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Enhancing curriculum relevance and student engagement: the role of lecturers as agents of change in higher education

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This study investigates the role of lecturers as change agents in higher education, focusing on their ability to improve curriculum relevance and student engagement within rigid institutional structures. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with lecturers and analyzed using in-vivo and open coding, culminating in the development of the Conditional Matrix. The findings reveal that lecturers who integrate real-life experiences, foster collaboration, and adopt innovative teaching strategies, such as flipped classrooms, significantly enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and curriculum relevance. However, challenges such as resistance to change among faculty and outdated module descriptors were identified as barriers to progress. The study emphasizes the importance of granting lecturers greater autonomy in curriculum development and providing targeted professional development to align education with industry demands. Ultimately, empowering lecturers is essential to preparing students for the modern workforce and ensuring higher education remains relevant and impactful.

KEYWORDS

lecturers as agents of change, curriculum recontextualization, student engagement, constructivist grounded theory, curriculum innovation, continuing professional development

1 Introduction

Higher education encompasses three core knowledge activities: the production, continuation, and distribution of knowledge (Stephens et al., 2008). These institutions are not just places of learning; they are dynamic spaces where tuition is delivered through carefully crafted curricula by specialized lecturers. According to Stephens et al. (2008), curricula should go beyond traditional knowledge to integrate emerging skills and contemporary expertise, ensuring relevance in an ever-evolving world. A well-designed curriculum should, therefore, serve as a supportive framework, benefiting both lecturers and students by fostering a rewarding and meaningful educational experience.

The curriculum serves as the primary vehicle for transmitting knowledge, with its ultimate goal being students' lifelong development. For this reason, curricula must be designed with a long-term vision, keeping the future needs of learners in focus. Lecturers play a central role in this process, but their approaches vary significantly. Some may adhere strictly to the curriculum descriptor, while others might modify their teaching content to enrich the learning experience (Paik, 2011). However, a small group of academics often create curriculum descriptors and tend to be standardized and inflexible. In many cases, they become outdated over time, creating a disconnect between curriculum developers and lecturers. As Mandel (2015) notes, this exclusion of lecturers

from the curriculum design process often leaves them feeling marginalized and undervalued.

Rigid institutional structures refer to administrative and bureaucratic constraints that limit lecturers' ability to innovate within their teaching practice. These structures are typically characterized by fixed module descriptors, inflexible quality assurance procedures, and a hierarchical curriculum design process that is slow to respond to change. For instance, updating a module descriptor may take several academic cycles, despite rapid developments in industry or technology. As participants in this study described, these rigid frameworks often delay the integration of emerging practices into the curriculum, thereby compromising educational relevance and responsiveness.

When lecturers adhere strictly to "teaching by the book," the scope of their instruction is often limited to what is prescribed in the curriculum descriptor. While this approach ensures consistency, it can inadvertently stifle students' creativity, critical thinking, and engagement with the subject matter (Paik, 2011). To prevent such limitations from hindering the educational process, lecturers must adopt an active, agentic role. Those who take the initiative to improve curriculum delivery contribute to a more effective transfer of knowledge, fostering richer and more impactful learning experiences.

A truly effective educator recognizes and responds to the needs of their students, adapting their teaching methods to enhance learning outcomes. For meaningful changes to take root in curriculum content, lecturers must exhibit a combination of courage, open-mindedness, and patience to achieve the desired outcomes (Plank et al., 1997). In doing so, they not only bridge the gap between theory and practice but also empower students to thrive in an ever-changing educational and professional landscape.

RQ: How can a lecturer be an agent of change by going beyond the fixed curriculum?

The curriculum is fixed and usually developed by a limited pool of persons with the authority to write modules (Mandel, 2015). The research question investigates if recontextualizing the curriculum is possible without changing curriculum design procedures and structured content.

The main goal is to find innovative ways to keep students engaged in the learning process. Stephens et al. (2008) pointed out that the perception of a lecturer as an expert in their subject is slowly fading away, and this research aims to provide benefits to stop this phenomenon.

2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction to the literature

Innovation is becoming a signature phrase in educational services to promote quality in learning design and delivery (Karkkainen, 2012). The last twenty years have been crucial for the education sector, experiencing turbulent changes due to shifts in economic drives and the labor force. As a result, education needed to innovate to adapt to these changes (Davies, 1997). Transformation in module content often arises when curriculum makers and lecturers identify ongoing problems that need to

be addressed (Karkkainen, 2012). Beyond skills and knowledge content, a module descriptor serves as a roadmap for learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

A change in curriculum can be a turning point for innovation. European countries have adopted a competence-based curriculum, which is an amalgamation of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values. Karkkainen (2012) strongly suggests that lecturers should be involved in and given the power to review curricula to become curriculum innovators, thereby improving teaching. While these perspectives are optimistic about lecturers' potential, many studies underplay the structural and procedural constraints that inhibit these changes. For instance, institutional frameworks often require lecturers to go through lengthy bureaucratic processes to suggest even minor curriculum adjustments. This makes the gap between the idealized role of the lecturer as a change agent and the actual institutional reality especially problematic. The literature acknowledges innovation but lacks critical exploration of how these innovations are stifled or delayed within conservative academic systems.

2.2 The qualities needed for change

21st-century cultures, societies, and educational development are on a fast-moving trajectory, and lecturers can be catalysts for change. The term "agent for change" refers to lecturers implementing internal and external changes and collaborating with others (Van der Heijden et al., 2015). However, change must be initiated by the lecturer's free will and not imposed by management. To change something, one must accept change and then act on it. Conversely, some lecturers oppose change, and innovation is not in their repertoire (Daif and Yusof, 2011).

