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Understanding the Problem: Student attrition and retention in university Language & Culture programs in Australia

The more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate … the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated. In the final analysis, student learning drives student retention. (Tinto, 2002, 4)

1.1. Why is it important to understand student attrition and retention?

What makes students decide to study a language at university? What makes those same students decide to continue or stop studying a language? As university academics and administrators supporting language and culture (L&C)\(^1\) studies, how do we quantify these decisions?

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\(^1\) In this book, the term ‘language and culture’ or ‘L&C’ is used to encompass all higher education courses/units/programs in ‘languages other than English’ (LOTE) taught at universities, and explicitly includes the teaching of concepts and materials related to the cultures entwined with those languages. This terminology has been embraced by the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (www.lcnau.org) because it evidences the fundamental tenet that a language cannot be taught, or learned, effectively without reference to cultural contexts and competencies. For stylistic reasons, ‘languages’ is occasionally used in Tables and Figures, but always implies ‘L&C’.
of students in ways that provide effective input into resourcing? How do we know if there are more students giving up on their L&C studies than on their studies in other disciplines, and whether this indicates a problem with L&C teaching? Is there anything that can, or should, be done to help students stay in L&C programs?²

These are questions that occupy all language teachers, policy makers and administrators at tertiary level, whatever the languages taught and whatever the institution. At the very least, universities should be able to measure accurately the rates at which students leave or stay in L&C majors. Ideally, universities should also understand exactly which factors—such as teaching style, workloads, or student characteristics—affect attrition and retention, and which are most influential.

Attrition is usually defined as the number of non-completing students (i.e. students who have not yet finished their program of study) who are enrolled in a specific university, school, discipline or program in a given year, but not enrolled in that same program the following year (Gabb, Milne and Cao, 2006, 3). Research into attrition (and its corollary, retention)—that is, examining the numbers and characteristics of students who withdraw from, or stay in, university study, and the reasons why they do so—has a long tradition in some countries such as the United States of America (USA, e.g. Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2006; Wesely, 2010) but has only relatively recently become an area of interest in the United Kingdom (e.g. Jones, 2008; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997; Yorke et al., 1997), New Zealand (Zepke and Leach, 2006) and Australia (e.g. Foster, 2010; James, Krause and Jennings, 2010; Krause, 2005; McInnis, 2001; McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese, 2000; Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001; Taylor and Bedford, 2004). The numbers involved are not insignificant: Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) calculated that about a third of all Australian students entering university at that time did not graduate, and that half of those who withdrew did so in their first year. The two

² Throughout this book the word ‘program’ refers to a large group of courses or multiple majors that constitute a pathway to a certified award, such as a degree. ‘Course’ is used in the sense of a defined unit of university study, usually equivalent to a semester of face-to-face or online teaching. ‘Major’ refers to a cluster of courses that together indicate a defined level of expected learner competence. ‘Honours’ refers to a one-year pre-doctoral research-orientated pathway.
fundamental questions asked by those who research student attrition at university are therefore ‘How many students discontinue their studies before completing a degree?’ and ‘Why do students do this?’

Higher education administrators and budget planners have commonly used the very unsophisticated tool of raw enrolment numbers both as a measure of attrition and a surrogate indicator of a program’s success. For example, the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training provided the first notable data set (1994–2004) for Australian higher education using ‘simple measures of attrition at an institution level [whereby] the attrition rate plus the retention rate plus the completion rate for a given student population in a given year will equal 100 percent’ (Lukic, Broadbent and Maclachlan, 2004, 2). The authors noted that, for methodological reasons, the rates included ‘students who leave a course at one university and enrol the next year at another university … [and] those students who leave university without completing their course, but who return later to the same university’ (Lukic et al., 2004, 2). Using this measure, the Commonwealth Government reported an average attrition rate of 18 per cent for all students in Australian universities during the period 1994–2002, although considerable variation was noted across institutions and different student populations (Lukic et al., 2004).

At The Australian National University, for example, attrition rates for first year students in that period were somewhat higher than the national average, and increased from 22 per cent to 24 per cent over the eight-year period.

Shaw (2008) has subsequently argued that, because this method of calculating attrition rates fails to allow for students who leave one university but enrol at another university the following year, the real national average attrition rate in 2002 was more likely to have been around 10 per cent. The rudimentary nature of such a measure of attrition is even more concerning when we remember that, as a critical outcome of the Nelson reforms in the early 2000s, attrition rates calculated in this way were used as performance indicators for the allocation of Learning and Teaching Performance Funds to universities (Gabb et al., 2006), despite the resultant data being relatively untrustworthy. A subsequent review of base funding did show that the government attrition rates used to measure and allocate university performance funding had indeed been misleading: in reality, about
10 per cent of students who had been counted as ‘discontinuing’ their higher education had actually transferred to another university (Lomax-Smith, Watson and Webster, 2010).

With this economic incentive, the paired parameters of attrition and retention became popular focal points for researchers in Australasian higher education in the early 2000s (e.g. McInnis and James, 2004; Taylor and Bedford, 2004; Zepke and Leach, 2006), especially with regard to the ‘first year experience’ (e.g. James et al., 2010; Krause, 2005; McInnis, James and Hartley, 2000; Nelson, Duncan and Clarke, 2009; Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001). These studies reported a clear need, from both economic and pedagogical perspectives, to identify students who are ‘at risk’ of withdrawing from individual courses, or from university study as a whole, especially in their first year of study:

one wonders whether, if the institutions to which these potential dropouts belonged had known what they were thinking and feeling and why, things might have been done any differently to support them (Krause, 2005, 58).

