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Abstract

Widening participation in higher education can be a force for democratization. It can also map on to elite practices and contribute to further differentiation of social groups. Those with social capital are often able to decode and access new educational opportunities. Those without it can remain untouched by initiatives to facilitate their entry into the privileges that higher education can offer. This article 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). Meritocratic discourse infers that individual achievement is the most important principle determining access and success in higher education. The project is statistically and discursively deconstructing merit. We are mapping meritocracy in order to identify if the most marginalized communities are being included in the widening participation

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agenda. In this article, we demonstrate how current opportunity structures reflect traditional beliefs about meritocracy and reproduce privilege and exclusion. We argue that when gender is intersected with socio-economic status, participation rates of poorer women are seen to be extremely low in both African countries. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)