

Tertiary refugee education in Afghanistan: vital for reconstruction

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Since 1992, UNHCR has been implementing the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI), a German government-funded programme to provide tertiary education for refugees in countries of asylum. Afghans have comprised the largest group of DAFI students.

The capacities of tertiary institutions within Afghanistan are very limited and, with some three million Afghans still in Pakistan and Iran, the need for higher educational opportunities – via DAFI or other avenues – for Afghans in neighbouring countries remains high.

Afghanistan has been a focus of the DAFI programme from the outset, with enrolment of students from Afghanistan reaching a peak of 447 in 2003.¹ External factors, however, inevitably influence the programme. As a result of the mass return of Afghans since 2002 the overall number of students enrolled in Iranian and Pakistani universities has fallen considerably. Iran stopped admitting new Afghan tertiary students in 2004 as a result of an active repatriation policy. This policy was lifted in 2007 and Iran is currently the country receiving the highest number of Afghan refugee students. In 2005, due to an overall gender

imbalance in the DAFI programme and as UNHCR tried to specifically target girls' education, only female students were permitted to enrol in the DAFI programme in Pakistan.

The available level of funding set the overall targets for the programme in this and other regions. Host countries need to have policies that are compatible with the needs of refugees. If refugees are not allowed to enrol in university, need special permission or are charged a prohibitive 'international' student rate, implementing a scholarship programme becomes considerably more difficult. Globally, the average cost of each DAFI student is approximately \$2,000 per annum.

To ensure the long-term success of the Afghan intervention, numerous challenges have been addressed. DAFI has focused on motivating female participation in the programme, seeking gender parity.

In recent years female enrolment among Afghan refugee students has increased. Women now comprise 54% of Afghan DAFI students, considerably above the global average of 39% in 2006. These women are role models for Afghan women and girls; their example may help to promote education and motivate families and girls themselves to further their own education.

Lack of coordination among donors supporting tertiary education for Afghans has been a problem. A large number of education advisors and funding agencies adopting different approaches have created competing structures to support refugee programmes outside the country. This has led to fragmentation and confusion within the Afghan education system, complicating education and return for young refugees.

UNHCR and partners realised the need to counsel each refugee on their future studies and plans and have organised workshops in countries of asylum on a range of subjects, from job market information and HIV/AIDS awareness to general questions regarding return to Afghanistan.

Evidence of success

As part of a global assessment of DAFI's impact, in 2007 UNHCR sent a questionnaire to ex-students.² Responses from the Afghan cohort show the direct link between a refugee programme focused on tertiary education and national reconstruction. By educating Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, DAFI has provided them with the skills needed for sustainable return and made the move back home a more viable option for the future for many students and their families. The impact of returned university graduates on the reconstruction of Afghanistan is clearly visible.

Refugees who have received a university education in the region have both the skills and the entrepreneurial willingness to return early. This has helped to bring academically qualified human resources to an area that has experienced a considerable drain of vital brainpower. While there was still considerable room for individual choice, students were encouraged to undertake much needed employment- and development-oriented degree programmes. As a result, the different fields of study and, subsequently, work within the Afghan group of DAFI students currently represent a broad spectrum, reflecting all needs of a country which did not have proper functioning universities for a number of years.

The majority of returned graduates now work in Herat or Kabul. Over 70% work as civil servants or as NGO managers, with the remainder in the private sector. Research indicates that Afghanistan faces an acute lack of qualified managerial personnel. As a result of DAFI encouragement, around a quarter of DAFI's Afghan students now focus on management and economics studies. Another area of special intervention has been support of rural communities and long-term food security. DAFI has supported many students to study agriculture, especially in Faisalabad in Pakistan. Approximately 20% of the Afghan students are currently enrolled in subjects related to agriculture/fishery and forestry.

Examples of the success of the programme can be found at all levels of Afghan society. One DAFI

graduate is the deputy director of the Ministry of Counter Narcotics, another heads Afghanistan's National Assembly and another works for the National Standards Authority. A number of DAFI graduates are in senior positions in NGOs, providing expertise on human rights, gender issues, humanitarian interventions and social service delivery.

"DAFI scholarships have made a substantial contribution to the education and development of many young, talented refugees, enabling them to expand their horizons and explore their potential. Through the scholarships for higher education, DAFI has given thousands of young men and women the means to break the cycle of violence and deprivation.

During my missions abroad I have met DAFI scholars and graduates on several continents and have seen firsthand their experience put to work for the good of the community. The value of this education cannot be overestimated. It gives refugees the hope to imagine a brighter future for themselves and their communities and the skills and determination to realise their goals."

António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Conclusion

Tertiary refugee education is not a priority compared with the other levels of education, especially primary. However, research into 15 years of experience with the DAFI scholarship programme has proven that the benefits for development are high. Scholarship programmes can and do work, provided they are carefully implemented and funds efficiently allocated. It makes sense for refugees to study in countries that are close to their countries of origin – both in geographical and cultural terms as it makes returning home more likely. Funding for tertiary education must be geared towards sustainable results.

Students will benefit most from courses that teach them to work with regionally available resources. Especially in the cases of medicine and engineering, it is counterproductive to learn to handle equipment and materials that will

be in short supply once graduates start working in their communities. UNHCR does not fund scholarships for multi-year courses like medicine; they are too expensive and tie up funds for too long. On the other hand, UNHCR does fund paramedic courses because graduates deliver valuable services. A similar cost-benefit consideration applies to post-graduate studies. Instead of paying for one student to get a PhD, it makes more sense to help two students reach a first degree.

Unsurprisingly, three quarters of global refugees educated by DAFI report earning above average incomes. However, the benefits of tertiary refugee education transcend the individual student as they greatly benefit communities and nations emerging from conflict. The return of qualified human resources to a post-conflict area is a vital component for durable reconstruction.

The Afghan example shows that tertiary refugee education can directly contribute towards reconstruction in a country that still struggles with protracted conflict. The fact that, globally, 94% of returning DAFI graduates find employment back home highlights the need for their skills. The fields of study chosen by Afghan students, the sectors in which they have found employment and the gender balance among refugee students are all positive indicators of future change. UNHCR has shown that in Afghanistan, as elsewhere, refugee scholarship programmes are highly relevant and that all forms of humanitarian intervention must be linked to long-term development.

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For more information about DAFI see: www.inwent.org/ez/articles/065278/index.en.shtml. The November 2007 evaluation of DAFI is at: www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/47b4083d2.pdf

1. In 2006, 1,067 DAFI students from 37 countries were enrolled in courses in 38 countries.

2. www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/4603d6954.pdf