

# LIFE AFTER SCHOOL FOR RECENT MATRICULANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

GABRIELLE WILLS

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At the dawn of democracy, South Africa faced a sobering reality: fewer than a third of 25- to 34-year-olds had successfully achieved a matric or equivalent qualification. Fast forward to 2024 and the proportion of individuals in this age group that had completed their schooling reached 57% —a leap that signals remarkable progress (see Figure 1). This upward trajectory will be further bolstered by the record-breaking results in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) (commonly referred to as the matric examination) in recent years. The upshot of this is that South Africa's school completion rates are now high and comparable to other middle-income countries (Department of Basic Education, 2024, p4).

**FIGURE 1:** Percent of South Africans 25-34-years-old with at least a matric



Source: Own calculations using the PALMS series 3.1.1 from 1994-2008, and Quarterly Labour Force Survey data (quarter 1) from 2010-2024



**THE LIKELIHOOD OF YOUTH WITH A MATRIC HAVING A JOB AT THE START OF 2024 ROUGHLY RESEMBLED THE CHANCES OF YOUTH WITHOUT A MATRIC HAVING A JOB EIGHT TO TEN YEARS AGO.**

However, in the face of rising unemployment and a faltering economy, we must confront a critical question: what are the actual prospects for young South Africans obtaining a matric qualification? In chapter 4 of a study titled "School completion, the matric and post-school transitions in South Africa" by Gabrielle Wills, Rebecca Selkirk & John Kruger (2024) I aim to answer this question by examining the outlook for recent matriculants. Six key insights are drawn from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey – a nationally representative, household-based sample survey in South Africa – and other data sources.

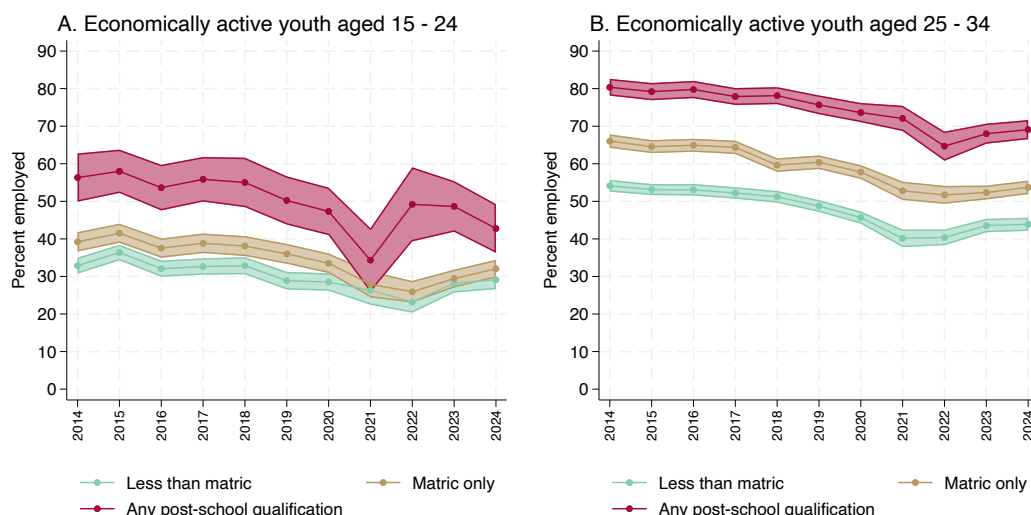
## **1 YOUTH WITH A MATRIC WERE ABOUT AS LIKELY TO GET A JOB IN 2024 AS THEY WERE 8 TO 10 YEARS PREVIOUSLY WITHOUT A MATRIC**

Figure 2 illustrates the brutal truth: 10 years ago, finding a job was easier for matriculants than it will be for the matric class who finished school at the end of 2024, despite their hard work in completing secondary school. The likelihood of youth with a matric (those with 12 years of completed schooling) having a job at the start of 2024 roughly resembled the chances of youth without a matric having a job eight to ten years ago.

Although changes in the composition of the matric group over time could be driving some of the declines in their employment prospects, there has been a deterioration in the labour market for all youth over the past decade. Employment prospects have even declined for youth with a post-school qualification from quarter 1 (Q1) of 2014 to Q1 2024 (see panel B of Figure 2).

