

From Studio to Screen: How IBM Developed a Digital Showcase for Final-Year Students at University of the Arts London



By Matt Candy

Culture itself is always changing. But in the world of art, there are many constants. Graduate shows from final-year creative arts students are one such constant. The culmination of years of hard work and sacrifice, the final show gives the student—often for the first time—a space to introduce themselves to the world. For many it's a defining moment in their careers. For all, it is an unforgettable experience.

When COVID-19 disrupted the prospect of graduate shows as we know them, universities like the University of the Arts London (UAL) faced a huge dilemma. Cancellation was not an option.

[Ranked number two in the world](#) for art and design, UAL brings together [six iconic colleges](#). With close to 7,000 students of art, design, fashion, media and performance planning to put on graduate shows this summer, the University had to find the right solution—and fast.

Sir Nigel Carrington, UAL Vice-Chancellor, said: "We partnered with IBM as a rapid response to the coronavirus pandemic to create a platform to host the final collections of our graduating students. Now more than ever we need the talent, entrepreneurship, resilience and vision of our creative graduates to reshape our economy and keep our society and culture thriving."

That challenge came to IBM in mid-March, and it was fast-paced: fewer than three months to tear up the rule book and start again on a project UAL would typically spend a year preparing.

Creating a Unique, Compelling Platform

A team of experts from IBM's Global Consumer Industries Center of Competence and [IBM iX](#)—the business design arm of IBM Services—was quickly assembled. Using IBM's learning from projects such as

our recent [Wimbledon 2020](#) “The Greatest Championships” compilation and our work on the [Mercedes-Benz Stadium](#) in Atlanta, the team sketched out concepts. Agile project management then kicked in as the IBM and UAL project teams came together.

Harnessing ideas from as many perspectives as possible—from staff to students to industry—was central to the project. What everybody quickly understood was that this project was not about technology replicating a live show. The objective was to create a unique platform for students to showcase their work in the most compelling ways for industry, the media and the general public.

The end result is the [UAL Graduate Showcase](#)—a curated and richly layered digital platform announced today. UAL describes it as a platform hosting the next generation of creative talent from across UAL’s six world-leading colleges in one, curated space for the first time in history.

The launch of the platform will be accompanied by an events program, running from July 28 to August 7. But users are not constrained by the transience of a gallery visit or a catwalk show. Visitors can take their time to absorb what’s before them, and they can return again and again. Graduates can highlight works for sale, with embedded links to their individual e-commerce platforms.



Works from three of the artists taking part in the UAL Graduate Showcase: At top, "Grenouille" by Julia Sasaki Hernanz, B.A. Costume for Performance, London College of Fashion, UAL; above, "r you happy to be alive" by Yifan He, B.A. Fine Art: Sculpture, Camberwell College of Arts, UAL; and below, "Break the Frame" by Sophie Huckfield, M.A. Material Futures, Central Saint Martins, UAL. Images courtesy the

artists and UAL.

Planning for a Hybrid Future

Behind the new digital platform is state-of-the-art thinking and technology. Our project engagement leader, Joseph Kearins, and his team worked hand in hand with UAL and the colleges in agile sprints. They built the platform using Red Hat OpenShift on the IBM public cloud, providing a solid foundation of open source innovation, security leadership, and enterprise-grade infrastructure. This platform gives UAL the flexibility to access the very latest applications and services without vendor lock-in.

IBM iX harnessed the power of design, data and exponential technologies to quickly create and bring to life an engaging—and beautiful—digital platform experience.

The UAL Graduate Showcase does not intend to replace physical shows. The world is experiencing a very unusual moment, and UAL plans a return to physical shows as soon as it is safe to do so. Yet, looking ahead, as current world events continue to disrupt regular business operations, it is clear that the current health crisis will have a lasting impact on how we live and work.

UAL will have to tackle whether a hybrid approach with graduate shows will become a necessity in the future—not just to cope with post-pandemic safety measures, but to continue to grow as a leading arts institution in the digital age. Hybrid shows, blending physical and virtual experiences more deeply than ever before, could change how future generations of talent are announced to the world, and shape how creators and audiences engage with the arts.



In a world where we are being consistently digitally disrupted, businesses across all industries will now have to enter into a constant innovation stream. They will need to blend strategy, technology and creativity to tackle every challenge. Beyond the creative arts, there are opportunities in many sectors: from education to automotive and beyond. This new approach also holds significant potential for the B2B sector—for example, with hybrid trade shows.

Right now, close to 7,000 UAL graduate students are currently putting their work on the [UAL Graduate Showcase](#). The public launch of the platform will take place on July 28, at 18:30 BST (1:30 p.m. ET). It will unveil the newest names in art, design, fashion, creative communications and performance—under one roof for the first time

ever.

As UAL Chancellor and Turner Prize-winning artist Grayson Perry said when welcoming people to the Showcase: “Get ready to expect the unexpected!”



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