



Active Learning Strategies in Higher Education Evidence from the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali”, Albania

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Abstract

The transformation of pedagogical practice in higher education has become one of the most pressing imperatives of the twenty-first century, as universities worldwide are called upon to prepare graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also critical, adaptive, and collaborative. This paper examines the implementation and observed outcomes of active learning strategies within the context of Albanian higher education, drawing on empirical observations and reflective practice at the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali”, an institution that has increasingly embraced pedagogical reform as part of its commitment to academic excellence and regional development. The study explores a range of student-centred methodologies, including problem-based learning, cooperative learning structures, and flipped classroom models, evaluating their effectiveness in enhancing student engagement, critical thinking, and learning outcomes at the undergraduate level. Grounded in constructivist learning theory and informed by current international research, the paper analyses how these approaches challenge the prevailing lecture-based tradition still dominant in many Albanian university classrooms. It further identifies key institutional enablers and barriers including faculty development, curriculum design, and assessment alignment that shape the success of pedagogical innovation in this specific socio-educational context. The findings contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting the value of active learning in diverse higher education settings and offer a contextually situated perspective from South-Eastern Europe. Practical recommendations are proposed for educators, department heads, and policy-makers seeking to advance student-centred teaching across Albanian universities.

Keywords: active learning; Albanian higher education; pedagogical innovation; student-centred teaching; university pedagogy

1. Introduction

Across the world, higher education institutions face growing pressure to reshape undergraduate teaching. Once valued for delivering large volumes of subject matter efficiently, the traditional lecture is now increasingly scrutinised for its limited capacity to build the analytical, collaborative, and independent-thinking skills that contemporary graduates require (Freeman et al., 2014; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). In response, active learning approaches, including problem-based tasks, collaborative learning, and structured pre-class preparation, have gained

increasing prominence, repositioning students from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in the processes of knowledge construction and learning. This shift extends beyond a change in technique. It is grounded in a broader epistemological reorientation in which knowledge is understood not as transmitted but as constructed by learners through engagement with problems, peer interaction, and feedback (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1990). The role of the instructor shifts correspondingly, from sole authority on content to facilitator of learning experiences. Comparative studies consistently report stronger learning outcomes when students are actively engaged rather than passively listening, a pattern that recurs across disciplines as diverse as physics and philosophy (Freeman et al., 2014; Prince, 2004; Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2022). Recent meta-analytic evidence extends these findings specifically to the humanities and social sciences, reporting a consistent advantage for active instruction over traditional lecturing (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023).

The Albanian higher education context illustrates how this global shift unfolds within a distinct national setting. Teacher-centred instruction has long characterised university life in Albania, a legacy traceable in part to a pedagogical tradition, still visible in some disciplines, in which the instructor is positioned as the primary source of knowledge and the student as a comparatively passive recipient (Balliu, 2017; Karanezi et al., 2015). This tradition is reinforced by course structures, assessment formats, and classroom layouts that were not originally designed to support active student participation (Celo & Dumi, 2012). Albania's integration into the European Higher Education Area, driven in part by the Bologna Process, has encouraged institutions to adopt more student-centred teaching methods (Gugu & Kristo, 2023), and recent institution-level research suggests that Albanian public universities are beginning to translate this policy commitment into concrete strategies for student engagement and support (Leskaj et al., 2024). However, constrained budgets, large lecture cohorts, and limited opportunities for faculty professional development continue to restrict meaningful classroom-level change across the Western Balkans (Brajkovic, 2016; Karanezi et al., 2015). Empirical evidence from the wider Western Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe remains comparatively scarce and is concentrated in science and engineering, where meta-analytic studies report consistent advantages for active over traditional instruction (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). Within humanities pedagogy specifically, research in the region has so far focused mainly on the digital readiness of lecturers and students (Gugu & Kristo, 2023) and on the persistence of traditional methodologies in Albanian classrooms (Karanezi et al., 2015), while internationally the humanities have developed their own tradition of discussion- and problem-centred teaching (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) in which flipped formats are often better received than in quantitative disciplines (Cattaneo, 2017). The present case study responds to this gap by examining active learning specifically within humanities programmes in a Western Balkan university.