Van der Heijden et al. (2015) recognize three factual areas for educators to implement change:

- 1 Inside change: The lecturer analyses module content to ensure the written discourse aligns with the learning outcomes of the unit being taught.
- 2 External demands: The lecturer must be familiar with current trends shaping education, such as technology, and what is happening in the workforce environment, such as new skills and equipment.
- 3 Collaborative change: Change should be more effective and factual when done in collaboration with other lecturers and institutions. Researchers recommend that educators should not work in isolation, as this could hinder the creation of a community of practice.

An agent of change tries to improve the learning process and go beyond the module descriptor content. However, the term "agent of change" can also refer to lecturers trying new things for curiosity and experiential learning, not necessarily to change the classroom situation (Van der Heijden et al., 2015).

Another definition by Van der Heijden et al. (2015) describes a change agent as a professional with industry experience backed by sound pedagogical and technological knowledge, transversal skills, and content knowledge. This makes the lecturer a lifelong learner who uses intrinsic knowledge to improve skills. An agent of change should constantly master their skills, especially in the vocational context.

2.3 The purpose of an effective curriculum design

The term “curriculum” is derived from the Latin word meaning “a trail to run in small steps” and can also be defined as “a plan for learning.” Effective teaching should feature professional instruction and a modular structure, especially in vocational education (Albashiry et al., 2015). Albashiry et al. (2015) emphasize that curricula should focus on lifelong learning skills rather than solely on workforce training. They suggest that modules should be more flexible and have an extensive vision for students’ future skills.

Albashiry et al. (2015) describe four stages of curriculum development:

- 1 Macro: At the ministerial level, curriculum standards are set according to the accrediting agencies of the respective countries.
- 2 Meso: At the curriculum department of institutes, where planning and reviewing of modules is done.
- 3 Micro: Performed by the lecturer during learning activities.
- 4 Nano: The student learning process.

Curriculum issues arise when gaps and inconsistencies exist between these strategic levels. A detailed and organized module helps lecturers and students clarify issues that may arise during the semester, guiding students throughout their study journey. All curricula subjects are linked to the specific course that students are studying.

Despite these structured layers, the practical autonomy of lecturers is often limited at the micro level due to prescriptive frameworks established at the macro and meso levels. This hierarchical system restricts innovation unless supported by institutional reform, which remains underexplored in many academic discussions on curriculum design.

2.4 The recontextualization of the curriculum content

Beyer and Davis (2012) consider each lecturing activity as a process of engagement with curriculum design implementation. Researcher Shay (2016) defines curriculum discourse as valid knowledge, which is then analysed and placed in a lesson plan. When lecturers identify strengths and weaknesses, they can make appropriate analyses to target the weaknesses. Curriculum recontextualization should be reflected in the lesson plan (Beyer and Davis, 2012). This recontextualized knowledge is vital for lecturers to identify curriculum limitations and repetition of content. There should be a pattern in the field of knowledge and knowledge production (Shay, 2016). Educators interpret content in their own way and then put it into practice, incorporating their academic knowledge and work experience in the recontextualization process (Shay, 2016).

Apart from the written curriculum structure, curriculum material resources help lecturers plan lessons (e.g., books, equipment for practicals, and technology use). Lecturers bring a wealth of experience, knowledge, beliefs, and abilities. There should be a bond between the written context and the lecturer’s academic and personal experience in the workforce (Beyer and Davis, 2012). If the connection works effectively, change is created by the lecturer as discourse is put into practice more easily. This produces

opportunities for students to shape their own ideas (Beyer and Davis, 2012) and allows the lecturer to position themselves as an agent of change.

Yet, while the literature supports the concept of recontextualization, there is limited acknowledgment of institutional resistance. Lecturers often operate within environments where such flexibility is discouraged, not structurally enabled. This tension remains insufficiently explored in current scholarship.

2.5 Different approaches to create change

Change in education can mean various events. McGrath et al. (2016) describe two approaches lecturers can use to create change in classrooms:

- 1 Bottom-up approach: This approach starts with small details during a lesson, gradually mastering the whole concept of the topic. Using observation and analysis, the lecturer gains insight into the different capabilities of students to understand the lesson. This process enables the lecturer to implement required changes in the lesson plan, ensuring no students fall behind.
- 2 Top-down approach: This technique provides students with a broad overview of the module being delivered, e.g., a science experiment. The lecture starts with the expected result from the experiment, and then the lecturer breaks down the method into simpler steps. This method helps students analyse and understand how things work together harmoniously.

Although both approaches have pedagogical merit, the literature lacks an exploration of how institutional environments affect lecturers’ ability to employ either method. This study addresses that gap by exploring how lecturers manoeuvre within constraints to apply such strategies.

2.6 Lecturers’ autonomy to create change

Higher education is often seen as conservative and suffers from institutional paralysis (Louvel, 2013). The call for change has been around since the 1980s, encouraging lecturers to become organizational actors. Over the years, academics have felt the need to act to eliminate curriculum limitations that affect higher education. There is always a need for a transition from passive to proactive modes (Louvel, 2013).

