UAL Student Voices: Nelson

SPEAKERS
Nelson, Victoria (Academic Support)

Victoria 00:00
So welcome, Nelson, you've just graduated. Yes. You've just been through the ceremony?

Nelson 00:07
Yes, I have. And it was really amazing to see everybody getting the gowns and taking pictures. And I was like, oh my god, this is it, this is it.

Victoria 00:18
So what a wonderful opportunity to reflect back on your time. Let's start [amazing]. Maybe introduce yourself, the course you're on and how you first came to UAL.

Nelson 00:30
So, I'm Nelson Choga, I just graduated from a fashion pattern cutting degree. It was five years ago, I was in Tanzania and I just happened to accompany the GM I was interning for, to a fashion show. And I just fell in love with fashion. And from then on, I decided I wanted to do something in fashion but I wasn't sure what. So, I worked extremely hard to get into the Foundation, because I had no fashion background at all, zero. And so, starting from square one, like one step at a time, endless hours, time difference, extra lessons, just trying to get that portfolio in. And in the end, it did become fruitful. And I got into the Foundation course at London College of Fashion. And from then I got into my BA in pattern cutting.

Victoria 01:25
What was it about fashion that made you decide this is what you had to do?

Nelson 01:31
You know, I was thinking about it this morning. And I think it's not one thing because you know, it was captivating, and it's something that I was drawn to. But when I think about, when I moved to Tanzania, there was like independence, not just personal independence, like to live alone, financial independence. I was able to buy clothes. And I think that became a way of expressing myself. Also, figuring out the relationship between what I wear and how people respond. It was quite interesting. All of those were pivotal for me to study fashion and wouldn't be one thing specifically.

Victoria 02:05
What made you decide to come in and talk today?

Nelson 02:11
Well, the main thing is, I think I wanted to sort of reflect on my experience. You know, the last four years have been the most amazing, but it was the most difficult thing. And I think this was an opportunity for me to sit down and truly reflect on how the process has been, from the pandemic to everything else. And I think the second thing as well was my stories of resilience, determination and hitting a few blocks along the way, just being able to leave something that somebody else can hear and relate to, and then not feel like they're alone. Because I think university is a difficult experience, that there's all these expectations in society, you know, formal education, which is amazing. What we do not communicate enough is that this is a difficult experience, you will hit challenges. And I think what gets easier is the way you deal with it. If somebody would say to me, because you are learning something new, you are getting on a different level every single year, and it's going to be hard. But what becomes easier is how you deal with it and how you manage that stress how you manage that anxiety, how you manage that time management, those are the skills that I wish somebody would have told me that I need to focus on.

Victoria 03:28
So tell us a bit about the development of those skills and the hardships. And what happened?

Nelson 03:34
Yeah, obviously I did my Foundation, which was an amazing experience and I loved it. And going on to the BA, obviously, that's a different level of skill. There was a space between where I thought I was and what the reality of actual the skills I had. I found it really hard that I could not produce physically what I thought I could. Then in turn, I would struggle internally, the pandemic didn't help being forced to work alone. And I struggled so much being alone with my own thoughts. So, I found it really, really challenging in my first year, I decided that I didn't want to be at university, I didn't want to study...and I had failed my first year, by the way. So, this is like September, I failed my entire first year. I don't think I want to be here anymore. You know what I'm going to do everything I can to leave the degree. And I always say is the universe... after all, exhausting all options, there was no option I could take that would allow me to leave because you know one, I'm an international student. So, leaving meant leaving the country and I think that was something I was not prepared to do.

[04:49]
After all of that, there came a moment of actually, I've tried everything. And maybe now it's time to sit down and be disciplined because I've tried to leave, I tried not to do this. I remember I had to submit all my first years' worth of work in two and a half weeks. And that was the most challenging but yet rewarding experience. It taught me that I was scared. The reason why I wanted to leave wasn't necessarily because I wanted to leave the degree but I think it was because I was scared. I was scared of letting go of what I thought I should be like, as a designer, as an upcoming artist. I had to be disciplined. The dream wasn't just enough. Just dreaming wasn't enough. I am a big dreamer. I had to put in the work. That means putting in the work physically in my education, but also I think putting in the work in myself as a person. Just learning all these basic fundamentals, I think, of protecting myself from myself, like, I just could not believe in myself, but I think I've had the incredible community around me that I could feed off when I didn't have that strength.

[06:00]
And I think that's one of the things I came here to say is you don't have to do it alone. That's wonderful about this university experiences, you meet a lot of people from everywhere, you know, you're all feeling the same way. Even when I had to communicate my story to my friends afterwards, they were like, you should have just reached out we were all feeling the same way.

Victoria 06:22
Something that was really interesting that you said you thought being a designer was a certain thing. And then you realise actually, it wasn't? So could you talk a bit more about that, because somebody might be coming in with similar thoughts. What happened?

