encountered various conflicts in balancing her personal and professional duties. She was found to overcome these challenges by utilizing both self-regulative strategies and external support as key mediational resources for her agency.

Mode of HETA. The literature indicates that university lecturers can exercise their agency through individual or collective modes, representing distinct approaches (Green & Pappa, 2021; Hinojosa-Paredes, 2021). In the individual mode, university teachers tend to address professional challenges independently, drawing on their own resources. Conversely, in the collective mode, they actively seek help from colleagues or collaborate with others to achieve shared goals.

Green and Pappa (2021) explored how eight Finnish teacher educators employed collective or relational agency to navigate power dynamics with the government and their institution. Similarly, Carr et al. (2020) discussed how teacher educators, through joining a writing group as a form of relational agency, strengthened themselves individually through shared knowledge, views, and mutual support (p. 674). Tao et al. (2020) described how eight university English language teachers collaborated and supported each other with resources and emotions by exercising their relational agency.

Influence of Contextual Conditions. The literature highlights that HETA is both facilitated and constrained by various contextual factors, including policies, regulations, institutional and departmental leadership, educators’ workload, and their professional relationships with local communities (e.g., colleagues, students). Educational policies are frequently discussed as a pivotal determinant influencing the facilitation or hindrance of HETA. Often, new policies are implemented hierarchically, imposing changes on teachers without adequate consideration for their existing practices (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2020; Phan & Hamid, 2017).

Liu et al. (2020) emphasized the significant mediational role of institutional leaders in influencing HETA, noting that “institutional delays in implementing national policy and the ignorance of administrators toward the efforts of individual teachers to change close space for teacher agency” (p. 548). Additionally, to engage in HETA for research purposes, university educators usually need to acquire funding or a research grant (e.g., Tao & Gao, 2017). Lecturers’ overwhelming workload also hinders their capacity to experiment with new methods to improve existing practices (e.g., Xu & Harfitt, 2019). Factors such as low salaries and lack of recognition for educators’ individual efforts have also been identified as contributors to negative emotions, hindering effective or transformative HETA (Phan & Hamid, 2017).

RQ2: How Has Teacher Agency in Higher Education Been Conceptualized and Explained in Previous Literature?

The theorization of teacher agency has been found to be limited and varies in the reviewed studies, contingent on the theoretical approaches adopted. Additionally, previous scholars have used a wide range of terms to describe the forms or manifestations of teacher agency, ranging from two basic forms of proactive and reactive agency to up to six different types of manifestations, namely progressive, oppositional, territorial, bridge-building, accommodating, and powerless agency (e.g., Annala et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021). This demonstrates the complexity of the concept of teacher agency. Ruan et al. (2020) asserted that “it is almost impossible to construct a unified concept of agency” (p. 2). Table 2 provides a compilation of diverse conceptualizations of teacher agency extracted from the reviewed studies.

In general, previous studies have adopted three major approaches to the theorization of teacher agency, including a psychological approach, a sociological approach and a combination of both. On the one hand, teacher agency can be extrapolated as a psychological phenomenon where researchers explored teachers’ will, intentionality, sense of control and capacity to act (e.g., Ruan & Zheng, 2019, Verberg et al., 2016). Accordingly, psychological theories such as theories about identity and selves are adopted to investigate teacher agency. For instance, Ruan et al. (2020) utilized self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) to elucidate the agency of Chinese EFL university teachers. Within this framework, three types of selves were examined: ought-to selves

Table 2. A Sample of Conceptualizations of HETA in Previous Studies.

Study	Agency conceptualization
Bao et al. (2020)	“The initiatives and autonomy of teachers” (p. 1)
Green and Pappa (2021)	“A mediated phenomenon that occurs in social practice” (p. 2)
Huang (2019)	“What one does or achieves rather than what one has or possesses” (p. 1186)
Phan and Hamid (2017)	“Agency denotes freewill or power to act” (p. 43)
Ruan and Zheng (2019)	“A dynamic process of self-actualization and identity commitment” (p. 350)
Ruan et al. (2020)	“Intentional and innovative teaching practices” (p. 2)
Tran (2019)	“The ways they individually or collectively feel, perceive, interpret, improvise, and judge the change” (p. 547)
Vähäsantanen et al. (2009)	“The capability of persons to make intentional choices, and to act on these choices in ways that make a difference in their lives” (p. 396)
Verberg et al. (2016)	“Intentionally making things happen ... being in control of their own actions ... taking initiative in the pursuit of their goals” (p. 535)
Yang and Clarke (2018)	“Proactively making changes” (p. 199)

(attributes one should possess), ideal selves (attributes one would like to possess), and actual selves (attributes one actually possesses). The perceived gaps among these selves were believed to generate emotions and motivate university teachers to take agentic actions. Ruan et al. (2020) argued that professional agency was mobilized to “bridge the gap between beliefs and practices” or address the “teachers’ self-discrepancies perceived in their teaching” (p. 6).

