

# Improving prospects for South Africa's youth: Education, vocational training still key priorities

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 36 | Ayanda Nyoka and Rorisang Lekalake**

## Summary

In 2015, the Republic of South Africa ratified its National Youth Policy 2015-2020 (NYP). One of the policy's four primary objectives is "to strengthen the capacity of young people to enable them to take charge of their own well-being through building their assets and ultimately realising their potential to the fullest" (Presidency, 2014, p. 12). This is a crucial objective, given that about half of the country's unemployed workers are youth ages 15-24 years (Statistics South Africa, 2015).

Two-thirds (66%) of South Africa's population is less than 35 years old (Statistics South Africa, 2014). To reap a demographic dividend from its "youth bulge," the government's strategy entails investment in human capital development, particularly in education.

This paper examines South Africa's progress in building young people's human and labour-market capacities through education. Longitudinal data from Afrobarometer and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's (IJR) Transformation Audit indicate that the South African government has succeeded in increasing access to education for the current generation of youth. However, an analysis of unemployment data and trends in higher education participation rates paints a less rosy picture for the prospects of South African youth, particularly Black youth.

Although the NYP clearly indicates that the government considers young people to be one of South Africa's primary assets, a majority of South African children and youth still attend under-resourced schools with poorly trained teachers (Spaull, 2013). Furthermore, the loss of pupils in the school pipeline contributes to low levels of post-secondary education, exacerbated by limited vocational skills training (Lolwana, 2012).

Despite government efforts, inequalities in educational attainment persist across races. Our results suggest that further investment in public education, including upskilling of teachers, is key to creating a generation of productive and fulfilled citizens. In addition, given the high proportion of young people who fail to complete secondary education, vocational training is an untapped resource for increasing employment and growing the economy.

## Data sources

### *Afrobarometer survey*

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Democracy in Africa (Idasa), interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in October-November 2011. A sample of this size yields

results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008. Data collection for the Round 6 survey, led by the IJR, will take place in 2015.

### *Transformation Audit*

The Transformation Audit is the annual review of the IJR's Inclusive Economies project. Published since 2003, the Transformation Audit represents IJR's contribution to an improved understanding of the socioeconomic and development factors that impact social justice and national reconciliation in South Africa.

While South Africa defines "youth" as ages 15-35 years, as per the African Youth Charter, the Transformation Audit uses a 15-34 age range based on statistical norms in South Africa, and this analysis of data from Afrobarometer, which surveys only adult citizens, reports on 18- to 35-year-olds.

### **Key findings**

- South African youth have consistently identified unemployment as the most important problem facing the country. In Afrobarometer surveys since 2000, on average 46% of young respondents have cited unemployment first among the three most important problems that they say government must address. In 2011, two-thirds of young South Africans were optimistic about the government's prospects for solving the problem by 2016.
- Almost all young respondents (95%) had at least some formal education in 2011, but higher education remained out of reach for the vast majority (90%) of South Africans.
- Despite government efforts to improve access to and quality of education, the legacy of apartheid-era inequality persists. In the 2011 Afrobarometer survey, young White/European South Africans were significantly more likely to have post-secondary education (44%) than South Asian/Indian (20%), Coloured/Mixed race (14%), and Black/African (8%) respondents. The Cape Higher Education Consortium in 2011 noted that White/European South Africans' participation rates in tertiary education were 43 percentage points higher than those for Black/African South Africans.
- Government's financial aid support for financially needy students accessing higher education has grown significantly since South Africa's political transition: In 1995, financial aid of R40 million supported about 40,000 beneficiaries, which grew to almost R13 billion for approximately 150,000 beneficiaries in 2010.

