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Professional agency in a university context: academic freedom and fetters

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Abstract. Professional agency is an urgent topic in academic contexts, albeit relatively unexplored, and elaborated with contradictory conclusions on its extent and characteristics. To contribute to the discussion, this multimethod study investigated professional agency within a Finnish university. We utilised questionnaire data and interviews to explore agency, as manifested in *influencing at work*, *developing work practices,* and *negotiating professional identity*. We found that overall, these three dimensions of agency were manifested fairly substantially, and in a similar manner among the academic staff. The study further emphasises the social nature of professional agency, and presents theoretical and empirical considerations for future research.

Keywords: Professional agency; higher education; multimethod research; teachers; leaders.

Introduction

The academic profession is traditionally believed to enjoy a high degree of freedom, such that academics can fairly freely determine their own work tasks, with possibilities to act according to their own professional ambitions and goals (Höhle & Teichler, 2013; Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014). However, current changes in the higher education sector (e.g. new managerial practices emphasising control, productivity, and accountability)

have requirements and restrictions on academics' work, roles, and identities (Korhonen & Törmä, 2016; Marquina & Jones, 2015). The global trend towards neoliberal economic policies has entailed the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles. These were introduced into education in the 1990s, the aim being to increase efficiency and international competitiveness. This highly influential global movement has led to educational restructuring, involving privatisation and the marketisation of educational organisations, which are now required to be more accountable, and to accept new systems of monitoring, reporting, and evaluation (e.g. Samuelsson & Lindblad, 2015). After a time-lag of a couple of decades, these trends were manifested also in Finnish universities. The culmination was a new University Act (2009), which strengthened the financial and administrative status of the universities and paved the way for a neo-liberal university model (Rinne & Jauhiainen, 2012). Despite this, one feature of Finnish university education is that all thirteen Finnish universities continue to serve public needs and are publicly funded; moreover studying remains free of charge (Välimaa, Aittola, & Ursin, 2014).

For Finnish academics, neoliberal policies and new public management principles have been anticipated as threatening academic professionalism (Rinne & Jauhiainen, 2012). In any case, in a situation of increased monitoring and assessment of academic work, there is a need for individuals to (re)negotiate their professional identity, taking cognisance of contradictory external pressures and individual missions (Arvaja, 2018; Huang, Pang, &, Yu 2017). A study by Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) has further shown that academic identities in Finland have become increasingly diversified and polarised due to on-going managerial and structural changes. At the same time, there are threats to traditional university careers – formerly grounded on secure, long-

term employment – with threats also to traditional values such as collegiality and academic freedom (Arvaja, 2018; Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017).

Nevertheless, Brew, Boud, Crawford, and Lucas (2018) note that academics still have a measure of freedom, since current university policies and structures provide merely a broad framework for their action. In this sense, academic work is shaped by what is made possible by structural conditions, and by what academics desire to achieve. In addressing the (partly contradictory) influences in play, questions arise as to how far individuals are able to influence and develop their work, and to express their professional goals within academic life. By addressing these questions, it should be possible to shed light on academic life in terms of the extent to which, at a given time, individuals feel free or fettered in their professional agency, and the reasons for this.

This study focused on *professional agency* among *academic staff*[1], i.e. persons holding a post as teacher, researcher, or leader at a Finnish university. Agency has become one of the main research areas in various educational landscapes (Buchanan, 2015; Pantić, 2017; Tao & Gao, 2017; van der Heijden, 2017). The current assumption is that professional agency is positively connected to the learning of students and teachers, to organisational development (Lai, Li, & Gong, 2016; Oolbekkink-Marchand, Hadar, Smith, Helleve, & Ulvik, 2017), and to teachers' well-being, and commitment

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[1] Throughout this article, the term *staff* refers to academic (not support) personnel. It encompasses teachers, researchers, and leaders employed at a university. The term *academics* encompasses both teachers and researchers, i.e. individuals whose main responsibilities are associated with research and teaching (see e.g. Winkel, van der Rijst, Poell, & van Driel, 2017). The *leaders* of academic organisations also fall within the category of academic staff (Pekkola, Siekkinen, Kivistö, & Lyytinen, 2018; Söderhjelm, Björklund, Sandahl, & Bolander-Laksov, 2018), insofar as they engage in research and teaching activities. However, they have special administrative and management duties, for example, in terms of managing departments and leading the academics and their work. The post of leader is mostly temporary and/or part-time.

(Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015; Vähäsantanen, 2015). All this underlines the utility of elaborating professional agency in educational organisations, and of seeking to advance it.

Despite intensive research on professional agency in educational contexts, we lack a fully elaborated understanding of agency in academic contexts. To date, only a few studies have addressed the professional agency of academic personnel (Brew et al., 2018; Englund & Price, 2018; Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Mathieson, 2011); these have indicated that agency plays a pivotal role in the navigation of changing academic contexts and in the development of academic practices. Moreover, these studies (like other studies on teachers' agency) have mostly been small-scale and qualitative in nature (for exceptions, see Pantić, 2017; Toom, Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2017).

This paper presents a multimethod study on the professional agency of academic staff in a Finnish university, and on the features connected to agentic manifestations. We have adopted an understanding of professional agency as *influencing at work, developing work practices,* and *negotiating professional identity* (Vähäsantanen, Räikkönen, Paloniemi, Hökkä, & Eteläpelto, 2019). We anticipated that such a comprehensive understanding of professional agency would allow us to explore several meaningful aspects of academic work. As will be emphasised, our understanding covers professional identity – an aspect that has been ignored in research utilising cultural-historical activity theory (e.g. Englund & Price, 2018). We believe that our study can increase an understanding of professional agency in academic work, and shed light on various social features connected to agency.

Theoretical framework

The conceptualisation of professional agency in educational settings

In recent years, agency has become a significant theoretical and empirical concern in educational sciences (e.g. Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Jääskelä, Poikkeus, Vasalampi, Valleala, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2017). Like several researchers on the topic, we consider it unfruitful to view professional agency merely as something that people *have* – i.e. an innate property, capacity, ability, belief, or competence. Rather, we see it mainly as something that people *do* and *enact* at work (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). In this sense, agency occurs in the relations between actors and environments (see also Simpson, Sang, Wood, Wang, & Ye, 2018). It is worth considering how, in the educational context, professional agency is often elaborated through three lenses, as described below.

