



On the importance of randomized controlled trials - Field experimental evidence from higher education in Austria

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#### Outline

Project "Evaluating measures to promote study performance" set-up and results (treatments still ongoing)

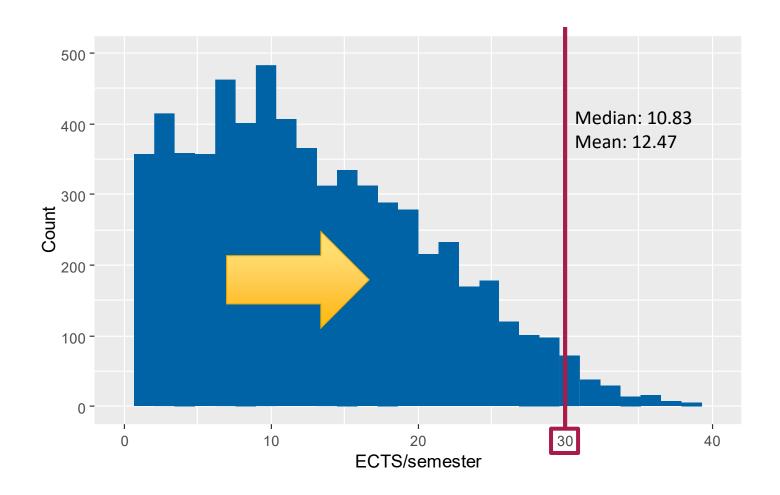
General point on the NEED for RCTs

# Evaluating measures to promote study performance

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Ongoing RCT, financed by the Ministry of Education

# Problem & aim



# Evaluation of measures to improve study success (EVUS) – an experimental investigation

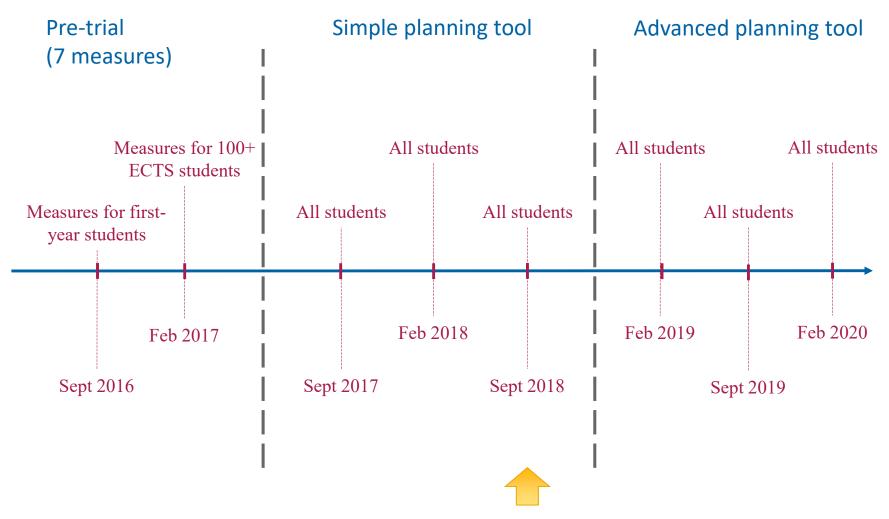
- Aim: help students to
  - Study faster
  - Achieve better grades
  - Avoid dropping out
- Measures
  - Mentoring program
  - Study groups
  - Self commitment
  - Email-Reminders
  - Electronic planning tool
  - Coaching event
  - Infovideos

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# Evaluation of measures to improve study success (EVUS) – an experimental investigation

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## Experimental sequence



# Experimental design

Treatment map: programs x experience

Study Program	Treatment	
	First year students	Experienced students
Law	Yes	No
Business & Econ	Yes	Yes
Comp. Science	Yes	No
History	Yes	Yes
Sociology	Yes	Yes
Chemistry	Yes	Yes
Nutrition Science	Yes	Yes

