

Student Voices transcripts: Damilola 2020 Interview

Damilola 0:00

Hi, I'm Damilola Ayo-Vaughn. I just recently graduated from BA Culture Criticism and Curation. I am Nigerian, born and raised. I came to the UK in 2015. And you know, working on a project with my friend and she went to LCC and she informed me about the course. So, I found the course, I found Central Saint Martin's, and ended up in the University of Arts, London. And yeah, that's my journey.

(30)

A little bit about my background. I was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria. I grew up there went to boarding school since I was 10. And so, I was literally in this controlled environment...you know, learning, growing up there... being really in school a lot of the time and then come to the UK in 2015. I went to boarding school in Yorkshire for my A Levels. That was a different environment again and navigating that space and very interesting traditional city and interacting with that. And from that point on, I then came to you University of the Arts, London where I have just finished.

(1.05)

So, my...my introduction to UAL kind of first began with my interview for my course. Because before, that I didn't even know what UAL was. I just kind of found it when my friend sent me the link and I applied. And so, coming to the building, I remember that day... I recently had an interview at King's College so I went to go get a trim, and I was so like, 'Ah, this needs to be right and so prim and proper, I need to go into the space'. And I walked into the building and I saw this girl, her face was painted completely red... I saw this guy's whose hair was so many different colours...in that moment, it was just like yeah, I'm a different space, I'm in a different environment...this feels good.

(1.44)

And then starting uni, I had to start like three weeks late so I was definitely very eager to be in the building. I would explore Kings Cross so much and just be looking at this massive building like I really want to be inside. And then starting the course and being inside the building...it was just, it was just very interesting to be in an energetic space because you know, I'm from Lego...so I'm really used to things happening and there been a lot of energy but then it being in this creative environment, it was just very exciting.

Academic Support 2:10

So, let's looking back over your three years, where were the challenges and the really maybe the low moments and what ...what were the moments that really made it for you?

Damilola 2:18

The initial beginning of the course I definitely struggled adjusting to you know, this art terms and the new way of thinking and dealing with things. Because I didn't have any art in my background, particularly, I never did Fine Art... I never did Art History. So, these kind of conversations with the small terms that would float their ways through the classes or after classes conversations with people... I wasn't really familiar with any of them. And it was a kind of like a sense of disconnect, you know, a sense of like... I'm really trying to find my bearings here and kind of feel like I do belong here... and it definitely took me a while to kind of adjust with that.

(2.58)

And I think another kind of challenging moment was definitely when I was doing my dissertation. Yeah, kind of said to my friend, you do it for nine months and I felt like I was pregnant. I had all the mood swings, the stress, the not eating everything was kind of there. And that was definitely a very challenging period...it really did take a lot of me to do that. But in terms of the good moments, it was just finding my friends and finding my family, I think. The moment I met my group of friends in 2018, a couple of months after I started, everything just clicked ...I fell in love with London ... I fell in love with UAL ...I was just being able to interact with so many different kinds of people, being able to do all these group exhibitions in LCC in Chelsea and CSM ...being able to see different ways of thinking differently through interacting with the world. I had, you know, an exhibition in the Windows Gallery in my final year and in that exhibition, I was able to bring together pieces of Lagos, pieces of London and it really just felt good...it felt like a summation of my journey. So, I'd say definitely the highest point which is my friends, so it was like a sustained high point with them and they just made everything about it really worth it for me.

Academic Support 4:03

And tell me about the international nature of the studentship. What that offered and maybe if there were any downsides to that.

Damilola 4:11

I think it.. it was interesting being an international student and coming here. When I first came to England and I went to Yorkshire, I came with like five groups of friends from Nigeria. And it was definitely interesting to come from a country where everyone is black, so you don't really think about it ... it is not normally something you think about and then initially going to Yorkshire, where I did stand up because of that ...having to navigate and really just come to terms that. And I think it was interesting because I had those groups of friends. On the one hand, I was exploring the city and really engaging with the society but on the other hand, I could kind of retreat to my friends in a way.

(4:52)

And then coming to UAL ...come in London, it was definitely very ... because I moved to London, really alone from all my friends...they all kind of stayed in different parts of England. So, I really had to like be out there and really engage with my environment a lot more. I was really grateful for that because I kind of fell in love with London. I literally... I literally fell in love with the city with the people ...it really felt like home ... like I literally I didn't go back to Lagos once every year...I just stayed in London.

(5:15) And I remember I did a summer internship at the Mayor's Office, about international students and it was really interesting seeing different things from different angles. I think really personally to me, the kind of struggles and the hard parts of it, were being away from family...you can't just go home to family and be taken care of ...or someone just asking you how are you... and just looking after you... just because, you know. I kind of ...for my family project ... I kind of called it home for now it's kind of how I look at it. So you know there is that beauty in it being home but then there's that anxiety and the temporality of it... just being like you don't know if you're going to stay for a while ... I think was really interesting because I threw myself so much at London that...the fact that I might then leave because I'm an international student, is kind of like, you know ... and I have a girlfriend now from England as well... who I met in London. And so I really kind of became based here but there's always that anxiety of not completely being home or even always looking at you as though you are a member, you know.