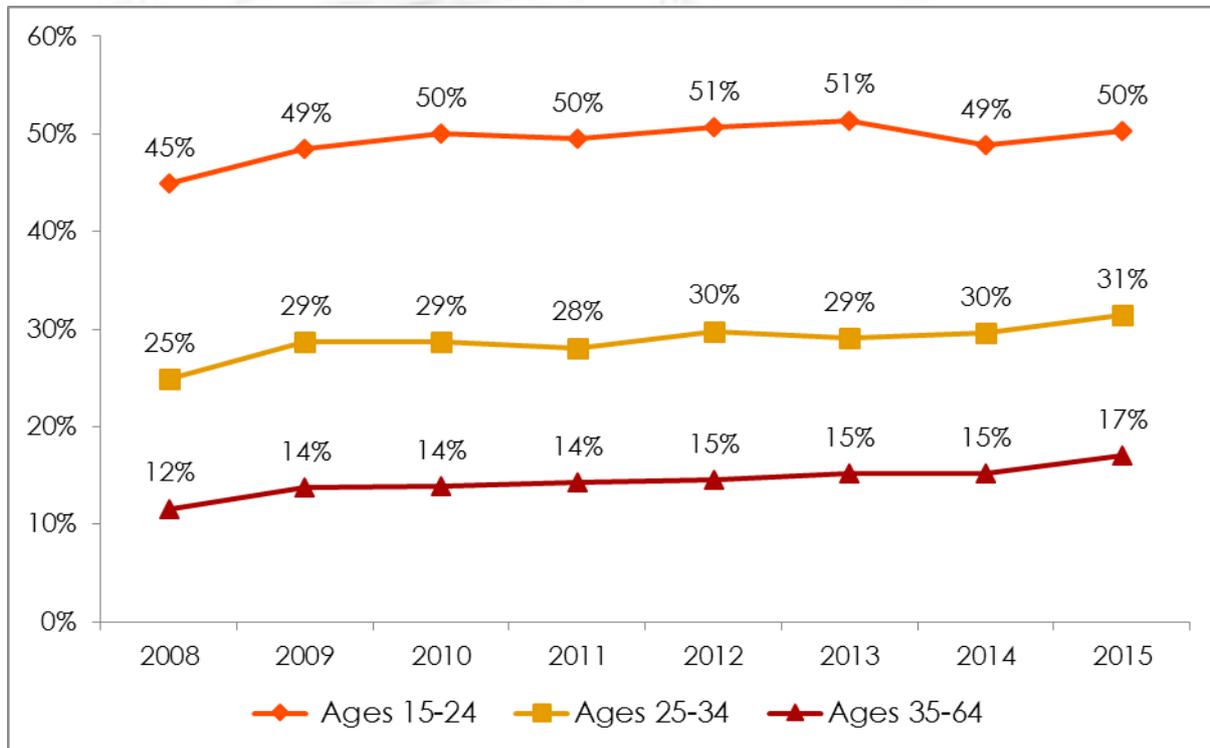
### **Unemployment and job creation**

In South Africa, youth are disproportionately affected by unemployment. In the first quarter of 2015, 50% of workers ages 15-24 were unemployed; in the age cohort 25-34, 31% were unemployed. Between late 2008 and early 2015, the unemployment rate for the age cohorts 15-24 and 25-34 increased by 5 and 6 percentage points, respectively (Figure 1).

Afrobarometer survey results show that unemployment has consistently been a leading issue for South African youth. Almost half (48%) of young citizens identified unemployment first among the most important problems facing the country in 2011, reversing a gradual decline between 2002 (61%) and 2008 (36%) (Figure 2). Approval ratings of government performance on job creation have been low during this period, although the 2011 figure (approval by 25% of young respondents) was almost double that in 2000 and 2002 (12%). Despite these views, young people have been optimistic about the prospects for solving the unemployment

