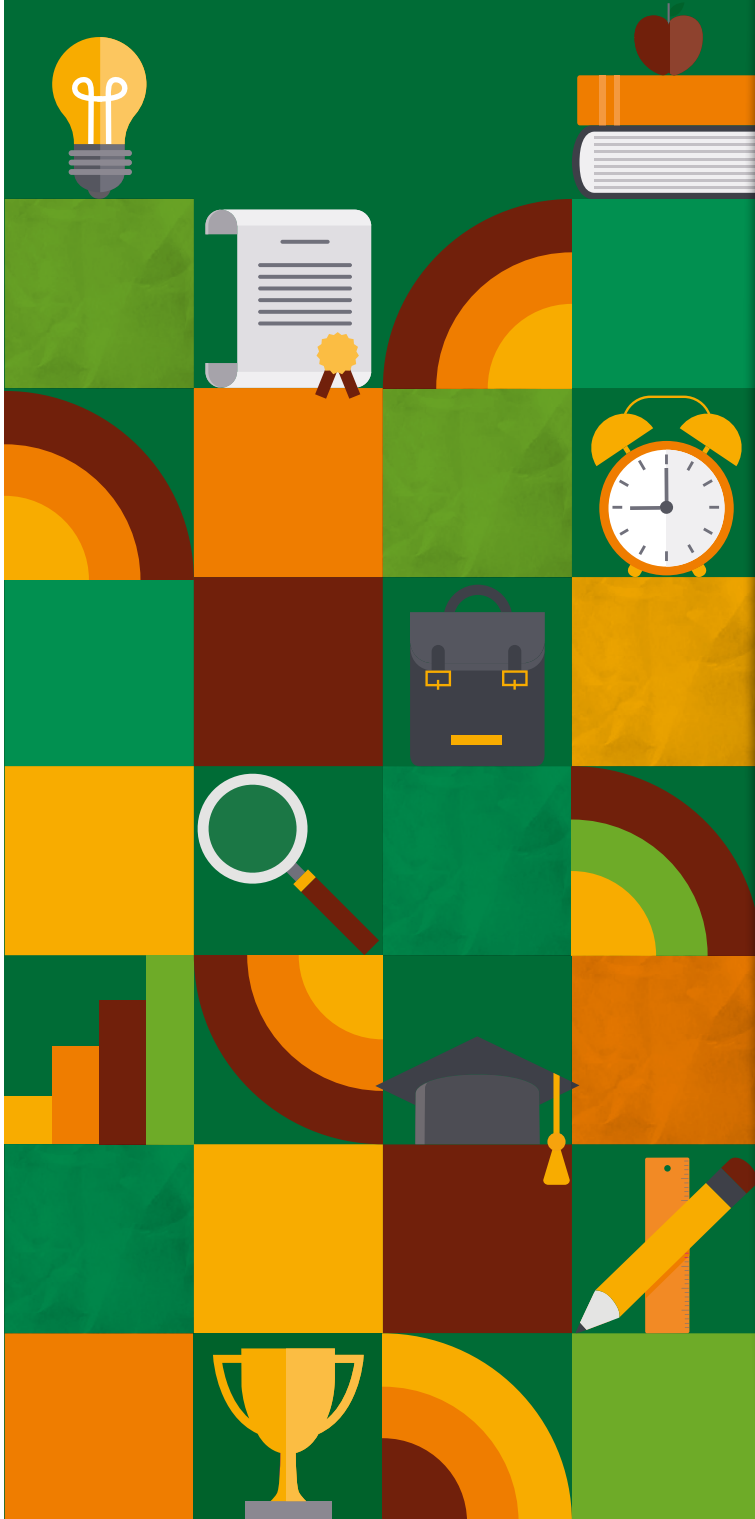


MARCH 2025

FACT SHEET



CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR FORCE



BACKGROUND

This Fact Sheet provides information about the size and shape of the South African labour force in relation to skills and employment. The insights it offers are crucial for developing and monitoring policy measures aimed at boosting skills development and job creation. Improved and inclusive access to post-school education and training opportunities contributes positively to the growth of the economy and its global competitiveness, especially where it increases the share of those in the labour force who have degrees.

This Fact Sheet uses Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) data from Statistics South Africa for the period 2023Q3 to 2024Q3. Definitions of key terms and concepts are provided in an appendix.



