UCL Remarkable Stories\_Lakkaya Interview

[00:00:00] **Gia:** We are UCL and these are our remarkable stories. My name is Gia Lulic, and I work in the Organizational Development team at UCL. In each episode, I will be in conversations with our UCL guests as they share with us their remarkable stories, experiences, and life lessons.

[00:00:26] **Gia:** In today's episode, I'm so excited to speak to UCL student Lakkaya Palmer, about her journey to academia, following her dyslexia diagnosis, and overcoming the challenges to get to where she is today.

[00:00:45] **Gia:** So if we could start with a little bit about your journey to get to your PhD and just some of the milestones. And then we'll touch on a few of those points throughout the interview.

[00:01:00] **Lakkaya:** I'm currently a first year PhD student and film studies here at UCL. I've had a weird academic journey in the sense of I only got four GCSEs during like secondary school.

[00:01:15] **Lakkaya:** And then tried to work really hard for A levels, and then I didn't get into the university that I wanted at first. I got my second choice, so I was hit back by that. And then going into undergrad, I found out in my third year that I actually had dyslexia. I had it the whole time, so that was quite unique as well.

[00:01:39] **Lakkaya:** But, I really enjoyed my time at undergrad, despite maybe being a bit behind in reading or not writing my essays as fast enough as my friends, but I feel like the passion was always there and it was like, I'm not done. So I moved on to the masters here at UCL. But of course they were the covid years and halfway through writing my master thesis, they suspended all teaching on campus. So that was a struggle as well dealing with that. But I did, and again, felt like I wasn't done and applied to do a PhD. And here I am.

[00:02:16] **Gia:** Amazing. There's a few things that I want to touch on with what you said. Maybe we'll start with what have you found to be like your biggest challenge, and on the back of that just talk to us a little bit about the dyslexia. How you found out about it, and how has it been a challenge, or how has it impacted your studies?

[00:02:41] **Lakkaya:** I'd say that my biggest challenge was this sense of imposter syndrome, like throughout my studies. That probably does link to the dyslexia as well. But knowing that I didn't read as fast enough as my peers, or knowing that it'd take me two or three reads for the information to sink into my brain and for me to understand. Whereas other people just got things straight away, and I feel like that made me doubt myself and my abilities a lot.

[00:03:13] **Lakkaya:** At some points I even thought I was like stupid and that I didn't deserve to be at uni because I just felt like I wasn't grasping it. With my dyslexia I feel like it went quite undiagnosed because I moved schools quite a lot in my younger years. I went to five different secondary schools. So it kind of makes sense why it wasn't picked like up on in schools because I wasn't there for long enough for them to notice.

[00:03:40] **Lakkaya:** Well, when going to university for my BA I took a lot of medieval history modules and I was with the same professor every time in these different modules. Really amazing person, and I think he picked up that in my work, like with my essays and everything, there were like certain grammatical errors and spelling errors.

[00:04:04] **Lakkaya:** And even questions that I'd posed to him before in the end and he was like, Lakkaya you know, in the nicest way possible, have you ever been tested for dyslexia? And I was kind of like, no I've heard of it, but I didn't know too much about it. And then he informed me that my university at the time had this free dyslexia screening thing.

[00:04:25] **Lakkaya:** So I filled out the questionnaire, which then got sent back to the disability service at university. and then they emailed me back saying that they wanted to do a referral to the official people that deal with it. It was a very long process, a series of tests and questions, and when I received the official report back, I was 21 years and eight months old.

[00:04:50] **Lakkaya:** It was weird, but at the same time, I feel like it made a lot of sense why I had been struggling so much in. So I feel like that definitely was very challenging, but I overcame it through the diagnosis and understanding that it's not a bad thing and I'm not stupid. I just learn in a different way to my peers and that's fine.

[00:05:11] **Gia:** Did that provide like a bit of a relief for you that you knew why you were having struggles?