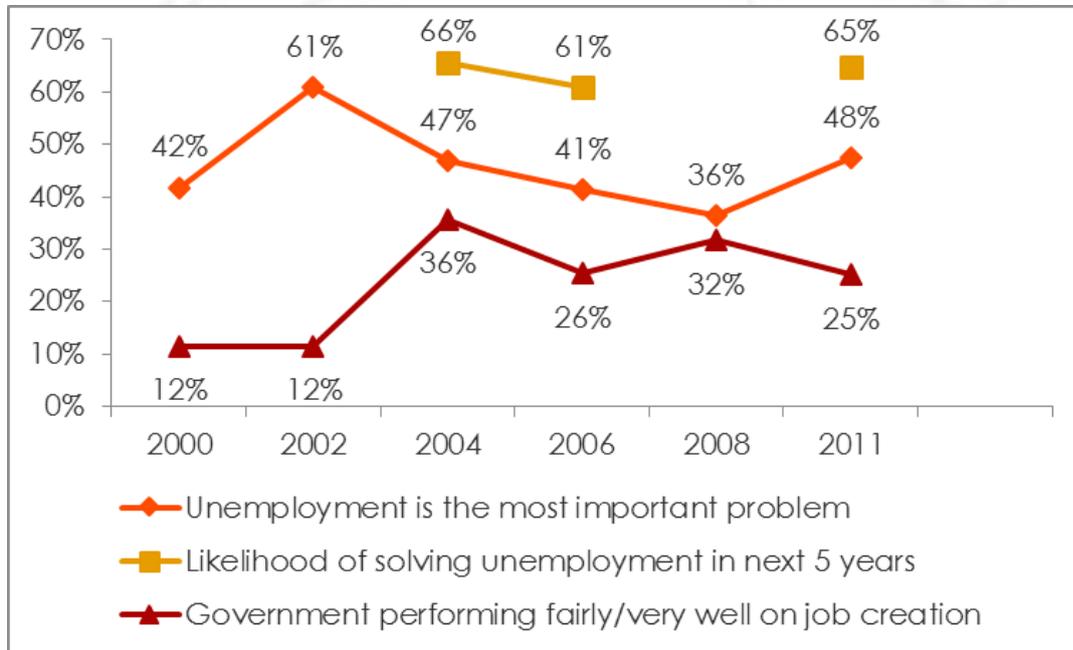
problem within the next five years. It is unclear, however, what effect the past four years of low economic growth have had on these attitudes.

**Figure 1: Official unemployment rates by age group | South Africa | 2008-2015**  
 | Transformation Audit



Source: Authors' calculations for 2008-2013 are based on Quarter 4 data sets from Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Surveys (Revised) 2008-2013. For 2014-2015, figures for the age cohorts 35-64 are calculated based on Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey Report 2015, Quarter 1. Figures for the age cohorts 15-24 and 25-34 are sourced from the same report.

**Figure 2: Youth perceptions regarding unemployment** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2000-2011 | Afrobarometer



**Respondents were asked:**

1. In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (% who cited “unemployment” first. Note: The 2000 figure combines responses for “unemployment” (16%) and “job creation” (26%). Subsequent survey rounds dropped this distinction.)
2. Taking the problem that you mentioned first, how likely do you think it is that government will solve this problem within the next five years? (% who said “somewhat likely” or “very likely”)
3. How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Creating jobs? (% who said “fairly well” or “very well”).