Firstly, professional agency is viewed as oriented and enacted towards one's work. The agency of teachers encompasses active involvement in directing and designing their working practices (van der Heijden, 2017). This occurs through making choices and participating in decision making, thus exerting influence in ways that cover both individual and shared work practices (Biesta et al., 2015; Vähäsantanen, 2015). In this sense, professional agency can be focused, for example, on individual ways of working, collective work culture and practices, the contents of the work (e.g. work tasks and duties), and the development of the curriculum. Consequently, one can suggest that exerting influence at work is a pivotal part of professional agency within education. If individuals are truly seen as influential actors in a professional community, there will be recognition of their opinions and views, and support for their active participation and practices.

Secondly, professional agency takes the form of developmentally-oriented activities at the individual and collective level in educational environments. This implies that professional agency has an effect on teachers' individual learning processes and pathways (Lai et al., 2016; Tao & Gao, 2017). Agency is also seen as a precondition or driver for the (re)construction of conditions of educational workplaces, including individual and shared work practices (e.g. Toom et al., 2015). Accordingly, the activities denoting professional agency include, for example, creating and modelling new ways of working, making developmental suggestions, and participating in collective developmental activities. In referring to these aspects, Clavert, Löfström, and Nevgi (2015) use the term change agency, thus capturing teachers' activities aimed at establishing new ways of working, doing things differently, and introducing new meanings and practices within pedagogical communities.

Thirdly, professional agency is seen as intertwined with the professional identity that lies at the core of the teaching profession. Professional identities can be regarded as teachers' understandings of themselves as professionals (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). More precisely, professional identity includes individuals' professional commitments, interests, goals, values, as well as future career prospects (Arvaja, 2018; Huang et al., 2017; van Winkel et al., 2017). Beijaard et al. (2004) were among the first to suggest that professional identity should be investigated from the viewpoint of agency. This perspective suggests that identity should be viewed as negotiated through individuals' activities in a social environment. In this sense, teachers' agency encompasses activities performed to negotiate and enact one's interests, values, and goals in their professional contexts (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017; Pantić, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015). For their part, McAlpine and Amundsen (2015) conceptualise

agency in terms of how early-career researchers advance their intentions and hopes in their work practices – whether or not these are successful.

In line with these considerations, we have adopted a validated theoretical model of professional agency, including the dimensions *Influencing at work*, *Developing work practices*, and *Negotiating professional identity* (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). This conceptualisation captures agency as multidimensional phenomena rather than as an entity acting along a single dimension (such as influencing at work). In line with previous literature (e.g. Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017), the model includes an assumption that the extent to which individuals manifest their agency might vary per individual and over time. In line with the theoretical considerations mentioned above, the model also includes the notion that professional agency emerges at both individual and collective levels. The individual/collective aspect implies that, for example, influencing at work can be targeted on the one hand at individual work practices (e.g. individual ways of working), and on the other hand at shared activities and frameworks (e.g. collective work practices).

The main features connected to professional agency

In recent times, professional agency in educational organisations has been seen as simultaneously resourced and constrained by both individual features (e.g. work experience, professional interests, personal characteristics) and social features, including the work community and the social culture (Lai et al., 2016; Priestley et al., 2015; van der Heijden, 2017). In this sense, the enactment of agency emerges from the interplay of individual efforts, individual resources, and surrounding social features as they come together in particular situations. In a similar way, a study by Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2017) conducted in various countries revealed that the support and

trust of school management is an important factor in the achievement of agency, although the researchers also emphasised that it is impossible to ignore teachers' individual backgrounds. In the case of university academics, a study conducted by Leibowitz, van Schalkwyk, Ruiters, Farmer, and Adendorff (2012) has shown how a sense of self-fulfilment and agency is generated by one's individual biography, individual dispositions, broader current contextual influences, and steps taken to enhance teaching, all working together.

An important implication of these notions is that professional agency can be seen as manifested and situated within a complex interplay of individual backgrounds together with socio-cultural features and contexts. Despite this, in investigating aspects connected to agency in educational settings, some scholars have looked at individual features rather than social features. Along these lines, Buchanan (2015) suggests that teachers take actions and make decisions based on their understanding of who they are within their educational contexts. Tao and Gao (2017) have further found that both prior experiences and identity commitments mediate teachers' agentic actions and choices regarding their professional development trajectories. Among academics, motivations, experience, and knowledge serve to promote agency regarding pedagogical change (Clavert et al., 2015).

By contrast, in placing more emphasis on contextual and social features, some scholars have taken a relational approach to teachers' agency (see e.g. Edwards, 2015). It has also been noted that within universities, agency is related to a variety of social positions and conditions. For example, the commitment of academic personnel in acting as the driving force of reforms and taking responsibility for carrying them out seems to be linked to being in a superior post (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Furthermore, a study by Hökkä and Eteläpelto (2014), which elaborated academic teacher educators' agency

within their identity negotiations, showed how this form of agency was resourced and restricted by social and culturally shared discourses.

Overall, studies conducted in the academic context seem to suggest that professional agency is strongly connected to social, contextual, and structural features, but also resourced and constrained by some individual features.

Research questions

This study investigated the professional agency of Finnish academic staff in a Finnish university. The research questions were as follows:

(1) How is professional agency manifested among academic staff members?

(2) What kinds of individual and social features are connected to the manifestations of professional agency among academic staff members?

Methods

According to Pantić (2017) the use of triangulated data from different sources facilitates elaboration of multifaceted and context-contingent agency. In this study, the questionnaire in particular created an extensive, comparative, and generalisable picture of professional agency. The quantitative questionnaire items comprehensively explored the agency of the academic staff, and the background factors that were (or were not) connected to their agency; this picture was enriched by qualitative data. The interviews sought to gain a deeper understanding of the manifestations of professional agency, and to encompass its features more comprehensively than permitted by the questionnaire. Hence, the datasets overall aimed to provide comprehensive and complementary information on both research questions.

