

# Evaluation of the UNHCR Tertiary Education Scholarship Programme – DAFI: relevance, effectiveness, impact<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Since 1992, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) scholarship programme has reached over 21,500 refugee students worldwide. It is widely regarded as one of the most renowned and long-standing higher-education scholarship schemes available to refugees. The programme, funded by the German Government and other partners,<sup>2</sup> has been implemented in over 50 countries across various displacement settings, ranging from low-income countries to upper middle-income countries. It has been implemented either directly by the UNHCR or through national NGO partners.

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide evidence regarding the results of the DAFI programme. More specifically, it aims to aid in understanding how the programme contributes to social and economic outcomes for the young people who take part in it, as well as those around them. The key objective is to provide evidence to improve the design, management and implementation of the DAFI programme, as well as other higher-education programmes for refugees that may be based on it.

## Key evaluation questions

The evaluation addressed a list of key evaluation questions (KEQs), grouped according to the evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness and impact of the programme. This brief will focus on the KEQs grouped under the criteria specified in this section.

### RELEVANCE

- R1) How relevant are the various components of the DAFI individual scholarship, as defined in the DAFI policy and programme guidelines, to a) the beneficiaries' needs and b) the completion of an undergraduate degree and the transition to work?

### EFFECTIVENESS

- E1) How, and to what extent, has the DAFI programme contributed to its objective of facilitating the completion of an undergraduate degree for refugees? Has the programme delivered equal results for young people of all genders?
- E2) How, and to what extent, has the DAFI programme allowed its beneficiaries to a) engage in the development of their communities; b) become role models in refugee communities; c) maintain a positive outlook on life and d) develop positive views towards peace, non-discrimination, gender equality and against radicalization?
- E3) What, if any, general lessons can be found to improve the design and the effectiveness of the DAFI programme, as well as other UNHCR interventions that complement DAFI in tertiary education?

### IMPACT

- I1) How, and to what extent, has the DAFI programme contributed to the transition of its graduates into labour markets, across countries that guarantee refugees the right to work?
- I2) Does the programme have any indirect secondary effects, for example, on participation and retention in secondary education, particularly among girls?

<sup>1</sup> This brief was written by Cirenía Chavez and is based on the findings of the DAFI programme evaluation report, as authored by Matteo Valenza. While the evaluation also tackled additional evaluation questions from other criteria (coherence and sustainability), this briefing focuses on the most robust findings from the evaluation. Please refer to the forthcoming full evaluation report for additional details.

<sup>2</sup> Danish and Czech Government, as well as private donors, including those who supported the Aiming Higher campaign.

## Methodology

This evaluation includes both summative and formative elements. A mixed-methods approach was taken to evaluate the DAFI programme over the 2014 to 2020 period.<sup>3</sup> DAFI experiences and practices were explored from a global perspective via three online surveys directed towards refugees, implementing partners (IPs), UNHCR personnel and other stakeholders. These surveys are referred to as:

- **Refugee survey:** administered to all DAFI beneficiaries globally and all refugees shortlisted for DAFI in 2021 (n=1,124);
- **Implementing partner survey:** administered to all DAFI countries relying on IPs to deliver the DAFI programme (n=18);
- **UNHCR personnel survey:** administered to all countries where DAFI operations are active (n=30).

In addition, key informant interviews (KIIs) were held with a range of stakeholders, including DAFI beneficiaries, UNHCR personnel and IPs, in seven focus countries: Chad, Ecuador, Jordan, Rwanda, South Africa, Turkey and Uganda.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation followed a set of ethical principles for conducting fieldwork based on a series of guidelines.<sup>5</sup>

However, limitations do exist regarding the design of the evaluation and the data. The evaluation relied on a single cross section of data and the lack of an existing evaluation strategy made it impossible to estimate a counterfactual and isolate causal effects. Data-related limitations include the lack of consistent data prior to 2014. Furthermore, while the refugee survey has been administered globally, DAFI operations hosting Syrian students displayed higher response rates. Finally, the refugee survey may be biased towards DAFI students who have access to the Internet.