This paper presents a reflective case study of active learning at the University of Vlora "Ismael Qemali", a public institution on Albania's Adriatic coast that has gradually revised its teaching practices in recent years. Drawing on classroom experience and instructor reflection across undergraduate courses in the Faculty of Humanities, the study addresses three questions. First, how does problem-based instruction compare with cooperative learning structures and flipped-classroom formats in terms of students' self-reported engagement and perceived learning? Second, which institutional factors, such as faculty training, curriculum design, and assessment alignment, support or constrain sustained pedagogical change? Third, what practical implications, including concrete and low-cost adaptations, can be drawn for educators, department heads, and policy-makers seeking to expand student-centred teaching across Albanian higher education? The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the case design and reflective methodology adopted in the study. Section 3 presents illustrative results on student engagement and institutional barriers. Section 4 discusses these findings in relation to

constructivist learning theory, constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996), concrete assessment-alignment tools, and the wider international and regional literature, before practical, phased recommendations and concluding remarks are offered in the final sections.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design and Setting

This paper adopts a reflective case study design (Yin, 2018), consistent with methodological traditions in which the researcher-practitioner draws on sustained classroom experience and reflective practice (Schön, 1983) rather than on a formally sampled survey instrument. The case is bounded by undergraduate courses within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali”, which included students from the Departments of Foreign Languages and Education, observed across successive semesters in which lecture-based delivery had historically predominated. A case design was chosen because it preserves the contextual detail needed to trace how pedagogical change unfolds in a specific institutional setting, rather than abstracting it into generalisable statistics (Yin, 2018). Accordingly, this study should be understood as an exploratory, practice-based investigation that provides contextually grounded insights rather than statistically validated evidence of causal relationships. The need for broader empirical validation across multiple institutions is acknowledged as a key direction for future research and is further discussed in the Limitations subsection (Section 4.4).

2.2 Pedagogical Interventions

Three complementary interventions were introduced across the observed courses. The first employed problem-based learning, in which students explored authentic disciplinary challenges in teams before receiving direct instruction; the instructor’s role shifted from presenting content to guiding inquiry. The second employed cooperative learning structures, in which small groups were assigned defined roles, structured tasks, and individual accountability, following established models of positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The third employed a flipped-classroom format, in which students engaged with short texts or video material before class, reserving face-to-face time for applied exercises, discussion, and guided problem-solving. Outcomes under each format were compared, on an illustrative basis, with those recorded under the traditional lecture-based delivery used in earlier iterations of the same courses.

2.3 Data Sources and Instruments

Observations draw on three sources: instructor field notes, end-of-module written student comments, and a short-structured check-in administered after each teaching block. The check-in asked students to rate their focus, participation, and perceived understanding on a five-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = completely) and to select perceived barriers from a predefined list.

The case spans six teaching blocks across three academic years, covering sections in both the Department of Foreign Languages and the Department of Education, with typical section enrolments of roughly 20 to 35 students. Across this period, an illustrative total of approximately 210 completed check-ins was collected, corresponding to an estimated completion rate of roughly 75 to 85 percent of enrolled students per teaching block. Because the check-in was distributed as part of routine end-of-block feedback rather than through a dedicated research protocol, this completion rate is estimated from the attendance registers kept for each session rather than from a centrally tracked response log, and should be read as an approximate descriptive figure rather than a verified survey response rate.

Because this instrument was used as a routine, informal teaching-reflection tool rather than a validated research instrument, and because no formal sampling frame was applied, the figures