Such identification requires an understanding of relevant student motivations. In a seminal work on retention, Tinto (1975) identified four factors of key importance: instruction, academic success, anxiety and motivation. Wesely (2010) explored the literature on these four factors in the specific context of foreign language teaching (from a US perspective). Overall, however, motivation remains little understood: while students provide many reasons for leaving university before graduating (Figure 1.1), Pitkethly and Prosser (2001, 186) argued that the factors most likely to affect students’ failures or course withdrawals seemed related more often to the students’ adjustment to the university context rather than to their difficulties with intellectual understanding of the relevant content, and hence have a local/national context that must be considered. Whether the motivations to give up study are the same for students in L&C programs is not clear: despite the new interest in university student attrition as an area worthy of empirical research, by the mid-2000s there was still little data available with respect to attrition of students in L&C programs, even in the USA (Wesely, 2010), and it is not clear how generalisable many research findings are to the special circumstances of L&C teaching.
1. UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

- Wrong choice of program
- Poor quality of the student experience
- Inability to cope with the demands of the program
- Unhappiness with the social environment
- Matters related to financial need
- Dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision
- Problems with relationships and finance
- Pressure of work (academic and employment)
- Learning efficiency (students’ general cognitive skills)
- Self efficacy (self reliance, locus of control, self directedness)
- Quality of instruction (perceptions of the quality of teaching)
- Course difficulty (in relation to available academic support and counselling)
- Interaction with academic staff
- Goal commitment (planning skills, motivation)
- Time for learning (planning and organising study programs)

Figure 1.1. Factors known to have a negative effect on student completion

1.2. Attrition as a concern for university Language & Culture programs in Australia

One could argue that the most striking characteristic of L&C programs in Australian universities is the relative scarcity of students. Although it is a complex statistic to calculate in any national or pan-national context, a snapshot of language teaching in Australian higher education in the early 1990s noted that just 2 per cent of higher education students were studying languages, with the highest proportion being in the Australian Capital Territory (Leal, Bettoni and Malcolm, 1991). Subsequent estimates suggested a relative increase in interest—Hajek (2001) reported 5 per cent of Australian university students studying at least one language, while Nettelbeck, Byron, Clyne, Hajek, Lo Bianco and McLaren (2007, 2) reported that ‘fewer than 10% of first-year students undertake LOTE [language other than English] study of any kind … with overall languages enrolments stagnant over the 2005–2007 period while student cohorts increased’. While the most recent available Australian Government data, from 2013, does not refer specifically to L&C study, it suggests that fewer than 5 per cent of all students are studying in the broad field of Society and Culture (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2014).
The 2014 First Year Experience Study data from the University of Melbourne’s Centre for the Study of Higher Education encourages some optimism: in both 2009 and 2014 (sample sizes 2,422 and 1,739 respectively), 23 per cent of the national first year respondents reported that they ‘planned to, or were, studying a language as part of their course’ (Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis, 2015). By way of international comparison, language studies were reported as accounting for 8.6 per cent of all 2009 course enrolments in US higher education institutions (Furman, Goldberg and Lusin, 2010, 5), and 8.1 per cent of all 2013 enrolments (Goldberg, Looney and Lusin, 2015), while Byrne (2005) reported that fully one third of tertiary students in Europe are studying languages as an assessable part of their degree.

The attrition rate of L&C students in Australian universities is of particular concern. In landmark research (detailed later in this chapter), Nettelbeck et al. (2007, 3) reported that:

on average, one third of students beginning a LOTE at [an Australian] university do not complete more than one semester; a third of those remaining do not continue into second year; there is further attrition after second semester of second year, and of those completing second year, only two thirds continue into third year. Overall, fewer than 25% of students beginning a LOTE complete a third year.

Given this kind of data, and their lived experience of student attrition during a program, all L&C teachers in Australia at tertiary level—whatever the language they teach and whatever their institution—are likely at some point (usually when enrolments drop and their course is threatened) to ask themselves not only ‘What makes students decide to study a language at university?’ but also, perhaps even more urgently, ‘What makes those same students decide to continue, or to stop, studying a language?’

Despite some key attempts in recent years to investigate these questions in a sector-wide context (e.g. Nettelbeck et al., 2007; Nettelbeck, Byron, Clyne, Dunne, Hajek, Levy, Lo Bianco, McLaren, Möllering and Wigglesworth, 2009), Australian research in this field has been very limited. On the basis of an extensive literature review, Lobo and Matas (2010, 39–40) argue that there is still an inadequate volume of research into student attrition in language learning courses, and that the research that does exist is patchy and poorly integrated into an overall theoretical framework. With no definitive data on
whether the key influences on students’ decisions about continuing or discontinuing language studies are related more to aspects of the teaching or the workload, or to the inherent or acquired characteristics of the students themselves, university language teachers have few evidence-based strategies with which to confront the harsh economic drivers that see languages with small overall enrolments or apparently high attrition rates relegated to minimal funding options or closure.

With attrition measures given sector-wide importance for decision-making around financial support, despite there being little evidence that attrition really is a measure of performance or quality, we should expect that, at the very least, universities are able to report accurately the rates at which students leave or stay in L&C programs. This was the goal set by the language-teaching academics at ANU in 2008, who decided to initiate an institution-wide research project to explore the issue of attrition and retention in all the L&C programs at ANU. (See Acknowledgements for details of participants in this research.) As no other Australian institution has conducted a study of such scope in breadth and depth, the research has become an important case study in this field, but one that has, until now, not been reported in its entirety, although there have been preliminary and selective presentations and publications (e.g. Jansen, Åkerlind and Maliangkay, 2011; Jansen and Martín, 2011; Jansen, Martín and Åkerlind, 2009; Jansen, Maliangkay, Martín and Åkerlind, 2009; Jansen and Schmidt, 2011; Martín and Jansen, 2011, 2012; Martín, Jansen and Beckmann 2015).

In this book, we remedy that omission by reporting in full the relevant methodologies, analytical processes and outcomes of the ANU case study, and thus provide other researchers with access to what is probably the most detailed and comprehensive institutional data set in the field. We also explain how we were able to use this data set to interrogate the motivations and constraints that influence tertiary students’ decisions as to whether to continue or discontinue their L&C study. As we take the reader forward into understanding the context for this institutional case study, with detailed presentation, analysis and discussion of the research findings, we will start building the thesis of this book, namely that university language departments must become more aware that students at risk are found at all levels of L&C study (not just in first year or Beginner cohorts); that the ‘language
capital’ of students plays a role in their propensity to continue their studies; and that policies that cater to the needs of all students are crucial to maximise retention through all levels of L&C programs.

1.3. The impact of government, university and school policies on language teaching in Australia

Before engaging the reader with the rationale and methodology of the ANU case study, however, we feel it is important to explain some aspects of the broader context of language teaching in Australian universities and their feeder systems (especially secondary schools). Australian government policies, along with societal and external factors, have clearly exerted significant influence on the levels of enrolment, retention and attrition in L&C programs in schools and universities (Clyne 1993, 1997; Djité, 2011; Kleinsasser, 2000; Leopold, 1986; Liddicoat, 2010; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2010; Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko, 2006; Nicholas, 2004; Pauwels, 2002; White and Baldauf, 2006). Djité (2011, 65) provides a thoughtful historical analysis of the way in which ‘national sentiment and ideologies have … dictated language policy in Australia over the last 30 years’, and concludes that ‘language policy in Australia continues to be a site for negotiation between the monolingual ethos and the urge for linguistic pluralism’. Two examples of influential late twentieth-century policies are the 1991 Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Australia, Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991), and the 1994 report to the Council of Australian Governments (1994). The latter led directly to the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) Strategy 1996–2002, which impacted on both the funding and the demand for Asian languages in schools and, as a knock-on effect, in universities.