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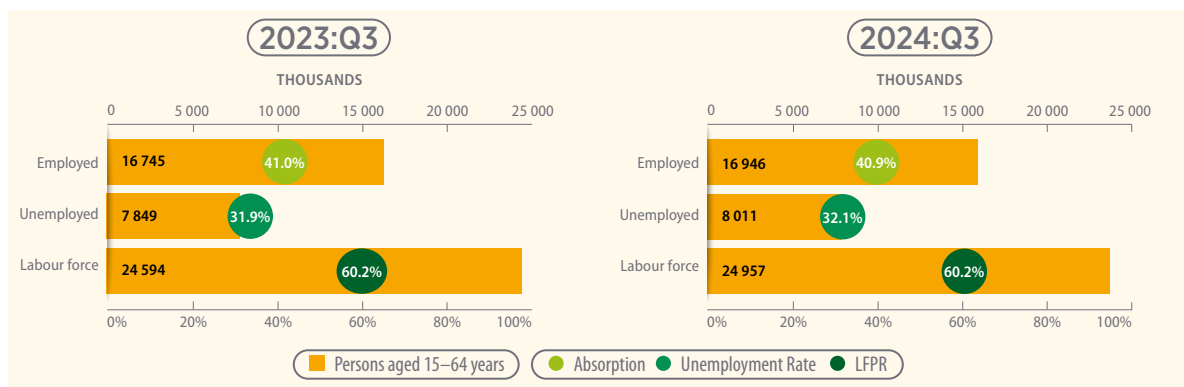


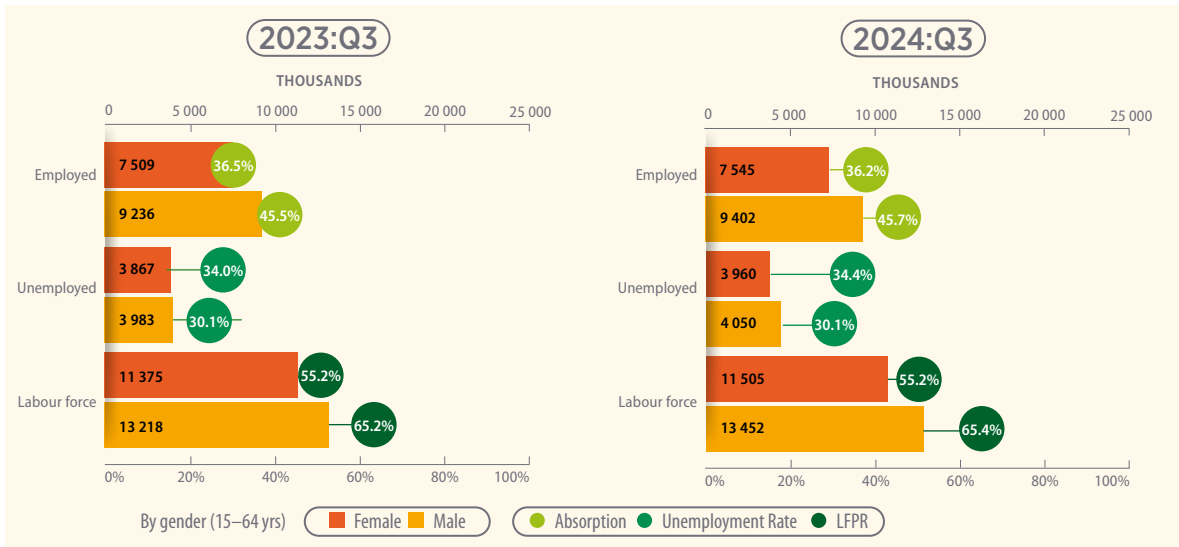
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

