

## **Democratising Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: Opportunity Structures and Social Processes**

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### **Abstract**

Widening participation in higher education can be a force for democratisation and differentiation. In the developing world, there has been scant research and theorisation of how different structures of inequality intersect or how higher education relates to policy discourses of poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals. Socio-cultural theory has not been widely applied to research on higher education in low-income countries, nor has there been consideration of the part that private higher education plays in widening participation. In short, there has been limited scholarship on the sociology of higher education in low-income countries. This paper is based on our ESRC/DFID funded research project on Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: Developing an Equity Scorecard ([www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation)). Findings to date suggest that opportunity structures reflect social inequalities.

### **Widening Participation in Higher Education: Poverty Reduction, Meritocratic Equalisation or Elite Formation?**

Widening participation in higher education is a global policy objective, underpinned by economic and social imperatives. Higher education is positioned by the international community as a central site for facilitating the skills, knowledge and expertise that are essential to economic and social development. Overt links are being made by the global polity between

participation rates, wealth creation and poverty reduction (UNESCO, 1998; World Bank, 2002). Economic rationalism is linked to the imperative of modernisation, with widening participation initiatives perceived as a state interventionist approach to steering higher education systems. Internationally, there are debates on the ideology of widening participation policies (David, 2007). Widening participation policy discourses link individual choices, institutional responsiveness and national/universal salvation (Ball, 1998). There is a complex balance between the individual and the collective good, conflating knowledge production with national and global skill requirements. Knowledge is increasingly commodified and education policy colonised by economic policy imperatives. There is an assumption that macro and micro level aspirations will overlap and that governments and citizens will choose the most appropriate providers and programmes which tie in to developmental strategies (Naidoo, 2006). Walkerdine (2003) questions whether widening participation is a neo-liberal project of self-improvement and social mobility in which subjectivities, aspirations and desires are aligned with labour market changes.

There are questions about whether widening participation is a force for democratisation or differentiation. Initiatives are perceived as a form of meritocratic equalisation and as a reinforcement of social stratification processes. It is debateable whether educational expansion 'reduces inequality by providing more opportunities for persons from disadvantaged strata, or magnifies inequality by expanding opportunities disproportionately for those who are already privileged' (Shavit *et al* 2007:1). There has been scant research into the motivations, subjectivities, educational trajectories and experiences of people from socially disadvantaged groups trying to enter and achieve in higher education systems in low-income countries. In a globalised knowledge economy, the question of who is participating and where demands closer scrutiny.

Working with a public university and a private university in Ghana and Tanzania, this project aims to provide a statistical overview of participation patterns in the two countries. The project is developing Equity Scorecards to measure access, achievement and retention of socially and economically excluded groups in four case study institutions. The statistical data are

being illuminated by the multivocality of interviews with stakeholders who are rarely included in international policy arenas *i.e.* 100 academic staff and policy makers and 100 students in selected programmes in each country. Overarching aims are to build socio-cultural theory of higher education in low-income countries, to expand the research capacity in the countries concerned, and to provide new knowledge and literature that could contribute to making African higher education more socially inclusive.

### **A Mass Global System?**

Global enrolment in higher education in 2004 (132 million) was more than double the figure thirteen years earlier. In spite of growth, a relatively small share of the world's population participates in higher education. In 2005, the global Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) was 24 percent (UNESCO, 2007:124). The highest participation rates are seen in North America (70 percent GER) and the lowest GER in the world is in Sub-Saharan Africa where only 5.1 percent enter higher education (UNESCO, 2007).

The feminisation of higher education largely relates to quantitative, rather than qualitative change (Morley *et al.*, 2006; Quinn, 2003). Participation rates for women have increased between 1999 and 2005 in all regions of the world. Globally, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for higher education is 1.05, suggesting that rates of participation are slightly higher for women than for men (UNESCO, 2007:132). This increase has been unevenly distributed across national and disciplinary boundaries. In 2005 participation in higher education was greater for women than for men in four regions of the world: Northern America and Western Europe; Central and Eastern Europe; Latin America and the Caribbean, and Central Asia. However, in East Asia and the Pacific, South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, participation rates for men continue to outstrip those for women and the GPI in each region remains below one (UNESCO, 2007).

Globally, women are concentrated in subjects associated with low-wage sectors of the economy. In many countries, two-thirds to three-quarters of graduates in the fields of Health,

Welfare and Education are women. In regions where enrolment rates of women are lower than for men, men also dominate these disciplinary areas (UNESCO, 2006:19). Globally, men predominate in subjects related to Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, and Maths and Computer Science (OECD, 2007). The question of what and where women are accessing can also be related to the type of higher education institution (HEI).