Approximately 11,000 students participate each semester

# **Electronic Planning Tool**

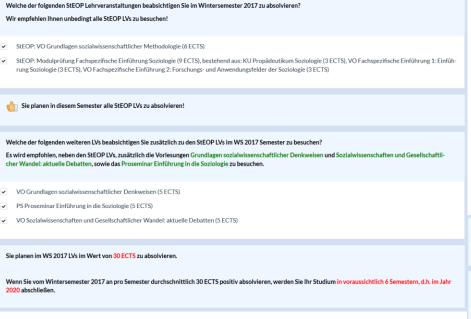
## Behavioral Background

Why a planning tool is expected to help students

- Effect used: **planning of small concrete steps** (what, when, where and how) increases the chance of actually following through on the plan
  - Related to implementation intentions (e.g. Milkman et al., Harvard WP, 2012)
- Setting concrete and ambitious goals (goal commitment)
  - Kurose (2015); Klein et al. (J Applied Psy 1999)
- People try to act consistently to keep up their self-perception and self-efficacy
  - Dunning (Journal of Consumer Psychology 2007), Thaler & Benartzi (J Pol Econ 2004)

# Screenshots of simple planning tool

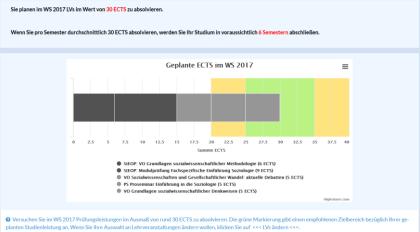
Note: experiment is conducted in German only



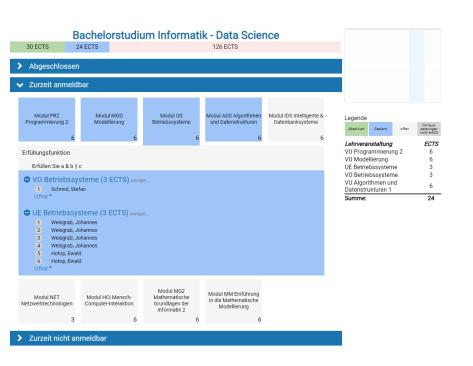








# Screenshots of advanced planning tool

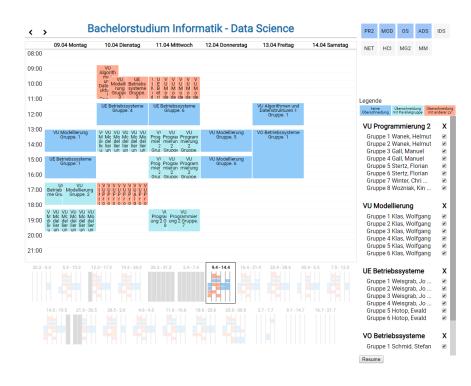




**Planning** 

#### Avoiding overlaps



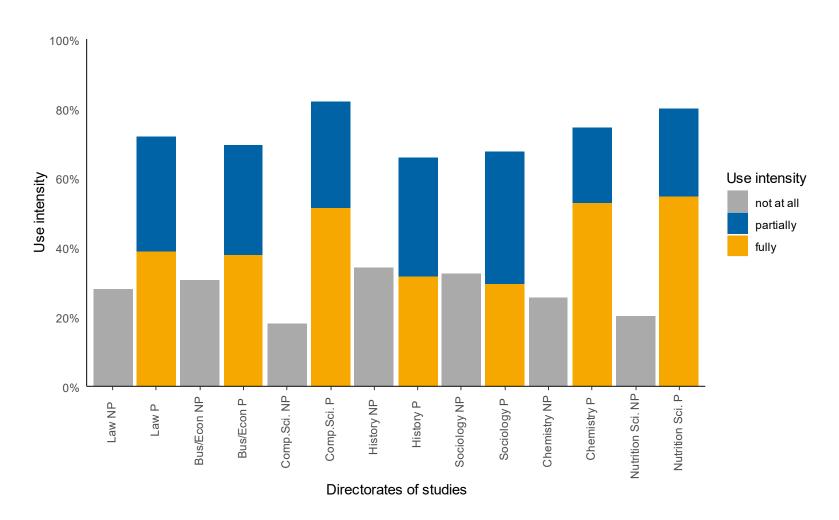


#### Results

Experiment is ongoing: some evidence from Autumn term 2017/18 (simple planning tool)