Louvel (2013) pinpoints that to enact change, lecturers should go beyond strategic-level behavior and be more self-determined in implementing new actions. Louvel (2013) uses the term “bricolage” to describe change. Bricolage involves identifying problems (after analysing module content), collecting adequate materials, and applying the right methodology (lesson plan) to deliver the lesson. Initially, the process may be blurry, but as it flows, lecture planning materializes with more information gathered. This is crucial because some lecturers fear analysing module content, thinking curriculum writers have more knowledge (Beyer and Davis, 2012). The weight of a module is influenced by summative assessments, and lecturers tend to teach by the book, emphasizing topics mentioned in the curriculum descriptor.

It is normal for lecturers to feel normative pressure imposed by institutions, as they must follow existing module criteria. This situation can initiate change because change happens in an active and tense environment (McGrath et al., 2016). Literature suggests that academics teaching the same units should collaborate to agree on which unit content needs change, ensuring consistent lesson planning. Van der Heijden et al. (2015) and Louvel (2013) agree that change should be carried out collaboratively.

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review has underscored the critical role of innovation in educational services, emphasizing the necessity for adaptive curriculum design and delivery to meet the evolving economic and labour market demands (Karkkainen, 2012; Davies, 1997). The integration of competence-based curricula across European countries exemplifies efforts to amalgamate skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values into educational frameworks (Karkkainen, 2012). Lecturers are identified as pivotal agents of change, capable of implementing internal and collaborative changes to enhance teaching efficacy and curriculum relevance (Van der Heijden et al., 2015). The concept of curriculum recontextualization, as discussed by Beyer and Davis (2012), emphasizes the importance of aligning written curricula with practical teaching methods to foster a dynamic learning environment.

However, while these contributions are valuable, there is a notable lack of engagement with the institutional obstacles that prevent such strategies from being easily enacted. Many studies advocate for lecturer autonomy and innovation but offer little insight into the operational mechanisms that inhibit or enable such changes. By exploring this overlooked terrain, the present study aims to provide a more grounded understanding of the real-world challenges and opportunities lecturers face as they act as change agents in rigid institutional contexts.

3 Methodology

Constructivist grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that aims to develop theories or explanations for social phenomena based on the experiences and perspectives of participants (Charmaz, 2021). Rooted in the constructivist school of thought, this methodology emphasizes understanding how individuals construct their realities and meanings through interactions with the external world. Rather than imposing pre-existing hypotheses or frameworks, researchers engage actively with the data to grasp the participants' subjective experiences and interpretations (Charmaz, 2021).

3.1 Data collection

Data were collected through four one-to-one interviews, a method known for eliciting unexpected and meaningful insights that allow participants to explore past relationships and experiences on a deeper level. In line with grounded theory methodology, interview questions were not standardized but were refined continuously as new codes emerged during the research process (Foley et al., 2021).

The decision to include four participants in this study aligns with the principles of constructivist grounded theory, which prioritizes the

depth and richness of data over sample size. Charmaz (2014) argues that smaller samples enable a more focused and iterative exploration of participants' narratives. The concept of "theoretical sufficiency" is central here: when recurring patterns and themes consistently emerge across data sources, further sampling may not be required to explore the central phenomenon meaningfully. As such, saturation was approached when similar insights, particularly around curriculum recontextualization, institutional constraints, and lecturer agency, began to surface across all four interviews. This approach is also supported by Foley et al. (2021), who maintain that depth of insight is preferable to breadth in grounded theory research when the aim is exploratory.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure their experiences were directly relevant to the research question. The inclusion criteria required participants to be current higher education lecturers actively involved in module delivery and student engagement. Exclusion criteria omitted individuals whose roles were limited to administrative, managerial, or policy-based duties without direct teaching responsibility. Participant 1: Communications Lecturer, Participant 2: Food and Beverage Lecturer, Participant 3: Psychology Lecturer and Participant 4: Information Technology Lecturer. This purposive strategy ensured that the narratives collected reflected firsthand practice-based knowledge and experiential insight.

This study intends not to generate a substantive theory but to explore how lecturers perceive and enact change within rigid curriculum environments. The rich, in-depth data obtained from these four participants offer a meaningful foundation to examine these dynamics and contribute to understanding the micro-processes of educational innovation.

3.2 Coding of transcripts

In grounded theory, in-vivo codes are crucial as they capture the participants' language and understanding of the subject under study (Corbin, 2021). The first four interviews were coded using in-vivo codes to preserve the participants' meanings and perspectives (Charmaz, 2014). As Charmaz (2014) notes, in-vivo codes serve as symbolic imprints of the interviewees' spoken words and definitions.

Following the in-vivo coding phase, open coding was applied to the remaining seven transcripts to develop categories and subcategories. The coding process was facilitated using MAXQDA software, which supported systematic and iterative data analysis. Through constant comparison and theoretical sampling, codes were organized into a category schema to guide further interpretation, as detailed in the Conditional Matrix section.

3.3 Memo writing: a reflexive exercise

Memo writing was conducted for each interview and throughout the coding process. Memos serve both as intellectual information storage and as catalysts for research development (Birks and Mills, 2015). Reflexivity was integral to this exercise, allowing the researcher to explore emerging meanings while remaining attentive to personal biases. By writing memos throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher engaged in an abductive reasoning process, bridging participants' views with conceptual insights and contextual interpretations.

3.4 Conditional matrix

The conditional matrix, as described by [Strauss and Corbin \(2015\)](#), was employed to create the category schema. MAXQDA's creative coding feature was used to organize contextual conditions, actions-interactions, and consequences and outcomes. As these conceptual links deepened, one central phenomenon began to consistently integrate and explain the various subcategories, and the core category was identified as "Lecturers Implementing Change." Followed with three major categories used to classify the contextual conditions, actions and reactions, and consequences and outcomes.