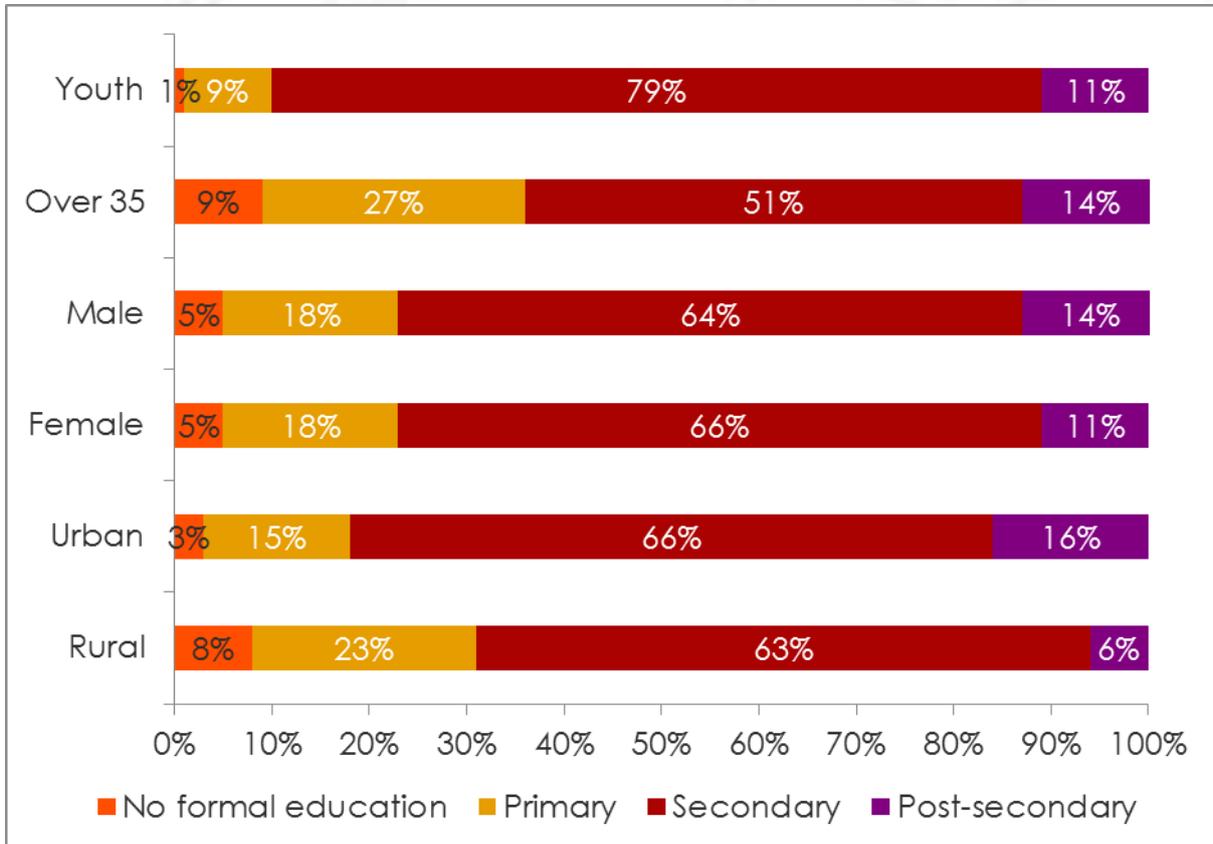
**Access to higher education**

One of the key government strategies to reduce youth unemployment has been to increase young people's capacities via significant investment in education. The government spent R254 billion on education in 2014-2015, 20% of the national budget (National Treasury, 2014).

The 2011 Afrobarometer survey results confirm significant improvement in South Africans' access to secondary education. Nine in 10 South Africans aged 18-35 years had at least some secondary education, compared to 65% of respondents aged 36 and older (Figure 3). However, only 11% of young respondents had post-secondary education, compared to 14% of respondents aged 36 and older. While educational attainment varied little between men and women, citizens living in rural areas were less likely to have higher education (6%) than their urban counterparts (16%).

