Participatory learning methods and their usefulness in higher learning institutions of developing countries: Critical literature review

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ABSTRACT

The research study focused on participatory learning methods which universities from multiple countries implement to understand their current status, benefits and obstacles in their application. Guided by participatory action learning theory and constructivist learning theory, the review highlights the pedagogical value of positioning students as active co-constructors of knowledge. The study performed a systematic search for peer-reviewed studies from 2017 to 2025 through major research databases before applying thematic analysis to detect emerging patterns. The study demonstrated that participatory learning methods which include as problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, peer instruction and facilitated learning, team-based learning, co-creation of learning experiences, participatory action learning and student-centred learning affect student academic success. The implementation of these methods encounters barriers because of existing system limitations which include oversized classrooms, insufficient resources, unprepared teachers and diverse educational contexts between various higher education institutions. Therefore, the study recommends that learning institutions need to establish mentorship programs alongside monitoring systems and incentive structures to help lecturers use participatory teaching methods in their classrooms. Cross-cultural and longitudinal studies is recommended in understanding how participatory learning methods can be adapted to maximise student learning and engagement globally.

Keywords: Critical Literature Review, Higher Learning, Learning Methods, Participatory Learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Student learning approaches in higher learning institutions have attracted debates among scholars, on how lectures facilitate the learning process in academic institutions (De Carvalho et al., 2024). In recent years, there has been criticism of teacher-centred learning approaches, while participatory learning approaches have gained global attention for their effectiveness in teaching and learning processes. Participatory learning does not mean that students can do whatever they want without considering how it affects others or their learning. Instead, participatory learning practices provides opportunities for students to engage in classroom teaching and learning actively, and also enable learners to share information and work together to solve common problems (Kimoga et al., 2017; Shohel et al., 2024). Participatory learning, also known as active learning or student-centred learning approach, is a teaching method that places students at the centre of the learning process, giving them the freedom to learn according to their needs and interests (Shohel et al., 2024; Maharjan et al., 2024; Dara, & Kesavan, 2024). It encompasses various aspects of teaching and learning, such as critical thinking and problem-solving, engagement and motivation, ownership of learning, readiness for the real world, diversity and inclusiveness, promotion of creativity, higher-order thinking abilities, student happiness and satisfaction, improved communication skills and lifelong learning (McDavid et al., 2018; De Sousa, 2021; Shirke, 2021; Mafugu, 2023; Shohel et al., 2024).

Participatory learning functions as a core educational method throughout developed countries because higher learning institutions dedicate resources to creating learning spaces and building digital infrastructure and enhancing staff training which produces steady improvements in student involvement and critical thinking and inclusive educational methods. Participatory teaching methods have reached their peak implementation in research-based institutions of the developed countries including United Kingdom and United States of America through student involvement and collaborative assessment and curriculum co-creation and institutional backing. Higher education institutions in Europe which support inclusive learning environments demonstrate how participative teaching methods lead to better social responsibility development and knowledge creation through joint efforts (Goldbach et al., 2022; Shohel et al., 2024). The

combination of institutional resources and cultural elements leads to active learning methods which produce quantifiable improvements in student performance and equality targets (Goldbach et al., 2022). As such, well-designed classrooms combined with instructors who have high self-efficacy lead to increased student engagement through student-focused teaching methods (McDavid et al., 2018).

Learning practices in higher learning institutions in developing countries differ from those in developed countries due to technological, socio-economic, and infrastructural factors. In developing countries, higher learning institutions face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited access to technology, and resource constraints which hinder the implementation of modern teaching methods and technologies, resulting in more traditional and teacher-centred approaches. This makes developing countries adopt different teaching and learning methods based on the technology and resources available. The most emphasised method is the participatory learning method that best suits African environments and needs (Oyserman, 2017; Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017; De Carvalho et al., 2024). While participatory learning methods have shown promise in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes, their use in higher learning institutions has been limited in some classes in higher learning institutions. The common challenges include larger class sizes, limited skills of engaging students in learning, resources, curriculum constraints, institutional resistance, and others (Mirata et al., 2020; Chakyarkandiyil & Prakasha, 2023).

