



COVID-19 AND JESUIT WORLDWIDE LEARNING

How we operated and what we learnt

INTRODUCTION

JWL has developed a blended learning model to effectively bring higher education to young people living at the margins, that is refugee youth, IDPs, minority groups, indigenous populations, young people who could not otherwise access higher education opportunities.

The education model developed through the years by JWL has got some key features that are important to highlight for the sake of this report:

- Academic and professional courses are structured according to a blended learning model;
- The model includes virtual global learning spaces and virtual classrooms delivered by international faculty working with students from different locations;
- Community Learning Centres promote Student lead learning supported by learning facilitators;
- IT solutions enable the fruition of content both on-line and off-line.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, JWL and its Community Learning Centres around the globe faced extreme challenges and had to rapidly adapt in order to ensure that its students could continue learning.

	Diploma in Liberal Studies	BA in Sustainable Development	BA in Management	Peace Leader	Learning Facilitators
<i>Afghanistan</i>	45	13	-	26	-
<i>Iraq</i>	53	-	-	16	-
<i>Jordan</i>	34	-	-	-	-
<i>Kenya</i>	103	-	56	-	-
<i>Malawi</i>	132	-	42	6	9
<i>Myanmar</i>	-	1	-	12	6
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	6	9	-	21	27
<i>Zambia</i>	12	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	385	23	98	81	42

Table 1: Number of students per program per country (May 2020)

This report accounts for the challenges faced, the solutions adopted and the opportunities identified by the organisation, with a special focus on its academic and professional programs, namely its Diploma in Liberal Studies, its two BAs: in Sustainable Development, and in Management, and two of its Professional programs: Peace Leader and Learning Facilitators (active during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic).

METHODOLOGY

This report has been compiled by combining a variety of information sources: written and oral reports from country coordinators and program coordinators have been a key resource to understand how the pandemic was affecting JWL academic and professional programs and to act swiftly to ensure the best possible learning experiences to the students. Furthermore, the students experience has been captured by the Students and Alumni Liaison Officer, who was and is in continuous communication with students and students' representatives.

A key strategy for data collection, but also a key method to enable experience sharing and best practice development throughout a global and distributed organisation such as JWL was the organisation of a virtual workshop held on May 18 and attended by 38 participants among students representatives, learning facilitators, online facilitators, program and country coordinators and the HQ staff.

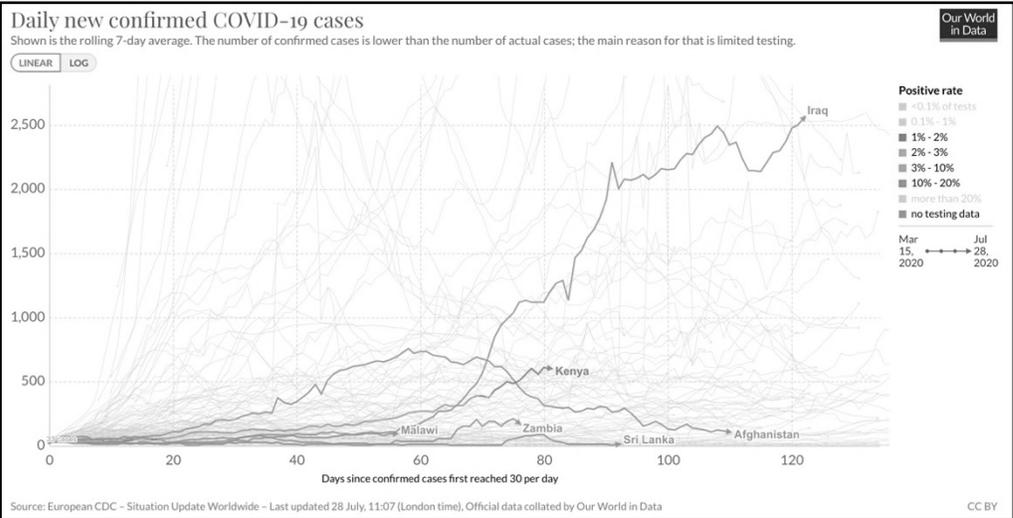
During the virtual workshop the participants were divided in groups - heterogeneous in terms of geographical location and homogeneous in terms of role and function - to discuss key challenges and mitigation strategies adopted in each location and to promote inspiration and cross-fertilisation among the Community

Learning Centres. Results of the group discussion were then shared with the whole group of participants as a first step to develop a global community of practice.

