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FACTSHEET

ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

COUNTRY COMPARISON USING GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO

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1. Background

It is widely acknowledged that tertiary education remains instrumental in fostering economic growth, reducing poverty, and enhancing innovation[1]. There is substantial evidence indicating that through improved access to tertiary education, a country can have a highly skilled workforce that is more employable and productive, earn higher wages and cope with economic shocks better[2]. The degree of participation in tertiary education therefore has key implications for a country's relative international position on the production of human capital stock and labour productivity. The National Planning Commission[3] notes that although the South African higher education[4] system functions relatively well, it continues to suffer from low participation rates. Consequently, South Africa is a mid-level performer in knowledge production by international standards.

A commonly used measure of participation in tertiary education is the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER). The GER is often used internationally as a proxy measure to compare access to education across numerous countries. Such comparisons serve as a barometer for how countries perform in terms of their education systems, and they also serve as indicators used to measure a country's competitiveness against other countries. Investors often draw on this indicator to assess investment potential in a country.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to assess whether South Africa's participation rate at universities fares well when compared to that of other countries.

3. Definition and Interpretation of GER

GER (also called the participation rate) for tertiary education is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in tertiary education regardless of age, by the population of the applicable age group, and multiplying by 100[5]. UNESCO estimates the population of the official age for tertiary education as the 5-year age group immediately following upper secondary education. For example, if upper secondary (in South Africa) formally ends at 17 years, then 18-22 is the 5-year age group immediately following upper secondary education[6].

This Fact Sheet uses data available from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). The UIS obtains education-related data from all UNESCO member countries and maps these to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to ensure the

[1] World Bank (2022). Understanding poverty. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation#1
[2] World Bank (2022). Understanding poverty. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation#1
[3] National Planning Commission (2012). National Development Plan 2030. Our Future-make it work. Chapter 9: Improving Education, Training and Innovation. Republic of South Africa. https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/NDP_Chapters/devplan_ch9_0.pdf
[4] Refers to university education in the South African context.
[5] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR
[6] http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/gross-enrolment-ratio-tertiary-education-sex

comparability of education programs across different countries. Population data are drawn from the United Nations Population Division. Therefore, all the GER statistics presented in this Fact Sheet were obtained as precisely calculated and reported by the World Bank (making use of the data from UNESCO and the United Nations Population Division) to allow the use of a single source and ensure a consistent methodology across countries.

With regards to interpretation, a high value of the computed GER indicates a high degree of participation in tertiary education by students of all ages in the country, and vice versa. It is important to note that the GER is not a measure of the extent to which a particular age cohort of people participate in tertiary education[7]. Rather, it measures participation levels irrespective of the age of participants. Therefore, in the case of some countries, a trend towards higher GER could be attributed to a declining population in the age group used in the calculation of GER instead of improvements in actual enrolments.

4. Limitation of GER

The GER is a broad measure of participation in tertiary education and does not take into account differences in the duration of programmes between countries or between different levels of education and fields of study. It is standardised to some extent by measuring it relative to a 5-year age group for all countries, but may underestimate participation especially in countries with poorly developed tertiary education systems or those where provision is limited to first tertiary programmes, which are generally shorter than 5 years in duration[8]. Moreover, GER can exceed 100% due to the inclusion of over-aged and under-aged students because of early or late entrants, and repetition. In such a scenario, a rigorous interpretation of GER would need additional information to assess the extent of repetition, late entrants and so on[9].

5. Definition of Tertiary Education

Tertiary education builds on secondary education, providing learning activities in specific specialised fields of education. It aims at learning at a high level of complexity and specialisation. Tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education. It comprises International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 5 (labelled as Short-cycle tertiary education), level 6 (labelled as Bachelor's or equivalent level), level 7 (labelled as Master's or equivalent level) and level 8 (labelled as Doctoral or equivalent level).

