K12 ACADEMICS — INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERIES

Studying in South Africa

A guide for international students & families — how South African higher education works, the study visa, English-medium study at Africa's top universities, and work rights.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

ABOUT K12 ACADEMICS

The world's largest education resource.

Online since 2004, K12 Academics has helped millions of families, students and educators **find the right school, college, camp, business and program in their community** — for every kind of learner.

AFRICA'S TOP UNIVERSITIES, ENGLISH-MEDIUM, AFFORDABLE

South Africa is home to **Africa's top-ranked universities** — the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and Stellenbosch — offering **globally recognized, English-medium degrees** at costs well below the US/UK/Australia. Add strong research, a striking natural setting, and a large international community. Students get a **study visa**. This guide walks it in **ten steps**.

General guidance, not legal or immigration advice. South African rules, tuition, and the funds requirement change. The details here are recent examples and **must be confirmed with the Department of Home Affairs (via VFS), your university, and the South African mission**.

1

STEP 01 OF 10

Understand Why Students Choose South Africa

WHAT TO KNOW

South Africa offers **Africa's top universities (UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch), globally recognized English-medium degrees, affordable tuition and living, strong research (especially medicine and conservation), and a striking natural setting** — outstanding value.

BY THE NUMBERS

Africa's top	English-medium	Affordable
UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch	+ globally recognized	+ research strength

HOW TO HELP

Weigh South Africa's **top-ranked English-medium quality and value** against following local safety guidance — for world-class study in Africa on a budget, it's excellent.

GOOD TO KNOW

UCT leads Africa in **medicine, development studies, and environmental sciences**, and Wits is globally strong in mining engineering — genuine research depth.

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STEP 02 OF 10

Understand the System

WHAT TO KNOW

There are **26 public universities**, led by **UCT (#1 in Africa), Wits, Stellenbosch, and the University of Pretoria**, plus the University of Johannesburg, UKZN, and Rhodes. **English is the primary medium of instruction**. The academic year runs **early February to late November**, with registration opening in January.

BY THE NUMBERS

26 public universities	English	Feb–Nov
UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch	primary medium	academic year

HOW TO HELP

Choose among South Africa's **top public universities** (UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch, Pretoria) by field — all English-medium, with a February–November academic year.

GOOD TO KNOW

Bachelor's degrees typically take **three years** (plus an optional honours year); the year runs February–November.

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STEP 03 OF 10

Get the Study Visa

WHAT TO KNOW

You need a **study visa**, applied for at a South African embassy (using the BI-1738 form) or via **VFS**. It's **institution-specific** (a change of university needs a Change of Conditions). Provide acceptance, proof of funds, accommodation, a **medical and radiological report, police clearance, and comprehensive South African medical aid**; postgrad foreign degrees need a **SAQA evaluation**. Processing is **4–12 weeks**.

BY THE NUMBERS

Study visa	Institution-specific	4–12 weeks
embassy (BI-1738) / VFS	+ medical aid	processing

HOW TO HELP

Apply for the **study visa** (BI-1738, via embassy or VFS) with acceptance, funds, accommodation, medical/radiological reports, police clearance, and SA medical aid — allow 4–12 weeks.

WATCH OUT

The visa is **tied to your institution** — switching universities requires a Change of Conditions; missing medical aid or funds proof causes major delays.

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STEP 04 OF 10

Apply to Universities

WHAT TO KNOW

Apply **directly to each university** (registration for new international students opens in January). Provide transcripts and **English proficiency proof** (if English isn't your first language); **postgraduate applicants with foreign degrees need a SAQA evaluation**. Ensure all documents are in English or certified-translated.

BY THE NUMBERS

Apply directly	English	SAQA
registration from Jan	proof if not first language	postgrad foreign degrees

HOW TO HELP

Apply **directly** to your chosen universities, with transcripts and English proof — and get a **SAQA evaluation** if you're a postgraduate with a foreign degree.

GOOD TO KNOW

Get your **SAQA evaluation** early for postgraduate study — it's required to apply, and takes time.

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STEP 05 OF 10

Plan for Tuition & Scholarships

WHAT TO KNOW

Tuition generally runs **ZAR 22,000–82,000/year** (professional degrees like medicine or engineering cost more) — affordable versus the US/UK/Australia. Universities offer scholarships and financial aid — check each institution's pages. Note that Wits requires **75% of annual tuition paid before registration**.

BY THE NUMBERS

Tuition	Medicine/engineering	Scholarships
~ZAR 22k–82k/yr	cost more	per university

HOW TO HELP

Budget the **tuition** (ZAR 22k–82k; medicine/engineering more) plus living costs, and pursue university scholarships — note some universities require most tuition paid before registration.

GOOD TO KNOW

Some universities (e.g., Wits) require **~75% of annual tuition paid before registration** — budget for the upfront cost.