## Key findings

**R1) How relevant are the various components of the DAFI individual scholarship, as defined in the DAFI policy and programme guidelines, to a) the beneficiaries' needs and b) the completion of an undergraduate degree and the transition to work?**

- **Financial support:** Financial support for students – in the form of tuition payments and living allowances – was fundamental to maintaining high completion rates, as most students would not have been able to finish their degrees without financial support from the DAFI programme. In many countries, the financial support was sufficient to cover basic needs and was delivered in a timely fashion. However, in others, the financial support provided under the DAFI programme was not always sufficient to cover students' basic needs and was not always delivered on time. KIIs with students highlighted that in some cases, delayed or suboptimal financial support led to an increase in students' stress levels, and may have had an adverse effect on academic performance due to students having to find extra income to pay for tuition or cover their basic needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the scholarship was often insufficient to cover the costs of the IT equipment and internet connection needed to continue learning during university closures, resulting in lost learning.
- **Student counselling:** Approximately 50 per cent of DAFI beneficiaries received either counselling or mentoring. KIIs with refugees highlighted the relevance of counselling and mentoring when students encountered unexpected difficulties and confirmed that this component helped to keep dropout levels low.

*"We need to have allowances that reflect our needs for electricity and accessing the Internet. Studying has become very hard after the university closed due to COVID".*  
– Male DAFI student

<sup>3</sup> While the original plan set out in the Terms of Reference (ToR) was to evaluate DAFI from 1993 onwards, the evaluation had to focus primarily on the 2014–2020 period. UNHCR does not possess an integrated data management system that allows for analysis prior to 2014 and data is often patchy, incomplete or unavailable prior to this date.

<sup>4</sup> Some large DAFI country operations declined to participate in the evaluation (Ethiopia, Iraq and Kenya) due to country-specific circumstances linked to human resource capacity or worsening humanitarian crises that would hamper data collection.

<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) norms and standards, the UNEG ethical guidelines for evaluation, the Code of conduct for evaluations in the UN system, the UNHCR data protection policy and the UNHCR age, gender and diversity policy. The principles of informed consent, anonymity and minimization of burden for participants were followed throughout the evaluation.

- **Internships and work readiness:** Since 2014, around 30 per cent of DAFI beneficiaries completed an internship. KIIs with DAFI students revealed a strong demand for internships to allow students to gain entry-level work experience. In this sense, it could be suggested that more internships are needed from companies and governments.
- The evaluation found an unmet need for more youth employment programmes and social protection interventions. This is understandable given the degree of financial hardship experienced by respondents. In this respect, half of refugee respondents reported that they went to bed hungry either on a regular or sporadic basis over the month leading up to the survey, with almost a third requesting more generous scholarships (Table 1).
- Overall, it seems that refugees are primarily concerned with finding employment after graduation, which is understandable given the financial hardship they experience. As Table 1 also indicates, almost half of the DAFI beneficiaries surveyed suggested a need for more direct support to find employment after graduation, while one fifth suggested support through entrepreneurship training to set up a business, legal support to obtain work permits and more internship opportunities.

*“As a woman studying engineering, a field that is male dominated, this scholarship helped me become self-confident. I now feel that I am able to do anything that I put on my mind”.*  
 – Female DAFI student

**Table 1.** Comparative relevance of various suggested changes in the design of DAFI

Suggested change	Percentage of DAFI beneficiaries who selected the change as one of the top three suggestions most relevant to them <sup>6</sup>
More direct support to find employment after graduation	46%
More generous scholarships	32%
More legal support to obtain work permits and the documentation needed to work	19%
More entrepreneurship training to set up new businesses	18%
More internship opportunities	16%
More academic support during the undergraduate course	16%
More opportunities to volunteer	14%
More language courses	10%
More courses to develop the IT skills required by the job market	10%
More mentoring to get to know the job market	8%

Source: DAFI refugee survey (2021)

