

Finals countdown: How to avoid *meltdown* during exam season

By Chris Green, Thursday, 17 May 2007

¹ The month of May is exam time in universities. Although the introduction of modular degrees and continuous assessment means that degree results no longer depend solely on final exams, students still approach the period with *trepidation* and, in some cases, *abject* terror.

² 'Exam stress is a problem that has always been there,' says Alex Duncan, president of Durham University Students' Union. 'Some people work far too hard, others not quite hard enough. University is a key stage in people's lives, and they do want it to benefit them in the long term.'

³ The student welfare department at Durham has two full-time advisers on hand in the exam period, and has set up a website to help panicking undergraduates deal with the pressure of finals, with tips on how to revise effectively. There's an interactive map of the city with parks and other places for students to go to chill out, and massage therapy is on offer for those in need of active stroking.

'avoid last-minute panic ... plan, plan, plan'

⁴ Exam stress is often felt most keenly by those who have partied too hard. But Dave Berger, a senior counsellor at the University of Hull, says even top students can find exam time very *trying*. 'Quite often, the most conscientious people are the ones who become most panicked, because they are aware of their ability to do very well,' he argues. 'This is especially true at top universities like Oxford and Cambridge, where the *set-up* attracts people who are, by nature, perfectionists.'

⁵ The counselling service at the University of York provides workshops for students suffering from stress-related writing difficulties. Berger thinks that students can burn out in an effort to *craft* the perfect essay.

⁶ But, whether you're a diligent worker or a lazy *procrastinator*, revision needn't mean meltdown.

Michael Worton, vice-provost and Professor of French language and literature at UCL, advises students to relax. 'Have walks, go out with friends,' he says. 'Engage in conversations, in real time or online; the revision period should not be a time of isolation, it should be about creating a learning community.'

⁷ So what is the best way to prepare for the final push? Don Shiach, the author of a new student handbook, 'How To Write Essays', which offers a crash-course in exam essay technique, says students should concentrate on giving the examiners what they want. 'You must focus on the question,' he says. 'Sometimes stress causes students to just slap down everything they know. I encourage them to underline the key words in a question to focus their minds on what the examiner really wants.'

⁸ And, says Worton, having a broad base of knowledge is vital if you are to focus on the question before you instead of falling into the trap of *regurgitating* a prepared essay. 'When revising, it's fatal for students to try to spot questions or only revise certain areas,' he says. 'The key is to think through what you have learnt in a *holistic* way.'

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⁹ In the heat of the moment, students are tempted to demonstrate their knowledge by padding out answers with irrelevant detail. But, says Shiach, this is more likely to bore the examiner than impress them. ‘Sometimes, students have a natural reluctance to leave out the things they know,’ he says. ‘But don’t be afraid to: those who do know their stuff will have to accept that they’ll only be able to use a fraction of what they learnt.’

‘Don’t set unrealistic targets’

¹⁰ Time management is crucial. You may know a lot about the first two questions, but don’t let that force you to rush the third: leave plenty of time for each. Answers in note form are not looked upon kindly by examiners.

¹¹ The best way to avoid last-minute panic is to plan, plan, plan. Don’t set unrealistic targets; instead, try to focus on what you can learn in the time allowed. Get plenty of sleep and take substantial breaks during revision. Above all, remember that the degree result is not the be all and end all: getting any degree is an achievement in itself.

¹² A student’s chances of employment will benefit more from a well-rounded university career than a double first, says Michael Hill, chief executive of the careers advisory service Graduate Prospects. ‘What’s most important is to get the right balance between practical things such as work experience and nose-to-the-grindstone academic work. It’s a balancing act, and some people get it wrong; you could end up with a first and still be totally unemployable.’

¹³ ‘People like to bracket off a 2:1 from a first, but in reality the vast majority of people who get a degree of any standard will, within a few years, end up in an interesting, skilled and well-paid job,’ Hill says.

¹⁴ Some top jobs still require a 2:1 or first to get to the interview stage, he admits. ‘But there are many thousands of employers out there who are happy to take on graduates regardless of their degree result. Ultimately, the degree is the important thing, because degrees open the doors that A-levels do not.’

¹⁵ So try not to worry; you’ll have done most of the hard work – getting into university, doing that work experience, joining those sports teams – before you even enter the exam room. ■