Finally, this report also combine quantitative data, by reviewing information related to course success rate and course enrolment, especially for the Diploma in Liberal studies and for the BA in Sustainable Development, in order to back up the qualitative picture gathered from the field.

THE COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRES AND THEIR RESPONSES

In this section we report challenges and action taken by each country were JWL has active professional or academic programs. Each country section gives an overview of the COVID-19 situation updated to July 2020.



Afghanistan

The COVID-19 situation in Afghanistan varies across the regions. The centres located in rural areas in the Daikundi Province were least affected, and were able to remain open to small group meetings. Herat, being the

hotspot and because of the proximity to Iran, was badly affected, with some of the students tested positive. Until date the centre in Herat remains closed and the students are encouraged to study from home.

It has been a challenge for the students to study from home as they were not able to engage in onsite discussions and some of them had poor internet connectivity.

Academic and professional courses students, especially in Daikundi and Ghor, were able to carry on their studies more or less regularly, students could access the centres in small group to attend the onsite sessions and discussions and to upload the assignments, and could work from home and access the materials through the JWL LMS offline version.

In three centers - Khidir, Bhandar and Lal - it was the first intake of students for the Professional Programs and students were able to have the course content downloaded on their devices. Those not having their personal laptops or mobile devices were provided with tablets, and data bundles.

Iraq

The Kurdistan Region in Iraq closed all education activities on February 29th, a complete lockdown started in Erbil/Sulaymaniyah on March 13th and in Duhok on March 18th. In the first week a complete lockdown was enforced, followed by a partial lockdown that only covered night hours as well as travel restrictions between governorates. As regards refugee camps, Domiz had the strictest regulations: although the Duhok province did not follow the first lockdown regulations, the camp was totally shut down. All activities had to be stopped and no one was allowed to leave or enter the

camp for 2 months. Starting from mid June JWL Community Learning Centre had a special permission from Camp Management for small student groups to come to the center for perform invigilated tests. The situation in Khanke was less strict: the Camp followed all regulations in the beginning and the situation was very similar to Domiz. Starting from June, students were allowed to access the center again.

Connectivity in Kurdish area, where JWL is operating, is generally reliable; therefore centres and students were able to keep up with the learning activities and to stay connected during the weeks of lockdown. Furthermore, all diploma students have laptops and internet and were able to purchase data bundles to stay connected with their programs.

Zoom was the main platform chosen by centres and programs coordinators, to deliver and attend classes and on site facilitations. Classes were recorded, so that students with weaker connectivity could access them and keep the pace. Zoom was also used to ensure invigilation of students sitting quizzes and assessment sessions and by JWL staff to run their usually in presence meetings, such as program coordination meetings.

The second platform used was WhatsApp: coordinators and learning facilitators used it to share additional materials, and students organised WhatsApp groups to stay in touch with each other and to work on group activities.

Students experienced financial issues due to the lockdown, as many were not able to secure their weekly or monthly income. They also experience a very challenging moment in terms of anxiety, with many of them scared for their relatives living in more affected areas.

Jordan

The lockdown started in Jordan on March 16th, and the Community Learning Centre in Amman has not been available to students since then.

In Jordan, students enrolled in the academic programs have access to stable internet connection, this eased the transition to online learning. Also, JWL staff turned to Zoom and WhatsApp in order to facilitate group discussions and to virtually meet with students. Students had live sessions workshops with The Regis University Professors which were very useful and the challenges with the new digital tools to use at the beginning. The main challenge experienced by students is, again, the sense of disconnection and loneliness caused by the impossibility to meet in person. Students in Jordan reported high level of anxiety at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, as Jordan was severely hit by the pandemic, but also they reported that they are adjusting to the situation as the country is working on controlling the spread of the disease.

