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Just a phase or quiet quitting? Exploring low study activity among university students

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ABSTRACT

Study delays in higher education are associated with costs for taxpayers, universities, and students. However, the perspective of students is often underrepresented in research. This paper addresses this research gap, providing first-hand insights from students with low study activity. The research questions address reasons for low study activity, students' self-perception, and their potential for overcoming their low study activity. The analysis is based on a qualitative longitudinal study with narrative interviews with students at Austrian universities across two time points (first interview: $n = 28$, second interview: $n = 11$). Students with low study activity typically experience multiple challenges, including issues with learning behaviour and motivation. These challenges often already occur at the start of their studies. We identified three groups: students who have chosen low study activity voluntarily (group I), students who have successfully transitioned to a higher level of study activity between the two rounds of interviews (group II), and students whose low study activity has become entrenched (group III). The findings emphasise the need for tailored support that addresses the individual and often complex challenges faced by students. They also highlight the importance of recognising the transition to university as an individual process that requires time for students' personal development.

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Introduction

Study delays are associated with costs for taxpayers, universities, and students (Witteveen and Attewell 2021). A prolonged time-to-degree can hinder students' subsequent labour market success (Di Stasio and van de Werfhorst 2016; Witteveen and Attewell 2021). Furthermore, study delays are also associated with dropout (Schmidt et al. 2022). Thus, the presence or absence of study delay represents an early indicator of student success (Wijbenga et al. 2024).

Student success is a multifaceted phenomenon with many influencing factors (Behr et al. 2020; Kuh et al. 2007). Traditionally, analysis and theory building have relied on quantifiable indicators from an institutional perspective. The students' point of view – for

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example, how they define success and how they perceive their study progress – is often ignored (Guterman 2021). Recent studies indicate that students hold their own perceptions of success. However, these studies frequently focus on successful students (Lynam, Cachia, and Stock 2024) or specific characteristics of students (O'Shea and Delahunty 2018; Wilke et al. 2024). The perspective of students experiencing study delay, often regarded as unsuccessful according to classical definitions of student success, remains under-researched.

In response to these gaps, we designed a study focusing on Austrian university students with study delay, operationalised as 'low study activity' (students who achieved one to ten credit points in the winter term of 2020/21). The study is guided by the following questions:

(1) What are the reasons for low study activity according to students?
(2) How do students with low study activity perceive themselves in their role as students and their own study progress?
(3) Can students overcome their low study activity?

The article contributes to a more holistic understanding of study activity and student success. Firstly, it focuses on student perspectives. Including students' point of view in explaining and understanding student success and its influencing factors is crucial. Secondly, the new insight can help to identify gaps in support and to develop strategies for enhancing student success. Thirdly, from a methodological perspective, the study uses a longitudinal approach to understand students' perspectives and analyse changes in their success, goals, and perspectives over time.

Literature review

The subsequent section discusses various definitions of student success, one dimension of which is study delays. Secondly, the factors influencing success and delays are presented. Thirdly, study delays and the related concept of (low) study activity in the Austrian context are discussed.

Definitions of student success

Student success can be operationalised in different ways (York, Gibson, and Rankin 2015), with research on the factors that enable or hinder success often being based on 'objective' definitions of student success. Quantitative, measurable indicators such as study duration until graduation (DesJardins 2003), grade point average (Richardson, Abraham, and Bond 2012), or the number of credit points earned within a certain period (de Koning et al. 2012) are used as dependent variables in statistical models.

More recently, numerous studies have focused on students and their perceptions of success. These studies show that students often have a more holistic definition of success. For engaged students, this includes achieving good grades and obtaining a degree as well as personal development and achievements (Lynam, Cachia, and Stock 2024). According to Brooks et al. (2021), for students, key purposes of higher education include labour market preparation, personal development, and the opportunity to contribute to the

development and progress of society. Xulu-Gama et al. (2018) asked students about their understanding of student success and successful aspects of their university life. They found that half of the students did not have a definition for student success, others mentioned grades, developing competencies, and employability after graduation. Additionally, they mentioned social aspects such as making friends and maturing as a person, as well as academic aspects like time management.