In developing countries participatory learning methods is implemented through various training systems, for example countries like Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana and Pakistan have Competence-Based Education and Training (CBET). In countries like Ghana, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Philippines and Sri Lanka, have Competency-Based Training (CBT). Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Nepal, Indonesia and India, implement Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) (Kimoga et al., 2017; Wongnaa & Boachie, 2018; Amutabi, 2019; URT, 2021; URT, 2024; Daniel, et al., 2024). The implementation of participatory learning in these countries faces obstacles because of institutional barriers which include oversized classrooms and insufficient facilities and inconsistent teacher training. Classroom size and inadequate teacher contact time with students create barriers to participation even though educational policies promote active learning (De Carvalho et al., 2024). Discussion-based teaching methods and group activities are common yet simulation and technology-based approaches remain underutilized because of limited resources and insufficient facilities (Charles et al., 2024).

1.1 Research Objective(s)

To critically review the literature on participatory learning methods and assess their usefulness in higher learning institutions of developing countries.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study uses Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT) and Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as its fundamental theoretical basis. The two theories demonstrate how participatory learning lead to improved learning results and student satisfaction in higher education settings.

2.1.1 Constructivist learning theory

Constructivism learning theory as a paradigm for teaching and learning emphasize how people might acquire knowledge and learn, the theory was advanced by Piaget 1920s to 1970s. The theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences (Olusegun, 2015). Constructivism maintains that learners build their knowledge through active participation with tasks and tools and peer interactions. Learning occurs through social interaction and benefits from developmental support within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Studies shows that constructivist teaching methods produce better learning results and higher-level skills development when teachers use teamwork activities through discussion and real-world assignments which are essential elements of participatory learning (Arega & Hunde, 2025). The study adopts constructivism as its theoretical framework to study participatory learning methods because the theory highlights that students who learn through collaborative activities with supportive guidance experiences better engagement and understanding and develop more positive learning attitudes compared to traditional lecture-based classes. According to Baig and Yadegaridehkordi (2023) participatory methods enable students to build knowledge together through group discussions and peer instruction and co-creation activities which produce visible learning through verbal communication and feedback and joint problem-solving approaches that have received recent attention in higher education research.

2.1.2 Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory describes a four-stage cycle such as concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, the theory highlights that that effective learning occurs when students experience, reflect, theorise, and apply (Kolb, 1984). Studies demonstrates that Experiential learning theory cycle-based courses which include simulation, debriefing, concept framing and practice activities that lead to better student perceptions of course relevance and improved theoretical-practical integration and academic achievement (Wijnen-Meijer et al., 2022). The updated reviews of ELT systems show that real-world situations together with user evaluation activities generate substantial learning transfer results (Morris, 2020). In this study the theory demonstrates how participatory methods produce better results for students in higher education research (Baig & Yadegaridehkordi, 2023).

2.2 Empirical Review

Previous studies reveal different participatory methods used in learning and teaching, Fernando and Marikar (2017) and Rahmanian and Nouhi (2020) found 'question and answer' and 'group discussion' effective in teaching. Michael (2023) revealed participatory methods of practical exercises, group discussions, interactive technology integration and group discussion, have proven to be effective tools to enhance learning. Charles et al. (2024) add focus group discussion, brainstorming, think-ink pair-share and informal lecture teaching strategies were methods mostly used, while simulation games were not used at all. Furthermore, De Carvalho et al. (2024) found that issues that hindered classroom participation and interactions with faculty include some teachers tended to limit interactions with students in the classroom and class size as an environmental factor that made the teacher's task of incorporating discussion into their courses difficult.

In addition, studies have revealed opportunities for using participatory learning methods. For instance, De Sousa (2021) established that when including a participatory approach in teaching and learning students use their different perspectives when reasoning to participate collaboratively to work toward resolving environmental issues. Xu et al., (2024) found participatory learning has demonstrated a notable enhancement in student engagement, and significant improvement in their mastery of knowledge, problem-solving abilities, and application skills.

Likewise, Goldbach et al. (2022) reveals that participatory teaching significantly improves the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge among students, at the micro level, participatory teaching changes higher learning institutions teaching practices to be more inclusive, engaging students actively in the learning process. Jakob et al. (2023) insist that participatory method improves overall student test scores and the share of students with top grades increases by 6 percentage points from 16 to 22 per cent. Also, Ma (2023) reveals that the participatory teaching method, enables students to be involved in the decision-making process regarding the course content, which increases course participation, fosters a positive learning attitude, and motivates students to actively seek out course-related information.