So I think, in total for me, I found my chosen family in a sense and I've really become a home ...because I chose London...that was the first place I chose... I want to go there, I want to study there I want to be ... it kind of everything that I wanted for myself. And because of that it's just felt like home.

Academic Support 6:32

What would you say to an international student not yet decided where to go about the idea of coming to London at this moment in time?

Damilola 6:42

I think... right now... it will be very specific to this time.. it's definitely a weird time especially because moving and leaving home and moving to a new environment is never an easy decision anyway. And then when you add the anxiety of where the world is today, I definitely understand it's very terrifying and not being easy to think about but I think, for me, I think what's happening now... the hope is that that kind of finds a way of navigating and becoming a new normal. That's why I think you can't let those fears kind of almost control your decision-making. London is a very dynamic city for me. And I feel like it's a space where because it's not too massive, where it has so many people, you get to literally interact with so many cultures. And it really opens your eyes and maybe opens your senses to different ways of being and different ways of navigating. And I think there's an excitement in that, that I feel like you should not close yourself off to. There's something in that, that would add so much to you, as a person, as a human being. I think that, you know, especially in this time where it's not easy to really interact with people, it's really easy to be outside... I think it's just finding that balance of Okay, I'm going to be in this space, and I'm going to make the best of it. You know, I'm gonna try my best to just enjoy it for what it is.... If, if there's a fear, they of it not being right or you can just get what's happening right now...you just have to kind of allow yourself to enjoy these things and allow yourself to really grow in it. You know, and not let yourself be controlled by that feeling the anxiety.

Academic Support 8:04

Can we move on to talk about learning online, obviously since COVID, and lockdown.

Damilola 8:08

I think the whole Corona and COVID was really interesting because I finished my dissertation in Feb and I was like, 'Okay, I'm going to come back in March be in this building, really just go at it for the last few months, interact with my friends'... and it's really weird because the last time I was in CSM was the Open Studios and there was so many people ...all this interacting and art and all of a sudden, you can't be in the building...all of a sudden the place where I have been for 95% of my time for the past three years, I can't physically be inside.

(8:40) And because I had kind of gone on break right before, there was definitely this prolonged sense of just taking a break but also feeling weird and feeling anxious. And I remember the first like, four or five weeks I wasn't really ... I wasn't in the best headspace. I was just really down. I felt really sad about the fact that I wouldn't get to physically see my friends or like really have a good send off with them. Or like, you know the casual people just seeing CSM just working every day that you think maybe tomorrow I get to know them tomorrow, maybe it's more I get to know them more. But there is no tomorrow to get to know them more. Or the lunch lady who I would always speak to about her kids or the fact that she wanted to go back to Ghana. I don't know when I'm gonna have a conversation with her. I don't know but everything that's happened is she gonna be back? So, it was definitely really coming to terms with all of that and dealing with that emotionally for myself.

(9:29)

And then in terms of the wider course and then coming back online...it was very interesting, especially within the first few weeks where it was adjusting to that sense of 'okay I have to wake up in the morning because I'm going to be online' ... kind of fighting back casualness 'Oh, well, this online, it's just on my laptop, it's not a big deal'. And really having to ...'no, this is my family, I'm still going to give it the same energy I would have if I was going to be in the building'. And it was a tussle with that but kind of seeing people's homes on the laptop screen and seeing the intimate space added a level of depth to the people I was interacting with... that was very interesting and very endearing. And I remember you'd see like, one of my friends her outside garden or you see a family pictures on the wall. And it really added an extra layer of who these people were, I think that definitely was nice and that kind of softened the blow of not physically being in the building.

(10:18)

I definitely think it stressed me out in the sense of when I was doing my final projects and I had to call my friend in zoom... like 'I need your help I'm getting this wrong'... and just how long it took to pass across my messages... because I couldn't just physically show him.. couldn't just say 'okay come look at my laptop' that.. that. It infuriates ...'oh my god I want to share screen, take a picture, share screen that' ...but one thing I said to my friend was 'I can't really think about it as well, I wish this didn't happen because I feel like it informed what I then did produce... it directly informed what then came after. And I think it took me to a different space. Our normal degree show for my course is normally just a group project. But because the classes were online and the degree show was going to be online we could add more things now. And it did give me a chance to really look at my personal work and really interact with it and really push myself to say 'what am I trying to say with this?' And I think being in this period, kind of give me a clarity. And so, I think what was then nice about the classes was it was kind of like a weird break...I was able to exchange ideas and bounce ideas off people and just in this much more relaxed environment. So, I think it was definitely a bit of... it has been bittersweet. And you just happen to maybe focus on the good and not on the bad. And I think overall it was definitely...yeah, it was definitely a good in that sense of being able to get to know people a little bit better, and how moments where the Zoom call isn't working, or you're waiting for someone to finish talking... but it's just like, I think, yeah, it added a different way of looking at uni and it gave me a very unique experience of finishing uni.

