

# WHAT & WHERE YOU STUDY MATTERS IN THE LABOUR MARKET

*Unpacking how employment and wages vary  
by qualification and institution type*



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Nicola Branson  
Samantha Culligan  
Sara Tonini  
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Opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Kresge Foundation or any of their officers or employees.

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# Introduction

Many young people enter the labour force with limited skills due to low levels of school completion, low enrolment in post school education and training and even lower qualification completion rates. This reality stands in strong contrast to the demand for high skilled employees in the labour market, resulting in skills mismatch and many being excluded from the labour market.<sup>2</sup>

Previous studies have shown that post school education has the potential to enable the youth to find jobs and earn higher wages, thus alleviating poverty and joblessness.<sup>3</sup> Despite being true that young South Africans who obtain post school qualifications are generally better off than their peers with less education, the benefits of further education differ with respect to the qualification pursued.<sup>4</sup> In particular, studies investigating the relationship between post school education and employment (and/or earnings) in South Africa have disaggregated tertiary qualifications into certificate/diploma and degree.

Very often the distinction between certificate/diploma and degree has been equalized to the distinction between college versus university enrolment. Is this the case? While there is agreement on the fact that degrees are awarded by universities, certificates and diplomas can be issued by a variety of different institutions. Given that most individuals pursuing higher education in South Africa obtain certificates or diplomas, understanding which institutions provide these qualifications and whether qualifications are valued differently in the labour market based on where they are obtained, is of primary importance.



South Africa is renowned for its stark and persistent unemployment level, especially among the youth.

With over 38% of young South Africans being unemployed, the country has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world.<sup>1</sup>

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[1] The figure does not include discouraged workers i.e. it represents the strict unemployment rate among youth (StatsSA, 2018). Note strict unemployment among youth in NIDS wave 5 is found to be lower at 26% overall.

[2] Graham and Mlatsheni, 2015. Branson, De Lannoy, and Brynde, 2019.

[3] Branson, Leibranddt and Zuze, 2009. Biyase and Zwane, 2015. Salisbury, 2016. Mlatsheni and Ranchhod, 2017.

[4] Van Broekhuizen (2016) discusses how labour market outcomes differ according to the quality and type of higher education institutions attended. Branson, Leibranddt and Zuze (2009) estimates the employment and earnings returns to tertiary education for wage employees between 2000 and 2007, distinguishing between certificate/diploma and degree holders. Branson, De Lannoy, and Brynde (2019) review the literature produced from the NIDS data on youth labour market outcomes and highlight how quality of employment, for example casual and informal versus formal employment, differs for young individuals with different educational attainment.



Given that the majority of individuals pursuing higher education in South Africa obtain certificates or diplomas, understanding which institutions provide these qualifications and whether qualifications are valued differently on the labour market based on where they are obtained, is of primary importance.

The National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), an initiative of the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, is an invaluable source of data to investigate education and labour market issues in South Africa. With reference to qualifications, respondents who attained some post school education are asked to name the institution where they successfully completed it. By matching this information to a list of post school education institutions, we can differentiate the providers, i.e. Training, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Private College or Higher Education Institution (HEIs) and Public University. The list of post school institutions has been compiled from different sources based on South Africa's National Qualification Framework (NQF). The National Learners' Record Database (NLRD) is an inclusive management system for the NQF and produces a list of all registered and quality assured national qualifications.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) provides a list of all registered private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and private colleges. In addition, a list of accredited nursing education institutions was sourced from the South African Nursing Council (SANC). The list of private HEIs, private colleges and nursing education institutions were appended to the NLRD list to create a master list of post school institutions in South Africa. Respondents who provided details of institutions that were not on the master list, but could be grouped according to a common trade, were categorized as training provider. Training provider is, therefore, a residual category for qualifications that are not NQF aligned. Those respondents who did not provide enough information about the institution they attended were left unmatched. While the overall matching rate was 69%, this varied by age and qualification type. See appendix A for information on the matching process and the resulting sample size.



# Educational attainment by qualification and institution type

In 2017, the NIDS sample included 12 997 youth. Table 1 shows that enrolment in basic education remains high for youth in their late teens; 78% of 15-19 year olds are still in school, with a further 5% in post-school education and training (PSET). PSET enrolment is highest for those aged 20-24 at 17% (with a further 10% still enrolled in school). Enrolment is low in the 25-29 group at 7% overall.

Given our focus on labour market outcomes we restrict our analysis to the 25-35 age-group. Among this group, about one-third (35.3%) completed some form of post-school education.