[00:05:18] **Lakkaya:** Yeah, I think so. I think for the most part, like moving schools, I thought it was because of that I felt like maybe just stuff wasn't sinking in because of the lack of stability in the school and like system because of my moves.

[00:05:34] **Lakkaya:** So I feel like that kind of played a part in it. But by the time I got to sixth form, I had that stability and I had great teachers, great support from my mom, but I still was struggling a lot with my grades. So I feel like three years later, once I got that dyslexia diagnosis, just everything made sense. It was a relief and at the same time, it did make me sad for a bit that I hadn't gotten the support during A Levels or even GCSEs.

[00:06:05] **Lakkaya:** I think it's just a testament to how hard I've worked in spite of that.

[00:06:09] **Gia:** So just for our audience, actually, myself included, who are not sure what dyslexia is, could you tell us what it is exactly?

[00:06:19] **Lakkaya:** Yeah. So it's a special learning difficulty and I think it varies from person to person. So for example, some people with dyslexia can be quite slow at reading because like their processing is a little bit different and information is harder to stick into the brain than say the average person.

[00:06:40] **Lakkaya:** Or sometimes when you have dyslexia, you can get words muddled up. Say for example, if you're reading a book, sometimes the words can blur information doesn't make sense. And I think the biggest thing for me that I found out through my dyslexia diagnosis was it can affect your memory quite a lot. That's probably the reason why if I read something it just goes - it differs from person to person.

[00:07:04] **Lakkaya:** I think with mine it's more like memory and processing things as well as sometimes reading can be a little bit stressful. Which is ironic seeing as I'm doing a PhD and all I do is read.

[00:07:18] **Gia:** And you mentioned that you've moved quite a few schools. How has that impacted you and do you think that kind of contributed to the imposter syndrome, or do you think that's had an effect on you overall in a positive or negative way?

[00:07:34] **Lakkaya:** For the most part, it was quite stressful because I didn't have a group of friends even, right? People in schools typically stay in like one secondary school, and then they already have their friends and they've known each other since primary school. But moving schools, I didn't really have that a lot. So I feel like I struggled a lot with like friendships, even like the kind of social side of school.

[00:08:00] **Lakkaya:** And I did really struggle with subjects. Math was the bane of my existence because I already was not very good at it. So moving schools, having different teachers and having to learn in a different way and get used to like a new environment. I think that was quite hard. But for the subject, I was quite passionate about history, English literature.

[00:08:26] **Lakkaya:** I feel like that passion carried over from school to school. So despite the new environment or new teachers or even new people around me. It was that kind of passion for the subject remained. And I think in hindsight, looking back at the time, I felt like moving schools had a negative effect on my education. But it's actually made me really resilient in hindsight, and it's made me know how to deal with being thrown into new environments and how to navigate those environments.

[00:09:02] **Lakkaya:** I think it had its pros and cons, but I wouldn't be the person I am today without those experiences.

[00:09:09] **Gia:** I love that. I've actually moved quite a few schools as well throughout my education, and I do definitely feel like that's impacted on my resilience where I'm not really uncomfortable in situations where other people might find themselves feeling super uncomfortable.

[00:09:28] **Gia:** Talk to me a little bit about the imposter syndrome and like how that's impacted you. Because that's another one of those things where I think most people have it. What was your imposter syndrome about specifically, and how did it impact you?

[00:09:45] **Lakkaya:** Like you say, not many people know what it is or anything about it.

[00:09:51] **Lakkaya:** But I think the moment it hit was on GCSE Results Day for me. So I moved from Birmingham to London in year 11, and there actually wasn't any schools available for me to finish my GCSE at. So I was actually moved to a college and I didn't do the best. I got four GCSE passes and I remember opening the paper.

[00:10:17] **Lakkaya:** Thinking, I'm never going to be good enough. I'm never going to achieve anything. I'm not going to go anywhere in life because that is what's really drilled into you as a child in the education system. Like you need GCSEs to get a job. From that moment on, I always felt inferior to those around me and just to myself.