Participants and datasets

The study was conducted in one Finnish university. The changes in higher education affect Finnish universities in a similar manner, since all the universities are public (with basic funding coming from the Government), and their operations are regulated by the same Universities Act (Ministry of Justice [Finland], 2009).

This study was part of a larger research project addressing professional agency. After the participating university departments were informed about the project, and after they had voluntarily promised to participate, their personnel were introduced to the relevant voluntary data collection. The participants did not receive any financial benefits from their participation. However, they were informed that the departments would utilise the research findings in their development work.

As a first step, we utilised quantitative questionnaire data (collected electronically) from academic personnel ($n = 106$). After preliminary information on the project, the researchers sent an email to the personnel of the departments. This included the description of the data collection (e.g. its goal and ethical principles), and a separate link for anonymous completion of the questionnaire. The total response rate was 32.5%. In addition to questionnaires, the study utilised voluntary interviews ($n = 25$).

The backgrounds of the participants are presented in Table 1. All the participants had at least a master's degree. Overall, they represented both 'soft' and 'hard' disciplines, according to the classification of Becher (1989). However, the interviewees did not include informants from any of the 'hard' disciplines due to a lack of financial resources for comprehensive data collection. Despite this main difference between the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees, the background profiles of the interviewees were fairly similar to those of the questionnaire respondents. However, as compared to the questionnaire data, individuals holding a permanent contract or a

teacher post were over-represented in the interview data. After preliminary information on the project, the interviewees informed the researchers about their willingness to participate in the study. Due to the voluntary nature of the participation, the authors of this study were not able to influence the sample. This might also explain why teachers are over-represented.

Within the datasets, persons who worked either as university teachers or lecturers were categorised as *teachers*, while *researchers* were considered to be persons who worked, for example, as university researchers, project researchers, or doctoral students. Persons categorised as *leaders* were holders of a superior position (i.e. one with subordinates). They worked, for example, as the (vice) leader of a department, or a leader in research projects.

During the study, the interviewees were not asked whether they had responded to the electronic questionnaire. However, it is possible that the interviewees participated in both phases of the study, since they were included in the sample for the quantitative phase of the study.

--- Insert Table 1 ---

Ethical issues were recognised throughout the study, including voluntary participation and provision of comprehensive information on the study to the participants and their departments. The leaders of departments and the interviewees signed consent forms before data collection. Ethical aspects were also addressed via anonymous responses (to the questionnaire), plus anonymous data processing and confidential data storage throughout the study. The findings are also presented anonymously, including pseudonyms for the interviewees. The interviewees were also able to read the article before its publication. The researchers had a professional

relationship with the participants, but no close or personal relations, or professional power position.

Questionnaire: measures and data analysis

The questionnaire consisted of 17 items measuring three dimensions of professional agency: *Influencing at work*, *Developing work practices*, and *Negotiating professional identity*. Items belonging to each of the dimensions were originally presented and validated in the study by Vähäsantanen et al. (2019), and are described here in Tables 3–5. Overall, in line with our theoretical notions, these items cover professional agency as something that people (are able to) *do* and *enact* at work, rather than as their inner properties and capabilities.

The questionnaire also covered the participants' background information. The present study focused on gender (coding: 0 = men, 1 = women), age in years, the nature of the employment contract (0 = fixed-term contract, 1 = permanent contract), and on having an academic post (1 = teacher, 2 = researcher, 3 = leader). For the analyses, the academic post variable was split into three dummy-coded variables, namely *teachers* (0 = others; 1 = teachers), *researchers* (0 = others; 1 = teachers), and *leaders* (0 = others; 1 = teachers).

Within the analysis, we examined how professional agency was manifested among the respondents. This was approached quantitatively in two ways. Descriptive statistics were computed for the mean scores of the three dimensions of professional agency. Thereafter, differences in the response patterns for each dimension of professional agency (i.e. whether or not the items *within* a given dimension were rated similarly by the academic staff) were examined via Friedman's test. Friedman's test was chosen, in the first place, because the items pertaining to professional agency were

measured on an ordinal scale. Furthermore, it takes into account the interdependency of items belonging to the same agency dimension. If the overall result of Friedman's test turned out to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), pairwise comparisons between the items were conducted using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. These analyses were conducted using SPSS 24 software.

As our next step, we investigated how selected background variables were associated with the professional agency of the academic staff. This was done via exploratory structural equation modelling (ESEM; Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009; Marsh et al., 2009) in line with our validation study on an instrument to measure professional agency (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). ESEM integrates exploratory factor analysis (EFA) within a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)/structural equation modelling (SEM) framework. Within the ESEM framework one can, for example, do the following: (i) include both CFA and EFA factors based on the same, different, or overlapping sets of items, (ii) estimate measurement-error corrected latent variables, (iii) compute standard errors and goodness-of-fit statistics, (iv) compare competing models through tests of statistical significance and fit indices. The advantage of using ESEM instead of CFA is that loadings from all factors on all items can be estimated, whereas in CFA, each item is required to load on only one factor (i.e. cross-loadings are constrained to be zero). In CFA, misspecification of factor loadings to zero usually leads to distorted factors with overestimated factor correlations; these could result in biased estimates in SEMs incorporating other variables (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009; Marsh et al., 2009). This was particularly relevant in our study, in which we sought to examine the associations between background factors and the dimensions of professional agency.

In our study, the measurement model for professional agency was a three-dimensional EFA model, via which one could estimate loadings from all three factors

on all 17 items of professional agency, and correlations between the factors. These correlating dimensions of professional agency constituted the dependent variables, which were regressed on the background variables. In order to compare each academic post with all other academic posts, each post in turn was set as a reference group (i.e. each of the three dummy variables was excluded in turn). The findings are reported as standardised regression coefficients. In addition, R^2 for each dimension of professional agency is reported.