Furthermore, the definition of student success differs across student groups. O'Shea and Delahunty (2018) interviewed students who were the first in their family to attend university. These students tend to define success in terms of personal survival and resilience, which encompasses, for example, maintaining good mental health. As Wilke et al. (2024) have shown, disabled students diverge from normative definitions of success and instead create their own definition based on their situation. In addition to academic achievements, they consider social integration, being healthy, learning new concepts, and building communities as significant components of success.

Guterman (2021) argues that students define their success in relation to their goals, but often their perspective is overlooked in research on the assessment and measurement of student success. Especially, the perspective of low-performing students, according to 'allegedly' objective criteria (Guterman 2021), is still missing. Our paper addresses this research gap and contributes to a better understanding of various dimensions of student success from a student's perspective.

Success factors and reasons for study delays

The literature identifies numerous factors that contribute to student success, ranging from individual factors such as sociodemographic characteristics and personality traits to institutional factors such as study conditions and teaching quality (Behr et al. 2020; Kuh et al. 2007).

Student success is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon with two areas being particularly crucial for students with low study activity. The first area is factors that limit the time students have available for attending classes and studying. One such aspect is employment, which reduces studying time if weekly working hours exceed a certain threshold. The threshold varies depending on the country and the structural design of the study programme. In European countries, the average threshold is approximately 15 hours of employment per week (Hauschildt et al. 2021). In Austria, working 10 hours a week noticeably reduces the time spent on studying, and working over 13 hours leads to a considerable decrease in study time (Unger et al. 2020). Another constraint on students' time budget is care responsibilities for children (Hauschildt et al. 2021). Physical and mental disabilities also require additional time. For example, students with disabilities may need extended periods for rest due to physical pain, for medical appointments, or for time spent in 'mental fog' (Wilke et al. 2024).

The second area is transitioning from school (or work) to university. The first-year experience is widely recognised as a crucial phase in higher education pathways (Young et al. 2020), as many dropouts withdraw during their first year (Lassibille and Navarro Gómez 2008). According to Tinto (1993), students' integration within the academic and social system is essential for their persistence. Academic integration includes academic performance and interactions with faculty, social integration encompasses extracurricular

activities and peer-group interactions. Drawing on the work of Van Gennep (1960), Tinto (1993) argues that students have to go through three phases of integration: separation from their prior communities, transition from high school to university, and incorporation into the society of the university. Another critical aspect that arises in the early stages of studying is how students transition from the structured learning environment of secondary school to becoming self-reliant learners in higher education. Learning how to learn, learning strategies, time management, and self-regulated learning are crucial factors for academic success (Farrell, Brunton, and Trevaskis 2020; Faure-Carvallo et al. 2025; Wingate 2007). Our analysis contributes to a better understanding of these aspects from a student's perspective, focusing on students who are struggling to succeed.

Study delays in Austria

Public universities represent the largest sector in Austrian higher education (BMFWF 2025). Access to these universities is predominantly free with only a few study programmes having strict admission procedures in place (Haag et al. 2020). Students require a university entrance qualification from high school or alternative access routes. In Austria and throughout Europe, academic achievements are measured in credit points ('ECTS', European Commission 2024). A bachelor's degree typically consists of 180 credit points with a minimum 3-year duration. Thus, students are expected to acquire an average of 60 credit points per year to obtain the degree within the minimum duration. Historically, tuition fees were either absent or minimal (727 EUR per academic year for EU students) and students could remain enrolled for an unlimited period. Over the past two decades, several steps have been taken towards a stricter system (Haag et al. 2020; Pechar and Elke 2020). However, studying at Austrian public universities still allows a lot of freedom and only a few students graduate within the minimum duration (Thaler 2026).

Additionally, Austria has introduced the concept of study activity ('Prüfungsaktivität') as an important national benchmark for student success. Students must reach a minimum of 16 credit points per academic year to be defined as active. According to this indicator, approximately 40% of enrolled study programmes[1] are not actively pursued (BMFWF 2025). Study activity serves as a benchmark for comparing public universities and has become a vital indicator in the funding mechanism of public universities (Pechar and Elke 2020). Consequently, study activity has gained increasing interest among Austrian universities in recent years (Loder 2023).

Study activity is closely related to study delays, as low study activity leads to delays that can only be compensated by extra outstanding efforts in the consequent academic year. In this study, the term 'study delays' is used to denote either delays that have already appeared in the past or, more generally, the overarching concept of delays. The term '(low) study activity' refers to the activity within a specified period (e.g. academic year) or when discussing the Austrian context.