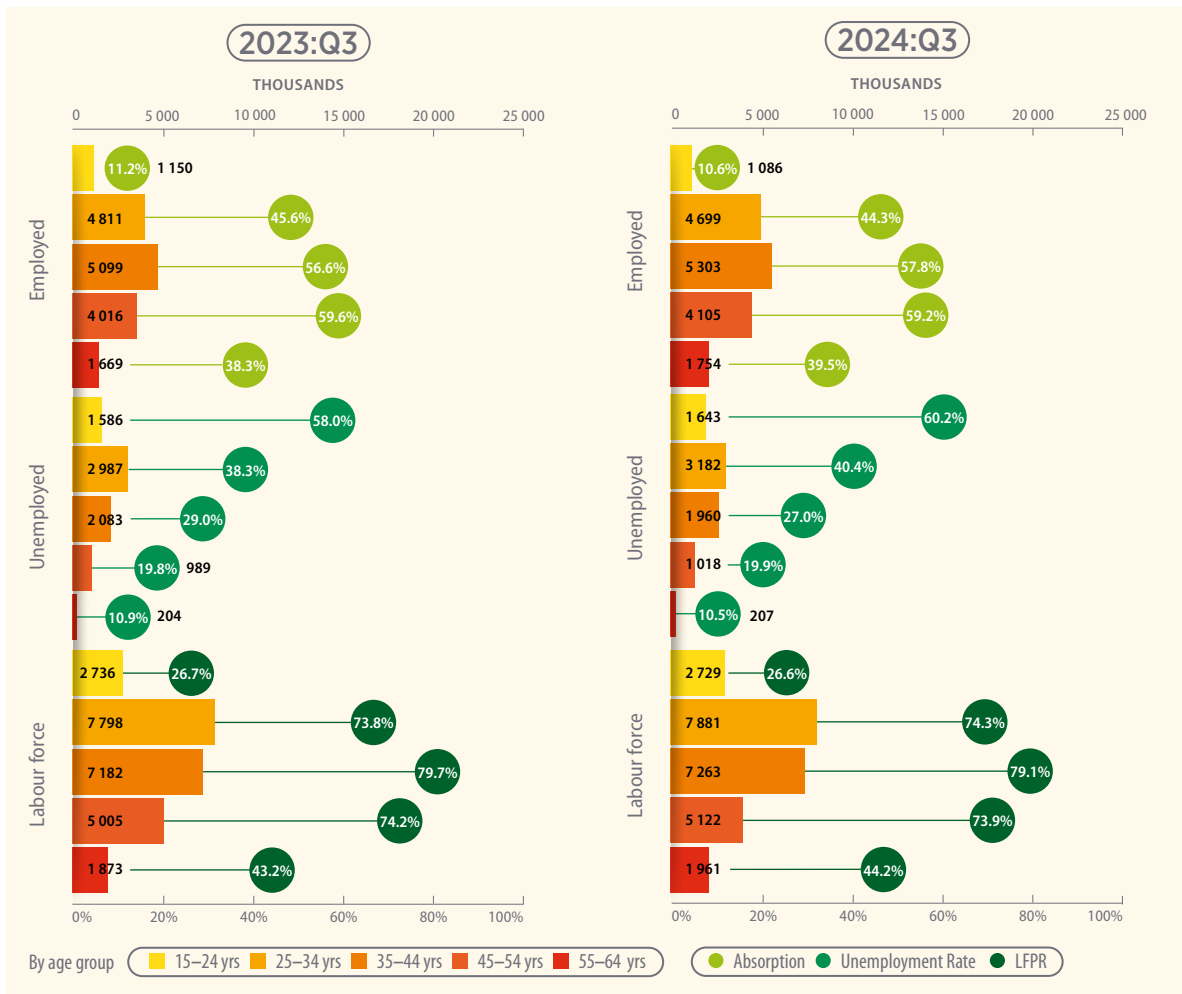
PROFILE OF THE LABOUR FORCE (PERSONS AGED 15–64 YEARS)

- In 2024Q3, the South African labour force comprised 16.9 million employed persons and 8 million unemployed persons (Figure 1).
- The employment rate (also referred to as the absorption rate) increased by 0.8 percentage points from 40.1% in 2023Q3 to 40.9% in 2024Q3, while the unemployment rate increased by 0.2 percentage points over the two years, from 31.9% in 2023 to 32.1% in 2024 (Figure 1).
- More males than females were employed in both 2023Q3 (9.2 million) and 2024Q3 (9.4 million). The absorption rate into employment in 2024Q3 remained substantially higher for males, at 45.7%, than for females, at 36.2% (Figure 1). The unemployment rate for females (34.4%) remained higher than that for males (30.1%).
- In 2024Q3, absorption rates remained highest among Whites, at 62.4%, and lowest among Black Africans, at 38.0%. Unemployment rates remained highest among Black Africans, at 36.0%, and lowest among Whites, at 8.2%, in the same period (Figure 1).
- In 2024Q3, absorption rates into employment remained the highest among persons aged 45–54 years, at 59.2%, followed by those aged 35–44 years, at 57.8%. Unemployment rates were the highest among younger age groups aged 15–24 years, at 60.2%, and 25–34 years, at 40.4%.
- The largest share of employed persons had 'secondary completed', at 36.4%, followed by 'secondary not completed', at 31.0%, as their highest level of educational attainment (Table 1). The opposite was true for unemployed persons: the highest share for the unemployed is 'secondary not completed', at 42.1%, followed by 'secondary completed' at 39.8% (Table 1).
- Although the unemployment rate of those who have completed a tertiary qualification has increased over the past decade, it has remained relatively low compared to those with lower levels of education attainment. The unemployment rate for persons who have attained a tertiary qualification was 16.0% in 2024Q3, which is lower than the national average (Table 1).
- These findings suggest a positive correlation between higher levels of education and higher employment rates.

