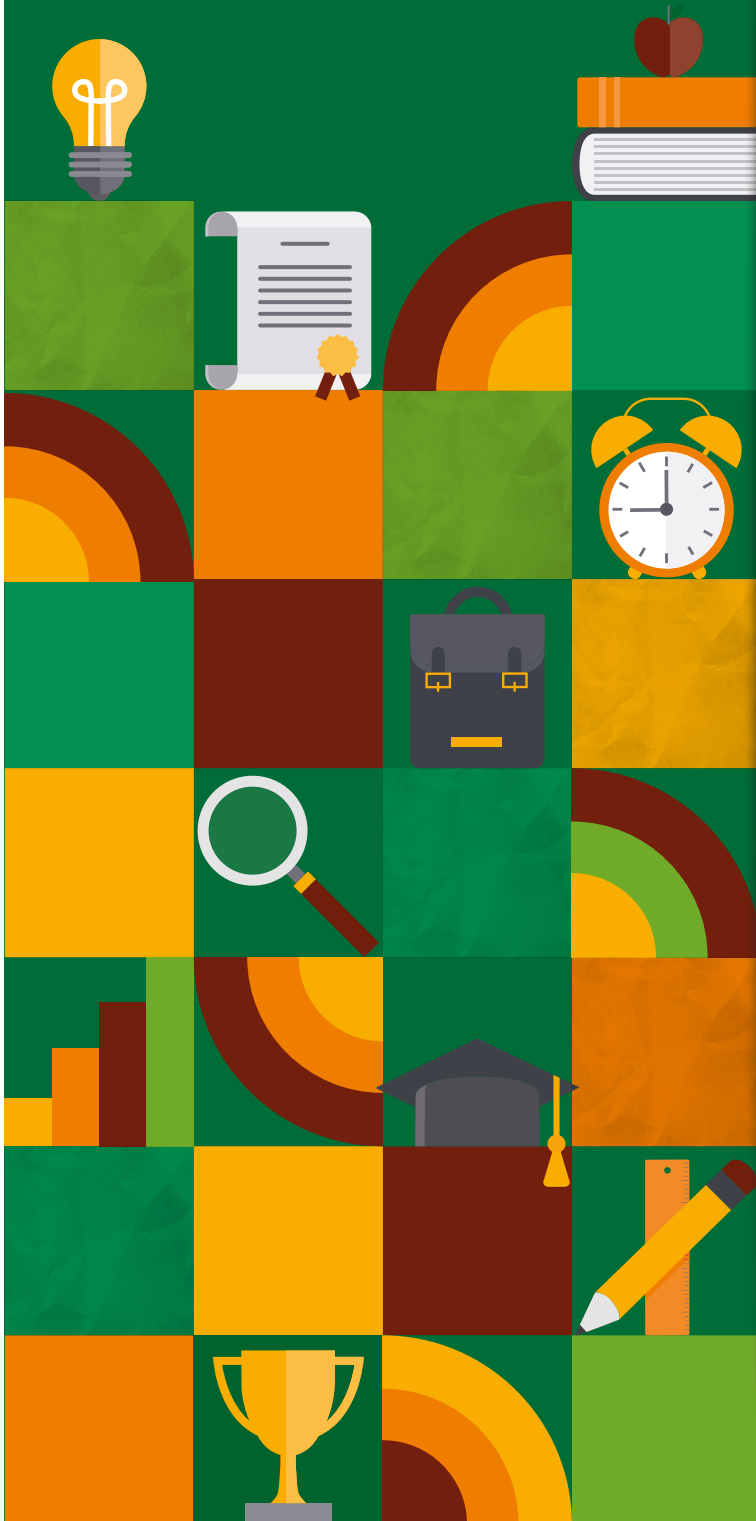


MARCH 2025

FACT SHEET



ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: COUNTRY COMPARISONS USING THE GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO



BACKGROUND

Tertiary education is a cornerstone of economic growth, innovation, and social mobility, as a skilled and capable workforce is critical for a country's competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. In South Africa, tertiary education plays an especially vital role in addressing structural inequalities, reducing poverty, and equipping individuals to meet the demands of the 21st century labour market. Access to tertiary education serves as a pathway to prosperity, particularly for historically disadvantaged populations, as it bridges the divide between economic exclusion and opportunity.