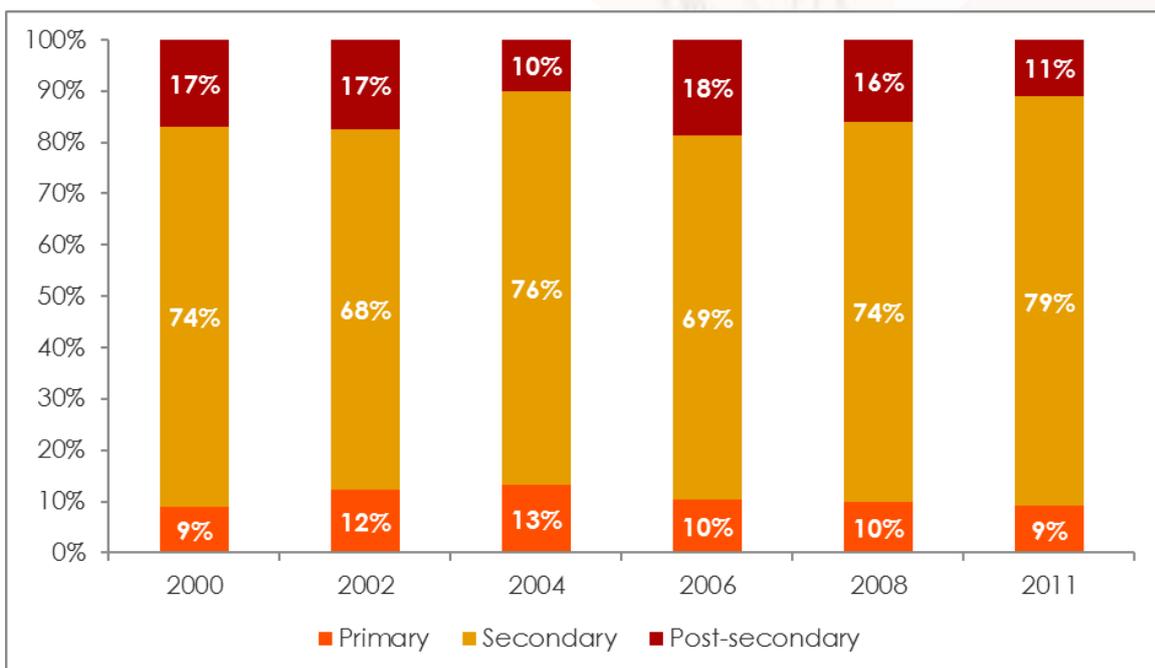
Figure 4 confirms the lack of progress toward increasing access to higher education between 2000 and 2011; higher education remains out of reach for almost nine in 10 young South Africans.

**Figure 3: Educational attainment in South Africa** | by age, gender, and location | 2011 | Afrobarometer



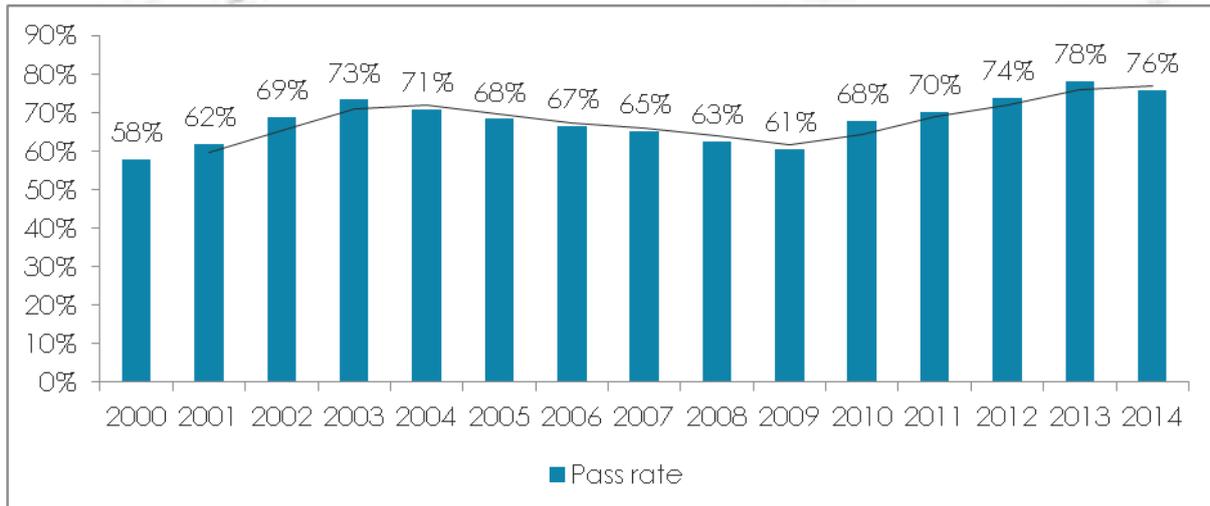
Respondents were asked: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

**Figure 4: Youth educational attainment** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2000-2011 | Afrobarometer



The pass rate for the National Senior Certificate (NSC), which is South Africa's school-leaving certificate and therefore an important asset that young people need to gain entry into higher education and the labour market, has stayed above 60% since 2001 and exceeded 70% during the period since 2011 (Figure 5). This improvement in the pass rate does not, however, reflect the major systemic challenges of low learner retention rates and poor educational quality – hence the lack of corresponding growth in tertiary education participation figures.