### **Private Higher Education: Opportunity or Exploitation?**

Globally, the provision of higher education remains predominantly public. However, the situation is different in Latin America, East Asia and some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Ghana has 6 public and 13 private universities. Tanzania has 7 public universities, 4 public university colleges and 17 private universities. Much private provision has a religious base. In Ghana and Tanzania, private universities currently account for 10 per cent of the undergraduate university student population (Lugg *et al*, 2007). As in much of Sub-Saharan Africa, the development of a private sector has been a strategy to widen participation and is embedded in reform measures of the sector. Reliance on market forces and the incapacity of the fiscal state to finance education have contributed to private sector growth (Varghese, 2004). Trade liberalisation through the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), is likely to accelerate the trends transforming higher education into a commodity that can be invested in by private and foreign providers operating on a global scale. The rise of private higher education has been theorised in terms of market colonialism, that is, new forms of economic and political domination unleashed on developing countries through the 'neutral' interplay of market forces in the global arena (Chossudovsky, 1998). Concerns also relate to issues of accreditation, standards and quality assurance (King, 2003).

Private higher education occupies a complex material and discursive space. It involves a decoupling of education from direct state control, subjecting it to the disciplines of the market and redefining it as a competitive private good (Ball, 1998). International policies tie education to national economic interests and locate it as a public good. The rapid and often unplanned

growth can be theorised in terms of neoliberalism, marketisation and 'disorganised capitalism' (Lash & Urry, 1987). While equity is usually a residual concern in marketised education systems, the development of new provision can paradoxically offer new opportunity structures for new constituencies of students. For example, in Ghana, women comprise 32 percent of the overall undergraduate population, but make up 41 percent of the students in private higher education. In Tanzania, 30 percent of the overall undergraduate population is female, but 36 percent of students in private higher education are women (Lugg, *et al*, 2007). Private higher education is rarely sociologically interrogated *i.e.* how it interacts with social structures such as gender, age and socio-economic status. While more quantitative data are available on the growth of provision, it is rare to hear consumers' views on quality.

We have observed that many students enter private higher education because they failed to enter or achieve in state run universities, rather than because of religious affiliations, values and dispositions or a marketised choice. Concerns about the comparability of quality were expressed in both countries:

*Actually what came into my mind, was, this is a private University will they really meet the standards required of a University? (Female Tanzanian student)*

Another Tanzanian female student describes her reduced expectations and *faute de mieux* approach:

*I did not have any information about this university. I only came to know about it after applying here University of Dar es Salaam and could not get a vacancy.*

The same applied to a Ghanaian female:

*Actually, I wanted to go University of Ghana, Legon. .. my grade wasn't good so ... I came here.*

These quotations suggest that some members of socially disadvantaged groups, while demonstrating the qualities of enterprising subjects, have fewer opportunities for consumer choices in a hierarchalised higher education system. However, another Ghanaian female saw lower entry criteria as providing opportunity structures:

*I had a colleague here before I came here and she told me about the good parts of the school. The curriculum that they offer and their way of admitting students, such that they do not discriminate or disregard you through your previous grades. They give you a stepping-stone for you to prove yourself that you are really capable of making it in the university.*

A common binary in educational policy is the belief that markets promote efficiency and a successful economy and that the state protects equity, both in terms of a value commitment and to deflect the more corrosive effects of market forces through state regulation and state support for the most vulnerable groups in society (Hirst, 1999; Naidoo, 2000). Varghese (2004) suggests that the public sector in many African countries is criticised for inefficiency and the private sector promoted for its efficiency. In our study, there were complaints about inefficiency and lack of accountability in the private sector. Ghanaian students note lack of democratic processes, commercialisation and poor quality assurance.