Kenya

In Kenya the lockdown was enforced on March 13th, and the centre had to close; after a month the lockdown had ease and the centre could reopen for one-to-one meetings and small gatherings. The number of cases is rising in Kenya at the moment, therefore the government has not decided for an official re-opening of educational institutions, yet.

Students enrolled in Diploma in Liberal Studies and in the BA in Management in Kakuma have been given laptops and data bundles so that they could keep connect to

the internet and continue their learning journey. In terms of technical challenges not all the students have access to electricity in their houses, and many experience power cuts, therefore charging devices has been a problem, causing delay in uploading assignments. Furthermore, the internet connectivity is not very reliable and strong in the camp.

The Community Learning Centre in Kakuma managed to stay in touch with its Diploma and BA students through a range of diverse communication platforms, the most used were Zoom and WhatsApp, together with personal phone calls, in order to support students and have regular catch up with them. Learning Facilitators use WhatsApp also to share with their students short videos to present the content and activities of the week.

SNHU students and staff also experimented Google Classroom to carry on tutoring, workshops and discussions. Google classroom was set up to keep the students accountable and to provide tutoring. Students were to set out their goals on Monday and to be tracked and held accountable on Fridays. They could sign up for tutoring one on one or in groups.

Furthermore, JWL staff in Kakuma organised themselves in four WhatsApp groups: an admin group, a SBO (Student-based Organisation) group, a Learning Facilitators group and an Academic Adviser group. The SBO group manage the organisation on the ground, distributing hand sanitiser and laptop for example, while the learning facilitators took care of accompany the students closely, and the academic adviser group check weekly on the progress in order to understand students' needs and challenges and follow up with students' enrolment. They

also offered psychological support to students in collaboration with SNHU.

Malawi

In the refugee camp of Dzaleka, JWL Community Learning Centre had to close at the beginning of April, and it has been closed since then, and with the number of COVID-19 cases on the rise a date for re-opening is not confirmed, yet. the CLC in Dzaleka has been open to staff who could remotely help students with their academics. Students are able to access the centre in small groups and take their tests (e.g. Science test requiring kits) at the centre under the supervision of Diploma Learning Facilitators and Program Advisors.

Students enrolled in academic and professional courses in Dzaleka have been given devices (tablets and laptops) and data bundles to be able to carry on their studies. Before entering lockdown, the Community Learning Centre organised technical workshops to ensure that students were able to connect and use the provided equipment. Despite these efforts, students still experienced technical issues: not all the students have electricity in their homes, therefore a selected number of students was granted access to the centre in order to charge their devices and smartphones. Furthermore, a combination of old smartphones and poor connectivity has to be added to the technical challenges faced by students. These challenges turned into late submissions of assignment, but the global faculty agreed in adopting a flexible approach to deadlines in this unprecedented period.

In order to facilitate the learning experience during these challenging times students have been provided with offline materials, to spare on data usage. The main alternative platform used in Dzaleka has been WhatsApp: onsite

facilitation carried on via WhatsApp along with more informal catch up by local staff to ensure students were not left behind.

The main challenge reported by students is the sense of isolation caused by the lockdown: students reported to feel very lonely, as life is depending on being connected with others. This sense of isolation, in combination with boredom and increasing anxiety to see the virus spreading around the country, lack of PPEs in the refugee camp, and uncertainty about how their basic needs will be answered are the big challenges faced by students in Dzaleka.

Myanmar

The COVID-19 situation is not critical in Myanmar, with most of the cases affecting migrant workers coming from different parts of the world, and, none of the students had COVID-19, so far. As a precautionary measure, the government announced the closure of all the schools from March 19th, and the closure has been now extended to the end of August. Life returned to normal in most parts of the country from the month of June, with the opening of the restaurants, Government offices, public and private enterprises in compliance with the safety measures.

