

Education and skills

IMPROVING THE QUALITY AND RELEVANCE OF SKILLS

- ▶ South Africa has made impressive progress in improving access to education, with upper-secondary enrolment having increased by 35% since 2000. But persistent inequities and poor education quality lead to low education outcomes.
- ▶ South Africa needs to improve the quality of primary and secondary schooling to ensure that all students achieve the skills needed for further education, work and life.
- ▶ Strengthening the equity, efficiency and effectiveness in resource use will be vital to addressing South Africa's large social and educational inequalities and meeting the aspirations of a burgeoning youth population.
- ▶ Stakeholders across government and industry must work together to strengthen the labour-market relevance of education, including vocational education and training, and improve the school to-work transition, particularly for disadvantaged youth.

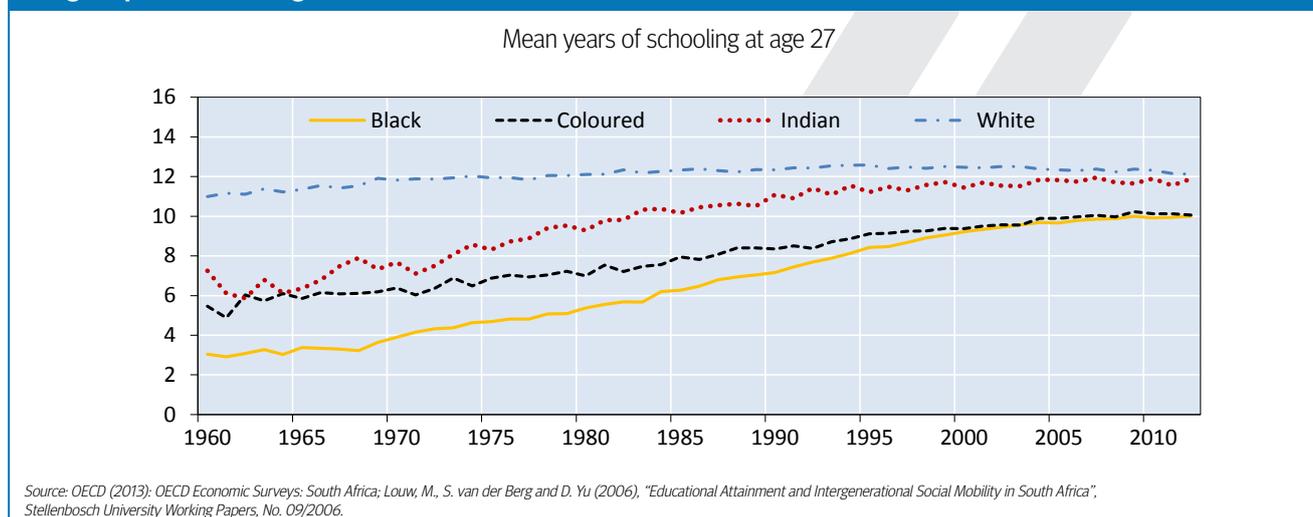
What's the issue?

South Africa has made impressive progress in expanding educational opportunity and redressing the injustices of apartheid. Access has improved at every level. Since 2000, the number of adults attaining secondary education has increased by 35% and enrolment in tertiary education has more than doubled. Such rapid expansion has been supported by a surge in government spending on education. Today, South Africa invests over 6% of GDP in education, on a par with the education expenditure of OECD countries.

However, persistent inequities combined with poor education quality prevent South Africa from reaping the returns of this investment (see Figure). Learning outcomes

are low, not only by international standards but also compared to neighbouring economies. A recent OECD comparison of international assessment results shows that more than two-thirds of South African students lack basic skills, well below all other upper-middle income countries surveyed. Instead of supporting social mobility, South Africa's education system has reinforced inequalities. A severe shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) has led to a widening performance gap between rich and poor students and high levels of drop out, in particular among Black Africans. South Africa's vocational education and training (VET) system

Despite significant improvement, gaps in educational attainment between different population groups remain large



fails to provide alternative pathways to further education or employment. With low quality, low status and low labour market relevance, the system is ill-prepared to address the needs of the country's burgeoning youth population.

The government recognises these challenges. The National Development Plan 2030 provides a bold vision for education reform and rightly concentrates on the need to improve learning outcomes through robust assessment, better quality teaching, and increased access to ECEC. Efforts to reduce inequalities will require a carefully targeted approach and much smarter use of resources. While overall spending is high, population pressures mean that per pupil expenditure in South Africa is well below that of other G20 economies. Redistribution reforms will need to go hand in hand with greater effectiveness and efficiency if the country is to expand access while raising performance standards. The 2014 *OECD Skills Beyond School Review of South Africa* offers recommendations on how South Africa can meet its ambitious target of achieving 2.5 million enrolments in VET colleges by 2030. The review places strong emphasis on the role work-based learning can play in building a stronger bridge between education and the world of work.

Why is this important for South Africa?

Ensuring that all children complete school with the skills needed for further education, work and life is essential to enhancing South Africa's competitiveness and encouraging higher value-added production. The OECD estimates that South Africa's annual GDP growth would be 1.65% higher if all students currently in school were to achieve basic skills. Higher skill levels can help young people access decent jobs. If combined with active labour market policies, better education could thus have a major impact on reducing South Africa's high rates of youth unemployment. Results from the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) show that higher skills can also bring important social benefits, in terms of better health, greater trust and more positive engagement in political processes. Getting more children from poor families into education at an early age, as well as ensuring they receive the same quality of teaching and learning infrastructure as children from wealthy communities, would be one of the most effective strategies for addressing inequality in South Africa and breaking the cycle of poverty.

The risks of inaction are equally high. South Africa has one of the lowest tertiary enrolment rates among G20 countries. At just 6%, it is insufficient to give South Africa the innovation capital it needs to reach high income status. Within Africa, South African students are already outperformed on regional tests by those in many smaller neighbouring economies. While other emerging economies have expanded access to education, South Africa has struggled to keep up with demographic trends in recent years and the number of out-of-school children has increased. This is not only a waste of human talent, but threatens social cohesion and democracy.

What should policy makers do?

- ▶ Expand early childhood education and care to bridge equity gaps and strengthen the foundations for learning.
- ▶ Enhance the equity, effectiveness and efficiency of resource use across the education system.
- ▶ Improve the quality and labour-market relevance of vocational education provision, including through more systematic use of work-based learning and stronger professional development for vocational teachers.
- ▶ Enhance the country's knowledge of its strengths and weaknesses with respect to the supply, demand and use of skills.



Further reading

OECD (2015), *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264234833-en>

OECD (2013), *OECD Economic Surveys: South Africa 2013*, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eco_surveys-zaf-2013-en

OECD (2008), *Reviews of National Policies for Education: South Africa 2008*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264053526-en>

Field, S., P. Musset and J. Álvarez-Galván (2014), *A Skills beyond School Review of South Africa*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264223776-en>