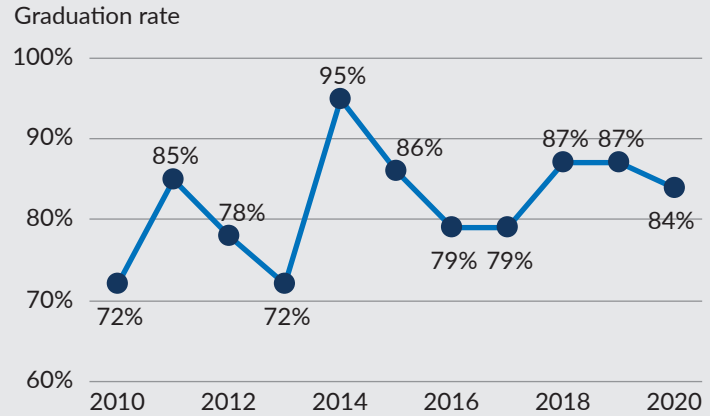
**E1) How, and to what extent, has the DAFI programme contributed to its objective of facilitating the completion of an undergraduate degree for refugees? Has the programme delivered equal results for young people of all genders?**

- Across countries, the graduation rate of students (defined as the number of DAFI students who graduated each year divided by the sum of those expected to graduate in the same year and those who left the programme due to various reasons)<sup>7</sup> stood at an average of 84 per cent between 2010 and 2020. As illustrated in Figure 1, the graduation rate increased between 2016 and 2019 and stood at 87 per cent in 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Multiple choice (up to three elements) was allowed; this is why the percentages exceed 100 per cent.

<sup>7</sup> Due to repatriation, resettlement or granting of a scholarship in a third country.

- The amount of competition in terms of being selected for the DAFI programme varies considerably depending on the country. In spite of this, a couple of country operations with strong programmes have very low award rates.<sup>8</sup> Award rates are defined as the number of awards divided by the number of applications in a given country in the same year. The evaluation found that some country operations (for example, Jordan and South Africa) showed very low award rates despite delivering high completion rates and receiving consistent positive feedback on the support provided with regard to managing students' progression and adopting structured monitoring, for instance, both from students and from UNHCR. However, some variance in the award rate is to be expected. For example, Ethiopia offers particularly advantageous conditions from a financial standpoint, resulting from a tuition cost-sharing agreement with the Government, which may explain the high award rate.

**Figure 1.** Graduation rate of DAFI students, 2014–2020


Source: UNHCR student database (2021)

*The evaluation identified an important indirect effect, namely that awareness of DAFI among refugees in secondary education is motivating students to finish secondary school; this “pull” effect is stronger in camps than in host communities and, interestingly, is stronger for girls than for boys.*

*“As a girl studying in a prestigious University in South Africa, I have become a role model in my community. Younger girls come ask me for advice on how to get a degree”.*

