Knowledge and skills, as the first foundation of the conceptual model, represent an anchoring element of the impact of the Diploma on graduates’ lives. During the interviews, graduates expressed what it meant to receive an education through the JWL Diploma. While many shared the importance of the skills learnt during the Diploma, some graduates also understood this question more symbolically by emphasising the empowering side of receiving an education. In this chapter, we first present the skills identified as acquired or improved during the Diploma. We then analyse what it signifies for graduates to have the opportunity to enrol in a higher education programme.
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Gaining skills

During interviews, graduates refer to certain skills that they identify as having been developed throughout the Diploma journey. We identified the following main soft skills: professionalism, communication, time management; and the following major hard skills: research, business, social work, English language, digital skills, hygiene, and research. In the graduates’ narratives, gaining these skills always serves a double purpose: self and community empowerment in light of the motto ‘men and women for others’.

1.1 Soft skills

Graduates frequently referred to skills that are intangible (Balcar 2014) and closely related attitudes, throughout their Diploma journey.

1.1.1 Professionalism

In terms of soft skills, gaining professionalism is often perceived as one contribution of the Diploma on the alumni’s lives. For this graduate in Malawi, developing professional skills was one of the most crucial takeaways from the Diploma:

“The most important thing that the Diploma help me [with] is to live a professional life. Yeah, because before being in the Diploma programme, I knew that people work, I knew that people do business, but I didn’t have the professional skills to undergoing this the proper way. Programme has made me to know all those skills that are applicable in your professionalism.” (MD_A5_R)

While professionalism helped this graduate navigate through life’s challenges, for others, being professional imply more practical skills such as knowing how to write emails (MD_A2_T), doing things formally in keeping with relevant etiquette (KK_A1_R), and communicating in a professional manner. Whether this is through advising people more tactfully (MD_A15_T), approaching people from different backgrounds (cultural, religious, etc.) (MD_A2_T; MD_A5_R; KK_A3_R), or engaging in professional conversation more broadly (KK_A14_MZ), communication appears as an essential component of professionalism. For instance, a graduate in Malawi expresses that the Diploma has helped him “to develop professionally in associating with people from different religions” (MD_A2_T). While professionalism is understood in terms of developing communication tools that fit diverse communicative cultures, for this counselor, participating in the Diploma programme helped him to reflect on his method of communication:

“I used to sit down with young people, I advise them they tell their problems. I think by then I wasn’t professional, but now I think I’m a professional because there are seven steps that I need to take in order to counsel someone or

“If it wasn’t for JWL, I wouldn’t be where I am right now, I wouldn’t have found an opportunity with higher education, and now I am having this opportunity because JWL was there to help me when other organisations totally failed. The only thing I can tell you is an appreciation to JWL for the good job that they are doing changing life of many people as they have also changed my personal life.”

– KK_A4_JR
advise someone. So, it changed me.” (MD_A15_T)

Besides this personal reflection on professional communication during counselling sessions in Dzaleka refugee camp, some graduates also viewed this new skill as serving community needs:

“[...] but now [...] anything I have to do I have to do it in a professional way. I’ll have to link with the community, I have to include them in everything. [...] but [...] with my current situation [...] I feel proud of this Diploma programme.” (KK_A14_MZ)

Therefore, professional skills developed throughout the Diploma seem to have a cross-cutting impact, influencing graduates’ confidence, personal, professional and community life.

1.1.2 Communication
Communication is often one of the first skills mentioned when Diploma graduates are asked to reflect on the impact of the programme on their journey. Coded 213 times, it is the skill identified during the interview that appears the most (followed by "business" code). For this graduate in Afghanistan, completing the interpersonal communication course was essential to understand and improve his communication skills:

"We studied interpersonal communication course [...] It was really, really enjoyable for me. In that course I came to know how to interact with others, what are social distances, what are traditions and cultures in talking, in behaving others. I came to know about verbal communications, about nonverbal communication and about how to influence others while you are talking, about first impressions, about conflict resolution, about how to bring peace among two individuals who had a conflict among a group and so on so forth.” (AH_A1_N)

This enhancement of communication skills is not limited to verbal interaction. Graduates also refer to the importance of body language (JA_A8_A), writing (JA_A3_A), reading (JA_A8_A) and listening skills (IE_A5_M) as being developed during the Diploma. The mastering of these skills can even lead to the development of a storytelling capacity. This graduate in Iraq cites that the Diploma:

"[The Diploma programme] help [me] to [...] express about [myself] and to be more like a storyteller because according to her, "many times you have to tell our stories." (IE_A4_M).

Additionally, some graduates employ their newly acquired skill in their professional setting, such as this teacher, who also transfers communication knowledge to her students:

"In Diploma, we studied [...] interpersonal communication. [...] So, now when I'm teaching my students, so I know how to communicate with them. So, all the topics which I studied in Diploma. So there, it means anywhere I can use them.” (AB_A14_H)

This applicability in diverse settings is also a source of confidence-building. For instance, this graduate in Kenya relates confidence to freedom of expression:

"Self-confidence basically is the ability for one to be able to express him or herself without any fear. [...] Being able to freely express, [...] and confidently express yourself in terms of speaking when you're communicating with others.” (KK_A9_R)

This form of freedom through communication also enables graduates to become more aware of themselves. This Iraq alumna shares that studying interpersonal communication:

"[...] was very, very nice, very high courses and provided us with many skills, how to
communicate with people from different cultures, from different regions, with different backgrounds. [...] So [it] tells me [...] to be also more aware of myself because it helps us to learn more about our values. It helps us to share our experiences, our life experiences, our stories. [...] we found that our voice has been heard there, as they were like listening to our opinions or ideas. So, this helps us to be more aware about ourselves.” (IE_A4_M)

Therefore, learning about communication does not only enable one to be more confident in interacting with people but also empowers graduates to express themselves freely and amplify their voices. In the words of this Afghan participant, learning about “interpersonal communication or having a good communication [...] can help us to achieve our goals, to achieve whatever we want.” (AB_A10_H). In practice, the utilisation of communication skills appears to help mitigating challenges and allows one to arrive at one’s ends without sparking conflict.

