# The Dismal State of the Dismal Science in South Africa*

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**Abstract**

Economists at South African universities publish many accredited articles. Yet almost none of that work appears in the core international economics journals. Compared with 25 peers over 1990–2025, South Africa ties for ninth in top-500 universities overall. In core economics articles, it ranks 18th, well behind peers with fewer top-500 universities such as Chile, Brazil, Colombia, and Czechia. Core journals do not ignore South Africa. Foreign-based scholars account for about 85% of authorship on core articles about the country. Domestic economists publish instead in development studies and time-series regressions. Those papers earn wide social-science citations and full state subsidies. Local metrics therefore hide the core-journal gap. Leading South African authors hold fewer foreign PhDs and have rarer prior ties to top-five co-authors than Latin American peers. Several other institutional and labour-market factors could also explain this shortfall.

**Keywords:** economics profession; South Africa; bibliometrics; research incentives; talent allocation; administrative data

**JEL codes:** A11; A14; I23; O55

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# 1 Introduction

Economists study practical problems that affect people's incomes, jobs, health, and schooling. Governments have to decide how to tax firms, run public hospitals, price electricity, and target social grants. The quality of economic research shapes the quality of the policies that officials can design and implement. No dataset can prove that stronger academic economics automatically produces better policy in every country. Controlled experiments with policymakers nevertheless show that officials update their beliefs when researchers present credible empirical evaluations (Hjort et al., 2021; Vivalt and Coville, 2023). In Brazil, municipal leaders informed about a taxpayer-reminder study also became more likely to adopt that policy (Hjort et al., 2021).

Useful economic research appears in many places. And editorial review at top journals also makes mistakes (Heckman and Moktan, 2020). Even so, an article in a core international economics journal sends a clear signal of scrutiny. Editors and referees at these journals test whether an empirical finding survives competing explanations. Many also check whether the underlying data and code reproduce the published numbers. Because scholars and civil servants cannot read every working paper, articles in core journals receive far wider international attention than papers published elsewhere. A core-journal article on a country introduces foreign scholars to its institutions and puts its datasets onto graduate reading lists. Follow-up studies, international research grants, and better-informed domestic policy debates can grow from that attention.

Economists based in South Africa almost never publish in these core economics journals. Between 1990 and 2025, researchers listing a South African institution as their primary workplace published two regular articles in the top five general-interest economics journals and 36 in the headline top 30. Across all South African universities and research institutes combined, that output averages one headline article a year. Core journals do not ignore South Africa. Over the same decades, they published 80 regular articles about South Africa's economy and public institutions. Foreign-based researchers accounted for about 85% of the authorship on those papers, and domestically based researchers accounted for about 10%. South African departments publish many accredited papers and advise national policymakers. Their low output in core economics therefore goes largely unnoticed at home. This paper neither blames individual researchers nor claims that international editors exclude South African scholars. Its aim is to measure where the domestic profession stands against comparable peers and to ask why domestic economists seldom publish where universities of South Africa's standing are expected to publish. The word 'dismal' in my title is a literal statement about that low participation in core economics rather than a judgement on local policy work.

This paper measures how far economists based in South Africa participate in core international economics and asks where their research goes instead. I assemble a global dataset of regular research articles from 1990 to 2025 across South Africa and 25 middle- and high-income peer countries. The journal sets follow a published citation ranking rather than personal selection. Authorship is assigned by the primary workplace each author lists first on the paper and is divided equally across co-authors. I combine these publication counts with international university rankings, global

citation records, 72,860 classified national abstracts, and career histories of where authors trained and with whom they co-authored.

Domestic core-journal output is small by almost every international comparison. Peers with smaller populations and non-English undergraduate teaching, such as Chile and Czechia, publish many multiples of South Africa's total under identical rules. South Africa's wider university system makes that shortfall surprising. Five South African universities place in the global QS Top 500 and four place in the Times Higher Education Top 500 (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2026*a*; Times Higher Education, 2025). Nine peer countries with fewer QS Top-500 universities – including Israel, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Czechia – publish far more core economics than South Africa. Other faculties on the same South African campuses perform strongly under the same national funding formula and student pool. University-wide constraints therefore cannot by themselves explain why economics lags behind. Few domestic entrants publish a second or third core article. An education-based count that credits South African-trained economists working abroad adds five foreign-based top-five papers. Even then, a wide gap with peer countries remains.

South African economists publish much of their international empirical work outside disciplinary economics journals instead. In interdisciplinary development studies, South Africa ranks second of the 26 countries even when the *Journal of African Economies* is excluded. In disciplinary development economics, South Africa sits 11th. Most of that development-studies output comes from authors who also publish in national economics outlets. Global citation records show the same split. South African economics papers rank seventh in the country group for reaching the world top 10% of citations across all fields. But only about one in 27 of those top-decile papers is ever cited by a core economics journal. Rising accredited article counts and strong interdisciplinary citations make domestic departments look productive on local metrics. That apparent success hides how rarely their work appears in core international economics.

The classified national abstracts show that this outlet divide matches what domestic economists study and how they study it. About 40% of South African economics output uses time-series econometrics on aggregate macroeconomic or financial series, nearly double the peer benchmark. Most of that surplus remains after matching peers to South Africa's mix of fields and correcting for classification errors on both sides. Formal economic theory and microdata studies of firms, labour markets, and cities sit well below peer predictions.

Several historical, institutional, and labour-market conditions accompany these patterns. Apartheid segregation excluded most South Africans from research universities. The academic boycott of the 1980s then reduced collaboration with foreign departments. Among leading-journal economists with school or undergraduate education in South Africa and a known doctoral country, about 60% hold a foreign doctorate, compared with more than 90% in Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. Only about a third of recent domestic core-journal author slots belong to researchers who had earlier co-authored with an established top-five economist, against nearly three-quarters in Latin American peers. Inside South African universities, the state subsidy formula assigns the same unit weight to a rapid time-series paper as to a multi-year microdata study. University appointment

and visa rules also make it difficult to hire foreign academics. Outside academia, high status in accounting and insurance professions and high salaries in South Africa's large financial sector compete for quantitative students and graduates. At the same time, a respected domestic policy sector offers empirical researchers a rewarding career outside core journals.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it adds a middle-income peer comparison to research on the global geography of economics (Das et al., 2013; Chelwa, 2021; Porteous, 2022; Amarante et al., 2022; Aigner, Greenspon and Rodrik, 2025). Much of that literature focuses on low representation of developing-country scholars in top journals. Across 26 middle- and high-income countries under one external citation rule, core journals regularly publish studies on South Africa and regularly publish economists based in Latin America and Central Europe. Editorial exclusion of middle-income countries therefore does not explain South Africa's position. Many domestic factors are plausible explanations instead. Candidates include doctoral training, international co-author ties, flat publication subsidies, and appointment policies that make it difficult to hire non-South African scholars. Strong demand for technical economists in South Africa's large finance sector and the high status of accounting and insurance professions at university also draw quantitative talent away from academic economics. This paper does not test which of these explanations matters most. Its primary aim is simply to document the underperformance clearly. Second, the paper traces a complete national economics profession across its outlets, citations, and methods rather than counting top-journal articles alone. Together, the core-journal counts, development-journal panels, citation links, and classified national abstracts show how domestic economists specialise in well-cited development-studies and aggregate time-series research that seldom connects to core economics. Third, the paper connects South African higher-education research (Truu, 1966; Luiz, 2009; Muller, 2017; Mouton and Valentine, 2017; Kerr and de Jager, 2021; Branson and Whitelaw, 2025; Snowball and Kramm, 2026) to the economics of graduate training and academic networks (Waldinger, 2010; Colussi, 2018; Carrell, Figlio and Lusher, 2024) by comparing economics against overall university standings on the same campuses. Strong performance in other faculties at South African universities shows that national funding rules and schooling constraints cannot explain the gap on their own. Conditions specific to economics therefore have to form part of any explanation.

Section 2 sets out the journal ranking rules, country definitions, and data sources. Section 3 examines domestic participation in core economics journals, compares it with overall university rankings, and measures who writes core-journal research about South Africa. Section 4 analyses interdisciplinary development studies and global versus core citations. Section 5 compares South Africa's fields, methods, and data sources against peer benchmarks. Section 6 discusses historical context, candidate explanations, and possible policy options. Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Data and measures

A credible test of how far a national profession participates in international economics needs an external journal rule rather than an author's hand-picked list. Editorial decisions at leading jour-

nals are an imperfect measure of individual article quality (Heckman and Moktan, 2020). Applied economics can also improve public budgets and social programmes without targeting international journals. Core journals still serve a distinct purpose in the discipline. Economists from many countries use them to test methods and compare evidence across settings. I base the journal sets on RePEc's ten-year recursive discounted citation ranking of journals frozen in October 2026 (Zimmermann, 2013). This published ranking weights each incoming citation by the citation standing of the citing journal and discounts older citations. Citations from heavily cited journals therefore carry greater weight than citations from peripheral outlets.

