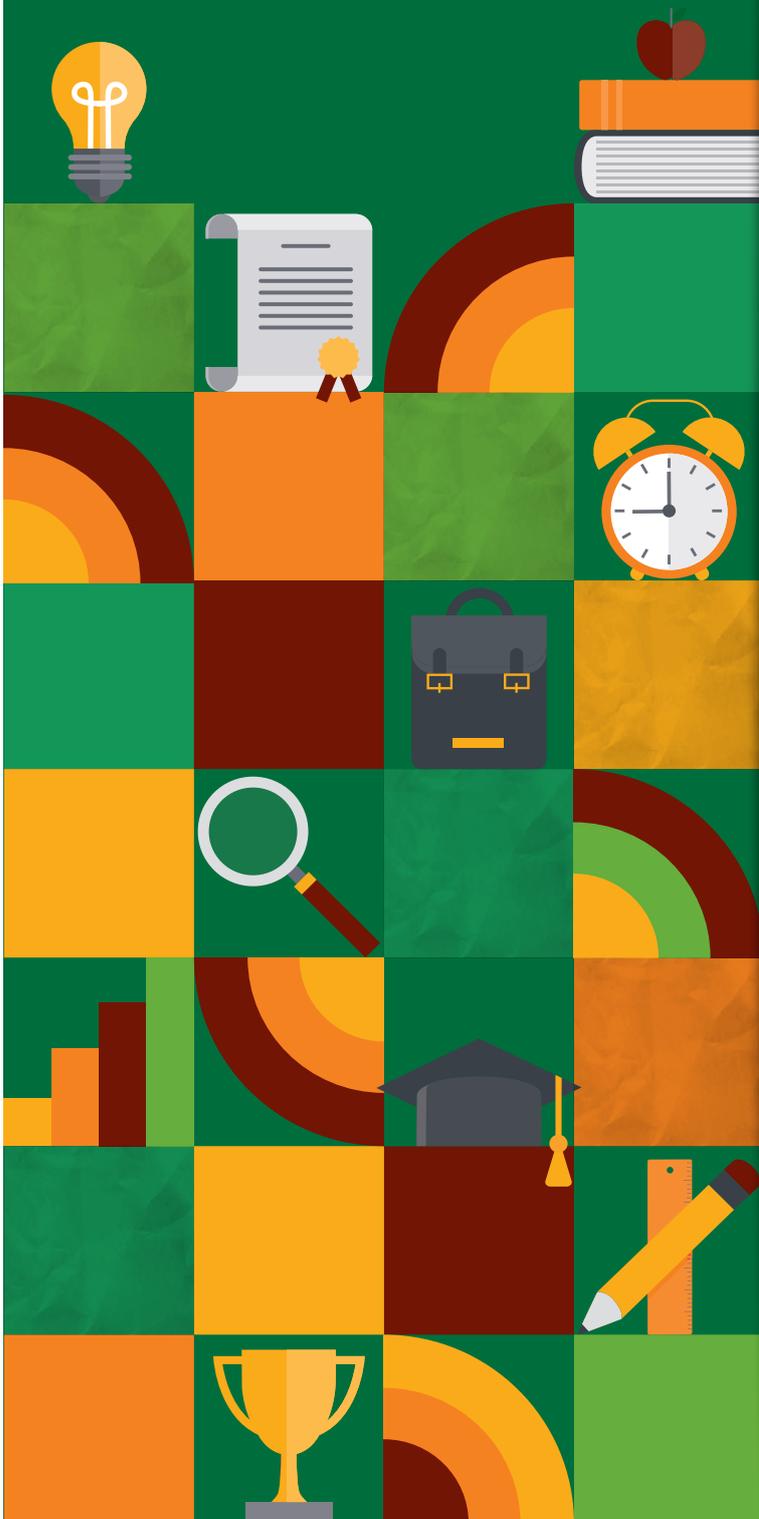


MARCH 2023

# FACT SHEET



## ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

Country Comparison using Gross Enrolment Ratio



### BACKGROUND

The level of participation in tertiary education has key implications for a country's international position on the production of graduates. The National Planning Commission<sup>1</sup> notes that although the South African higher education<sup>2</sup> system functions relatively well, the system still suffers from low participation rates, making it a mid-level performer in terms of knowledge production, by international standards.

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



higher education  
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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to assess whether South Africa's participation rate at tertiary education institutions fares well relative to other countries.



