As part of the building bloc “knowledge and skills” of the conceptual model, critical thinking emerges as a key element to set graduates on the road to empowerment. Often understood as a life-changing tool, critical thinking is perceived as crucial to be able to overcome challenges. Its essence is formed of the following elements: analysis and evaluation skills, communication skills, adaptability and autonomy, and problem-solving. The chapter presents the elements highlighted by the graduates when describing a critical mindset and their reflections on the results of developing such mindset.
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1 The key components of critical thinking

Graduates refer to specific elements that help them develop critical thinking, perceived as crucial in their journey towards empowerment. Analysis and evaluation skills are mentioned in the interviews as key components of critical thinking, in line with the literature (Dwyer 2017); furthermore, the interviews emphasise the key role of interpersonal communication in nurturing and applying critical thinking. The intertwining of these dimensions results in transforming critical thinking from a skill into a mindset, as argued by Franco et al. (2021).

1.1 Analysis and evaluation skills

First, analysis and evaluation skills appear as two critical skills intertwined with the growth of critical thinking. Indeed, one of the most common expressions used to describe critical thinking by participants is “thinking outside the box.” In order to think “in depth”, participants refer to the need to identify and understand the limitations of the “box”. A graduate in Afghanistan relates to critical thinking by explaining that:

“[when] I think deeply about the issues, I consider all the aspects [and one should] not judge a book by its cover.” (AH_A1.O)

The importance given to understanding facts over biased judgements reveals the two pre-requisites of a critical mind: analysis and evaluation skills (JA_A5_A; KK_A13_MZ). As graduates become aware of their surroundings in any given situation, they can develop rational thinking that is based on a thorough evaluation of the environment they find themselves in. According to this graduate in Kenya, this type of mindset helps build self-confidence for any given situation:

"Right now, I’m quite different person unlike the time when I have not joined the programme. So currently, I’m able to think critically [...]. Nobody can come and deceive me for any issue, when someone approaches me for any issue, before whatever the person explains to me, [...] so I’m able now to think critically." (KK_A13_MZ)

As graduates build a rational perspective, this critical mindset allows the formation of their judgements. For this graduate in Kenya, developing this bias-free mindset is precisely what critical thinking means:

“Critical thinking is a way of looking at issues without being biased or in hurry, you take time to think about something, just differentiate facts from opinions without fear of contradiction.”

– KK_A1.G

Therefore, the Diploma is seen as supporting the building of an evaluative consciousness of surroundings through a process of analysis and evaluation,
ultimately leading to graduates’ growth in critical thinking.

Analysis and evaluation are often mentioned together as part of the first step in the decision-making process or in identifying a solution to a problem. For instance, this graduate in Kenya demonstrates his critical thinking skills by giving the following example:

“Yes, I would just make an example of maybe [...] [the] example of kids fighting over one orange, [...] the first thing I have to [do], you may not know what is going on between the 2 kids, why are they fighting over that orange, so you have to ask them their interests, let them lay out, then you have to see based on the interests of the person, and then you have [...] judgement, when you judge something, you have to first analyse before you put your judgement, so critical thinking you have to analyse something before you take an action” (KK_A7_JR)

Like this graduate, many participants introduced a situation in which they analyse the circumstances before evaluating the situation and taking any further action. According to this graduate in Malawi, when he has to solve issues, he makes sure that before any decision is taken, he uses critical thinking and take time to analyse the situation:

“A person can come, they narrate their conflict with other people, after listening, I say “okay, just give me time” before I answer to any conflict/issues I received.” (MD_A8_F)

Taking time to fully understand the situation emerges as fundamental for graduates to be able to apply their analytical and evaluation skills. Through this evaluative process, another skill appears essential to ensure smooth problem-solving and develop a critical thinking: communication.