**Table 1:** Youth numbers and enrolment status in NIDS 2017.

Age group	Observations	Enrolled in school	Enrolled in PSET	Not Enrolled
15-19	3 686	78%	5%	17%
20-24	3 301	10%	17%	72%
25-29	3 006	1%	6%	93%
30-35	3 004			
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 997</b>			

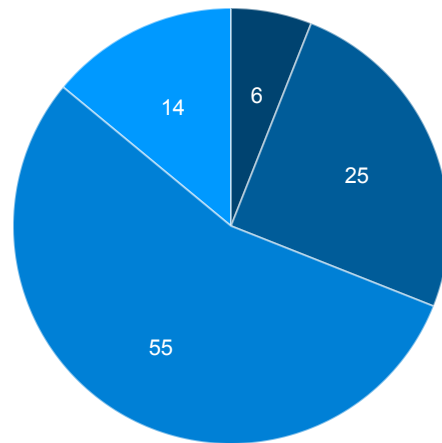
Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied. Enrolment information is not available for those over 30.

Figure 1 shows that 80% of the young South Africans in this age group who completed some post-schooling obtained a diploma/certificate (55% completed a diploma/certificate that required a grade 12 prior to enrolment and 25% one that did not require grade 12), 14% a degree, and 6% a National Certificate Vocational or a National Technical Certificate.



**Figure 1:** 25-35 year-old students who completed a post school education qualification, by type of qualification obtained.

**Completed post schooling 25-35 years-old**  
**Qualification type (%)**



● NTC/NCV	6
● Certificate/diploma (without matric)	25
● Certificate/diploma (with matric)	55
● Degree	14

Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

Part of the choice of which qualification to study towards will be determined by an individual's educational background. Table 2 examines educational background in terms of whether the individual completed secondary school (matric) prior to their post-school qualification or not.

As expected, most individuals who get a degree or a diploma/certificate requiring grade 12 have previously completed matric. Interestingly, most (85%) who attained an NTC/NVC, a qualification that does not require matric, have also previously completed grade 12. Only 15% of individuals with NTC/NVC qualifications appear to have used this pathway as an alternative to completing secondary school. On the other hand, most individuals with diploma/certificates that do not require matric have incomplete secondary school. The percentage of young South Africans with matric who indicate that they have a diploma/certificate not requiring matric is relatively small (28%) but given that this group represents the largest share of youth, still signifies a significant number of youth.

**Table 2:** Post school education and secondary school completion for individuals aged 25-35.

Post school type	Complete secondary	Incomplete secondary
Certificate/diploma (not requiring matric)	28%	72%
NTC/NCV	85%	15%
Certificate/diploma (requiring matric)	99%	1%
Degree	100%	0%

Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

How can we better understand the different kinds of skills and knowledge that individuals acquired through completing these qualifications? In the literature, researchers have used the distinction between those completing a degree and those acquiring a certificate/diploma to analyse the labour market prospects of the higher educated.<sup>5</sup> An exception to this is a study by Borat and Kimani (2007) who use NIDS to describe the association between the type of higher education institution attended, and the probability of employment and level of earnings of graduates (ages 24 to 64) in the South African labour market. The study finds that the type of institution attended, namely universities and colleges, plays a significant role in determining both employment probability and earnings, with university graduates in favour of higher labour market outcomes relative to college graduates.



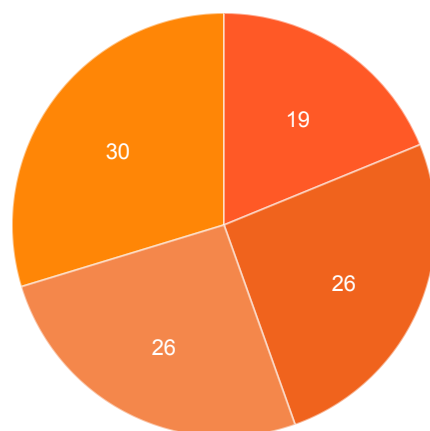
Using NIDS, we are able to dig deeper into the heterogeneity both within qualification type, and across institution types and to examine how these differences reflect in the labour market outcomes of individuals.

[5] See Van Broekhuizen (2016) for an extensive overview of studies on the effect of heterogeneity in the type and quality of post-school education in South Africa on the labour market prospects of individuals.

By looking at the institution at which youth completed their post-schooling, we can gain additional information. Figure 2 replicates figure 1 by institution type. The first thing to notice is the higher share of individuals claiming to have obtained a qualification from a university compared to the share with degrees in Figure 1. 30% of respondents in this group have completed a qualification from a public university. This is mainly because individuals can obtain diplomas from universities. The share of qualifications is the same for public TVET and public nursing institutions (NEI) and private colleges, HEIs and nursing institutions (26%). The remaining 19% obtained a qualification from a Training Provider. This category contains qualifications from training centres, adult based education and training, security training centres, computer colleges, hospitality academies, home based caring and religious colleges.

**Figure 2:** 25-35 year-old students who completed some post school education, by type of institution where the qualification was completed.

