The intention of this monograph has been to contribute to the research and debate on retention and attrition in L&C programs in Australian universities by providing the full details of an in-depth single-institution case study. By considering retention as a social phenomenon as well as an educational phenomenon, we have been able to provide an evidence-based framework for reconceptualising retention and attrition in L&C programs as a function of students’ language capital at the commencement of their university language studies.

Guided methodologically and philosophically by ideas expressed by Bourdieu (2010) and Lo Bianco (2009) (see Chapter 1), and largely contemporaneously with the most significant research focused specifically on retention in L&C programs in Australian universities (Lobo and Matas, 2010; Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 2009), the ANU case study was developed through a data-driven approach. This involved thorough statistical analyses of both an extensive set of institutional enrolment information, and of the detailed student data collected through a comprehensive questionnaire across multiple L&C programs.

The outcomes achieved with these methodologies, and their accessibility to theory-guided interpretation, indicate the potential for future similar studies across multiple institutions to guide the development of new, more effective policies related to student
retention in university L&C programs. In particular, five key findings from the case study, once replicated and debated across the sector, could be expected to contribute significantly to future policy development.

First, it has become clear that using a retention/attrition dichotomy, which simply compares ‘continuing’ to ‘discontinuing’ students, results in an incomplete, and relatively unhelpful, understanding of the retention/attrition profiles of L&C programs. Instead, the case study has shown that at least three—and ideally four—groups of students need to be differentiated. The evidence-based characterisation of students as falling into the groups of Committed Students, Doubters and Quitters (comprising Reluctant Quitters and Voluntary Quitters) accounts for the phenomenon of attrition much more effectively than the traditional dichotomy of Continuers versus Discontinuers.

Second, the case study data show clearly that research into student retention in L&C programs cannot be based on the assumptions that all first year university students enrol in Beginner level courses, or that all students who enrol in Beginner level courses are in their first year at university. Similarly, researchers and administrators cannot assume that all students in higher level L&C courses are beyond first year, that is, that they are already accustomed to university studies (and therefore perhaps no longer need as much in the way of academic and other support services).

Instead, we have to acknowledge that the real picture is much more complex: in at least some universities, significant numbers of students (including international students) who are already in the middle—or even in the last year—of their degree may still choose to enrol in Beginner L&C courses, and thus become Late Starters. Conversely, many students in their first year of university who have a background in a LOTE (including international students and local background speakers), or have studied a language before, may start their L&C studies beyond Beginner levels, and thus become Advanced Starters. These cohort-based phenomena not only confound many aspects of attrition calculations, but also create significant complexity for teachers, as they must work with classes of students with potentially very diverse levels of pre-existing knowledge of the language, and diverse status in terms of their relative experience in a university setting.
Moreover, students who are background LOTE speakers and/or international students appear to have a significant impact on attrition and retention rates, both through their enrolment as Advanced Starters, and, indirectly, by their presence in mixed-ability classes, through their unintended influence on other students with less language capital, who may perceive the Advanced Starters as having an unfair advantage. The mix of cohorts created by student enrolment patterns may be further complicated by institutional funding constraints that reduce the capacity for staff to stream L&C courses effectively.

This finding from the case study is extremely important, as it means that the complexities of retention and attrition issues in L&C programs will never be understood through data collection and analysis that focuses solely on Beginner students. In this context, the finding not only identifies an unexpected methodological limitation of both LASP studies (Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 2009), which was confined to Beginner students, but also presents an important facet of L&C student behaviour for future in-depth exploration.

Undoubtedly, L&C programs can be considered to be at a structural disadvantage when compared with other humanities or social sciences majors because a substantial proportion of L&C budgets must be devoted to helping students develop the language skills required for more content-oriented courses. The range of electives and subject choices for students in L&C programs is therefore always going to be significantly more limited than in humanities or social sciences programs.