For this graduate in Malawi, these communication skills allowed him to defend himself and his friend when they were facing a challenge at work (MD_A6_F). Working for an international organisation, he realised that there was an error with his salary, as part of his income was left unpaid. As he “tried to communicate” with the manager, he explained to him that there was an error in the calculations of the salary and asked the coordinator to follow up on this. As his request was accepted and the income was rightfully returned to him and his friend, he concluded that the Diploma “really helped [me] to have this self-confidence, and even to defend [my] fellow colleague” (MD_A6_F). Hence, thanks to the Diploma, communication skills are not only developed but also applied in daily life, which ultimately serves as empowering and life-navigating tool.

1.1.3 Time management

Lastly, time management is among the frequently cited soft skills list as acquired during the Diploma. This importance given to time management is especially prevalent in Afghanistan and Iraq, as quotes related to “time-management” code in interviews from these two countries represent respectively 38% and 32% of the overall code frequency. As studying on the Diploma programme is time-demanding, some graduates share how they learnt how to manage their time to be successful in their JWL journey. For this Afghan alumna, the Diploma helps her in terms of doing work very easily even though she may feel overloaded, as she believes that she can do it. She explains that:

“For example, like I am doing my courses taking sometimes two classes at the same time. Sometimes [...], I have four classes I need to take preparation, I need to check my notebook, [...] I need to plan, write reports and so many of these, all things but again I feel strong. I feel that I’m still strong and I believe on myself that I can do anything that comes to me like, I can like manage it very well.” (AB_A10_H)

Consequently, this learning experience contributed to being more confident when managing multiple responsibilities. Similarly, this graduate in Afghanistan successfully managed to complete his last courses in Diploma whilst teaching a class (AB_A15_H). This multi-tasking ability developed during the Diploma is well encapsulated in the words of this participant:

“The key thing which I learned is being on time [...]. It’s really helpful if you want to be a success person, you should do your works well and be on time and take your responsibilities and do them well in your life.” (AB_A2_O)
Therefore, this capacity to organise one’s agenda and embrace responsibility in a balanced manner through time management is understood as being an essential factor for gaining control over one’s life and being empowered. This participant in Afghanistan develops this idea as she states that:

"I would explain that I’m empowered because I can explain how I can manage my life and I have control over my life. And I can manage my time and I can take decisions on what I’m going to do." (AB_A15_H)

Therefore, development of time management skills appears to be a determining skill in shaping graduates’ lives, from their daily studying responsibilities to their broader life goals.

1.2 Hard skills

More concretely, graduates share specific skills that are easily observed and measurable (Balcar 2014). Among the skills related to the knowledge gained through their learning journey at JWL, some derived directly from the concentration tracks of Business and Social Work. While these concentrations appear as anchoring streams to develop some of these hard skills, the Education concentration in the Diploma was less frequently mentioned as less graduates opted for this track. However, certain skills seem to relate closely with the teachings of the Education track, such as the English language skills.

1.2.1 Business skills

Closely related to the soft skill, professionalism, graduates mention business as one of the impactful hard skill learnt in the Diploma. For this graduate in Afghanistan, studying the business concentration in the Diploma helped her understand how to start a business, how to keep it running, how to be connected to customers, how to provide to their needs and ultimately apply it for the community:

"So, when I start a business, I can fill a gap in my community. First, I should find the problem, [...] And find a solution for it. So, it is a very important point that I learned in this programme." (AB_A1_H)

This newly gained perspective, more conscious of the business needs, is also shared by a graduate in Kenya who now runs a 43-employee soap-producing company:

"The time I graduated I had in mind to this business of soap and it was a very good to me because there were some challenges before, but after completing this Diploma, it assisted me so much to operate very well my company." (KK_A8_R)

Building from the theoretical knowledge learnt during the Diploma, this participant applied this newly acquired skill to enhance his business management. Similarly, this graduate in Kenya was able to expand his business project after gaining this type of knowledge from JWL’s Diploma (KK_A5_MZ). While before the Diploma, he understood his work, fish farming, as “simple” and “just for fun”, after gaining enriching knowledge about how to improve one’s society and its ethics through the Diploma, he realised that his activity could be expanded, turning it into a community-based organisation in Kakuma:

"I came to understand the business part. How should I make this Community-Based Organisation walk without losing money, without losing time, without losing energy? I should make it helpful for the community. I should make it benefit for self and community." (KK_A5_MZ)

While learning how to manage a business is perceived as fulfilling a purpose to the
benefit of the community, it is also considered as a means to empower and invest in the community. According to this graduate in Kenya, applying and transmitting his newly gained knowledge in his organisation was the first thing he did after finishing the Diploma (KK_A11_G). As his work was to analyse challenges in business and provide a general evaluation of the business, he also shared his perspective to encourage refugees facing difficult economic conditions:

"I have understood most of the refugees do complain about them not [being] able to meet their needs in terms of financial stability. And I remember telling them: It’s beyond our capability, there is nothing we can do but, with the little we have can we think of developing something useful. Let’s invest in ourselves and develop multiple skills to enhance and embrace the culture of investment. You can do something to supplement what you are paid instead of waiting the incentive because everyone is getting less paid. The best thing that now I was able to learn [from] business management […], I could make many understand that the little that they get and can still manage, it wisely [to] begin different business to supplement what they are getting.”  