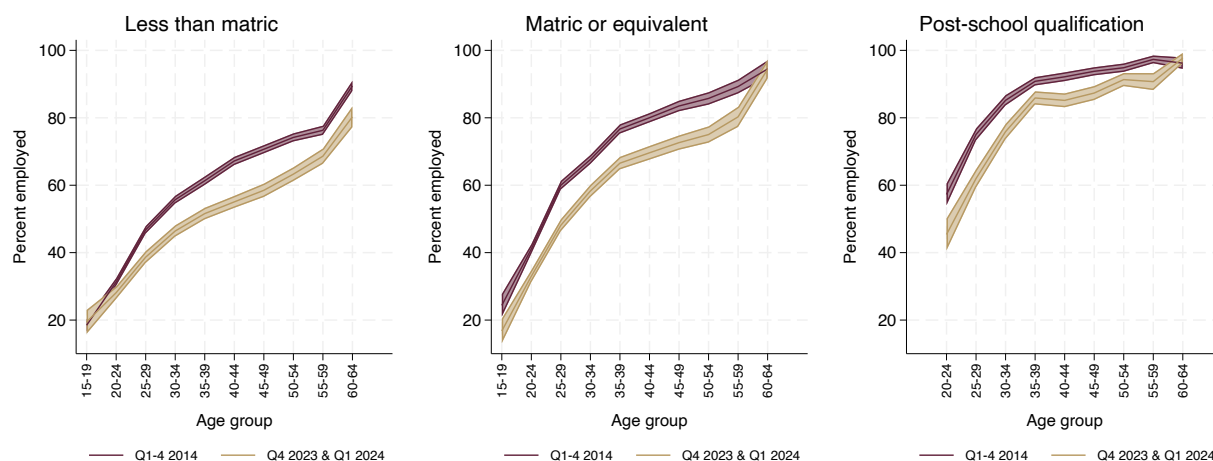
For nearly all age groups and education levels, employment probabilities in 2023/24 were lower than in 2014. Figure 3 further illustrates this, showing employment probabilities for the economically active (including discouraged work-seekers) working-age population in five-year age groups across four periods: Q1-Q4 of 2014, Q1-Q4 of 2019, Q1-Q4 of 2022, and Q4 2023 to Q1 2024. Alarmingly, in 2023/24 the employment probability age profile for those with a matric resembled the profile of individuals with less than a matric a decade ago.

**FIGURE 2: Percent of South African youth employed by qualification level**



Source: Adapted from Wills (2024) based on Figure 7 using the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 1. Shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals. Discouraged workseekers are included among the economically active.

**FIGURE 3: Probability of employment by age in 2014 vs 2023/24 in South Africa. Sample includes economically active and discouraged job seekers**



Source: Own calculations using Quarterly Labour Force Survey, weighted and confidence intervals account for complex survey design.

Notes: Sample excludes not economically active but includes discouraged worker seekers. 95% confidence intervals in shaded area.

## 2 ONE OF EVERY TWO RECENT MATRICULANTS IN 2024 WAS “NOT IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION OR TRAINING” (NEET)

Limited expansion in post-school education and training (PSET) opportunities in the past decade (2014-2024) juxtaposed against a deteriorating labour market over the same period has meant that relatively fewer recent matriculants (defined as 15-24-year-olds with 12 years of completed schooling) are transitioning into meaningful opportunities.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic (2014–2019), around 44–45% of recent matriculants were classified as NEET. This figure peaked at a staggering 55% in early 2022 and remained alarmingly high at 49.8% at the start of 2024 (see Figure 4). Stated differently, one of every two recent matriculants was not engaged in work or studies in the 1st quarter of 2024. Coupled with the rising numbers of youth getting a matric, this implies that the number of recent matriculants that were NEET rose by over half a million from the start of 2015 to the start of 2024. As many as 1.78 million recent matriculants were NEET in the first quarter of 2024.

Among all youth aged 15–24, NEET rates increased from 32% in 2014 (quarter 1) to 35% in 2024 (quarter 1), while even larger NEET rate increases were seen for youth aged 25–34 from 45% (quarter 1) in 2014 to 52% (quarter 1) in 2024.

