AUGUST 2024

FACT SHEET

ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA:

Country Comparison using Gross Enrolment Ratio

BACKGROUND

The level of participation in tertiary education is considered a key social and economic indicator internationally, primarily because tertiary education is crucial for developing a highly skilled, knowledgeable and innovative workforce. In turn, this is essential for economic growth and competitiveness in the modern, knowledge-based economy. Higher levels of tertiary educational attainment generally correlate with increased productivity, technological advancements, and the ability to adapt to changing economic and social conditions. Moreover, access to tertiary education provides individuals, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with opportunities for social and economic mobility, helping to reduce inequality and promote more inclusive societies. In addition, increased participation in tertiary education can lead to better employment prospects, higher incomes, and improved living standards, contributing to greater social cohesion and equality.

higher education & training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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.

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[1] notes that although the South African higher education[2] 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.

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is commonly used to measure the degree of participation in tertiary education. It is often used to compare the education levels of people across countries. The GER is an important indicator for policymakers and educators to track progress towards educational goals, detect gaps, and conduct targeted interventions to increase access to high-quality education for all.

DEFINITION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE GER

The GER (also known as the participation rate) for tertiary education is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled at South African higher education institutions,[3] regardless of age, by the population of the age group, which officially corresponds to tertiary education, and multiplying by 100.[4] According to 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.

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.[5] 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

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.[6] 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.[7]

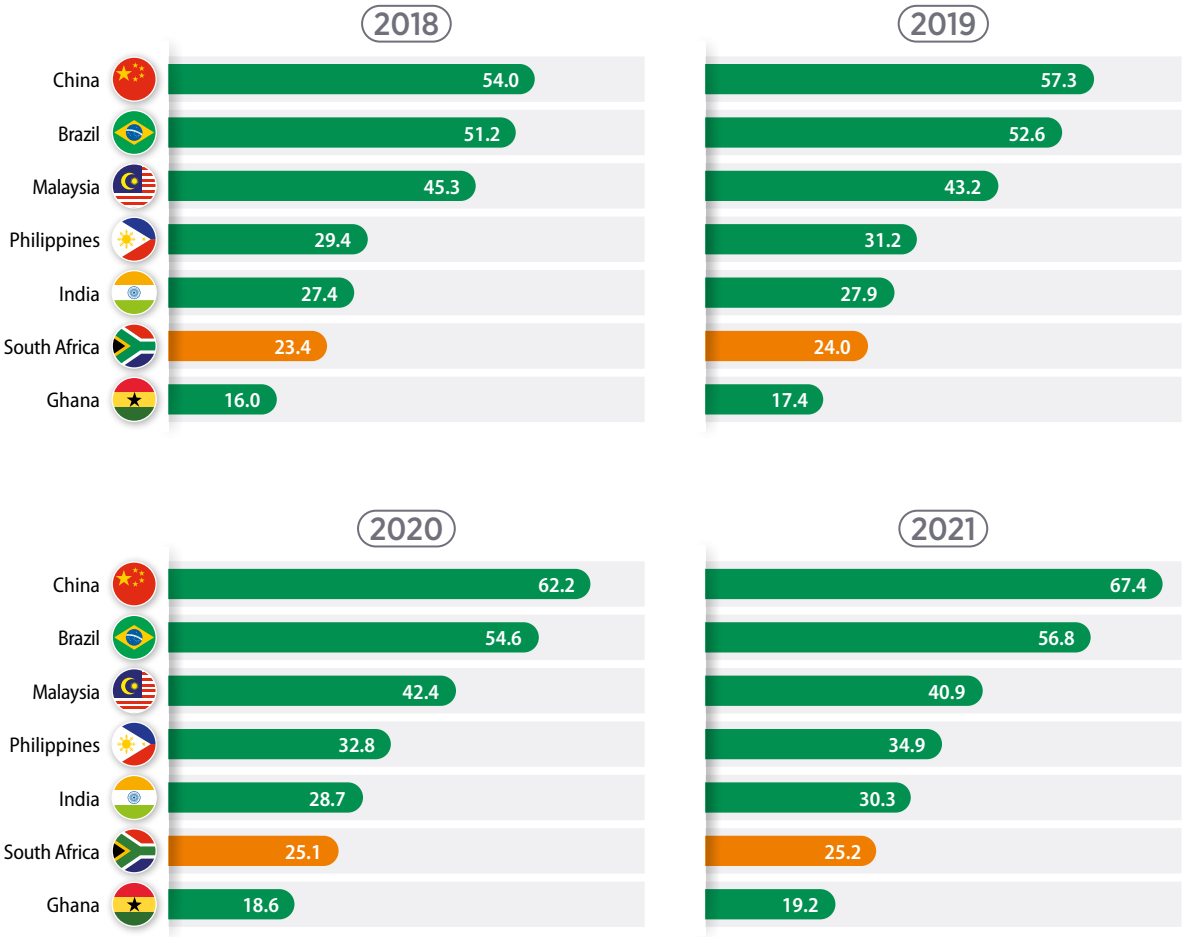
TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