Scope filters restrict the RePEc list to peer-reviewed economics research journals. They exclude finance and accounting journals, invited survey series, central-bank bulletins, and non-economics publications. Each eligible journal must also record a country affiliation on at least 65% of regular-article author slots over 1990–2025. Table 1 summarises the resulting journal sets. The top-five general-interest tier comprises the *American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and the *Review of Economic Studies*. The next 25 eligible ranked journals bring the headline top-30 set to 56,631 regular articles. A broader top-50 set retains 44 eligible journals and 79,537 regular articles to check sensitivity to the rank cutoff.

Table 1: Journal sets, 1990–2025

| Set | Rule | Journals | Articles |
|---|---|---|---|
| Top five | Five general-interest journals | 5 | 11,020 |
| Headline top 30 | Next eligible ranked journals | 30 | 56,631 |
| Top 50 | Filtered top 50, six exclusions | 44 | 79,537 |
| Development economics | JDE, EDCC, RDE | 3 | 6,341 |
| Development studies | WD, JDS, JAE | 3 | 10,749 |

*Notes:* Core sets follow the frozen RePEc ranking and the 65% first-affiliation coverage rule. Counts are regular articles. The top-50 set retains 44 journals. Source: journal rule and rebuilt corpus totals.

Applied economists in developing countries often publish outside general-interest and field theory journals. To trace where that work goes instead, I assemble a six-journal development panel. Three disciplinary journals represent development economics (*Journal of Development Economics*, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, and *Review of Development Economics*). Three interdisciplinary or regional journals represent development studies (*World Development*, *Journal of Development Studies*, and *Journal of African Economies*). This pairing separates disciplinary development economics from interdisciplinary development studies.

I link authorship to countries through each author's first affiliation on the published article. First affiliation records the primary workplace listed first by that author rather than secondary visiting posts or research-network memberships. An article enters a country's integer count when at least one author lists a primary institution there. Fractional authorship divides one unit of credit equally across all co-authors on a paper and sums the shares held by domestically based authors. If an economist in Cape Town co-authors one paper with a colleague in London, South Africa

receives one article in the integer count and 0.5 in the fractional count. I compare South Africa with 25 middle- and high-income peers across Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Uruguay), Europe (Czechia, Finland, Greece, Poland, Portugal, and Russia), Asia and the Middle East (Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam), and Oceania (New Zealand). More intensive coding and cohort-matched exercises use documented subsets of these 25 peers.

The publication records come from OpenAlex, which sometimes omits institutional addresses on older and African publications (Alonso-Álvarez and van Eck, 2025). I therefore supplement missing addresses with Crossref affiliation strings. The Online Appendix documents every scope filter, decade-level affiliation coverage rate, journal exclusion (including *The World Bank Economic Review*), and blind three-model check on candidate South African author slots. Beyond the core and development panels, I use OpenAlex economics-field records to measure world citation percentiles and core-journal citations for each country's broader national output. To compare economics output with broader university performance, I use the 2026 QS World University Rankings, the 2026 QS World University Rankings by Subject, and the 2026 Times Higher Education World University Rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2026*a*,*b*; Times Higher Education, 2025).

Two further datasets measure research content and academic careers. For research content, a language-model classifier coded 139,291 article abstracts across South Africa and stratified comparator samples under a fixed codebook covering economic fields, empirical methods, and data types. Multi-model validation statistics and sample flows appear in the Online Appendix. For academic careers, I link leading-journal authors to a biographical census of school, undergraduate, and doctoral origins and to their complete OpenAlex co-authorship histories. Those records separate where economists work today from where they trained and with whom they co-authored earlier in their careers.

## 3 Core-journal output and university rankings

Table 2 reports domestic participation in the core economics journal sets from 1990 to 2025. Over these 36 years, economists listing a South African first affiliation published two regular articles in the top five (0.6 fractional equivalents) and 36 in the headline top 30 (15.7 fractional equivalents). That total places South Africa 18th of the 26 countries by article count. Across the full 1990–2025 period, all South African economics departments and research units combined averaged one regular article a year in the headline set. Both top-five papers appeared in 2022. South Africa's fractional total in the top five sits among the lowest in the country group across alternative coverage restrictions. Expanding the benchmark to the top-50 set leaves South Africa at 18th.

Individual peer comparisons show the size of this gap more clearly than ranks alone. Chile has roughly a third of South Africa's population and a comparable upper-middle-income history. Under the identical first-affiliation rule, Chilean institutions published 30 top-five articles and 297 headline top-30 articles. In fractional terms, Chile produced more than ten times South Africa's

Table 2: Participation in core economics journals, 1990–2025

| Country | Top 5 | Frac. | Top 30 | Frac. 30 | Rank | Top 50 | Frac. 50 | 2015–24 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Israel | 164 | 96.8 | 735 | 480.1 | 1 | 1,121 | 756.3 | 231 |
| South Korea | 53 | 26.8 | 522 | 299.1 | 2 | 715 | 426.9 | 207 |
| India | 67 | 32.3 | 433 | 250.4 | 3 | 620 | 366.1 | 181 |
| Brazil | 39 | 19.4 | 339 | 206.0 | 4 | 448 | 286.2 | 181 |
| Chile | 30 | 15.6 | 297 | 170.2 | 5 | 399 | 243.7 | 185 |
| Finland | 16 | 8.3 | 252 | 162.9 | 6 | 493 | 347.8 | 124 |
| Portugal | 23 | 12.0 | 238 | 142.7 | 7 | 391 | 236.1 | 95 |
| Russia | 68 | 36.5 | 228 | 125.3 | 8 | 288 | 162.2 | 130 |
| Mexico | 27 | 11.6 | 226 | 128.1 | 9 | 312 | 187.6 | 87 |
| New Zealand | 14 | 6.3 | 197 | 117.2 | 10 | 304 | 186.5 | 52 |
| Argentina | 21 | 10.2 | 172 | 95.3 | 11 | 222 | 125.0 | 69 |
| Turkey | 29 | 13.6 | 170 | 93.7 | 12 | 287 | 174.3 | 79 |
| Greece | 7 | 5.0 | 139 | 89.2 | 13 | 236 | 151.1 | 39 |
| Colombia | 8 | 2.9 | 137 | 73.8 | 14 | 188 | 98.6 | 84 |
| Czechia | 21 | 10.6 | 128 | 73.5 | 15 | 221 | 131.5 | 75 |
| Poland | 4 | 1.2 | 57 | 32.0 | 16 | 120 | 70.8 | 25 |
| United Arab Emirates | 5 | 2.7 | 56 | 25.5 | 17 | 99 | 45.8 | 43 |
| South Africa | 2 | 0.6 | 36 | 15.7 | 18 | 57 | 27.5 | 22 |
| Uruguay | 2 | 0.7 | 33 | 15.7 | 19 | 50 | 27.2 | 17 |
| Bangladesh | 5 | 1.2 | 31 | 11.3 | 20 | 43 | 15.5 | 19 |
| Indonesia | 4 | 1.2 | 24 | 9.5 | 21 | 34 | 12.7 | 9 |
| Egypt | 0 | 0.0 | 16 | 9.6 | 22 | 20 | 11.1 | 9 |
| Malaysia | 0 | 0.0 | 16 | 7.0 | 22 | 23 | 10.2 | 8 |
| Thailand | 3 | 0.8 | 16 | 7.2 | 22 | 27 | 13.4 | 7 |
| Kazakhstan | 3 | 0.8 | 10 | 4.0 | 25 | 13 | 5.3 | 6 |
| Vietnam | 1 | 0.3 | 9 | 5.1 | 26 | 18 | 10.1 | 7 |

*Notes:* Articles count papers with a domestic first affiliation; fractional equivalents sum equal author shares. Rank is the top-30 article-count rank among 26 countries. The final column reports top-30 articles in 2015–24. Source: OpenAlex and Crossref regular-article records under the RePEc journal rule.

output in the headline top 30 (170.2 versus 15.7). That wide margin holds in the recent 2015–24 column of Table 2, where Chile published 185 headline articles against South Africa's 22. At leading departments in Santiago, publishing in core economics journals is a regular part of academic work. At South African institutions, an acceptance in those journals remains rare.

