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HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE MARGINS

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A Journey towards Empowerment: The impact of Liberal Studies on graduates and their communities

Sense of community



This chapter analyses the scope of graduates' sense of community while understanding the mechanism of this competence. Through graduates' experience in the community, we present how the development of this capacity is anchored across various aspects of life. Furthermore, this chapter evaluates how servant leadership and empathetic approaches to community work as mechanisms for the development of a sense of community with the ultimate purpose to address community challenges.

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“Diploma is a bridge to me [...]. The heart of the community, I got that heart of the community after I studied the Diploma. I never knew what community was.”

– KK_A3_R

1 Building an awareness of the community at different levels

Graduates expressed how their learning journey through the Diploma helped them build a new awareness of the community. We present how this awareness is characterised by an inclusive approach to community and developed in various spheres of life during the Diploma.

1.1 Rise of a community consciousness

Graduates share how their experience in the Diploma led them to develop a sense of awareness about their community. According to this graduate in Jordan, enrolling in the Diploma allowed him to develop a new type of engagement in his community through the application of skills learnt:

“In Diploma, I learned critical thinking. I build leadership skills. And engagement with community. [...] Before Diploma, I was not like that, taking initiative. But now, [...] I am able to do things that I never experience before like volunteering, engaging in the community. [...] Now I am able to engage more. Now, I am helping others. And also, give advices for many of the families here.” (JA_A5_A)

This new drive to help the community is also reflected in the words of the Afghan participant who explains how he is now “conscious of [his] people’s problems” and

thinks about how to solve them (AB_A4_H). For this other graduate in Afghanistan, studying in the Diploma allowed him to “get the feeling of the community” as well as develop a sense of “responsibility” toward the betterment of his community (AB_A6_H). He explains that he used to think negatively about his community:

“I had the conclusion [that] my community is a backward community and we got no opportunities, and we have less schools in our community. Then I decided to be one of the persons, [who is] helping the children of that community, [...] I believe that through studying and through educating we are able to [...] shape a good community for us.” (AB_A6_H)

Determined to transfer what he learnt to his community, he grew a new sense of responsibility and a new perspective, which ultimately allowed him to strengthen his community engagement. This shift in perspective toward one’s community can be particularly characterised through a switch from an individual to a collective consciousness. For example, this graduate in Kenya explains how he changes his perspective while completing the Diploma:

“Diploma helped me to increase my sense of community, whereby before I used to think about myself, but now, I think about the people around me, the community.” (KK_A10_R)

Now, he is working for NGOs and supporting his community in any way he can, for instance by building trenches to



prevent flooding (KK_A10_R). This outward expansion of one's consciousness to include one's community can even result in increasing the efficiency of involvement in the community. For example, this graduate formulates that the Diploma made her involvement in the community more "organised and helpful," having "helped [her] to improve [her sense of community] and to structure it." She explains that:

"I have now the ability to train people on case management, on social work, to write plays [...] to criticise something or a bad thing in our community. So, it was like, I'm sending a message through the play" (ID_A1_HD).

This new capacity to bring change to her country is particularly reflected in the strong representation of Iraq in the quotes related to the topics of 'democracy' (42%) and 'society development' (48%), representing almost half the quotes linked to these subjects.

Therefore, the Diploma programme is not only helpful for graduates to develop a new awareness of the community, but also in making this new understanding more responsive to the community's needs.



Figure 1: Students in Erbil, Iraq



1.2 An inclusive understanding of sense of community

As graduates build a new awareness of the community, they also enlarge their definition of community, which becomes more inclusive. According to this alumnus in Kenya:



“A sense of community is the feeling that, that person is the same as us, no matter [...] where they are from. In community, [there is] no tribes, no nationalities, community beats those terms that we give ourselves [...] we don't put them, we don't consider those words. Because the community is much wider than this.”