### **3 A MATRIC QUALIFICATION STILL PROVIDES YOUTH AN ADVANTAGE OVER NOT HAVING A MATRIC**

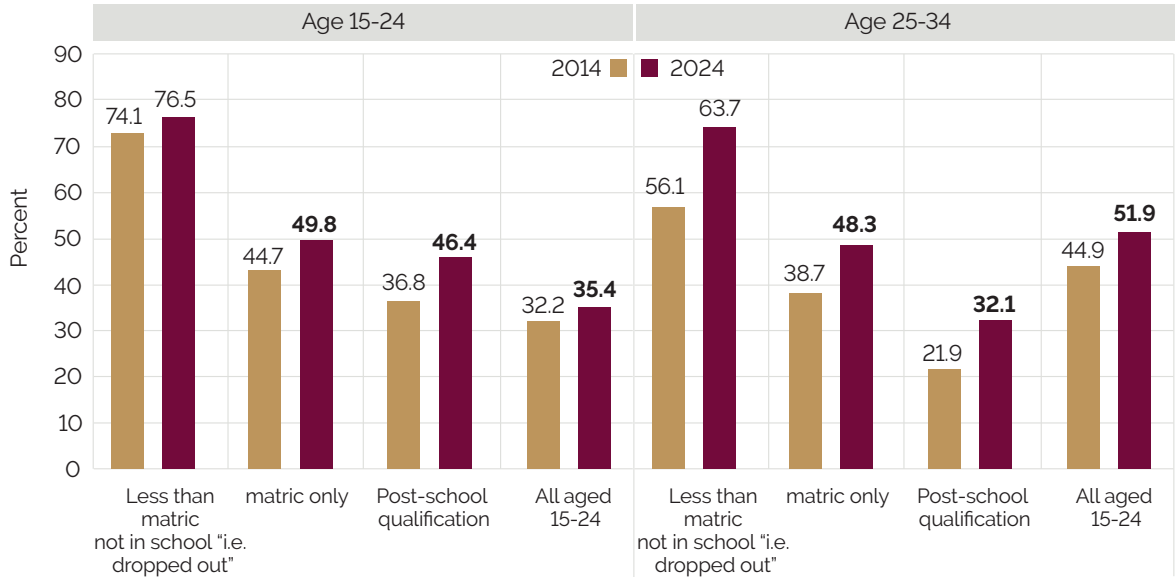
While rising NEET youth rates among recent matriculants are undeniably concerning, it is important to emphasise that it does not diminish the significance of the matric qualification. In quarter 1 of 2024, nearly half (5 out of 10) of matriculants aged 15–24 were classified as NEET. But almost 8 out of 10 of their peers who had dropped out of school were NEET. Youth are certainly better off obtaining a matric than not. The chances of getting a job with a matric remain much higher than not having a matric as seen in Figure 2 and 3. But having a post-school qualification remains preferable to having a matric only.

### **4 RECENT MATRICULANTS WHO WERE NEET IN 2024 WERE MORE LIKELY TO FIND THEMSELVES AMONG THE LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED THAN A DECADE PREVIOUSLY**

Among matriculants aged 15–24 in 2014 classified as NEET, 27% searched for work for more than a year. By 2024, this figure had risen to 32%, reflecting a growing trend of prolonged unemployment spells among youth. The situation is more dire for 25–34-year-old NEETs holding a matric qualification, with the percentage searching for work for over a year rising from 37% in the first quarter of 2014 to 50% in the first quarter of 2024. In other words, one in two NEETs with a matric aged 25–34 had been searching for work for more than a year at the start of 2024.

This is concerning because the longer young people remain disconnected from employment, education, or training, the greater the toll on their mental health. Persistent NEET status is associated with worse mental health (Branson et al., 2018), particularly among young men (Sherif & Vermaak, 2019), emphasising the importance of creating opportunities to keep youth meaningfully engaged.