~ KK_A11_G

Therefore, gaining business knowledge from the Diploma has not only been a key component for graduates to innovate and formalise their business ideas but also to contribute to the community by addressing its needs and transferring this newly acquired knowledge.

1.2.2 Social work-related skills

As a concentration of the Diploma, many graduates emphasised the importance of learning about social work. For this graduate who is now a social worker in Afghanistan, enrolling in the Diploma programme raised her awareness about social issues:

"Before the Diploma, I honestly, I didn’t know anything about social work, about the community, about how we can join, how we can communicate with other people, how we can ask them some questions, how we should not ask them other questions, I mean what type of questions we should ask about people or what type of questions we should not ask? Diploma taught me about communication skills, about the confidentiality of people, about the sensitivity of people."  (AH_A4_N)

Similarly, acquiring knowledge about social work practices is identified by other graduates as supporting professional development. For this graduate in Kenya, JWL’s Diploma programme equipped him with the knowledge that was “really needed” in his career as he currently works as a social worker, therefore “using the impact of that professionally” (KK_A9_R).

Furthermore, developing knowledge about social work is seen as a vital tool to support and protect one’s community. Solving community issues appears as the main target of graduates with social work skills. In the context of Afghanistan, this Social Work concentration graduate highlights how she uses her social work knowledge to deal with local gender issues:

“[…] in some community, people are against girls’ education. Then, it is not something good. So, it is the responsibility of a social worker to go to that community to find out and search what is the source for this that they are not
allowing their girls to go to school. So, these are all the things that I have learned from Diploma and it can help me.” (AB_A9_H)

Therefore, social work-related skills become more than competencies for graduates – they turn into a mindset. From the perspective of this alumnus in Jordan, the Social Work concentration:

“[…] created a sense of consciousness apart the injustice things around us. Not only, you know like: oh! From outside, but also, from inside. Our daily life, things that we see, the impact of such policies on our life, the impact of such norms and rules of the society on some people. So, I had that perception since I finished my Diploma programme, and I believe not only raising my awareness but also pushing me in a situation where I want to have some impact on the situation, be a contributor. So, I’m challenging these systems. […] It’s not easy to challenge them! But I’m challenging them.” (JA_A4_A)

Applicable in many aspects of life, this newly developed mindset can be used as a means to develop peace-building skills. For example, according to a graduate in Afghanistan:

“This programme helped me to use justice in my personal life, in my social life, in my professional life when I am working with others in an office, I can use justice in my thinking also, in my decision making also, in my family also I can use justice, or in my community […] So, it is very important to point that it can help me as a youth, as an Afghan youth to use it and bring peace, by justice we can bring peace in Afghanistan.”

– AB_A1_H

Therefore, whether the impact is most felt on the professional life of graduates, in their communities or daily lives, social work-related skills appear as one of the fundamental bases of knowledge to develop key dimensions of JWL’s impact, such as community involvement, leadership, empowerment, and peacebuilding.

1.2.3 English language

Given the nature of the programme, graduates refer to the programme as an opportunity to develop and strengthen their English language skills. For Jordan, English appears to be a significant skill developed during the Diploma as it represents more than half (53%) of all the codes applied for “English language”. For this graduate in Jordan, practising English was her goal during the Diploma:

“Honestly, in this Diploma, my goal was to improve my English, to improve my writing skills. This is the first time I write English in my life. I do it! I just have pushed myself to do it. The professor was very helpful for us.” (JA_A6_A).

This improvement of English language skills has even been recognised as being a form of empowerment. According to this graduate:

“One way that the Diploma programme has empowered me is the English. Before my English was not good before I joined Diploma programme, I could not speak very well. I could not transfer the message to the other person very well, but now I can talk very well. I can exchange ideas with a person very well, so this is the kind of empowerment as I have empowered my knowledge.” (AB_A1_O)

As graduates are applying their English skills as means of empowerment, the impact of enhancing one’s English skills is not only about knowing a language, but also about having a voice. Additionally, the strengthening of English language skills enables graduates to give back to their community by, for instance, transmitting this knowledge to others. This
teacher graduate explains that the Diploma helped her improve her oral, reading, and writing skills, which ultimately helped her to become a teacher (AB_A2_H). For others, improving their English language skills means assisting their respective communities through translation. According to this alumnus in Malawi, the community can benefit from his knowledge gained through JWL because if somebody asks him for a translation from Swahili to English, he can “write for them in English, then provide it for them” (MD_A2_R).

While this application of knowledge through the English language can be used to the benefit of the community, it can also be employed professionally. This graduate in Iraq shares that her learning experience in JWL helped her to expand her professional horizon through developing her English language oral skills:

“[…] because English language, truly is like an international language, especially in Iraq, we want to find a better job because if you don’t have English language, you cannot work in a good place and […] you can’t get also a good opportunity.” (IE_A2_M).