On the other hand, teacher agency has been explored as actions mediated by context, primarily influenced by an ecological perspective (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) grounded in a sociological approach (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Studies employing this approach often define professional agency as the actions of teachers and the attainment of these actions, shaped by three temporal dimensions: past, present, and future (e.g., Vu, 2018; Xu & Harfitt, 2019). Xu and Harfitt (2019) argued that the “achievement of agency involves an interplay between individual efforts stemming from one’s past experiences, evaluative projections and possibilities in the present, and the cultural, structural, and material resources and constraints available in specific settings” (p. 474). One limitation of this approach is its (over)emphasis on environmental factors as the determinants of teacher agency. It seemingly falls short in specifying the dynamic interactions among individual factors within the three temporal dimensions (e.g., how prior experiences inform educators’ current judgment of the situation).

The third approach seeks to overcome the limitations of previous conceptualizations of HETA by framing it as influenced by both personal and contextual factors. Teacher agency is argued to be not solely determined by environmental factors but can be subjectively enacted (Green & Pappa, 2021; Kitade, 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017). However, there is a heuristic depiction of subjectivity in HETA enactment, attributing it to teachers’ personal backgrounds or past experiences without specifying the mechanisms accounting for individual differences. While this approach marks a positive theoretical development in HETA, it appears to be insufficient in explaining teachers’ subjectivity within their agency. Despite recognizing the significance of teachers’ psychology, its roots in a sociological perspective may contribute to this inadequacy. Therefore, it is important to advance a theoretical understanding of HETA that incorporates both teachers’ psychology and sociocultural conditions.

Discussion

Themes and Conceptualization of HETA

This scoping review synthesizes findings from 42 studies exploring how university teachers exercise their agency across various formal and informal professional contexts. The collective evidence strongly underscores the pivotal role of HETA in instigating personal and institutional change and development, thereby influencing the professional outcomes of educators and the academic outcomes of learners. The literature characterizes HETA as purposeful and contextually mediated actions, shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external motivational factors, including change

initiatives, teachers' personal biographies, and their subjective experiences and interpretations of the situation. The realization of HETA depends on teachers' individual capacities, the strategies employed for its implementation, and contextual factors such as leadership, social relations, and the availability of relevant cultural and material resources.

This review also found the conceptualization of HETA insufficient, where it has been generally treated as a psychological phenomenon (e.g., intentionality, a sense of control) or as contextually mediated actions. Empirical evidence highlights the need for a "hybrid" conceptualization that transcends reducing it to individual characteristics, actions, or context alone. Instead, it should be perceived as a dynamic interaction among these three components. In addition, it was noted that studies drawing on established theories tend to offer a more effective explanation of HETA compared to those relying on a heuristically and empirically observed explanation of HETA.

However, the exploration of HETA necessitates further theoretical development beyond the application of psychological or sociological theories. This review highlights the need for a more integrative approach in theorizing and examining HETA. An approach that can be deemed "psycho-social", drawing upon the advantages of psychological theories to explain educators' motivational sources and purposes of HETA, and leveraging sociological theories to examine the influence of local structural conditions. Nevertheless, this psychosocial approach should be dynamically applied. Depending on the context, the focus of its application can be on exploring the psychological aspects of HETA, such as educators' professional competencies to accomplish their agentic actions, or on the contextual conditions that enable or impede the manifestation of HETA or its development.

There is also a lack of recognition of the potential mismatches between teachers' intentionality and their actions. For instance, the misalignment may occur between teachers' beliefs and their practices or between their intention to make curriculum changes and their inaction due to a lack of resources and unsupportive contextual conditions. Scholars should, therefore, recognize the necessity of promoting the transition from intentionality to actions and achieving qualitative outcomes. In addition, previous studies seem to attribute HETA efficacy to the presence of suitable means but lack investigation into the quality of how educators employ these means, which can contribute to individual differences in HETA outcomes.