**Completed post schooling 25-35 years-old  
Institution type (%)**



● Training	19
● TVET/ Public NEI/ Other public	26
● Private college/ Private HEI	26
● Public university	30

Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

# What do we learn about the employment and earnings prospects of youth when education is disaggregated by qualification and institution type?

Labour market prospects of higher educated individuals differ across types of qualification obtained. Degree holders are better off in terms of employment opportunities than diploma/certificate holders.<sup>6</sup> Much less is known about how the labour market outcomes of individuals educated at different institutions are affected.

In line with previous contributions, Figure 3a shows that almost all degree holders (93%) were employed<sup>7</sup> at the time of the interview (2017), this percentage drops to 87% among those with a National Certificate Vocational or a National Technical Certificate qualification and 85% for those with a diploma/certificate requiring grade 12. The employment prospected among individuals with diplomas/certificate qualifications that do not require grade 12 is 74%, lower than among respondents who have completed grade 12 has their highest qualification and similar to those with incomplete secondary education (73%). The figure confirms what has already been shown in the literature; individuals with post-secondary education are more likely to be employed than youth who haven't completed any further education or training. The figure adds two additional pieces of information. First, employment rates among those with NCV and NTC qualifications are second highest (although the confidence bands show the largest range) likely a result of these qualifications being taken by those already in employment. Second, those who have a certificate or diploma that does not require a grade 12 on entry are no more likely than those with incomplete secondary education to have employment. Indeed, those with grade 12 as their highest educational attainment, appear to be better off in terms of employment.<sup>8</sup>

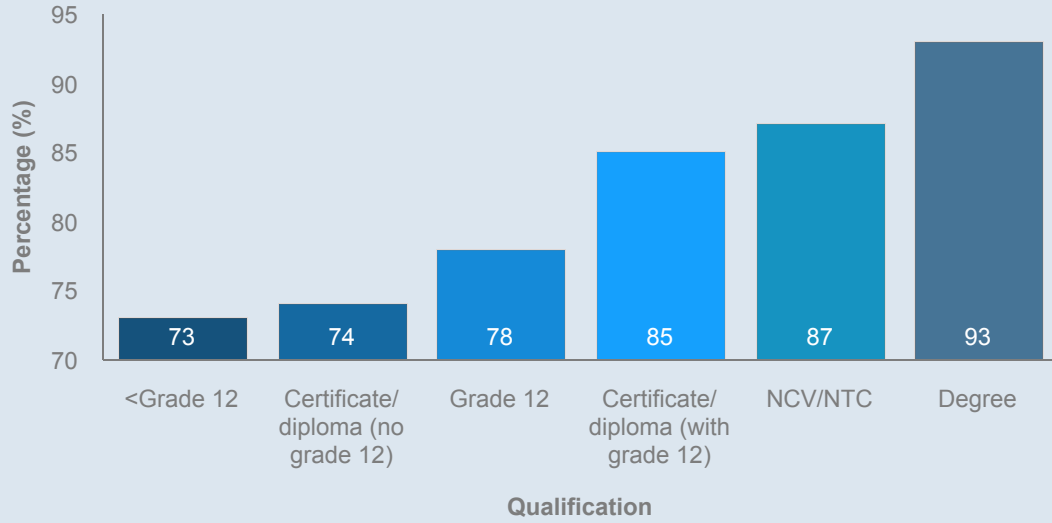


[6] Van Broekhuizen (2016).

[7] Employment includes those in wage employment, self employment and casual employment.

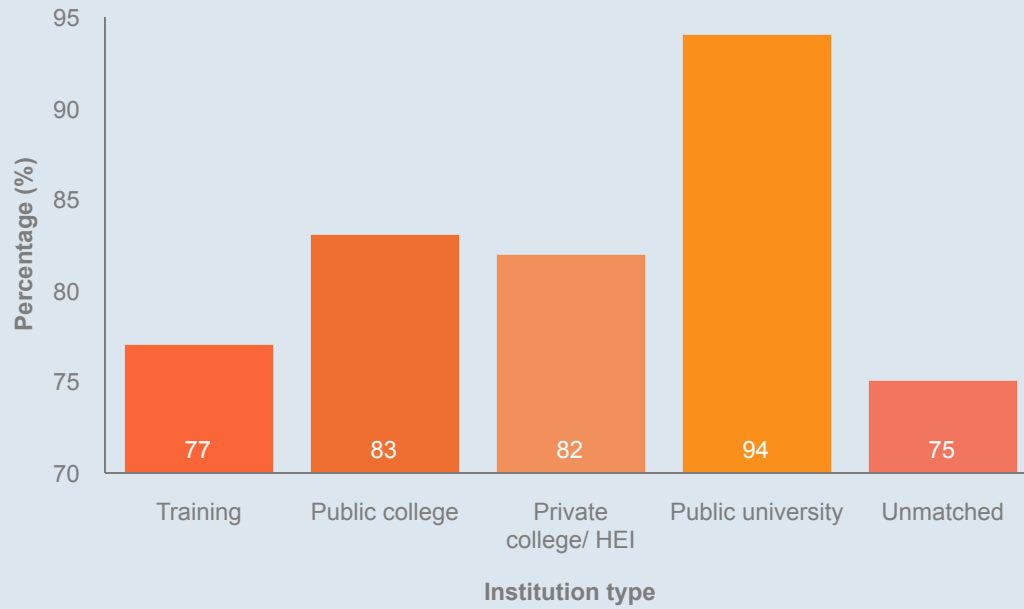
[8] However when those who matriculated are compared to those who did not within this group, those that matriculated and then got the certificate or diploma do better than those with grade 12 only.

