

Student Voices transcripts: Grace

Grace 2020 interview

Academic Support 0:00

Thank you so much Grace for being involved in this project and for coming to talk today. (You're very welcome). If we could just start with you introducing yourself and how you came to be at UAL.

Grace 0:13

Yeah, of course know, of course, I'm Grace. Everyone knows me by Grace. I'm Zhilin Xu, Xu Zhilin. I'm currently a first year BA student at Central Saint Martins. And I'm studying Fine Art, and I'm in the 3d pathway. I'm from China, and I've been living here....I've been living in England for around five or six years now.

Why UAL? Well, there are a lot of reasons. First of all, I had a really good Open Day experience at CSM. On the day, I was instantly attracted to its energetic creative and positive vibes. In addition, I did a few short summer courses with CSM before my application and I enjoyed all of them. I like the fact that it is very international and is open towards different cultures and I will be able to make friends who are from all over the globe when studied here? Its geographical location is also key to my choice because London is where most of the exciting art events take place. It's the centre of the art world in the UK. And Kings Cross, for St. Martin', is also a brilliant place and I really like the building and the canvas... campus I meant.

Academic Support 2:02

Yeah. So how did you prepare for university?

Grace 2:05

Well, I went on a foundation course at the Royal Drawing School, so it's not worth UAL and the tutors there helped me to really learn about my own practice and helped me to narrow down my interest in art and design. To be honest, it wasn't really that long before the application that I decided to apply for CSM.

Academic Support 2:38

Tell me about the first few days at university. What were the first few days like for you?

Grace 2:45

So, the first day of uni, it was very... it was very exciting to be suddenly really part of it. And we ...what do we do? We played two games during the day. They're all part of this whole thing that's called the game of power. And we had to take on different tasks. And the final goal is to outwit the previous group who did the same task, so that you could assume the most powerful position. I was nervous. I was nervous but the game really helped me to relax and to mingle with different people. So, by the end of the day, I felt much more at home, and more comfortable interacting with the new people I've met on that day.

I was lucky because I met two girls who were at the same accommodation with me. And we're also on the same course as I do. So, I already know people and that was comforting but still I was nervous. Everyone ...everyone was really friendly. And it's very different from high school, college. It was a pleasant surprise the canteen was better than we thought it was going to be. And yeah, the cafe's pretty impressive. Yeah, it was, it was a good day, for me.

Academic Support 4:33

Thinking more about studying itself, were there any surprises that you hadn't really expected?

Grace 4:41

I guess it's time management. That's one of the main challenges because if you're a Fresher there are a lot of things going on at the same time. Of course, you like to get some social experience as your education experience. You want both to be good and then you need to find the balance between the two and make the commitment to go to every single lectures, even if they aren't compulsory. At the same time, go on the raves and nights out so that you don't feel like you're missing out. So, initially, I guess I felt it was more important to go out to than to attend lectures.

(5:27)

But then, after a few weeks, it gradually came to me that I'm here for an education. And I need to commit and to explore the resources UAL has to offer. It has a fantastic library and there were a lot of workshops that you could book online. And I missed out on that for the first few weeks of my first term. Yeah, I think that was the challenge.... it wasn't really a challenge, but it was a transition for me.

(6:09)

Commuting and being on time is a challenge. It's good to have someone to go to uni with so that you keep each other on time. And just make sure you go to the studio. But the first term is pretty intense...there are so many things going on events and stuff. ...Oh yeah with challenges, I think, for many ...for many friends whom I've talked to who are from China when English isn't their first language...well, English isn't my first language neither... people tend to find the language side a huge obstacle for them to get the full learning experience. Yeah, it's harder for them to integrate into the studio culture, too. And, yeah, it's just something I'd like to put in there.

Academic Support 7:18

And what would you recommend? What would you say to somebody thinking of coming from China as to how they might approach that?

Grace 7:26

It's definitely good to have some knowledge of English and know how to converse casually. You don't have to speak perfect English. I don't speak perfect English still. Just have to... well ...just to be willing to speak to others. Even if you felt like you're speaking with broken English, its fine, people understand, as long as you make the effort. Yeah, people are more friendly than you think they would be. And it's definitely... definitely worth spending some time on learning English learning to speak English. If you're considering coming and study abroad and yeah, just believing in yourself a bit more than you think you can and just, you know, make the first step and believe in yourself, believe in others around you. Yes, it really opens up more opportunities.

Academic Support 8:45

Tell me about what happened in lockdown.