As in previous ESEM studies (e.g. Arens & Morin, 2016; Marsh et al., 2009), the assessment of fit for the ESEM model was based on the following indicators, which have been established in a CFA context: the chi-square (χ^2) test, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), standardised root mean square residuals (SRMR), the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI). An acceptable fit with the data is thus indicated by a non-significant χ^2 value, CFI and TLI values of above .90, an RMSEA value of below .06, and an SRMR value of below .08 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). It should be noted that research regarding the adequacy of these criteria for ESEM is still lacking (Arens & Morin, 2016). Hence, as suggested in other ESEM studies (e.g. Arens & Morin, 2016; Marsh et al., 2009), we used these criteria only as rough guidelines for facilitating model evaluation, and simultaneously applied other criteria for determining the fit of our ESEM models, such as the theoretical adequacy of the model.

The ESEM analysis was conducted using Mplus version 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). An oblique geomin rotation (the default) with an epsilon value of .5 was employed (e.g. Marsh et al., 2009). The few missing values (covariance coverage 98.5–100.0%) were assumed to be missing at random, and, since the data were not normally distributed, the robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLR) was used. The Full-

Information-Maximum-Likelihood (FIML) procedure was used to account for missing

data.

Interviews: data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interviews specifically targeted (i) work history and current work,

(ii) professional agency within work and work communities (manifested e.g. in having

influence at work and realising one's professional interests), and (iii) challenges to

personal development at work. The interviews were aimed at building an open

conversation while at the same time focusing on pre-determined themes, without having

strictly formulated questions in a specific order (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However,

some preliminary questions were formulated. In the case of professional identity

negotiations, they included: *Could you describe your main interests and values at work*

– What are possibilities to enact them in your work? Could you describe your future

hopes and career prospects in your work? Altogether, the data amounted to 439 pages

(Times New Roman, font size 12, 2.5 margins).

The data were analysed via researcher triangulation in accordance with the

principles of qualitative and quantitative content analysis (Saldaña, 2013). First of all,

the interviews were read in order to identify the expressions of professional agency, and

to code and locate them within three main thematic categories (*Influencing at work,*

Developing work practices, and *Negotiating professional identity*). The analytical

process was regarded as theoretically imbued (Saldaña, 2013), since a theoretical

understanding of professional agency was used as an analytical lens for initial coding.

Following this coding into three main categories, we decided to add two sub-categories

under each main category. This decision was informed by the findings from the

questionnaire data. For example, the main category of *Influencing at work* included two

sub-categories: (i) influencing one's own work, and (ii) influencing shared work-related matters. Thereafter, we recoded the expressions into sub-categories. While doing this, we calculated how many participants indicated that they were able to manifest professional agency, or not, with regard to each category. In the case of the second category, we calculated the frequencies of agentic/non-agentic manifestations, for example via a participant's mention of *having developed his/her ways of working* (agentic), or *not having taken part in the development of the department's actions* (non-agentic).

To answer the second research question, open coding of interview data was used to identify the features that could be related to professional agency. During this process, we identified the features indicated by the participants and categorised them. In this sense, the data analysis was data-driven. Furthermore, we also calculated the frequencies for each feature found.

Overall, the frequencies referring to persons were calculated both jointly and separately for leaders and academics. Since in the event most of the interviewees held an academic post as a teacher, we were not able to conduct a systematic comparison between teachers and researchers. Note also that since the size of the professional groups (i.e. academics and leaders) varied considerably, the analysis should not be understood as an absolute group comparison. Rather, it illustrates the main differences and similarities between these groups. As a final step, the interview findings were considered in relation to the findings obtained via questionnaire data, to check the levels of congruence.

Findings

The findings of the questionnaire data (Table 2) indicated fairly substantial professional

agency among staff members, who reported their agency similarly across the three dimensions. Below, the findings regarding the dimensions of professional agency are presented in more detail. Each dimension is considered in a separate sub-section. Within each sub-section, the findings are described in the order of the research questions, complementing the findings from the questionnaire data with the interview data. Note that here, *staff* includes all participants (i.e. teachers, researchers, and leaders), while *academics* refers to both teachers and researchers, and *leaders* only to leaders.

--- Insert here Table 2 ---

Professional agency and related features: influencing at work

Considerable agency regarding influence, notably at the individual level

In the case of the first research question, the findings of the *questionnaire* indicated that overall, staff members could be seen as influential actors within their work (Table 2). However, Friedman's test showed differences in the area of influence. As Table 3 indicates, the entire staff (i.e. teachers, researchers, and leaders) were clearly able to make decisions regarding their own work and be heard in matters relative to that work, but were less influential as members within their broader unit (i.e. in their department), for example, in terms of participation in the preparation of matters, or in the decision making of the unit. One can thus say that the agency of all staff members was more substantial regarding their own work than in relation to their department as a whole.

--- Insert here Table 3 ---

Similarly, the *interviews* indicated that the most of the staff experienced wide-ranging opportunities to influence and make decisions regarding their individual work

(n = 23/25). For example, the academics were particularly able to influence and decide how they worked (including ways to design and engage in teaching and research practices), and also where and when they worked. It was notable, however, that even if they recognised opportunities to decide their ways of working on the basis of their own desires and professional strengths, they were more restricted in their possibilities to decide the actual content of the work:

> Well, I can influence my work to a moderate extent… At least to some extent I pick which courses I want to take. Or, I don't know whether there is a choice. However, at least I can influence how I teach the contents, in that there's a possibility of choice and quite a lot of one's own decision-making I think. (Ella)

The leaders, too, expressed considerable agency in terms of influencing their own work. They were able to determine their work (e.g. workload and work tasks) and to enact leadership practices individually. In particular, the leaders emphasised the importance of finding time to meet subordinates, but also the possibility to allocate time for their own wellbeing at work. This was possible through delegating and prioritising their work. As an example of this, one leader described the choices she had consciously made:

> I just absolutely avoid doing things, or postpone doing them. I won't take work home in the evenings anymore, I won't work at weekends unless I absolutely have to. So those kinds of little things help. And then I delegate such things as much as I can, things which I really don't have to do myself, we'll do it together then. (Catherine)

The interviews corroborated the findings of the questionnaire in revealing that the staff overall reported less professional agency at the department level ($n = 11/25$) than at the individual work level ($n = 23/25$). Although the staff had substantial influence over their own individual work practices, their agency was more constrained in terms of being heard and participating in decision making at departmental level.