However, the third case-study finding of significance is that student retention rates in L&C programs may not be as low as previously thought. This has become evident through the more refined methodology and analyses—the Global Retention Rate and Semester Level Retention Rate measures (Chapter 2)—developed as part of the case study research. These measures show that similar—even comparatively lower—retention rates are found in some groupings of science disciplines that have degree majors structurally similar to L&C majors. Real attrition rates are, however, difficult to determine because effective collection of the appropriate data requires contact with students who are no longer enrolled at the university, and who may therefore not be contactable, or not interested in providing feedback even if they can be contacted.
The fourth key finding of the case study hinges on those students who fit the characterisation of Doubters, namely those students who doubt the benefits of continuing their L&C studies, and who are therefore the students at greatest risk of giving up. While it is not surprising that 25 per cent of students in ANU Beginner (Level 1) courses were Doubters—as this is comparable to the proportion of at-risk students among Beginners identified in the LASP1 study (Nettelbeck et al., 2007, 11)—it is of some concern that no less than 40 per cent of students in the ANU Intermediate or Advanced courses (Levels 2 and 3) were also identifiable as Doubters. The issue of learning anxiety—for languages and in general (see Chapter 1)—may prove a worthwhile contribution to the description of Doubters in this context.

This finding is of significance as it contrasts substantially with the traditional perception that retention efforts have to be concentrated on first year students as those most at risk of giving up. If the implications of this finding gain acceptance, as we think they should, they will have a major bearing on the design of future interventions aimed at improving student retention in L&C programs in Australian universities. For example, while Lobo and Matas (2010) achieved success in improving retention by means of early identification of Beginner students at potential risk of discontinuing, this benefit could be lost in the students’ subsequent years of study, as we do not yet understand the drivers for later-year Doubters and potential Voluntary Quitters.

Our case study results thus raise a concern that retention strategies that focus solely on students at Beginner level may turn out to be relatively unsuccessful in the long term in their impact on overall numbers of students completing L&C programs. Moreover, such an emphasis on Beginners would also fail the more advanced students on whom L&C programs ultimately depend. Losing students who are already in Intermediate or Advanced courses seriously compromises the overall number of students available to complete majors or move into Honours programs, and it is from this group that Australia’s future language teachers and scholars will come.

The final key finding from the case study relates to the relevance of language capital as a construct that facilitates a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of retention issues among L&C students. We believe that such a construct—once replicated, tested and debated across the
sector—may provide valuable guidance for curriculum- and program-level interventions, such as those already suggested by Nettelbeck et al. (2009, 18–19). In particular, the importance of needs-based design for different groups of L&C students becomes paramount: language curricula, and the design of majors and minors, should cater to the needs, at all levels, not only of Committed Students, but also to those of the other identifiable groups—Doubters, potential Voluntary Quitters, Late Starters, international students, background speakers of a LOTE, and all students at risk of discontinuing L&C courses.

In this context, we can only echo the most recently published view of the most prolific and long-term researcher on student retention in the world, Professor Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University:

> Our prevailing view of student retention has been shaped by theories that view student retention through the lens of institutional action and ask what institutions can do to retain their students. Students, however, do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist. The two perspectives, though necessarily related, are not the same. Their interests are different. While the institution's interest is to increase the proportion of their students who graduate from the institution, the student’s interest is to complete a degree often without regard to the institution in which it is earned. Although there has been much written from the former point of view, much less has been written from the latter … For institutions, an understanding of student perceptions, not simply their behavioural manifestation, and their impact upon student decisions to stay or leave is a pre-requisite for the development of a more comprehensive strategy to further enhance the persistence and completion of all, not just some, students. Only when institutions understand how student perceptions shape decisions to persist and how their actions influence those perceptions can institutions move to impact those decisions in ways that enhance the likelihood of greater persistence … (Tinto, 2015).

What are the implications of all the ANU case study findings for future research in this field? Potentially, we can imagine the characteristics of the three identified student cohorts—Committed Students, Doubters, and Quitters—being generalised across other L&C programs in Australian tertiary institutions. However, we first advocate replication of the case study methodology with more defined institutional or jurisdictional foci.
We see an urgent need to refine and test, in the broader sector, our reconceptualisation of retention in L&C programs, with a particular focus on the dilemma faced by the students we characterise as Doubters. While we consider that the psychographic characteristics of Doubters are an excellent starting point for distinguishing students at risk of discontinuing their L&C studies, more cross-sectional studies involving different types of universities would allow a detailed refinement of the relevant cohort profiles. (A study encompassing all universities in one of the Australian state capitals could be ideal, as it would contrast diversity of institution and language capital profiles within the student population.)