[00:10:41] **Lakkaya:** So I was let into a sixth form on like a trial because my GCSEs weren't good. So they were like, we need to see how you like operate or else we'll remove you from the program. And I remember like going into this new sixth form on my own, just in a corner, and everyone already knew each other and talking about like their GCSE results.

[00:11:05] **Lakkaya:** So I got 10 A stars to like B's. And then that was me with like my two Bs and my two Cs, and I was like, ah, I literally felt so bad. I've never felt that kind of feeling before of just being so inferior to everyone and just feeling stupid and just feeling like I didn't deserve to like even do A levels right.

[00:11:30] **Lakkaya:** So I somehow completed my A Levels. I didn't get all A's, but I got an A in history, which is crazy coming from like a C in history GCSE, thanks to the encouragement of my amazing history teacher at the time. And also my mom that helped to like keep me grounded. And like I said before, I didn't get into my first choice Uni.

[00:11:54] **Lakkaya:** I got into my second choice and I think again, the imposter syndrome of if you are not good enough to go to this university. Like they don't want you, it doesn't matter like how hard you've worked at A level, it's still not good enough. You're still like not where you want to be, and I feel like that really hit my confidence as well.

[00:12:17] **Lakkaya:** And then just going into uni, no one prepares you for that. You're with people from all different walks of life. You are with people that have gone to private schools. You're were people that have grown up in different socioeconomic backgrounds and stuff. And I took an interest in medieval history quite a lot and I picked most of those like modules and stuff.

[00:12:41] **Lakkaya:** And for quite a few of the people in the courses, they'd already learn medieval history as an option in school and classics and things that I just had absolutely no idea about. So again, that imposter syndrome of everyone in this room knows more than you do and you don't deserve. So I just think it was like a continuous thing during undergrad, during masters, and weirdly as well, my PhD.

[00:13:13] **Lakkaya:** I didn't get a lot of scholarship and it got to August or something and I was like, I'm not going to get a scholarship again. Like this feeling of not being good enough and no one wants me. And then when I actually did get a scholarship offer, I had imposter syndrome about that too.

[00:13:29] **Lakkaya:** I was like, okay, maybe it was a mistake, or oh my God, the other scholars are going to be so much smarter than I am. So it's a continuous thing and I've been like learning to live with it and tell myself that I am good enough and I do deserve to be here. And people have academic success in different ways. Some people can have 10 A stars and a first and everything.

[00:13:52] **Lakkaya:** But I've worked just as hard. And my success story is coming from four GCSEs to undergrad degree to a master's degree and like being here. And I think that's okay and it is a good story to tell just as much as the other persons.

[00:14:06] **Gia:** Yeah, absolutely. I think it's inspiring the fact that a lot of people may have just quit there and said there's other things that I can do, but you kind of persevered.

[00:14:18] **Gia:** What do you think that thought process was that kind of made you continue forward and just lock that doubt in your mind. And I guess, who are the people in your life? You mentioned your mom and your teacher. What was that process of overcoming that imposter syndrome and are you further along now than where you were say a couple of years ago?

[00:14:41] **Lakkaya:** I think I am where I am today because of the support of other people that really did help me keep going and block the voices out. Mom is like my biggest supporter ever, and I remember going home some days and just crying and being like, I can't do this. I'm not going to go to uni. And she was always just telling me to believe in myself and she never doubted me ever.

[00:15:07] **Lakkaya:** And I think that her belief in me and my ability really did hold me together, and still does. There are sometimes, even now, I call my mom crying about the PhD and she's like, you're fine, Lakkaya you've done it before. So she's definitely a key person that helps me stay grounded and another person was my history teacher, Ms. McInally.

[00:15:31] **Lakkaya:** I remember on the first day of sixth form, and I said I was standing in a corner. She came up to me and was like, Hi. Like she's just really happy, chirpy person. And I think it was obvious to her that I was like standing alone. And I was like, Hi. And she was like, what A levels are you doing? And I was like, English, literature, psychology and history.