In Myanmar the learning journey of students attending professional courses wasn't affected greatly, and students are coping with the situation quite well. The majority of the students have access to devices and internet, and onsite facilitators used Zoom and Messenger to meet regularly with students and to replace face-to-face meetings.

Sri Lanka

On March 12th all educational institutions were closed in Sri Lanka, and JWL had to close to follow the anti-COVID-19 country regulations. On May 11th the restrictive measures were eased and students could start again accessing the 6 JWL centres (Batticaloa and Trincomalee in the Eastern Province and Hatton, Mannar, Vavuniya and Mulliathivu in the Central and Northern Provinces) in the country in small groups. The month of June was relatively calm in terms of COVID-19 circulation in the country, but the government is now worried about a second wave and re-enforcing restrictive measures and the closure of educational institutions on and off.

Many students in Sri Lanka, especially in the most remote locations, do not have access to personal devices and rely on the centres to study, access contents, participate in global discussions and do their assignments. JWL staff managed to organize the distributions of laptops and data bundles to students, but were not able to reach the entire student community. Some students were able to use their smartphones to access contents and to do their assignments, but they reported many difficulties in carry out their assignments through mobiles. Another reported challenge is the cost of data packages in the country, that makes very expensive to work purely online from home without a financial support from the organization. JWL was able to support some students but to reach the ones in extremely remote areas was not possible.

Despite these technical challenges, the majority of students were able to continue with their professional and academic programs. BA and Diploma onsite sessions were moved online via Zoom, with coaching sessions organized twice a week and prioritizing the most difficult classes in terms of content. Zoom was also used in the

professional courses. Furthermore, WhatsApp and Viber groups were organized by onsite learning facilitators to deliver content and to keep in touch with the students.

Although staff and students were able to stay connected during the lockdown, they mentioned that they were missing face-to-face interaction, in terms of peer-to-peer learning and coaching effectiveness.

Zambia

Educational institutions closed on March 20th in Zambia, as consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and have been closed so far.

Students in the academic programs were given laptops to use during the lockdown and were able to download the off-line version of the course materials. JWL staff used a combination of emails phone-calls and arranged one-to-one meetings to stay connected with the students and carry on with onsite discussions. The main challenge was the lack of interaction with on-site peers, as students reported the difficulty of working in isolation, both from a motivation point of view, and because assignments often require discussions with fellow peers.

LESSONS LEARNT

Challenges

Despite the fact that the pandemic affected countries and centres to different extents, despite the differences in responses to the crisis in each country, and despite the fact that population and infrastructure are very diverse in the countries in which JWL operates with professional and academic

programs, the following common challenges can be identified.

Technical Challenges. Technical challenges are diverse from country to country and has affected to different extent the learning experience of JWL academic and professional students. The main technical challenges experienced in all JWL locations are related to **poor connectivity, power cuts and the obsolescence of personal mobile phones**, that made difficult to connect to the internet.

Isolation and the Lack of the Social Dimension of Learning. The main challenge from a student experience perspective, that has been mentioned by students in all locations and across all programs is **isolation**: students missed social interaction especially with their peers in the Community Learning Centres.

Economic and Financial Difficulties. Another challenge in some of the countries is related to financial issues due to the lockdown that force students to interrupt their studies to focus on **day to day food security**.

Creativity and Innovation

Community Learning Centres work swiftly to face and overcome the challenges brought by the pandemic. This triggered the implementation of creative and innovative solutions to ensure learners could carry on their studies in the best possible way, as also proved by the course pass rate in the first semester of 2020, that did not drop in comparison to 2019.

Equipment for the students. To mitigate the above-mentioned technical challenges some centres, especially the ones with a larger number of students – in Dzaleka refugee

camp, Malawi and Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, provided **laptops, tablets and bundles to students** to be used at home during the lockdown.

Alternative Communication tools. In all the centres JWL staff **used alternative communication tools** to stay connected with their students based on local needs/resources: **WhatsApp and Zoom** are the two most used platforms across countries and programs, with some experiences of a more structured use of **Google Classroom** especially for students in the BA in Management.