Previous research has demonstrated how participatory learning methods deliver educational advantages to students in various higher learning settings yet academic sources about this topic fail to combine studies about participatory approaches across different nations and educational fields. Multiple studies have identified particular instructional methods which produce positive results yet no thorough critical assessment exists to merge these findings for developing cross-contextual knowledge about participatory teaching methods. A thorough literature review requires evaluating current research and examining different methodological approaches and implementation settings to identify gaps that warrant further academic investigation. The review delivers essential information to researchers, educators and policymakers because it explains existing knowledge while identifying ongoing problems that need to be solved through research and practical solutions. The critical review depends on key objectives which researchers developed through their analysis of existing literature and the remaining unanswered research questions. The review aimed to combine different participatory learning methods from various higher education settings, while examining the learning outcomes and implementation challenges identified in previous research. Also, the study seeks to identify all remaining conceptual and contextual gaps, which will direct upcoming studies toward better adoption and performance of participatory teaching methods in university settings.

2.3 Conceptual framework

Figure 1 explains the influence of participatory learning methods on student results at higher learning institutions through critical intervening factors. The figure shows that student learning outcomes improve through participatory learning methods which include problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, peer instruction and facilitated learning, team-based learning, co-creation of learning experiences, participatory action learning and student-centred learning are positioned as the independent variables expected to enhance student learning. Their effectiveness is channeled through mediating variables, namely instructor capacity, class size and resources, culture and discipline, student's engagement, policy and institutional context and self-efficacy, which shape the strength and direction of these relationships. The final student

performance results become dependent on the following variables which determine how well participatory methods function in practice. The dependent variables which represent the expected results of effective participatory learning implementation consist of three main outcomes: improved academic performance and better learning experience satisfaction and enhanced graduate competencies that are needed for professional and real-world application. The conceptual framework therefore highlights a structured lens for understanding how and under what conditions participatory learning generate meaningful improvements in higher learning contexts.