A Holistic Conceptual Framework for Understanding Higher Education Teacher Agency

Based on the insights gleaned from this review, we present a conceptual framework for the examination of HETA (see Figure 2). This framework encompasses six key components where individual, relational, and contextual represent the three levels of analysis for the remaining three components, including motivational, purposeful and mediational. For example, the purpose of HETA for teaching can be influenced by educators' individual considerations (at the personal level), the characteristics of

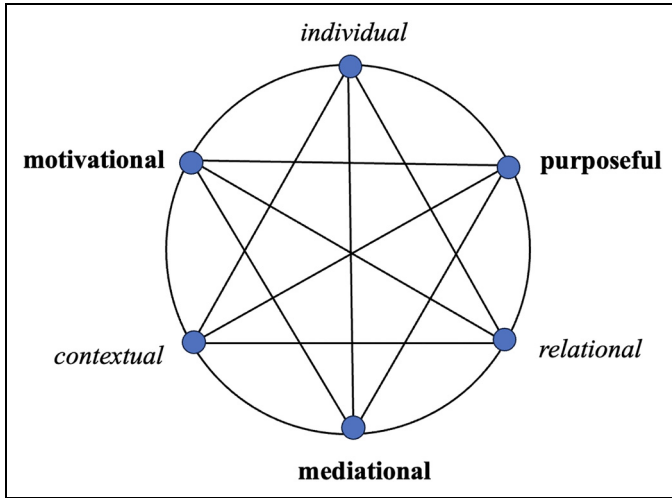


Figure 2. A conceptual model of higher education teacher agency.

students (at the relational level), and the curriculum demands (at the contextual level). Similarly, the motivational source of HETA can be more comprehensively explored by delving into factors spanning these three levels, such as educators’ beliefs and interpretation of the professional situation at the individual level and their professional relationships with colleagues and students at the second relational level.

In this framework, the purposeful dimension underscores that HETA is inherently linked to goal-oriented actions, encompassing both long-term and short-term objectives. The motivational component highlights the diverse drivers that underpin HETA, while the mediational dimension emphasizes that the attainment of agency hinges on a spectrum of means, encompassing personal characteristics, relational resources, and supportive contextual conditions. This multifaceted and multi-level framework underscores the dynamic and interconnected nature of the myriad factors influencing HETA, implying that for HETA to be effectively enhanced, a holistic approach should be adopted, concurrently addressing and supporting these factors across various levels.

In terms of practical application, the outlined framework can function as an analytical tool for diagnosing, researching, and implementing professional development interventions geared toward fostering HETA. For instance, when assessing the underperformance of educational reforms in specific contexts, administrative leaders and researchers can utilize the framework to conduct a thorough analysis of pertinent factors, discerning whether the challenges stem from teachers’ personal characteristics (e.g., beliefs, professional competencies), a lack of supportive mechanisms, or a combination of both. In addition, this comprehensive understanding empowers university educators to strategically plan and enact their agency, thereby optimizing its outcomes.

Educators can tailor their approaches, drawing on a nuanced awareness of the interplay between personal characteristics, relational dynamics, and contextual conditions. For instance, if a teacher identifies a gap in their curriculum design skills (i.e., the personal level), they might collaborate with colleagues (i.e., the relational level) or seek professional development opportunities (i.e., the contextual level) to address this deficiency.

The utilization of this conceptual model comes with several potential limitations that merit acknowledgment. Although the framework outlines key dimensions of HETA, its consumers are encouraged to delve into more specific factors associated with characteristics of the local educators and context that influence teacher agency. In this regard, the HETA coding table (see Table 1) should serve as a crucial supplementary tool, aiding in a comprehensive exploration and analysis of HETA. Additionally, it is essential to gather more empirical findings to assess the usefulness and efficiency in extrapolating HETA of the proposed model.

Implications for Future Research Directions and Educational Practices

Previous studies often approached HETA in a segmented manner, focusing on specific purposes such as teaching, research, or professional development. However, in reality, university educators' agency is commonly enacted for accomplishing a multifaceted range of activities, encompassing teaching, research, professional learning, initiating curricular changes, and safeguarding their well-being (e.g., employing strategies to buffer against negative emotions). This tendency to focus on specific aspects of HETA in the previous research may be influenced by the characteristics of the local context, for example, where university teachers may predominantly concentrate on teaching, or the specific goals of intervention studies centered around professional development.