Similarly, this francophone graduate in Malawi shared that being comfortable in both the French and English languages helped him to “work anywhere throughout the world without any problem” (MD_A1_F). Therefore, this linguistic ability can support not only the community but also one’s professional development. Consequently, the impact of developing such literacy during the Diploma is multidimensional in graduates’ lives.

1.2.4 Digital skills

The Diploma programme also contributes to the betterment of graduates’ lives in terms of computer literacy. This seems to be particularly true in the Afghanistan and Iraq, as more than 50% of quotes related to this theme are come from these two countries (31% and 26% respectively). Having to study online, graduates mention how their learning journey with JWL helped them to strengthen their digital skills. According to this graduate in Malawi, online learning was seen as a source of learning opportunities:

“What I learnt will, okay, will help me in the sense that, we are learning in digital way, digitalising, everything now is online, we are leaning on how to make a video, to access learning online, to learn using what we call classroom meeting, or Zoom meeting, those are the key tools that will help me to survive in the future.”

– MD_A4_F

While online learning is articulated as a way to develop digital skills, some graduates particularly emphasised certain computer skills acquired, such as typing or proficiency in Excel (KK_A12_R). For this online graduate, online learning resulted in a significant impact as:

“It has changed me a lot, firstly I would say in terms of skills, it has made me familiar with the computer since I was doing my essays on the computer typing every day, so I became a bit a fast typer and also I gained some skills on computers that I didn’t know, I got to be familiar with all Microsoft office, how to present, I got many skills on that.” (MD_A1_T)

Therefore, the contribution of the Diploma was pivotal in developing graduates’ digital skills, which are identified as being crucial to engage in professional and educational opportunities.
1.2.5 Research skills
Some participants shared how the Diploma enabled them to develop research skills. This graduate in Kenya was able to practise research during the Academic Writing course which has proven “helpful to this day” (KK_A3_R). Applied in a professional setting, this other graduate in Kenya shares how the Diploma supported his growth as a researcher:

“I work mostly in the research and now I’m also preparing my paper, my research paper [...] on people [...] who are doing the research in the camp and the Northern researchers and southern researchers I said who should come and interact with the refugees. So, with this leadership role that I am playing in the camp, it could not happen without the skills I gained it [...] from you, [...] the Diploma courses. So, [...] I’m also now working on a research in [...] one of the organisations in the camp. So, this how I translate my skills to the community.” (KK_A2_MZ)

Therefore, as the Diploma supported this graduate in enhancing his research skills, he was successfully able to apply it within the community through his leadership in assisting researchers and developing research projects in the Dzaleka refugee camp. Consequently, developing research skills is one of the potential impact of the Diploma.

Figure 1: Focus time, students in a community learning centre in Afghanistan
2 Gaining Opportunities

Graduates acknowledge the skills they developed during the Diploma programme can open the doors to new opportunities. Whether academic, networking or professional opportunities, graduates identify the role of the Diploma in shaping new experiences.

2.1 Academic

Given the nature of the programme, many alumni highlight the impact of the Diploma as contributing to their academic growth. It was reported that 65% of graduates pursued further studies (Tshilombo and Rega, 2021). Different dimensions characterise this gain of academic opportunities.

This emphasis on the Diploma shaping academic development is particularly relevant in Jordan, as it cumulates at 29% for quotes related to academic opportunities compared to other countries, while only 9% for the quotes related to professional opportunities and 15% for the quotes related to network opportunities. This emphasis on academia is also strengthened by the strong representation of Jordan regarding quotes that refer to education (encapsulates 27% of quotes linked to “education”, 38% of quotes related to “peer learning”, and 41% of quotes linked to “learning challenges”). We infer that the overall importance given to academic opportunities for Jordan is due to the difficult conditions that these alumni face, due to strict national labour policy and refugee regulations.

2.1.1 Access to education

First, the Diploma is understood as being crucial in the development of their access to education. For many, graduating from the Diploma allowed them to have the confidence to apply to higher education institutions and continue their academic journey (JA_A5_A; IE_A2_M; KK_A4_JR). Recognised as the “first step” to pursue higher education, this graduate in Jordan explains how the Diploma programme encouraged him to apply for further education programmes:

“I applied for master’s degree, and this [...] Diploma help me to do this because; they asked me for an English certificate in order to study master’s degree. [Although] I don’t have an English certificate, [...] I have my record from Regis. This has helped me to get my seat in the University.” (JA_A5_A)

Acting as a foundation to further academic growth, the Diploma is seen as essential to the development of future academic opportunities. As the “introduction to the academic world” or “first foundation” to bachelor’s degree (MD_A10_F; MD_A1_HD; MD_A1_R), participants articulate the Diploma as being a key component in developing their academic knowledge path. For this graduate, the Diploma helped him to achieve many things:

“[…] because it gives me one step ahead whatever I go. That’s the only qualification which I present first. […] The education I took at JWL […], it has given me first of all that the introduction of academic world. Let me say University education works at a very high standard. It’s where I got the first foundation or the 1st in formation. On social work and liberal studies, because […] the basic introduction of social work studies, which I got at JWL has enabled me.” (MD_A1_HD).