*We wrote the paper I think last February ok, and they brought the result only in May. ... Results must be there at the first week in the New Year but they will not do it. They will wait for one, two months so you will pay. ... They don't show any respect for students. That makes me very sad. (Ghanaian female)*

Another Ghanaian female student highlights the commercialisation of the educational processes:

*We cannot see our copies of exam scripts unless we pay.*

There were numerous comments about poor facilities:

*The library is not that big enough to take the capacity of the students we have. So most of the time we have to hang around or stay outside the library...even in the rainy season...*

Higher education is a cultural and an academic experience. Poor social facilities and transmission pedagogy reduce opportunities for the development of social capital, networks, and interpersonal skills, as a Ghanaian male indicates:

*You know, university is not only about academics, sometimes you learn so many things from your friends and.....Social life and ... here the ... the interaction is somehow limited, when we are comparing with other universities.*

The nature of the contract with the private university is minimal, as a Ghanaian female student observes:

*I always say that ... we don't have residence and we don't participate in any other activities but the fees are still high. Even like I always asked my friends "so apart from lectures that we do get, the examinations that we do write, is that all that we get for the money? For because we don't get any other benefit from it and moving from here to another campus is another surprise.*

If rates of participation for women are higher in lower status private higher education, this poses questions about core and periphery provision. Socially disadvantaged groups could be getting diverted into peripheral higher education, thus reinforcing stratification of the sector and social differentiation. In this analysis, widening participation in higher education can be conceptualised as a process of diversion, *i.e.* a re-routing of members of socially disadvantaged groups into lower-status institutions in order to reserve the higher-status

universities for the elite (David, 2007). 'Buying an education becomes a substitute for *getting* an education' (Kenway *et al.*, 1993: 116).

### **Gendered Processes**

A question is why women's participation continues to be so low in Sub-Saharan Africa compared to the 'feminisation' of higher education in high-income countries. Threats of social exclusion can reinforce norms and keep women within a complex matrix of social rules and conventions. Women are at risk if they do or do not conform. Conforming to traditional female roles in many African countries is a risk to educational opportunities. Non-conforming might allow women to access education, but places them at risk socially. Gender discourses ensure compliance for women and men to psychic and social norms (Hey, 2006). Our life history interview data reveal how gendered divisions of labour and women's socially prescribed domestic responsibilities influence women's possibility of participation, at all educational stages. A Ghanaian female student comments on her primary school years:

*During that time ... financial things were not so good but my brothers were there. Because they were guys when I come from school I was made to go sell, come back home, cook that kind of thing so things were not very smooth for me so if I were a boy I wouldn't been involved in all those things.*

A mature Tanzanian female student explains how this pattern continues into higher education:

*Like for me, I am a married woman so I find it very tiresome because I have to do some domestic work and do the reading so I can not meet the standards ... there have been a lot of problems; maybe you plan to do this there are interferences like you have visitors at home... and other domestic problems that are hindering my studies.*



These observations are evocative of Edwards' (1993) study in which she found that mature women students were caught between two greedy institutions and that survival involved complex splitting and disconnection between the two highly gendered worlds.

Compulsory heterosexuality and the inevitability of marriage and motherhood are apparent in our data. Women are represented as a culturally conditioned social category. The category of woman automatically implies constraint, restrictions and oppression. Gender is naturalised and heterosexualised. There is a morphology, with the biological development of women's bodies assuming social dimensions (Butler, 2006). Emergent female bodies signify problems for formal educational systems, with women normatively constituted as wives and mothers.

*Yes, an advice always to young girls, through my experience I advise them at this time when they finish their A-levels they shouldn't get married first, finish your education, complete your education then get married (Tanzanian female student).*

Norms of gender identification also relate to academic disciplines. Entry into non-traditional disciplines can create practical and social difficulties for women. Certain embodied identities are irreconcilable with the subject matter. There is a perception that if a subject is 'hard' *i.e.* a 'hard science', it is unsuitable for women, as a Tanzanian Female Engineering student relates:

*Q: How many girls are you in your class?*

*A: We were 8, but now we are only 3 girls*

*Q: Where are they?*

*A: They thought the course was so difficult they ...dropped it*

*Q: They went to another profession?*

*A: Yah, they went to teaching.*

Skill and knowledge acquisition lead to subject formation and identity within a set of norms that confer or withhold recognition. Another Tanzanian woman relates how her social status

increased as a result of entry into a 'non-traditional' discipline:

*When you go out there and tell people that, I am an Engineer, they take it as if a woman cannot do Engineering work. They just see as if you are very genius, so that makes me feel good.*

Whether women are constructed as geniuses or deviants, entry in non-traditional disciplines is still coded as a cultural transgression.

### **Gendered Agents of Support**

Students' biographies include a range of (gendered) parental influences and orientations. More privileged students describe a type of aspirational *habitus* whereby their families manage higher education entry. Parents' social capital and insider knowledge of educational systems provides an additional and crucial resource. Parental capital is cultural and material and the financially well endowed can buy more privilege for their children. The educationally successful young person was often the product of an entire family.