The academic post and the work environment connected to agency in the area of influence

As regards the second research question, the findings of the ESEM analysis indicated that the *academic post* was connected to the professional agency of the staff (fit of the whole model: $X^2(152) = 217.19$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.04; .08]; CFI = .92; TLI = .89; SRMR = .05; R^2 for Influencing at work = .16). The leaders reported more agency than the researchers in terms of influencing in their work ($\beta = 0.34$, $p = 0.002$). In addition, those academics who worked as teachers were able to exert more influence at work than the academics who worked as researchers ($\beta = 0.32$, $p = 0.007$). However, the leaders and teachers reported similar agency with respect to influencing at work ($p = 0.102$). The possibilities to exert influence were not connected to gender, age, or the employment contract.

The interviews, too, revealed the importance of the academic post for professional agency. Academics ($n = 19/21$) and leaders ($n = 4/4$) both wielded considerable professional agency in the context of their own work, but academics seemed to experience less agency than leaders regarding collective (departmental) matters. When the academics described their professional agency at department level, their accounts ($n = 6/21$) did reveal some forums where they could participate in departmental preparation (e.g. department meetings, committees). However, they did

not mention genuine, wide-ranging opportunities for influencing or having their opinions recognised in these forums. One academic put the matter thus:

> And the department meetings are there just for the formality, because they have to be organised. However, the idea isn't that personnel would be listened to, or that things would go forward… It is not even the aim, that people would take a stand or that they would listen to other people's viewpoints. (Sophia)

By contrast, all the leaders ($n = 4/4$) reported real opportunities for participating in the preparation of shared matters and decision-making within their department. The opportunities were related to having various group memberships. These were helpful in gaining a comprehensive understanding of departmental of matters within the department and the university more broadly. Despite this, the leaders' agency seemed to be quite narrow at university and faculty level, i.e. in terms of influencing strategic decision-making. The leaders also emphasised that the unstructured management of the university, which tended to implement only short-term resource allocations, and was currently undergoing several change processes (i.e. structural changes), narrowed their agency:

> The university does not provide us with the resources for long-term planning. It only gives them for a year at a time, so that complicates work as a manager. The way that they give these terribly advanced strategic goals, and when we resolutely try to go along with them they pull the rug from under our feet, meaning that you have to cut out everything except what was previously mentioned. So in a way our own possibilities for having influence in this big organisation and administration are actually extremely low. (Amelia)

The interviews also showed that professional agency was framed by the *work environment*. When the academics talked about making decisions and being heard regarding their own work, their accounts were often accompanied by mention of the leadership practices ($n = 13/21$) and co-workers ($n = 8/21$). Co-workers and leaders both supported and constrained the agency of the academics. The academics felt that their opinions were not always taken into consideration when teaching duties were distributed. On the other hand, they were able to make certain work-related choices, in situations where work-related matters (including work distribution) were decided equally with co-workers, with their suggestions and views being recognised by leaders:

> When we do the plan for the upcoming academic year in our work community, we think together which courses are given by whom, and which courses come [in the programme], and when they come to each of us. So, we do it with our close colleagues here, and then again my manager has responded positively and flexibly, saying that this is precisely the way it can be done. (Noah)

Professional agency and related features: developing work practices

Considerable agency regarding development, particularly at the individual level

The *questionnaire data* indicated that overall, staff members had fairly substantial agency in terms of developing their own work practices (Table 2). In particular, the Friedman's test indicated that the agency of staff members was manifested substantially in terms of developing their ways of working, and in trying out new ideas within their individual work (Table 4). This suggests considerable professional agency at the individual level. On the other hand, Table 4 indicates that the agency of the staff overall was more constrained at the collective level (particularly at the departmental level),

since they gave fewer reports of developmental suggestions regarding collective work practices, or participating in the development of their department's actions.

--- Insert Table 4 ---

Along similar lines, the *interviews* indicated considerable professional agency of the academic staff in developing work practices ($n = 22/25$). For their part, the academics emphasised activeness and enthusiasm, particularly in developing novel practices in teaching and researching, for example in developing and experimenting with drama methods in order to inspire students and promote their learning. The leaders were able to develop themselves and their leadership practices, for example, via participating in various in-service courses.

Although the interviews indicated (in line with the questionnaire data) that the agency of the staff was slightly stronger in developing work practices at the individual level ($n = 22/25$) than at the collective level ($n = 18/25$), one can say that staff members were also active in developing shared matters within their work environments. For example, the academics described how they participated in cultivating collective work practices (e.g. technological teaching solutions) via collaboration and presenting their own opinions. For their part, the leaders engaged actively in creating visions for the future and in experimenting with novel ways of working and collaborating:

> And then it just absolutely started to feel as if it was no longer okay like this, that something had to be done to get people more together. I then proposed an idea to a leader colleague of mine, that we'd get something going, with one day dedicated to the possibility of people being together [without teaching] and changing our meeting culture. My colleague thought it was a good idea, and we took it on, and started taking it forward, just the two of us. We set up meetings to

which we invited the personnel, presented an idea, and started working on it.

(William)

Furthermore, the leaders said that they want to encourage their followers to innovate, do things differently in their work, and experiment with new, even unorthodox ideas via their own examples and specific leadership practices.

The academic post and the work environment related to agency in the area of development

The ESEM analysis indicated that the *academic post* was intertwined with developing work practices (R^2 = .14). The leaders reported stronger agency in the area of development than academics with a researcher post (β = 0.23, p = 0.046). Furthermore, those academics with a teaching post described stronger agency than the academics who worked as researchers (β = 0.36, p = 0.004). However, the leaders and the teachers reported similar agency with respect to developing work practices (p = 0.903). Neither gender, age, nor the employment contract was connected to professional agency in terms of developing work practices.