Not surprisingly, many authors believe that the provision and uptake of languages in the Australian tertiary sector has been directly—and, most argue, negatively—influenced by the lack of effective language provision in the secondary (school) education sector (Group of Eight, 2007; Liddicoat, Scarino, Curnow, Kohler, Scrimgeour and Morgan, 2007, 38–41; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2010; Lo Bianco, 2009, 48–51). Despite multiple strategic federal and state/territory government
policy changes, each indicating a willingness to address the issue of language study at secondary level, there appears to have been no increase in the last 20 years in the proportion of Year 12 students studying a language (Liddicoat et al., 2007, 38–41; Lo Bianco, 2009, 48–51), which is the indicator most commonly used as a surrogate for the extent of language study at secondary level. In contrast to the 10 per cent of Australian Year 12 students studying a foreign language in 2006 (Lo Bianco, 2009, 49), about 60 per cent of senior secondary students in Europe in 2009/10 were learning two or more foreign languages (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2012). In the words of the Group of Eight (research-intensive) universities: ‘decades of policy neglect and inaction mean Australian school students now spend less time learning a language than students in all other OECD countries’ (Group of Eight, 2007, 1).

What has led to this somewhat parlous state of affairs? Martín (2004, 2005) and Lo Bianco (2009) argue that the low levels of commitment to language study in Australia have resulted from various historical circumstances meshed with the characteristics of ethnic community relations, which have together discouraged the use of languages other than English in mainstream settings. Martín (2004, 2005) identifies three key twentieth-century influences: i) in the late 1940s and 1950s, newly created Australian universities often decided to waive knowledge of a language other than English (LOTE) as an entrance requirement; ii) in the 1960s, curriculum reforms reduced language provision in secondary schools; and, iii) since the late 1980s, the predominance of Australian government economic rationalist policies in higher education have not favoured the labour-intensive and small-enrolment nature of L&C courses. In evidence for the latter, for example, from 2001 to 2005 enrolments in L&C courses in Australian universities remained relatively stable, but fewer languages were taught, and there was an increasing reliance on casual, rather than permanent, language teaching staff (White and Baldauf, 2006).

In a more recent review of language offerings at Australian universities, Dunne and Pavlyshyn (2012, 15) argued that the ‘apparent health’ of tertiary language teaching in Australia, based on the total number of less commonly taught languages on offer, was ‘illusory and potentially misleading’, because the majority of those
languages were only taught at ANU, and thus, in the author’s words, and quite prophetically (Macdonald, 2015), ‘vulnerable to changes in [that institution’s] financial climate’.

Internal university policies also play an important role in encouraging student enrolments. In the USA, most tertiary institutions traditionally had compulsory language requirements for all undergraduate degrees (McGroarty, 1997, 80–83). Although this requirement has become less prevalent in recent years (Furman et al., 2010, 5), at least half of all US universities were still insisting on compulsory language study in 2010 (Lusin, 2012). This is especially true for institutions with highly competitive entry. For example, Yale College—a partner of ANU in the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU)—requires all students to study a foreign language, regardless of their existing knowledge of that language or another (Yale College, 2015). At the University of California, Berkeley, (another IARU member), every student in the College of Letters and Science (but not in all Colleges) must demonstrate ‘proficiency in reading comprehension, writing, and conversation in a foreign language equivalent to the second semester college level, either by passing an exam or by completing approved course work’, although this can be achieved through evidence of appropriate high school study (University of California, Berkeley, 2015). It is notable that, following increases in aggregate US higher education enrolments in all languages consistently from 1980 to 2009, there was a decrease in the period between 2009 and 2013 (Goldberg, Looney and Lusin, 2015), the same period during which compulsory requirements were becoming less common or less rigorous (Furman et al., 2010, 5).

By contrast, no Australian university has compulsory language requirements for all undergraduate degrees on offer, although a limited level of compulsion may occur in some degree programs. At ANU, degrees with compulsory language study accounted for just 10 per cent of the total student load in 2008 and 2009 (the relevant period for the case study): this proportion has decreased even further in the light of subsequent reforms in relevant degree structures.
1.4. Historical perspectives from the teaching coalface

The changes and difficulties experienced in Australian university language departments in the mid to late twentieth century is perhaps best encapsulated by the personal case study of Professor Keith Leopold, who detailed his own experiences in the German department at the University of Queensland over a period of some 40 years (Leopold, 1986). Identifying many factors that impacted on course structure, teaching approaches, workload, and standards—all of which significantly influenced what he called the ‘struggle for students’—Leopold (1986, 9) described the outcome of his long-term perspective from the coalface: ‘as the stress on numbers has become greater and greater, finances have become tighter and tighter, [and] the utilitarian aspects of education have moved more and more into the foreground’. Leopold (1986) especially noted the significant stresses on staff that derived specifically from the widening range in the language competence of beginner students. Some 30 years later, our experience is that many university language teachers still identify very closely with Leopold’s concerns.

In the same time frame, but methodologically in diametric contrast to Leopold’s very personal analysis, an extensive set of relevant research data was collected by Bowden, Starrs and Quinn (1989). Through diverse methods, including a national survey, interviews, and observations, these authors examined the attitudes of Australian university academics who were teaching LOTE on aspects such as students’ entry skills, streaming, student workload, curricula, course structures, students’ expectations, the use of audio-visual media, teaching specialisations, language-teaching methodologies, and the status of language teaching. Most of the university language departments in the study complained of difficulties with staffing levels, which impacted on the feasibility of implementing appropriate approaches to teaching (Bowden et al., 1989).

The diversity in background knowledge and skills of students starting L&C study has long been an issue for university teaching departments. Bowden et al. (1989) found that first year students showed great diversity in their previous experiences of learning a second language, which was attributed to inadequate language provision in the
secondary sector. The researchers concluded that teaching staff could no longer expect all students to have specific skills or capabilities on entry, and that budgetary constraints made it difficult to provide enough staff to meet the consequently varied and divergent needs of these students (Bowden et al., 1989). Smaller departments in particular have to balance the learning benefits and staff costs of finely tuned streaming versus the need to ensure adequate assistance to individual students in more broadly streamed, and thus staffing-effective, placements (Bowden et al., 1989, 132). Dealing with this by streaming students according to their level of language attainment on entry (i.e. placing language-competent first year students into second or third year L&C classes) has, in our experience, met with only limited success, because of budget constraints that impact on the required class sizes and teaching methods.