Student narratives reveal the gendering of parental support. Some women report detraditionalising influences emanating from fathers whose social capital helps decode and demystify educational structures. Mothers are often perceived as offering traditional nurturing and emotional support, especially in the early years. Parental message systems sometimes reinforce gender appropriate subject choices, as a Tanzanian female student describes:

*Q: Did anyone give you any particular encouragement?*

*A: It was my father.*

*Q: So how did he encourage you?*

*A: I remember when I was a kid, I normally liked taking science subjects and even when I was in form four I did both Science and Arts. Then he told me, you are too much*

*concentrated in science, but the way I see you it is better you do Arts...He told me he would like to have a lawyer in the family and he said you can make it.*

A Ghanaian female also attributes the construction of aspiration in secondary schools to a father:

*My dad always asked whether I was interested in the course I was doing and how I was coping with the exercises and laboratory work. He asked questions and even gave me scenarios about females who had passed through the secondary school and are prominent people. So he always said that if you learn very hard ... you can even be a minister so we should learn hard.*

Early years' experiences formed academic identity. Several students report the association of mothers with domestic and affective domains, and fathers with public and professional domains. Parental biographies influence educational decision-making. Wealthier parents wanted to reproduce and recreate class privilege *i.e.* to repeat their personal histories, while socially disadvantaged parents often try to avoid history repeating itself, as a Tanzanian male describes:

*My father was an orphan, he had no father, no mother, so he was telling us I didn't go to school because I had no parents. But you, because I am here, you have to study, I will help you in whatever way, to make sure you are going to school, University. There is no reason to avoid getting to higher education unless you fail because of your stupidity.*

As this quotation suggests, material poverty does not necessarily mean aspirational poverty.

Poor parents were able to contribute other forms of capital, in terms of dispositions, emotional stability and relationship. A Tanzanian female acknowledged the encouragement and strength that she received from her socially disadvantaged mother:

*I had a mum who was really a mum she never lost her identity of being a mother. She was strong, very strong, and she was my heroine. She didn't go to school. ...She was supporting us, strongly, she is the one who made us to be where we are I can say... She didn't have any money you see! But she was always there for us.*

Food was a currency used by mothers to comfort, motivate, support and reward early years' educational experiences, as a Ghanaian female relates:

*My mother in particular, she saw my problem of the writing so she used to teach me in the house. Sometimes I will be weeping and she wouldn't also leave me, she would entice me with some biscuits and other things for me to write.*

Student narratives describe differently distributed emotional, social, cultural and material capitals. Parents who lack capital in one area often compensate in another. The students in our sample who report limited capitals e.g. materially poor but emotionally supportive and educationally aspirational backgrounds are more likely to be in non-elite, private universities than those students whose parents had strategically mobilised multiple forms of capital.

### **Intersecting Gender and Socio-economic Background: Developing Equity Scorecards**

There are multiple markers of identity that inter-relate. Yet policy discourses often prioritise one structure of inequality. While gender has received some policy and research attention, it is rarely intersected with other structures of inequality in low-income countries.

Intersectionality theory suggests that oppression and discrimination occur in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity, and that there are 'vectors of oppression and privilege' (Ritzer, 2007: 204). Intersectionality tries to capture the relationships between socio-economic and socio-cultural categories and identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1991). Poor women fall into at least two socially disadvantaged groups and can become the invisible 'other' in audits of gender or social disadvantage. Gender gains, in the form of

affirmative action and access programmes, when scrutinised can often mask socio-economic privilege (Morley *et al.*, 2006). In a study of admissions to two Ghanaian universities, Addae-Mensah (2000) revealed that most students come from the top 50 schools *i.e.* fewer than 10 per cent of schools in the country. While universities are recruiting from a larger number of schools, the elite schools still dominated in terms of the numbers and proportions of students admitted. In other words, their relative advantage is *increasing*.

In Tanzania, national enrolment data are not disaggregated by the socio-economic background of students. However, Demographic and Health Survey data indicate that those who complete higher education are predominantly men from wealthier backgrounds.

Participation in higher education in Tanzania is also shaped by religion, region, and ethnicity (Cooksey *et al.*, 2003).