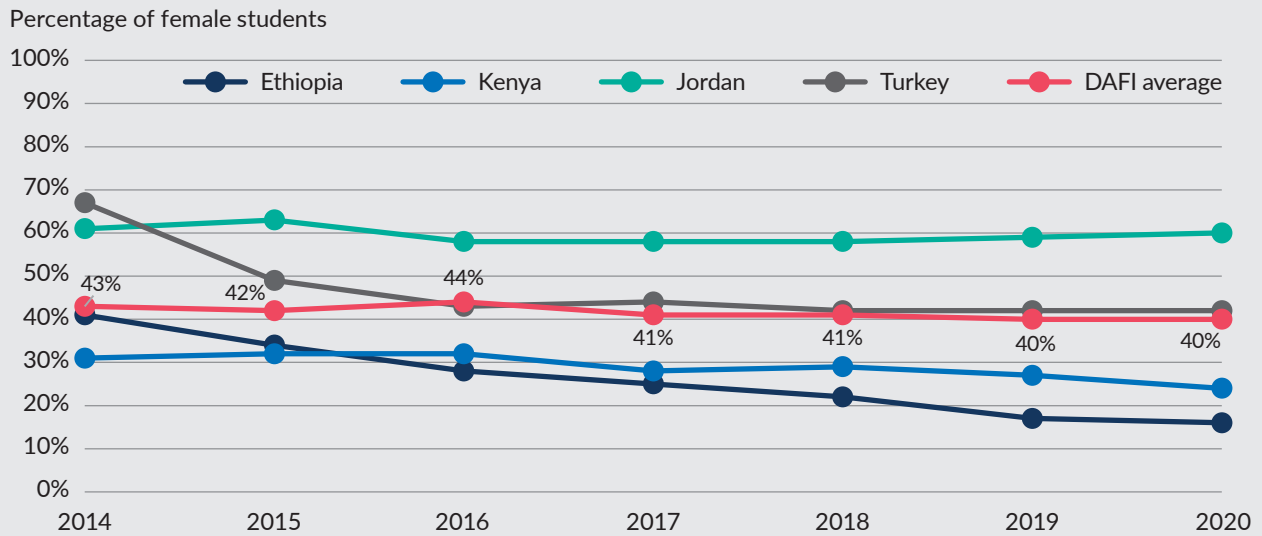
– Female DAFI graduate

Over time, the DAFI programme has succeeded in increasing the number of female recipients. However, scholarships are not awarded to male and female students in equal numbers. The participation of girls in the DAFI programme hovered around 40 per cent between 2014 and 2020 (Figure 2). Several country operations indicated that this situation is mainly caused by the high dropout rates of refugee girls from secondary education, which results in a lower representation of girls in the pool of candidates eligible for the DAFI programme.



DAFI students, Uganda. © UNHCR/Antoine Tardy

<sup>8</sup> The evaluation defined the “award rate” as the number of awards divided by the number of applications in a given country in the same year (expressed as a percentage). There are significant discrepancies in the award rate between countries, with some well-performing country operations such as Jordan and South Africa showing very low award rates. Some variance in the award rate is to be expected. For example, Ethiopia offers particularly advantageous conditions from a financial standpoint, resulting from a cost-sharing agreement with the Government regarding tuition fees for refugees. This means that a high award rate can be justified in light of cost-effectiveness. In addition, UNHCR cannot anticipate variations in the number of applications received, especially in large operations, meaning that the award rate cannot be fully controlled.

**Figure 2.** Share of female students supported 2014–2019, selected largest operations


Source: UNHCR student database (2021)

**E2) How, and to what extent, has the DAFI programme allowed its beneficiaries to a) engage in the development of their communities; b) become role models in refugee communities; c) maintain a positive outlook on life and d) develop positive views towards peace, non-discrimination, gender equality and against radicalization?**

- **Civic engagement:** The evaluation found variation across countries in implementing this component. Unstructured civic engagement<sup>9</sup> is more common than engagement within structured, collective organizations. KIIs with refugees provided anecdotal evidence that some DAFI students obtained part-time jobs or felt that they became more employable because of the skills that they acquired while volunteering. KIIs with IPs revealed that implementing and monitoring the civic engagement component is quite resource-intensive, with IPs struggling to provide a menu of civic engagement choices that are relevant to students' objectives, let alone monitor the results of such engagements.
- **Role models:** KIIs with students (Jordan) and IPs (Chad and Lebanon) highlighted that there are three pathways that lead to DAFI beneficiaries becoming role models.<sup>10</sup> The first is by being selected for the programme, which has a reputation of excellence and competitiveness. The second is by attending prestigious universities in the host country and the third is by completing projects that create social value via the civic engagement experience.
- **Outlook on life:** On average, DAFI beneficiaries maintain a somewhat positive outlook on life, despite the challenging circumstances they live in: 50 per cent of respondents said that they are very happy or relatively happy.
- **Views towards peace:** Due to the design of the evaluation, it is not possible to attribute participation in the DAFI programme to improvements in views towards peace, non-discrimination, gender equality or against discrimination. However, the survey responses show that DAFI students have largely favourable opinions towards gender equality and democracy, and against discrimination.