Grace 8:53

Um, we were lucky in the sense that last term was ... the main focus for last term was collaboration. And that provided us the opportunity to explore different digital platforms and to explore how to collaborate using digital platforms. And it became a form of support during such an uncertain time. However, well it's not ideal that we don't have the access to.. to all of the physical making workshops, so we couldn't get into metal , wood and printmaking workshops. And some people found that really frustrating.

(09.45)

It really depends how you... how you adapt to it, because for people who are more willing to adapt, they will find that it's actually not as bad as people would usually say it is. When you are unable to use certain facilities, you're forced to explore new ways of executing your ideas. And some of these detours actually help you to expand your practice. That was a case with me and with some others who I talked to. For example, I had to learn to use Adobe, like different apps in the Adobe Suite. I didn't know how to use Photoshop, nor Premiere Pro.

And it was the lockdown that made me to learn to use them and it's always good to learn new skills. But I do miss working in a studio with others. Also, for fine artists, it's important for us to work in the creative ... like in a creative community, to be physically part of the community. So that We can bounce off each other. It felt like you're more cut off from the actual art world ...even though you were like never part of it to start with... maybe not part of it ...yet, in that sense. Yep.

Academic Support 11:18

And how about communicating with staff and students? How did you do that?

Grace 11:24

We had a lot of Zoom meetings and Collaborate meetings within our collaborative group and all of our tutorials were moved online. We communicated through the emails... but it does feel like it's a less direct form of communication, whereas it's always easier to just talk to someone in person and to capture them in studio to show them a new work you've done. So, technology is a bit tricky...sometimes, when you're doing everything online. We were all divided into groups and we had daily meetings within my group to discuss and to share progresses. We also managed to actually kind of perform during the meetings to each other, as of form of experimentation.

Academic Support 12:33

What do you mean by perform as a form of experimentation? Could you explain that?

Grace 12:36

Yeah, sure. So, we had performance workshops during the first time and we were taught a few ways to initiate a performance. And last time during the lockdown, we decided to try out the techniques we were taught and to perform responsively to each other....Yeah, without an audience initially but then we invited others to come and watch our performance online. Yep. That was what I was talking about.

Academic Support
13:20 How was it?

Grace 13.23

It was very uncomfortable at first... but it became very liberating after a few trials. Well, firstly, we get to know each other better...we all kind of felt more relaxed in front of each other, even though it was well still in front of the camera. It was practice and with time, we grew more confident in front of the camera. And as it is also an art performance, so you could basically do whatever you want in front of the camera and people wouldn't judge ..so yeah, and it was fine. And yeah, it kind of became a topic of conversation. And some people who really, really value their private space then it is weird to have to show your private space to everyone who are in the same zoom meeting as you do. I had that feeling too.

Academic Support 14:24

So, if you are feeling uncomfortable, how do you deal with that?

Grace 14:30

It's good to talk to friends who you really close to you, who you're very, very comfortable with and is also good to talk to ...well...well maybe find a way to voice your discomfort. You don't have to be so upfront with it but just to let other people know that they're making you uncomfortable. It's alright to tell people that and people understand and they will then ...if it's their fault, or if it's their insensitivity, then they will acknowledge your feelings and acting a more considerable way. Yeah. ..always talk to your family too ... if you can talk to them...it depends...some people can't talk to their family.

Grace 14:30

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(15.27)

I can't really imagine what everyone's going through. Yeah, it must be different for everyone and everyone has their own personal challenges. But you're not the only one out there, that's for sure. And always talk to people...don't take everything on yourself. Talking helps.

Academic Support 15:47

Imagine future students. Yeah, the chances are the courses and you ...next year and the year after. Do you have any idea how your course is going to develop?

Grace 16:03

I think is going to be part online and part face to face. The lectures and anything that involves mass gatherings is going to be moved online. However, we are going to get slots during which we could use the physical studio. And we're doing it on rota, which means there are going to be less people in the studio at any time, next term.

(16:31)

I know that some of my friends in China, they are really struggling with the fact that most of the content was moved online last term and they couldn't engage. And they also found it harder to integrate...yeah.

Academic Support 16:51

And is there anything you would say to people about this?

Grace 16:56

Um, so I think that perhaps next time it's gonna be better and not everything is going to be online. And if you're going to be able to come to the UK then you will be able to experience the course as everyone else. And hopefully, hopefully we'll kind of being able to be back in the studio ...completely... I hope, one day, it will be back to normal again.

Academic Support 17:26

So, what would you say to anyone thinking of coming to UAL in this current situation?

Grace 17:34

Um, you know, just go and throw yourself in, throw yourself into the experience. Don't

...don't overthink it. Just enjoy. And there are going to be pleasant surprises and things are usually better than what you think they're gonna be like. Yeah, just go out and embrace everything. Yeah, welcome to UAL!