**Figure 3a:** Employment by qualification type (%).



Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

**Figure 3b:** Employment by institution type (%).



Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

Figure 3b disaggregates by institution type and therefore provides additional information regarding the employment prospects of young South Africans who completed post-school education. It shows that 94% of individuals who completed their qualification at university were employed in 2017. This percentage is similar to the percentage of employed individuals among the degree holders. This is surprising given that universities issue diplomas/certificates as well as degrees which are associated with lower employment. Table 3 clarifies this point - most degrees (89%) were awarded by public universities while only a quarter of the diplomas/certificates requiring grade 12 were obtained at a university. Most of the diplomas/certificates requiring grade 12 were obtained from public TVET or nursing colleges (29%) or private colleges or HEIs (34%). Those who obtained qualifications from private or public colleges have similar levels of employment (82% and 83% respectively) and are relatively well aligned with the rate of employment among diploma/certificate holders seen in figure 1a (85%). Employment levels are far lower (77%) for those who obtained their qualification from a training provider. Table 3 shows that over 50% of diplomas or certificates that do not require grade 12 are obtained from training providers and a further 26% at a private college or HEI which are likely to account for the lower rates of employment. The majority (81%) of National Certificate Vocational or a National Technical Certificate qualification are awarded from public TVET or NEI colleges with a further 15% from private or HEIs.

**Table 3: Classification of qualifications by institution type.**

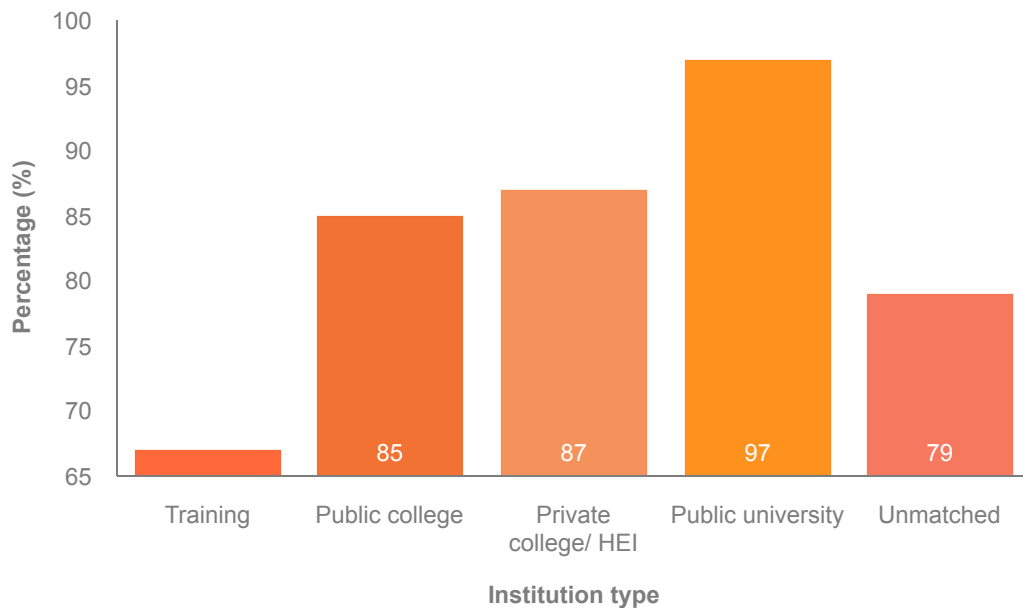
	Certificate/ diploma (no grade 12)	Certificate/ diploma (with grade 12)	Degree	NTC/NCV	All
Training provider	53%	12%	3%	2%	19%
TVET/ Public NEI	19%	29%	3%	81%	26%
Private college/ HEI/ NEI	26%	34%	6%	15%	26%
Public university	2%	25%	89%	2%	30%
<b>Sample</b>	298	698	189	91	1 288

Notes: Post stratification weights applied. There are 16 cases where institution type was defined but educational qualification level was not. There were 12 cases where qualification level was defined but institution type was not, even though it was matched.

What stands out from Table 3 is the range of institutions providing certificates and diplomas both requiring and not requiring grade 12. It is unlikely that these qualifications result in similar levels of skill acquisition.