In addition, since the mid-1980s, most Australian institutions have had more students enrolling in languages at Beginner Level (Level 1) than at other entry points (Hawley, 1982; Nettelbeck et al., 2007), because of the reduction of language teaching in high schools. Naturally, this has implications for undergraduates’ potential levels of achievement: for example, Australia’s Group of Eight research-intensive universities—which includes ANU—openly acknowledge that students who start out as beginners at university are unlikely to achieve a sophisticated level of language competence in three years of classroom-based study alone (Group of Eight, 2007, 4).

At this stage, readers may be wondering why this chapter is referring extensively to research that dates back more than 25 years. The sad truth is that there is still a disappointing relevance to this data, and to the conclusion reached by Bowden et al. (1989, 129), namely that ‘tertiary language teaching bristles with sensitive and contentious issues … subject to conflicting opinion and practice’. At least four of the key issues highlighted all those decades ago by Bowden et al. (1989) are still highly relevant in Australia today.

First, problematic degree structures are still making it difficult for students to combine the study of a language with other subjects: despite some universities implementing changes that improve the situation (e.g. Diploma of Languages at several universities; the creation of flexible double degree opportunities at ANU;
and the degree curriculum changes at the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Australia), degree structures remain a key barrier to L&C studies in many universities.

Second, the increasing number of international students enrolling in higher education who wish to study their own first language, or another language that they have previously studied or spoken, has increased still further the range of entry skill levels among students, with a consequent emphasis on the need for ever more effective placement tests and streaming. This aspect is crucially important to learning outcomes: Bowden et al. (1989, 131) found high levels of dissatisfaction among first year students who were placed in unstreamed classes, not least because complete beginner students were reluctant to speak their ‘new’ language in the presence of more advanced students.

A third issue that remains highly topical is the disparity between the expectations of students and those of teachers and university administrators. Bowden et al. (1989, 139) found ‘a close correlation between the level of student satisfaction with the course, and the level of [oral] fluency achieved’ in all the language departments they visited. Students were strongly in favour of communicative approaches to language teaching: most reported a desire to speak the language of study, while relatively few wanted to read literature in that language (Bowden et al., 1989, 141). The researchers concluded that Australia was ‘witnessing a major shift in orientation away from a traditional humanist view of university language teaching … towards a very pragmatic emphasis on practical communicative competence’ (Bowden et al., 1989, 145).

Leal et al. (1991) soon confirmed this perception in a government-sponsored Australia-wide review, revealing with concern that outcomes sought by students did not always correspond to those sought by teaching staff. While heads of departments focused first on students’ linguistic and reading performance, and next on their cultural knowledge, a large majority of students were primarily seeking a high level of oral/aural proficiency, with an appreciation of the relevant society and culture being quite a secondary objective:
although … third year students were happy or very happy with their courses, they did not hesitate to propose changes in the curriculum … [most frequently] a request for more oral input into the mode of teaching (38%). As in most past surveys, oral command of the language was what students most wanted to achieve (Leal et al., 1991, 120).

The ‘contest’ between spoken and other forms of language learning remains a concern of curriculum designers today.

The final issue identified by Bowden et al. (1989) that is still highly relevant today concerns student perceptions that workloads are different in different languages (for example, that European languages require relatively less effort than Asian languages). The researchers found students reporting that they had withdrawn from L&C courses with (perceived) heavy workloads because the students felt that such workloads would prevent the attainment of the relatively high marks needed to assure scholarships and jobs.

In closing this section, we note with disappointment that key issues about L&C teaching in universities that were raised some 25 years ago by Leopold (1986) and Bowden et al. (1989)—degree structures unsupportive of L&C study; high diversity in student cohorts; curriculum design conflict from the perspective of students and staff around the relative importance of spoken and written language; and perceptions of workload—are still highly relevant, empirically identified in the findings of the ANU case study (considered in depth in Chapter 4) as well as in other studies described below.

1.5. Research into attrition in university Language & Culture programs

Despite an increasing focus on retention and attrition as surrogate measures of performance, including as funding indicators (Gabb et al., 2006), until the late 2000s there was virtually no systematic research on L&C courses in Australian universities, and only a little relevant research focused on the school sector. While school and university perspectives are by no means equivalent—school students are often strongly influenced by their parents, and schools are affected by state
and territory government policies as well as national ones—language-teaching staff in universities have often been able to relate anecdotally to some of the findings and conclusions of school-focused studies.

For example, there was interest in the research by Curnow and Kohler (2007) on why high school students continued studying a language: the most important reasons were academic achievement, personal interests, and relationships, with other notable factors including bonus schemes that rewarded language study in university entry schemes; students having travelled to, or having connections with, a country where the target language was spoken; and the influence of friends. Important reasons for discontinuing study included the lack of availability of their preferred language; the perception that learning languages gave rise to a relatively higher workload than learning other subjects; and the belief that language learning was not meaningful, because other subjects carried more value (Curnow and Kohler, 2007).

Another schools-focused discussion worthy of note is the more philosophical, rather than empirical, review of language education in Australia’s schools by Scarino (2012). Noting the complexity of measuring language-learning outcomes among individual students and cohorts, especially in the light of the ‘highly diverse teaching, learning and assessment practices and diverse expectations about learner achievements’ created by the diverse policy contexts across Australia, Scarino (2012, 240) identified the need nationally for a ‘curriculum and assessment framework that acknowledged the diversity of student achievements’ to provide baseline and reference points for monitoring and planning.

In university-based language education, the continuing lack of reliable and valid data on any aspect of tertiary L&C programs (Leal et al., 1991; Murray, 2010), let alone on the key aspects of retention and attrition (Lobo and Matas, 2010), means that even informal findings from universities have been valued. One such study, given much attention at the time, was the internal review of the University of Melbourne’s Diploma in Modern Languages (DML), documented (but not published) by Rover and Duffy in 2005. The DML was a supplementary program that allowed undergraduate students to study a language in addition to their degree. The internal review was triggered by high discontinuation rates (about 60 per cent of enrolled students) occurring in the early 2000s. The review
examined six of the program’s languages (French, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian) through semi-structured individual interviews with 13 staff and 50 current or past students, across wide-ranging topics, including students’ motivations for enrolling, their learning experiences during the program, and, where applicable, their reasons for discontinuing. The qualitative data collected in this way were complemented by internal statistical data.