**FIGURE 4:** Percent of youth aged 15-24 or 25-35 that are NEET by education

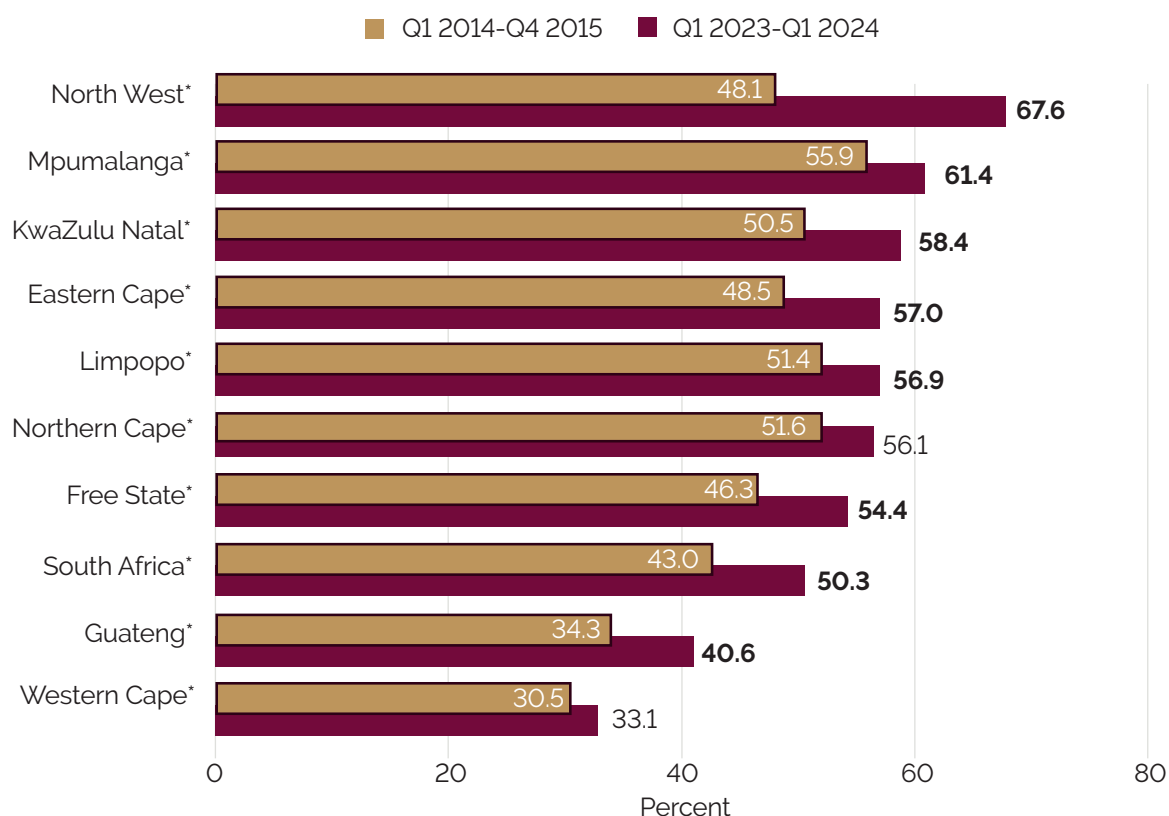


Source: Wills (2024) from Table 5 using the Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2014 & 2024, Quarter 1. NEET rate only calculated for those with known education status and identifiable activity status. Data label is in bold in 2024 if the rise from 2014 is statistically significant at 5% level.

**5 THERE ARE STARK REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN NEET RATES AMONG RECENT MATRICULANTS**

Where you live in South Africa shapes post-matriculation opportunities. For instance, a third of recent matriculants in the Western Cape were NEET in 2023/24. In stark contrast, in the North West Province, that figure more than doubles, rising to over 67% (see Figure 5). Tackling the structural inequalities that drive these differences should feature strongly in future PSET planning and in youth employment creation initiatives.

**FIGURE 5: Percent of recent matriculants (aged 15-24 with a matric) that are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) by province**



Source Wills (2024) adapted from Figure 5a using the Quarterly Labour Force Survey.

\*Indicates that estimates for Q1 2023 - Q1 2024 are statistically significantly higher than estimates for Q1 2014 - Q4 2015. Data label is in bold in 2024 if the rise from 2014 is statistically significant at 5% level.