FIGURE 1: Profile of the labour force by employment status, gender, race and age group in 2023Q3 vs 2024Q3





















Source: Statistics South Africa QLFS 2024Q3 (Nesstar repository, data extracted on 20 November 2024)

Note 1: LFPR stands for labour force participation rate.

Note 2: The unemployed are defined according to the official definition of unemployment.

TABLE 1: Numbers, shares, and absorption of the employed and the unemployment rate of unemployed persons by highest level of education, 2023Q3 vs 2024Q3

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION OF THE EMPLOYED	2023:Q3			2024:Q3		
	'000	Share (%)	Absorption (%)	'000	Share (%)	Absorption (%)
 No schooling	189	1.1%	25.0%	179	1.1%	25.2%
 Less than primary completed	673	4.0%	30.9%	647	3.8%	30.0%
 Primary completed	481	2.9%	28.6%	522	3.1%	32.8%
 Secondary not completed	5 100	30.5%	29.9%	5 251	31.0%	30.3%
 Secondary completed	6 093	36.4%	46.0%	6 163	36.4%	45.2%
 Tertiary	3 984	23.8%	72.6%	3 936	23.2%	72.0%
 Other	224	1.3%	49.3%	248	1.5%	44.4%
TOTAL	16 744	100.0%	41.0%	16 946	100.0%	40.9%

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED	2023:Q3			2024:Q3		
	'000	Share (%)	Unemployment rate (%)	'000	Share (%)	Unemployment rate (%)
 No schooling	64	0.8%	25.2%	57	0.7%	24.3%
 Less than primary completed	304	3.9%	31.1%	321	4.0%	33.2%
 Primary completed	287	3.7%	37.3%	258	3.2%	33.1%
 Secondary not completed	3 413	4.5%	40.1%	3 375	42.1%	39.1%
 Secondary completed	3 007	38.3%	33.0%	3 192	39.8%	34.1%
 Tertiary	725	9.2%	15.4%	748	9.3%	16.0%
 Other	49	0.6%	18.0%	58	0.7%	18.9%
TOTAL	7 849	100.0%	31.9%	8 011	100.0%	32.1%

Source: Statistics South Africa QLFS 2024: Q3 (Nesstar repository, data extracted on 20 November 2024)

Note: The unemployed are defined according to the official definition of unemployment.

CLASSIFICATION OF THE EMPLOYED

- In 2024Q3, 11.6 million persons (68.4%) worked in the formal sector, while 3.3 million persons (19.4%) worked in the informal sector (Table 3).
- From 2023Q3 to 2024Q3, employment levels decreased by 27 000 in the formal sector. The contribution of the formal sector declined by 1.0 percentage points from 69.4% in 2016Q3 to 68.4% in 2024Q3. In the same period, the informal sector saw an increase of 237 000 persons, which translates to a gain in share of 1.2 percentage points (Table 3).
- In 2024Q3, close to one quarter (24.4 %) of all those who were employed worked as elementary workers, followed by those who worked in sales and services-related occupations (17.7%) and crafts and related trades (11.1%).
- In terms of the type of industry in which the employed worked, in 2024Q3 almost a quarter of all workers (23.7%) were employed in the community and social services sector, followed by the trade (20.5%) and finance and intermediary services sector (16.0%).