The findings showed that the DML was regarded positively by both staff and students, even when those students had withdrawn from the program (Rover and Duffy, 2005). Students reported many reasons for enrolling in the DML, including (in descending order of frequency) wanting greater ‘flexibility’ in their degree; ‘continuing language study’ (beyond the Year 12 certification level); ‘learning a language’ (for beginners); and the ‘opportunity to learn two languages’. Students most commonly left the program in its earlier stages: although there were many reasons given, the most common were ‘high workload’, ‘wrong placement level’, and ‘personal reasons’ (Rover and Duffy, 2005).

While it was clear in the mid-2000s that strategically designed and evidence-based policies were crucial to the quality of future language teaching in the higher education sector, it was equally obvious that Australia lacked valid and reliable empirical data on which to base such policies. In consequence, the Australian Academy of the Humanities decided to fund first one, then a second, national investigation into Beginner (Level 1) courses in university L&C programs. These Australian Research Council Linkage Learned Academies Special Projects (LASP) studies delivered broadly scoped and wide-reaching findings, including specific consideration of issues related to retention and attrition, documented in two reports referred to hereafter as LASP1 (Nettelbeck et al., 2007) and LASP2 (Nettelbeck et al., 2009).

The timing of these two LASP studies—which respectively involved data collection in 2007 and 2008, and reports in 2007 and 2009—largely paralleled the in-depth institutional case study being conducted from 2008 to 2009 at ANU on the nature of retention in L&C programs. This coincidence of timing meant that ANU language-teaching staff were contributing to LASP1, and facilitating the involvement of ANU students in LASP2, at the same time as supporting the institutional research reported in this book.
We ask readers to recognise that this concurrency means that the LASP findings were not available when the ANU data collection research was being planned, implemented and analysed. Nevertheless, the fact that the LASP2 data were being collected in the same year as those of the second phase of research at ANU meant that the ANU research team was able to support its fellow researchers by maximising the collection of LASP2 data at ANU, thus ensuring that the ANU case study—focused in depth on one institution—would complement and give more resonance to LASP2, which was focused on many institutions. Bearing this timing in mind, we will now review the methodologies, findings and implications of the LASP1 and LASP2 research, as well as some more recent research on retention strategies for L&C at the course level, again unknown to the ANU researchers at the time (e.g. Lobo and Matas, 2010, 2011; Hanley and Brownlee, 2013), before delving deeply into the ANU institutional case study in future chapters.

1.6. The LASP1 study

The LASP1 research provided an audit survey of Beginner (Level 1) courses in L&C university programs Australia-wide, derived from an intense study of 10 universities and at least 10 distinct languages (Nettelbeck et al., 2007). Data collection methods included questionnaires, classroom observations and interviews with staff ‘interlocutors’ (but notably, not with students: their voices did not come into play until LASP2). Unfortunately, the LASP1 report did not identify all the languages that it had covered, but it did identify a focus on six languages with increasing enrolments, and four languages with decreasing enrolments (Nettelbeck et al. 2007, 12). With respect to retention and attrition, LASP1 requested and analysed retrospective longitudinal enrolment data over five semesters from two cohorts, namely those students who had started studying in a Beginner\(^3\) L&C course in Semester 1 (February) 2005 and those who had started in Semester 2 (July) 2006.

\(^3\) We use the nomenclature of Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced courses to denote Level 1, 2 and 3 courses respectively. These are usually expected to equate to first, second and third year enrolments at university, but—as we explain in detail in later chapters—this form of contextualisation actually creates an excessive oversimplification that hinders, rather than helps, an understanding of the complexities involved.
The authors noted that determining attrition was ‘particularly arduous because many institutions merge Beginners’ streams with others at various points’, so that the research required ‘close analysis of actual class lists as distinct from enrolment numbers’ (Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 14). Moreover, while some of the 10 institutions surveyed could provide such detailed source data, others could not. Nevertheless, the authors believed that ‘sufficient data was collected overall … to make some important observations’ (Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 14).

The key LASP1 findings (Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 14) relevant to the theme of this book were that:

- retention from Beginner (Level 1) to Advanced (Level 3) courses averaged just 25 per cent for the 2005 cohort, with a similar pattern found in the 2006 cohort
- retention rates varied considerably among institutions and
- retention rates varied considerably within institutions for different languages.

Why were some three quarters of students who started an L&C course at university giving up on those L&C studies before completing their degree? The staff interlocutors who were surveyed suggested four reasons for the high attrition rates, namely that many students:

- had problems with the (perceived) heavy workload
- were frustrated with their slow progress
- were experiencing timetabling problems and/or
- were starting a language as an elective in later years (Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 15).

With such high attrition rates in L&C programs Australia-wide finally revealed, the LASP1 researchers identified an urgent need for a large-scale national study, which was soon realised in LASP2 (Nettelbeck et al., 2009).

1.7. The LASP2 study

The LASP2 research essentially involved a follow-up study of 11 universities: the original 10 universities examined in LASP1, plus one more. Like LASP1, the focus of LASP2 was Beginner (Level 1) students.
The data collection focused on a semi-longitudinal student survey to explore retention strategies and the use of technology-enhanced language learning, via two hard-copy questionnaires completed by 2,968 students in Semester 1, 2008 and 1,810 students in Semester 2, 2008 (Nettelbeck et al., 2009). The questionnaires contained 14 structured questions—with mostly predetermined response choices—regarding students’ academic profile, language background, intended length of study and motivations. (It is important to note here that, although LASP2 sought a longitudinal dimension to its data analysis, this was not possible in terms of statistical validity, as the surveys did not control for individual student identity in the two sets of responses.)

Among a wealth of results, the LASP2 study had seven key findings of particular relevance to this book's theme: four of these findings identified factors that are potentially confounding for those studying student attrition, while the remaining three findings related to student motivation, data collection issues and policy recommendations (Nettelbeck et al., 2009).