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is a globally recognised metric for assessing participation in tertiary education and provides a valuable benchmark for comparing access across nations. By evaluating South Africa's GER against international and regional averages, policymakers gain an evidence-based foundation for assessing the effectiveness of current strategies, identifying gaps, and refining interventions to expand enrolment in tertiary education and improve equity.



higher education
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Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



This Fact Sheet seeks to highlight South Africa's achievements, identify gaps in access, and evaluate progress in expanding participation in higher education.

Monitoring these trends is essential to aligning South Africa's education system with the goals of the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) and global frameworks such as the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Despite notable progress in increasing tertiary enrolment, South Africa's GER remains below that of several peer countries and international norms. This subpar performance underscores the need for strategic investments and policy measures to accelerate access to tertiary education, ensuring that the country can leverage its human capital to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth.



PURPOSE

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to provide a comparative analysis of South Africa's participation in tertiary education by using the GER. By examining the country's GER trends relative to other nations and selected country groupings by income level and regional averages, the Fact Sheet seeks to highlight South Africa's achievements, identify gaps in access, and evaluate progress in expanding participation in higher education.

Serving as a strategic tool for policymakers, educationalists, and stakeholders, this document offers actionable insights to guide informed decision-making. It aims to support the development and refinement of policies that address barriers to access, promote equity, and improve the overall performance of South Africa's tertiary education system. Ultimately, the findings from this Fact Sheet will contribute to strengthening South Africa's position in global knowledge production while advancing the developmental objectives outlined in the NDP and the SDGs.



DEFINITION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE GER

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (also known as the participation rate) for tertiary education is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in tertiary education programmes at South African higher education institutions (regardless of age) by the total population of the age group that officially corresponds to tertiary education, then multiplying the results by 100.¹ According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),² the population comprising the official age for tertiary education is estimated to be the five-year age group immediately following upper secondary education.

With regard 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 for low values. It is important to note that the GER is not a measure of the extent to which a particular age cohort participates in tertiary education.³ Rather, it measures participation levels irrespective of the age of students. In some countries, a trend towards a higher GER could be attributed to a declining population in the age group used to calculate the GER, instead of actual improvement in enrolments, and vice versa.



METHODOLOGY

Data on tertiary education are collected by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and mapped onto the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), which is the official framework used to ensure the comparability of education programmes at an international level. On the other hand, data on population are drawn from the UN's Population Division.

All the GER statistics presented in this Fact Sheet were obtained directly from the World Bank (making use of the data from UNESCO and the UN Population Division) to ensure a single source. Using a single source for population data standardises definitions, estimations, and interpolation methods to guarantee a consistent methodology across countries.



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 calculating participation

1 World Bank, n.d. School enrolment, tertiary (% gross). The World Bank. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [Accessed 28 November 2022.]

2 UNESCO Glossary of terms. <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary>

3 This is a different indicator, often referred to as the net enrolment rate and sometimes as the age-specific enrolment rate.

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 entry-level tertiary programmes, which are generally shorter than five years in duration.



DEFINITION OF TERTIARY EDUCATION

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012),⁴ 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. Tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education.

Tertiary education, whether or not in an advanced research qualification, normally requires enrollees to have successfully completed secondary-level education as a minimum condition of admission (World Bank, n.d.). It encompasses ISCED Level 5 (short-cycle tertiary education),⁵ Level 6 (bachelor's degree or equivalent), Level 7 (master's degree or equivalent), and Level 8 (doctoral degree or equivalent) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