Contextual conditions refer to the circumstances or conditions that shape individuals' actions and reactions, influenced by their interpretation of events and experiences. Actions and reactions represent individuals' responses within their context, through which they make sense of and justify occurrences. Consequences and outcomes are the resulting actions within a given context ([Strauss and Corbin, 2015](#)) ([Figure 1](#)).

4 Analysis and findings

4.1 Contextual conditions

This section analyses the contextual conditions, the first tier of the conditional matrix. The conditions are the actual circumstances that

form the framework of the phenomenon being studied ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). The contextual conditions reflect the participants' concern that the curriculum must stay relevant to the industry needs.

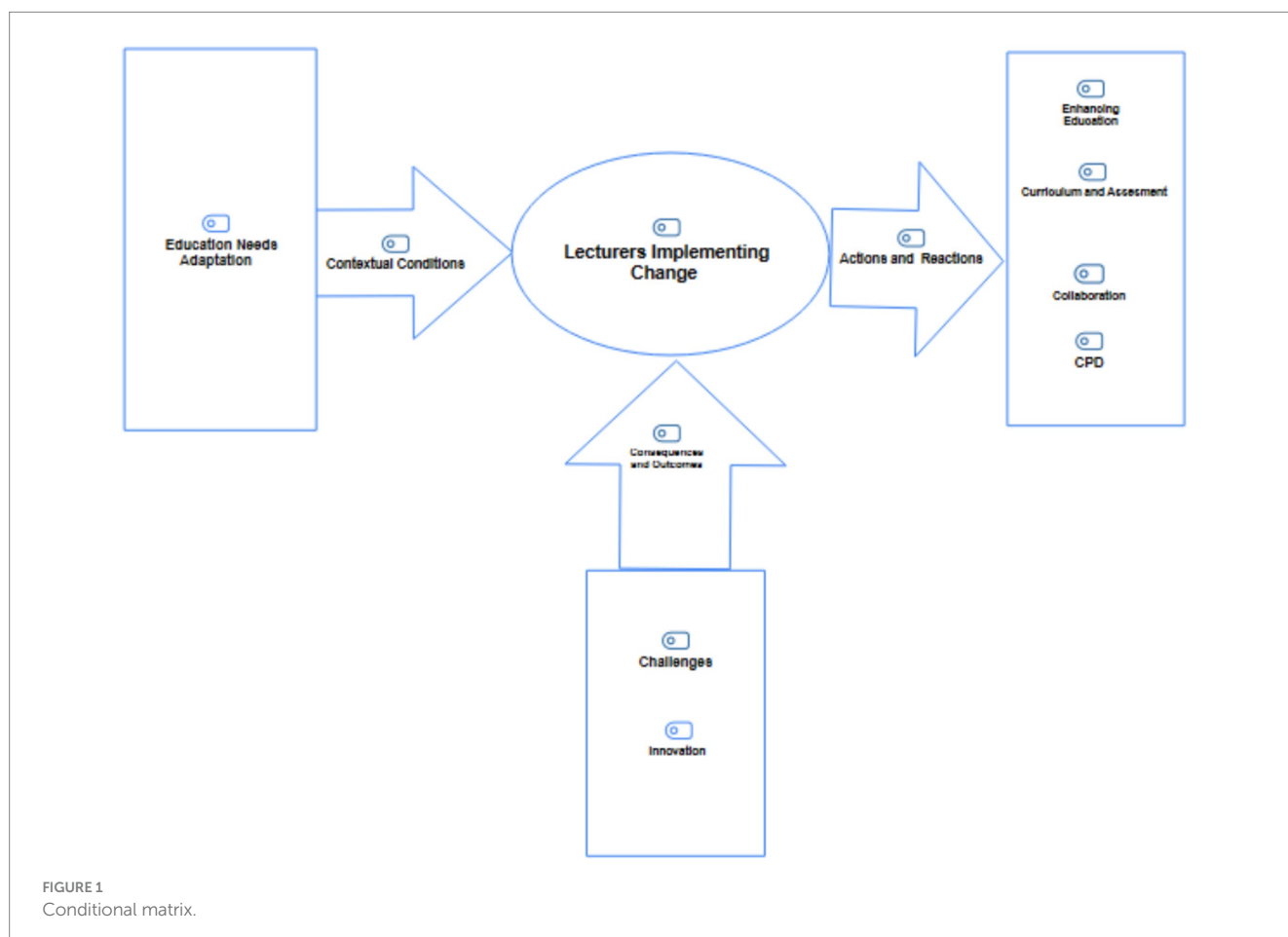
4.1.1 Adapting education by integrating industry trends and enhancing practical experience

In modern education, aligning curriculum content with prevailing industry trends and enhancing lecturers' practical experience is crucial for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of learning outcomes. [Albashiry et al. \(2015\)](#) emphasize that an effective curriculum must go beyond theoretical knowledge and focus on practical skills that directly prepare students for real-world challenges. The study's findings reflect this sentiment, as the participants incorporated industry trends and experiences into their teaching to ensure that students are equipped to meet the demands of the workforce.

"In IT specifically, technology advances at a very fast rate we try to adapt the content within the wording of the unit descriptor." – Participant 4.

"There are certain things, especially with the theoretical part which might not be adaptable also to reach the audience." – Participant 2.