Central to our inquiry are Equity Scorecards (Bensimon, 2004). Based on a culture of evidence, we are measuring intersections between sociological variables *e.g.* gender, socio-economic status (based on deprived schools indicators) and age, and educational processes: access, retention and achievement in four organisations (two public and two private universities) and four programmes of study in each university. Below is an example of how datasets have been transformed into Equity Scorecards for the public university in Ghana.

**Equity Scorecard 1: Rates of participation on the four programmes for different social groups in Ghanaian public university (2006/7)**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>% of all students who are women</b>	<b>% of all students from deprived schools</b>	<b>% of all students who are women from deprived schools</b>
B. Sc. Physical Science	15.3	2.2	0.6
B. Commerce	28.8	3.3	1.0
B. Education (Primary Education)	41.2	4.6	1.2

B. Management Studies (BMS)	42.0	2.8	1.4
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*Datasources:* i) Students from deprived schools enrolled on four selected programmes in 2006/7, by programme, level and gender; Data Processing Unit, Ghana Public University. ii) Total number of students enrolled on four selected programmes in 2006/7, by programme and gender; Data Processing Unit, Ghana Public University

As this Scorecard indicates, women, in general, have a low participation rate in sciences, and this decreases for women from deprived schools. One interpretation is that academic disciplines continue to be linked to gender and to socio-economic backgrounds. When gender gains are scrutinised, it seems that poorer women are not gaining access to high status disciplines or universities.

**Equity Scorecard 2: Rates of participation on the four programmes for different social groups in Tanzanian public university (2007/8)**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>% of all students who are women</b>	<b>% of all students (M&amp;F) who attended a less privileged school</b>	<b>% of all students who are women who attended a less privileged school</b>
Commerce and Management	34.2	2.5	0.5
Law	25.0	1.0	0.0
Engineering	22.0	4.2	0.0
Science Education	16.4	4.2	0.7

*Datasources:* Admissions to 4 programmes in 2007/8, by gender, school attended and age.

**Equity Scorecard 3: Access to 2 programmes at Tanzanian private university for mature women (2007/8)**

<b>Admissions</b>		
<b>Programme</b>	<b>% women admitted who are aged under 30</b>	<b>% women admitted who are aged over 30</b>
LLB	91.7	8.3
BBA	80.0	20.0

*Data sources: Admissions to 2 programmes in 2007/8, by gender and age*

**Equity Scorecard 4: Comparing Mature Women's Access to Mature Students' Access at Tanzanian private university (2007/8)**

<b>Admissions</b>		
<b>Programme</b>	<b>% women admitted who are aged over 30 / % all students admitted who are aged over 30</b>	
LLB	0.61	Mature men have greater access to law than mature women
BBA	1.30	Mature women have greater access to business administration than mature men

*Data sources: Admissions to 2 programmes in 2007/8, by gender and age*

These Equity Scorecards reveal that women, in general, have a low participation rate in high status disciplines e.g. sciences, law. This decreases for women from deprived schools. It also decreases for older women, indicating that gendered participation follows age-related norms. The Equity Scorecards raise questions about the relationships between academic disciplines and the ways these continue to be linked to gender, age and to socio-economic backgrounds. They also provide evidence that suggests when gender gains are scrutinised, poorer and older women are not gaining access to high status disciplines.

## **Preliminary Conclusions**

Our findings so far suggest that opportunity structures in Ghana and Tanzania appear to reflect social inequalities, despite organisational, national and international policy interventions to widen participation. Enrolment in higher education is rising but is not distributed across different social groups. Participation by women has increased, sometimes via marketisation (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), and there is now a participation rate of 40 percent in private higher education. Gender equality gains may not be including women from lower socio-economic groups. Social inclusion interventions can contribute to further stratification.

Shavit *et al.* (2007) and David (2007) pose questions about the relationships between expansion and differentiation and between diversion and inclusion. This is evocative of Reay *et al.*'s (2005) finding that there are stratified and multiple higher education systems. Widening participation initiatives might be adding numbers to a previously elite system, but it is questionable whether it is undermining or redistributing the power of socio-economically privileged groups. The most striking finding so far in our research is that students' socio-economic background is still strongly correlated with the school they attended. In a socially deterministic way, this influences access to higher education, the type of programmes selected and the age for participation. Social stratification is related to educational opportunities, processes and systems. There appears to be a conversion of economic wealth into educational advantage. Participation in higher education is not just about individuals, but is about positional advantage and the relations and spaces between social groups. The circular relationship between social identity, social capital and access to higher education is as evident in Ghana and Tanzania as elsewhere.

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