**E3) What, if any, general lessons can be found to improve the design and the effectiveness of the DAFI programme, as well as other UNHCR interventions that complement DAFI in tertiary education?**

- The UNHCR survey and KIIs highlighted that DAFI programmes implemented by UNHCR in small countries may be characterized by multiple disadvantages, including that they are unlikely to have the necessary influence over higher education institutions (HEIs) or governments to command a reduction in tuition fees or to advocate policy change. This situation occurs if an operation only has a few scholarships, which results in difficulties in finding an entry point with the government or universities. However, some interviews revealed that keeping a high number of countries in the programme is a strategic decision.

<sup>9</sup> This refers to individual, occasional and non-organized activities such as helping children with homework or caring for the elderly.

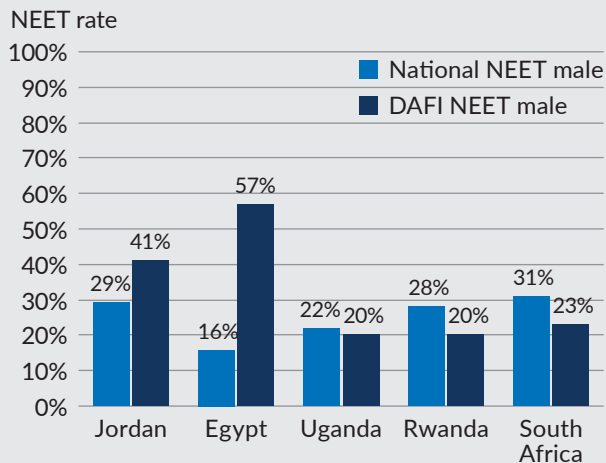
<sup>10</sup> Key informant interviews with students revealed that the first two pathways were more common.

- Multiple sources of data showed that UNHCR has not been as effective as local IPs in providing tailored, consistent monitoring and support to students. Conversely, cross-country evidence has highlighted that national NGO IPs have performed very well in individual monitoring and counselling, with Chad, Jordan and South Africa standing out in this respect.
- DAFI students faced significant challenges in online-only degrees for several reasons, including insufficient access to devices. Only one IP, in Jordan, was able to lend laptops to DAFI students. Data plans in some countries remain unaffordable. In addition, students experience difficulties in navigating the online environments that some HEIs had to rush to set up as institutions shifted to online learning as a result of COVID-related university closures.

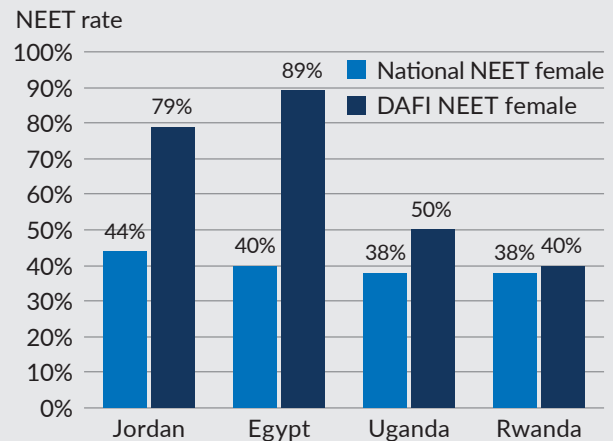
**11) How, and to what extent, has the DAFI programme contributed to the transition of its graduates into labour markets, across countries that guarantee refugees the right to work?**

- Around 52 per cent of DAFI graduates who responded to the refugee survey are not in education, employment or training (NEET). NEET rates among DAFI graduates are high, but they are not significantly different to those of local populations. In several countries, NEET rates for DAFI graduates are indeed lower than the corresponding figures for nationals among male graduates (Figure 3). On the other hand, NEET rates are substantially higher for female graduates, reflecting the intersectionality of gender-related barriers to employment for female refugees (Figure 4).