Nelson 06:39
The first thing is, you know, when I came to university, I was struggling myself. So, you know, it's not like I came in here and then I started struggling, I've had huge sort of traumatic things happen throughout my childhood, I think I have not processed all of that. But I think the misconception coming in, I thought, you know, you need to be broken to be a creative, because that's how you communicate your story to the world, isn't it? Because we hear all of these stories of iconic stars that have struggled. We underestimate the impact that has on the upcoming generation and upcoming talent. Okay, I'm struggling, so you know what, I just have to work really hard and be a great designer and that's it, I'm out. Then as well, like the lifestyle that we showcase around designers, you know, the constant partying, the constant use of recreational drugs, like all of those things that are sort of normal in our world. So I tried it all. And I was like, you know what, this is how I'm meant to be because this is what fashion is, isn't it. Because of that, because that's not what I'm meant to be, I struggled, I did not fit that lifestyle internally. And that was the battle I felt within. Then in realising that, oh my god, like, I can carve out my own space, that doesn't necessarily have to involve all of those things. Like I can say my story from a place of healing, rather than from a place of brokenness. You know, my story is still the same. And I think I would rather do it from a mindful place than do it from a place that is not safe for me. By doing that, I was able to come back to myself as a person, but I was able to learn so much about myself. And I think I was able to convey my story in a way that I am proud of. And you know, I can remember what I've done in a while I've done there, that is the most blissful thing for me.

Victoria 08:26
So, are you sober now?

Nelson 08:28
Sober! Two years, nothing. First three months, were hard, not because I wanted to do anything, drink or whatever, because it becomes another job. You know, after a while, it just becomes normal. Like you find your own place in the society or at the party. You know, you still find your own place, and you find other things that you enjoy doing, I can safely say, I'm happy that I can never have a hangover again.

[09:00]
You know, it's been the most wonderful experience because everything that I do comes from a place of mindfulness. And I think it's because I had to invest as well. I think it's not just deciding to be sober, but I think it's deciding to mindfully invest in myself. I remember like learning how to meditate learning how to breathe, all of those processes. It's now part of my DNA. But you know, in the beginning, it's like
discipline, again, comes back to discipline, you know, being disciplined about myself and about what I have around me and the people that I have around. Deciding what shape I want my future to be like, and just investing it day by day.

**Victoria** 09:42
So now I want to move on and talk about design. (Yes). And pattern cutting. (Yes) But more fashion. (Yeah). What is it to you? What's the point of learning about it? What have you got from being here and how is that going to help you moving forward?

**Nelson** 09:59
For me fashion is the art of storytelling. I think it's being able to communicate with the world. And also, it's being able to inspire and shape the world and your own views or the views of those around you, or those that are important to you. Specifically pattern cutting, the way I would describe it is, it's a puzzle. So, pattern cutters, you know, have to make sure that every piece fits together. And all those pieces then, make a garment. What I've learned, technical skills first, just being able to like understand garment construction. What I've learned from it as well is attention to detail. I think, you know, if the pattern is not matching, you have to fix it until you reach the desired outcome. I think attention to detail. Also, stability have got a very wild mind, I get distracted a lot. But when I'm pattern cutting, I don't. It makes me focus, it makes me be still. And I think there's a stability and consistency to it. If that makes sense.

**Victoria** 11:08
Makes total sense. Yeah. Well, you've sort of covered it about storytelling, when I was gonna say, what's the point of fashion?

**Nelson** 11:17
I think the thing is, you know, we all want to be inspired. You know, there's different modes of storytelling. Garments have always been part of our society since the beginning of time. And, I think, they evolve. So, in them evolving, that means their story is evolving. It's just a wonderful vehicle to sort of tell a story. And also, the thing is that story means differently to everyone else. You know, when you see the Jean-Paul Gautier and Olivier Rousteing collaboration, it's just amazing to see all of those garments come to life. But also, the history associated with those garments. So, for a generation that knows little of that fashion knowledge, being able to tap into the history and showcase in a different way, I think, you know, fashion is the best vehicle and element for that.

**Victoria** 12:03
And what about from your own influences? Clothes and fashion and arts and culture? Have you been able to use that?

**Nelson** 12:13
It's obviously like elements, like for my graduate collection, you know, I was focusing on African sculpture, finding ways to sort of showcase that in a modern and contemporary way. I think I find, especially the research part, as a way of learning about things that I didn't know, I love that. I've travelled and lived across the world, in different places. You get inspired by different cultures. And I
think for my graduate collection, it was sort of an element of getting in touch with myself. You know, this space I am, I always think that the space I am, was created by people who were before me. So I want to know, who were those people, you know. What have they done for me to be here?

African culture is massive. Finding elements that I’m inspired by and also finding stories I'd like to showcase, stories that I would like people to know. Yes, I come from Harare, Zimbabwe but you know, like, that's not entirely who I am as a person. After everything and everywhere I've been, I think I identify as a multicultural being. So, I think my art becomes the intersection between, you know, where I come from, and where I am now. Because also I think Zimbabwe has had a negative perception due to political unrest. So, I think for me as well, sometimes it's trying to bring that to a positive light. To showcase that there's more than just what we read in the newspaper or our struggles. As people, there's more to our art.