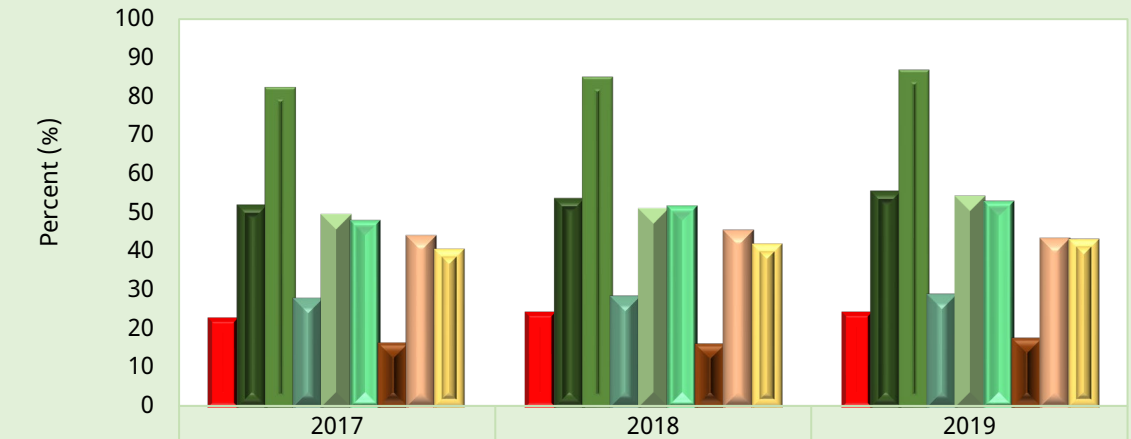
[7] This is a different indicator – often referred to as Net Enrolment Rate and sometimes as Specific Age Group Enrolment Rate.
[8] UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022). Glossary: Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education. UNESCO. Accessed 17 February 2022. http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/gross-enrolment-ratio-tertiary-education-sex
[9]UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022). Glossary: Gross enrolment ratio. UNESCO. Accessed 17 February 2022. http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/gross-enrolment-ratio

According to the World Bank[10], tertiary education, whether or not to an advanced research qualification, normally requires, as a minimum condition of admission, the successful completion of education at the secondary level.

6. Findings

Figure 1 shows that during 2017-2019, South Africa's GER remained much lower than the GERs of peer BRICS economies (Brazil, China, India and Russia), and other comparable emerging economies like Malaysia and Mexico. Although South Africa's GER improved slightly to 23.9% in 2019 from 22.4% in 2017, its performance in 2019 remained lower than that of countries like Russia (86.4%), Brazil (55.1%), China (53.8%), Algeria (52.6%), Malaysia (43.1%), Mexico (42.8%) and India (28.6%). Despite the steady improvement in South Africa's reported GER, policy measures and strategies implemented to promote equitable, quality and affordable access to tertiary education should be strengthened to improve the country's performance in tertiary education.

Figure 1: South Africa's GER relative to BRICS nations and selected countries, 2017-2019[11]



	2017	2018	2019
South Africa	22,4	23,8	23,9
Brazil	51,6	53,3	55,1
Russia	81,9	84,6	86,4
India	27,4	28,1	28,6
China	49,1	50,6	53,8
Algeria	47,6	51,4	52,6
Ghana	16,0	15,7	17,2
Malaysia	43,7	45,1	43,1
Mexico	40,2	41,5	42,8

Source: World Bank, 2022

Note 1: Countries included in the analysis were selected based on consistent availability of data.