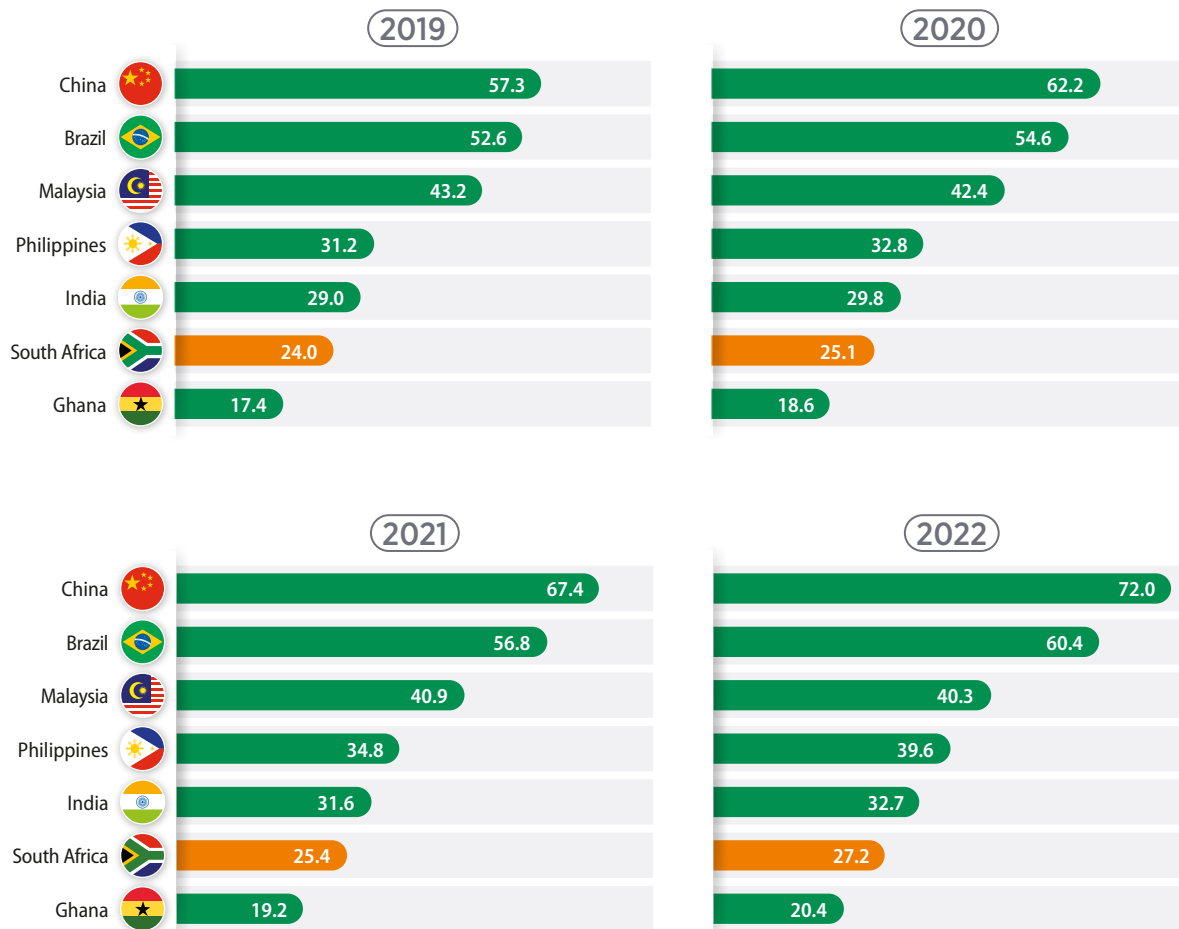
Figure 1 highlights South Africa's GER in tertiary education over the four-year period from 2019 to 2022, comparing it to selected countries. In 2022, South Africa's GER was 27.2%, demonstrating gradual improvement from 2019's 24.0% but remaining substantially lower than that of other upper-middle-income countries such as Malaysia (40.3%), Brazil (60.4%), and China (72.0%). South Africa's GER was, however, higher than Ghana's at 20.4% and closer to India's at 32.7%.