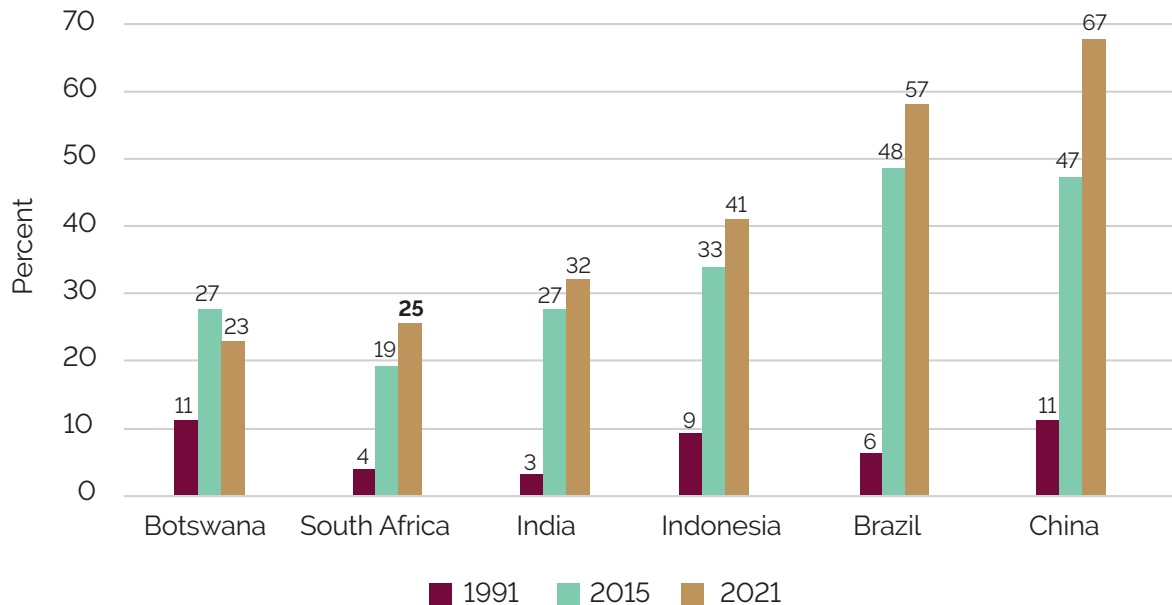
## 6 ENROLMENTS IN POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (PSET) ARE NOT GROWING SUFFICIENTLY TO MATCH THE RISING TIDE IN SCHOOL COMPLETION

Despite ambitious plans from the government for significant expansion in PSET opportunities, the proportion of youth aged 15-24 (or youth aged 15-24 with a matric) enrolled in PSET did not improve much between 2014 and 2024. The number of 15-24-year-olds with a matric from 2014 to 2024 (quarter 1) identified in the QLFS grew almost three times as much as the increase in the number of 15-24-year-olds in the PSET system over the same period. And with funding cuts to the national post-school education budget as South Africa addresses escalating national debt servicing costs, significant growth in PSET is unlikely to occur anytime soon.

In comparison to other developing nations, Kruger (in chapter 5 of the same report) finds that South Africa is falling significantly behind in getting youth into post-school education

(see Figure 4). For example, 2021 estimates from the World Bank identify South Africa's tertiary enrolment rate at 25%, compared to 57% in Brazil and 67% in China. If the availability of highly skilled individuals is necessary for economic growth, not providing sufficient study and training opportunities could exacerbate South Africa's low-growth trap.

**FIGURE 6: Tertiary gross enrolment rates. South Africa vs. selected countries**



Source: Adapted from Kruger (2024, Figure 3) using data from World Bank  
<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators/Series/SE.TER.ENRR> World Bank



## Implications

Rising numbers of educated South African youth without opportunities represent a legitimate concern. These trends raise the potential for social unrest on tertiary campuses, youth mental health issues and increasing pressure on the state's already strained resources to support those vulnerable to poverty and its deleterious consequences.

Addressing the youth NEET problem demands a coordinated, two-pronged approach: improving labour market conditions and expanding PSET opportunities that enhance youth employability. This is no small task and is unlikely without improved economic growth. While spending more on PSET is at odds with fiscal consolidation, perhaps some hope lies in improving cost-efficiencies in tertiary institutions and redesigning an unsustainable fee-free tertiary model.

But what can we do as ordinary South Africans? We should still encourage the youth around us to complete their schooling because attaining a matric appears to offer some protection against becoming NEET. And then, where possible spur them on to obtain a post-school qualification. This won't provide a full-proof guarantee of a job but raises youth's chances of finding one compared to having a matric only. Then when it comes to



finding a job, South Africans need to maximise their available social networks to connect youth to work experience opportunities. Youth should seek assistance with ensuring their CV's stand out from the rest of the pile, attaching referral letters and relevant references (Abel, Burger & Piraino, 2020).

In the process, young people must also adopt a practical, pragmatic, and entrepreneurial mindset. They need to temper short-term aspirations and seize every opportunity available to them—whether in the labour market or post-school education.



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