Figure 4 shows the importance of the awarding institution for the labour market outcomes of individuals who obtained a diploma/certificate requiring grade 12. In fact, when the qualification has been awarded by a public university, the employment level of this group is higher than for degree holders (see Figure 3a). On the contrary, when the certificate/diploma requiring grade 12 has been obtained from a training provider, the employment prospect is lower than for young South Africans who completed a certificate/diploma not requiring grade 12. Employment rates are similar for those who obtained this qualification from a public or private college.

**Figure 4: Employment by institution type of those with certificate/diploma requiring grade 12**

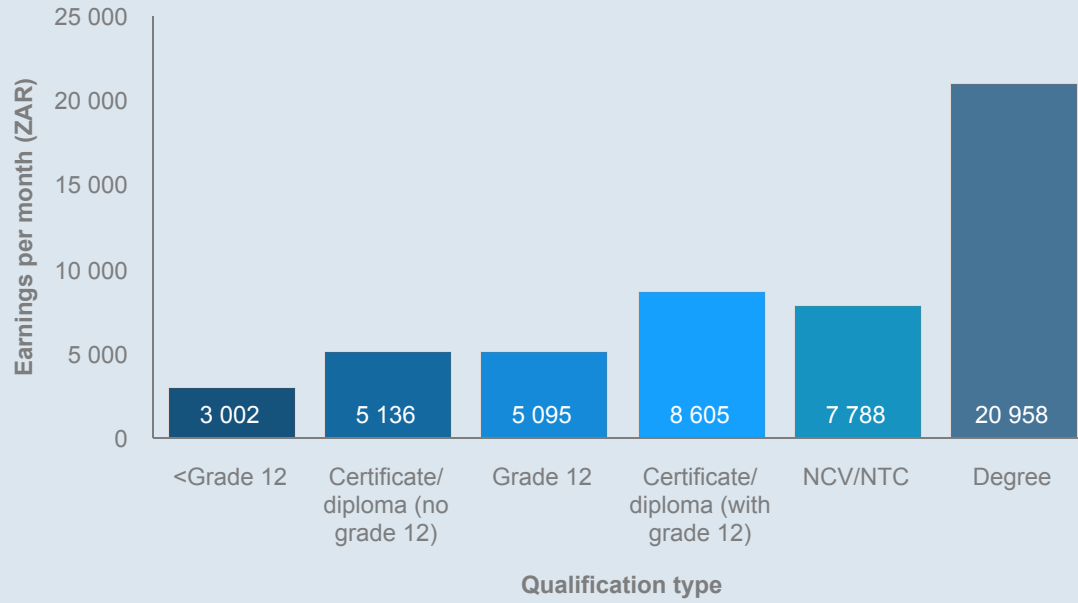


Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied. Samples for each column are quite small 7XX in total.

Degrees and NTC/NVCs on the other hand are predominantly obtained from a single type of institution and are therefore more likely to be aligned in terms of skill acquisition.

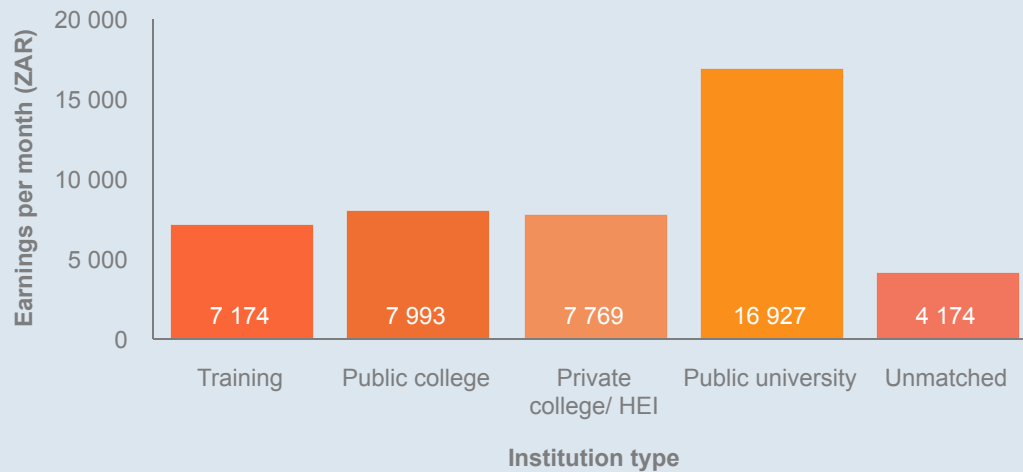
Figures 3 and 4, have described the varying levels of employment among youth with different qualifications levels from different institutions. Figure 5 explores wages across similar dimensions. Once again, we see three distinct groups; those with degrees or qualifications from universities more broadly, earn far above the rest; those attending public or private colleges and obtaining diplomas or certificates requiring matric or NCV or NTC qualifications earn less than those in the first group, but more than those with grade 12 or less, including those with certificates or diplomas not requiring grade 12.