These comparisons reveal that South Africa lags behind upper-middle-income countries in tertiary participation rates, underscoring the need for accelerated policy measures to bridge this gap. The infographic also suggests that other BRICS countries are increasing their participation rates at a faster pace than South Africa. The data emphasises the importance of targeted investments in access, affordability, and infrastructure to boost enrolment rates and achieve parity with leading nations.

4 UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012). International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011. Own publication, Montreal, p. 45. Available at: <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>.

5 In South Africa, this level includes higher certificate, advanced certificate, and diploma.

FIGURE 1: South Africa's GER in tertiary education relative to selected countries, 2019–2022



Source: World Bank Indicators (2024). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [Accessed November 2024.]

Notes

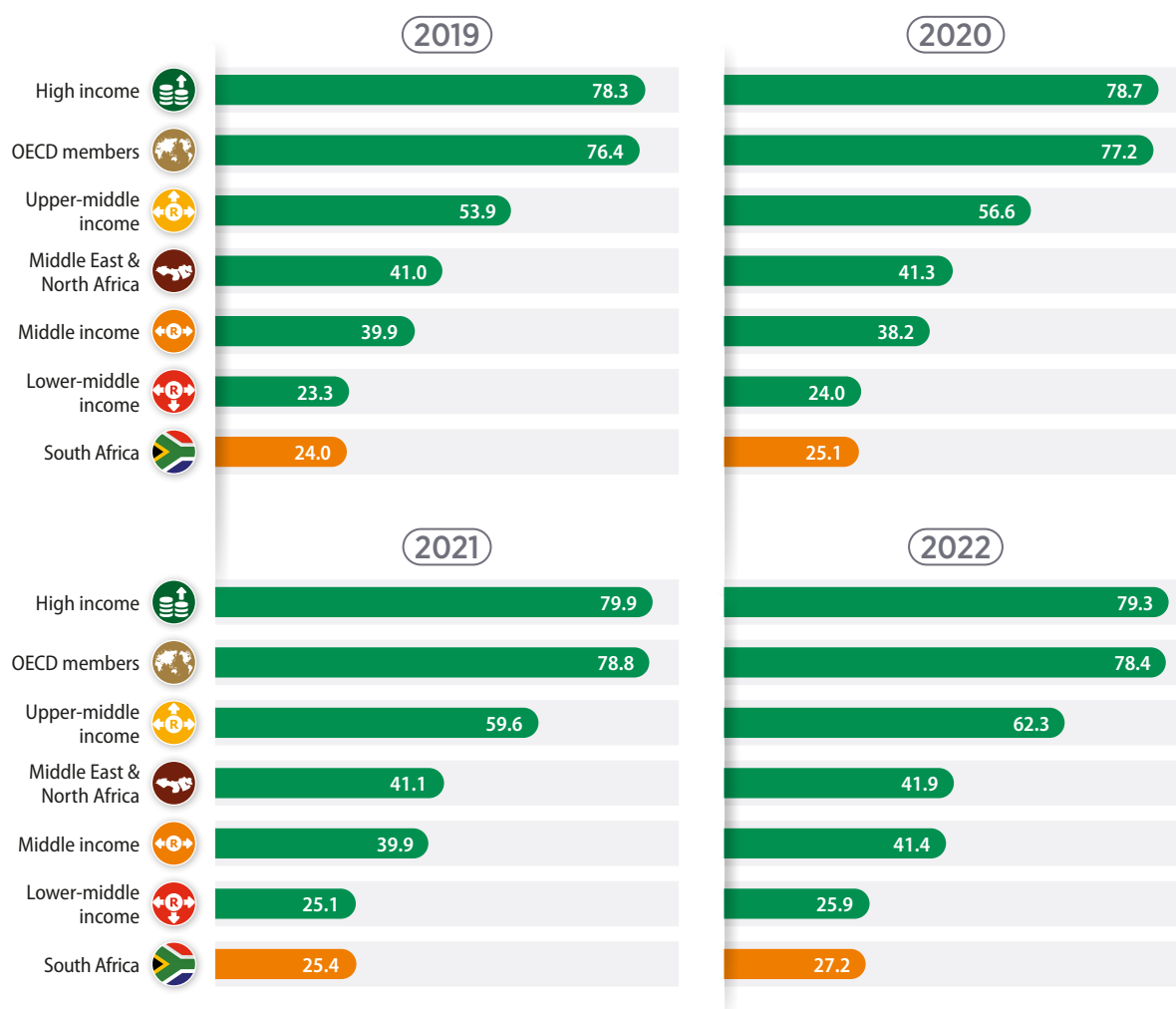
Note 1: Countries included in the analysis were selected based on consistent availability of data.