The shortfall extends well beyond Chile. Smaller or middle-income economies such as Israel, South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Czechia each published multiples of South Africa's core-journal total over the same decades (Table 2). South Africa sits instead alongside Uruguay and just ahead of Bangladesh and Indonesia. Language and institutional age do not explain this position. Universities in Latin America and Central Europe teach undergraduates in other languages and shifted toward English-language journals more recently. South Africa entered the post-1994 era with century-old campuses, English-medium instruction, and established research libraries.

International university rankings make South Africa's low economics output even more surprising. In the 2026 QS World University Rankings, five South African universities place in the global Top 500 – Cape Town (150th), Witwatersrand (291st), Stellenbosch (302nd), Johannesburg (308th), and Pretoria (362nd) – and nine place in the Top 1,000 (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2026*a*). That count of five Top-500 universities ties South Africa for ninth place among the 26 countries. Panel (a) of Figure 1 plots each country's number of QS Top-500 universities against its headline top-30 economics articles. Nine peer countries in the shaded upper-left region have fewer QS Top-500 universities than South Africa yet publish far more core economics. Brazil and Israel each have four Top-500 universities and published 339 and 735 core articles. Chile, Colombia, Czechia, Greece, and Poland each have three Top-500 universities and published between 57 and 297 core articles. Mexico and Argentina have two each and published 226 and 172 core articles. The 2026 Times Higher Education rankings weight citations and research output heavily rather than employer surveys (Times Higher Education, 2026). South Africa places four universities in that Top 500, tied for fifth of the 26 countries (Times Higher Education, 2025). But 11 peers with fewer Top-500 universities in that table outproduce South Africa in core economics.

Overall university rankings largely reflect institution-wide reputation and aggregate research volume across all faculties rather than a single social-science department (Selten et al., 2020). That distinction is what makes Figure 1 informative. Panel (b) looks inside South Africa's five Top-500 universities across the 2026 QS rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2026*a*,*b*). Every one of the five campuses ranks in the global Top 365 overall and in the global Top 150 in Development Studies, led by Cape Town at 11th and Witwatersrand at 25th. None of the five enters the global Top 200 in Economics and Econometrics. By contrast, 13 of the 25 peer countries place at least one economics department in the Top 200. Other faculties at Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch, Johannesburg, and Pretoria reach high international ranks under the exact same national state subsidy, university budgets, exchange rate, and school-leaver pipeline. Economy-wide and university-wide explanations therefore cannot on their own account for the poor core-journal performance of South African economics.

Incomplete historical address records do not explain South Africa's rank either. Bibliographic

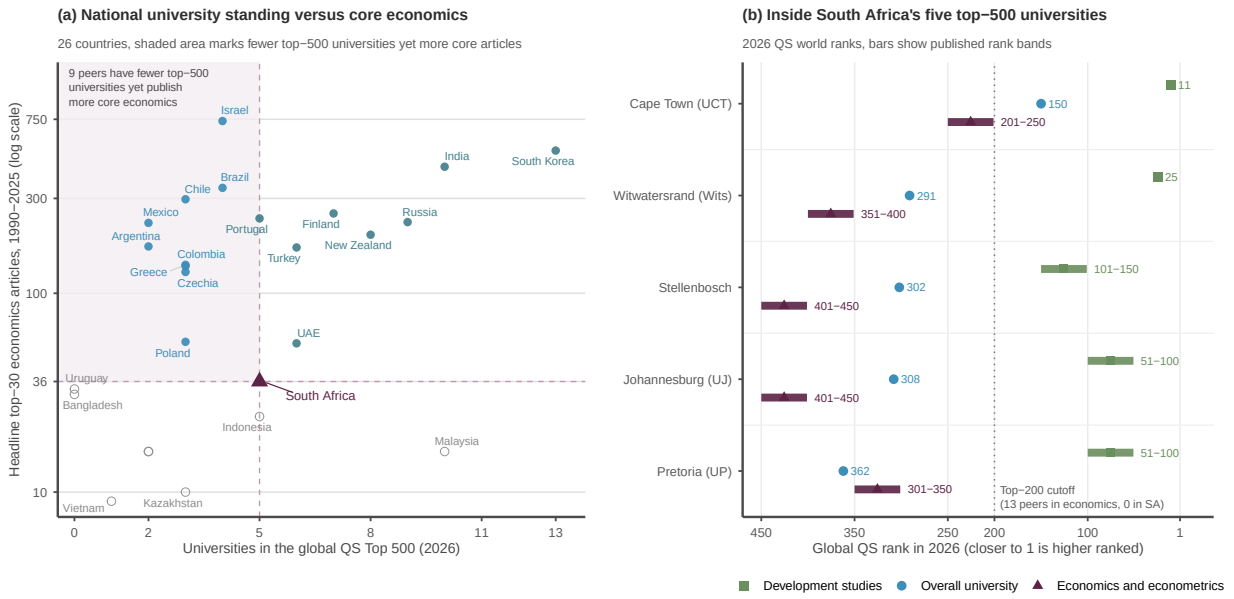



Figure 1: Overall university standing and core economics underperformance. Panel (a) compares the number of universities in the 2026 QS World University Rankings Top 500 with regular articles in the headline top-30 economics journals over 1990–2025 across all 26 countries. Panel (b) compares the 2026 QS overall world rank, Development Studies rank, and Economics and Econometrics rank across South Africa's five Top-500 universities, plotting published rank bands as horizontal bars.

databases sometimes lack institutional addresses from the 1990s because older print journals often listed only an author's name. A check restricted to journal-decades with at least 90% resolved affiliations leaves South Africa at 18th in the headline top 30. A second check turns off the South Africa-specific affiliation screen that removes secondary visiting appointments listed after a foreign primary workplace. That change adds three South African articles and leaves South Africa at 18th as well. The Online Appendix reports these checks alongside missing-affiliation bounds around the two observed top-five articles.

Recent growth offers some encouragement from that low historical base. Across a fixed group of 18 core journals with high affiliation coverage in both ten-year windows, South Africa's fractional output grew about thirteenfold from 0.50 in 2000–09 to 6.51 in 2015–24. That rate is the second-fastest percentage increase among countries with positive output in both windows. Younger researchers based at South African universities have shown that publishing in core outlets from home is possible. Because growth started from half a fractional article per decade, however, fast percentage gains have not yet closed the gap with peers.

Total output also stays low because few domestic entrants publish in core journals again. Across 1990–2025, 47 identified researchers published in the headline top 30 from a South African institution. Six of those 47 published a second top-30 article from South Africa. None published a third. An audit of OpenAlex profiles for split author identifiers uncovers no three-article sequence, and counting later articles written after moving to a foreign university leaves the number of three-paper

authors at zero.

Many South African entrants published their first core article only recently, so I also follow earlier entrants over a fixed ten-year career window. Sixteen researchers published their first top-30 article from South Africa by 2015, and none reached three top-30 articles within ten years. Across 95% of equally sized, cohort-matched random draws of Chilean entrants followed over the same ten-year window, between two and seven researchers reached at least three top-30 articles (Online Appendix). Lower repeat publication per entrant accompanies the small size of the domestic author pool.

Emigration is another natural explanation. Ambitious South African graduates often move to universities in North America or Europe, where workplace counts assign their articles to foreign countries. The biographical career census identifies 111 South African-educated economists and records six regular top-five articles by them over 1990–2025, five of which list foreign primary affiliations. Most top-five articles by South African-trained economists were indeed written abroad. Even when every diaspora author is credited back to their country of schooling or undergraduate study, a wide gap with peer countries remains. Chilean-educated economists in the same census published 106 top-five articles, or 17.7 times South Africa's education-based total. Brain drain accounts for most of South Africa's small top-five presence. But it does not explain the gap with peer professions.

Core journals might publish few South African-based authors because editors find South Africa uninteresting as an empirical setting. To test that possibility, three independent models coded every candidate article blind to identify regular papers in which South Africa's economy, data, or policy is a central subject. Multi-country papers count only when South Africa is a named study case rather than a row in a cross-country table. Passing mentions and author addresses do not count (rejection counts appear in the Online Appendix). Core journals do not ignore South Africa. Across 80 regular articles about South Africa in the headline top 30 over 1990–2025, foreign-based researchers hold 85.2% of fractional authorship, domestically based researchers hold 10.2%, and unresolved affiliations account for 4.6%. In the six-journal development panel, domestically based researchers hold 30.3% of fractional authorship across 319 regular articles about South Africa, roughly triple their share in core economics. First affiliation measures workplace rather than nationality, so foreign-based authors include South African expatriates and longtime international collaborators. Even so, the workplace gap between core economics and development journals is wide.