## DEFINITION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE GER

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) (also known as 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 age group, which officially corresponds to tertiary education, and multiplying by 100.<sup>3</sup> According to the The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the population of the official age for tertiary education is estimated to be the five-year age group immediately following upper secondary education. For South Africa, the 20–24-year-old population was used to calculate the GER, while the GERs for other nations were obtained as provided by the World Bank.

Data on tertiary education are collected by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and mapped onto the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), the official framework used to ensure the comparability of education programmes at an international level. Population data are drawn from the United Nations (UN) 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 UN Population Division), to allow the use of a single source and to 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.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it measures participation levels irrespective of the age of participants. In the case of some countries, a trend towards a higher GER could be attributed to a declining population in the age group used in the calculation of the GER, instead of actual improvements in enrolments.



## LIMITATIONS OF THE GER

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The GER is a broad measure of participation in tertiary education and does not take into account differences in the duration of programmes across countries, or between different levels of education and fields of study. It is standardised, to some extent, by measuring it relative to a five-year age group for all countries; however, it can 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 five years in duration.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the 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 the GER would need additional information to assess the extent of repetition, late entrants and so on.<sup>6</sup>



## DEFINITION OF TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Tertiary education builds on secondary education, providing learning activities in specialised fields of education. It aims at learning at a high level of complexity and specialisation. According to the World Bank,<sup>7</sup> tertiary education, whether or not in an advanced research qualification, normally requires the successful completion of education at the secondary level as a minimum condition of admission. Tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education. It comprises ISCED level 5 (short-cycle tertiary education)<sup>8</sup>, level 6 (Bachelor's or equivalent level), level 7 (Master's or equivalent level) and level 8 (Doctoral or equivalent level).



## TERTIARY EDUCATION COMPRISES:

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ISCED LEVEL 5

Short-cycle tertiary education

ISCED LEVEL 6

Bachelor's or equivalent level

ISCED LEVEL 7

Master's or equivalent level

ISCED LEVEL 8

Doctoral or equivalent level

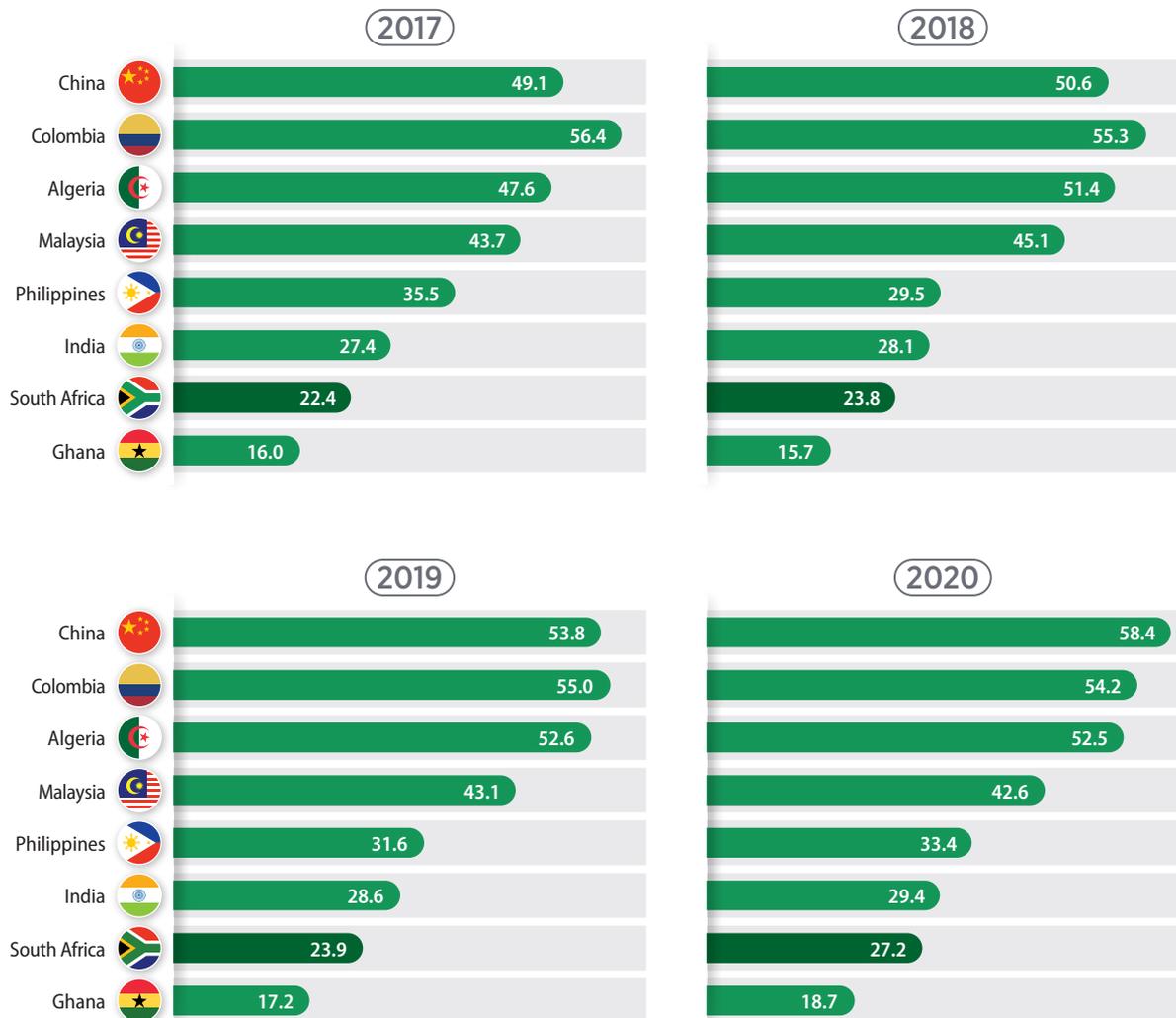
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## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Figure 1 shows that despite significant gains over the past four years, South Africa's GER in tertiary education has remained consistently lower than that of other comparable middle-income nations, such as China, Colombia, Algeria and Malaysia, from 2017–2020. In 2020, South Africa's tertiary GER stood at 27.2%, significantly below that of China (58.4%), Colombia (54.2%), Algeria (52.5%) and Malaysia (42.6%). Conversely, South Africa's participation rate in tertiary education was relatively closer to that of India, and higher than that of Ghana, from 2017–2020. These findings suggest the need for improved participation rates in tertiary education in South Africa.