Methodology

Our research is designed as a qualitative longitudinal study with two rounds of narrative interviews.

In autumn 2021, 28 narrative interviews were conducted with low-active students at Austrian universities. This first round of interviews was part of a comprehensive project on low study activity. Students were defined as 'low-active' if they completed between one and ten credit points in a single study programme during the winter term of 2020/21, i.e. from October 2020 until January 2021. Students who did not achieve any credit points ('zero-fails'; Ploeg et al. 2024) were not part of our target group. We recruited participants from 13 Austrian universities. Each university emailed their students with one to ten credit points and invited them to a short online survey. At the end of the survey, we inquired whether the students would be willing to participate in additional interviews and, if so, requested their contact information. We used purposive sampling to ensure participants' diversity, including gender, age, university, and field of study.

Interviews in the first round started with an open question about the student's educational history and decisions. The open nature of narrative interviews allows interviewees to choose the starting point of their narratives and the importance of their topics. After the interviewees' narration, follow-up questions about self-perception as students, challenges in their study progress, their current life circumstances, and plans for their future were addressed.

In a second round of interviews, 11 out of the 28 students were re-interviewed in November 2022, approximately 1.5 years after the initial interview. Nine of the 28 students were unavailable for a second interview. Of the remaining 19 we interviewed 11 participants until theoretical saturation was reached by drawing on the thematic patterns and information on similar cases established during the first-round interviews. After 11 second-round interviews we had obtained sufficient analytical material to inform our research aim.

The 11 participants consist of 6 women and 5 men, aged between 21 and 40 at the time of the first interview (Table 1). All of them have been enrolled in bachelor's degree programmes at Austrian universities in various fields of study (e.g. humanities, social sciences, business, law, and engineering). The purpose of the second round was to investigate whether students had been able to overcome their low study activity. This longitudinal approach allowed students to assess their progress in retrospect and explain changes in their study behaviour. The 17 students from the first round who were not reinterviewed consist of 10 women and 7 men aged between 21 and 69, with 2 students over 40.

Table 1. Overview of the re-interviewed respondents.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at first contact	Group	Low study activity intended	Duration of low study activity
Isabel	female	40	I	yes	permanent
Tobias	male	22	I	yes	temporary
Sylvia	female	21	II	no	temporary
Stephanie	female	22	II	no	temporary
Karina	female	28	II	no	temporary (graduation)
Alex	male	22	III	no	permanent
Lily	female	22	III	no	permanent
Marc	male	23	III	no	permanent
Harry	male	26	III	no	permanent
Linda	female	27	III	no	permanent
Roman	male	30	III	no	permanent

The interviews in both rounds lasted between 1 and 2 hours. They were transcribed and analysed using the documentary method (Bohnsack 2014). In the initial phase of the analysis, the interview excerpts were categorised into primary and secondary themes. In the subsequent interpretative analysis, the framework of the narratives was reconstructed, and by comparative analysis, we contrasted the cases, leading to an identification of three distinct groups. The survey and evaluation phases were repeatedly interrupted by reflection phases for quality assurance according to a processual project cycle (Froschauer and Lueger 2009).

Both interview rounds were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period characterised by distance learning and 'social distancing'. Most respondents appreciated the interview as an opportunity to talk about their situation and have someone listen to their personal stories. In the first phase of the pandemic, social and academic integration of students decreased (Resch, Alnahdi, and Schwab 2023). However, low study activity is not a new phenomenon at Austrian universities; rather, it is a long-standing issue.

In the second round of interviews, the respondents' openness increased significantly. Based on enhanced trust in the interviewer, students shared more personal stories, facilitating a more in-depth analysis.

Findings

The first section is based on the 28 first-round interviews and addresses reasons for first study delays in students' pathways at university. Furthermore, findings are augmented by new insights derived from the second-round interviews. The remaining sections focus on retrospective and longitudinal findings from the 11 interviewees that participated in both rounds of interviews.