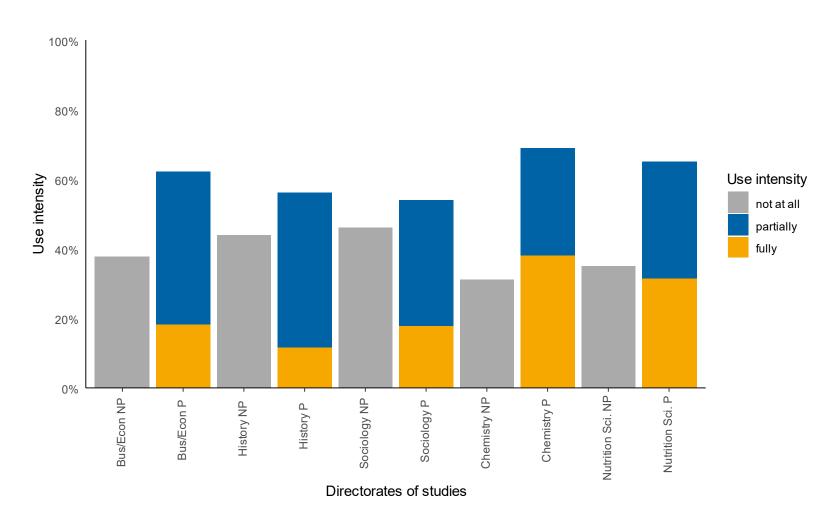
# Use intensity

#### First year students



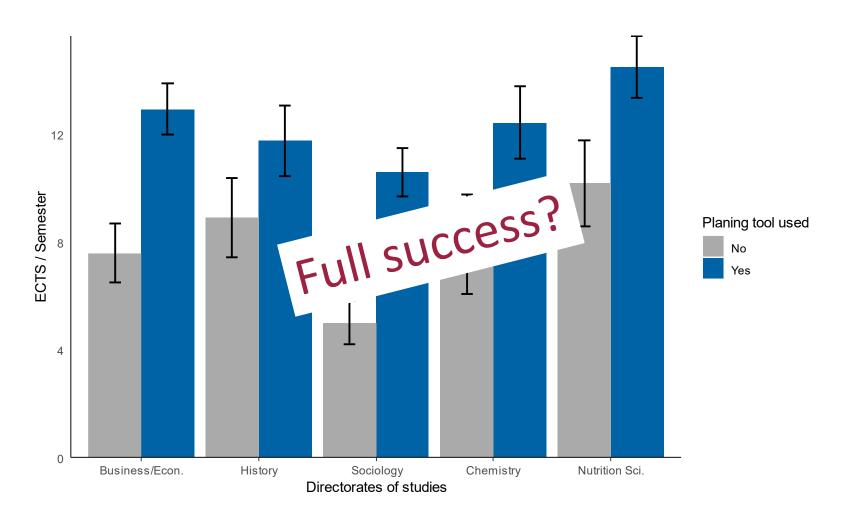
# Use intensity

#### **Experienced students**



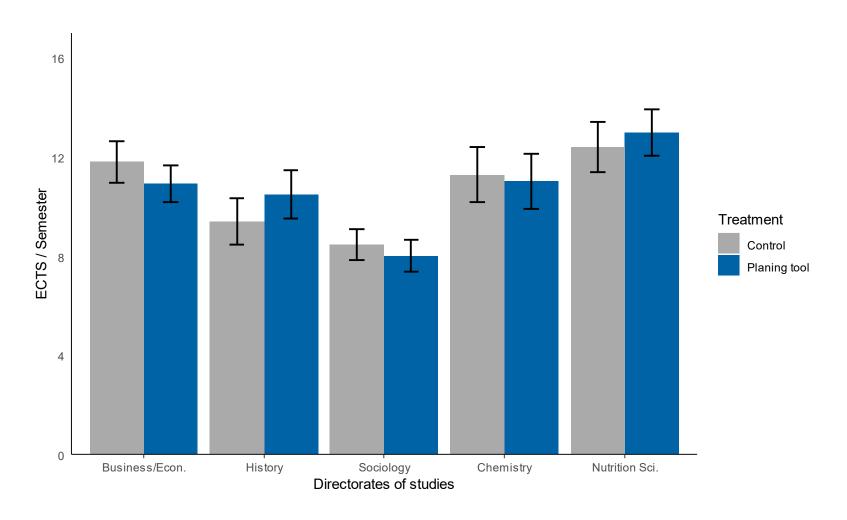
# ECTS / semester

#### Experienced students, by usage



# ECTS / Semester

#### Experienced students; causal effect!



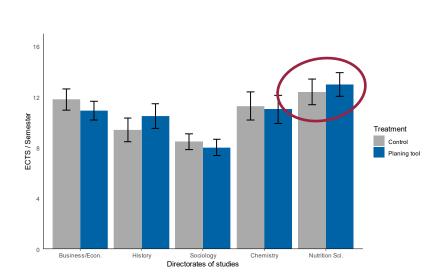
# The importance of causal evidence...

... and data literacy

#### Selection effect

# Planing tool used Planing tool used Planing tool used No Yes Planing tool used

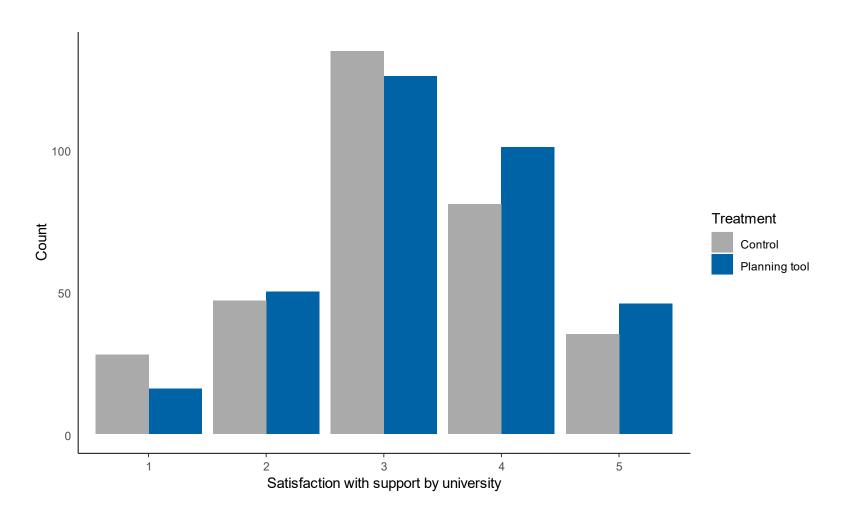
#### Causal effect!



So has this been a useless exercise?

### Causal effect on satisfaction with support by University

Ongoing survey, currently n≈600



## >> Generating causal evidence <<

#### And interpreting it properly

- Causality vs. correlation
  - Example: windmill and wind
- Causality vs. selection
  - Example: planning tool usage and outcome effect
- Most decision makers understand what causal evidence means at the moment of explaining it to them.

#### But don't be too optimistic:

 Not everyone appreciates the importance of rigorously establishing causal relations once you leave the room!

# New developments around the world





http://insight-austria.ihs.ac.at