TABLE 2: Classification of the employed by status in employment, sector, occupation and industry, 2023Q3 vs 2024Q3

By status in employment	2023:Q3		2024:Q3		Change (2023:Q3–2024:Q3)	
	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Percentage Points
Employee	14 307	85.4%	14 013	82.7%	↓ -294	-2.8%
Employer	707	4.2%	918	5.4%	↑ 211	1.2%
Own-account worker	1 653	9.9%	1 907	11.3%	↑ 255	1.4%
Unpaid household member	78	0.5%	108	0.6%	↑ 30	0.2%
TOTAL	16 745	100%	16 946	100%	201	0.0%

By sector	2023:Q3		2024:Q3		Change (2023:Q3–2024:Q3)	
	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Percentage Points
Formal sector (non-agricultural)	11 616	69.4%	11 589	68.4%	↓ -27	-1.0%
Informal sector (non-agricultural)	3 058	18.3%	3 295	19.4%	↑ 237	1.2%
Agriculture	956	5.7%	935	5.5%	↓ -21	-0.2%
Private households	1 116	6.7%	1 128	6.7%	↑ 12	0.0%
TOTAL	16 745	100%	16 946	100%	201	0.0%

By occupation	2023:Q3		2024:Q3		Change (2023:Q3–2024:Q3)	
	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Percentage Points
Manager	1 105	6.6%	1 457	8.6%	↑ 353	2.0%
Professional	1 354	8.1%	826	4.9%	↓ -528	-3.2%
Technician	1 444	8.6%	1 504	8.9%	↑ 60	0.2%
Clerk	1 889	11.3%	1 841	10.9%	↓ -48	-0.4%
Sales and services	2 953	17.6%	2 992	17.7%	↑ 38	0%
Skilled agriculture	76	0.5%	68	0.4%	↓ -8	-0.1%
Craft and related trade	1 717	10.3%	1 876	11.1%	↑ 159	0.8%
Plant and machine operator	1 408	8.4%	1 401	8.3%	↓ -7	-0.1%
Elementary worker	3 935	23.5%	4 128	24.4%	↑ 193	0.9%
Domestic worker	860	5.1%	854	5.0%	↓ -6	-0.1%
Other	5	0.0%		0.0%	↓ -5	0.0%
TOTAL	16 745	100%	16 946	100%	201	0.0%

By industry	2023:Q3		2024:Q3		Change (2023:Q3–2024:Q3)	
	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Share (%)	Thousands	Percentage Points
Agriculture	956	5.7%	935	5.5%	↓ -21	-0.2%
Mining	409	2.4%	484	2.9%	↑ 75	0.4%
Manufacturing	1 508	9.0%	1 635	9.6%	↑ 127	0.6%
Utilities	113	0.7%	127	0.8%	↑ 14	0.1%
Construction	1 357	8.1%	1 381	8.1%	↑ 24	0.0%
Trade	3 390	20.2%	3 469	20.5%	↑ 79	0.2%
Transport	966	5.8%	1 047	6.2%	↑ 81	0.4%
Finance	2 836	16.9%	2 716	16.0%	↓ -120	-0.9%
Community and social services	4 084	24.4%	4 021	23.7%	↓ -62	-0.7%
Private households	1 116	6.7%	1 128	6.7%	↑ 12	0.0%
Other	10	0.1%	4	0.0%	↓ -7	0.0%
TOTAL	16 745	100%	16 946	100%	201	0.0%

Source: Statistics South Africa QLFS 2024Q3 (Nesstar repository, weighted estimates extracted on 20 November 2024)

Note 1: An employee is a person who works for a public or private sector employer and receives remuneration in wages, salary, commission, tips, piece-rates or pay in kind.

