Working methods and exams

Whether or not you intend to retake your exams, identifying certain elements relating to failure will be useful for future exams. Think about the following issues:

Were you surprised by your grades?

⇒ Did you miss the point?
   ♦ It is vital to carefully read the exam questions before answering them. Clarify exactly what is expected of you and how you are supposed to answer (by analysing? comparing? criticising? illustrating? proving?).

⇒ Was your self-assessment wrong?
   ♦ If you are surprised at your grade, it is always useful and constructive to see your exam paper: this will give you an idea of course requirements and the gaps to be filled. You are entitled to consult your exam papers for 6 months following the exam. Contact the professor in charge of the course.

Were you surprised by the questions?

⇒ Did you expect other types of questions (e.g. less general, more specific)?
   ♦ Anticipate and adjust your preparations based on former exams which you could have consulted. Discuss with more advanced students. Try to find out the professor’s style, their way of structuring information, their pet subjects…

⇒ Did you really understand the subject and its major points?
   ♦ Discuss the course with students who successfully passed the exam. Ask them what they found important, specify your point of view and your ideas.

Did you find it difficult to cope with stress?

♦ A few ways of dealing with stress:
   1. Face the problem: look for solutions, define priorities and objectives, plan.
   2. Check your thoughts and emotions: confide in someone, tell yourself to stop when negative thoughts arise, do not exaggerate with “always” and “I must”.
   3. Learn to use relaxation methods, physical exercise, etc.
   4. Be kind to yourself: take breaks, have a relaxing week-end, buy yourself a treat.
   5. Eat wisely: balanced and varied food, less alcohol, coffee, tobacco, etc.

Have you done enough work?

⇒ Too many extra-curricular activities/responsibilities?
   ♦ Prioritize!

⇒ Tendency to put things off?
   ♦ A few ways to avoid this:
     - Set priorities.
     - Divide up the task in small chunks.
     - Complete a difficult task for 10-15 minutes every day.
     - Set precise and finite objectives.
     - Motivate yourself by rewarding yourself.

⇒ Tendency to underestimate the size of the exam subject?
   ♦ Try starting to revise early on in the year.

⇒ Lack of motivation?
   ♦ Some advice to boost your motivation:
     - Draw links between studying and personal interests.
Transform your aspirations into educational projects.
Adopt an inquiring attitude towards the subjects studied, your classmates, etc.
Set objectives.
Explain what you study to those close to you.

Have you worked efficiently?

⇒ Passive attitude during lectures?
◆ Advice:
  ➢ Develop an active attitude before and after lectures: reread notes from earlier classes, link them up with your own knowledge, learn to anticipate on future lectures, put questions, etc.
  ➢ Take efficient notes.
  ➢ Work on your notes: fill in the blanks, correct mistakes, try to understand what was said.

⇒ Lack of concentration?
◆ How to improve concentration:
  4 Work regularly (same time, same place)
  4 Restrict surrounding noise.
  4 Clear your work station.
  4 Set objectives for the day and meet them.

⇒ Memory trouble?
◆ A few operational laws:
  • Law of repetition: To avoid forgetting, repeat after 15 minutes, then after a day, then after a week, month and term.
  • Law of task distribution: several short working periods are more effective than a single long period.
  • Use of several sensory channels: you generally remember 10% of what you read, 15% of what you hear and see and 90% of what you do.
  • Recitation: reciting 60% of study time doubles the quantity you remember.

⇒ Time management issues?
◆ Experience has shown that sound time management considerably decreases the risk of failure and stress during exams.

A few tips:
  4 Set yourself realistic deadlines.
  4 Dare to say no.
  4 Draw up a list of daily tasks.
  4 Limit time-consuming activities (phone calls, long breaks, etc.)

σ A last word of advice: share your ideas! Dare to ask your peers and more advanced students for advice!
It is hard to learn how to be a student

It would seem that the initial three months at EPFL or university are highly significant. This is the time when new students find out how the institution operates, but also have to learn new institutional (academic freedom, new schedules, how to address professors, ...) and intellectual rules (taking notes, stress management, reading, scientific abstraction...) specific to this new environment. In other words, these are the months when new students assume a new role: becoming a student. They need to have the necessary time and means to do so – e.g. by signing up immediately for a workshop, discovering the library, meeting other students or joining cultural or sport teams... Once students are familiar with this new universe, the feeling of fitting into EPFL or university sets in and students are more available for studying. Without this apprenticeship, there may be a good chance that a student will give up studying or fail their exams a few months later. **If you have failed, do not question your choice of curriculum before you ask yourself whether you really had a shot at “learning to be a student” in your first months at university.** Maybe this is what you should question, and your situation is not necessarily irreversible.