Table 3 applies the same blind three-model coding rule to headline top-30 articles about Chile, Brazil, Colombia, Czechia, and India. Foreign-based researchers write most of the core-journal work on every country in the table. That common pattern shows why low domestic authorship should not be misread as foreign exclusion of South African scholars. What stands out instead is how much more often peer professions participate in core research on their own economies. Within the six countries, South Africa ranks second-lowest at 10.2%, ahead of India (7.7%) and behind Czechia (13.0%), Colombia (19.5%), Brazil (21.5%), and Chile (25.8%). Domestic economists in

Table 3: Authorship of own-country research in the headline top 30, 1990–2025

| Country | Articles | Domestic (%) | Foreign (%) | Unresolved (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| South Africa | 80 | 10.2 | 85.2 | 4.6 |
| Chile | 121 | 25.8 | 70.8 | 3.4 |
| Brazil | 282 | 21.5 | 73.0 | 5.6 |
| Colombia | 151 | 19.5 | 74.8 | 5.7 |
| Czechia | 18 | 13.0 | 70.4 | 16.7 |
| India | 746 | 7.7 | 85.9 | 6.4 |

*Notes:* Article-normalised first-affiliation shares; domestic means based in the study country. South Africa retains R1 labels. Comparator labels use the completed three-model majority.

Brazil, Colombia, and Chile hold roughly two to two and a half times South Africa's share of authorship on their own economies because their departments publish regularly in core outlets.

International interest in South Africa grew from five core articles in the 1990s to 24 in 2020–24. But the domestic share of authorship has not risen steadily with article volume. Before 2010, every resolved author slot on a headline top-30 article about South Africa belonged to a scholar based abroad. Domestic co-authorship rose to between 22.9% and 29.2% in 2010–14 depending on how unresolved addresses are assigned. It fell after 2010–14, and missing-affiliation bounds in the Online Appendix do not establish any increase between 2015–19 and 2020–24. Foreign-led studies benefit South Africa by bringing careful empirical work to local questions of social grants, labour markets, and schooling. What South Africa misses is wider participation by resident economists in writing and testing that evidence. Resident academics are the scholars who maintain longitudinal surveys over decades, advise government departments between elections, and train the civil servants who run public programmes.

## 4 Development studies and citations

Low output in core economics journals does not mean that South African researchers stay out of international publishing. Domestic scholars publish heavily in interdisciplinary development studies instead. Table 4 compares domestic output across the three development-economics journals and the three development-studies journals over 1990–2025. In disciplinary development economics, South Africa ranks 11th of the 26 countries with 46 regular articles, behind peers such as India, Brazil, Mexico, South Korea, Chile, and Colombia. In interdisciplinary development studies, South Africa ranks second with 215 regular articles, ahead of Brazil, Mexico, and Chile and behind only India. Domestic researchers produce a large volume of international empirical work on poverty and social policy. Most of it goes to interdisciplinary development journals rather than disciplinary economics outlets.

An African regional journal does not explain that second-place finish. Without the *Journal of African Economies*, South Africa still ranks second in development studies across *World Development* and the *Journal of Development Studies* alone, with 158 regular articles. On that two-journal

Table 4: Development economics and development studies, 1990–2025

| Country | DE art. | DE frac. | DE rank | DS art. | DS frac. | DS rank | Ex-JAE art. | Ex-JAE rank | DS/DE | Ex-JAE/DE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| India | 268 | 188.6 | 1 | 358 | 247.4 | 1 | 358 | 1 | 1.3 | 1.3 |
| Brazil | 104 | 78.8 | 2 | 144 | 99.6 | 3 | 143 | 3 | 1.4 | 1.4 |
| Mexico | 84 | 53.8 | 3 | 130 | 87.1 | 4 | 129 | 4 | 1.5 | 1.5 |
| South Korea | 83 | 55.6 | 4 | 67 | 47.9 | 11 | 64 | 10 | 0.8 | 0.8 |
| Chile | 75 | 46.3 | 5 | 97 | 65.0 | 5 | 91 | 7 | 1.3 | 1.2 |
| Colombia | 68 | 44.6 | 6 | 96 | 56.5 | 6 | 95 | 5 | 1.4 | 1.4 |
| Turkey | 58 | 42.4 | 7 | 38 | 26.6 | 15 | 36 | 15 | 0.7 | 0.6 |
| New Zealand | 54 | 31.2 | 8 | 78 | 52.0 | 9 | 68 | 9 | 1.4 | 1.3 |
| Israel | 49 | 32.0 | 9 | 26 | 17.8 | 17 | 26 | 17 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| Argentina | 47 | 28.7 | 10 | 52 | 33.3 | 13 | 50 | 13 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| South Africa | 46 | 28.6 | 11 | 215 | 139.2 | 2 | 158 | 2 | 4.7 | 3.4 |
| Greece | 39 | 26.9 | 12 | 8 | 4.8 | 24 | 6 | 25 | 0.2 | 0.2 |
| Finland | 34 | 20.2 | 13 | 76 | 53.8 | 10 | 63 | 11 | 2.2 | 1.9 |
| Portugal | 25 | 15.3 | 14 | 15 | 11.9 | 21 | 14 | 21 | 0.6 | 0.6 |
| Bangladesh | 23 | 10.0 | 15 | 80 | 43.1 | 8 | 79 | 8 | 3.5 | 3.4 |
| Vietnam | 23 | 16.2 | 15 | 64 | 29.3 | 12 | 63 | 11 | 2.8 | 2.7 |
| United Arab Emirates | 21 | 11.6 | 17 | 23 | 13.0 | 18 | 23 | 18 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| Malaysia | 18 | 9.4 | 18 | 22 | 12.7 | 19 | 22 | 19 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| Russia | 17 | 9.9 | 19 | 10 | 5.5 | 23 | 10 | 23 | 0.6 | 0.6 |
| Egypt | 15 | 8.7 | 20 | 30 | 18.2 | 16 | 27 | 16 | 2.0 | 1.8 |
| Indonesia | 14 | 8.9 | 21 | 92 | 47.7 | 7 | 92 | 6 | 6.6 | 6.6 |
| Czechia | 11 | 6.2 | 22 | 14 | 10.0 | 22 | 12 | 22 | 1.3 | 1.1 |
| Uruguay | 11 | 6.8 | 22 | 18 | 13.2 | 20 | 18 | 20 | 1.6 | 1.6 |
| Poland | 9 | 5.7 | 24 | 5 | 3.6 | 26 | 4 | 26 | 0.6 | 0.4 |
| Thailand | 7 | 4.1 | 25 | 40 | 23.7 | 14 | 40 | 14 | 5.7 | 5.7 |
| Kazakhstan | 3 | 0.9 | 26 | 7 | 3.5 | 25 | 7 | 24 | 2.3 | 2.3 |

*Notes:* DE comprises *JDE*, *EDCC*, and *RDE*. DS comprises *WD*, *JDS*, and *JAE*. Both ratios use integer article counts; the final column excludes *JAE* from DS. Ranks are among 26 countries. Source: OpenAlex and Crossref regular-article records.

measure, South Africa publishes 3.4 development-studies articles for every development-economics article, compared with ratios of 1.2 to 1.4 in Chile, India, Brazil, and Colombia. Only Indonesia and Thailand record higher ratios, each from a small base in development economics (Online Appendix). Both journal trios study poverty, agriculture, and social protection in developing economies. One trio sits inside disciplinary economics, and the other addresses a broader readership across development policy and neighbouring social sciences.

Sociologists, geographers, and public-health researchers also publish in development-studies journals. If non-economists wrote almost all of South Africa's 215 articles, second place in Table 4 would say little about where domestic economists send their work. A link between those development-studies authors and national economics publication records shows that 66.4% of South Africa's fractional output in development studies comes from researchers who also publish in the national economics corpus or are classified as economists in the author database. That two-thirds overlap holds when the *Journal of African Economies* is excluded (Online Appendix). Publication overlap is not a formal staff roster of university departments. Even so, it shows that empirical economists based in South Africa produce most of the country's international development-studies output.

The QS subject rankings reflect the same disciplinary split through their scoring weights (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2026*b*). South Africa counts six ranked universities in Development Studies – more than any of the 25 peer countries – and zero in the Economics and Econometrics Top 200. In the Economics subject table, South African departments score above the comparator median on citations per paper. Four of the five score below the comparator median on academic reputation.

Development Studies assigns 60% of its total score to academic reputation surveys compared with 40% in Economics, rewarding South Africa's strong standing in interdisciplinary poverty and policy research (Online Appendix).