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 UNESCO Institute of Statistics 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 compares South Africa's GER to averages for various income groupings and regions between 2019 and 2022. In 2022, South Africa's GER of 27.2% was notably lower than the averages for upper-middle-income countries (62.3%), OECD member states (78.4%), and high-income countries (79.3%). It is concerning that although South Africa is an upper-middle-income country, its performance is similar to that of lower-middle-income countries, averaging 25.9%.

This result suggests that South Africa falls remarkably short of global and regional benchmarks for middle- and high-income countries. The trend highlights the urgency of scaling up tertiary education access and aligning the country's performance with international standards. Strategic reforms, including expanded financial aid schemes and increased capacity in higher education institutions, are necessary to improve participation rates.

FIGURE 2: South Africa's GER relative to income groupings and regional averages, 2019–2022



Source: World Bank Indicators (2024). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [Accessed November 2024.]

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Table 1 illustrates South Africa's GER for male and female students compared to other countries from 2019 to 2022. While the country's female GER consistently exceeded that of male participants across the four-year period, the overall GER for both genders remained lower than that of China, Brazil, Malaysia, and the Philippines. For instance, in 2022, South Africa's female GER at 34.2% was remarkably higher than Ghana's 19.8% but substantially lower than the Philippines' 47.3%.

The persistent gender disparity across countries, where female enrolees generally achieve higher GERs than male enrolees, reinforces the need for interventions aimed at promoting male participation in tertiary education. This imbalance in South Africa calls for a dual strategy:

sustaining efforts to support female candidates in higher education while simultaneously implementing targeted initiatives to address the low participation of their male counterparts.

TABLE 1: South Africa's GER relative to selected countries by gender, 2019–2022

	2019		2020		2021		2022	
	♀	♂	♀	♂	♀	♂	♀	♂
 CHINA	64.1	51.4	68.9	56.5	73.9	61.8	78.1	66.7
 BRAZIL	61.0	44.4	64.6	45.1	67.8	46.4	71.9	49.1
 MALAYSIA	48.8	37.9	48.2	37.0	46.7	35.5	46.1	34.8
 PHILIPPINES	35.4	27.2	37.0	28.9	40.3	29.7	47.3	32.3
 INDIA	30.3	27.9	31.3	28.5	32.4	30.8	33.3	32.1
 SOUTH AFRICA	28.9	19.2	30.9	19.5	31.5	19.3	34.2	20.3
 GHANA	15.7	19.1	17.4	19.8	18.3	20.1	19.8	21.0

Source: World Bank Indicators (2024). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR> [Accessed November 2024.]