For this resettled graduate who pursued a degree, the Diploma was not only helpful in shaping the core foundation of academic knowledge, but also in gaining transfer credits from his university:

“First of all, I think it has acted as a foundation of my bachelor degree. I told you that I was
asked just to take the programme courses, all the credits from Regis were accepted as electives and I’m still hoping that some will be transferred in the programme courses meaning that it is the foundation of my bachelor’s degree. So, this has helped me save money as the first thing. Second, [...] it will help me just do my bachelor’s degree in three years, different for what I was supposed to do if I was a new student. And also, I think some of the classes I’m going to take will be somehow similar to what I’ve already done meaning that I won’t get a lot of troubles. Let me give you a good example: when I arrived here in Canada, I did not have many problems with academic writing because I already done it with JWL, I knew everything concerning academic writing, I knew that I had to cite, to acknowledge some people’s ideas in my essay and all those things, and also how to paraphrase and many things so, it means that JWL education really helped me or shaped my thinking and my future.” (MD_A1_R)

This testimony illustrates the many aspects the Diploma facilitate new academic opportunities.

Like this graduate resettled in Canada, other participants mention how the Diploma was a financially viable opportunity to access to higher education. For many, joining a free higher education available in their place of residence was also a financial opportunity. According to this Afghan graduate:

“I think when I was graduated from high school, I think […] I could not join or attend university because my family was not supporting financially me. So, I had no money to attend to other provinces, to go other provinces and study. But this Diploma programme helped me and encouraged my family to let me to come and join this Diploma and get benefit from this.” (AB_A1_H)

This alumnus in Kenya reflected the same idea in terms of her gratitude for the programme:

“My gratitude goes to JWL and they should know that we are very proud for having given the opportunity to learn. We are financially unstable; we tried our best to get the scholarship.” (KK_A7_G)

Therefore, graduates also identified the role of the Diploma as providing access to higher education to people who would otherwise not have the financial resources to do so.

In addition to encouraging graduates to pursue higher education through the provision of financial support and providing them with a foundational academic basis, the Diploma is presented as being a source of empowerment and hope. For this graduate in Iraq:

“JWL gave us opportunities to study courses or participate in programmes so that that gives me more confidence and empowered me more and more I see myself. I see myself like I am walking, I’m not stopping.” (IE_A2_M)

This alumnus from Malawi further elaborates this idea:

“This education has played a very big role in my life. Especially, in my academic life because it has made me to uncover the opportunities that I didn’t know because looking at my past life compared today, I’ve seen that I have restored the hope that I had lost some time back. Yeah, so, this academic has played a very big role. By sharpening my mind and making me to begin to think fresh and to see a bright future.”

– MD_A5_R

In this “life-changing journey”, not only does the Diploma provide access to higher education when its graduates think their chances of doing so are non-existent, but also gives them a “brighter future” (KK_A1_G). Therefore, both in terms of
practical needs and moral support, graduates “got the Diploma when [they were] needing it” the most (KK_A1_G).

2.1.2 Peer learning

Another characteristic that shapes the nature of the academic opportunities identified by graduates is the peer-learning aspect of the Diploma. Learning emerges from exchanges between students that are fostered during the Diploma, whether online or in-person. Seen as a strong contribution to their learning journey, peer learning allows them to apply their knowledge in a group setting and explore others’ perspectives (JA_A8_A, JA_A5_A, AH_A1_O). According to this graduate in Afghanistan, the online setting of the Diploma enables her to spark new discussions that are fruitful to her learning experience:

“[..] because when we were setting online Diploma, we had many classmates from other parts of the countries or both. When they were sharing their discussion their debates, we saw many differences and we became aware of [...] that we have other and different cultures. So, Diploma helped me to understand these [intercultural] issues better.” (AH_A1_O).

For this graduate in Malawi, peer learning is the source of sharpening her critical thinking:

“During our studies we are having like a group discussion in which we are having a peer review. You, you check your peers’ work and then you. You like corrected or you debate on that, whether positively or negatively. So, the change that I’ve seen is that when we were doing this group discussion, I was able to do the best and I learned that criticising someone is not using like hatred. Know you criticise somebody by knowing the other side of the view of the issue. So that made me to understand that OK, critical thinking means seeing something at your view and seeing something at somebody’s view. So that is how I have learned that. […] But before I didn’t know that skill.” (MD_A5_R)

Therefore, peer learning appears as one of the opportunities for development provided by the Diploma.

2.1.3 Learning challenges

While graduates acknowledge their experience in the Diploma as an opportunity some also refer to challenges faced during this experience. Nevertheless, some of these challenges have also been understood as a source of development, building resilience and confidence. For example, as the type of assignments has been presented as potentially challenging for some participants, once overcome, the graduates share how this resilience fuelled their self-confidence and motivation to succeed. This graduate in Jordan shares how her learning difficulties helped her develop her self-confidence:

“Honestly! honestly! honestly! The most important thing for me is that the Diploma gave me confidence. First thing, […] anything new in my life, I can do. The Diploma was from a distance. I was able to learn from a distance. I was able to absorb from the foreign teachers. It was the first time in my life. […] I was able to write in English. I was able to express my opinion. I was able to absorb the vast amount of information. Frankly, […] the book was very big. It was a challenge for me to read the book. I read the topics they were presenting to us, I can analyse and understand them. That in itself, it was a challenge for me. Very difficult challenge. The situation in which I live. Because of my child, I was able to organise my time. I was able to decide whether I could or not. The Diploma helped me a lot. I deferred courses in the Diploma, and they were flexible with me. They were very cooperative. Frankly, they were nice. This is one of the things that helped me complete the Diploma.” (JA_A6_A)