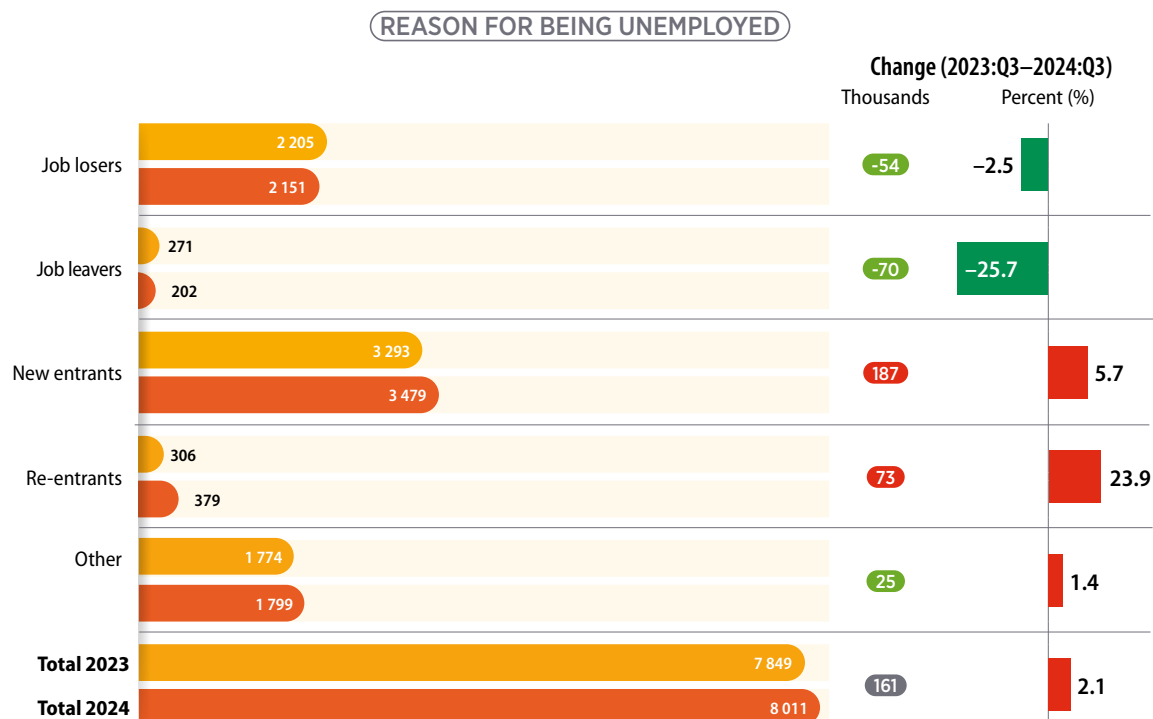
Note 2: An employer is a person who operates his or her own economic enterprise or engages independently in a profession or trade and hires one or more employees.

Note 3: An own-account worker is a person who operates his or her own economic enterprise or engages independently in a profession or trade and hires no employees.

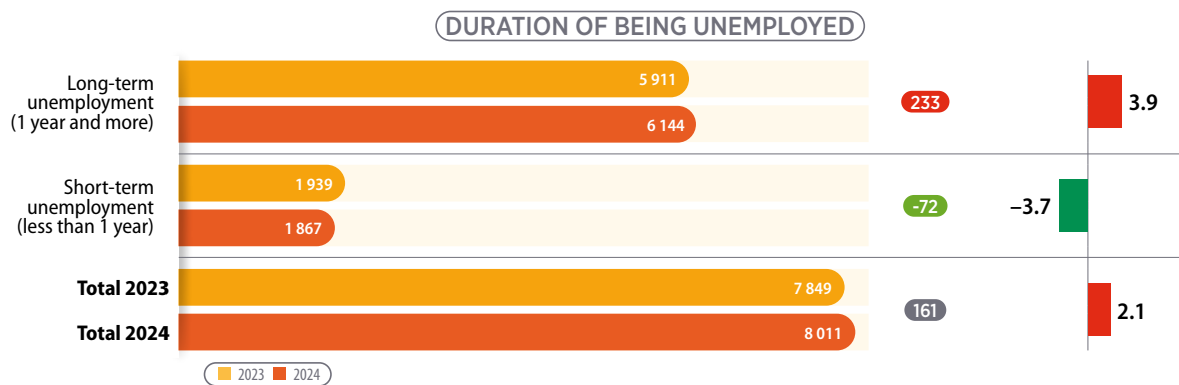
REASONS FOR AND DURATION OF UNEMPLOYMENT

- The main reason that people were unemployed was that they were new entrants to the labour market and could not be absorbed into employment. In other cases, people had been employed previously but, since then, had lost their jobs in either 2023Q3 or 2024Q3.
- The number of new entrants to the labour market was 3.5 million in 2024Q3, reflecting an increase of 5.7% from 3.3 million in 2023Q3.
- The number of people who lost their jobs decreased by 2.5% from 2.2 million in 2023Q3 to 2.1 million in 2024Q3.
- The number of people who had been unemployed for one year and more (long-term unemployment) increased significantly by 3.9% from 2023Q3 to 2024Q3. It is worrying that more than three out of four persons who were unemployed in the period under review were unemployed for a year or longer. The number who were unemployed in the short term (i.e., for less than one year) stood at 1.9 million in 2023Q3 and 1.9 million in 2024Q3, which implies that there was no change during the two periods.
- According to the OECD,¹ long-term unemployment causes significant mental and material stress for affected individuals and families. It is of particular concern to policymakers, as high rates of long-term unemployment indicate that the labour market is operating inefficiently.
- Furthermore, persons in long-term unemployment find it more difficult than their peers to gain employment as time goes by due to their low levels of educational attainment and lack of the skills that are required in the labour market.