**FIGURE 1: South Africa's GER in tertiary education relative to selected countries, 2017–2020<sup>9</sup>**



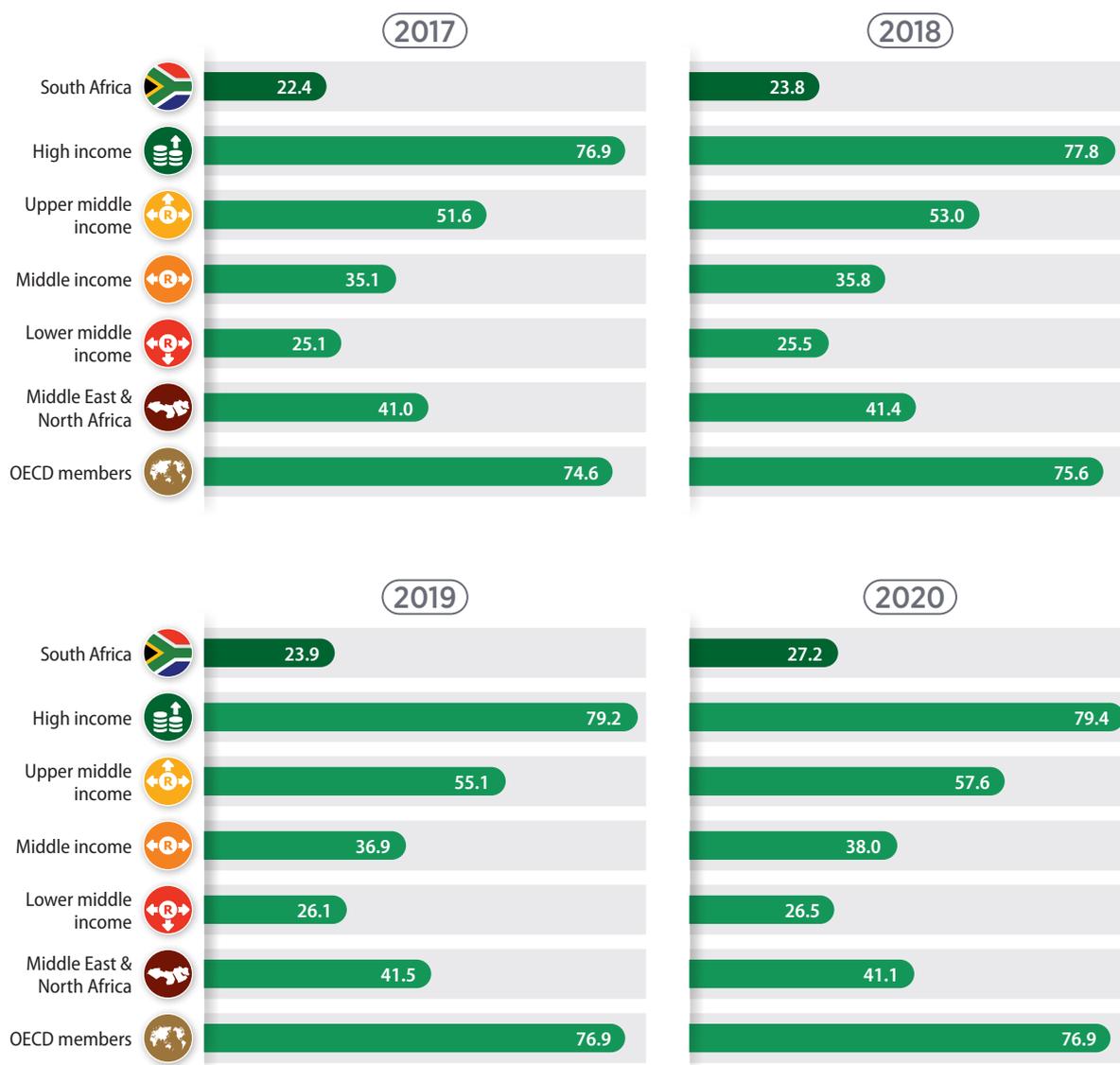
Source: World Bank, 2022

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, using education data from the UNESCO UIS and population data from the UN Population Division. All the data are mapped to the ISCED, to ensure comparability of education programmes at an international level. Additionally, using a single source for population data standardises definitions, estimations and interpolation methods, to ensure a consistent methodology across countries. In other fact sheets and reports, South Africa's GER statistics are calculated using mid-year population estimates from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), while in this Fact Sheet, the population data used by the World Bank comes from the UN; hence, figures may differ.

Figure 2 shows that South Africa’s participation rate in tertiary education also remained significantly lower than the averages of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members, Middle East and North Africa regions, as well as high-income and upper-middle-income nations, from 2017–2020. South Africa’s GER of 27.2% in 2020 was much lower than the averages of the OECD members (76.9%), high-income (79.4%), upper-middle-income (57.6%), Middle East and North Africa (41.1%), and middle-income (38.0%) regions. Between 2017 and 2019, South Africa’s participation rate remained lower than the average of lower-middle-income nations but stood slightly higher in 2020.