Moreover, as [Karkkainen \(2012\)](#) highlights, lecturers should play an active role in curriculum design to ensure that the content is



up-to-date and forward-looking. From the analysis, it surfaced that updating course descriptors can be challenging and often a slow process, sometimes taking years to implement due to institutional constraints. This is a significant issue as industries evolve rapidly, and delays in updating curricula can result in content becoming outdated. Nevertheless, lecturers continue to push for these updates, recognizing the importance of integrating new knowledge and practical examples into the curriculum to better prepare students for the ever-changing professional landscape.

4.2 Actions and reactions

Actions and reactions, the second tier of the conditional matrix, involves the participants' reactions to situations studied and how their actions are executed (Charmaz, 2014). These actions reflect how to enhance education delivery, assessment practices, collaboration practices, continuous development and the fostering of critical thinking.

4.2.1 Enhancing education through the integration of knowledge by experience

A key finding from the research was the impact of integrating personal and professional experiences into lectures, significantly enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. This aligns with Louvel (2013), who suggests that practical examples make education more relatable and impactful, allowing students to see how theory applies to real-world situations.

"I try to teach as much as possible from my experience at work and even from my experience with my students." – Participant 1.

"I give them a lot of practical examples from my therapy session experiences." – Participant 3.

According to Van der Heijden et al. (2015), lecturers act as agents of change by incorporating their industry knowledge into their teaching. This was evident in the study, where participants frequently adjusted their lesson plans to include real-life scenarios and case studies from their professional backgrounds. These adjustments not only made the lessons more engaging but also fostered critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students.

"I changed the coursework, it was a written exam and then I changed it to an oral exam I wanted to assess how students communicated." – Participant 1.

This approach mirrors Shay (2016)'s argument that aligning education with industry demands ensures students graduate with the skills necessary for career success, particularly in fast-paced fields like hospitality and tourism.

4.2.2 Adapting curriculum and assessment

The study prominently identified the rigidity of current curriculum structures. The participants felt constrained by outdated module descriptors that limit their ability to introduce new content and innovative teaching methods. Louvel (2013) discusses similar challenges, pointing out that institutional resistance to change can

hinder necessary curriculum updates. While lecturers are eager to incorporate more relevant content and adapt to new educational practices, they are often held back by administrative barriers and fear of overlapping content with future courses.

Despite these challenges, the lecturers in this study were able to implement alternative assessment methods that better reflect the real-world applications of the skills being taught.

"Sometimes the structure is too rigid, so I change how students are assessed to make it more applicable." – Participant 2.

For instance, the introduction of oral exams in communication modules was particularly effective in evaluating students' ability to articulate ideas clearly and interact in a professional context. Van der Heijden et al. (2015) support this approach, advocating for assessments that mirror the practical demands of the workplace, such as effective communication and problem-solving skills.

4.2.3 Reactive action from lecturers to enhancing curriculum and student engagement

This analysis revealed that lecturers are not passive participants in the education system but rather take active steps to enhance both curriculum content and student engagement. Van der Heijden et al. (2015) describe lecturers as agents of change, a role that was clearly demonstrated in the findings. Despite the constraints imposed by rigid curriculum frameworks, the participants used creative teaching strategies to make their lectures more engaging and effective.

"I prepare something that they love like a match quiz game and they gain knowledge through fun." – Participant 1.

The analysis showed that the participants often went beyond the prescribed curriculum by incorporating their own knowledge and experiences into their lessons.

"I use visuals and examples from my therapy experience to make abstract concepts more real." – Participant 3.

This aligns with McGrath et al. (2016), who emphasize the importance of bottom-up changes driven by the insights gained from direct interaction with students. Participants modified their teaching methods based on student feedback, demonstrating adaptability and a commitment to improving learning outcomes.

4.2.4 Collaborative practices in curriculum development

Collaboration among lecturers was identified as a critical factor in improving curriculum content and enhancing academic delivery. Van der Heijden et al. (2015) argue that collaborative efforts lead to more significant and effective changes in educational practice, and this was reflected in the findings.

"We revamped a total of five subjects we wrote them all together." – Participant 4.

"We decided to give it a go to adapt the form of a flipped classroom." – Participant 2.

The study found that while formal collaboration between lecturers was sometimes lacking, informal discussions among colleagues led to the successful implementation of new teaching methods and curriculum updates.

“At the beginning there always was the input of the lecturer I could change it.” – Participant 1.

Louvel (2013) also highlights the importance of overcoming institutional inertia through collaboration, and this was evident in the findings. Lecturers who worked together, particularly those teaching the same modules, were able to make consistent improvements to the curriculum.

4.2.5 Enhancing the relevance of continuing professional development

Continuing professional development (CPD) programs should be closely aligned with lecturers' specific needs. Louvel (2013) discusses the critical role of ongoing learning in maintaining industry relevance and states that CPD programs were most effective when they allowed educators to stay up-to-date with the latest industry trends and incorporate this knowledge into their teaching.

“We have CPD, but not in our line of work, and they are not attractive they are forced to be done.” – Participant 3.

“I think the management is very open if we need something they get people to talk to us.” – Participant 1.

However, the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current CPD offerings, which they felt were often disconnected from their actual needs. This mirrors Van der Heijden et al. (2015), who advocate for greater autonomy in professional development, allowing educators to choose the training that best supports their teaching objectives.

4.3 Consequences and outcomes

The consequences are the last tier of the matrix, and they reflect the outcome of what happened because of the action taken (Charmaz, 2014), such as the challenges for curriculum development and innovative approaches from the lecturers' side to enhance the delivery of a lecture.