1.2 Communication skills

Whether communication skills are understood as speaking, writing, or listening, graduates specify the role of interpersonal exchanges as part of their journey to develop critical thinking. Indeed, graduates articulate that effective communication skills can facilitate the identification of adequate solutions. For instance, this graduate in Iraq mentions that it is crucial to identify who the sender and receiver are in a given exchange, to understand the situation:

“So, this is a critical thinking, you should know [how] to receive the message and to interpret, [...] this word is information that can [become a] solution to make a decision.” (IE_A1_M)

In addition to applying communication skills in a problem-solving setting, communication is also part of an emancipation process supported by critical thinking and nurturing self-confidence. Feeling free to communicate with anyone through the help of the Diploma programme, this participant is ready to apply his critical thinking to any situation requiring problem-solving, permitting him to advance on his empowerment journey.

“First of all, now, I can go dialogue with anyone without fearing, go in discussion and deep with everyone, without being fear what they say. [...] I have power, and now I can face it.”

– KK_A1_G

Therefore, as a skill developed during JWL Diploma, critical thinking appears as more than a simple decision-making tool. It
involves multi-dimensional skills such as communication, analytical, and evaluation skills. This multi-faceted aspect of critical thinking is ultimately articulated as contributing to graduates’ personal development and reshaping their daily lives.

Figure 1: This tank from the early 2000s could not be removed from this field in Bamyan (Afghanistan), so the community decided to paint it.
2. The consequences of developing critical thinking skills

As a result of the strengthening of these critical skills, other soft skills emerge, which enable graduates to improve their daily lives. Problem-solving, adaptability, and autonomy skills are the three main skills referred to by graduates that result from developing their critical thinking.

2.1 Problem-solving

One effect generated by graduates’ critical thinking is related to situations requiring solving a problem. The importance of the problem varied across examples, with some situations exploring everyday decision-making and others referring to more significant issues such as conflict-resolution in the community. This research analyses three different aspects of life in which Graduates applies critical thinking: community, work, and personal life.

Gender perspective

The parent code ‘critical thinking’ is present almost perfectly equally in the interviews from the two genders. However, we notice some differences in the children-codes in terms of balance between gender. As the chart below shows, ‘conflict-resolution’ related quotes are more prominent in males’ interviews, whereas ‘communication’ related quotes are expressed predominantly by female participants. This different approach to critical thinking reflects that for women critical thinking seems to be understood as a tool for personal development, emphasising the communicative virtue of this mindset as highlighted in the chapter, whereas male participants’ utilisation of critical thinking mirrors a mindset seeking to solve larger-scale conflicts, often taking place at the community level.

Figure 2: Analysis of some of the quotes related to critical thinking by gender
2.1.1 Community problem-solving
First, participants expressed critical thinking in terms of solving situations in the community. Whether the problems are rooted in political, gender, intercultural, public health or representation issues, critical thinking is often illustrated as a process in which the participants solve issues that their community is facing. For example, this community leader participant identifies the need to apply a critical mindset to ensure the wellbeing of her community. As she explains how she proceeds when a student is unable to go to school, she mentions that:

"One of the goals of the chairperson is that to make decisions, critical decisions. [...] Another thing is that the role of the Chairperson is that to solve challenges in the community" (KK_A4_MZ)

This pairing of critical thinking with problem-solving reflects how a critical mindset is applied for the purpose of the betterment of the community.

One way that graduates employ their newly acquired skill is through their hygiene sensibilisation in the community. For example, this graduate shares that as people in his community were not following personal hygiene guidelines, he taught people how to develop personal hygiene habits such as washing hands, washing cloth, etc., before concluding that “this is how critical thinking has changed me” (KK_A1_R).

Furthermore, this graduate in Kakuma explains how she was able to solve the problems in the community working as a hygiene promoter. She recalls that as a hygiene interpreter, she “solve problems in community until it was successful, and it was through the help of this Diploma” (KK_A15_MZ). Thus, transmitting health knowledge through the teachings of the Diploma can also be a means for graduates to apply their problem-solving and critical thinking skills to better support and engage with their community. This motivation to contribute to the betterment of the community through critical thinking can even lead to peacemaking, as this graduate explains:

“The critical thing is all about coming up with the possible solution, how to solve conflict among people in the camp, so Diploma [...] has really empowered me on critical thinking, especially in the community. People do call me Peacemaker, and previously no one was calling me a peacemaker.” (KK_A13_MZ)

For this refugee in Jordan, critical thinking is the tool that allows him to find solutions and think in different ways about the conflict in his home country, Sudan, “instead of staying there and be angry or doing a negative thing about it” (JA_A5_A). Nevertheless, given the profound change that gaining critical thinking represents in one’s minds, if the graduates’ environment is not welcoming of this change, it can also result in challenging graduates’ relations to their communities. For this graduate in Kenya, developing critical thinking signified confronting the reaction of his community:

“You know, I used to say the negative part of [the Diploma] is when you are exposed to critical thinking and you start thinking critically, people may think you have problem because you don’t believe normally and they begin thinking that this guy has a problem and the fear of the unknown become the chain if they give me an opportunity, they think I might take it from them, that is the negative part of the Diploma. [...] I think I became a problem to some people who like to live on lies.” (KK_A13_G)

In the context of Afghanistan, challenging one’s community is rooted in gender issues. For instance, this Afghanistan graduate presents how she applies critical
thinking to enable other girls attend school:

"In a community that we are living, it has a problem which we are not allowing their daughters to study. So, here we need to have critical thinking. [...] we have to understand what is the root of this problem in the community. So, we have to find [...] what is the problem, who is not allowing their daughters. If we find all the information and the problems, based on [...] our search, we can find solutions." (AB_A3_H)

Therefore, developing critical thinking may also result in graduates having to confront their community and the status quo. In these different applications of critical thinking, conflict-resolution is used to improve the livelihoods of their respective community.

2.1.2 Work problem-solving

Second, this form of problem-solving, intrinsic to building a critical mind, is identified as part of graduates’ professional lives. Critical thinking helps them navigate their professional lives in a smarter way, which can even lead to professional growth as this graduate in Afghanistan highlights:

"In the past before participating in this university [Regis University] maybe I could not solve the problems easily, but after that when I learned a [class] with the name of critical thinking, so it taught me how to solve the problems of yourself and myself and the people and also others. For example, during the work I can analyse better and search to find a solution for the problem, so it is one of the benefits of critical thinking during the work and my life." (AH_A2_N)

However, for refugees with limited or no right to work, developing this critical mind can be a source of frustration. This participant in Jordan enunciates this issue:

"I [...] haven’t been given [...] a chance to do the things based on my knowledge, as I said earlier [to] you. So, I’m here only a refugee, and I don’t have an option to use the knowledge I have in order to measure myself whether I’m I critical thinker or not." (JA_A2_A)

Therefore, the local working conditions for refugees may potentially hinder their application of critical thinking. Despite these local constraints, critical thinking has been articulated as supporting the strengthening of graduates’ problem-solving skills in their professional lives.

2.1.3 Personal life problem-solving

While critical thinking can be helpful to solve professional problems, graduates also use it to solve personal issues. For instance, this graduate in Kenya mentions that thanks to the Diploma, she improved her critical thinking abilities which helped her balance between family duties and work and study commitments (KK_A5_5). Another graduate in Afghanistan summarises this perspective:

"Diploma empowered in case of thinking critically [...], take better decisions, prioritise the things I want to do. Before I join Diploma, I had no plan for what I should do to have a better life but now I have my clear plans and very confident to do them, [...] and to make good decisions.”

– AB_A4_H

Critical thinking is articulated as a tool for life, supporting graduates in making the right choices in their personal lives.

Additionally, some graduates merge all these spheres to use critical thinking across all aspects of life. This alumna in Afghanistan reflects that:
“Once upon of time, I had so many problems with my family. And beside of that one, I was very busy in my work and I was teaching English. I was studying online Diploma and I was busy in other places. Just one day, I was thinking that why I am thinking in a different way. Why I’m like always depressed about the problems or the works that I’m doing. Then I couldn’t just organise my works. [...] So, one day I was just thinking critically how I can solve these all problems, the problems that I face with my family, it was financial problems. Or the problems that I faced with my workplace, with which was that I was involved in so many activities [...] and I was not able to organise, arrange them and manage them. And that critical thinking helps me to organise and manage my very works that I was doing in, step by step, [...] I was able, and I succeed to do everything very well.” (AB_A10_H)

Therefore, this life-changing skill developed through the Diploma appears to allow to do more than solving daily problems. Graduates’ testimonies show the importance of critical thinking to drive a comprehensive change in one’s perspective, potentially building up to personal growth.