This alumna in Afghanistan expressed how difficult it was in the beginning for her to write her assignments due to the different type of teaching provided by the Diploma:
"In Afghanistan, [...] We just listen to the teacher and memorise the things, the information that he or she taught us. Teach us and here in Diploma at the first it was very hard for me to know my assignments to think about my assignments and at the first of this Programme, I was somehow, I was facing with more problems because I didn't know how we should write my assignments. After that, during and the Diploma [...] I could, I learned that how I should learn my assignments? How I should think about my assignments? How I should recognise the main idea of assignments and after thinking I could write my assignments in a best way." (AH_A4_N)

This overcoming of learning challenges has been identified as bringing a sense of pride to graduates. An alumnus in Jordan shared how he felt proud that he graduated as during his journey he felt like giving up as he was working very hard and was under a lot of pressure (JA_A1_A). For yet another graduate in Kenya, the support received during his learning journey helped him overcome his lack of computer skills and prevented him from dropping out, eventually boost his motivation to succeed in the programme (KK_A3_JR).

Therefore, the learning challenges encountered during the Diploma programme appear to contribute to the development of graduates’ confidence, presenting the Diploma as a unique opportunity to build one’s resilience.

2.1.4 A unique type of knowledge

Lastly, one of the characteristics of the Diploma programme mentioned in interviews is the unique form of knowledge that is conveyed. Presented as “mind-changing” and “door-opening” to the intellectual world (MD_A1_HD, MD_A1_R), the Diploma is articulated as providing a different learning experience than they would normally get in their local educational institutions (IE_A2_M, JA_A6_A, AH_A6_N). For example, this graduate in Jordan highlights the difference in teachings between JWL Diploma and her national university:

"[in] our system in university, when I studied statistic at the University of Jordan, just books and you keep it and go to make exam. But in Diploma, no! you have to read, you have to think, you have to write your opinion, to criticise. You will have to analyse. It’s more analyse, more than just keep it. This is the first time, I studied like that. So, it's a good journey. I am blessed to have it." (JA_A6_A)

This emphasis on developing a critical and in-depth type of knowledge is also shared by another Afghan graduate who compares the Diploma learning experience to her local educational system as follows:
"As I told you, the differences were very obvious for myself because in Afghanistan, in education curriculum or system, we have just knowledge of science or any other thing but not for life. Maybe we have some just subjects which are not very important at school, which they are teaching the way of life for children but, maybe at that age students are not just realising such issues, but at the university I myself did not study such issue which would be relevant to my family, to my own just community so, because of that I could notice the differences very obviously. That was very different because online Diploma knowledge just come from our own family and ourselves and whatever we were studying was relevant to us, was our own stories. We could just express ourselves very well because we had the knowledge, we had the experience of that but, the things that I studied at the university was only knowledge that I could apply maybe for my career" (AH_A6_N).

The emphasis on the application of knowledge and skills in graduates’ community, family and daily life appears as one of the distinguishing characteristics of graduating from the Diploma. Consequently, the quality of knowledge developed during the Diploma appears to equip graduate with a competitive advantage.

Therefore, the Diploma emerges as impactful in terms of opening academic opportunities for students. Whether it is opening new doors in graduates’ academic journey, building resilience through overcoming learning challenges, learning through interactions with peers from all over the world, or developing multi-modal learning, the Diploma is seen as stepping stone for developing academic potential.

2.1.5 Network
The Diploma programme has been identified by graduates as contributing to developing their networking opportunities.
Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya and Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi rank rather highly for the total representation of the code “network opportunity” (34% and 43% respectively of the quotes related to “network” code), reflecting a context more prosperous for opportunities led by refugees.

Gender perspective

Using a gender lens to analyse codes related to knowledge and skills, we observe that despite a similar weight in the number of quotes regarding opportunities from female and male interviewees; the child-codes analysis reveals a disparity in the type of opportunity that participants refer to by gender. In fact, males seem to benefit more in their professional life. Quotes from male participants are predominant for the following codes: network (63%), professional opportunities (67%), professionalism (61%), and research skills (81%). Comparatively, although quotes related to academic opportunities seem evenly balanced between the two genders, the sub-code analysis demonstrates that females tend to significantly benefit from this type of opportunity. Female participants are referring to quotes related to education goals (61%), drop-out (61%), peer learning (60%) more significantly. Additionally, female interviewees’ quotes appear as more dominant for the skills related to English language code (73%), suggesting a stronger emphasis on education and academic opportunities.

This can be explained through the nature of the professional positions that the two genders are more likely to hold in the contexts where the Diploma is delivered. As a lot of female graduates previously had or have teaching positions, they tend to place a stronger weight on their academic and teaching opportunities whereas male participants tend to have jobs in different fields, with an orientation on business development and entrepreneurship. Therefore, this difference of emphasis regarding the type of opportunity gained from the Diploma reveals the potential for different journeys based on gender.