**Figure 5: School-leaving pass rates | South Africa | 2000-2014 | Transformation Audit**



Source: 2003–2012 data sourced from the Presidency, Department of Monitoring and Evaluation, 2012 Development Indicators; 2013 data sourced from Department of Basic Education, 2013 NSC Examination Technical Report; 2014 data sourced from Department of Basic Education, National Senior Certificate: Information Booklet.

Although access has improved at primary and secondary school levels, cost remains a major impediment to accessing higher education. Students from poor households, mostly Black/African, can obtain funding for higher education from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Between 1995 and 2010, NSFAS funding grew from R40 million to R12.9 billion, with corresponding growth in the number of students receiving aid, from 40,002 to 148,387 (De Villiers, 2012). However, given increases in tuition fees, the demand for public funding continues to increase.

### Persistent inequalities

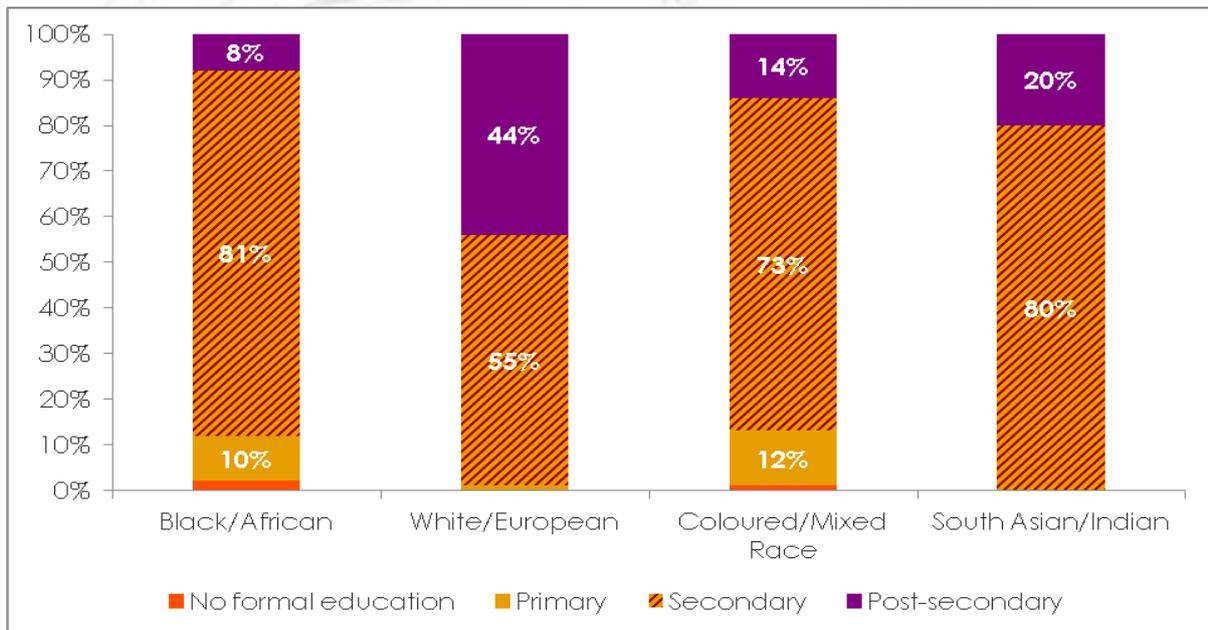
Despite government efforts since 1994, the legacy of apartheid-era racial inequality persists in South Africa's education system. In the 2011 Afrobarometer survey, 44% of young White/European respondents said they had completed at least some post-secondary education, compared to only 20% of South Asian/Indian, 14% of Coloured/Mixed race, and 8% of Black/African respondents (Figure 6).