4.3.1 Challenges in student engagement and curriculum development

A significant challenge identified in the study was students' dependency on lecturers for learning materials, which inhibited their development of independent research skills. This finding aligns with Shay (2016), who discusses the need for educational frameworks to foster critical thinking and independence.

“I feel that I am still teaching at primary school when I gave them a PowerPoint task, they grumbled a lot.” – Participant 3.

Another challenge highlighted in the findings was the resistance to change among certain faculty members, which mirrors Louvel (2013)'s concept of institutional paralysis.

“Some people they are very much set in their ways trying to pitch in your idea might involve a bit more work.” – Participant 2.

4.3.2 Innovative approaches and lecturers' initiatives

The study also highlighted the numerous innovative approaches being adopted by the participants, even in the situation of institutional resistance. McGrath et al. (2016) discuss the importance of trying new methods, and the findings support this.

“I try to make it entertaining I get some sweets for them like kids and they love it.” – Participant 1.

“We try and instil their enthusiasm I put in a photo of local restaurants and we discuss what they notice.” – Participant 2.

Lecturers acted as agents of change, using creative solutions to overcome the limitations of traditional teaching methods. Those who shared ideas and collaborated with colleagues were more likely to succeed in implementing these innovations.

4.4 Research question analysis

Lecturers can act as agents of change by recontextualizing the fixed curriculum through various strategies that enhance the learning experience without altering the formal curriculum structure. By integrating current industry trends and their own practical experiences into their teaching, lecturers ensure that education remains relevant and effective, directly preparing students for real-world challenges (Albashiry et al., 2015; Karkkainen, 2012).

“We have to go beyond the fixed curriculum I do that every day, otherwise, they disengage.” – Participant 2.

They incorporate emerging technologies, share real-life scenarios, and adapt assessment methods to reflect practical applications, which significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Louvel, 2013; Van der Heijden et al., 2015). Through these efforts, lecturers go beyond the fixed curriculum and fulfil their role as agents of change, driving innovation and enhancing the quality of education.

4.4.1 Concept model

The conceptual model illustrates how lecturers serve as agents of change by recontextualizing the curriculum, bridging the gap between academic learning and industry demands. This process ensures that students receive an education that is not only relevant and practical but also engaging and responsive to evolving professional landscapes (Figure 2).

The model is structured around three key components:

- 1 Key-strategies: Lecturers play a pivotal role in enriching the curriculum by integrating industry trends, personal expertise, and contemporary developments. By adapting teaching methodologies and assessment strategies, they create dynamic learning environments that foster critical thinking and deeper student engagement. This approach ensures that education

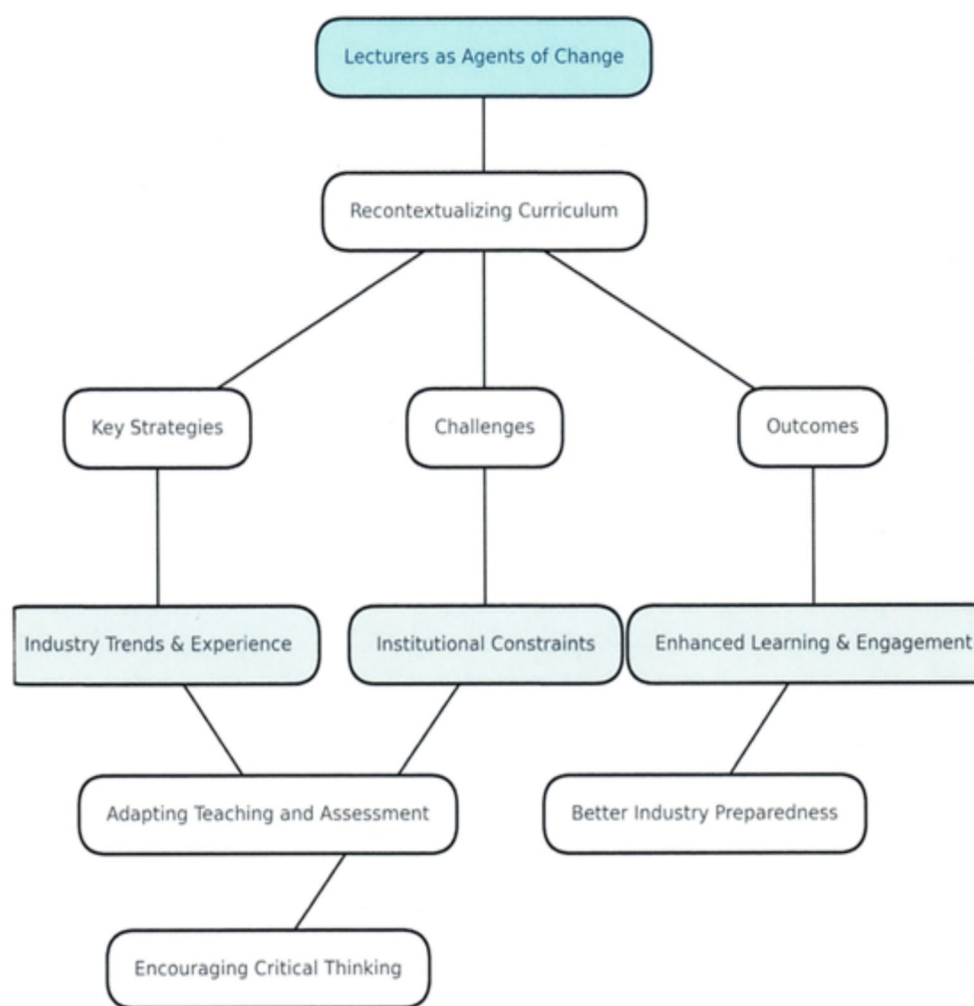


FIGURE 2
Lecturers as agent of change concept model.

remains aligned with real-world applications rather than being confined to static theoretical constructs.