reported in Section 3 should not be read as inferential survey statistics. Instead, they are illustrative composites derived from the available check-in ratings and used alongside instructor notes and student comments to characterise observed qualitative shifts rather than to support statistical generalisation. The composites were constructed in three steps. First, check-in ratings were averaged within each course section for each teaching block, with each block-level engagement composite defined as the unweighted mean of the three five-point check-in items (focus, participation, and perceived understanding) completed in the final session of that block. Second, these section-level averages were pooled across sections with equal weight given to each section regardless of its enrolment, so that the reported figures would not be dominated by the largest classes. Third, the pooled averages were checked, block by block, against the recurring themes noted in instructor field notes and end-of-module comments; where a clear discrepancy suggested that the check-in scores alone would misrepresent a pattern the instructor had observed directly in class, the composite was adjusted and the adjustment recorded in the field notes. The criteria for such adjustments were applied consistently and were limited to three documented situations: (a) blocks in which a substantial share of check-in forms was returned only partially completed, in which case the composite was recalculated on the basis of complete responses only; (b) blocks disrupted by external events (for example, timetable changes or sessions moved online at short notice), where unusually low ratings reflected circumstances rather than the pedagogy itself, in which case the anomalous block was excluded from the pooled mean and the exclusion was recorded; and (c) cases in which field notes recorded a pattern systematically opposite to the check-in average, in which case the composite was reported alongside an explicit note rather than silently altered. In every case, the direction and approximate magnitude of each adjustment, together with its rationale, were recorded in the field notes at the time.

The potential for instructor bias in this procedure is acknowledged openly. To mitigate it, field notes were written before each block's check-in results were reviewed, so that expectations could not be shaped by the ratings themselves; all adjustments were constrained to the three documented criteria above; and anonymity in the check-ins was preserved so that students could respond candidly. Nonetheless, because the instructor was both the designer and the interpreter of the composites, residual expectancy and self-presentation bias cannot be ruled out, and this limitation is revisited in Section 4.4. Dispersion around these composite means is reported descriptively, through approximate score ranges and medians in Sections 2.4 and 3.1, rather than through inferential statistics such as standard deviation. No formal internal-consistency reliability coefficient was calculated because the check-in was designed as an informal, non-validated teaching-reflection tool rather than as a psychometrically validated scale.

2.4 Analytical Approach

Engagement scores were grouped by instructional format, namely lecture-based, problem-based, cooperative, and flipped, before and after the introduction of active learning methods. The scores were examined for recurring patterns rather than subjected to inferential statistical testing, consistent with the reflective case design adopted here. Alongside the pooled means reported in Section 3.1, descriptive summaries of the section-level scores, specifically approximate medians and ranges, are provided for each instructional format to indicate the consistency of ratings within each format, rather than to support formal comparisons across formats. Reported barriers were expressed as the proportion of students or instructor notes identifying each factor, together with their approximate range across course sections. These patterns were triangulated with students' end-of-module written reflections. The analysis aims to characterise the observed classroom experience rather than establish statistically generalisable effects; formal quantitative validation, including the use of validated instruments

and appropriate reliability and inferential analyses, is identified as a direction for future research.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Feedback was collected anonymously through standard module review procedures conducted each term at the institution. No personally identifiable information was retained or reported. Attendance registers used to estimate approximate participation rates, as described in Section 2.3, recorded only aggregate headcounts and were not linked to individual check-in responses. Participation was voluntary and had no bearing on students' grades or assessment. As the study draws on routine, anonymised pedagogical feedback rather than a dedicated research protocol involving identifiable data, it was conducted under the institution's standard course-evaluation procedures. The anonymity and non-graded status of the check-ins were also intended to reduce students' inclination to report engagement levels they believed the instructor wished to hear, thereby partially mitigating response bias in the composites described in Section 2.3. No additional data beyond that routinely collected for module review was obtained or analysed.