**Figure 5a: Earnings by qualification type**



Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

**Figure 5b: Earnings by institution type**



Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.



These findings have uncovered heterogeneity in labour market reward to different qualifications and further, qualifications by institution type. Next, we examine the characteristics of individuals obtaining certain qualifications and qualifications from different institutions, to further unpack these observed differences.

## Who goes into which kind of institution?

Given historical inequalities in access to quality education, including differential access to post school institutions by population group and gender, it is important to first examine how achievements by institution type differ between across population groups and between males and females.

**Table 4a:** Distribution across qualification achievement for racial and gender subgroups.

	No qualification	Has a qualification (matched)	Has a qualification (unmatched)	Sample
<b>African</b>	70%	22%	8%	5 012
<b>Coloured</b>	77%	15%	8%	751
<b>Indian</b>	74%	20%	6%	82
<b>White</b>	40%	47%	13%	147
<b>Male</b>	71%	21%	8%	2 571
<b>Female</b>	69%	22%	9%	3 419

Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

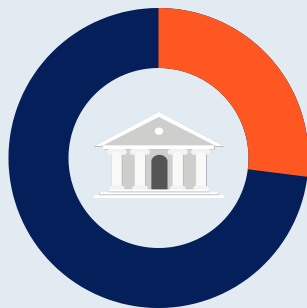
**Table 4b:** Distribution across institution type for racial and gender subgroups.

	Training	Public TVET/ NEI	Private College/HEI	Public University
<b>African</b>	20%	27%	26%	27%
<b>Coloured</b>	7%	43%	26%	23%
<b>Indian</b>	4%	3%	31%	62%
<b>White</b>	12%	7%	27%	55%
<b>Male</b>	21%	27%	20%	32%
<b>Female</b>	16%	25%	32%	28%

Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied.

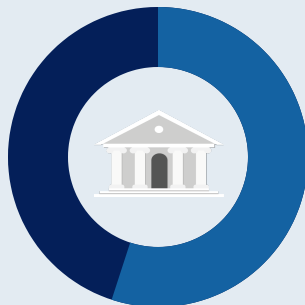
Table 4a and 4b shows continued inequality in access to post school across population groups. Over 70% Africans, coloureds and Indians from our sample of interest have no qualification, while 60% of white youth have obtained a qualification. The tables also shows fairly high segregation by institution type by population group among those who have completed a qualification. 62% of Indians and 55% of whites who complete a post school education obtained their qualification from a public university. This percentage is much lower at 27% for Africans and only 23% for coloured individuals. African and coloureds on the other hand, are much more likely to have attended a public TVET or NEI than Indians and whites. In fact, the majority (48%) of coloured individuals who complete some post-school education qualified from a public college (TVET or nursing institution). A fairly equal share of the African group attends each institution type – 20% training, 27% public college, 26% private college and 27% public university.

*Difference between African & White population groups  
obtaining a qualification from a public university:*