- 2 **Challenges:** Despite their efforts, lecturers often encounter institutional constraints, such as rigid curriculum structures and limited flexibility in content delivery. However, they navigate these challenges by prioritizing relevant topics, supplementing course materials, and employing innovative teaching strategies. This proactive approach allows them to maintain the relevance of educational content while working within existing institutional frameworks.
- 3 **Outcomes:** Through curriculum recontextualization, students benefit from enhanced engagement and enriched learning experiences, ultimately improving their industry preparedness. Graduates emerge with the critical skills and applied knowledge necessary to meet professional demands, positioning them for success in an increasingly competitive workforce.

By leveraging industry expertise, refining pedagogical approaches, and fostering critical thinking, lecturers transform education into a dynamic and evolving process. Despite institutional challenges, their

commitment to innovation ensures that students receive an education that is not only theoretically sound but also practically relevant, reinforcing their role as catalysts for educational transformation and workforce readiness.

5 Discussion

This section synthesizes the study's findings with existing literature, offering insight into the role of lecturers as agents of change in higher education. Despite the presence of rigid institutional structures, participants in this study actively demonstrated innovation, adaptability, and reflective practice recontextualizing curricula to maintain relevance and foster student engagement.

5.1 Key contributions of lecturers as agents of change

The findings reaffirm the notion that lecturers are not passive recipients of curriculum frameworks but active contributors to

curriculum delivery and relevance. By integrating personal experience and up-to-date industry knowledge, lecturers enrich the learning environment. This reflects [Van der Heijden et al. \(2015\)](#), who describe lecturers as “professional agents” capable of synthesizing pedagogy and practice to improve learning outcomes.

Innovative approaches such as flipped classrooms, experiential discussions, and alternative assessments enhanced the applicability of academic content. For example, one participant replaced written exams with oral assessments to better evaluate students’ communication skills an approach aligned with workplace needs, as advocated by [McGrath et al. \(2016\)](#). This strategy also supported the development of transversal skills, increasing graduate employability.

5.1.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to constructivist grounded theory by applying its principles to the underexplored area of curriculum recontextualization in rigid academic environments. The emergence of the core category “Lecturers Implementing Change” extends the scope of grounded theory from individual agency to institutional navigation, demonstrating how educators enact bottom-up change despite structural limitations.

It also adds to the literature on educational innovation by operationalizing [Louvel’s \(2013\)](#) concept of *bricolage* through real-world examples of curriculum adjustments. Furthermore, the study affirms [Shay’s \(2016\)](#) idea of curriculum as “discourse,” showing how lecturers continuously reinterpret and reapply fixed content to reflect student needs and current industry practices.

5.2 Challenges and barriers to change

While the lecturers in this study were innovative and engaged, they also encountered considerable resistance. Institutional inertia manifested through outdated module descriptors and sluggish approval processes limited their ability to update content in a timely fashion. This reflects [Louvel’s \(2013\)](#) concept of “institutional paralysis,” where procedural rigidity inhibits necessary curricular evolution.

Resistance also emerged from peers, some of whom were reluctant to adopt new practices or participate in collaborative planning. This highlights the need for cultural change within academic institutions to support experimentation and innovation. As one participant noted, “you have the descriptor as a base, but you can still build on it,” illustrating how lecturers work around constraints rather than ignore them.

Another notable challenge was students’ dependence on lecturers for content delivery, especially in contexts where passive learning was the norm. [Shay \(2016\)](#) argues that this reliance inhibits the development of critical thinking and independence skills vital for both academic and professional success.

5.3 Collaborative practices and professional development

Collaboration was a recurring theme throughout the findings. Informal partnerships, such as co-designing assessment strategies or sharing teaching materials, often proved more effective than

institutional mandates. For instance, John and his colleagues created a curriculum stream that spanned three academic years, ensuring coherence across modules. This initiative not only reduced content redundancy but also aligned learning outcomes with industry expectations.

Such peer-led efforts mirror [Van der Heijden et al. \(2015\)](#), who argue that collaboration fosters consistency and curricular innovation. Formalizing these networks through institutional frameworks such as shared repositories, peer observation schemes, or team-led curriculum reviews could further enhance their impact.

Professional development (CPD) also emerged as a key area for improvement. While some lecturers praised the flexibility to request specific training (e.g., in research or industry tools), others criticized existing CPD offerings as generic and misaligned. Tailored, subject-specific CPD grounded in lecturer needs and industry demands—is critical to enabling continued growth and curricular relevance ([Louvel, 2013](#)).

5.4 Implications for higher education policy and practice

To fully leverage lecturers’ potential as agents of change, higher education institutions must revisit policies that limit their agency. Increased autonomy in adapting lesson content, assessment design, and pedagogical tools would empower lecturers to meet the changing needs of learners and industry alike.

Institutions should also restructure CPD to allow lecturers to co-design their training pathways. These could include short industry placements, collaborative research projects, or skill-based certifications that support lecturers’ dual roles as educators and practitioners.

Moreover, curriculum revision cycles should be shortened and include formal mechanisms for lecturer input. Institutions that ignore the frontline insights of lecturers risk offering education that lags behind industry expectations and student needs.