Replication of the research methodology would also allow a revisiting of the characterisation of Voluntary versus Reluctant Quitters, which we could not explore in depth in the ANU case study because of sampling issues. In particular, we were unable to investigate factors that may influence motivation to continue or discontinue L&C studies in tertiary settings, such as the teaching programs, mode of delivery, or proportion of native/background speakers or international students in the class mix, or students’ socio-economic background, rural or urban backgrounds, or Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score.  

We also suspect that the experiences of students in the transition period from high school to university would be a crucial focus for exploration in the context of the concepts we have raised, such as language capital, degree structure, and Advanced and Late Starters.

We have hypothesised that the construct of language capital provides a crucial, and potentially causative, basis to the many issues previously identified in L&C research as individual retention problems (such as mixed proficiency groups, perceptions of high workloads, frustrations with slow progress, and perceptions that not enough time in class is spent on learning to speak the language). In both the LASP1 and LASP2 studies (respectively Nettelbeck et al., 2007; Nettelbeck et al., 2009), and in our preliminary treatment of the ANU case study data using the dichotomy of Continuers versus Discontinuers, all the above factors were considered as separate issues.

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1 The Australian First Year Experience Study 2014 found that studying a language was less common among respondent students with a disability, part-time students, students from regional backgrounds, students with low socio-economic status, and low ATAR students (Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis, 2015).
We now believe that the methodological failing of using such a simple dichotomy masked the much more integrated issues related to both the language setting and the identity of students participating in mixed-ability classes. We are now convinced that a more effective use of theoretical frameworks and perspectives, and especially a more open consideration of frameworks derived from diverse academic disciplines (for example, as advocated by Wesely, 2010, and by Forsman, Linder, Moll, Fraser and Andersson, 2014), and of students’ perceptions (as advocated by Tinto, 2015) may generate new ways of understanding the concepts of retention and attrition, certainly in the context of L&C programs, and potentially in more general contexts.

In particular, the concept of language capital that we propose in this book appears to be independent of the social factors known to influence attrition and retention in other disciplines, and is thus a construct we believe could be useful in developing a more complete understanding of the realities of student retention and attrition in L&C programs. If this approach were to be combined with current trends for ‘big data’ analysis (Daniel, 2015; Ram, Wang, Currim and Currim, 2015; Tickle, 2015), and data reduction methods and complexity thinking as an approach to calculating retention (Forsman et al., 2014), the concept, more broadly defined as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), could be potentially applied to other disciplines as well (especially those comparable to L&C, such as the sciences and Mathematics).

We believe that future research in this field is vital. Even though the empirical methodologies described in this book were limited to a single institution, we believe that the findings, and especially the tools developed to interpret those findings, can provide valuable insights into retention and attrition in other university L&C programs. As such, we hope this case study will serve as a springboard for future studies and policy formation.

We especially advocate combining the methodologies of the in-depth approach reported in this book with a cross-sectoral approach such as that used by Nettelbeck et al. (2009). By analysing new data in the context of the four characteristic segments of the student body that we have identified, we believe that other areas of focus, such as
language aptitude or differences in learning styles, could also provide an enriched source of guidance for language teachers in developing curricula and strategies to meet student needs.

Future research that is based on the national collation of accurate Australia-wide retention and attrition data, and used to inform debate through the more rigorous calculations suggested in this book, could provide a firm platform from which an evidence-based Australia-wide retention policy for university L&C programs could be developed, ideally informing a broader national policy on tertiary language teaching. The policy we envisage would be ‘bottom-up’, and, ideally, would be planned, conceived and proposed within the framework of activities overseen by the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU). Such a policy should be based both on empirical data gathered by Australia-wide and longitudinal retention studies and reconsideration of Australia’s future L&C learning needs as a society, for example as envisaged and debated by Liddicoat and Scarino (2010).

Participants in this policy-making would ideally include all Australian universities, the secondary language-teaching associations, the Australian Government department responsible for higher and schools education (currently the Department of Education and Training), and other relevant federal and state government departments, as well as other stakeholder sectors such as Chambers of Commerce, and representatives of major export industries and tourism.

We hope that the methodologies, outcomes and interpretations in this book can provide insights of practical value to language teaching practitioners and educational policymakers as they attempt to address the Doubters’ Dilemma, that is, the decision that many students face every year, perhaps every day, as to whether or not to continue their L&C studies at university.
This text is taken from *The Doubters’ Dilemma: Exploring student attrition and retention in university language and culture programs*, by Mario Daniel Martín, Louise Jansen and Elizabeth Beckmann, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.