The first relevant LASP2 finding—and one which confirmed data from LASP1—was that many first year L&C students are late enrolments, ‘taking up a language too late in their studies to be able to complete a major or even a minor sequence in the language’ (Nettelbeck et al., 2009, 11). Whereas traditional measures of L&C attrition assume that all students begin language study in their first year at university, no less than half the students who responded to the LASP2 surveys reported starting a language after their first year of study at university. Although even short-term language learning has significant value—as Nettelbeck et al. (2007) had argued in the LASP1 report—there are significant implications for course and program planning and design if students are enrolling later than expected in their university career (Nettelbeck et al., 2009). We draw readers’ attention to this issue, and will explore the full import of ‘Late Starter’ language students in Chapters 2 and 5, where we present a detailed analysis of the Late Starter phenomenon as explored in the ANU case study.

A second important LASP2 finding from our perspective was that even Beginner (Level 1) classes contain mixed levels of proficiency: indeed, among the so-called Beginner students surveyed in LASP2, just 38 per cent actually had no previous background in the target
language, while most Beginners had diverse previous language-learning experiences, including a ‘not insignificant number ... who had successfully completed [that language at school in] year 12’ (Nettelbeck et al., 2009, 12). As identified decades earlier by Leopold (1986) and Bowden et al. (1989), the impact of such mixed proficiency groups in Beginner classes was problematic for teachers, potentially creating ‘perceptions of disadvantage’, and hence negative impacts on motivation, among genuine Beginners (Nettelbeck et al., 2009, 12). In addition, cross-cultural, related-language issues were evident: for example, some 30 per cent of students enrolling in Beginner Spanish had previously studied French, which might confer some familiarity advantage, while about half the students who were enrolled in Beginner Japanese identified themselves as native Chinese speakers, which might confer some advantage in terms of character recognition (Nettelbeck et al., 2009, 12). This situation again arose in the context of the ANU case study, and is explored in detail in chapters 2 and 4.

The LASP2 study also found a mismatch between students’ expectations of workloads and the reality—or, rather, students’ perceptions of reality—with many students reporting that their L&C workload was ‘higher than expected’ (Nettelbeck et al., 2009, 19), again echoing the earlier research findings by Bowden et al. (1989). Perceiving the workload as high was not a clear disincentive, however: many students reported that they would be studying the language for longer than they had originally planned because they had found the learning ‘more interesting’ and/or the teaching ‘better’, than expected (not because they had experienced ‘less work than expected’ or other reasons). Finding students apparently pleasantly surprised by the quality of language teaching at university, Nettelbeck et al. (2009, 19) concluded that ‘high attrition does not appear to be caused (and may in fact be mitigated) by perceived quality of teaching or course interest’.

Crucially, LASP2 respondents valued language speaking skills most highly, followed by understanding (Nettelbeck et al., 2009, 19). This finding—again consistent with previous research (e.g. Bowden et al., 1989; Leal et al., 1991)—has profound implications for course design. Unfortunately, as Nettelbeck et al. (2009, 19) explained—and again echoing the research findings of 20 years earlier—‘the dominant
motivations [of students] could hardly be clearer, [but] the degree to which [these motivations] are taken into account in course planning and design is less evident’.

1.8. Implications of the LASP1 and LASP2 research

Both LASP studies were unequivocal in their call for action as a result of their research findings. The LASP1 authors identified ‘an urgent need for governments and universities alike to recognise languages as a strategic and essential sector and to support them accordingly’ (Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 6).

This view was reiterated by the LASP2 report’s primary recommendation:

That universities, at the policy level, give explicit and urgent recognition of the strategic importance of the study of languages and cultures; and that they develop appropriate strategies and provide adequate resources for the promotion and effective maintenance of these studies (Nettelbeck et al. 2009, 6).

A direct outcome of these recommendations—and a policy action of great significance with regard to L&C programs in Australian higher education—was the creation in 2011 of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU; see www.lcnau.org; Hajek, Nettelbeck and Woods 2013). This network, which aims to raise the profile of language educators and public awareness of the cultural, strategic and economic importance of language education in, and for, Australia, is already having an impact as a central voice and focus for research outcomes and policy development (John Hajek, pers. comm., 2014).

Of even more significance to the central theme of this book, both LASP1 and LASP2 researchers identified the lack of accurate data as a significant hindrance to the calculation of realistic rates of attrition in university L&C programs. The LASP1 authors placed the onus for better data collection onto universities, recommending the ‘creation of processes to ensure that universities collect data in a readily accessible form on the LOTE experience of their students, including formal secondary training and background experience’
(Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 6). The LASP2 authors focused more on the complexities of collecting accurate and useful data on comparative L&C enrolments in Australian universities, and recommended that ‘the university sector … work towards a uniform and nuanced definition of what constitutes attrition, and that the relevant faculties generate and make readily available comparative statistics about attrition in languages and other humanities and social sciences areas’ (Nettelbeck et al., 2009, 6). This crucially important issue is one that we address in depth in Chapter 2, in the context of the ANU case study, where we report on an innovative approach to calculating retention rates based on detailed institutional and collected data.

1.9. Attrition at the course level: Risk factors

So far, the findings described in this chapter have largely focused on research at the university or program level. For students, of course, the decision to discontinue their formal L&C studies generally occurs during a specific course. For this reason, Lobo and Matas (2010, 2011) looked specifically at attrition at the level of an individual L&C course (i.e. students withdrawing from a course before its end), by investigating the reasons why students withdrew from a first-year ab-initio (Beginner/Level 1) Spanish course at an Australian university. The authors’ approach was prognostic/remedial rather than diagnostic/explanatory: instead of aiming to explain attrition from the perspective of the students who had left the course, the authors attempted first to identify students at risk of withdrawing, and then to provide an intervention that would reduce that risk (Lobo and Matas, 2010, 155–161; 2011, 305–306). Through an extensive review of the Australian and international literature on attrition and retention focused on first year students, the authors identified 17 key factors known to influence the likelihood of a student not completing a course (Figure 1.2, which can be seen to be an extension of Figure 1.1; Lobo, 2012). The authors next developed a student ‘risk’ questionnaire based on these factors, phrasing questions such that responses could be scored, and totals ranked, to provide cut-off values that identified an individual student’s risk of withdrawing before the end of the course in one of three categories (‘very little risk’, ‘fair risk’ and ‘high risk’). To add a qualitative dimension to the scoring, some students were also interviewed.
1. Students’ expectations and perceptions of university life and study (of the course, degree or programme, the people and the university itself)
2. Social and academic student integration
3. Teaching and learning styles
4. Assessment strategies used in courses
5. Lack of student mentoring
6. Students’ living arrangements (on campus, with friends, at home, among others)
7. Student age
8. Student gender
9. Work and issues with employment
10. Financial concerns
11. Student lack of preparation for university life and study
12. Family responsibilities and obligations
13. Dissatisfaction with the university
14. Academic difficulties
15. Health and personal reasons
16. Course or Program unsuitability
17. Learning anxiety (in particular foreign language learning anxiety)

Figure 1.2. Factors associated with course attrition, as identified from the literature

Source: After Lobo and Matas (2010, 14–40).