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STEP 06 OF 10

Meet the Financial Requirement

WHAT TO KNOW

For the visa you show **proof of sufficient funds** for tuition and living, plus **comprehensive South African medical aid** (mandatory for the whole academic year) and accommodation. Living costs run **ZAR 8,000–15,000/month**; medical aid ZAR 5,000–10,000/year. Confirm exact figures with your mission.

BY THE NUMBERS

Funds	Medical aid	Living
tuition + living	mandatory (SA cover)	ZAR 8k–15k/month

HOW TO HELP

Prepare **proof of funds and comprehensive South African medical aid** (required for the year) plus accommodation — confirm exact figures with the South African mission.

GOOD TO KNOW

Comprehensive South African medical aid is mandatory for the whole academic year — arrange it as part of your visa file.

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STEP 07 OF 10

Meet Language Requirements

WHAT TO KNOW

English is the **primary medium of instruction** (South Africa has 11 official languages, including Afrikaans, isiXhosa, and isiZulu), so you prove English proficiency if it isn't your first language. Study is accessible in English for most international students.

BY THE NUMBERS

English	11 official languages	Proof
primary medium	incl. Afrikaans, Zulu	if not first language

HOW TO HELP

Prove **English proficiency** where required — teaching is primarily in English — in a multilingual country (11 official languages).

GOOD TO KNOW

English is the **main language of instruction** — language is rarely a barrier for English speakers.

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STEP 08 OF 10

Prepare for the Move

WHAT TO KNOW

After your visa, **arrange accommodation, complete registration, and set up banking and medical aid**. Most students are based in **Cape Town or Johannesburg**. South Africa combines modern cities with striking natural attractions; **safety varies by area**, so follow your university's and local guidance.

BY THE NUMBERS

Accommodation + registration	Cities	Safety
first tasks	Cape Town, Johannesburg	follow local guidance

HOW TO HELP

Handle arrival admin — **accommodation, registration, banking, medical aid** — in Cape Town or Johannesburg, following university and local safety guidance.

GOOD TO KNOW

Safety varies by area — follow your university's and local guidance, as you would in any major city.

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STEP 09 OF 10

Understand Work Rules

WHAT TO KNOW

The study visa permits **part-time work up to 20 hours per week during term**, and **full-time during official vacations** (with a letter from your institution). **Practical training/internships** required by your degree (e.g., for medicine or engineering) are also permitted.

BY THE NUMBERS

Work	Full-time	Practical training
20 hrs/week in term	in vacations (with letter)	if degree requires

HOW TO HELP

You may **work up to 20 hours/week during term** (full-time in vacations with a letter), plus degree-required **practical training** — useful for experience and living costs.

GOOD TO KNOW

Full-time vacation work needs a **letter from your institution** confirming the vacation dates — keep it handy.

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STEP 10 OF 10

Thrive & Work After Study

WHAT TO KNOW

The study visa **doesn't give direct permanent residence**, but graduates can apply for a **work visa (e.g., Critical Skills or General Work) with a job offer**, and Study → Work → PR is a common progression. South Africa's tech, research, and healthcare sectors offer strong opportunities.

BY THE NUMBERS

No direct PR	Work visa	Study → Work → PR
from study visa	after a job offer	common path

HOW TO HELP

Plan for a **post-study work visa** (Critical Skills or General Work, with a job offer), and note the Study → Work → PR progression; South Africa's tech/research/healthcare sectors offer opportunities.

GOOD TO KNOW

Post-study, a **work visa with a job offer** can lead toward PR over time — a clear (if multi-step) route to staying.

QUICK REFERENCE

Studying in South Africa: The Essentials

A snapshot — figures change, so confirm with the Department of Home Affairs (via VFS), your university, and the South African mission.

The system

26 public universities led by UCT (#1 in Africa), Wits, and Stellenbosch (Africa's top three), plus Pretoria, Johannesburg, UKZN, and Rhodes; English is the primary medium; the academic year runs February–November.

The visa

A study visa (BI-1738, via a South African embassy or VFS), institution-specific, requiring acceptance, funds, accommodation, medical and radiological reports, police clearance, comprehensive SA medical aid, and (for postgrad foreign degrees) a SAQA evaluation; 4–12 weeks.

Tuition & scholarships

~ZAR 22,000–82,000/year (medicine/engineering more), affordable versus the West; university scholarships; some universities require ~75% of tuition paid before registration.

Money & language

Show proof of funds plus comprehensive SA medical aid (mandatory) and accommodation (living ZAR 8k–15k/month); English is the primary medium (proof if not your first language).

Work & after

Work up to 20 hrs/week in term (full-time in vacations with a letter), plus degree-required practical training; no direct PR, but a post-study work visa (with a job offer) can lead toward PR.

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