Reasons for first study delays

During the initial interviews, respondents placed significant importance on explaining the reasons for their low study activity and the circumstances leading to it. Many students had difficulties getting started at university after school, including time management and coping with the perceived high-performance requirements. These difficulties are often accompanied by issues with learning behaviour and motivational problems, as illustrated by the following quote:

> I somehow felt a bit lost. I had huge problems with the workload at university (. . .) I had a bit of social anxiety and difficulties at the beginning with networking and getting support in study groups. And I think that's when I fell into a depressive hole for the first time, into a crisis of meaning. I already knew that from school, but there I was in an environment that was quite protected and [there were] structures (. . .). And suddenly all of that disappeared, it became difficult, and I asked myself 'uh, what am I doing?' (Alex)

Additionally, health-related problems and responsibilities such as employment or caregiving can contribute to time constraints and lead to low study activity. The students' narratives also highlighted challenges with study conditions, such as the implementation of examination and teaching methods during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviewees were open about their health, including sensitive topics such as mental health issues (depression, burnout, social anxiety disorder, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder). Some students have been dealing with health problems for several years, while others have only recently become aware of their mental health issues. This awareness may have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalence of mental health discussions during that time. In the daily lives of students, these health problems manifest in various ways. Some students experience difficulties in learning and motivation, while others encounter stress-induced problems during exams, such as 'blackouts'. These health issues, some occurring continuously and others as flare-ups, severely hinder the study progress. By the second round of interviews, most respondents with mental health problems were already receiving psychological or psychotherapeutic treatment or had received such treatment at least once.

Students' perceptions of their difficulties and burdens vary widely. Most students attribute their study delays to a multitude of issues, or even to a chain of interconnected problems. According to the students, these delays are often triggered by certain events. The narratives suggest that the delay in studying is caused by a combination of difficulties. For example, one student attributed his low level of study activity to 'problems with learning behaviour'. Upon examining his entire educational biography, his initial negative experiences at university were not only a result of his 'wrong' learning behaviour but were also intensified by the need to work to finance his studies. Throughout his studies, he encountered challenges in balancing university and work, as well as coping with increasing exam stress and anxiety. However, he did not attribute his low level of study activity to the challenges of combining university and work, but rather to his ineffective study and learning behaviour.

Intentional versus unintentional low study activity

To understand the importance of study activity for the students, it is essential to distinguish between intentional and unintentional low study activity. Students have varying perspectives on the meaning of their studies and their progress, which are influenced by their current study phase and life circumstances. For most interviewed students, the notion of 'being a student' is of highest importance. Some associate their student life with a phase of freedom that allows them to structure their daily lives and emphasise building social connections. They do not see themselves as 'passive' students, even if they do not meet the curriculum's requirements.

However, in retrospect, most re-interviewed students defined their low study activity as unintentional and expressed dissatisfaction with their slow study progression. They consider the curriculum and the duration until graduation as important benchmarks:

> I define myself quite strongly by my academic success. (. . .) I want to have a reasonable study duration and overall, it is better for the CV if you need four or five years instead of eight years for the bachelor's degree; otherwise, there is the question: What did you do in that time? (Marc)

In contrast, two re-interviewed students felt that the low activity was a conscious choice. They are studying part-time according to their own definition or have employment or care responsibilities. For them, their study progress is of secondary importance:

> It's also a question of priority. First, I want to get my son through school well. And then – if I have enough time – I'll sit down to learn. (Isabel)

Typology of low-active students

We identified three groups of low-active students among the respondents. The main distinction is whether the low study activity was a conscious decision of the students (group I). If the low study activity was unintentional, the students are further distinguished into two groups: group II, who found a way out, and group III, whose low study activity has become entrenched (Table 1).

Group I consists of only two students, Isabel and Tobias. They both have a low level of study activity by choice, although for different lengths of time. Tobias is a young student who is highly motivated to finish his studies quickly. However, due to the circumstances at his university during the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. examination and teaching methods and their implementation by lecturers), he took time out from his studies to assist his mother at work and earn some money. In the second interview, Tobias has completed several courses and seems to be no longer at risk of becoming a permanently low-active student. Isabel, an older student who already holds a master's degree and has long-term employment, is not primarily concerned with graduating quickly. Unlike other respondents, Isabel is not seeking a way out of low activity. She is pursuing her studies as a personal interest, prioritising her family and job. However, she is highly motivated to complete her studies, stating that graduation 'is only a question of time'.