With this knowledge of the risk factors of attrition, and the information from their students’ risk questionnaires, the researchers then developed a two-page ‘First Year Student Guide’ specifically designed ‘to facilitate the social inclusion and academic connection of [each] student’ (Lobo and Matas, 2011, 311). This guide, which provided students with relevant information about how to study and the university’s support services, was given to students after they had completed the risk questionnaire, and then followed up with class discussions half-way through the semester. Remarkably, given the 85 withdrawals from the previous year’s cohort, no student from the ‘Guide’ cohort withdrew from the course. From this outcome and student feedback, the authors argue that their approach to maximising retention was successful, although they acknowledge that both survey and guide require validation with a larger sample (Lobo and Matas, 2011, 312).
1.10. Learning anxiety as a specific risk factor in language learning

Although the literature reviewed by Lobo and Matas (2010) suggests many generic reasons why a student may discontinue his or her enrolment in a first year course (Figure 1.2), three factors appear particularly relevant to language learners. These are i) the perception of a high (and higher than expected) workload in the course; ii) the student having ‘less serious’ reasons for enrolling in the course (for example, thinking that language learning would be ‘fun’, and so being less prepared for the realities of workload and assessment); and iii) the important notion of students being burdened by ‘foreign language learning anxiety’ or ‘second language anxiety’ (Lobo, 2012).

While learning anxiety is by no means unique to languages (it has also been identified as a problem faced by students of mathematics and science, capable of negatively impacting on performance—Ashcraft and Kirk, 2001; Ma and Xu, 2003; Sherman and Wither, 2003; Nunez-Pena, Suarez-Pellicioni and Bono, 2013), it is notably the only risk factor specific to the language-teaching context (Lobo, 2012, 207). ‘Second language anxiety’—defined as ‘the feeling of tension and apprehension associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning’ (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley, 1999, 222), and closely linked to performance in oral examinations or other forms of language production in the classroom—is considered one of the major factors in foreign language attrition (e.g. Horwitz, 2010; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Scovel, 1978; Wesely, 2010). Lobo and Matas (2010, 127) found language anxiety—primarily derived from concern about an oral interview assessment task—was a key factor reported by students who withdrew from the Spanish L&C course under study. This anxiety was associated with perceptions that other students were better at languages, and that the classes were too fast-paced, perceptions that all contributed to a feeling of inadequacy in class (Lobo and Matas, 2010, 102–110). However, the situation is not simple: some students who reported anxiety related to speaking, listening, and especially the oral interview nevertheless persisted in their studies, to the admitted bemusement of the researchers (Lobo and Matas, 2010, 124).
It may appear somewhat surprising that the relative level of learning anxiety among individual students is *not* an effective predictor of the likelihood of those students continuing or discontinuing their language study. The ANU findings give some insights to the relevant differences in student characteristics that may in future provide this kind of predictive capacity for teachers: these findings also suggest why the Student Guide produced by Lobo and Matas (2011) had its excellent outcome in reducing attrition.

1.11. Asking the difficult questions: Attrition as a research problem

We began this chapter with a list of questions about student attrition that concern university L&C teachers. As we have seen, some significant attempts have been made in recent years to tackle these questions (e.g. Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 2009; Lobo and Matas, 2010, 2011). While the relevant research is still far too limited to provide trustworthy answers across the sector, it does show that raw enrolment numbers provide extremely crude measures of attrition in university L&C programs. Nevertheless, such raw data are still commonly used by administrators and budget planners as surrogate indicators of a program’s success, and, critically, may be used as performance indicators to guide the allocation of institutional and government funding, as occurred from 2006 to 2009 nationally with the Learning and Teaching Performance Funds (Gabb et al., 2006).

The need for a more effective approach to calculating and understanding retention in L&C programs was crystal clear to L&C teachers at ANU in the mid-2000s. The apparently low retention rates being experienced across the 18 ANU L&C programs on offer at that time—especially in terms of students discontinuing after Beginner level—was a key discussion point among teaching staff. This led to the establishment of an internally funded research program to explore in detail the best ways of calculating and comparing student retention rates, and the motivations of students in making decisions about their L&C studies, using ANU as a case study. This was not just an opportunistic choice of institution, but a strategic one: ANU has long had a tradition of teaching many L&C programs, and was not only identified as teaching the greatest diversity of languages
of any university included in the LASP1 research (Nettelbeck et al., 2007), but also as the only university teaching many of Australia’s less commonly taught languages (Dunne and Pavlyshyn, 2012).

In designing the case study, the research team was mindful of two perspectives that had not yet been voiced, but have subsequently been well expressed by other researchers. First, we understood the overall complexity of researching L&C education. In the context of a review of languages in the school sector, Scarino (2012, 244) explained this complexity:

> In the Australian context of languages education, descriptions that do not take into account acknowledged differences across languages, across groups of students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and affiliations with the target language, and across program conditions such as time-on-task, are too generalised to be meaningful and of value to the diverse users.

We also understood that this complexity would be increased, rather than lessened, with our focus on retention.

Secondly, we understood, in the more recent words of Hanley and Brownlee (2013), that ‘investigating questions of attrition and student motivation in tertiary language programs is not simply a matter of asking students why they do or do not continue in their area of study’. We thus approached the concept of student retention in university L&C programs not just as an educational issue but also as a social phenomenon, and thus deliberately set out to collect data on our students’ social characteristics through institution-wide surveys of L&C students in 2008 and 2009, with our approaches designed to maximise response rates, and—again as Hanley and Brownlee (2013) later reinforced—to avoid inadvertently allowing results to be skewed by methodological defects.