**Figure 3.** NEET rates in selected countries, male



**Figure 4.** NEET rates in selected countries, female



Source: ILOSTAT (latest available), World Bank data (latest available) and DAFI refugee survey (2021)  
 Note: The data for ILOSTAT World Bank are national data

- Countries where legislation favours the employment of refugees and where DAFI students attend top-ranked HEIs have lower NEET rates. For example, in Egypt and Jordan, which have regulatory frameworks that are less favourable towards refugees, high NEET rates can be observed. However, in countries with favourable legislation such as Rwanda and Uganda, the NEET rate hovers at around 20 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively.

**12) Does the programme have any indirect secondary effects, for example, on participation and retention in secondary education, particularly among girls?**

- Around 83 per cent of IPs indicated that the possibility of being selected for the DAFI programme represents an incentive for refugee students to complete secondary education. Data from the refugee survey confirms this finding. However, only about 18 per cent of refugees stated that they knew about DAFI prior to completing secondary school (this is also because some refugees were displaced after they had finished secondary school). Out of these, 79 per cent indicated that an awareness of eligibility for DAFI strongly encouraged them to complete secondary education. For refugees who find out about DAFI while in secondary school, this “pull effect” to complete their schooling is significant and has a stronger effect on girls.

**Table 2.** Pull effect of DAFI awareness on the completion of secondary education

	Refugees who became aware of DAFI before finishing secondary school	Refugees who felt strongly encouraged to complete secondary school thanks to an awareness of DAFI
<b>Males</b>	21%	74%
<b>Females</b>	15%	85%
<b>Total</b>	18%	79%

Source: DAFI refugee survey (2021)

- The pull effect is stronger in camps, with 34 per cent of encamped refugees stating that they became aware of the DAFI programme before completing secondary education. Out of this number, 88 per cent felt strongly encouraged to complete their secondary education as a result of the possibility of applying for DAFI. This may be linked to the fact that information flows faster in camps. Across countries, the pull effect is clear and varies considerably in size. One key element that explains this variation is the timing of displacement: In Ecuador, for example, Venezuelan refugees are a recently displaced refugee population compared to refugee populations in Jordan, Rwanda or Uganda who have typically been displaced for longer and are thus more likely to have an awareness of the programme. In addition, the fact that DAFI has been running for much longer in Jordan, Rwanda or Uganda than it has in Ecuador helps to create an enabling environment for this pull effect.

**Table 3.** Pull effect of DAFI awareness on the completion of secondary education, by country

Country	Refugees who became aware of DAFI before finishing secondary school	Refugees who felt strongly encouraged to complete secondary school thanks to awareness of DAFI
<b>South Africa</b>	22%	100%
<b>Rwanda</b>	54%	89%
<b>Uganda</b>	58%	80%
<b>Turkey</b>	12%	71%
<b>Jordan</b>	42%	69%
<b>Ecuador</b>	9%	33%

Source: DAFI refugee survey (2021)

Note: Highest values in green, lowest in red

## Recommendations

**1) UNHCR should pursue affirmative actions to improve the participation of girls in the DAFI programme.** This includes:

- Implementing a set of successful practices at each stage of the programme (application, selection, progression and graduation) to narrow the gender gap (see the blue box in this section).
- Connecting country operations that are experiencing difficulties in increasing the participation of girls with country operations that have managed to increase female participation over time via a series of evidence-informed and periodic workshops (such as quarterly workshops).
- Preparing improvement plans for large DAFI country operations (in other words, operations with over 100 scholarships awarded per year) in which the participation of girls remains below 30 per cent, aimed at improving the gender balance before receiving their next round of DAFI funding.