Within group I, the low level of study activity is self-chosen. Although this group could be divided into two sub-groups based on the duration of low study activity, we have kept them in one group. Our primary research question for the longitudinal perspective is whether students can overcome their low study activity. This question becomes obsolete if students are voluntarily low active. However, the knowledge of the existence of self-chosen low study activity is crucial for understanding the phenomenon of low study activity and student success.

In contrast to group I, the main distinguishing factor between groups II and III is whether the low study activity is permanent or temporary. Respondents within group II – Sylvia, Stephanie, and Karina – are all women who overcame their low activity between the two interviews and found a way to increase their activity. Sylvia had difficulties at the beginning of her studies, exacerbated by COVID-19. For her, it was a matter of finding and navigating her own path to effective studying. Stephanie had a rather difficult educational history, with negative experiences with classmates and teachers. However, she is very structured, self-reflective, and constantly looking for ways to improve her study performance. Stephanie tries to tackle problems in a targeted way and is now on a good path, especially with her strong focus on studying to get her dream job. Sylvia and Stephanie are younger students who were struggling to get started at university, while Karina is slightly older and well-integrated into university. Karina is aware of her strengths and

weaknesses. She tries to work on them, and she has a strong perseverance. However, she struggles with motivation and is often distracted by other activities. She actively engages in student representative work, which negatively and positively affects her study progress. On one hand, it is a time-consuming distraction, allowing her to engage with university life without investing the necessary effort in learning. On the other hand, and in accordance with Tinto's theory highlighting the importance of interactions (Tinto 1993), she might have dropped out of university if she had not been personally anchored to the university's structures. She is an example of a student with an extended study duration (8 years) who still managed to complete her bachelor's degree.

Most respondents belong to group III, which consists of low-active students who have failed to implement their study plans. They had low levels of study activity in the first round of interviews, and their situation has hardly changed. These students have not found a (permanent) way out of their low study activity. The group is slightly divided in age: Alex, Lily, and Marc are younger students who have repeatedly encountered problems in completing the course requirements since the beginning of their studies. The main reasons given by students for these delays include challenges with study conditions due to COVID-19, health issues, and high academic standards. The other part of this group – Harry, Linda, and Roman – have been studying for several years. They face challenges with motivation, balancing work and university, or other personal difficulties, whereas they do not have current difficulties with study conditions. The students of group III share a persistent low level of study activity, which becomes entrenched, and there are no clear signs of positive developments. The need for a personal change in learning behaviour, which could include, for example, attending voluntary courses offered by the university (e.g. on learning or time management), is not addressed by the students of this group. Students' behaviours and beliefs are embedded in the institutional setting of Austria's universities, which have a comparatively high degree of flexibility and do not 'prevent' a certain degree of non-commitment.

Coping strategies

In the first round of interviews, most students of group II and group III reported future plans and sometimes coping strategies to become more 'active'. Learning strategies or changes in learning behaviour are particularly addressed in this context. Such strategies include writing summaries, recording lectures, mapping out weekly schedules for learning, participating in extra-curriculum university programmes (e.g. writing workshops) as well as health-related adjustments and noise cancelling headphones to facilitate better concentration.

In retrospect, many students attribute their first study delays to the fact that they had to find their own learning style, because they had to 'learn how to learn':

> I'm a very bad learner because I never learned it in school, because I was very good at school without doing anything. I had to teach myself how to learn at university. (Sylvia, group II)

> It wasn't easy for me, because I didn't know what type of learner I am, and how to learn properly. I also didn't know what was demanded to learn for the exams. (. . .) those were the biggest challenges I faced for two years. (Roman, group III)

In particular, the students in group II are actively looking for improvements in their learning behaviour. They are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and want to achieve their goals. In the first-round interviews, all respondents talked about certain learning strategies, but only students of group II implemented their plans. They have learned to deal with and overcome their fears and self-doubts. In accordance with their individual needs, they also seek and utilise institutional support, such as voluntary writing workshops or support programmes for students with disabilities. The students developed an awareness of the need to change their learning behaviour, describing it as a process that they had to manage themselves.

> I'm not going to let it get me down just because I'm not that talented. (Sylvia, first interview)

> I have learned a lot from and about myself, as well as other things that have nothing to do with a degree, but that's just as important. That is what I wish I had been told earlier. That I should not stress myself out so much and that everyone needs their time and that's kind of okay. (Sylvia, second interview)

These quotes from Sylvia indicate that obtaining a degree is not the sole measure of success for her. She considers personal development, personal survival, and resilience as equally important accomplishments.