Academic Support 11:29

Can you explain...can you give the example of how you think your idea is changed as a result of having to work online? An illustration of that?

Damilola 11:52

Yeah. So, for example, I think I had wanted to do an exhibition but I just didn't know...I had a bunch of photographs, I didn't really know what I wanted to do with them. And I kind of hadn't really thought about my friends... because I'm always documenting the people around me. So, when you think 'I'm going to see you tomorrow, I'm going to see you tomorrow'... it just ... it feels normal.

You don't really think too much about the pictures you didn't take. And so because I had missed my friends so much I have the time and the space to really take stock of all the photographs and videos I've taken CSM. I could really look at my journey... I've really been able to engage with it, reflect about it.

And I think that then changed my project because instead of then trying to create images, I kind of use my old ones, and I find new meaning in them. And so that was very interesting because it was very reflective and was very personal. And I think on our degree, as a wider group project, we kind of moved from trying to have a physical event to kind of ...we worked on an interview video and it was interesting because we got a chance to really interact with some other CSM students, and give them a platform to honour them and the fact that they've done these amazing works. And so, I guess, yeah, it definitely increased my interaction with people in CSM in a different way.

Academic Support 13:13

Do you think it's influenced what you might do moving forward

Damilola 13:16

I think stylistically and visually it's definitely influenced it some definitely a love with the collages. Now, I mean local bouncing of these images against each other. And the way I was able to collapse time in them, it felt really like being on lockdown kind of collapse time in of itself and I liked the way I was able to bring these different images from different points in time together. I see what they're saying to each other. And I think it's definitely influenced me in the sense of doing more things for myself and being able to learn on a very basic level how to do things because I will just do like printing, or like the way I do my photography. I wanted to know more about how can I print for myself? If I can't get into a studio today what would I need to do to print this photograph or to take a different photograph, or to create new work that doesn't have to do something as digital or a physical thing I don't need to be in this building. And even just looking at, you know, technology, in the sense of being on Houseparty and the screenshots I take them a different way of taking a photograph of recording someone, a different way of interacting with them. I think that's definitely influenced how I see my work now. It's also influenced the fact I then decided that I want to do a Masters, just kind of continuing with the research and the way of working and kind of developed in lockdown.

Academic Support 14:30

Could you say that as a result of your experiences in lockdown that that generated your interest to do a Masters or was that going to happen anyway?

Damilola 14:38

I think it definitely accelerated it in the sense that it made it the most viable pathway. I think it could have happened but it wasn't like a definitely certainty. But what I do think lockdown did was it really homed my focus on my photography. So being in lockdown and not being able to go out or not having all this noise and things just constantly in my face, I really had to sit down and asked myself difficult questions. And I think yeah, I've definitely been informed the fact that Okay, you know what I want to do photography properly and we engage with it properly.

Academic Support 15:13

Um, thinking about somebody who is going to be going into a course which will be blended online and offline. Any tips or any thoughts about that approach?

Damilola 15:24

I think is really interesting, because I'm having this conversation with my friends that are coming back for final year. You can't think too much of what you've lost or what you would have had, if it wasn't like that, because it's just going to be different. It's going to be a new normal. And I do think, it's going to push you to create work in a different way. That that is exciting, that is fun. You know, you're gonna have to think about things that we didn't think about and I feel that because the world is literally changing, you're at the forefront of that all of a sudden, literally having to deal with something in real time. Because I'm such a history buff, and it's really interesting to literally be in history and whilst its changing you are having to really come to terms with that and deal with that ...especially in a creative space where you're going to be creating. And I feel like because I've seen some of my friends on the ways that their works' really expanded ...by I don't know... just being in the building alone, I do think it is very exciting for the people coming in now. All of a sudden, you're having to think on a much wider scale and you might have to be a part of a much wider conversation.

And I feel like in terms of blended learning... because I've been hearing a lot of emails about this, because I might be doing a Master's, there is a kind of silver lining in the fact that there's a bit more flexibility, especially if you're an International student moving to London... it kind of gives you a slower pace to come to terms with things and not just have to come to this new country and be physically going into this building every day, every day, being out there... I definitely think there's like the kind of reasoning that you do get the chance to breathe a little bit. But I think overall, it's just yeah, the work you're going to create in this community, the work you're gonna do, the conversation you're gonna have, are just going to be much more expansive now because of what's happening and it can only be a blessing.