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,[8] 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),[9] level 6 (Bachelor's or equivalent level), level 7 (Master's or equivalent level) and level 8 (Doctoral or equivalent level).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Figure 1 demonstrates that despite significant advances over the last four years, South Africa's GER in tertiary education remained lower than that of other comparable middle-income countries, such as China, Brazil and Malaysia, from 2018–2021. South Africa's tertiary GER was 25.2% in 2021, which was significantly lower than that of China (67.4%), Brazil (56.8%) and Malaysia (40.9%). However, South Africa's GER in tertiary education was relatively closer to that of India (30.3%) and higher than that of Ghana (19.2%). These outcomes point to the need to improve tertiary education participation rates in South Africa.

FIGURE 1: South Africa's GER in tertiary education relative to selected countries, 2018–2021[10]



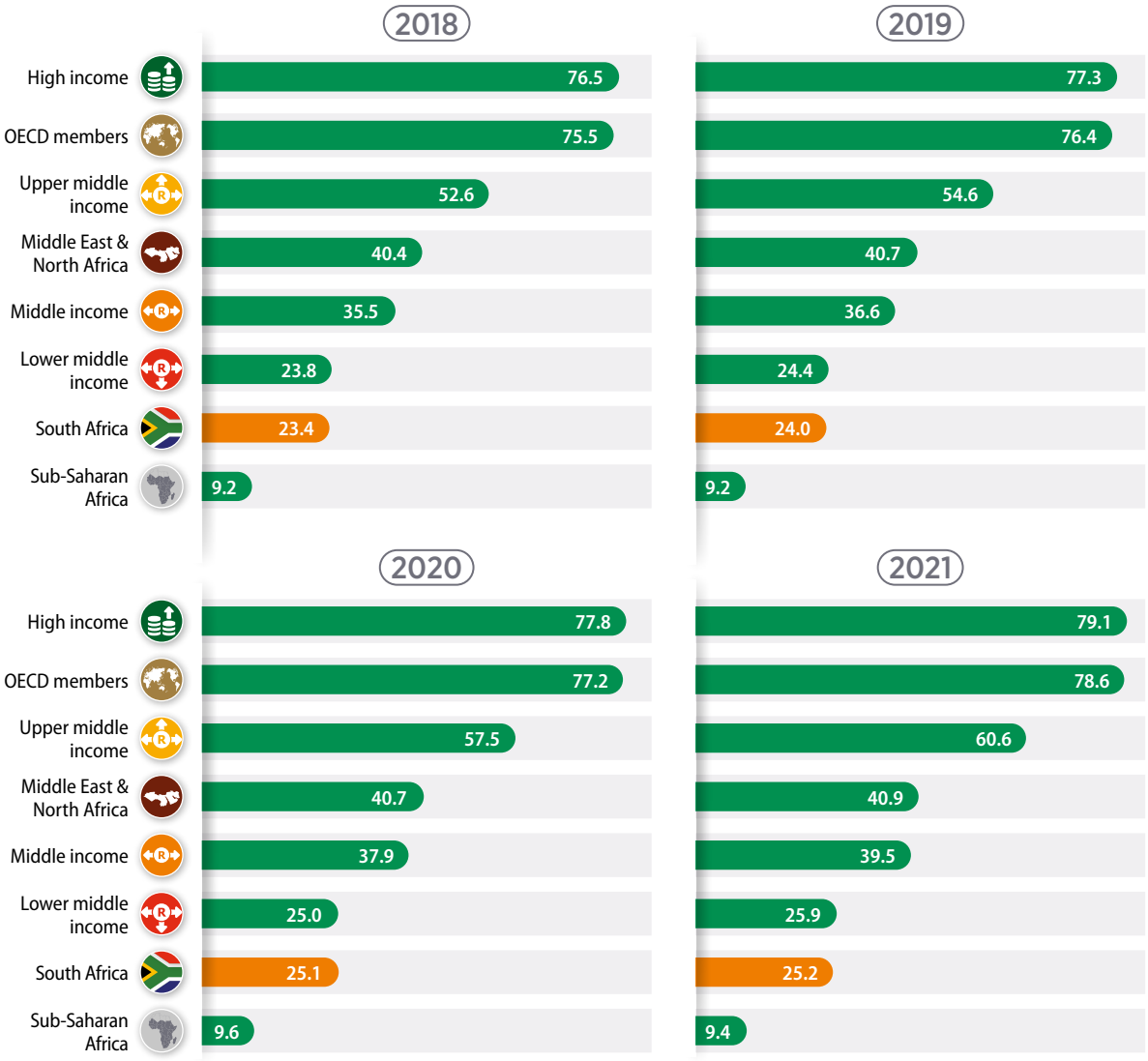
Source: World Bank, 2024

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 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 (Stats SA), while in this Fact Sheet, the population data used by the World Bank comes from the UN; hence, figures may differ.

Figure 2 demonstrates that, from 2018 to 2021, South Africa's participation rate in tertiary education remained substantially lower than the averages of high-income and upper-middle-income countries, the Middle East and North Africa regions, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members. South Africa's GER of 25.2% in 2021 was much lower than the averages of the OECD members (78.6%), high-income (79.1%), upper-middle-income (60.6%), Middle East and North Africa (40.9%), and middle-income (39.5%) regions. Between 2018 and 2019, South Africa's participation rate, although lower, was relatively closer to the average of lower-middle-income nations. On the other hand, South Africa's participation rate in tertiary education was more than double that of the countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region from 2018 to 2021.

FIGURE 2: South Africa's GER relative to income groupings/regional averages, 2018–2021[11]



Source: World Bank, 2024

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

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Table 1 compares South Africa's tertiary education participation rates by gender to those in selected comparable nations. Although South Africa's female participation rate in tertiary education improved from 2018 to 2021, it remained consistently lower than that of other comparable countries, such as China, Brazil, Malaysia and Philippines. And, like the overall GERs, South Africa's female GER in tertiary education was relatively closer to that of India and much higher than that of Ghana.

TABLE 1: South Africa's GER relative to selected countries, 2018–2021[12,13]

	2018		2019		2020		2021	
CHINA	60.3	48.5	64.1	51.4	68.9	56.5	73.9	61.8
BRAZIL	59.1	43.5	61.0	44.4	64.6	45.1	67.8	46.4
MALAYSIA	49.9	40.9	48.8	37.9	48.2	37.0	46.7	35.5