Figure 3: Analysis of the quotes related to “opportunities” by gender
First, graduates understand the place of the Diploma in the development of their network within the JWL community. For instance, this graduate in Afghanistan shares that she feels happy and proud of herself to have had the chance to study in the Diploma as she has been able to interact with different people from other places and to have been able to exchange information (AB_A3_H). For this graduate in Jordan, the Diploma was important to meet and learn from colleagues:

“I think if I didn’t take these online studies, I wasn’t able to meet to a good people. I mean my colleagues that I started with them. They helped me in many ways through reading their writings and discussions. I have learned many stuffs from their cultures and their religious, and […] as well as their personal life.” (JA_A8_A)

For this alumnus in Malawi, interactions within the JWL community also encompassed interaction with sponsors and people engaged in diverse projects:

“JWL is an interesting institution whereby it has created a lot of connections for the students and through JWL we have been introduced to a lot of sponsors and individuals who are interested in different projects especially those that help the community, with those connections that we already have in JWL, I think it will still continue to shape my future as we go along this journey.” (MD_A2_T)

Therefore, the networking opportunities within the JWL community are revealed as vast and diverse.

Additionally, the Diploma programme has been presented as being an important opportunity to develop community and professional networks. For example, the empowerment received during the Diploma has been identified as a factor encouraging this female graduate in Malawi to participate in networks for women:

“Honestly, Diploma programme has empowered me and also the other example is that there were some other programmes that were only special for females to attend like networking […] And there were like some motivations. You know, those things they were like making life easier and keeping you going on being encouraged. You know, we’re able to meet even other women from other places, even from Europe coming to share their experiences academic life, even their personal life, some of them. So when you see them and you compare yourself, you see […] where they have gone far. They become like a role model to you so I can say Diploma has really empowered me.” (MD_A5_R)

For this graduate in Kenya, the greater sense of community gained from the Diploma eventually helped him to build networks of people “who can help one another when there are opportunities” (KK_A1_G). The same willingness to develop professional development networks is present in Malawi as this graduate shares his networking project: “When we came up with idea of supporting other organisations, […] we came to […] realise that there are so many people who have ideas and some are already and run organisations that are already productive, they need the support like they don’t have external networks. So […] instead of doing what other people are doing, we came up with the idea of supporting what other people are doing.” (MD_A4_T)

Therefore, graduates’ networking opportunities go beyond JWL’s community.

2.1.6 Professional

While the Diploma can serve as a networking opportunity from which professional growth can emerge, it can also serve as the starting point of a new professional journey. This professional growth is salient in the context of Kenya and Malawi, as quotes linked to
professional opportunities-related codes come mainly from interviews in these two contexts (43% for Kenya and 25% for Malawi). Looking back at business and professional skills, we can see that 38% of the quotes of the code “business” are from graduates in Kenya, and 26% come from graduates in Malawi. In addition to the large representation of Kenya and Malawi in these codes, the application of “professionalism” code is almost exclusively present in Malawi (42%) and Kenya (53%) as they both represent 95% of the application of the code. These results are likely due to the less restrictive circumstances in these locations and more refugee-supportive environments.

Being a graduate of the Diploma increases one’s competitiveness in the job market (KK_A9_MZ). This graduate in Malawi presents this benefit of the Diploma in the following way:

“[..] so I can be able to tell the people that I have the Diploma, a company can trust me that I am capable of doing something which could be different from not having Diploma right now, so I believe that without having Diploma, my life wouldn’t be the same right now.” (MD_A1_T)

The Diploma is portrayed as giving legitimacy to graduates’ professionalism when applying for jobs. This resettled graduate from Malawi explains how the Diploma helped him transition into the Canadian job market:

“In Canada, when you apply for a job what they ask, what is your qualification? You don’t have any qualification, it means you don’t have right to any good job […]. But when I presented my Diploma qualification, they accept it, and I integrated the market as someone who went at school. So, it had much impact in the work market” (MD_A9_F).

Adding:

“So, whatever I’m doing like a job, […] I’m earning like a salary myself, I take it [as] it’s coming from that Diploma, because without it, nobody could hire me. Without it, nobody could have accepted that I went at school. But because of it, I’m earning something to live, because of it, I’m hoping for a better future.” (MD_A9_F)

Therefore, the emphasis on the recognition of qualification and the professional opportunities that the Diploma leads to appears to have a significant impact on graduates’ lives. However, graduates have also nuanced this effect by pointing out the limited national recognition of the Diploma. This graduate in Afghanistan shares her concern:

“Actually no, I do not feel any negative impact just I was worry about the certificate that I has taking from the Diploma because it was not recognised by Afghan people. Sometimes my friends, my colleagues, even my colleagues they told me that you just waste your time. You wasted your time because the Diploma that you get that is not recognised by Afghanistan. It is something that you waste your time. But again, I don’t care about that one just the knowledge that I got from the Diploma […] is very rich and I don’t care about its credit, certificate and any other things.” (AB_A10_H)
This lack of credit recognition does not hamper graduates’ thirst for knowledge to grow and seek further professional development.

Furthermore, the Diploma programme is seen as a career jump-starter. Indeed, according to Tshilombo and Rega (2021), 91% of the graduates reported at least one job experience after graduation. After graduation, this alumna in Iraq was offered a role as an English teacher and coordinator of one of JWL’s learning centres (IE_A3_M). According to this graduate in Afghanistan, completing the Diploma led her to start teaching at Jesuit Refugee Service for one year and then progressing to another job at World Vision “all because of online Diploma” (AH_A9_N). While the Diploma was important for new professiona opportunities for some, for others it meant developing entrepreneurship skills to start their own business (KK_A6_MZ, KK_A4_MZ). From the perspective of this graduate in Kenya, the impact of the Diploma is seen as “opening the door to jobs” and starting his business as he refers to the Diploma as “helping [me] and also in the future it will continue [do] the same” (KK_A7_R). For this graduate in Afghanistan, graduating from this higher education programme meant that he could take on the role of a business consultant for his friends:

“So, they are thinking that I am a university graduate. So, this really also affects my friends, I can help them in their business, for example; those people who are in Afghanistan they are not professional businessmen, but I have learned professional business. So, they sometime tell me that you can help us in our business for example; in our database or farms and anything else. It is not important that every time I get some money, but it is important that I can help them during their work, so I can help my friends on their business and also find out jobs easier and faster.” (AH_A2_N)

In addition to being a resource to others, this graduate is able to leverage knowledge gained during the Diploma to support business development in his community while expanding his career.
growth. While the Diploma is articulated as major supporting element for graduates’ professional growth, this alumnus in Afghanistan narrates that attending the Diploma mean he had to compromise on work:

"[...] because it was at the beginning of the Diploma and my work was in Afghan Wireless Company and [...] in the part of sales and customer service. I had also experience from Roshan Company and I was hired and our Diploma started, in the starting of this. When I was saying that here is also good office and also, I have opportunity of internet and also everything, so they agreed. They said that not you cannot go at four or three o’clock and cannot go to your studying out of the office, but I decided in the last opportunity that I do not want to miss my business study or Diploma but rather I would like to miss my work. So I lost my job and did not lost my Diploma study." (AH_A2_N)

Despite having to make a choice between his professional and the pursuit of academic studies, his willingness to prioritise his studies unveils that the opportunity to enrol in the Diploma was more important than working for his former employer. Therefore, the Diploma programme is understood by participants as having a considerable impact on their professional development whether it is in terms of gaining academic recognition, increasing their competitiveness in the job market, or building their entrepreneurial skills. In the words of this graduate in Kenya:

“JWL Diploma was like a bridge, it opened many ways for me, so by having certificate, I was able to transcend from one work to another, whenever I see an opportunity”

– KK_A3_R
3 Beyond gaining knowledge and skills

While certain types of opportunities and skills are mentioned during interviews as being central to the teachings of the Diploma, participants also expressed what gaining these knowledge and skills meant for their personal growth as well-rounded human beings. Some participants explained how their Diploma learning experience helped them build their self-confidence. For instance, this graduate in Malawi stressed that if he hadn't had the chance to participate in the Diploma programme, he would not have the confidence he has today:

”[...] because like I would be saying that I have no knowledge since I was just a high school graduate so my confidence would be low.” (MD_A8_T)

For this graduate in Kenya, not participating in the Diploma programme would have meant not be able to pursue other higher education degrees because he would not have been able to develop his self-confidence (KK_A7_JR) and “go and climb higher”. This motivation gained through the Diploma is also shared by this Afghan participant:

”I think Diploma has the most important role in this part since I want to explore what I have learned from online Diploma, I want to explore what I was taught by JWL to my community.” (AH_A8_N)

Motivated to apply the knowledge learnt in her community, this graduate reveals how the Diploma encourages her to pursue the Diploma teachings in daily life. This graduate in Malawi extends this thought as he reveals the multidimensional impact of the Diploma on his life:

”This Diploma will shape me much in the future because I’m seeing that if I cannot be employed but my life will be a changed life because I have got a vast knowledge whereby I can still be assisting whenever I can be in my family, in my village wherever I will be or staying, the knowledge I get from the Diploma much that my concentration was social work it means more things will be done in my life.” (MD_A7_T)

According to this graduate, the purpose of having knowledge becomes more than having a job, as it encompasses the notion of attending to one’s community and serving its people. This graduate in Malawi comments that he:

”[...] I appreciate[s] having the skills from this Diploma, they help me too much and they still, so I appreciate too much since I got the skills without paying anything if I was to pay maybe I couldn’t have got whatever I got. So, this is the appreciation I can get to JWL.” (MD_A13_T)

This graduate in Iraq concludes her interview by stating:

”I just want to say thank you so much to us like, it’s very nice having this opportunity that JWL provided for us for free and you know, like the intention to help people to learn to improve themselves. It’s very valid, valuable, like so thank you so much, and I hope all the best for JWL.” (IE_A4_M)

Therefore, these examples of gratitude-sharing reveal the profound impact of knowledge and skills developed throughout the Diploma on alumni’s life.
4 Conclusions

In conclusion, the Diploma programme enabled graduates to expand their academic, networking and professional opportunities while developing new sets of knowledge and skills which ultimately prepare them for greater success and self-development. Graduates see new doors open in their lives and apply the knowledge and skills gained to their daily lives, sharing these within their communities.

Ultimately, the purpose of graduates’ learning experience in the Diploma is beyond acquiring knowledge and skills that better prepare them for professional and academic opportunities; it is holistic as it also leads to graduates’ intrapersonal as well as community development through their effective actions. Thus, the knowledge and skills developed during the Diploma appear as the foundational element to reach personal and community empowerment.

Key points

- Graduates refer to a particular set of skills and knowledge as being developed through the Diploma journey - soft skills: professionalism, communication, time management; hard skills: business, social work, digital skills, English language, research, health knowledge.

- Developing these sets of skills during the Diploma opens new doors for graduates’ academic, networking and professional lives.

- Many graduates identified the Diploma as essential for them to pursue further higher education opportunities and for their professional professional development.

- The knowledge and skills acquired during the Diploma serve as the foundational step to support graduates’ growth in self-confidence and community engagement.
5 References


6 Authors

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