2.2 Adaptability & autonomy

One consequence of participants’ development in critical thinking is expressed through the concept of adaptability and autonomy. According to interviews, critical thinking is understood as an approach enabling students to become more independent from any potentially influencing factors. Whether these factors affect graduates in their personal, social, or economic lives, adaptability skills and sense of autonomy are some of the key impacts of developing strong critical thinking. This perception of critical thinking is particularly significant in Jordan as it encapsulates 42% of the quotes related to the “adaptability” code. Used in an introspective way, critical thinking is seen to permit the development of an independent mind that has the potential to question authority, customs, and others’ perspectives (KK_A4_JR). A participant from Malawi expressed that:

““When it comes to critical thinking, you shouldn’t limit yourself, you should go beyond what you see and beyond what you hear, so that you can come up with other answers.”

– MD_A4_T

This willingness to build one’s own perspective regardless of what others may think is particularly salient in the case of this female graduate from Iraq (IE_A4_M). She shared that when someone questioned why she is looking for work, instead of “just being at home” and that although she is single and 31 years old, she is not afraid of anything because she has all the knowledge, and the Diploma made her more “dependent on herself, not on others” (IE_A4_M). This ability to go beyond traditions and to decide for oneself shapes an agency that translates into a form of adaptability and autonomy through a critical thinking process. Eventually, this process is presented by graduates to engender a new form of maturity that helps them grow personally. For example, this graduate reflects this personal development as follows:

“You cannot understand yourself if you’re not a critical thinker. So, [...] this programme helped me to get to know myself, to understand myself and to know what I want for myself. So, all these things without critical thinking, that means you cannot move. So, [...] critical thinking helps me particularly to get to analyse each and every information. So I’m not a kind of person of saying ‘yes, yes’ to everything or ‘not, no’ to everything. So whenever I get the information I have to analyse the information and then adjust myself to one side. So this some of that vantage of critical thinking, so [...] you become more
mature because a critical thinker person is different from the hardware people used to say ‘yes, yes’ to everything or not [to] everything […] I’ll be able to reflect critically […] and at least I have my personal position which at least can be defended compared to before […] (MD_A4_L)

In addition to this intellectual independence detached from others’ perspective, critical thinking is also related to developing adaptability and autonomy that permits challenging one own’s thoughts and being able to approach situations from multiple perspectives. This multifaced form of thinking can also lead to empathy, as this graduate from Kenya demonstrates:

“Like I told, in Dadaab and Kakuma, women like you will find a lot of problems, but when you haven’t gone through this programme […] you can give yourself the kind of the rational thinking that will be very limited. But with the Diploma, one is able to understand from different angles, even if the things you are going through, or in the community at large […] you can see from different angles the issues […] than your initials thought.” (KK_A5_G)

This ability to understand what others could think can help to find solutions that were not originally thought of and build mutual understanding between communities. For example, this graduate explains that:

“We are here in Malawi, especially in Dzaleka camp, we are […] with different communities, […] with people from different background, so, you know, we are in constant trouble, misunderstanding […] So critical thinking […] helps me when I’m in problem with someone. [I] used to say […] to analy[]se the problem and see why can’t I accept that I’m the wrong person? I have to […] apologize so that we can move on. So, with critical thinking, […] you are able to anticipate things or actions, so it helps you see this discussion can lead us to ABC problems, so let me just say I apologize, accept [the] apology. […] Without critical thinking in community like ours, daily life will be in total mess or in trouble. So that means I have used critical thinking in at resolving problems or community issues.” (MD_A4_L)