– KK_A3_R

As the Diploma “encourages [graduates] to embrace togetherness, coming together and working as one people” (KK_A2_G), this has led some alumni to change their approach to serving the community. For example, this participant in Afghanistan explained how she opened her community engagement to a more diverse group of people:

“After graduating from the Diploma, I show more respect to different groups of people in my own community [...]. Maybe before [...] my relationship was limited in maybe a small group which is very similar to me, which they are from my own tribe [...], but after [what] I learned from online Diploma that my knowledge has increased, I could make my relationships just wider, and I can go with any kind of people to be in the community.” (AH_A6_N)

A similar behaviour is depicted in the interview of this participant in Jordan

whereby both host and country of origin communities are now included in the approach to serving communities:

“It makes me more aware about my society. Whether in Somalia and Jordan society as well. I can easily engage with the society that I live in.” (JA_A8_A)

1.3 Different spheres of sense of community

From this new inclusive approach to communities, different spaces of community involvement emerge from graduates' depiction of their sense of community. This graduate from Kenya refers to this inclusive sense of community by identifying different extents of community involvement:

“Community is all about everything that's around. It's not only the people, even the environment. And community is not only about the people with whom I share the same origin, the same values, [...] it includes everyone. [...] As long as there is people around me, it's already my community because I have responsibilities and I have a role to play toward those people and that environment and that [is] for me the community.” (KK_A8_G)

From this perspective, developing a sense of community requires an understanding of one's environment. These environments can be categorised in terms of the academic, professional, social, religious, cultural and family aspects of graduates' lives. In terms of academic spaces, JWL has been presented in interviews as a community space whereby graduates can build and apply their new sense of community. For example, this graduate in Kenya mentions that he “cultivated a sense of community within the school community” through discussing and working with classmates (KK_A13_MZ). In Jordan, this feeling of community is



denoted in terms of the exchanges with peers from diverse backgrounds:

"Back in Jordan, when we were there, we had students from different cultures. [...] also there were Sudanese, there were Iraqis, Palestinians, all these. And we all had [...] this sense of community. We care about each other, we laughed [with] each other, we shared food together, we built this sense of community. We had the feeling whereby, we would call each other if we are not coming [at] the centre [...], so we had strong community there, to be honest." (JA_A4_A)

Besides JWL as a site to develop and apply this sense of community, graduates refer to the role of social, professional, and religious environments as spaces for community engagement. According to this participant in Kenya, his community involvement is applied across these different spaces:

"I am helping street children in my community, I told you that I have an English school, helping women and elders, I told you that I have a business, I have a business selling second-hand clothes because clothes are very far from Kakuma, I try to bring them near the community, in that way I say that I am very active. [...] I tell you that even in the community I am a church leader in the community. I am even helping people spiritually." (KK_A7_R)

While this example represents an application of one's sense of community in various spheres of life; other graduates illustrate their community consciousness in more specific dimensions. For instance, the sense of engagement in cultural space of the community is reflected in the words of this graduate in Malawi, who speaks about the importance of setting the examples and leaving one's positive legacy on the lives of others:



"I have transformed people because I worked with children with difficulties [...] children with bad behaviour. Currently, they are now good children. I assisted children to [...] have a certain arts to perspective. [...] I started teaching them on how to write a poem. Well, now it's a very big organization of poetry. It's a club of poetry which helps children to [...] to know how to write. So everyone without [any] discrimination in the community is benefiting, has benefited, will benefit [...] on myself because I remember the sentence when we did [...] the intake essays in the Diploma, [it] was: "[Who] would you be you after death? [...] which means what impact will I leave to the community."

– MD_A1_HD

In addition to this active and diverse support to the community, some alumni also articulate their community involvement in their family lives. For example, this participant in Jordan translates the meaning of community engagement in terms of family responsibilities:

"So, sense of community starts also within the household [...]. So it is about the smallest actions his or her parents are taking the appreciation they are showing to the other people [...], the sense of teamwork they are showing in their actions and through also engaging in different ceremonies of celebration. So, the children see this from their parents and this will help them build sense of community." (JA_A7_A)

Hence, graduates have applied their sense of community in multiple contexts,



reflecting an inclusive approach to understanding communities. Consequently, graduates' new awareness of community developed through the Diploma not only helps to widen the

meaning of community, but also more efficiently supports communities across diverse environments.

Gender perspective

Graduates' sense of community engagement is articulated differently based on gender. As 55% of the quotes related to community are attributed to male and 45% of the quotes linked to community are mentioned by female participants, it seems that there is only a slight difference in the importance given to community between the two genders. Particularly, male alumni lead in terms of excerpts related to society development (representing 66% of the quotes on the idea of society development), and serving others (encapsulating 58% of the quotes on the notion of serving other). These codes suggest strong and vast forms of community engagements from male graduates that often requires important community mobilization. This is often reflected in the diverse community engagement in many graduates involved in multiple organizations at a time, holding different leadership positions. For female participants, sense of community seems to be reflected in a different manner, stressing topics such as resilience (58%) and respect (56%). This suggests that while male participants engage in community work with organisations, female graduates are more often involved in the community as individuals inspiring other to have their resilience and engage in the community. Therefore, male and female graduates apply different styles of community engagement.