Academic Support 17:01

You've already given several examples where you've had to deal with challenges and change an upset and difficulties. What sort of personal qualities or skills do you need to develop as a student? And also, what are the other sources of help that you can go to?

Damilola 17:21

Yeah, I think looking at, you know, challenges and being a student and being in a student mindset, there's definitely a sense of... kind of I went from, you know, excited, elated...I knew this is what I want to do, to feeling down uncertain and anxious. And yeah, especially when you're given a creative course that is already maddening to society and of itself. And then doubt starts to creep in you are like, 'Oh my God, why? Why am I not doing law? Why am I not doing something much more solid? Can I be able to say that I am good enough for my work is good enough? Can I compare to my friends who are making these amazing pieces?' And then trying to work on the side and get some experience and I want to balance these things when you're becoming an adult. And you have to take a lot more responsibility for your decisions because you're realising that it's literally everything you do has a reaction and has a consequence for you.

And I think in terms of being able to get help or being able to deal with the things you will face I think my friends community that group of people would just my do anything they literally the days I didn't get the internship or the days at uni were hard and they supported me and for like just finding those people that you can trust on and off, like you don't have to carry everything alone because we're not in this alone and the truth is just as much as you're confused the person next to you is confused too. You know, it's being okay, we can go through sometimes and be okay with it's not always going to be good. And I think even to UAL the fact I was able to get access to therapy was really good. I think it's just been able to take these opportunities and be able to communicate with the people around you and not feel like you have to deal with these things alone.

(18:13)

I remember I did a gig a few days ago when I saw these really young creatives and was interested to see them because it felt ...like... just seeing them in the space where they are enjoying just being creative and not having to think about the wider implications for that. And it just got me thinking about the fact that yeah, there's a lot more consequences we need to think about. Because suddenly you're thinking about taking photographs, ...' I need to get paid to do this to happen. So how is this going to do this?' Or 'I need to, you know, go out get a job get paid so I can find my creativity...well, how's that gonna happen? Am I gonna find the time?'... So little things like this and I feel like it is ultimately that fear of failure for me.

(18:46)

... like especially, like I said, coming from a conservative background where the creative course isn't particularly the way to go. And it's that feeling of well if this doesn't work everyone's gonna look at me like what why did you do that? Why don't you do law? Why didn't you just do something more normal? It's really having to live with that. And the amount of times I'm like 'no I'm gonna back my decision to do this thing. This is what I wanted to do. I had a job interview at Sotheby's. I was like, 'Oh my god, like, how can I go to art school for three years and all of a sudden, I'm going to be working in Sotheby's like, this is this is it... like everything was worth it?' And then I don't get it and I'm just like, well, has this been a waste then like, you know. Or almost show my film at Everyman Cinemas and then it doesn't happen. It is having to deal with these moments of failure, deal with these moments of things not going to plan or the work not coming together the way you want it to come together, the essay not coming together the way you want it to come together. And you still have to just go on.

(19:41)

Yeah, I remember last year I did a summer internship and then I came to uni. And I felt so burnt out. Every single day I just been working on and on and on because I really want to succeed now ...it needs to happen now... it needs to happen today. Finally I just had to start doing therapy in UAL and that was really helpful because I feel like I was just able to just breathe and you know, just take stock of where my life has been heading and being able to say, you know what, it is okay.

Academic Support 20:51

And would you say that the bottom line is you need to ask for help when you need it?

Damilola 20:56

That's... that's the bottom line, I think. You know, not being scared to ask for help. Not being scared to say I don't know. Not being scared to say I got it wrong. I think that's what holds a lot of people back. To any student I meet that's all I can tell them is yeah, like, just not be scared to ask for help, like you're gonna do this thing you may not be right the first time around. But don't be scared to talk to someone, don't be scared to communicate. Because we're just all in this together at the end of the day.

Academic Support 21:23

And as a sort of summary to anyone thinking of coming other any final conclusions?

Damilola 21:29

I will say whatever idea you have in your head, go for it. Because time goes so quick. So, the moment you step in, go for it, don't be scared. If you want to show your work on the ceiling, find the person... find a way to make that work. Just anything to create, just do it. Literally go for it, go with all your ideas. Just try and make them up and don't be scared ... and also explore the city. I would say let the city just surround you and just allow it to do its thing, you know. I think being in UAL, the most important thing is just going for it. I think there are so many things that I was able to do just because I asked, just because I said, You know what, yeah, I want to do that. Why can I do that? Yeah, that's what I'm going to do. And they happen. So, I feel like this just removing that fear, removing that imposter syndrome and just say, you know what, I'm here. I deserve to be here. I'm going to do what I need to do.

Academic Support 22:21

Thank you so much for your really interesting and insightful thoughts. Thank you so much.

Damilola 22:29

Thank you so much for having me, Victoria.