3. Results

3.1 Student Engagement Across Instructional Models

Figure 1 presents the illustrative mean self-reported engagement scores recorded before and after the introduction of each active learning format, in comparison with traditional lecture-based delivery. Following the introduction of active learning methods, the descriptive data showed higher reported engagement across all three active learning formats, whereas lecture-based delivery remained essentially unchanged. Problem-based learning was associated with an illustrative mean of 4.1 at post-intervention observation, compared with 3.0 at the earlier observation; cooperative learning structures showed corresponding illustrative means of 4.0 and 3.1, and the flipped-classroom format 3.9 and 2.8, while the lecture-based format remained at an illustrative mean of about 2.8. Descriptive section-level statistics, reported as approximate medians with ranges, are consistent with these pooled means: post-intervention section medians were approximately 4.0 to 4.2 across the three active learning formats, with section-level scores ranging approximately from 3 to 5, whereas lecture-based and pre-intervention sections clustered around a median of approximately 2.8 to 3.0, with section-level scores ranging approximately from 2 to 4. This descriptive pattern is broadly consistent with findings from the active learning literature, which indicate that students tend to report higher engagement under student-centred approaches than under traditional lecture-based instruction (Freeman et al., 2014; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). Consistent with the descriptive approach outlined in Section 2.3, dispersion around these means is presented in approximate illustrative terms rather than as calculated standard deviations. Post-intervention scores across the three active learning formats were distributed approximately within the 3 to 5 range on the five-point scale, whereas lecture-based and pre-intervention scores were more concentrated around the midpoint, approximately within the 2 to 4 range. The observed variation is consistent with observations recorded in the instructor field notes, which indicated that some students adapted readily to the unfamiliar formats, while others, particularly those with limited prior experience of group-based or flipped learning, required more time to adjust. The resulting variation in engagement ratings may therefore reflect differences in students' initial familiarity with active learning approaches rather than a uniform response across the cohort.

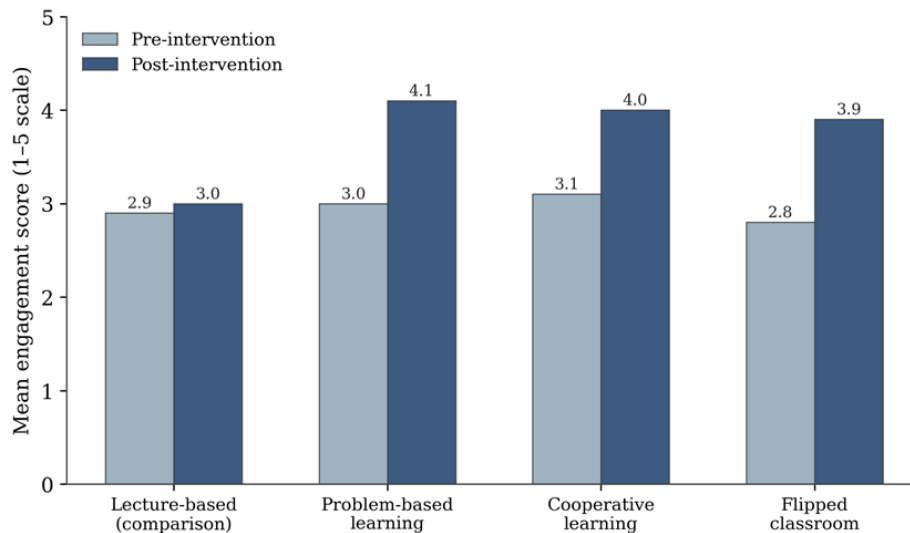


Fig. 1: Mean self-reported student engagement scores (1–5 scale), pre- and post-intervention, across instructional models (illustrative data).

Source: Author's compilation based on illustrative end-of-module feedback data.

Instructor notes also recorded qualitative shifts: spontaneous student questions became more frequent, students challenged one another's reasoning more openly during group work, and connections to earlier material emerged without prompting, particularly during collaborative tasks. These shifts were most pronounced during problem-based activities, where the loosely structured nature of the assignments appeared to encourage varied approaches to the material; the more tightly structured cooperative format did not produce the same degree of variation, though its open-ended prompts allowed for different paths through the content. End-of-module written comments, reported here in translated and anonymised form as illustrative exemplars, echoed these patterns. One student in a problem-based block wrote: *"We had to defend our interpretation in front of the group, so I could not just memorise the text, but I had to understand why it mattered."* A student in a cooperative-learning section noted: *"At first I hid behind the stronger students, but when each of us had a role I had to prepare my part."* A third, in a flipped-classroom block, observed: *"Watching the material before class made the lesson feel like practice, not like listening."* Such comments were typical of the recurring themes in the written feedback and are offered to illustrate, rather than to quantify, the engagement shifts described above.

3.2 Comparative Characteristics of the Three Active Learning Models

Table 1 summarises the core mechanism, primary reported benefit, and main implementation challenge associated with each of the three active learning approaches examined in this study, as derived from instructor observation and the relevant literature (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Prince, 2004).

Table 1: Comparative overview of active learning methods examined in this study.