5.5 Conclusive thoughts

This discussion reinforces the idea that lecturers can and do act as change agents within conservative educational systems. Through reflective, responsive, and often collaborative practices, they recontextualize rigid curricula to promote student engagement and real-world relevance. However, to maximize the effectiveness of these efforts, institutional policies and cultures must evolve to better support lecturer autonomy and innovation.

5.6 Strategic recommendations for empowering lecturers through institutional support and reflective practice

Institutional leadership should empower lecturers by delegating greater curricular autonomy. This means institutions should regularly involve lecturers in curriculum revision processes, granting them formal opportunities to suggest adjustments and innovations, thus helping them address evolving

student and industry demands more effectively. Additionally, institutions should offer tailored continuing professional development (CPD) programs aligned with lecturers' professional and pedagogical needs. These customized training initiatives allow lecturers to integrate newly acquired knowledge directly into their teaching, bridging the gap between academia and industry. Furthermore, lecturers should proactively engage in reflective teaching practices, regularly examining and critiquing their instructional methods and course adjustments through reflective exercises such as journal writing or peer feedback sessions, enabling continuous enhancement and pedagogical innovation.

5.7 Practical applications for advancing curricular flexibility and lecturer collaboration in higher education

Institutions could introduce policies that explicitly allow lecturers to modify or enrich curriculum content dynamically, based on contemporary industry trends or educational insights. This structured autonomy would facilitate immediate curricular responsiveness without requiring lengthy administrative processes. Another application involves developing customized CPD workshops that specifically address the challenges lecturers face in the classroom. Led by industry professionals and experienced educators, these workshops would provide practical, context-specific strategies directly applicable to lecturers' daily teaching scenarios. Finally, institutions can establish interactive lecturer networks such as online platforms or periodic institutional forums where lecturers regularly share innovative pedagogical approaches, collaborate to overcome instructional barriers, and exchange valuable resources and best practices, thereby cultivating a vibrant community of practice dedicated to educational excellence.

6 Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of lecturers as agents of change in higher education, particularly in enhancing curriculum relevance and fostering student engagement. Despite the constraints imposed by rigid institutional structures, lecturers actively recontextualize course content by integrating industry needs, personal expertise, and innovative pedagogical strategies. This adaptive approach not only bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application but also equips students with the competencies necessary to navigate the complexities of the modern workforce (Van der Heijden et al., 2015; Louvel, 2013).

Findings revealed that curriculum recontextualization allows lecturers to enrich student learning experiences without requiring formal institutional revisions (Shay, 2016). Strategies such as flipped classrooms, alternative assessments, and experiential teaching methods promoted student participation, critical thinking, and applied problem-solving skills (McGrath et al., 2016). However, institutional barriers including outdated module descriptors, hierarchical curriculum structures, and reluctance to embrace pedagogical change remain significant obstacles to systemic innovation (Louvel, 2013).

Collaboration emerged as a powerful enabler in overcoming these barriers. Informal and peer-led partnerships helped lecturers implement curricular innovations more effectively and sustainably. Such practices align with research highlighting the importance of communities of practice and interdisciplinary cooperation in educational advancement (Van der Heijden et al., 2015; Louvel, 2013). The study also highlighted the need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs that are better tailored to lecturers' practical realities. Many participants voiced dissatisfaction with generic CPD offerings and emphasized the need for more focused, field-specific training aligned with current educational and industry trends.

These insights hold significant implications for higher education policy and institutional strategy. Institutions must recognize the essential contribution lecturers make to curriculum adaptation and grant them the flexibility to tailor content, assessments, and delivery approaches to emerging learner and industry needs (Karkkainen, 2012). Support structures—such as specialized CPD pathways and formalized collaborative frameworks should be strengthened to facilitate ongoing innovation and pedagogical development (McGrath et al., 2016).

6.1 Study limitations

This research was conducted with a small sample of four higher education lecturers using in-depth qualitative interviews. While this aligns with constructivist grounded theory's emphasis on depth and meaning, it may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study also focused on a specific institutional and national context, which may not fully reflect broader systemic challenges faced in other countries or education systems. Additionally, the study primarily captured lecturer perspectives without incorporating student voices or administrative insights.

6.2 Directions for future research

6.2.1 Future studies should consider

Future research should seek to build on the findings of this study by broadening the scope and methodological depth. First, expanding the sample size and including participants from multiple institutions or international contexts would enhance the transferability of findings and reveal broader patterns across educational systems. Second, incorporating the perspectives of students and institutional leaders would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding curriculum innovation, enabling triangulation of data and strengthening theoretical saturation. Lastly, conducting longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into the sustained effects and long-term outcomes of lecturer-led innovations, offering a richer understanding of how such practices evolve and embed within institutional structures over time.

6.2.2 Future perspectives: the role of artificial intelligence

Emerging technologies particularly artificial intelligence (AI), present both opportunities and challenges for lecturers as change agents.

As highlighted by Ravšelj et al. (2025), students are increasingly engaging with AI tools to support learning, raising important questions about academic integrity, assessment design, and the evolving role of the lecturer. Future research should explore how AI can be leveraged by educators to further curriculum recontextualization and foster digital literacy while ensuring equitable learning outcomes.

By cultivating a culture of innovation and adaptability, higher education institutions can ensure that curricula remain relevant, dynamic, and responsive to an ever-changing professional landscape. Ultimately, empowering lecturers as catalysts for change is essential to advancing educational quality and equipping students with the critical skills required for success in the modern workforce (Albashiry et al., 2015; Shay, 2016).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the author himself.

Author contributions

BM: Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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