Global citation records show the same divide between broad readership and core economics. Across national economics articles published in 2011–20, 28.1% of South Africa's fractional output entered the world top 10% of citations for its publication year, placing South Africa seventh of the 26 countries (Table 5). That world benchmark compares each paper against all economics articles published globally in the same year across every citing discipline. Papers from South African economics departments and research units are widely read and outscore several peer countries that publish far more core-journal articles.

Table 5: Citation reach of national economics articles, 2011–20

| Country | Frac. articles | World top 10% | Rank 10 | World top 1% | Rank 1 | Core-cited (%) | Core rank | Non-core (%) | NC rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Israel | 1533.2 | 28.1 | 8 | 1.52 | 13 | 9.8 | 1 | 7.0 | 2 |
| Finland | 1772.0 | 37.3 | 1 | 2.83 | 3 | 9.3 | 2 | 8.0 | 1 |
| Uruguay | 219.2 | 14.3 | 18 | 0.77 | 20 | 7.0 | 3 | 5.5 | 3 |
| Chile | 1892.9 | 21.7 | 13 | 1.21 | 16 | 6.8 | 4 | 4.6 | 5 |
| Portugal | 2847.9 | 29.3 | 6 | 2.19 | 9 | 6.1 | 5 | 5.3 | 4 |
| New Zealand | 1854.6 | 35.7 | 2 | 2.37 | 8 | 5.1 | 6 | 4.1 | 6 |
| South Korea | 5822.8 | 27.0 | 10 | 1.67 | 10 | 5.0 | 7 | 3.8 | 7 |
| Argentina | 1625.0 | 13.9 | 19 | 0.79 | 19 | 4.7 | 8 | 3.2 | 8 |
| Czechia | 3147.6 | 17.3 | 17 | 1.63 | 11 | 3.9 | 9 | 3.2 | 9 |
| Greece | 3191.5 | 31.0 | 3 | 2.42 | 7 | 3.2 | 10 | 3.0 | 10 |
| United Arab Emirates | 718.1 | 29.7 | 5 | 3.02 | 2 | 2.2 | 11 | 1.9 | 11 |
| Brazil | 11640.3 | 13.1 | 20 | 0.87 | 18 | 2.0 | 12 | 1.6 | 12 |
| South Africa | 4262.9 | 28.1 | 7 | 1.37 | 14 | 1.6 | 13 | 1.6 | 13 |
| Mexico | 6316.3 | 8.7 | 22 | 0.46 | 22 | 1.6 | 14 | 1.1 | 21 |
| Turkey | 8225.7 | 19.8 | 15 | 2.71 | 5 | 1.5 | 15 | 1.3 | 15 |
| Thailand | 1147.5 | 22.9 | 11 | 1.23 | 15 | 1.4 | 16 | 1.3 | 16 |
| Kazakhstan | 602.7 | 8.8 | 21 | 0.60 | 21 | 1.4 | 17 | 1.4 | 14 |
| Colombia | 5054.7 | 6.9 | 24 | 0.15 | 26 | 1.3 | 18 | 1.2 | 17 |
| Bangladesh | 1369.0 | 21.9 | 12 | 2.54 | 6 | 1.2 | 19 | 1.0 | 22 |
| India | 14472.1 | 18.2 | 16 | 1.56 | 12 | 1.2 | 20 | 1.1 | 18 |
| Russia | 10729.4 | 6.6 | 25 | 0.36 | 23 | 1.1 | 21 | 0.5 | 25 |
| Vietnam | 1619.0 | 27.3 | 9 | 2.72 | 4 | 1.1 | 22 | 1.1 | 19 |
| Poland | 19549.7 | 5.7 | 26 | 0.24 | 25 | 1.1 | 23 | 1.1 | 20 |
| Egypt | 931.3 | 20.6 | 14 | 0.93 | 17 | 1.0 | 24 | 1.0 | 23 |
| Malaysia | 3622.4 | 30.8 | 4 | 3.90 | 1 | 0.6 | 25 | 0.5 | 24 |
| Indonesia | 13989.7 | 7.1 | 23 | 0.27 | 24 | 0.1 | 26 | 0.1 | 26 |

*Notes:* World percentile shares cover national economics output. Core-cited incidence is the weighted percentage of cited national articles receiving at least one headline-top-30 citation. Non-core excludes cited articles themselves in the top 30. Weights multiply sampling expansion weights by fractional first affiliation; periods use cited-article publication years. Source: OpenAlex national economics records and citation links.

Core economics journals nevertheless rarely cite South Africa's work, including its most-cited papers. I measure core citations at the article level using core-citation incidence, defined as the weighted percentage of cited national economics articles that receive at least one citation from a headline top-30 economics journal. This article-level measure prevents a few heavily cited papers from dominating country totals. Across all cited national economics articles from 2011–20, 1.6% of South Africa's papers receive a core-journal citation against 6.8% for Chile, placing South Africa 13th of the 26 countries (Table 5). Among articles in the world top 10% of citations, only 3.7% of South African papers – about one in 27 – ever receive a citation from a core economics journal, compared with 16.2% – about one in six – for Chile (Online Appendix). On that top-decile measure, South Africa ranks 19th and a leading Chilean article is more than four times as likely to be cited in core economics.

Two sensitivity checks show that financial journals and domestic core papers do not explain this citation gap. When financial-economics articles are excluded from the labelled national samples, the core-citation gap between South Africa and Chile remains intact. When cited articles published inside the headline top 30 are excluded, South Africa's incidence stays unchanged at 1.6% (Table 5; Online Appendix). In batch-counted field summaries of works citing South African economics articles, about half (52.4%) of classified citing appearances come from economics and the rest come from neighbouring social, health, and environmental sciences. Domestic economics papers attract wide interdisciplinary and regional readership. Authors in core economics journals rarely cite them. University administrators track accredited article counts and total citations across all fields. Those metrics give domestic departments little sign that their research sits largely outside core international economics.

## 5 Topics, methods, and data sources

Do economists based in South Africa also study different topics and use different empirical methods than peers elsewhere? Answering that question requires examining the full national research portfolio rather than elite international journals alone. I collect all OpenAlex economics-field journal articles with a South African first affiliation over 1990–2025, alongside stratified random samples capped at 1,500 articles per comparator country and five-year period and weighted back to population totals. The analysis sample keeps in-scope journal articles with abstracts that the language-model classifier judged to be core economics. That rule produces a symmetric first-affiliation sample of 7,264 South African articles and 65,596 comparator articles (Online Appendix).

Simple pooled averages across countries are a misleading benchmark because richer and larger economies support different specialist fields and empirical methods have changed over time. For each topic, method, and data category, I estimate a fractional logit regression – a model built for outcomes measured as shares between zero and one – across the comparator countries. The model predicts the share expected for a peer country with South Africa's income per person, population, and five-year publication periods. Figure 2 plots the $\log_2$ ratio of South Africa's actual share to that predicted share. A value of $+1$ marks twice the peer prediction, and $-1$ marks half the prediction. Points to the right of zero indicate relative surpluses in South Africa's portfolio. Points to the left indicate shortfalls.

The largest surplus in South Africa's portfolio is aggregate time-series econometrics. Time-series models – such as vector autoregressions, cointegration and error-correction models, autoregressive distributed lags, Granger-causality tests, and volatility models – account for 40.4% of South African economics output, compared with 22.1% predicted for a peer economy of similar income and size. Typical papers in this group download quarterly macroeconomic or financial series from central-bank or international databases and estimate long-run relationships among aggregate variables. Does this surplus simply reflect a larger share of macroeconomics and finance topics in South Africa? When I reweight the pooled peer sample to match South Africa's exact mix of economic