Independence and self-organisation. The need to overcome the sense of isolation and to stay in touch with their peers also motivated **students to organise themselves and to keep in contact with their cohort** and carry on their team works, mainly via **WhatsApp**. They also support each other, where possible, by for example, sharing laptop chargers.

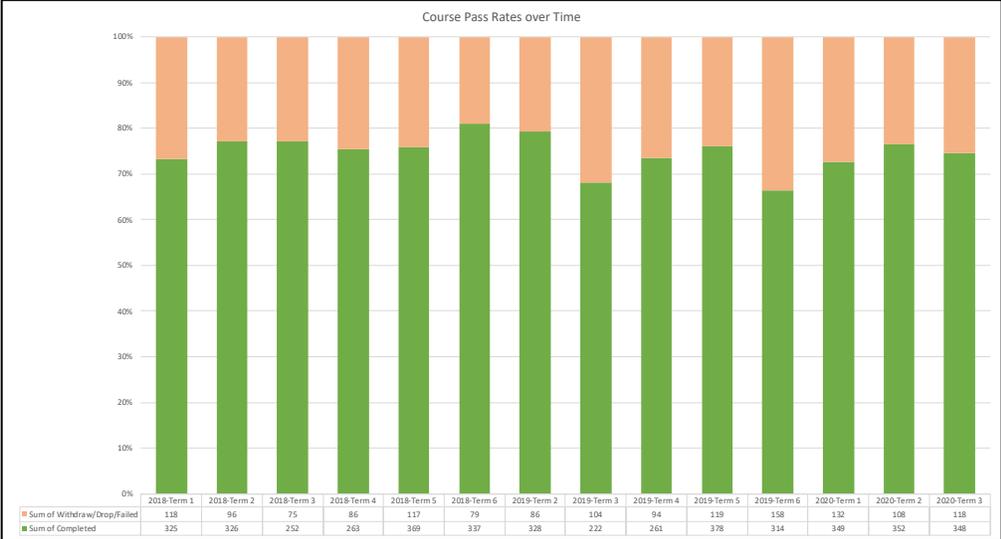
Flexibility. Finally, the HQ and the online faculty work hard to ensure the needed flexibility in terms of **adjusting assignment deadlines**, to keep students motivated and on track, while accounting for the financial stress their households were put under.

FINAL REMARKS

The enormous efforts in the field to ensure the learning experience of JWL students was coupled by a coordination effort from JWL headquarter to check on students' basic needs, distribute bundles and devices, to activate new communication platforms and to ensure the LMS was working and students were able to access it, to arrange with the online faculty submissions' extensions, to extend the period of enrolment, and to

circulate info at a global level. The pandemic brought an enormous opportunity to JWL as an organisation and to its distributed staff to experience its global nature and to strengthen communication and experience sharing: global webinars are now, for example, held regularly every second month

exceptional circumstances. As the data related to course completion for the Diploma and the BA in Sustainable Development show, **the course pass rate did not drop in the first semester of 2020, despite the global pandemic**; this is very indicative of the motivation of JWL students but also of the adaptability of JWL educational model to work under stress.