**27% of Africans**

obtained their qualification from a  
public university

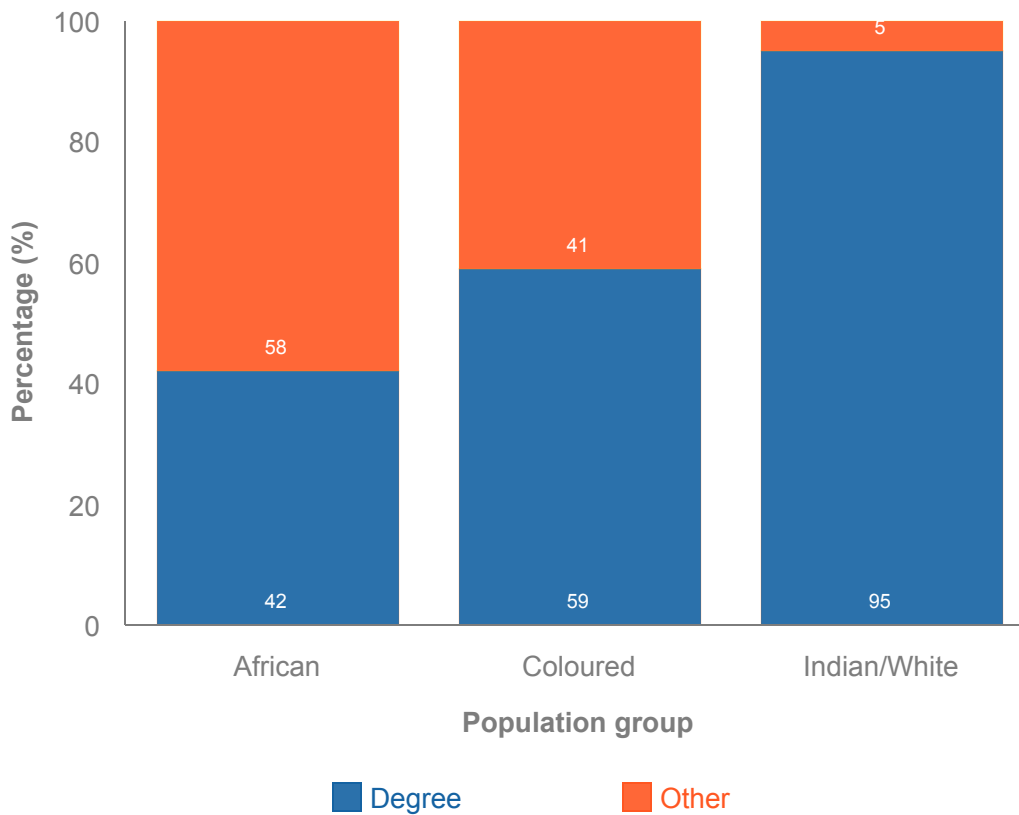


**55% of Whites**

obtained their qualification from a  
public university

Figure 6 shows that in addition to Africans and coloureds being less likely than Indians and whites to have completed their qualification from a university, the type of qualification obtained by those who do attend university is far more likely to be a certificate/diploma than a degree.

**Figure 6:** Qualification type by race among those who obtained a qualification from a university.



Source: NIDS, Wave 5. Post-stratification weights were applied. Indian and white respondents grouped together due to small sample size (46 in total). Sample size among coloured respondents is also very small (20).

The percentage completing a qualification and share of qualifications across institution type is similar for males and females. If anything, women are more likely to complete a post-school qualification, with the main difference in institution attended being that women are more likely to have obtained a qualification from a private college, HEI or NEI, while the largest share of men (32%) obtain their qualification from a public university.

**Table 5:** Characteristics of individuals by institutions attended.

	Training	Public TVET/ other college	Private College/HEI	Public University
<b>African</b>	93%	88%	85%	79%
<b>Coloured</b>	2%	10%	6%	5%
<b>Indian</b>	0%	0%	1%	2%
<b>White</b>	5%	2%	8%	14%
<b>Male</b>	54%	49%	35%	50%
<b>Age</b>	30	29	30	30
<b>Household income</b>	9 881	13 203	16 902	27 675

Table 5 examines the average characteristics of individuals who obtained qualifications from different institution types. Here the access to post-school and post school institutional type attended information is combined. We see the disproportionate representation of whites and Indians in public institutions and that public colleges are currently attended almost exclusively by Africans and coloureds. Public colleges and universities have a similar share of males and females while females are overrepresented in private colleges and training providers have a higher share of males. Finally, there is a distinct gradient in household income by institution type with those completing qualification from public universities far better off and those with training on the lower end.

The data confirms that the historic legacy of racial inequality in accessing higher education continues to affect the generation of South Africans who were born and grew up amid the country's transition into democracy.

## What have we learnt?

In unpacking how employment and wages vary by qualification and institution type, we have learnt that both what and where you study has an impact on your labour market prospects. These findings show that there is heterogeneity amongst the institutions awarding qualifications and heterogeneity in the qualification types, particularly for certificates/diplomas. Even though certificates/diplomas yield lower probabilities of employment and a lower wage relative to degrees, they still fare better than no post school at all. Further research is needed to better understand the value of certificates/diplomas attained from training providers and the institutions that were unmatched as these certificates/diplomas are likely to not align with South Africa's NQF and may hold a different value in the labour market.

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## Appendix A: Post-school institution matching rate

The National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) interviews adults (ages 15+) in South Africa on a series of education questions. The matching process used in *What and Where You Study Matters in the Labour Market* was primarily interested in individuals who responded “yes” to the question asking, “Have you successfully completed any diplomas, certificates or degrees outside of school?” as this produced the sample of adults in South Africa who have completed some form of post school studies.

To gain insight on the post school qualifications achieved, this sample was asked to explicitly name their highest level of education (for example, certificate not requiring grade 12) and state whether the duration of their studies was less than 6 months or more than 6 months (inclusive).

These individuals were then asked, “At what institution did you successfully complete the diploma, certificate or degree?”

The list of institutions, provided by the respondents, was matched to a master list of post school institution providers in South Africa. This step was necessary in order to determine the type of post school institution attended (for example, public university) by the respondent. Given the absence of a comprehensive master list, this list had to be constructed and checked manually.

The comprehensive master list was compiled from an understanding of South Africa’s Post School Education and Training (PSET) system and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF is used by South Africa to arrange the ten levels of qualification achievements, as shown in table A1. The inclusive management system for the NQF is the National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD) and is responsible for producing a list of all registered and quality assured national qualifications along with the accredited institution provider and respective accrediting body.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) provides a list of all registered private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and private colleges. In addition, a list of accredited nursing education institutions was sourced from the South African Nursing Council (SANC). The list of private HEIs, private colleges and nursing education institutions were appended to the NLRD list to create a comprehensive master list of post school institutions in South Africa.