Victoria 13:45
And you talk about yourself as a multicultural person because of the amount of travelling and the different influences you've had. How have you found studying here in London and UAL in terms of embracing a multicultural perspective?

Nelson 14:05
I think it's amazing. I'm always fascinated by people and their stories. So, UAL became a platform for all of these different stories and experiences. And I think, my friendship circle, there's a girl from Canada, there's a girl from Thailand, there's a guy from America that you know, there's people from everywhere. You get to be inspired by people's stories and people's journeys and, you know, because I think I feed off people and energy, UAL is the foundation, I think, of a multicultural place, because I think you've got everyone from everywhere, all different in their own way and with their own stories. But in a way, we all have the same story that we want to tell and I think that makes us a community and I think a wonderful community to be around in. That is one of the greatest blessings, I think.

Victoria 15:29
You will not want to blow your own trumpet, but I'm going to do it for you. Which is I know that you are a student rep. (Yes. Yes. Yes). And that you were nominated. Yes. (For a course rep of the Year award). So tell me about being a course rep and the perspective it gives you on students having a voice within the structures of the university.

Nelson 16:04
You know, firstly, literally, I think what I wanted was to be that bridge between the university students, the tutors, and the system at large. And I think what it does, it gives you sort of an idea of how everybody has different requirements, you learn to navigate all of those. You know, I think you can't make everybody happy but I think you can try and make everybody comfortable. So for example, like after COVID, most of our design sessions went online, one of the things was to have design classes in person so that those that struggle so much with drawing, they could have their tutor present. But you know, can we in some way negotiate to have at least one or two classes in person? And we managed to do that. So, I think it's more being able to mitigate and find solutions that help students. For example, pattern cutters have to learn a software called Lectra software, students were struggling with that, so I managed to get extra sessions almost every single day.

[17:08]
It was an interesting experience, I think being able to hear all of these challenges, and then being able to convey those challenges to the important people that make decisions. And also just being in the room just learning to communicate, you know, these are some of the skills that you need. When you get into the professional world. Being able to navigate the room, hear other students stories as well, but also fight for your own peers and cohorts so that the university experience is a little bit easier.

Victoria 17:38
One of the criticisms often levelled against universities is that students are paying an awful lot of money (laughs understatement). And sometimes they don't get such a good experience, or they feel that the fees aren't reflecting the resources. But I mean, if somebody is a potential student coming in, maybe feeling a bit resentful, or a bit frightened about the financial commitment they have to make. What's your view on? How would you reflect on that?

Nelson 18:08
There is two sides, obviously to everything. Initially, that was my view that the fees did not reflect the resources. However, I think after a while, after my first year, you know, when I struggled mentally, the School was amazing. Like, I got a mentor, which I've been seeing literally like a personal therapy session every Thursday for the last two years. So literally somebody I was seeing for an hour, the School had access to that. And then during COVID, you know, we had the COVID fund. So, I think, for me personally, I think I've come to a conclusion that the resources are there, but they're not communicated. So, nobody knows. So, I think it's finding a better way of communication to the students. You know, when you come to think of it, even like now after Uni's finished, there was a careers conference at JPS. So, I personally, do think with some things, the resources are there, like, you know, the mentorship, like there was just an email recently about, you know, if you're struggling, there is sessions for you to get tests, you know.

[19:13]
So, for me personally, I think the resources out there, it is a big School, but I think it's navigating and finding them when you need them. Because I think it's not enough sending a Welcome Day pack. Because to be honest, you're nervous, you're not going to read all of that. Getting an email, 'Welcome to UAL' fair and fine but you know, a lot is going on, you know, you're trying to navigate your place in this massive institution. So, the last thing you're going to do is scrolling through, clicking on everything
that the university has sent you. So I think maybe it is just finding a better way to communicate. Like I'm an international student so you can imagine my fees are astronomical, but after second, third year, and I'm like, Oh my God, there's so much there is so much happening around think it's just matter of communication. There's a lot of potential. UAL is the foundation of a multicultural place. And I think there's a lot of potential. We just take advantage of that. I think it'll be great. And it will look great on the university as well win win solution. So yeah!

Victoria 20:18
Thank you so much. You're a really inspiring example of someone who really hit rock bottom. Yes. And turned it around. (Literally). I know you're not gonna let me say that. You got a very, very good degree. (Yes). So, you did it really well. Congratulations. I'm sure things will go well. You've put a lot of effort in and things will not stop there. So, congratulations.

Nelson 20:48
Thank you so much for this time. And I think just allowing me the opportunity to share my story with everyone. I'm so excited for the future. And I think for everyone that comes through these doors, you know. As they said yesterday, you will always be part of your community. So, this is always home. I think for me, so really grateful for this. Thank you so much.