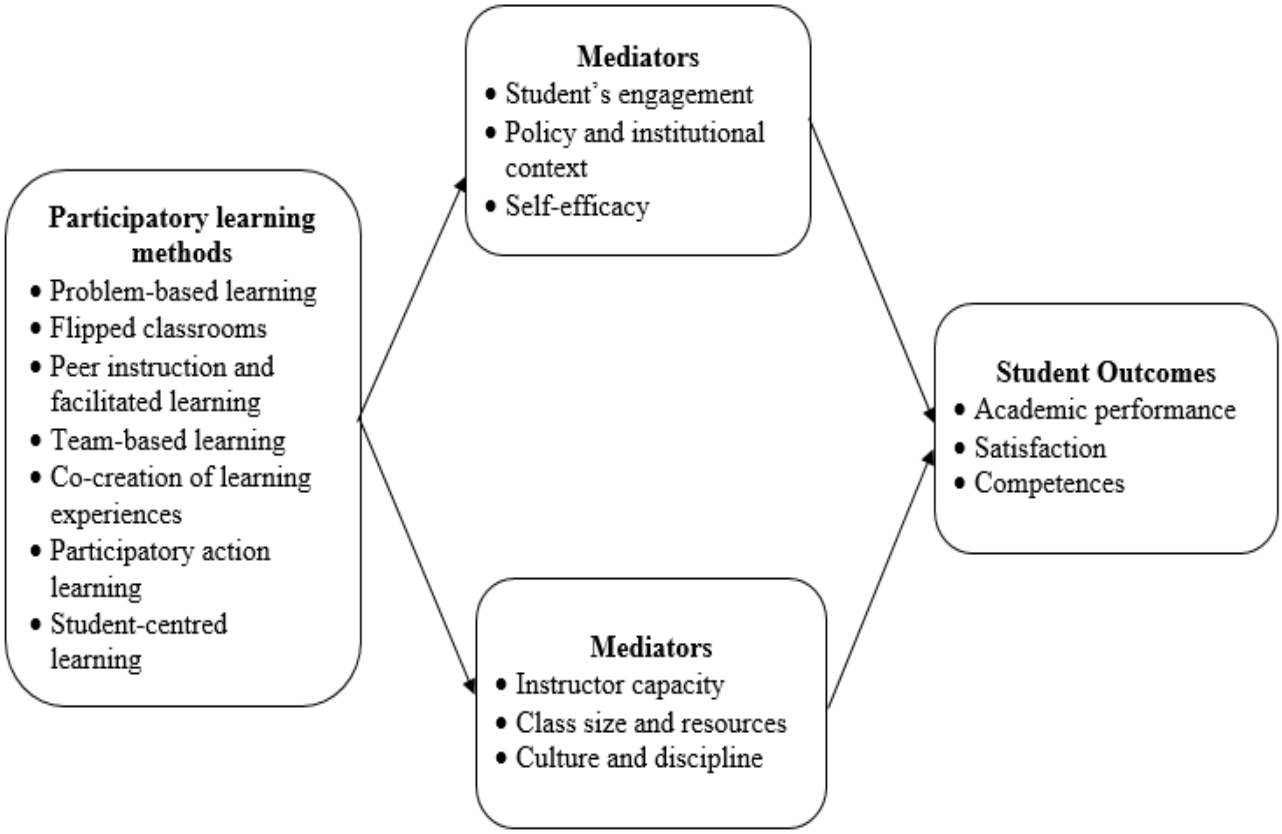

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework Explaining How Participatory Learning Methods Influence Student Outcomes in Higher Learning Institutions

III. METHODOLOGY

The study applied a critical literature review approach to combine and assess current studies about participatory learning approaches used in university education. The review process followed strict academic standards to produce a complete and transparent and reproducible analysis. A systematic search was conducted across academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using keywords including 'participatory learning', 'student-centred learning', and 'higher education'.

The study considered specific inclusion and exclusion criteria for their study which focused on scholarly works published between 2017 and 2025 to identify emerging patterns. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and policy documents focusing on participatory learning in higher education were included. The research excluded all grey literature and studies which did not pertain to higher education.

The thematic analysis helped to discover common patterns and advantages and obstacles and environmental elements which affect the implementation of participatory learning. A critical assessment of each study was done through established appraisal tools which evaluated methodological rigour and validity and relevance. The study used existing data which meant it did not need to get approval from an ethics committee. However, the academic integrity was preserved through the correct acknowledgment of all sources used in the work.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The critical literature review shows that different authors have documented different participatory learning methods in higher learning institutions in different countries as follows:-

Co-creation of learning experiences

Students together with their teachers work as a team to develop educational programs and assessment tools and learning tasks. Omland et al. (2025) discovered that in South Africa this approach leads to improved learning outcomes and increased student motivation because students develop ownership of their learning which results in better understanding. The system allows educators to enhance their teaching quality while they work on improving their assessment methods for team-based competencies. The research conducted by Nguyen et al. (2021) in Taiwan demonstrates that co-creation leads to improved student satisfaction with university life which results in sustained positive university reputation and enhanced institutional credibility.

Participatory Action Learning (PAL) and Action Research (PALAR)

This combines practical research with collaborative learning, where students and teachers collaborate to identify problems, implement solutions, and reflect on the results. The research conducted by Wood (2021) and Mahadew (2025) demonstrates that PAL and PALAR systems help South African students transform into academic thinkers while boosting their memory retention and adaptability skills for the future.

Student-centred learning

This method is a student-centred learning approach, including student-led discussions, collaborative projects, and flipped classrooms (Bhardwaj et al., 2025). In Jamaica, Wallder and Brown (2019) revealed that students have a positive perception of student-centred learning and believe it enhances their experience in their current studies. It strengthens independent learning and collaboration, as well as increasing problem-solving and critical inquiry skills. In Uganda, Nalongo (2024) noted the positive impact of student-led initiatives on academic achievement and personal development. In Pakistan, Sami et al. (2022) noted that students taught by peers performed as well as students taught by the academic staff. As such, peer-led learning is comparable to faculty-led teaching in acquisition of knowledge.

Combined flipped classroom and problem-based learning

The instructional approach integrates flipped classroom methods with problem-based learning to enhance student engagement and achieve deeper learning results. The model requires students to study theoretical content independently before class as it enables them to grasp fundamental concepts on their own. The two methods work together to create an active learning environment which enables small group collaboration and produces better academic outcomes for students (Wang et al., 2022). The educational research from Taiwan demonstrates that students achieve better practical application of theory and show increased classroom involvement when problem-based learning is combined with flipped classroom methods (Chang et al., 2022). This teaching method is implemented in Indonesia, and has demonstrated better results for student motivation and teamwork and critical thinking development when compared to standard educational approaches (Mudlofir, 2021). The research conducted in Thailand demonstrated that the combination of teaching of these methods produces superior results for problem-solving abilities and subject comprehension when compared to using problem-based learning alone (Pimdee et al., 2024). The study conducted by Odhiambo (2024) in Kenya highlights that the flipped classroom method allowed students to better organize their learning time and access materials through flexible study options. Students who participated in flipped classrooms stated that their teachers took an active role to help them finish their work through both discussion support and pre-class assignment evaluation.