Respondents who provided details of institutions that were not on this comprehensive master list, but could be grouped according to a common trade, were categorized as training provider. Examples of the type of institution included in the training provider group include places such as security training centres, hospitality academies and computer colleges. Training provider is, therefore, a residual category for qualifications that are not NQF aligned. Those respondents who did not provide enough information about the institution they attended were left unmatched.

**Table A1:** South African qualification by NQF level.

Qualification	NQF level
General Certificate	1
Elementary Certificate	2
Intermediate Certificate	3
National Certificate (Matric)	4
Higher Certificate	5
Diploma & Advanced Certificate	6
Bachelor's Degree & Advanced Diploma	7
Honours Degree & Postgraduate Diploma	8
Master's Degree	9
Doctoral Degree	10

The matching results between the list of institutions provided by the respondents and the built comprehensive master list are displayed in table A2. Overall, 3184 respondents were matched producing a match rate of 69%. For the age group of interest (25 to 35 years), the match rate is 72%. Reasons for those who are unmatched include not enough information being provided, not knowing, no information provided or not yet coded according to a training provider.

**Table A2:** Matching results of Wave 5 variable of institution where respondent successfully completed the diploma, certificate or degree outside of school.

	All (number)	All (%)	25-35 (number)	25-35 (%)
Matched	3 184	69%	1 304	72%
Not enough information	158	3%	56	3%
<b>Respondent gave:</b>				
Don't know	135	3%	38	2%
Refused	3	0%	1	0%
No information	117	3%	22	1%
Not yet coded	1 009	22%	388	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4 606</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1809</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure A1 displays the matching results for each age group. The match rate for the age groups ranges from 77% for the youngest group (15-19 years of age) and declines to 63% for the 50-54 age group. The older age groups thereafter have a slightly higher match rate of approximately 70%. The age group match rates oscillate around the overall match rate of 69%.

**Figure A1:** Match rate by age group.

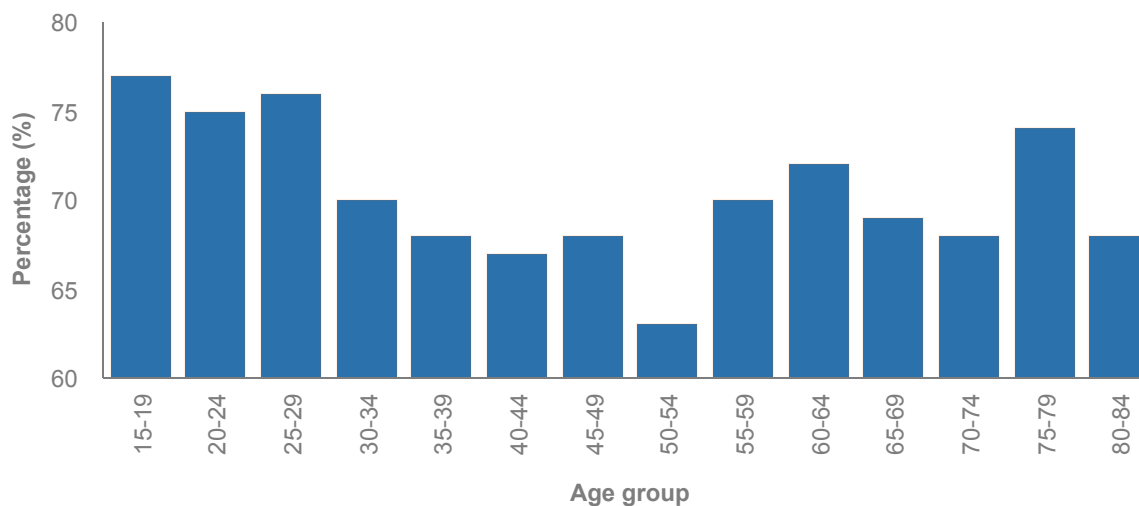




Figure A2 displays the matching results for each qualification type. In comparison to figure A1, figure A2 shows a much wider range of match rates for qualification types with degrees having the highest match rate of 94% and certificates requiring no grade 12 having the lowest match rate of 53%. Institutions offering degrees appear to be more well known in the labour market relative to institutions offering certificates and diploma (especially for institutions offering certificates/diplomas not requiring grade 12). Ns/NCVs are a particular type of qualification offered by the colleges with a clear skills development focus and also had a relatively high match rate of 87%. From these findings, it seems that there is a broad range of institutions offering certificates and diplomas not requiring grade 12, resulting in a relatively lower match rate compared to the other qualification types because they are not as well understood in the labour market.

**Figure A2:** Match rate by qualification type.