PHILIPPINES	33.4	25.6	35.4	27.2	37.0	28.9	40.3	29.7
INDIA	28.1	26.8	29.2	26.7	30.2	27.3	31.6	29.2
SOUTH AFRICA	27.9	18.9	28.9	19.2	30.9	19.5	31.4	19.2
GHANA	13.7	18.3	15.7	19.1	17.4	19.8	18.3	20.1

Sources: World Bank, 2024

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 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 (Stats SA), while in this Fact Sheet, the population data used by the World Bank comes from the UN; hence, figures may differ.

CONCLUSION

Tertiary education is essential for individual development, economic prosperity, social progress and global advancement. Investing in higher education yields numerous benefits for individuals, societies and the world at large, making it a critical component of sustainable development and prosperity. Tertiary education equips students with the skills needed to meet the everchanging labour market and, for those students in vulnerable circumstances, it is a passport to economic security and a stable future.

Over the past four years, South Africa has seen a substantial rise in tertiary education participation rates. Given past trends, it is evident that the National Development Plan's target of a 30% participation rate for higher education by 2030 will most likely be met. However, South Africa's tertiary education participation rate remains significantly lower than those observed in similar middle-income countries and other BRICS nations, such as Brazil and China. This finding calls for improved strategic measures and innovative solutions by the South African government, in order to enhance access to higher education, thereby promoting inclusivity, equity and socio-economic advancement.

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.nationalplanning-commission.org.za/assets/Documents/NDP_Chapters/devplan_ch9_0.pdf.
2. Refers to university education in the South African context.
3. In tertiary education programmes.
4. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR [2022, November 28].
5. This is a different indicator, often referred to as 'Net Enrolment Rate' and sometimes as 'Age-specific Enrolment Rate'.
6. 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.
7. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *Glossary: Gross enrolment ratio*. UNESCO. Available: http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/gross-enrolment-ratio.
8. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR [2022, November 28].
9. In South Africa, this includes the Higher Certificate, Advanced Certificate and Diploma.
10. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR [2022, November 28].
11. World Bank. 2022. *World Development Indicators. Gross enrolment, tertiary (%)*. Available: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR [2022, November 28].
12. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. *School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)*. The World Bank. Available: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR [2022, November 28].
13. 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].

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