The interviews, too, suggested that the academic post was connected to developing work practices. Both the academics (n = 18/21) and the leaders (n = 4/4) appeared to be agentic actors in developing themselves and their individual work practices. However, one can see a difference between the academics and leaders in terms developing work practices at the collective level. Whereas all the leaders (n = 4/4) engaged actively in developing shared matters within the department (even if the heavy workload of everyday managerial duties did not leave much room for this), the academics reported less agency in this domain (n = 14/21). For example, the academics emphasised that sometimes it was challenging and even impossible to develop shared

work practices, or to participate in collaboration or in the development of shared activities. Overall, the interviews indicated that academics developed their individual rather than shared work practices. As one academic commented:

> Yes, developing is somehow in my blood, that those things I am able to develop, I try to implement, in developing teaching. So I introduce some kinds of new ideas. Of course development is much more challenging in the department, when it takes the form of group work. (Evelyn)

The interviews also showed that professional agency in the form of developing work practices at the collective level seemed to be related to the *work environment*, including one's co-workers ($n = 14/25$) and physical working spaces ($n = 7/25$). Social relationships with co-workers appeared to be influential features that both constrained and advanced professional agency. If these relationships were tensioned, intensive collaboration did not emerge, and it was only possible to dream about presenting one's opinions in order to improve shared activities:

> What you experience as restricting is a sort of problem of chemistry. It means that there is no chance of developing any sort of creative project that is created together, or developing a subject together. There are these sorts of locked emotions which prevent any blossoming of creativity. When you can't say things freely, say what you think about something, or you can't go ahead and start sketching out things freely. (Emily)

On the other hand, close relationships between co-workers created a supportive arena for commenting and for making developmental suggestions regarding collective practices. Furthermore, all the leaders saw a close relationship plus collaboration with

personnel as a positive element in developing shared matters. Overall, developing shared practices was not seen as a solitary endeavour. Since the work community consists of various personalities, this can sometimes be hard for a leader. Finally, some academics emphasised that they were more or less disconnected from their co-workers due to physical separation (with their working spaces being located separately around the campus). This separateness hindered working on a daily basis, lessening intensive collaboration and shared development activities.

Professional agency and related features: negotiating professional identity

Considerable agency, particularly in enacting professional values and goals

The *questionnaire data* demonstrated fairly substantial opportunities for negotiating professional identity among staff members (Table 2). Friedman's test revealed that the staff had possibilities for enacting their values and goals, and for focusing on things that interested them in their work (Table 5). The possibilities for advancing careers within the work were less apparent.

--- Insert Table 5 ---

The interviews reflected the findings of the questionnaire data, indicating that the majority of the staff were able to realise their professional goals, values, and interests in their work ($n = 23/25$). In particular, this kind of professional agency was manifested in situations where academics' prime goals and interests were closely connected to their teaching ($n = 19/21$):

> Well I've perceived very strongly that I am a teacher. I enjoy teaching and being
>
> in contact with the students. And I've always actually felt as if I'll never become

a researcher, because I just can't sit at a computer all by myself. So I really like

and enjoy teaching and the contact with the students in this work. (Ella)

Similarly, the leaders had considerable agency in enacting their professional

goals and interests regarding leadership ($n = 4/4$). During the interviews, they talked

about having plenty of opportunities to concentrate on interesting issues, including

working towards their future missions. The core values of justice, equality, and renewal

were seen central in the future development of academic work and the academic

community.

Nevertheless, the staff overall emphasised that it is not easy or self-evident to

advance one's career in a university. During the interviews, only five of the academics

talked of their career in the university without mentioning the opportunities for

advancing their career within their current work. These academics' accounts indicated

that the construction of a career was challenged, in particular, by the practice of having

temporary working contracts. For their part, all the leaders ($n = 4/4$) shared an interest

in leadership, but emphasised restricted career prospects. A post as leader was to some

extent seen as a hindrance, since it took time away from research and teaching. There

were hopes for a recognised structure with a reward system, in order to develop

academic leadership. If this were to be set up, the post of leader would be more

attractive from the viewpoint of an academic career:

If the university manages to get the bonus systems and managers' roles in order,

so that you wouldn't have to do it alongside your own work, then I would gladly

[continue as a leader]. I would like to challenge myself so as to become a good

or reasonably good leader. (Catherine)

The post occupied, and competencies related to negotiating professional identity

The ESEM analysis did not reveal any statistically significant connections between background variables and the negotiation of professional identity ($R^2 = .12$).

On the other hand, the *interview data* revealed some features related to the professional agency of the staff within the domain of negotiating professional identity. The academics (i.e. teachers and researchers) indicated that their *professional competencies* outlined their agency ($n = 6/21$). In particular, it was not possible to successfully enact one's professional interest and goals at work when there were gaps in one's professional skills and knowledge.

In addition, the interviews revealed the meaningful role of the *post held*, as both an enabling and a restricting feature in staff members' professional identity negotiations ($n = 25/25$). For example, a teaching post made it possible to enact professional interests and goals that were closely connected to teaching. At the same time, this post could hinder the enactment of one's researcher-identity.

> I've experienced that things that are meaningful and interesting to me, I can put them into practice in this work as a teacher… But at a personal level my own research hasn't progressed the way I'd have wanted at a particular stage. But of course the job description is working as a teacher, and that's the thing I've been trying to do in the best way possible. But integrating a researcher identity with this hasn't worked out for me the way I'd hoped in this post, the way it has worked out for many others. (Liam)

Although a teaching post did not offer much time or other resources for enacting one's researcher-identity, the academics indicated that they currently faced many external pressures to conduct more research activities. They saw research as more

valued in the university than teaching. Furthermore, all the academics were required to engage in research work, and to produce results in this area:

> I think that research is very strongly demanded all the time. Occasionally we get these messages that there is a request or a demand for such a thing. Well not a demand, but anyhow, that teachers must also do research. Not should, but must. (Isabella)

The post held was further connected to the leaders' professional identity negotiations. The post of leader was complex, encompassing many duties, regarding leadership in particular – yet it could also encompass teaching and research. All the leaders had feelings of inadequacy, since they did not find enough time to give sufficient attention, for example, to research activities.

Discussion

This multimethod study explored professional agency in a Finnish university. The main findings from both datasets are overviewed in Table 6.