Good practices identified for increasing female participation:

- Implementing outreach initiatives in the refugee community that encourage schools, parents and religious leaders to contribute to changes in social norms with regard to the importance of higher education for girls.
- Ensuring female representatives are available throughout the application process (such as a female hotline operator, a designated email address for female students and so on).
- Leveraging existing women’s networks in communities to share information about the DAFI programme and encourage girls to continue their education.
- Monitoring the progress of promising female secondary school students in refugee communities and encouraging them to apply for DAFI via tailored messaging or direct support.
- Ensuring that at least 35 per cent of representatives on the DAFI selection committee/selection panels are women, as they are more likely to produce gender-balanced pools of beneficiaries.
- Pairing female students with female academic advisers and ensuring that all staff working with female students are trained in age, gender and diversity approaches and understand the programme objectives for gender parity.
- Providing targeted academic support to female students to ensure timely progression, proactively identifying at-risk students and making interventions according to personalized action plans.
- Aiming for gender parity in the provision of internships under DAFI.
- Providing “bridging” scholarships to high-performing female refugee students who are in their last year of secondary school and are facing financial hardship. This could help to offset the financial constraints which typically prevent refugee girls from completing their secondary education while reinforcing the pull effect of DAFI awareness on the completion of secondary education.

**2) UNHCR country operations should reduce variations in the DAFI experience by retaining components of the programme design that have worked best. This includes:**

- Transferring sufficient allowances in a timely manner to allow beneficiaries to focus on their studies.
- Discontinuing or re-conceptualizing additional components of the DAFI programme which have not been consistently and effectively implemented (depending on the country), such as civic engagement activities and the DAFI club.
- Establishing a minimum set of skills that DAFI participants should attain in each operation. These should include: a) language skills in at least English or French, depending on location and b) IT skills with at least a working knowledge of the most commonly used applications.

**3) To exploit the pull effect on the completion of secondary education, UNHCR should award scholarships regularly and consistently, and should maintain a stable intake of new DAFI students every year:**

- UNHCR should invest in activities to increase awareness of the DAFI programme among secondary school students in refugee communities, especially via social media and secondary school teachers.

**4) UNHCR and IPs should improve planning to avoid delays in transferring funds, which in turn results in delays in students receiving their allowance.**

- UNHCR should ensure that all agreements and provisions are signed well in advance of the academic year, so that allowances can reach students’ bank accounts before the start of the academic year.
- UNHCR should ensure that students understand all reporting requirements upon selection for DAFI since delays can also result from students misunderstanding their obligations in connection with participation in the programme.



Shimiyana, DAFI student, Zambia. © UNHCR/Antoine Tardy



5) The donor community should provide predictable, multi-year funding to DAFI since the programme has shown outstanding and consistent results for beneficiaries. In addition:

- UNHCR should fundraise specifically for DAFI, since the programme has high absorption capacity and is capable of delivering tangible results.
- UNHCR should prepare a resource mobilization strategy to diversify the pool of donors, including both public and private contributors.
- UNHCR operations and IPs should consistently engage in negotiations with HEIs to obtain favourable conditions to enrol the highest possible number of students, given the success of several DAFI country operations in negotiating fee reductions with individual HEIs.

6) UNHCR operations should provide support to DAFI scholarship recipients as they transition into employment by:

- Considering the expansion of DAFI to countries where there is greater potential for graduates to transition into employment. This includes countries where HEIs are delivering high-quality education and where award rates have been low.
- Building the capacity of large, public HEI hosting DAFIs to improve the quality of careers services in finding suitable roles, sharing the skills required for job hunting and CV writing, and providing internships.
- Enrolling DAFI students in HEIs that offer internships as a core component of undergraduate courses.
- Establishing entrepreneurship training opportunities with relevant entities, such as HEIs, businesses, networks and so on.
- Creating links with existing youth employment programmes and working to create lists of DAFI graduates that can be shared with the wider development community for potential internship opportunities.
- Forging partnerships with universities, programmes or institutions that are effective in fostering the transition to employment at the local level, and working to identify and understand the drivers that facilitate this transition.
- Improving monitoring systems to track outcomes of DAFI graduates and returnees.

7) UNHCR should create a virtual space dedicated to knowledge management and the exchange of good practices. All DAFI IPs across all the different countries should be able to access this space to establish a culture of documenting and exchanging successful implementation practices.



Francesca, DAFI alumni, Zambia. © UNHCR/Antoine Tardy