

# Breaking Epistemic Inertia in Teacher Education in Southern Africa

Professor Felix Maringe

University of the Witwatersrand

Conference on Transformation in Teacher Education

Botswana March 2026

Hosted by The Botswana Open University and De Montfort University, Leicester.

# Evidence Base

The paper is based on an ongoing project on Transformation in HE in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has TE as one critical dimension

# Core argument

## Reform without transformation

- Schools have a central role to play in the production of human capacities and capabilities (Sen)
- Teacher capacity, though variable across the region, has expanded substantially
- Teacher capabilities, though, have stagnated around the imperatives of the Western canon
- The incredible epistemic inertia has to be confronted as a first step to transform TE

# Why Teacher Education Matters

- Teacher education shapes schooling quality
- Central to national development
- Critical for social justice and inclusion
- Nurtures new capabilities required for societal transformation
- Yet transformation remains slow and uneven

# The Problem

- Colonial curricular legacies
- Theory-heavy programmes detached from practice
- Limited community engagement
- Weak innovation ecosystems
- Regulatory compliance over innovation

# Conceptual Lens: Epistemic Inertia

- Epistemic inertia: the persistence of dominant knowledge traditions and institutional routines despite changing societal needs.
- Stabilised by several hegemonies, including the perceived superiority of Western knowledge systems, donor-driven reform processes, stagnating economies, and resource-deficient learning spaces, amongst others.

# Manifestations of Epistemic Inertia in Teacher Education

- Imported curricular frameworks
- Limited African epistemologies
- Practicum disconnected from communities
- Little programme innovation
- Language dependence and exclusion

# Why Transformation Stalls

- Institutional conservatism
- Regulatory compliance regimes
- Global North knowledge dominance
- Weak research–practice–community linkages
- Resource deficiency
- Coloniality and dependence syndrome

# Teacher Education at a Crossroads

## **Southern Africa faces:**

- Youth demographic surge
- Digital transformation
- Labour market change
- Climate and sustainability challenges
- Increasing household poverty
- Widening opportunity gaps

**Four critical pathways can provide a force large enough to break epistemic inertia in TE.**

# Pathway 1: Epistemic Pluralisation

## **Integrate:**

- African knowledge systems
- Indigenous pedagogies
- Global scholarship

# Pathway 2: Community-Embedded Teacher Education

- Community-based learning
- School–community partnerships
- Problem-based learning linked to local realities

Deliberate development of Community-Based Learning modules need to be introduced and implemented in TE

# Pathway 3: Research and Innovation Ecosystems

## **Create TE ecosystems linking:**

- Universities
- Schools
- Communities
- Policy systems

# Pathways 4

## Digital Transformation

- AI-enabled pedagogy
- Leadership & Policy Reform
- Enable experimentation
- Encourage institutional learning

# Conclusion

- Transforming teacher education requires:
- Epistemic renewal
- Institutional innovation
- Policy innovation and flexibility
- Community engagement