--- Insert Table 6 ---

Both datasets indicated that the Finnish academic staff under study had fairly substantial professional agency in their work. In this sense, one could say that they experienced more freedom than fetters in their work. However, the more detailed analysis relating to *influencing at work* and *developing work practices* revealed that the staff's professional agency seemed to be higher at the individual level than in shared work practices and matters at departmental level (i.e. at the collective level). In the case of *negotiating professional identity*, the staff reported more opportunities to enact their

professional interests and values than to advance their career. However, it is worth noting that the leaders and academics interviewed did not say much about their career in academic work. We can only speculate as to why this was so. It may be that they were satisfied with the advancement of their career, or else that career prospects were not an important aspect of their academic work. It might even have seemed pointless to discuss the advancement of one's career, in the absence of attractive career systems.

Our findings further indicated that the academic staff's professional agency was connected mostly to social features. In particular, both datasets revealed the importance of the *post held*. According to the questionnaire, the leaders and teachers reported more substantial agency than the researchers in the domains of influencing at work and developing work practices. The interviews offered a slightly different perspective on the role of the academic post for professional agency. In particular, compared to the academics, the leaders seemed to enact more agency at the collective levels of influencing at work and developing work practices. These findings are in line with a study by Ylijoki and Ursin (2013), showing that Finnish academics with a leader position are more likely than others to act as agents of change in universities.

The questionnaire data suggested that, as compared to leaders and teachers, the researchers' professional agency was narrower from the viewpoint of exerting influence at work and developing work practices. There is reason to believe that current changes, involving e.g. the adoption of an NPM culture, have notably affected the work of researchers, since many of them have been connected more concretely to conducting research activities and evaluating externally research outcomes than to teaching practices. Tighter results-based monitoring systems might have increased pressures to do particular kinds of research, and to do more of it. Furthermore, bearing in mind the need to apply for external funding, they could have forced researchers into continuous

competition. This could become a source of friction, impeding researchers' possibilities to exert influence on work, and hindering collaboration on shared development activities. By contrast, the teachers seemed to be still fairly agentic in terms of influencing and developing their teaching work in a changing situation. Although our findings illustrate how the post of the participants appeared to frame their professional agency, one could also suggest that the differing experiences of researchers and teachers reflect the changes currently taking place in Finnish higher education.

It is notable that the teachers interviewed said they were able to enact their teaching ambitions within their teaching posts, but that they did not have enough time to engage in research activities alongside their teaching duties. However, they did report calls made on them to demonstrate increased research activities and outcomes (see also Korhonen & Törmä, 2016; Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017). In this sense, the teachers, too, felt the new external pressures to engage in more research activities. Nevertheless, the pressures did not seem to constrain their agency as teachers to an undue extent. In fact, previous studies have similarly shown that Finnish academic teachers can 'live their dream' by enacting their professional missions, even if at the same time they are 'victims of the teaching trap' (Arvaja, 2018). The findings further suggest that being a leader can actually be a demerit in academic life from the viewpoint of advancing one's career, even if it offers opportunities for enacting individual professional goals and interests.

The interviews enriched the questionnaire findings by illustrating notably the role of the *work environment*, particularly one's co-workers, for professional agency, in the domains of influencing at work and developing work practices. This study, like previous studies (e.g. Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017), further underlined the role of leadership practices for professional agency. In the present study, leadership practices

both supported and hindered professional agency among the academics in terms of influencing at work. It is slightly surprising that the interviewees mostly talked about social rather than individual features related to their professional agency. By contrast, a study by Clavert et al. (2015) has indicated that it is academics' motivations, experience, and knowledge that function as promoters for developing their work practices. An interesting additional finding from our questionnaire data was that the gender and age of the academic staff were not connected to their professional agency.

Conclusions, implications, and limitations

This study sheds light on how professional agency is manifested in academic work, and the extent of its manifestation in such work. Its theoretical contribution includes confirmation of the previously reported multidimensional structure of professional agency in the academic context, and indications of features related to agency among academic staff. In line with current discussions (Edwards, 2015; Mathieson, 2011; Simpson et al., 2018), our contribution further involves indications that professional agency is largely a socially embedded phenomena, though one also related to individual backgrounds, such as professional competences.

At the same time, our findings regarding the extent and features of professional agency indicate that academic staff do have a measure of freedom, with social conditions providing merely a broad framework for individuals' own professional agency, as emphasised also by Brew et al. (2018). In this sense, our study did not reflect the notion of Biesta et al. (2015), i.e. that current educational policy worldwide tends to reduce opportunities for individuals to exert judgement and control over their work. The reason for this might be that certain global changes have been interpreted and implemented differently in Finland. The changes have been implemented in the context

of the strong social justice ethos within Finnish higher education (e.g. Välimaa et al., 2014); consequently, the changes may not yet have constrained individuals' agency to the extent observed in other countries.

In this study, triangulation of the datasets made it possible to arrive at a comprehensive picture of professional agency within a university. However, the study had some limitations. Firstly, the participants interviewed did not represent the 'hard' disciplines, and the number of researchers and leaders interviewed was low. Hence, we could not use the interviews to validate the questionnaire data indicating that in the domains of influencing at work and developing work practices, the researchers' agency was more constrained than that of teachers and leaders. For this purpose, more comprehensive interview data would be necessary. Secondly, our study encompassed fairly small datasets from a single Finnish university. Since professional agency can be seen as embedded in a specific time and national context (e.g. Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2018), we cannot assume that the individual and social features that were here found here to support and restrict professional agency would be applicable over time and in different contexts. Future research on the professional agency of academic staff should therefore include a longitudinal perspective and a comparative approach, including datasets from different universities and countries.

Thirdly, one could say that the study mostly focused on professional agency at the micro-level, and did not adequately observe the broader social context, which would include higher education policies and the organisational context of agency. Our study did not address this point (which would be interesting forthcoming research topic), since the study design did not include direct questions on how specific changes in higher education might be connected to academics' professional agency. Finally, future research should give more attention to the interplay of individual and social features for

professional agency. Our quantitative data were too small for this kind of elaboration. For its part, the content analysis of the interviews was insufficient to provide the kind of holistic reading within a case (i.e. a teacher) that would have indicated such interrelations.