**FIGURE 2: South Africa’s GER relative to income groupings/regional averages, 2017–2020<sup>10</sup>**



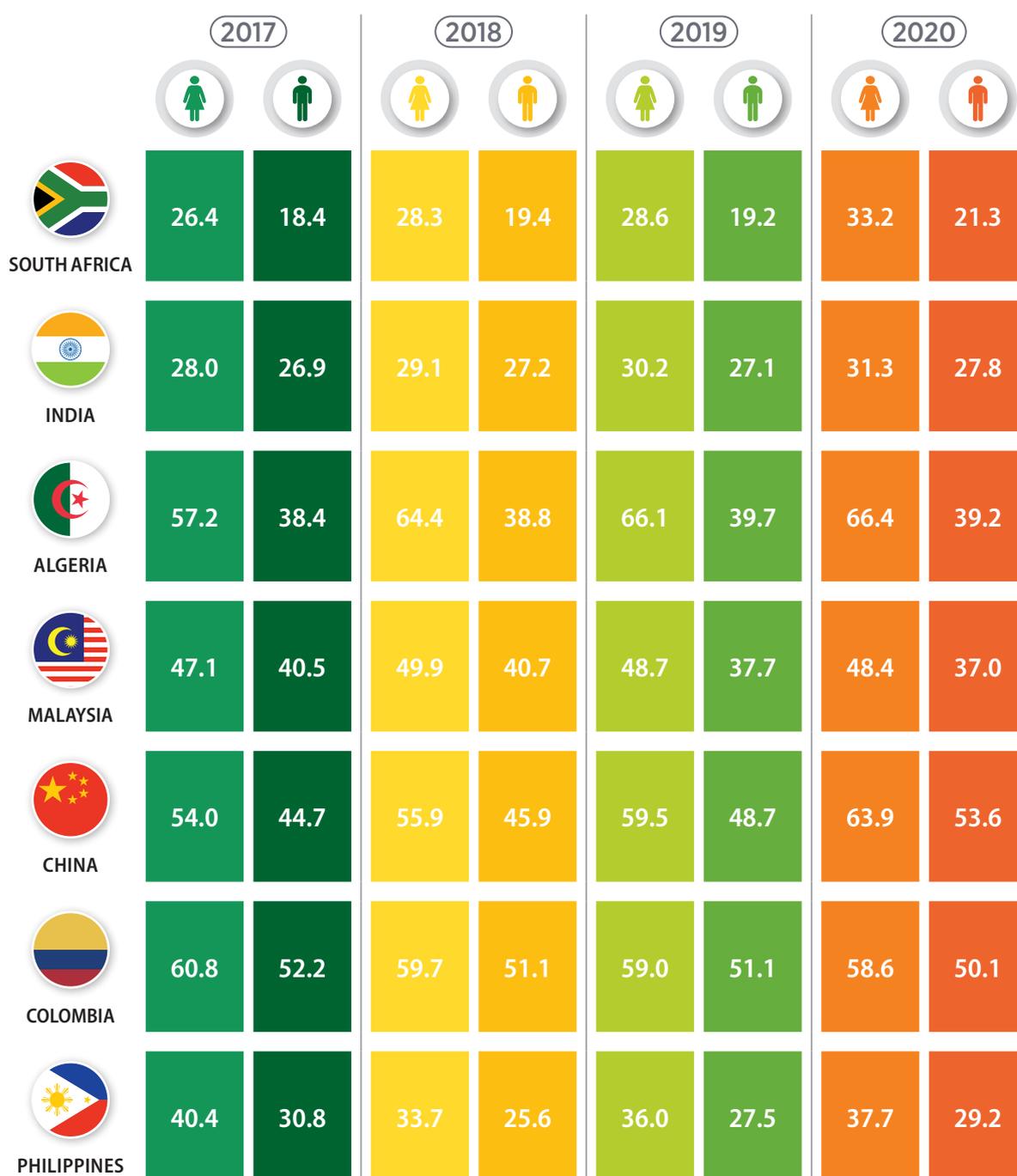
Source: World Bank, 2022

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 presents South Africa's participation rates in tertiary education disaggregated by gender, relative to corresponding participation rates in selected comparable countries. South Africa's female participation rates in tertiary education remained consistently higher than that of other comparable countries, such as India, Algeria, Malaysia, China, Colombia and the Philippines. However, in 2020, countries such as Algeria, China, Colombia, Malaysia and the Philippines had higher female participation rates than South Africa.

**FIGURE 3:** South Africa's GER by gender relative to selected countries, 2017–2020<sup>11, 12</sup>



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.



## CONCLUSION

It is generally well known that tertiary education is instrumental in reducing poverty and boosting shared prosperity. It benefits not only the individual but also society as a whole. People with a tertiary education are more employable and productive, and also earn higher wages compared with those who have lower levels of education.

However, despite significant growth over the past four years, South Africa's participation rates in tertiary education remain markedly lower, relative to that of comparable middle-income and emerging economies, such as China, Colombia, Algeria, Malaysia and the Philippines. South Africa's low performance by international standards suggests the need to implement policy measures that can accelerate improvement in access to higher education by the country's population.

The National Development Plan (NDP 2030) claims that, through higher participation rates in tertiary education, South Africa can markedly improve the production of the required skills and human resources in the economy. It therefore targets a participation rate of more than 30%<sup>13</sup> by 2030, one that is likely to be achieved if current trends in enrolment growth are maintained for the next eight years.



## ENDNOTES

1. National Planning Commission. 2012. National Development Plan 2030. Our Future – make it work. *Chapter 9: Improving Education, Training and Innovation*. Republic of South Africa. Available: [https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/NDP\\_Chapters/devplan\\_ch9\\_0.pdf](https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/NDP_Chapters/devplan_ch9_0.pdf)
2. Refers to university education in the South African context.
3. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [2022, November 28]
4. This is a different indicator, often referred to as Net Enrolment Rate and sometimes as Age-specific Enrolment Rate.
5. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *Glossary: Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education, by sex*. UNESCO. Available: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/gross-enrolment-ratio-tertiary-education-sex>
6. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022). *Glossary: Gross enrolment ratio*. UNESCO. Available: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/gross-enrolment-ratio>
7. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [2022, November 28]
8. In South Africa, this includes the Higher Certificate, Advanced Certificate and Diploma.
9. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [2022, November 28]
10. World Bank (2022). World Development Indicators. Gross enrolment, tertiary (%). Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [2022, November 28]
11. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [2022, November 28]
12. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary, male (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [2022, November 28]
13. Bearing in mind that this figure is likely to have been based on StatsSA population data and not the UN Development Programme (DP) population data.



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