FIGURE 2: Numbers and changes of the unemployed by reason for and duration of unemployment, 2023Q3 vs 2024Q3



1 OECD (2023). Long-term unemployment rate. Available at: Doi: 10.1787/76471ad5-en [Accessed 20 November 2024.]



Source: Statistics South Africa QLFS 2024Q3 (Nesstar repository, data extracted on 20 November 2024)

- Note 1: The unemployed are defined according to the official definition of unemployment.
- Note 2: Unemployed job losers are unemployed persons who were working when they became unemployed and had lost their job, or they were laid off, or the business in which they had previously worked had been sold or closed.
- Note 3: Unemployed job leavers are those unemployed persons who had a job but did not have one anymore because of their own decision and had stopped working at their last job for any of the following reasons: caring for own children or relatives; pregnancy; other family or community responsibilities; going to school; changed residence; retired; or other reasons.
- Note 4: New entrants into unemployment are persons who were unemployed during the reference period, had never worked before and were currently looking for work.
- Note 5: Re-entrants into unemployment are unemployed persons who worked before and were not economically active before they started looking for work.
- Note 6: (a) Red circles represent an increase (unfavourable) in the number of persons unemployed, while green solid circles signify a decline (favourable) in the number of persons unemployed; (b) red bars and their sizes show the magnitude of percentage upsurges (unfavourable) in persons unemployed, whereas green bars and their sizes show the magnitude of percentage decreases (favourable) in persons unemployed.



CONCLUSION

This Fact Sheet reveals that about two-thirds of South Africa's labour force was employed in 2024Q3 (16.9 million) and one-third (8 million), unemployed. There was however a slight increase in the number of persons employed in 2024Q3 (16.9 million) compared to 2023Q3 (16.7 million). This increase in employment levels was driven mainly by gains in community and social services, trade, and manufacturing industries. Yet despite the slight recovery in employment, the number of persons employed was still below acceptable levels of employment. Unacceptably high levels of unemployment continue to burden the country. This suggests that even though the largest group of unemployed persons are new entrants, there is a need for the government to provide interventions to help those who have lost jobs can return to the labour market.

The findings reported in this Fact Sheet also demonstrate a strong correlation between higher levels of education and higher employment rates, given that absorption rates were higher for persons with higher levels of education (for example at tertiary level) than for those with lower levels of educational attainment. By implication, improved equitable access to post-school education and training, especially at the tertiary level, may increase unemployed people's opportunities for securing employment.



APPENDIX

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Employed persons: Employed persons are those aged 15–64 years who, during the reference week of a labour survey, did any form of work for at least one hour.

Unemployed persons: There are two definitions of the unemployed—the official and the expanded definition. According to the official definition, unemployed persons are those aged 15–64 years who:

- were not employed in the reference week; and
- actively looked for work or tried to start a business in the four weeks preceding the survey interview; and
- were available for work, i.e., would have been able to start work or a business in the reference week; or
- had not actively looked for work in the past four weeks but had a job or business to start at a definite date in the future and were available.

According to the expanded definition, unemployed persons are those aged 15–64 years who:

- fall under official unemployment (sought and available); and
- are available to work but are discouraged work-seekers or have other reasons for not searching for work.

Labour market: A market system in which buyers of labour (employers or firms) and sellers of labour (employees or employment-seekers) interact with each other to enable transactions between them.

Labour force: The labour force consists of all employed and unemployed people. In this Fact Sheet, the term 'labour force' refers only to work-seekers and excludes those who are not employed and not looking for work.

Labour force participation: Active engagement in the labour market by working or looking for work during the reference week of the survey.

Labour force participation rate: The share of the working-age population currently participating in the labour force.

Labour force status: The status of being in employment, unemployment, or outside the labour force.

Absorption rate: The proportion of the working-age population which is employed.

Working age population: Persons in the population who are aged 15–64 years.

Economically active population: This is synonymous with the labour force.

Not economically active population: This refers to persons aged 15–64 years who are not available for work in the reference week. In particular, it refers to full-time scholars and students, full-time homemakers, the retired and those who are unable or unwilling to work.

Occupation: A set of jobs whose main tasks and duties are highly similar to each other.