Being able to accommodate different situations and adapt to various circumstances are also identified to be crucial capacities for developing critical thinking. For example, this participant in Jordan illustrates how the Diploma helped him to gain this form of adaptability:

“[Interviewer: Do you think that Diploma could help your future?] Yes! if I go to a new place that I feel free, and I can participate with a new community. So, I can develop, and I can put an idea to the ground.” (JA_A2_A)

While this graduate explains how critical thinking can be employed as a form of freedom to adapt to any community, this Kakuma participant highlights the power to be able to adapt to various contexts to grow professionally:

“For us refugees, even if you are [not] competent enough, you will end up being a messenger, that’s why I am telling my students in JWL that you are beyond what you are doing, even if you are now a messenger. It just a matter of time [for you] to explore your ability […]. [If] you aren’t able to do [what you want to do], then you can come out and form your own organisation […] “ (KK_A1_G)

As a business leader in transport food chain, he is

“[…] telling every student you may not be working as doctors, administrators in a company but you can do this in a special way, at the personal level[…] So if you show people that you are curious to learn and you are given an opportunity, use that opportunity to achieve what you are given, you will find yourself more competent than any other person despite the status and your current status or circumstances.” (KK_A1_G)

His ability to adapt to local circumstances while turning obstacles into opportunities for personal growth reflects how a critical mind can be used as a form of resilience and empowerment.
Additionally, the aforementioned graduate's teaching on how to use critical thinking to reach independence and develop adaptability skills is key to reaching this emancipation. Through their examples of autonomy and independence, many graduates demonstrated that teaching others how to employ such thinking was part of the process of strengthening critical thinking. For instance, one participant in Malawi shared that, aware of the high level of poverty in his community, he helped lead a permaculture project that taught vulnerable people to start their own production of food. With currently more than 20 active gardens in his community, he contributed to supporting his community in being less reliant on food donations and “be independent in their lives.” (MD_A5_L)

Therefore, critical thinking appears as a crucial means to gain autonomy, adaptability skills and independence, which can potentially result in self-empowerment and giving back to the community. The JWL Diploma appears to foster such personal and social development, as in the words of a graduate:

““The solid areas that JWL is focusing in supporting the refuges are the pillar of future, not just to educate something to pass the exam, but to be independent.”

– KK_A8_G

Not only do graduates refer to critical thinking as a key factor to achieve personal independence and empower others, but also to gain financial autonomy. This willingness to be financially independent by growing one own's food while seeking to improve living conditions reflects how critical thinking is employed in both the personal and community aspects of daily life. Financial independence, similar to the independence from customs and others’ perspectives, builds agency for graduates:

“Everything is different in my life now and it will be different. Because now I'm in different activities that are that the source is Diploma. [...] I'm a self-confident, self-independent person. I'm not asking others to pay me money. I can work and I can like get my salary and I can do whatever I want” (AB_A10_H).

As graduates construct a critical mind, it translates into building both material and psychological independence.
3 Conclusion

Critical thinking appears as a key component of JWL’s impact on its graduates and communities. Used constantly as a tool to navigate daily challenges, critical thinking is identified as a life-changing mindset that can drive graduates to advance on their personal growth journey. This emancipation is contagious. Along with their development, they utilise this critical thinking in their personal life but also their work, family and communities. Thus, given its empowering effects, critical thinking is understood by participants as one of JWL’s most relevant impacts.

Key points

- Development of critical thinking skills is one of the JWL Diploma’s biggest impacts on its graduates and their communities. It is often identified by graduates as among the first skills developed during the programme and is the second most applied category of codes (a total of 714 quotes coded under critical thinking).
- Graduates refer to critical thinking as encompassing analytical, evaluation and communication skills which are developed through the Diploma.
- The results of graduates’ enhanced critical thinking are anchored in the building of problem-solving, adaptability and autonomy skills.
- Critical thinking appears to be applied across graduates’ community, professional, and personal spheres of life.
- Critical thinking is a key tool to navigate life’s challenges and enhance graduates’ personal development.
4 References


5 Authors

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