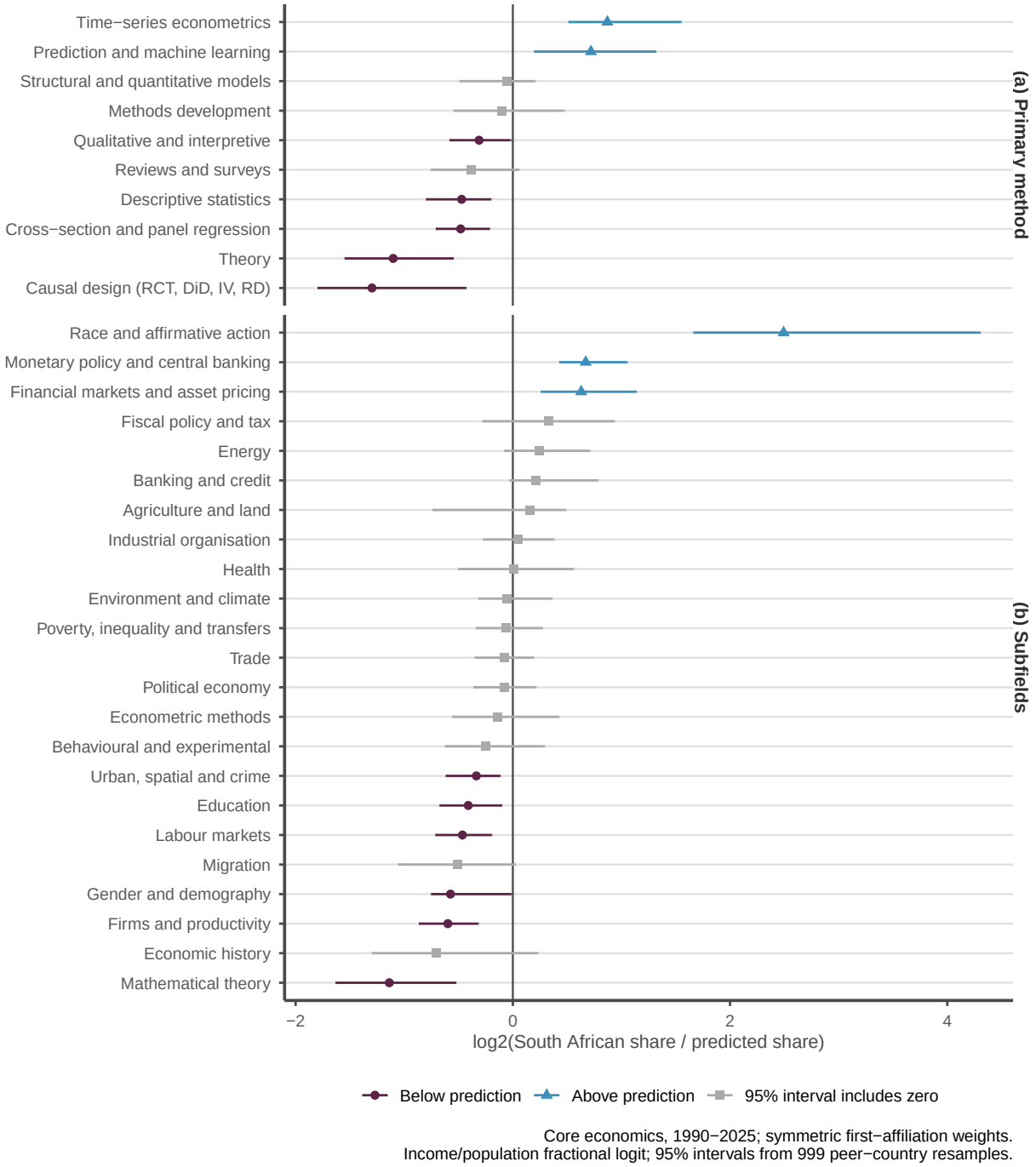



Figure 2: Fields, methods, and data sources of South African economics relative to income-and-population peer predictions, 1990–2025. Points plot $\log_2$(actual/predicted) across 7,264 South African and 65,596 comparator core-economics articles weighted by fractional first affiliation, with 95% country-cluster bootstrap intervals from 999 draws.

fields, 70.8% of the pooled time-series gap remains (Online Appendix). Domestic authors rely on aggregate time-series regressions across many subfields rather than in macroeconomics and finance alone.

Data sources match that method choice. Downloadable aggregate datasets show clear surpluses, including macroeconomic aggregate series (33.9% actual versus 26.0% predicted), financial-market series (20.8% versus 13.1%), and cross-country panels (13.5% versus 9.2%). Prediction and machine-learning papers also exceed peer benchmarks, as does research on race and affirmative action, a topic that makes up a small share of economics publishing internationally (Advani et al., 2026). Publicly downloadable series have low entry costs. A researcher can assemble quarterly series and estimate a model without negotiating data-access agreements or funding multi-year fieldwork. Applied policy fields such as poverty and social transfers, health, agriculture, and energy sit close to peer predictions.

Formal economic theory and microdata research sit on the opposite side of Figure 2. Theoretical papers make up 2.7% of South African output against 5.7% predicted, less than half the peer benchmark. Empirical studies using administrative microdata (6.8% versus 10.2%) or household survey microdata (13.2% versus 15.8%) also sit well below predicted shares. South Africa has fielded public household surveys for three decades and launched its administrative tax-data programme in 2014. Even so, domestic researchers publish far less work than peer norms predict on labour markets (6.8% versus 9.3%), firms and productivity (6.0% versus 9.1%), and the combined category of urban, spatial, and crime economics (9.2% versus 11.6%). High unemployment, slow firm job creation, and segregated cities define South African economic debate. But firm-level and micro-econometric studies of those problems remain scarce in the national portfolio.

Automated classification makes coding mistakes on both South African and comparator abstracts. I test whether classifier error explains these gaps using two stratified validation rounds coded blind by three independent models. Across all 21 headline categories, none shows a statistically detectable difference in net classifier error between South Africa and its peers at the 95% level. Agreement among three language models cannot catch errors that all three models share. A two-sided error correction applied to both South Africa's shares and the peer predictions nevertheless preserves the main gaps. The surpluses in time-series econometrics, macroeconomic series, cross-country panels, prediction and machine learning, and race research survive correction. So do the shortfalls in economic theory, administrative microdata, survey microdata, labour markets, firms and productivity, and urban-spatial-crime research (Online Appendix).

Several smaller gaps are indicative only after error correction. Causal identification designs make up 0.7% of South African output against 1.8% in the uncorrected benchmark. After two-sided error correction, that confidence interval crosses zero. Education and behavioural economics also lose statistical precision after correction, and experimental data sits close to the peer benchmark. In the codebook, causal identification and administrative microdata are separate dimensions because tax files can be summarised descriptively without a quasi-experimental design and causal studies often use household surveys or natural experiments. Qualitative and interpretive papers sit slightly below

peer predictions as well. South African economics specialises in aggregate time-series regressions rather than qualitative critique.

Corporate finance and asset-pricing journals account for a large share of time-series work worldwide, so I also re-estimate the benchmark after removing all articles whose primary field is financial economics (JEL G). Without finance, the gaps for education, prediction and machine learning, and qualitative work lose statistical support (Online Appendix). The central pattern holds. Time-series econometrics remains almost double the peer prediction (39.2% versus 21.0%). Economic theory, administrative microdata, survey microdata, labour markets, firms, and cities all remain well below peer norms.

## 6 Possible explanations and policy options

Why do economists at South African universities publish heavily in development studies and aggregate time-series outlets yet rarely appear in core economics journals? The comparisons in Section 3 rule out a simple story of exclusion from Northern journals. Core journals publish regular empirical studies on South Africa. Economists based in Santiago, São Paulo, Bogotá, and Prague also publish regularly in those outlets from outside North America and Western Europe. Openness to developing-country topics does not by itself separate differences in empirical methods from submission hurdles outside major Northern departments. Even so, peer middle-income professions overcome any such hurdles far more often than South Africa does. Nor does the gap reflect a lack of effort by individual South African academics. Researchers respond sensibly to the training, data access, and promotion rules around them. This paper does not test which domestic factor matters most. What follows is a set of plausible explanations rather than a causal test. Several have historical roots going back a century. Civil servants and university lecturers founded the Economic Society of South Africa in 1925 and started the *South African Journal of Economics* in 1933 (Pearsall, 1939). Early scholarship included public commissions of inquiry such as the Carnegie Commission on white poverty (Carnegie Commission, 1932). When Truu (1966) surveyed domestic economics departments in the mid-1960s, rapid undergraduate growth and outside hiring had already stretched small teaching staffs thin. Snowball and Kramm (2026) document the later evolution of domestic publishing in the Society's journal from 1980 onwards. From 1959, the Extension of University Education Act imposed racial segregation across higher education (Union of South Africa, 1959). That law confined black, coloured, and Indian students largely to underfunded colleges and excluded most South Africans from academic economics.

