Maintaining Competence:

A Grounded Theory explaining the response of university lecturers to the mix of local and international students.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
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by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to discover how university lecturers in management subjects respond to the mix of local and international students in their classes. The aim is to develop a substantive theory based on a conceptual understanding of the main concern of lecturers working in a changing Higher Education context.

The aim of developing theory rather than providing rich description led to the choice of Orthodox Grounded Theory as the methodology. Grounded Theory is an inductive methodology that provides the methods to conceptually generate the patterns that explain the behaviours of participants in the substantive area. This was relevant for the current research as I commenced with no explicit hypotheses and there was limited literature on the responses of university lecturers to teaching diverse groups of students, particularly a mix of local and international students.

Interviews and observations were conducted with lecturers from both traditional and newer universities in Melbourne, and data analysed using open coding, categorising, constant comparison, theoretical sampling and coding, and frequent memoing. The main concern of respondents emerged as balancing professional capability with the requirements of a heterogeneous student population. The Basic Social Process and Core Category that resolves this concern is Maintaining Competence. Maintaining Competence is both a causal-consequence model, and a typology model consisting of four strategies – Distancing, Adapting, Clarifying and Relating.

The emergent Grounded Theory of Maintaining Competence contributes to the extant literature, in particular the literature on professional competence, and the literature on teacher centred and student centred approaches and on contextual and contingency models of teaching. It adds to the latter by demonstrating the importance of the interplay of moderating variables, specifically Forces in the Lecturer and Forces in the Environment. The thesis adds also to the Grounded Theory literature in its explicit presentation of Orthodox Grounded Theory methods and its discussion of the research journey of a novice grounded theorist.

The emergent theory of Maintaining Competence has significance and relevance for university lecturers and university management in its recognition of the interplay of both personal and environmental factors on teaching approaches. It also opens up areas for future research through the development of particular strategies or moderating variables, as well as further research into the effects of internationalisation and potential differences between discipline areas. Finally, the potential for the development of formal theory exists by extending the concept of maintenance of professional competence.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Mary and Jack Gregory, for their generous and unconditional support in all my endeavours.

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have been instrumental in assisting me in undertaking and completing this research.

Initially, I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Professor Robert Jones, whose guidance, inspiration, and encouragement have enabled me to complete this thesis. Professor Jones' extensive knowledge of Orthodox Grounded Theory has assisted me in learning and applying the methodology, and his support as I have grappled with the data and the methodology has helped make this journey a challenging and exciting process.

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Finally, but not least, I wish to thank my partner, Peter, for his absolute support, and my children, David, Tessa, and Laura, for ensuring I maintained balance in my life throughout this research journey.

DECLARATION

I, Janet Forbes Gregory, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy from the Faculty of Business and Enterprise, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, is completely my own work except where otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

This work has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Janet Gregory.

Janet Forbes Gregory
May 1, 2006.

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