Problem-Based Learning

In problem-based learning, students work together in small groups to solve actual or simulated problems while instructors take on the role of facilitators instead of traditional lecturers. The method functions as a standard practice in higher education because it directly supports medical and health science education and engineering and certain scientific disciplines which need students to participate actively while applying their acquired knowledge. The research by Ingale et al. (2024) from India shows that problem-based learning delivers major advantages through its ability to boost student involvement and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills yet its success depends on the academic field and the way it is executed. The research by Kikomelo (2024) shows that problem-based learning faces implementation obstacles in

Tanzania because of overcrowded classrooms and insufficient math teacher numbers and restricted teaching periods and poor educational materials and teachers who lack skills for problem-based learning instruction. The research findings show that educators need to understand both institutional resources and contextual elements when they plan to implement problem-based learning in college programs.

Peer Instruction and Peer-Facilitated Learning

Through this educational method students participate in an active learning process by explaining concepts to their peers through conceptual questions and problem-solving tasks and short group activities. The educational method of peer instruction proves to be an effective way to teach large groups because it enables teachers to create active learning spaces for many students at once while helping them understand concepts more thoroughly. The educational results of Nigerian students show that peer instruction improves their academic performance and their ability to learn (Eremina & Tandi, 2021). The combination of structured peer interactions and higher-order questioning methods develops students' ability to think reflectively and analytically and critically. The method allows students to share their understanding of concepts better through teamwork activities which help them assess different viewpoints and strengthen their grasp of the subject. The peer instruction method leads to better academic performance while teaching students' vital skills which help them learn throughout their entire life such as problem-solving and communication and teamwork abilities.

Team-based learning

This instructional method uses an interactive approach which incorporates peer teaching activities that take place during both large group and small group sessions. The method focuses on student participation through collaborative problem-solving activities which lead to continuous feedback exchange between students and their teachers. The research conducted in Pakistan shows that team-based learning methods which require student and facilitator participation lead to improved educational results (Rehman et al., 2024). Students need to prepare their work before class and then participate in organized problem-solving exercises which lead to feedback from both their classmates and professional facilitators. The method allows students to develop their critical thinking skills and analytical abilities while learning to use theoretical concepts in practical work through its planned activities. Team-based learning creates an environment which supports student collaboration while helping students stay motivated and teaching those vital professional abilities including communication and leadership and teamwork skills which lead to academic achievement and career success.

4.2 Discussion

Participatory learning methods effectiveness

The research results show that participatory learning methods consistently generate improved student involvement and motivation and advanced cognitive abilities but their success depends on specific educational settings. The research results from well-resourced institutions show that students achieve better independent learning and teamwork abilities because teachers have both educational competencies and technological resources to support student involvement (De Carvalho et al., 2024; Goldbach et al., 2022). The research from resource-limited environments shows that these methods fail to meet their intended goals when teachers do not have proper training and when there are too many students in the class and when learning spaces do not enable interactive teaching methods (Kikomelo, 2024; Chakyarkandiyil & Prakasha, 2023). The analysis of these patterns reveals that participatory learning success depends on how well the teaching methods match with institutional resources and student preparedness. The evaluation demonstrates that participatory methods need to be modified according to particular situations instead of using one method for all cases.

The participatory educational approach demands students to actively participate in their learning process through knowledge construction and self-directed learning management activities. The educational methods that transfer responsibility from teachers to students help learners develop their ability to manage themselves and think deeply about course material through self-assessment and critical evaluation. The research evidence shows that participatory teaching methods produce better student motivation and improved understanding of difficult subjects and superior academic results than conventional lecture-based teaching methods (Xu et al., 2024; Goldbach et al., 2022; Ma, 2023). For example, Jakob et al. (2023) conducted a study on participatory teaching improves learning outcomes with evidence from a field experiment in Tanzania. The study showed that students who took part in hands-on learning activities gained better subject comprehension and achieved higher test results because they built problem-solving and critical thinking and collaborative reasoning abilities. The research findings correspond with existing studies that show participatory learning methods lead to better student engagement which results in improved academic outcomes and practical skills development for use outside school settings.