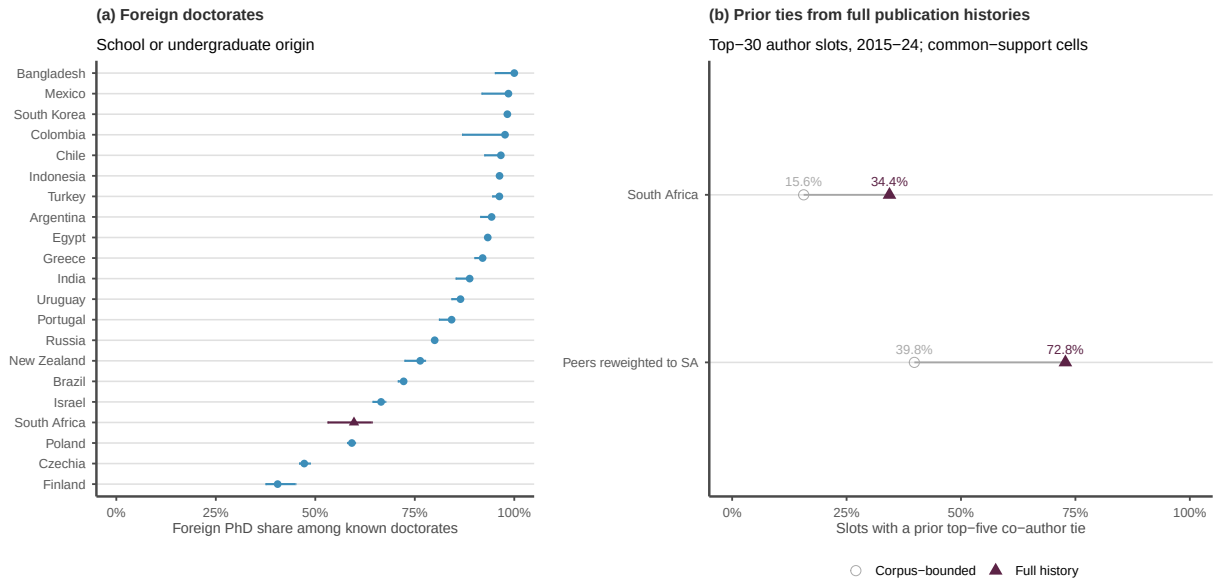
Apartheid isolation in the 1970s and 1980s separated South African departments from changes in international graduate training. Universities in Latin America and East Asia sent cohorts of graduates to doctoral programmes in North America and Europe during those decades. During the academic boycott of the 1980s, international conference travel and scholarly exchanges with South Africa were disrupted (Haricombe and Lancaster, 1995). Domestic economics departments continued to train most of their academic staff at home. Official apartheid statistics also omitted

reliable household data on black South Africans' incomes and jobs, and anti-apartheid poverty inquiries relied mainly on local case studies rather than representative econometric surveys (Wilson and Ramphele, 1989; Seekings, 2001).

The democratic transition in 1994 reopened international exchange and expanded domestic microdata. Countrywide household surveys began with the 1993 Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (Seekings, 2001), followed by official labour force surveys and the 2008 National Income Dynamics Study (Woolard, Leibbrandt and de Villiers, 2010). Public survey data supported growing domestic research on poverty, schooling, and labour markets (Seekings, 2001; Gustafsson and Mabogoane, 2012), alongside active debates between academic economists and government over post-apartheid economic policy (Padayachee and Sherbut, 2011). Foreign scholars and international partnerships still produced much of the early econometric survey research (Seekings, 2001), and South Africa experienced substantial skilled emigration more broadly (Stern and Szalontai, 2006). From 2014, the National Treasury, South African Revenue Service, and UNU-WIDER built anonymised firm and worker tax panels in a secure Pretoria lab, where confidential access required on-site work and panel-data skills (UNU-WIDER, 2014; Pieterse, Gavin and Kreuser, 2018; Fedderke, Obikili and Viegi, 2018).

Doctoral training routes among leading-journal authors still show that historical split. Panel (a) of Figure 3 uses the biographical career census to measure where authors with school or undergraduate education in each country earned their PhDs. Because the census tracks leading-journal authors wherever they work in the world, it describes the training of core-journal contributors rather than the full staff of domestic departments, most of whom never enter the census. Among South African-origin economists in the census with a known doctoral country, 59.7% (43 of 72) earned their PhD abroad. In Chile, Colombia, Argentina, and Mexico, more than 90% of comparable authors hold foreign doctorates. Only European peers integrated into regional academic markets, such as Finland and Czechia, combine substantial core-journal output with majority domestic doctorates. Leading North American and European PhD programmes typically begin with intensive coursework in economic theory and econometrics followed by regular research workshops. Empirical studies show that department standing and faculty quality during doctoral training strongly predict graduates' subsequent publication records (Waldinger, 2010; Conley and Önder, 2014). Domestic PhDs remained the standard credential for university posts in South Africa. Fewer returning graduates may therefore have brought those practices into local honours and master's programmes.

Academic training and professional ties are also closely linked to publication and peer-review outcomes in economics (Colussi, 2018; Carrell, Figlio and Lusher, 2024), where editorial boards are heavily concentrated in leading Northern departments (Ductor and Visser, 2023). Panel (b) of Figure 3 uses complete OpenAlex publication histories for domestic core-journal authors in 2015–24 to measure how often an author had earlier co-authored any paper with a scholar who had already published in the top five. Across the 12 journal-by-period cells with common support, 34.4% of South Africa's domestic author slots belong to researchers with such an earlier tie, compared with 72.8% across Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia reweighted to the same mix (Online Ap-




Sources: A12 census routes and A8 full histories. (a) At least 15 known doctorates; ranges allocate unknown doctorates all home or abroad. (b) Full histories extend observed corpus collaborations. Collaboration and partner top−five entry must precede the counted article. Same 12 journal−period cells: 32 SA slots and 277 Argentine, Brazilian, Chilean and Colombian slots, reweighted to the SA mix.

Figure 3: Foreign doctoral training and prior top-five co-authorship ties across South Africa and comparator countries. Panel (a) shows the share of school- or undergraduate-origin career-census authors with a known doctoral country who earned their PhD abroad across the 21 countries with at least 15 known doctorates, with bars marking bounds when unknown doctorates are assigned all home or all abroad. Panel (b) shows the share of domestic headline top-30 author slots in 2015–24 across 12 common-support journal-by-period cells held by authors with an earlier co-author who had already published in the top five, comparing full publication histories with corpus-bounded rates for South Africa and reweighted Argentine, Brazilian, Chilean, and Colombian peers.

pendix). Selective matching means this gap is an association rather than a causal effect. Evidence from mathematics doctoral training and life-science collaborations nevertheless shows that losing prominent faculty mentors or senior collaborators reduces subsequent research output (Waldinger, 2010; Azoulay, Graff Zivin and Wang, 2010). Geographic distance may also raise the cost of working without senior international co-authors. Junior lecturers in South Africa face expensive flights and receive fewer informal seminar comments on early drafts.

University funding rules are another candidate explanation. Under the national Research Outputs Policy introduced in 2003 and replaced in 2015, every eligible article in an accredited journal carries the same research-output unit weight regardless of journal standing (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015; Muller, 2017). Unaccredited policy reports and working papers earn no subsidy units. Accredited article counts across South African higher education and economics rose steeply through the 2000s and 2010s (Luiz, 2009; Yu, Kasongo and Moses, 2017; Pouris, 2026), accompanied by concerns over perverse incentives and predatory publishing in parts of the system (Mouton and Valentine, 2017; Tomaselli, 2018; Kerr and de Jager, 2021). Evaluations in Australia found that flat publication-count formulas shifted university output toward lower-tier journals (Butler, 2003; Hicks, 2012), and a study of Turkey's cash-bonus scheme found little gain in citation rates (Tonta and Akbulut, 2020). Many South African universities pass part of the subsidy into staff accounts or count accredited units in promotion reviews. Under those prices, a quick time-series regression on downloadable macroeconomic data earns the exact same unit weight as a five-year effort to link tax records and revise a paper for a core journal.

Alongside that subsidy sits an established domestic development-studies and policy sector. University research units produce much of the household-survey analysis used by South African government departments. When researchers publish those programme and survey evaluations in respected development-studies journals or accredited local journals, they satisfy grant funders, earn full state subsidy units, and meet university promotion benchmarks. Skilled empirical economists can therefore build well-cited, publicly useful careers at home without taking on the high rejection rates and multi-year revision cycles of core economics journals. When departments neither expect nor reward core-journal articles, researchers have little reason to target them.

Student degree choices, private-sector demand, and university hiring rules offer further candidate explanations. Accountancy and insurance professions such as actuarial science carry high status and pay in South Africa. Those degrees draw many of the strongest quantitative school-leavers away from economics in their first year at university. International evidence shows that high pay in finance draws quantitatively skilled graduates away from other careers (Murphy, Shleifer and Vishny, 1991; Oyer, 2008; Philippon and Reshef, 2012; Célérier and Vallée, 2019). In South Africa, a large banking, insurance, and consulting sector similarly offers high starting salaries to technical honours and master's graduates before doctoral study. Within universities, immigration delays and appointment policies also make it difficult for departments to hire non-South African scholars on the international market.