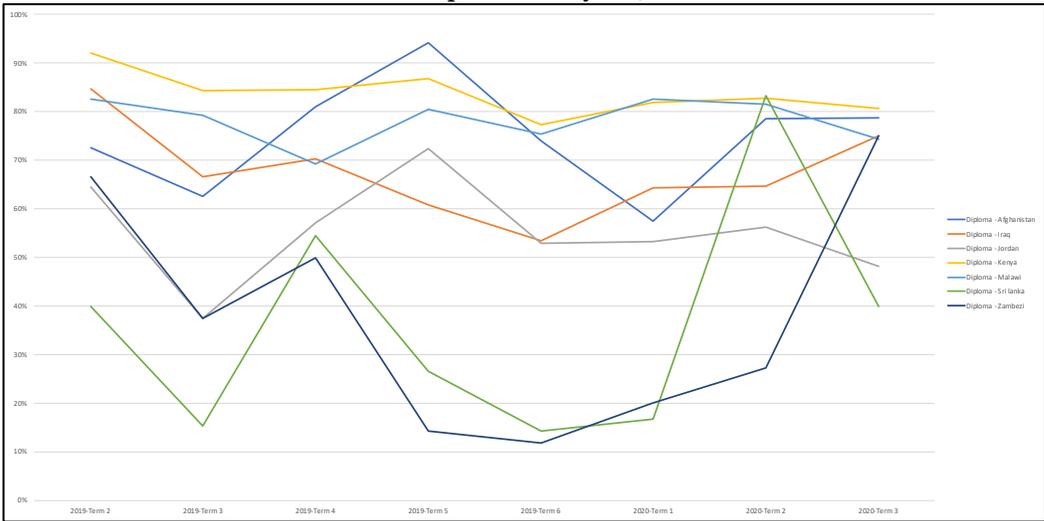
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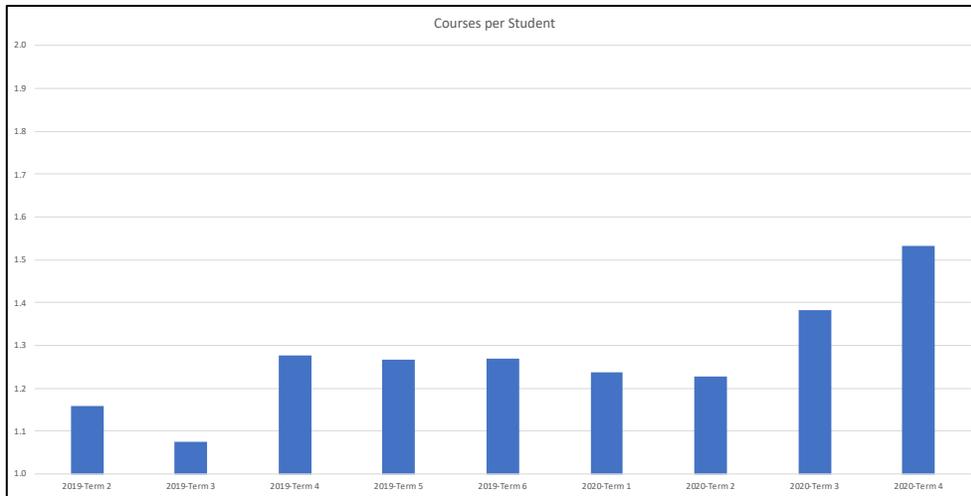
If we break down the overall picture by a country perspective, we can see that students in refugee camps in Kakuma (Kenya) and Dzaleka (Malawi), the

and are very appreciated by participants as an opportunity to listen and learn from colleagues from all over the world and in different roles.

two centres in which the majority of students are based, achieved a pretty stable course success rate in the first semester of 2020 in comparison with the previous year; in Iraq, Afghanistan, Jordan and Zambesi, the COVID-19 pandemic coincide with a higher course success rate in comparison with the previous year; while Sri Lanka has a

The JWL mobile and blended learning model has proved to be sustainable, practical, feasible and adaptable in any condition. JWL staff in each country were able to move to an online experience quite swiftly and successfully, given the





fluctuating trend difficult to interpret because of the small number of students included in the data set.

The motivation and the commitment of students, and possibly the fact that they fruitfully used their time in lockdown, is also shown by the fact that the number of courses taken by Diploma and BA in Sustainable Development students during the first semester of 2020 actually increased in comparison to 2019 (NB: students are allowed to take a maximum of 2 courses per term).

The human factor, embodied by the centres in the field and by the support

from local onsite facilitators and staff has proved to be a key element for the success of JWLMission: bringing Higher Education opportunities to the margins of this world.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not

over yet, but this time has already proved to be very rich in terms of learning opportunities, for JWLM; the next step of reflection the organisation would like to take is to unpack how the creative and innovative solutions adopted in the field and the lessons learnt during the crisis can be included and integrated into its model and practices.

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