An area warranting further research involves gaining a deeper understanding of how these distinct yet interconnected professional activities discussed above interact with and support one another. Second, while educators' HETA for instigating curricular changes (within and beyond their classroom) and for maintaining well-being has gained some attention, they are still relatively under-explored research areas. Understanding the strategies employed by educators to initiate curricular changes and safeguard their well-being, including addressing emotional agency, is crucial, especially given the significant impact of emotions on teachers' work.

Third, there is a noticeable lack of intervention-based research aimed at promoting HETA. While previous studies have largely focused on identifying factors influencing or determining the outcomes of HETA, more research utilizing intervention or professional development programs is needed to uncover how HETA can be enabled and developed to varying degrees in different contexts. By taking a more holistic and intervention-oriented approach, researchers can contribute valuable insights into fostering and empowering university educators in their professional agency.

On the other hand, the findings of this review hold significant practical implications for various stakeholders. Firstly, the importance of HETA should be recognized and

supported to facilitate meaningful educational changes. Policymakers and leaders should consider the voice of university educators and involve them in the decision-making process (e.g., Phan & Hamid, 2017). By valuing the insights and experiences of these individuals, policymakers can advance a more inclusive and collaborative approach to driving educational change.

Teacher trainers should consider approaches to enhance internal and external drivers of HETA, such as transforming deep-seated beliefs or creating collaborative spaces for reflection and peer learning (e.g., Verberg et al., 2016; Vu, 2018). Importantly, HETA for systemic change-making (i.e., curriculum or institutional change) should be examined as a distinct type of knowledge, skill and dispositions that extends beyond technical teaching expertise. Change-making HETA may involve various competencies in curriculum design, assessment, communication, collaboration, and resilience (Badiozaman, 2021).

University educators can derive valuable insights from the findings of this review, acquiring systemic knowledge about how their agency can be both enabled and constrained by various factors. Equipped with this understanding, they can strategically navigate their professional landscape, implementing actions that drive positive changes within and beyond their classrooms. This may involve engaging in self-reflection on their own beliefs and practices or proactively initiating collaborations to coordinate and implement new curricular changes. In essence, this review equips university educators with a deeper awareness of their agency's dynamics, enabling them to be proactive instigators of positive change in their professional spheres.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this scoping review, encompassing a comprehensive analysis of 42 studies, has illuminated the multifaceted nature of HETA among university educators. The synthesis of findings has allowed us to propose a conceptual framework that dissects HETA into three pivotal dimensions: motivational sources, professional purposes, and agency enactment. This framework serves not only as a diagnostic and research tool but also as a practical guide for educators and institutions aiming to foster HETA. The evidence presented in the reviewed studies underscores the interconnectedness of internal and external factors shaping the motivational sources of HETA, ranging from internal factors such as beliefs and emotions to external relationships and institutional policies. The enactment of HETA involves situated actions, enabled by personal, relational, and contextual resources, which further highlights the mediatedness and situatedness of HETA. Moreover, the reviewed literature highlights the need for a more robust theoretical conceptualization of HETA, with our proposed framework offering a stepping stone toward a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. By acknowledging the dynamic interplay of motivational sources, professional purposes, and agency enactment, stakeholders can collectively work toward creating a more conducive and empowering environment to foster teacher agency educational change.

While the reviewed studies have contributed valuable insights into the theorization of teacher agency in a higher education setting, it is crucial to acknowledge several potential limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, despite our efforts to retrieve the most relevant studies, there is a possibility that eligible studies for this review may have been inadvertently overlooked during our research. Additionally, the contextual specificity of the included studies in this review, which mostly adopt a qualitative design, underscores the need for caution in generalizing results across diverse educational settings. Third, the reliance on self-report retrospective measures such as interviews may introduce a level of subjectivity and potential bias. Recognizing and addressing these limitations is essential for advancing the field and ensuring the robustness of future research on teacher agency.

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Author's Contributions

The author is responsible for all stages of idea conception, performing literature search, conducting data analysis, writing and revising the manuscript. A research assistant helped with the screening process and is acknowledged in the paper.

Availability of Data and Material

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author


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