Contextual Challenges

Active learning strategies including flipped classrooms and problem-based learning and peer instruction bring documented advantages to students yet their adoption in educational environments shows uneven patterns especially in schools with limited resources. Research evidence demonstrates that educational institutions encounter three main obstacles when trying to apply these teaching methods because they have big classrooms and their facilities are inadequate and their teachers lack sufficient professional development opportunities (Chakyarkandiyil & Prakasha, 2023; Kikomelo, 2024). The ability to deliver interactive student-centered teaching methods suffers from these barriers because they create obstacles for teachers to manage their classrooms and deliver personalized learning support. To resolve these limitations systemic changes must occur through faculty development initiatives and educational facility upgrades and curriculum evaluation systems that incorporate active learning methods. The measures serve as essential steps to enable students to access the entire benefits of teaching methods which focus on student involvement and critical thinking and real-world learning application.

Policy Practice Gap

While national policies and approaches such as the CBET, CBT, CBC and CBE advocate for participatory learning centered pedagogies, their implementation in higher learning institutions remains inconsistent. Empirical studies demonstrate that teachers choose to teach through traditional lectures when they receive insufficient training and lack resources for their teaching needs and manage big classroom student populations. The gap between educational policies and their actual execution demonstrates that learning institutions need specific training programs which help trainers learn how to use participatory teaching methods successfully. The implementation of national policies requires educational institutions to establish support systems which include teacher training programs and mentorship networks and provision of learning materials. De Carvalho et al. (2024) emphasise that bridging this gap requires a systemic approach that supports policy objectives with classroom realities, thereby enhancing both the inclusivity and quality of education. The findings indicate that progressive educational policies require more than their existence to achieve teaching and learning improvements because they need ongoing support and institutional dedication and adequate funding.

The evidence contains various pieces of information that show how students learn through participation in in higher education. Scholarly research provides evidence that learning results improve when students take an active role in their education but these benefits do not occur in every educational setting. The success of participatory methods relies on three main factors which include institutional leadership and available resources and professional development opportunities and cultural acceptance of student-centered teaching methods. The discussion needs to establish exact circumstances that support participatory learning because this method does not work for every student. Education institutions that want to use participatory methods need to train staff and provide learning materials while also creating environments that support long-term educational transformation.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This review indicates that participatory learning methods, such as problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, peer instruction and facilitated learning, team-based learning, co-creation of learning experiences, participatory action learning and student-centred learning, hold substantial potential for enhancing educational quality and improving student outcomes in higher education. The findings shows that these methods help students grasp their subjects better while building their critical thinking abilities and teamwork skills and self-guided learning for life. The modern workforce needs these skills to make sure students who finalize their studies succeed in their professional roles and their communities. Empirical evidence from various nations shows that participatory learning methods create better student involvement, stronger problem-solving skills and improved knowledge retention when used properly. However, the realisation of these benefits depends on addressing structural and contextual barriers. The implementation of these challenges becomes difficult because of large class sizes and insufficient teaching materials and untrained staff and inflexible educational programs. The solution demands specific actions which include faculty development programs to enhance teaching skills and proper distribution of teaching materials and adaptable curricula that support participatory learning methods while maintaining educational standards. The success of these methods depends on various contextual elements which include institutional culture and discipline requirements and student readiness.

5.2 Recommendations

The research suggests higher education institutions should focus on participatory learning methods through ongoing professional development activities which help teachers improve their teaching abilities while learning how to guide students through self-directed learning. Institutions need to make learning environment enhancement their top priority through resource availability and technological support for active learning and adaptable classroom designs that promote teamwork and student engagement.

Learning institutions need to establish mentorship programs alongside monitoring systems and incentive structures to help teachers use participatory teaching methods in their classrooms. Participatory pedagogies need to become standard educational methods throughout all programs and disciplines because they help students achieve better academic results while building their self-confidence and developing their advanced skills. The implementation of participatory methods requires context-specific strategies which must adapt to different cultural backgrounds and academic fields and available resources to achieve maximum effectiveness in various higher education environments.

Future research should focus on discovering particular strategies which optimize the design and execution of participatory learning methods in various higher education environments. Also, cross-cultural and longitudinal studies is recommended in understanding how participatory learning methods can be adapted to maximise student learning and engagement globally.

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