[00:15:50] **Lakkaya:** And she's like, oh, I'm the history teacher. I can't wait to see you in class. I remember starting the class and being so nervous, but I had loved history so much, like forever. And at first for the mock exams and everything, I was getting like D's, I was not doing well. And Ms. McInally would be like, stay behind school for an hour.

[00:16:12] **Lakkaya:** I'd be like, oh, why am I being punished? And she'd literally sit me down and help me and show me how to construct essays and how to use different words in the paragraph that will change it entirely. And putting together my arguments and all these things that seem on the surface level, like basic, but helped me improve my writing so much to the point where my mock exams went from like D's to A stars all because of her.

[00:16:44] **Lakkaya:** And I always used to constantly doubt myself and say, miss, you're putting all your eggs in my basket. I'm not going to go to university and do history. It's not going to happen. And she'd be a reassuring presence. And apart from my mom, I'd never really had that before. And she really did keep me going for like the two years, just being someone I could speak to, helping me grasp concepts.

[00:17:11] **Lakkaya:** Helping me find ways of revising that worked for me. We figured out pretty fast that I was a big fan of color coding, which makes sense now in hindsight that I know I'm dyslexic. But she was the most amazing help and between her and my mom during A Levels, they were the two people that really made me believe that I could go to university and weren't shocked when I did.

[00:17:36] **Lakkaya:** Being an academic or being in academia, it's a process and you meet so many fantastic people along the way that really help you and are willing to help as well and are willing to help you work through things. Just a few honorable mentions as well is Jennifer Wallace, Susan Cord, Ellen Durban, Peter Danley, and Matt Jacobson, who really did help me during my time undergrad as well.

[00:18:04] **Gia:** That's amazing. It's like a very common thing as well. Even with all the guests that I've interviewed previously, there's a really common theme with teachers being a huge part of making people believe in themselves when they didn't really, or teaching them things.

[00:18:21] **Gia:** It just makes me think how important that role as a teacher is, and also how important mentoring is generally. What advice would you give to our students who are maybe currently in that place at the moment where they feel like life and everything's like coming you know?

[00:18:39] **Lakkaya:** First thing is if you are getting like overwhelmed with it, take a break. Because I know that's something I was very guilty of was overworking myself to death, right?

[00:18:51] **Lakkaya:** Because I'm like, I'm not good enough. I mean to work past 9:00 PM 10:00 PM like staying up to the 3:00 AM sometimes working on a project or an essay and it's not healthy. I think taking a break, taking a step away, whether that be for a couple of hours or if you need to take the rest of the day off, that's perfectly fine.

[00:19:11] **Lakkaya:** So stepping away, speaking to people that have your back, speaking to your support network, whether that be your parents or your friends, or a teacher that you trust or a lecturer that. And just gaining that insight and advice can really help as well. And I'd say the last thing, even though it sounds cliche, is just literally not giving up.

[00:19:34] **Lakkaya:** Telling yourself every day when you wake up that you can do it, that you deserve to be here, that you are valid, and you know you will get through it. Because I feel like the more you tell yourself that, the more you actually start to believe it.

[00:19:50] **Gia:** Definitely. So today, when you look back at everything, what would you say you're most proud of?

[00:19:58] **Lakkaya:** Graduating from my first degree and my mom and my little sister were there. And just seeing how proud she was of me, it was very emotional time for me. And I'd say the second thing is getting PhD. I'm hoping to stay in academia. I'm hoping to become a lecturer one day, but also being that kind of influence as well as I am a woman of color and I'm sure there are not many of them, especially here in the UK. And maybe inspiring someone that starts university and sees someone that looks like them or is from the same socioeconomic background and them thinking if she can do it, maybe one day I can too.

[00:20:45] **Lakkaya:** Thinking back to what 16-year-old me that was opening like 4 GCSE passes on results day, would've never imagined actually doing a PhD to one day become a doctor. That's kind of insane, and even as I'm speaking, I can't wrap my head around it. To be honest, like really proud of myself, I guess.