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CONCLUSION

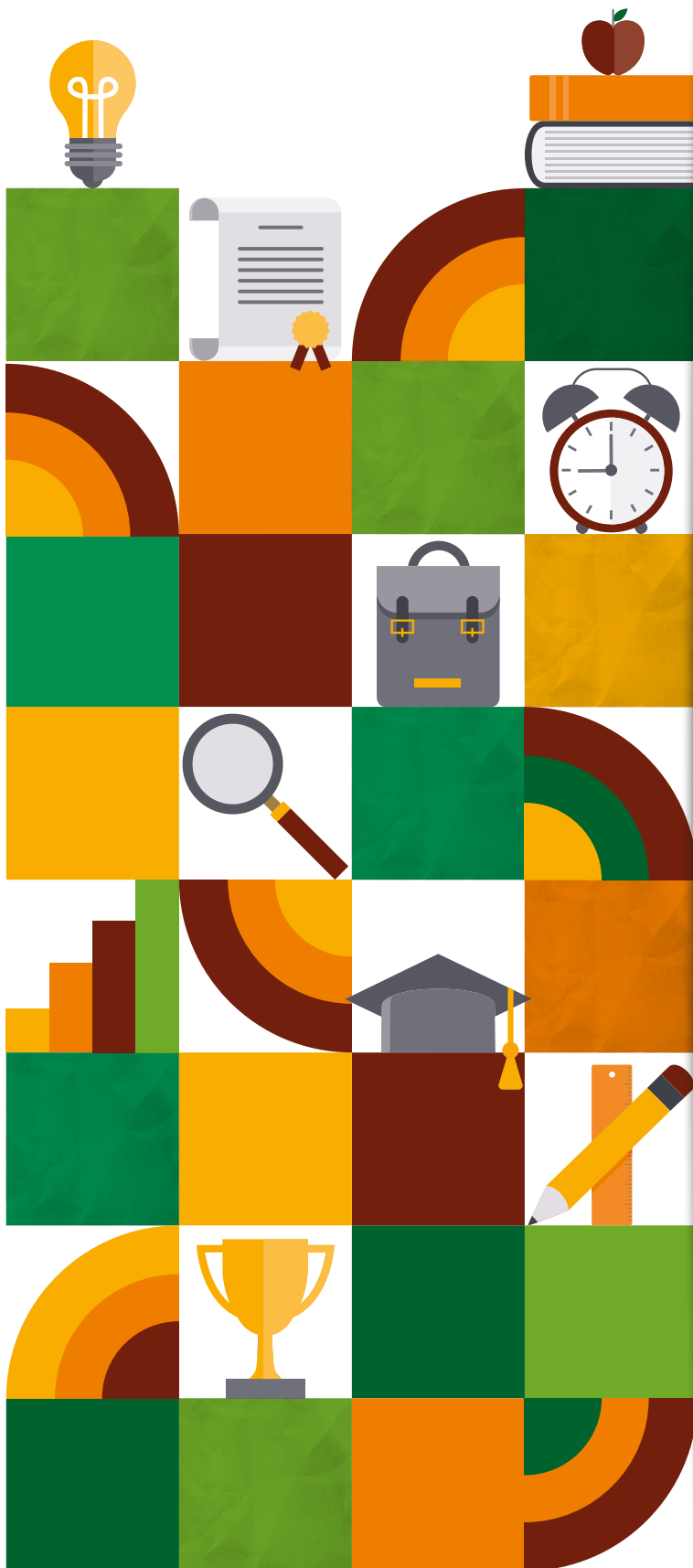
South Africa has made notable progress in increasing tertiary education participation, as reflected in the gradual improvement of its GER over recent years. However, the country's GER remains significantly below that of many peer nations and international benchmarks, particularly among upper-middle-income countries. This disparity underscores the need for targeted policy interventions to expand access, improve affordability, and enhance institutional capacity within the higher education sector. While South Africa's female GER demonstrates substantial achievements in promoting gender equity, the persistent underrepresentation of male participants highlights the need for focused efforts to encourage more male participation in tertiary education.

To achieve the goals outlined in the NDP and to align with the SDGs, South Africa must accelerate reforms aimed at increasing access to tertiary education for all demographics. Strategic initiatives such as increased funding for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, infrastructure development, and blended learning can help bridge the gap. By fostering a more inclusive and equitable higher education sector, South Africa can strengthen its global competitiveness, drive innovation, and unlock the potential of its human capital for sustainable economic growth.



South Africa can strengthen its global competitiveness, drive innovation, and unlock the potential of its human capital for sustainable economic growth.





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Khuluvhe, M. (2025). *Access to tertiary education in South Africa: Country comparisons using the Gross Enrolment Ratio*. Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.

This Fact Sheet is available on the Department of Higher Education and Training's website:



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