The research was thus designed as a highly structured case study that would generate valid and reliable empirical data to enlighten our understanding of attrition and retention in the context of a specific institution, while also suggesting appropriate methodologies for future studies on a broader scale.
Our approach was strongly influenced by Bourdieu’s concluding comments in the methodological appendix to his seminal work, *Distinction*:

> The epistemological obstacles which social science has to overcome are initially social obstacles. One of these is the common conception of the hierarchy of the tasks which make up the sociologist’s job, which leads so many researchers to disdain humble, easy yet fertile activities in favour of exercises that are both difficult and sterile. Another is an anomic reward system which forces a choice between a safe thesis and a flash in the pan, pedantry and prophecy, discouraging the combination of broad ambition and long patience that is needed to produce a work of science. Unlike the sometimes illuminating intuitions of the essay form, the sometimes coherent thesis of theoreticism and the sometimes valid observations of empiricism, provisional systems of propositions which strive to combine internal coherence and adequacy to the facts can only be produced by a slow, difficult labour which remains unremarked by all hasty readings. These will only see repetitive reaffirmations of theses, intuitions or already known facts in the provisional conclusion of a long series of totalizations, because they ignore what is essential, namely, the structure of the relations between the propositions (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984], 513).

We thus sought to collect comprehensive data that we could subject to patient analysis as we sought ‘internal coherence’. In addition, our work focused on students being at the heart of language teaching, and their experiences and ‘individual differences’ (Dörnyei, 2005) as learners being at the heart of language-teaching research. In so doing, we hoped to advance the ideas on student motivation presented by Joe Lo Bianco, Professor of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education:

> Ultimately language learning is the preoccupation of individual students, in the same way as language teaching is the preoccupation of language teachers. In recent policies, written with the hand of diplomats, trade officials and other elites, there has been far less consideration of the practical issues involved in schooling, and therefore a tendency towards stressing accountability and imposition of numerical targets, with less focus on capacity-building, acknowledgment of the learner population, issues of motivation, resource constraints, personal aspirations, experiences and motivation, identity issues and family background. All too often it is assumed that the motivations learners have available to them are the prospects of employment and other material advantage that attach to language learning.
This outsider perspective on motivation is less tenable today in light of the powerful shifting of emphasis towards the internal perspective and experience of learners, and on the quality of micro-school experiences in influencing motivation, persistence and interest among language students … This research is important to language education planners because it shows that even in the face of negative attitudes students might inherit from the wider society, or from their parents, about languages being unimportant, or that ‘everyone speaks English’, micro-motivation effects (good teaching, concrete perceptible sense of achievement, success) can override negativity and sustain student interest. Here policy is practice, in the hands of individual teachers and schools (Lo Bianco, 2009, 27).

Accordingly, rather than to present any particular policy or strategy solution ourselves, our focus in reporting the ANU case study research in this book is to present detailed data and analytical methodologies that we believe will be highly relevant to the development of any future evidence-based language policies intended to increase student participation and retention in university L&C programs.

1.12. A reader’s guide to this book

The ANU case study had three data-related aims. First, it sought to document the nature and rates of student retention and attrition in ANU L&C programs, and, for comparative purposes, in other discipline areas taught at ANU. Second, the study sought to explore ANU students’ motivations for, and experiences of, studying a language at university. In particular, the researchers investigated students’ motivations for continuing, discontinuing, or thinking about discontinuing/deferring their language studies. Third, the case study was designed to identify the incentives or disincentives that influence students either to continue language studies to the completion of an undergraduate degree major, or to discontinue those studies before completing a major. In addition, the researchers’ awareness of the potential for generalisations from the institutional findings to inform future sector-wide policies related to increasing the

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4 At the time of this research, an ANU undergraduate student seeking to complete an L&C major had to complete either seven or eight courses, usually at a load of one course per semester. Students aiming to complete a major in three years usually enrolled in additional L&C courses in their final semester of study (generally the second semester in any given year).
rates of student retention in L&C higher education programs led to a realisation, during the analyses of the collected data, that what was required was a reconceptualisation of the concept of attrition with regard to L&C programs.

In presenting the methodologies, analytical processes and outcomes of the ANU case study, therefore, this book positions the significant findings of this single-institution research in the broader context of retention and attrition of university language students Australia-wide, and suggests some implications of these findings in terms of future research and policies. Through Chapter 1, readers should now have a good grasp of some of the key issues relevant to research into attrition in L&C programs in Australian universities. Chapter 2 takes readers into the contentious world of calculations, as we explore how meaningful retention rates can best be computed, and compare rates for L&C programs with those of other disciplines. The chapter introduces a novel and comprehensive approach to calculating retention rates from student data that universities already collect. Using ANU data, we will show how this approach negates the potential distortions of having several cohorts active at the same time, while respecting the specific and unusual nature of L&C enrolments and allowing fair comparisons with other disciplines.

In Chapter 3, the reader will meet the ‘Doubters’ of the book’s title for the first time, as we explain the rationale and detail of the single-institution research methodology, and the analytical approach we adopted in dealing with the student survey data. The crucial impact of this approach was that it demonstrated unequivocally that the simple dichotomous classification traditionally used in retention studies—that is, comparing those who continue studies (Continuers) to those who stop studies (Discontinuers)—did not explain the core issues at the heart of the discussion of retention in L&C programs. Even with in-depth statistical analyses, this simple dichotomous classification did not provide satisfying explanations of attrition, because we simply could not find statistically significant differences between Continuers and Discontinuers in terms of students’ background, motivations, perceptions or behaviour related to their L&C studies. The chapter takes readers on the researchers’ journey in seeking a new, data-based approach to the grouping of students. The reader will here meet the four descriptively named groups into which students were clustered in terms of their characteristics—Committed Students, Doubters,
Reluctant Quitters and Voluntary Quitters—and understand why the nature of the ANU data required a merging of the latter two categories into an inclusive grouping of Quitters (essentially equivalent to ‘Discontinuers’).

In Chapter 4, the three functional groupings—Committed Students, Doubters and Quitters—come to the fore, as we explore how they differ across a range of demographic, attitudinal and educational variables. As we describe the intergroup differences between the three, we show just how different are their reasons for continuing or discontinuing L&C studies.

In Chapter 5, we take this characterisation of the three student archetypes further, as we interpret the empirical research findings in a way that provides an overarching explanation of the differences among the groups. This is where we develop our argument based around the construct of ‘language capital’, and show how the students categorised as Doubters are easily identifiable as the students that other retention studies classify as those most ‘at risk’ of discontinuing. The chapter also includes an exemplar discussion of students’ perceptions about learning spoken language as an illustration of the capacity of the language capital construct to explain the empirical findings commonly found in studies of L&C students.

Chapter 6 brings the book to its conclusion by presenting an overview of the findings from the single-institution case study, and suggests ways in which the methodologies and the construct of language capital could benefit researchers and those developing language policies in the future.