In contrast, students of group III have not found a way out of low study activity between the two rounds of interviews. No changes in their learning behaviour can be observed and, in most cases, no or insufficient strategies can be identified. For these students, the inability to achieve their goals is a significant problem. Nevertheless, they do not make use of university offers and support (e.g. writing workshops). These students are less likely to recognise problems in their own learning behaviour. This situation can be problematic and stressful for these students, such as Marc, for whom success is crucial:

> I just want to get ahead in my life. Right now, it just feels like stagnation, I'm still doing the same as I did six years ago. I want to build something for me, I want to have a job someday, I want to earn my own money. I also don't want to be permanently dependent on my parents. (Marc)

Their low level of activity becomes entrenched and, in some cases, a vicious circle. Group III students often mention mental health issues and related barriers as obstacles to study progress. As a result, they feel overwhelmed by the amount of material they need to learn, for example:

> I'm just too exhausted to learn. And if I don't study well, I have no chance to pass the exam because I could not focus on it. And it would be the same game the second or even the third time I take the exam. That's why I didn't write the exam at [that] lecture. (Marc)

For some students of group III, there was a change of perspective between the first and second interview. Initially, they had plans to increase their study activity, but by the time of the second interview, some of them had forgotten their plans, or their plans had become increasingly unbinding and less concrete. The intention to study becomes less important and fades into the background. Instead, the focus shifts to other areas of life, such as work or social environment:

> In my first year at the new job, I want to shift 80% of my performance capacities to work. Accordingly, I have not set up a non-plus-ultra study plan for myself. (Roman)

> I definitely put more focus on social issues. At least, I have decided that this is more important to me now, than sitting in my room for a month and isolate myself again in my mind, and work through [exam content]. Somehow there was no motivation in the world for it. (. . .) I am getting closer to 30 and I realise that time is not infinite. (Harry)

These students, who experience a decrease in their intention and commitment to study, may be at risk of dropping out of university.

Discussion and conclusion

Students with low study activity, i.e. study delays, are perceived as unsuccessful and are often accused of wasting time and money (Witteveen and Attewell 2021). Our analysis focused on Austrian university students with low study activity and their perspective, based on a qualitative longitudinal approach with two rounds of narrative interviews.

Results show that students, even if often unaware, face multiple reasons for their initial study delays. Although they are able to handle one problem, they often feel overwhelmed when facing multiple issues. Many already encountered problems at the beginning of their studies. The initial challenges include time management, learning behaviours, and motivation issues. These findings support previous research, which identified the transition to university as a critical phase in student life (Lassibille and Navarro Gómez 2008; Young et al. 2020). Another critical aspect experienced by our interviewees were mental health issues, which negatively affected students' success.

Results also show that low-active students perceive studying and study progress as important. However, not all students have the same definition of success as 'objective' statistical indicators may suggest. Some students study to a lesser extent by choice and consider themselves successful if they manage to balance family, work, and university. Others take achievements such as personal development into account. This finding supports and expands on prior research. While Lynam, Cachia, and Stock (2024) demonstrated that successful students have a more holistic understanding of success, this also applies to our students, who are not considered successful by normative 'objective' criteria. Our findings highlight how resilience and health are core aspects of success (see also O'Shea and Delahunty 2018; Wilke et al. 2024).

Based on our longitudinal results, two main dimensions, intention and duration, were derived to classify low study activity, leading to three groups of low-active students. Group I intentionally chose their low study activity due to certain circumstances and is satisfied with their decision. In contrast, low study activity is unintentional for group II and III students. They are dissatisfied and sometimes desperate about their situation. While group II overcomes their low activity within the observation period of 1.5 years (one student even graduated), group III students do not.

These findings both support and, in some respects, challenge existing theories of persistence and success. Group I illustrates that some students progress despite limited academic and social integration (Tinto 1993) due to external commitments. Their pace may not meet institutional expectations, but it fits their personal goals. Group II, by contrast, aligns closely with Tinto's (1993) model in two ways: first, transitioning from school to university and adapting to a new academic system is a process that takes time;

and second, strong social integration is crucial for persistence, particularly for students facing academic challenges. Moreover, this transition includes 'learning to learn' (Wingate 2007), which group II manages successfully, whereas for group III it remains an ongoing challenge.