The response rate of the questionnaire study was relatively low (32.5%). One could speculate that the non-responding individuals might simply have felt that they were too busy or unmotivated to answer the questionnaire. By contrast, one could assume that those who actually did respond were individuals who were dissatisfied with their agentic opportunities at work, and who wished to affect their working conditions.

We suggest that the instrument used on professional agency could be applicable to research, and would also be a practical tool for identifying professional agency in educational settings. These kinds of tools do appear to have value, in line with the arguments of Mathieson (2011), who highlights the importance of tools for academics that encourage them to reflect on the opportunities and constraints pertaining to agency in a range of structural contexts. Such reflection can assist them in becoming critical agents while developing their identities and practices.

From a practical viewpoint, this study further suggests that although the university context may be a supportive arena for agency, more opportunities could be provided for academics, notably in terms of influencing and developing shared matters. As a practical conclusion, we would emphasise a need for discussions, collective meetings, and development days in which individuals could express their opinions, and be truly acknowledged within efforts to orchestrate academic work and develop academic practices. In such a climate, individuals would also be able to enact their professional goals and interests, making their work more meaningful, and supporting their learning at work (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). Thus, there is a need for agency-

promoting leadership practices consonant with the notion that when one is leading

educational organisations, the emphasis should be on people, relationships, and

identities, rather than on managerial practices, control, and monitoring (Hökkä,

Rautiainen, Silander, & Eteläpelto, 2019). Englund and Price (2018) similarly

emphasise the need to support collaboration and individuals' agentic roles in

development work, rather than to implement changes on a top-down basis. We suggest

that the measuring instrument employed in this study could serve as a practical tool for

enacting agency-promoting leadership practices. The knowledge gained via the

instrument could help in efforts to promote necessary components of professional

agency as part of the sustainable developmental work of educational organisations.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for background variables. Means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) are presented for continuous variables, and frequencies (*n*) and percentages (%) for categorical variables.

Background variables		Descriptive statistics			
		Questionnaire (*n* = 106)		Interviews (*n* = 25)	
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*
Gender	Men	30	28	5	20
	Women	76	72	20	80
Education	Master's degree	46	43	13	52
	Licentiate/Doctorate	60	57	12	48
Discipline	Soft	83	78	25	100
	Hard	23	22	0	0
Employment contract	Fixed-term	51	48	6	24
	Permanent	55	52	19	76
Academic post	Teachers	53	50	18	72
	Researchers	42	40	3	12
	Leaders	11	10	4	16
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age (years)		44	10.99	47	10.11
Working experience in the current university (years)		11	9.69	15	9.20

Table 2. Means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) for the dimensions of professional agency.

Dimensions of professional agency[a]	*M*	*SD*
Influencing at work (α = .86)	3.97	.73
Developing work practices (α = .85)	3.97	.69
Negotiating professional identity (α = .68)	4.08	.65

Note. [a]Response scale: 1 = I strongly disagree…5 = I strongly agree

Table 3. Means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) for the items pertaining to Influencing at work.

Items[a, b]	*M*	*SD*	*Friedman's test*	*Pairwise comparisons*
1. I can make decisions regarding my own work.	**4.32**	0.68	$\chi^2(5) = 80.79$, $p < 0.001$	1, 2, 3 > 4 > 5 > 6 1 > 3
2. I am heard in matters relating to my own work.	**4.23**	0.84		2 = 3 1 = 2
3. My views are taken into consideration in the work community.	4.13	0.82		
4. My opinion is taken into consideration in my unit.	3.90	0.93		
5. I can participate in the preparation of matters in my unit.	3.67	1.15		
6. I can participate in the decision making in my unit.	3.48	1.27		

Note. [a]Response scale: 1 = I strongly disagree…5 = I strongly agree

[b]The *work community* referred to the community consisting of co-workers that the respondent collaborates with (for example, in a specific subject, or within a project). The *unit* referred to the respondent's own university department.

Table 4. Means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) of the items pertaining to Developing work practices.

Items[a, b]	*M*	*SD*	*Friedman's test*	*Pairwise comparisons*
1. I develop my ways of working.	**4.42**	0.68	$\chi^2(6) = 108.90,$	1, 2 > 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
2. I try out new ideas in my work.	**4.41**	0.74	$p < 0.001$	1 = 2
3. I actively bring up my own opinions in the work community.	3.95	0.92		3, 4 > 7
				3 > 5
4. I actively collaborate with others in my unit.	3.87	1.02		3 = 4 = 6
				5 = 6 = 7
5. I make developmental suggestions regarding collective work practices.	3.76	0.90		4 = 5
6. I take part in the development of my unit's actions.	3.72	1.11		
7. I ask or comment actively in my unit.	3.68	1.08		

Note. [a]Response scale: 1 = I strongly disagree…5 = I strongly agree

[b]The *work community* referred to the community consisting of co-workers that the respondent collaborates with (for example, in a specific subject, or within a project). The *unit* referred to the respondent's own university department.

Table 5. Means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) pertaining to the items for Negotiating professional identity.

Items[a]	*M*	*SD*	*Friedman's test*	*Pairwise comparisons*
1. I can act according to my own values in my work.	**4.41**	0.61	$\chi^2(3) = 54.36$, $p < 0.001$	$1 = 2$ $1, 2 > 3 > 4$
2. I can realise my professional goals in my work.	**4.36**	0.73		
3. In my work I can focus on things that interest me.	**3.97**	0.96		
4. I can advance my career in my work.	3.59	1.21		

Note. [a]Response scale: 1 = I strongly disagree…5 = I strongly agree

Table 6. Overview of the results related to professional agency and its features.

Manifestations of professional agency	Features connected to agency
Influencing at work: considerable agency, *particularly regarding individual work* (Q+I)	Post held (Q+I) Work environment, *encompassing leadership practices and co-workers* (I)
Developing work practices: considerable agency, *particularly regarding individual work practices* (Q+I)	Post held (Q+I) Work environment, *encompassing co-workers and working spaces* (I)
Negotiating professional identity: considerable agency, *particularly regarding goals and values* (Q+I)	Post held (I) Professional competences (I)

Note. Q = Questionnaire data; I = Interviews