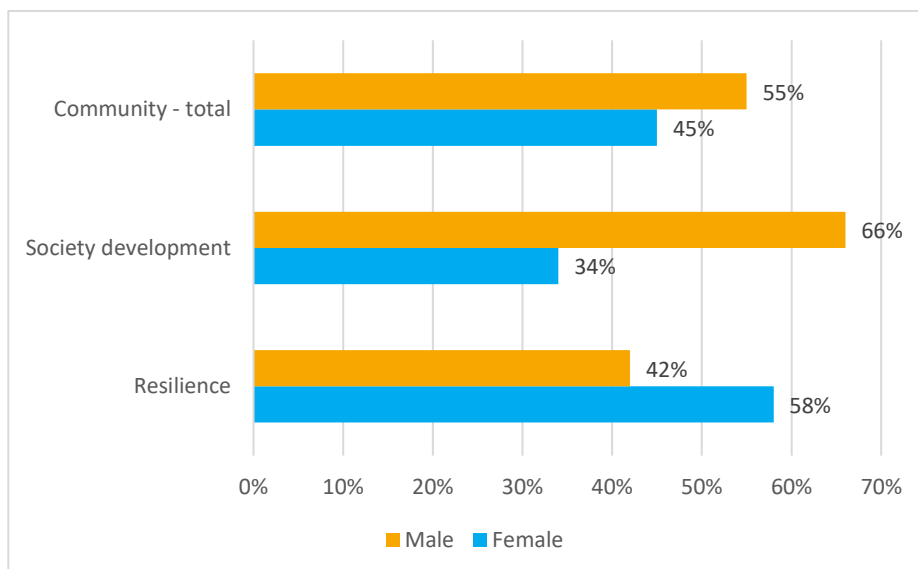


Figure 2: Analysis of some of the quotes related to community by gender



2 Mechanisms of sense of community: Empathy and servant leadership

Through the analysis of the types of engagement in the community, two major mechanisms were identified as the drivers of graduates' sense of community: empathy and servant leadership. Similarly to Martin (2015) and Scott and Graham (2015)'s findings, building an empathetic behaviour has been recognised as supporting the growth of one's sense of community. Additionally, servant leadership has been presented as one of the main drivers to develop this capacity (Meylahn and Musiyambiri 2017, Shekari and Nikooparvar 2012, van Dierendonck and Patterson 2015).

2.1 Empathy for the marginalised people

After building an awareness of the community to serve diverse contexts, graduates articulate their sense of community in terms of providing compassion, support, and care for marginalised/vulnerable peoples as a tool to build one's sense of community. This compassionate involvement in the community is of service in multiple ways. Whether through providing resources, support or care for orphans, poor students, ill persons, vulnerable women, or persons with disabilities, graduates have engaged in many activities and organisations to support the wellbeing of their communities.

For instance, this alumna shares how the Diploma initiated her "commitment" to "work for the wellbeing of the community" and her "dedication" to "save lives no

matter what" (MD_A6_R). She illustrated this willingness to protect her community by giving the following examples: She sponsored orphaned children who failed their classes to go back to school, hoping to prevent them from engaging in prostitution; every morning she cleaned the bowl used to fetch water to prevent disease from spreading in her community; she also volunteers as an Operations Assistant for the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), giving courage to students by providing them with supporting additional learning material to pursue their education (MD_A6_R). This commitment to the wellbeing of the society is also encapsulated in individual support. This graduate in Kenya demonstrates that engagement in the community does not have to be through an organisation but can come from an individual's initiative to provide care to peers:

"For example, there was someone who was sick for more than 5 days without someone to come and look at him. I realised it because it passes days without seeing him in the tape come to fetch water and then went to his home. Then found him lying in the house. He was seriously sick, and I asked you I asked him what's going on and he told me that he has no one to help him. He has no one to take [him] to hospital. So I took that [initiative] I hope other people [will] help [...] to take him to hospital and [...] now he's survived. So that is how I am active in the community and helping the community and make sure that the community is benefiting from me." (KK_A8_MZ)