National statistics from the Council on Higher Education confirm a corresponding pattern in higher education participation: Rates for Black/African and Coloured/Mixed race populations have lagged by about 40 percentage points behind those for White/Europeans, while rates for South Asian/Indians have lagged by about 10 percentage points (Figure 7).

Further analysis of 2011 Afrobarometer data indicates that Coloured/Mixed race and South Asian/Indian youth reported higher levels of access to post-secondary education than their older counterparts (by 10 and 14 percentage points, respectively). Young Black/African respondents, on the other hand, had nearly the same level of representation in higher

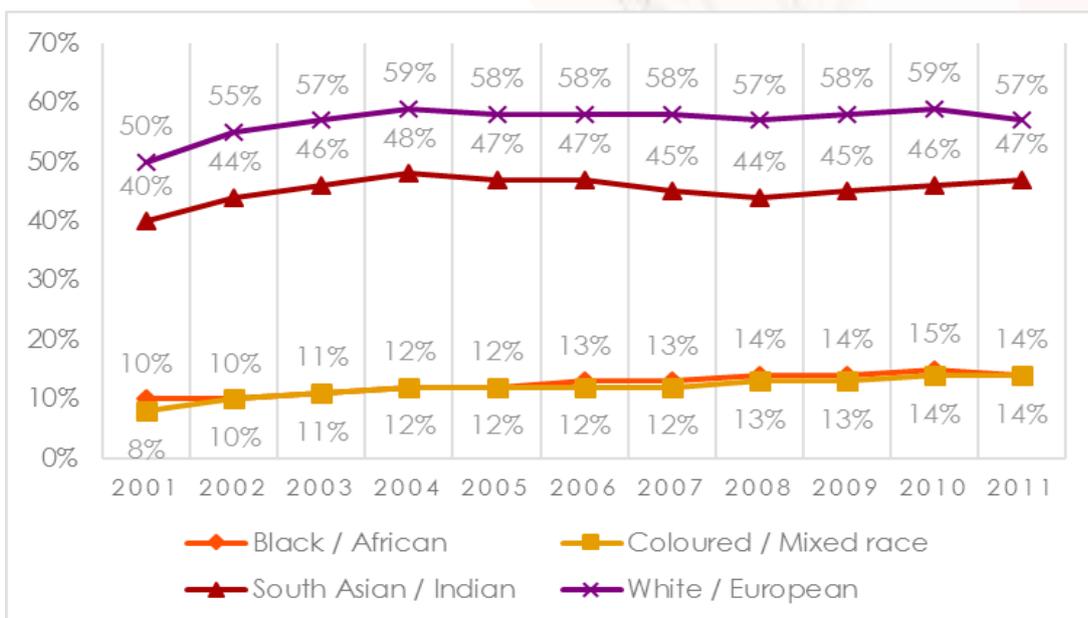
education (8%) as those over 35 years (7%) (Figure 8). This suggests that upward mobility and breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty may be more common among Coloured/Mixed race and South Asian/Indian youth than among Black/African youth.