These labour-market and funding pressures may also shape the demographic pipeline into aca-

demic economics. In my earlier 19-journal coding frame – retained so no demographic cell contains fewer than five people – black African researchers represent 16% of South African-affiliated authors in 2020–25 (including foreign nationals working in South Africa), compared with 68% of economics students at traditional universities in 2022 (Branson and Whitelaw, 2024, 2025). Cohort lags, pipeline attrition, and hiring cannot be separated in that cross-section. Even so, several forces before the PhD stage plausibly shrink the pool of black South African candidates trained for core-journal research. Large inequalities in school mathematics (van der Berg, 2007; Spaull, 2013; Spaull and Kotze, 2015) may already narrow entry into quantitative honours tracks. Among strong black honours and master's graduates, both demand and supply pull talent into the private sector before doctoral study. Employment-equity regulations make banks, insurers, and consulting firms eager to recruit top black quantitative graduates at high starting salaries. Even in the United States, economics PhDs come disproportionately from affluent families (Stansbury and Schultz, 2023). In South Africa, black graduates are more likely than other black adults to remit to family members and send larger sums, even after accounting for employment and living arrangements (Whitelaw, Branson and Leibbrandt, 2026). Those commitments may lead graduates to enter paid work after undergraduate study rather than prolonging study toward a PhD abroad. Strong South African applicants for foreign doctorates have also traditionally favoured British universities, which fund stipends less generously than US programmes. If most high-performing graduates enter corporate or policy careers before the PhD, universities face a small pool of research-trained candidates when making appointments.

Without evidence on which explanations matter most, I cannot offer firm policy recommendations. What follows is a set of possible interventions framed as options rather than prescriptions. Schooling quality, labour laws, and the national subsidy formula are set outside economics departments, and national government is unlikely to abolish the flat article subsidy soon. Medicine, engineering, natural sciences, and development studies at Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch, Johannesburg, and Pretoria nevertheless reach high international rankings under the exact same school system, labour laws, currency, and flat state subsidy. That contrast suggests that departments, universities, and private funders still have options to explore.

One set of options concerns undergraduate mathematics and postgraduate funding. Many South African economics undergraduates never take the real analysis and linear algebra courses that leading international PhD programmes expect. Clearer early advising and joint mathematics-economics degrees are one way departments could try to retain quantitative students who otherwise enter accounting, actuarial science, or financial engineering. Larger honours and master's bursaries – paired with advising toward fully funded overseas doctoral programmes – are a related option where private-sector salaries and family obligations draw strong graduates into immediate employment. Stipends closer to private-sector starting pay could help test whether financial pressure keeps talented first-generation graduates out of full-time research.

A second set of options concerns doctoral training, international hiring, and diaspora collaboration. Among US-trained science and engineering fellows, Fulbright home-residency rules were asso-

ciated with stronger home-country citation links in countries with smaller research systems (Kahn and MacGarvie, 2016). Evaluators of China's Young Thousand Talents programme found that returning scientists published more than comparable peers abroad, aided by larger research grants and teams (Shi, Liu and Wang, 2023). Return fellowships that appoint two or three externally trained PhDs together with protected early-career research time are one option for South Africa, alongside simpler university and visa procedures for appointing non-South African economists. Diaspora researchers often connect home-country scholars to international co-author networks (Xie and Freeman, 2020). Co-supervision grants and annual summer workshops are therefore another option for linking South African-trained economists abroad with domestic doctoral students.

A third set of options involves microdata access and departmental evaluation criteria. Curated firm and worker tax panels at the National Treasury have shown what South African administrative records can support (Pieterse, Gavin and Kreuser, 2018; Fedderke, Obikili and Viegi, 2018). Broader researcher access to administrative microdata has been central to empirical microeconomics elsewhere (Card et al., 2010; Einav and Levin, 2014). Secure regional data labs in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban – paired with synthetic training files and short courses – could let researchers outside Pretoria use tax panels without relocating. Within universities, appointment and promotion committees or private donors could also weight journal standing rather than counting accredited units alone (Butler, 2003; Hicks, 2012; Muller, 2017). Probationary expectations for international publication and greater weight on external doctorates are further options to consider, without importing rigid top-five-only tenure rules (Heckman and Moktan, 2020). If universities or donors pilot these options, review-score cutoffs or finalist lotteries could test which ones work.

# 7 Conclusion

Economists based at South African institutions rarely publish in the core journals of their discipline. Five South African universities nevertheless rank in the global QS Top 500, and peer middle-income professions publish in core journals regularly. Domestic economics papers attract substantial citations across the wider social sciences. Most of that work appears in interdisciplinary development studies and aggregate time-series econometrics, which core economics journals seldom cite. Those papers earn full state subsidies and strong interdisciplinary citations. South African departments therefore look productive on local metrics even though they rank near the bottom of comparable countries in core economics. The evidence in this paper covers published articles and career records rather than classroom teaching or confidential government advice. The cross-country comparisons also describe associations rather than causal effects. Even so, the comparison with both peer countries and neighbouring faculties on the same South African campuses shows that this underperformance is not the result of editorial exclusion or national university funding alone.

The paper's three contributions fit together around that diagnosis. The 26-country comparison under one external citation rule shows that core journals actively study South Africa and regularly publish domestic research from Latin America and Central Europe. Editorial exclusion of

middle-income scholars therefore does not account for South Africa's position, even though this paper does not test which domestic factors matter most. A complete national portfolio across core journals, development journals, citations, and 72,860 classified abstracts shows a domestic specialisation in interdisciplinary development studies and downloadable macroeconomic time series rather than economic theory or firm and labour microdata. A comparison of economics with overall university rankings on the same South African campuses rules out purely university-wide explanations. Candidate economics-specific factors include doctoral training, international co-author ties, flat publication subsidies, barriers to appointing foreign scholars, and strong competition for quantitative talent from finance, accounting, and insurance professions.

Who writes in core economics journals matters because these outlets test and publicise much of the empirical evidence that guides public policy. Rigorous peer review asks whether an empirical claim survives competing explanations, giving civil servants firmer evidence when choosing between policies. Recent articles in the top five journals, each written with at least one economist based in the country studied, answer practical questions that South Africa also faces. In Brazil, job loss increased crime, and unemployment insurance offset that rise only until benefits expired (Britto, Pinotti and Sampaio, 2022). A quantitative model of Brazil's labour market attributed most of the decline in informal employment between 2003 and 2012 to rising worker schooling (Haanwinckel and Soares, 2021). In Colombia, Medellín's gangs governed more strongly in neighbourhoods closer to state security offices, indicating that state presence can reinforce criminal governance rather than displace it (Blattman et al., 2025). In Chile, competitive recruitment and better pay for public hospital managers reduced hospital mortality (Muñoz and Otero, 2025). New transmission lines connecting Chile's power grid also raised investment in solar power (Gonzales, Ito and Reguant, 2023). In Indonesia, moving large regional firms into better-staffed tax offices more than doubled the tax revenue collected from them (Basri et al., 2021). Electronic food vouchers delivered more aid to poor Indonesian households than in-kind rice deliveries did (Banerjee et al., 2023). In Turkey, a school programme teaching children to consider others' perspectives reduced peer violence and increased friendships between Turkish and Syrian refugee pupils (Alan et al., 2021). In Mexico, borrowers with two credit cards kept substantial debt on the card charging the higher interest rate (Ponce, Seira and Zamarripa, 2017). South Africa debates each of these problems, from crime, informal work, and tax collection to public hospitals and the electricity grid.

South Africa would benefit from having more economists based permanently at its own universities who study these questions with rigorous methods and publish their findings where economists in other countries will read and test them. This paper documents the shortfall rather than testing its causes. Possible interventions are therefore options to explore rather than firm recommendations. Those options include larger postgraduate bursaries, simpler procedures for appointing externally and internationally trained PhDs, promotion and donor rules that weight journal standing, and wider regional access to administrative tax and firm microdata. Clear evidence of that shortfall is a necessary first step before departments, universities, and funders can judge which options are worth trying.

## Data availability

Aggregate data that reproduce every table and figure, and every number cited in the text, are available at `https://github.com/johanfourieza/research/tree/main/2026/dismal-science-south-africa`. Article-level data and code will be added on acceptance. Hand-coded person-level race and gender information about named individuals will not be released.

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