This compassionate behaviour demonstrates a selfless engagement in the community. For this alumnus, this type of engagement in the community reflects being *men and women for others*:

"When we graduated, 'We are made men and women for others,' you see, when we graduated, we called ourselves to be off from studies, but



toward the community. [...] We knew that the skills that we had learned was nothing unless we interpreted that into the service for others. [...] I can give you [as examples] many courses in Diploma. You will see that we think, we focus on people. Ethics is all about people, you see, how to live with others. Religion, it helps you understand and live with others and in Diploma, I develop these skills too. To see myself as a member of the community [...], the community will never develop if I did not do anything about it. [...] my community will remain the same. I had to do something about [everything] that I wanted to change." (MD_A10_F)

As he identifies the main classes that helped him to drive this sense of community, he gives the example of when he volunteered every day at the hospital, "going around the camp looking for sick people, especially elderly people, [...] that they can be given medication but forget, but they are seriously sick" and serving as a community agent to help inject doses "for people with TB (tuberculosis) and with diabetes" (MD_A10_F). His commitment to the community is particularly highlighted in his concluding sentence, which shows great depth of compassion and care:

"If one person dies in the community, that pains me, you see which means the problem of one person is mine." (MD_A10_F)

While this graduate describes his support to ill people as an application of the knowledge he gained during the Diploma, his framing of this shared pain articulates the mechanism of empathy that is to attempt to feel what the other is feeling. This graduate in Jordan elaborates this idea through reflecting on her teaching experience with JRS:



"I'm thinking about others so I'm thinking about transferring my knowledge to other people. [...] I learned about that it is not only about me, but it is about others. [...] so I sympathise with other people. I put myself in their shoes and I feel their pain."

– JA_A7_A

For this businesswoman graduate in Malawi, this empathy is reflected in her actions as she put herself in her neighbour's shoes:

"So as we are in the community we build up one another. For example, the common example, you can see that I have provision in my house like I'm doing a business in. My neighbour is not doing any business. What can I do? I am eating every day. They sleep with hunger. So to show that I contribute to my community. I have to share my food stuff.[...] then maybe tomorrow I see that neighbour. 'You know you can also do a small business to help you gain [money].'" (MD_A5_R)

By providing guidance to her neighbour in addition to sharing her food, she demonstrates empathy, caring for the wellbeing of her community peers (MD_A5_R).

During interviews, several graduates reflected on how to best interact with and respond to the needs of persons with disabilities. For instance, this participant in Malawi explained how she employed the knowledge of the Diploma to treat people compassionately and respectfully:

"Diploma taught me [...] not to be looking down on people no matter how they are, so before I used



to have the perspective like when you are seeing people with disability they [are] not able to do things, [...] I was wrong, but through Diploma I have identified that no matter which condition the person might seem to be we are all equal, so there must be equality in everything we do, the voice of those disabled must be heard, they must tell their story, [...] do a great change in the community.” (MD_A5_T)

This improved understanding of persons with disabilities’ needs depicts the willingness of graduates to employ the teachings of the Diploma in their daily lives in order to become agents of change in their communities. This support to marginalised people is also highlighted in the work of graduates seeking to support

orphans’ needs to attend school and meet vulnerable peoples’ needs. For example, this graduate used some of the money he earned for the greater good of the community by providing necessity goods like soap and sugar to people in prison, in hospitals, and to orphans (MD_A9_T). Similarly, this graduate – along with other JWL alumni – mobilised resources for orphans to attend school. (KK_A1_G). Hence, graduates have expressed (through diverse examples) a deep sense of compassion towards the community that is often translated into providing support and care to marginalised people.



Figure 3: International Day of Peace in Kakuma, Kenya



2.2 Servant leadership

Closely related to building an empathetic approach to the sense of the community is the presence of servant leadership in the form of involvement in their communities. Servant leadership is particularly reflected in the willingness of graduates to apply their knowledge and skills in the community, seeking to think for the community and become “men and women for others” (MD_A1_HD, MD_A4_L). Indeed, understanding leadership as not about oneself but rather for “you and others” (JA_A5_A), graduates unveil their sense of community in the examples of being a selfless servant. For instance, this graduate in Kenya working as a volunteer interpreter for UNHCR is not searching for other jobs because she does not “want to give up the [work she] is doing for the community” (MD_A2_F). This example of servant leadership is further elaborated by the reflection of this community worker seeking to combat domestic and gender-based violence through the different types of leadership he learnt from the Diploma (MD_A4_L). For him, learning about the different styles of leadership helped him to redefine his understanding of leadership, adopting a style seeking to serve others:

“We get education for others, so educating men and women for others. That means after getting the education now you are at the service of others that means you are a leader. But a servant leader. [...] But it really helps me [...] to understand myself and also to make myself at the service of others. [...] So whenever you are waking up in the morning, so you have to think not only for you but for others, this is like the road. So it helps us to be involved actively in our community and being involved actively is [...] identifying problems and trying to resolve the problems.” (MD_A4_L)

This approach using servant leadership as a roadmap to community engagement allows this graduate to emerge as the

‘voice of the voiceless’ whereby the community members are the beneficiaries of his involvement. This community benefitting approach of the Diploma is further reflected in the willingness of graduates to motivate others. A graduate in Kenya expresses this thought beyond the idea of Diploma’s impact as for him it becomes integral to the meaning of being a graduate:



“I should not say I am a graduate [if] I should not involve in community. By participating in the community activities, you are motivating others to see that everyone can do that work despite your education status.”

– KK_A6_G

From this flourishing energy seeking to give back to the community emerges a servant leadership style. This other graduate in Malawi voices this passion for the community in the following words:

“My life could have not been like this the way I am now and this passion of working for others couldn’t have been in me.” (MD_A9_T)

As community engagement becomes a passion (KK_A13_R, MD_A9_T), graduates reflect this by sharing servant leadership examples that seek to provide lasting solutions. For instance, this alumnus in Kenya explained that before he joined the Diploma, he used to buy bread and juice for street children. But after studying the Diploma, he realised that this was not enough and decided to mobilise the community to support these children to go to school, in order for them to eventually “earn money so that they can buy



themselves those bread and juice and even contributing to the community” (KK_A7_R). This servant leadership example shows the willingness of the graduates to apply their critical thinking to contribute to the community, with lasting effects. The same form of leadership is demonstrated by this graduate who decided to collaborate with his community to cover transportation fees for women students commuting to school (KK_A1_G). While this started on an individual basis seeking to safeguard the safety of a commuting female student, this one-on-one support turned into a community collaboration as the need grew, and eventually led to the provision of more sustainable solutions that would enhance the safety of the community (KK_A1_G).

The example of this alumna in Afghanistan demonstrates that the range of the application of servant leadership does not have to be extensive to be impactful. As she felt responsible for the wellbeing of a poor woman who could not pay her rent, she decided to ask for help from her community after the evening prayer and mobilise this community to provide a solution for this vulnerable woman (AH_A10_N). Therefore, whether through developing a group-based or individual-based approach to community issues,

these examples of lasting impact on communities reveal servant leadership as a driver for engagement in the community. This switch from ‘self-centredness’ to ‘thinking for others’ consequently gives agency to graduates to “change problems that are affecting not only [them] and [their] communities, but even the people living [in] the surrounding communities” (MD_A4_L).

As a result of this newly gained consciousness of the community, some graduates express how it also helped them boost their confidence, find resilience and ultimately give back to the community. This participant in Afghanistan shares that:

“My life would be different if I was not participating in this program. [...] Just I was maybe sitting at home; I was getting married then but right now I’m a different person. I’m thinking that I can be a leader in the community and a part of solutions in the community that I’m living, not a part of pollution.” (AB_A8_H)

Therefore, the community can also be a source of inspiration to embrace leadership and potentially overcome one’s marginalisation. This commitment to the betterment of the community can also be self-beneficial as it can allow graduates to find resilience and transmit it to their communities.



3 Conclusion

In their interviews, graduates have highlighted the importance of the Diploma in helping them to grow their sense of community. This new consciousness of the community is employed to embrace servant leadership and compassion

towards one's community in order to improve its wellbeing. Ultimately, this sense of commitment to the community presents graduates as agents of change, contributing at various levels to the wellbeing of their communities.

Key points

- The development of a sense of community and strong community engagement is considered as a crucial impact of the Diploma.
- Throughout the Diploma, graduates expand their understanding of community to adopt a more inclusive and diverse approach to their sense of community.
- Graduates express a new awareness of the community developed in various spheres of life.
- Graduates' sense of community is driven by an empathetic and servant leadership approach seeking to address challenges in the community, using the interconnected element of community to widen the benefits of this involvement.



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5 Authors

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