**Figure 6: Youth educational attainment** | by race | South Africa | 2011  
 | Afrobarometer



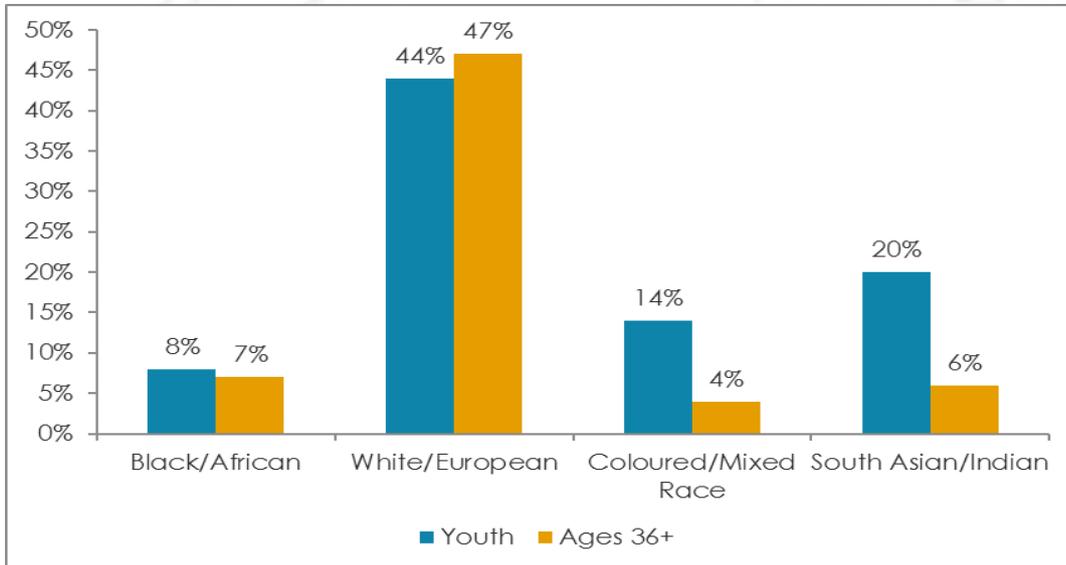
Respondents were asked: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

**Figure 7: Gross public higher education participation rates** | by race | 2001-2011  
 | Transformation Audit



Source: Wangenge-Ouma (2012). 2011 data sourced from Council on Higher Education (2011).

**Figure 8: Post-secondary educational attainment** | by age and race | South Africa  
 | 2011 | Afrobarometer

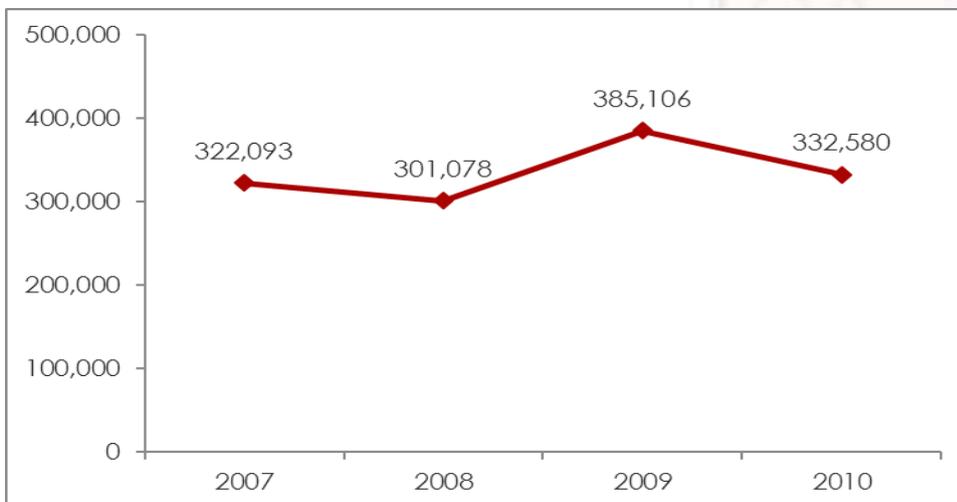


**Respondents were asked:** What is the highest level of education you have completed? (% who completed post-secondary education)

### Vocational training to boost youth employment

Intermediate-level skills are a critical need in South Africa's economy, and further education training (FET) colleges exist to fulfil this requirement. The government planned to increase FET enrolments, particularly among youth, to reach 1 million by 2014 to fill the country's shortage in these skills. But enrolments have remained static (Figure 9). Kraak (2014) argues that this is due to a failure to align FET college curricula with employer demand and government economic and industrial policy. This represents a significant missed opportunity to address this skills shortage while boosting youth employment.

**Figure 9: Vocational education training enrolments** | South Africa | 2007-2010  
 | Transformation Audit



Source: Kraak (2014)

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Core support for Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6 has been provided by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank.

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 36 | 30 June 2015**