The longitudinal aspect furthermore revealed a change in perspective for some students in group III. The importance of their studies has decreased, and their plans have become less binding. This suggests an increased risk of dropping out after a longer period without sufficient academic success (Schmidt et al. 2022). The decline in commitment and increasing disengagement observed in group III supports the conceptualisation of dropout as a process rather than a singular event (Behr et al. 2020).

The study design is restricted by students' voluntary participation in interviews. This may have led to a biased sample of more vocal students and an underrepresentation of more introverted individuals who may face specific challenges not revealed in our study. Regarding students who were unavailable for the second round of interviews, this may have led to an underrepresentation of students who dropped out between the two rounds of interviews in our study. Furthermore, students who did not earn any credit points, i.e. 'zero-fails', were not part of our target group. These students are more likely to drop out of university. Thus, further research is needed to explore motivations, reasons, and perceptions of these students.

Our findings have several practical, policy, as well as theoretical implications. First, our findings challenge classical definitions and theories on student success. This is especially true for students who consciously decide to study at a slower pace. Additionally, students' heterogeneous perceptions of success relate to Cunninghame and Pitman (2020), who highlight the benefits of higher education even without completion. Building on our findings, the development of new theoretical perspectives that integrate 'classical' definitions and students' perceptions is crucial for a more holistic understanding of student success.

Second, regarding policy implications, for some students the structure of study programmes at Austrian universities is too flexible and unbinding, as it allows students to postpone exams and remain enrolled for an unlimited amount of time. In recent years, steps have been taken towards stricter study structures at Austrian universities, such as requiring students to earn a minimum of 16 credit points within the first 2 years. While our study was conducted within the context of the Austrian higher education system, which has some features that seem to promote study delays, the issue of study delays is not limited to Austria, but is also prevalent in other higher education systems (Di Stasio and van de Werfhorst 2016; Wijbenga et al. 2024; Witteveen and Attewell 2021). Hence, the identified typology of low study activity may also apply to other higher education systems, particularly those with low or no tuition fees and where students are not dismissed for insufficient academic progress.

Third, regarding practical implications, our findings stress the need for flexible and open-minded support structures at universities. Most students with temporary or permanent low study activity aim to improve their academic performance and achieve more credit points per semester but are faced with complex and interwoven problems. For example, mental health issues or flare-ups of chronic illnesses during the exam period can lead to the 'loss' of an entire semester's progress, which in turn can lead to

increased stress and anxiety and further delays in the future. Previous research has shown that the study entry phase is often defining for a 'successful' study life and needs to be supported by universities (Farrell, Brunton, and Trevaskis 2020; Young et al. 2020). However, our analysis shows that the transition from school to university also needs to be understood as an individual process that takes time. Therefore, some students may benefit from reducing pressure and social standards, which for them can lead to setting unrealistic goals and becoming overwhelmed. This is especially true for students who have external responsibilities, such as financing their studies, or physical or mental health issues.

Different strategies are necessary to address the needs of the identified groups. While group I is satisfied with their current situation, groups II and III would benefit from support measures. There are overlaps in required support for these two groups, including courses on time management or learning skills. However, while for group II, it would be sufficient to offer and promote these courses, for students of group III, it is necessary to make such courses obligatory ideally during the study entry phase. Since group III students cannot be identified at the beginning of their studies and other students are also likely to benefit, making such courses mandatory for all students may be a viable approach. Mandatory interventions, however, may increase students' workload and reduce their sense of autonomy. Accordingly, these courses should be designed to be as concise as possible while maintaining high instructional quality.

Note

1. The term 'enrolled study programmes' is used for a technical reason: in Austria, some students are enrolled in more than one study programme at the same time. Therefore, the number and proportion of (active) students and (active) enrolled study programmes are not the same.

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Ethics statement

The field of potential interviewees was accessed via an anonymous and voluntary survey. The universities distributed the link to the survey via email to their students. At the end of this short survey, students could consent to providing their contact details to participate in a telephone interview. For both interview rounds, participants were asked to consent to recording the conversation at the beginning of the interview. In this paper, pseudonyms are used, and as few details as possible are provided, to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

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