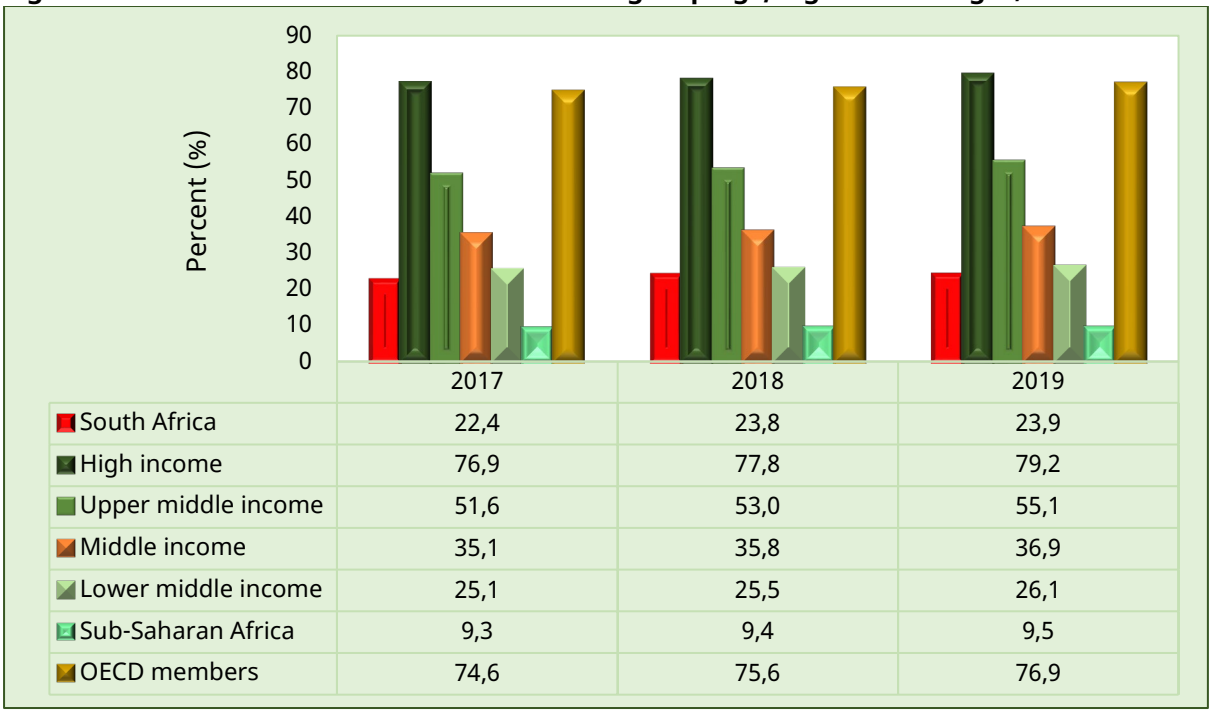
Note 2: All the GER statistics presented in this Fact Sheet were obtained as precisely calculated and reported by the World Bank.

[10] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR

[11] World Bank (2022). World Development Indicators. Gross enrolment, tertiary (%). Accessed 1 March 2022. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR

Figure 2 shows that over the period 2017-2019, South Africa's GER remained much lower than average GERs of the OECD, high income, upper middle income, middle income and even the lower middle income countries. In 2019, South Africa's GER which stood at 23.9 percent compared much lower than averages of the high income countries (79.2%), OECD members (76.9%), upper middle income nations (55.1%), middle income countries (36.9%) and lower middle income nations (26.1%). However, South Africa's participation rate was much higher than the averages of the Sub-Saharan African (SSA) region which remained below 10% in each year during the entire period under review.

Figure 2: South Africa's GER relative to income groupings/regional averages, 2017-2019[12]



	2017	2018	2019
South Africa	22,4	23,8	23,9
High income	76,9	77,8	79,2
Upper middle income	51,6	53,0	55,1
Middle income	35,1	35,8	36,9
Lower middle income	25,1	25,5	26,1
Sub-Saharan Africa	9,3	9,4	9,5
OECD members	74,6	75,6	76,9

Source: World Bank, 2022

Note 1: Countries included in the analysis were selected based on consistent availability of data.

Note 2: All the GER statistics presented in this Fact Sheet were obtained as precisely calculated and reported by the World Bank.