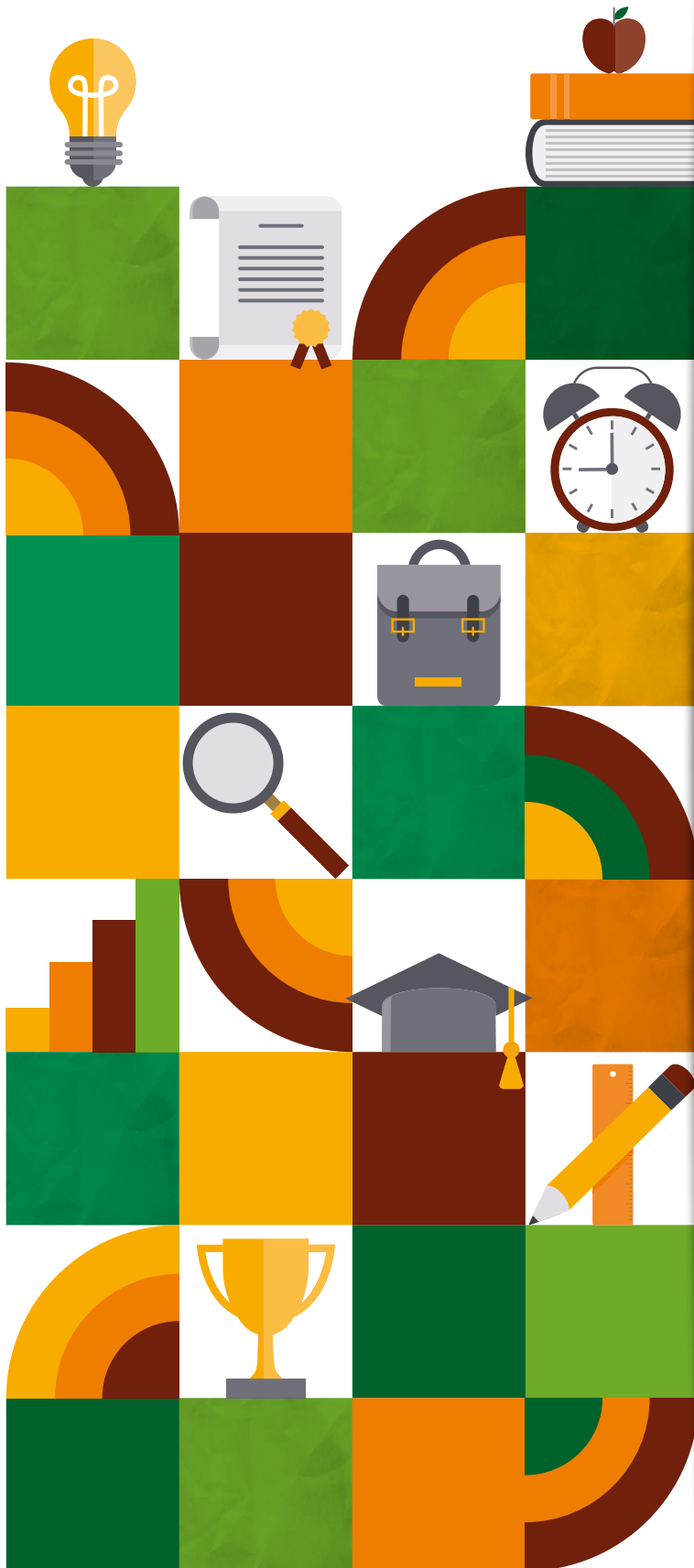
Industry: All production units that engage primarily in the same or similar kinds of productive activity.²

Informal sector: The informal sector has two components:

- employees working in establishments that employ fewer than five employees and that do not deduct income tax from their salaries or wages; and
- employers, own-account workers, and persons helping others who are unpaid in their household business and not registered for either income tax or value-added tax.

Tertiary education: This refers to the following qualifications: an undergraduate degree, a postgraduate degree, a diploma, a higher certificate (upon completion of matric) and an advanced diploma or advanced certificate.

2 Statistics South Africa (2012). *Standard Industrial Classification of all Industrial Activities*. Report No. 09-90-02. 7th ed. Statistics South Africa: Pretoria.



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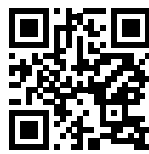
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Khuluvhe, M. and Gwantshu, W. (2025). Characteristics of the South African labour force. Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.

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