Tips to the survive the first year of a PhD program, by Itai Agur

Based on my own experience in the EUI PhD program. The first year of a PhD program is likely to be the toughest working experience in your life. Looking at the students in my year who did well and those who did not, the key element seems to be time management. Here are some tips that I would have liked to give myself before I started:

- **Don't overfocus on the maths**. Unless you have a special background in maths, you will be overwhelmed with new mathematical techniques and terms. It is easy to forget that you are studying economics. But the exams will test for intuition too. Though learning techniques is important, you do not need to go to the bottom of all mathematical details.
- **Don't overdo the problem sets**. Problem sets are a good way to learn the material, often give you credit, and can help prepare for exams. But you can also spend the whole week solving every detail, especially if you get stuck. You cannot afford to do this. Nor to spend hours comparing results with other students, and feeling stressed that they did it differently. Know when to stop. Spending some time on reviewing the problem sets after the TA class is a much better investment than trying to solve every detail beforehand.
- **Never skip classes**. This is not like a Bachelor program. Professors do not just read their notes out loud, and do not follow all points from a book. Coming to lectures and working classes saves you a lot more time than it costs, just by finding out what to focus on.
- **Preparing for exams: focus on the basics**. When exam time comes you will not know where to begin preparation. Likely you have seen more models than you imagined existed. But exams nearly always test your knowledge of the basic concepts. Forget about extensions. Just know the basic intuitions and techniques really well.
- **Reading lists are for decoration**. A student in my class found that he did not have the time to attend classes, do problem sets, read the textbook and read through all papers on the list. He decided to stop coming to classes in order to read through all papers, thinking they would contain all exam material. That was a very bad idea. Supplemental reading is for your spare time, which you won't have.

- **You are better than you think.** You are in this program because of your abilities. Don't panic because some people around you seem to talk like they knew about quasi-convexity and contraction mappings in kindergarten. Many students feel like they don't stand a chance to pass the exams. But, most do. Don't let class braggers or big-shot profs dent your confidence.
- **Cooperate, but not too much.** Working together on problem sets can save you time, and it can be more fun than working alone. But, *especially* if you feel you are slower than the others in the group, also try to tackle problems by yourself. Related: limit copying. In my year at some point some students specialized in GAUSS codes, others in maths problems, and we exchanged. Works well in trade theory, but the econometrics prof was on to us and made us write programming code on the exam.
- **Don't try to guess what will be on the exam**. One of the favorite games in exam time is to guess what questions will come. People spend days hedging against obscure models. See the earlier point: focus on the basics. More generally, don't be strategic about exams. Don't think about which exams you can "drop" in order to have more chance on the others. Don't spend 60% of your time on micro because the problem-sets were hard: macro will strike back. Stuff your brain in a balanced way. Go for all exams.
- **Never ever ever ever skip an exam.** I have known a student who did not show up for an exam, because he felt unprepared. Extremely bad idea. Professors will not forgive you.
- **Sleep.** This may sound motherish, but you need to sleep. With the amount of brain work you put in, you need 9 hours a night. Don't be peer-pressured into staying up all night, feeling lazy if you go to bed early. There's no point in glancing at books and problem sets, when the letters start lifting up from the page and floating around you.
- **Eat.** To complete the mothering section, warm meals will do you good. There's nothing cool about munching crackers all day long.
- **During classes: dare to ask basic questions.** During classes students often only ask very technical questions because they sound more "professional". Don't be afraid to ask about the basics of a model.

- **Don't be afraid to ask professors.** There are exceptions, but most profs are approachable. If you are running into trouble, let the professor know what you don't manage to understand.
- **Your pain is not in vain.** Won't I forget all of Mas-Colell one day after the exam? Of course you will. Still, looking back at the first year I realize it enriched me a lot, and gave me a broader and deeper view of economics. Maybe it's like a movie: when you see 24 models a second, you get a picture in your mind.
- **Don't worry about lack of reseach ideas.** Ideas will come when your mind is quiet (am I sounding like Yoda?). Anyway, most students feel a bit stressed about the fact that they still don't know what they want to do after. Once you get to that stage, however, you will be more creative than you expected, and you will remember why you signed up for a PhD program.
- **But isn't the purpose of the first year to make us into researchers? Isn't it about learning to be creative with the material, learning to identify problems and analyze them patiently?** No.
- **Finally: there is light at the end of the tunnel.** The first year will end, and your brain will not be permanently damaged.