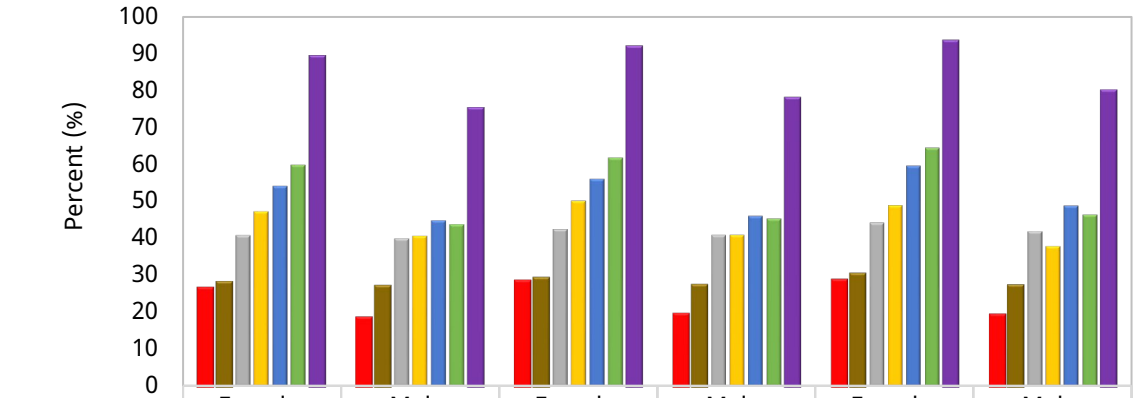
Figure 3 depicts South Africa's participation rates in tertiary education disaggregated by gender, relative to participation rates in the selected comparable international countries. Between 2017 and 2019, female GER in South Africa constantly remained higher than the GER of male counterparts. Female GER increased from 26.4% in 2017 to 28.6% in 2019, while male GER marginally increased from 18.4% in 2017 to 19.2% in 2019.

Despite being higher than GERs for males, participation in tertiary education by females in South Africa remained lower than female participation rates in all selected comparable emerging nations, namely Brazil, China, India, Malaysia, Mexico and Russia. Throughout

[12] World Bank (2022). World Development Indicators. Gross enrolment, tertiary (%). Accessed 1 March 2022. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR

the period 2017-2019, both female and male participation rates in South Africa constantly remained lower than parallel gender-based participation rates in aforesaid countries.

Figure 3: South Africa's GER by gender relative to selected countries, 2017-2019[13, 14]



	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
	2017		2018		2019	
South Africa	26,4	18,4	28,3	19,4	28,6	19,2
India	28,0	26,9	29,1	27,2	30,2	27,1
Mexico	40,6	39,8	42,3	40,7	44,0	41,7
Malaysia	47,1	40,5	49,9	40,7	48,7	37,7
China	54,0	44,7	55,9	45,9	59,5	48,7
Brazil	59,7	43,7	61,6	45,2	64,3	46,3
Russia	89,1	75,0	91,7	77,8	93,2	79,8

Source: World Bank, 2022

Note 1: Countries included in the analysis were selected based on consistent availability of data.

Note 2: All the GER statistics presented in this Fact Sheet were obtained as precisely calculated and reported by the World Bank.

7. Conclusion

Despite significant gains in access to Tertiary Education, South Africa's participation rates in tertiary education remain considerably lower relative to that of other BRICS nations (Brazil, China, India and Russia) and comparable emerging economies, particularly Malaysia and Mexico. Despite having higher participation rates than averages of SSA, South Africa's low performance by international standards suggests the strong need to strengthen its policy measures to accelerate expansion of access to higher education.

The country's National Development Plan (NDP) claims that South Africa can realise an improvement in the production of the required skills and human capital stock in the economy through higher participation rates in tertiary education. It therefore targets a

[13] World Bank (2022). World Development Indicators. Gross enrolment, tertiary, female (%). Accessed 1 March 2022. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR.FE

[14] World Bank (2022). World Development Indicators. Gross enrolment, tertiary, male (%). Accessed 1 March 2022. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR.MA

participation rate of more than 30% by 2030 in tertiary education; one that might likely be difficult to achieve if current trends in enrolment growth rates are maintained for the remaining eight years towards the year 2030.