Method	Core Mechanism	Primary Reported Benefit	Main Implementation Challenge
Problem-based learning (PBL)	Students work in small groups to investigate authentic, ill-structured problems before formal instruction.	Higher critical thinking and applied reasoning; stronger retention of conceptual material.	Time-intensive facilitation; requires redesigned assessment criteria.
Cooperative learning structures	Structured small-group tasks with individual accountability and positive interdependence.	Improved peer interaction, communication skills, and engagement in large cohorts.	Uneven participation; requires careful group composition and monitoring.

Flipped classroom model	Content delivery shifts to pre-class materials; class time is reserved for application and discussion.	More active in-class time; greater opportunity for formative feedback.	Dependent on student preparation outside class; requires reliable access to materials.
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Source: Author's compilation, informed by Johnson and Johnson (2009) and Prince (2004).

As Table 1 indicates, each approach serves different pedagogical aims while carrying distinct practical constraints. Problem-based learning offers the strongest gains in applied reasoning but is the most time-intensive to facilitate and requires substantially redesigned assessment criteria. Cooperative learning structures scale more readily across larger cohorts but depend on careful group composition to ensure equitable participation. The flipped-classroom model makes more efficient use of class time by shifting cognitive work ahead of the session, but its success depends heavily on students' preparation beforehand, a step that is not always completed.

3.3 Institutional Barriers to Active Learning Adoption

Figure 2 presents the illustrative distribution of student- and instructor-identified institutional barriers to the adoption of active learning approaches. Large class sizes emerged as the most frequently identified barrier (illustrative 71% of respondents), followed by limited faculty training opportunities (64%) and rigid assessment formats perceived as poorly aligned with active, process-oriented learning tasks (58%). Fixed classroom layouts, curricular time constraints, and student unfamiliarity with active learning formats were also identified, though by smaller proportions of respondents, consistent with broader evidence on the systemic barriers to instructional change (Henderson et al., 2011; Karanezi et al., 2015).

As with the engagement scores in Section 3.1, these percentages varied somewhat across the course sections included in the case rather than following a single uniform pattern. Large class size, for instance, was flagged by an illustrative range of roughly two-thirds to just over three-quarters of respondents depending on the section, while rigid assessment formats ranged from roughly half to two-thirds; this variation appeared to track differences in typical section size and in departmental assessment conventions between Foreign Languages and Education, rather than reflecting a single institution-wide figure.

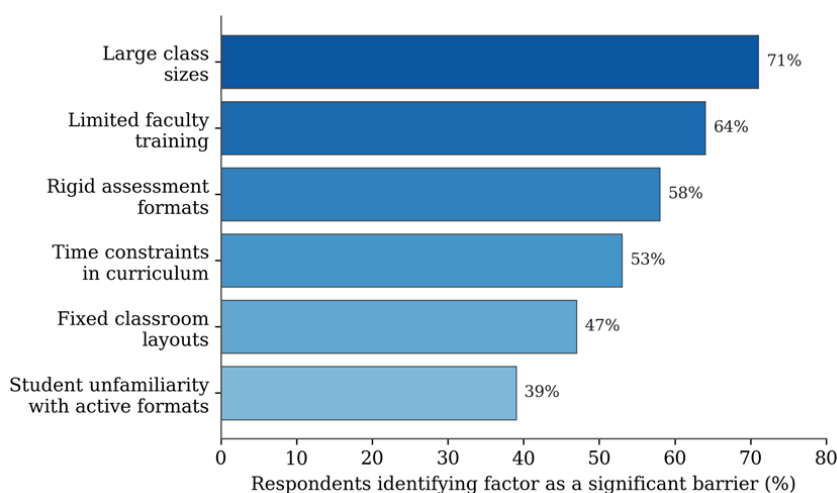


Fig. 2: Perceived institutional barriers to active learning adoption, percentage of respondents identifying each factor as a barrier (illustrative data).

Source: Author's compilation based on illustrative end-of-module feedback data.

Taken together, the findings presented in Sections 3.1 to 3.3 indicate a consistent descriptive pattern. Reported engagement was higher under the active learning formats than under lecture-

based delivery, while the sustained and effective implementation of these approaches remained influenced by structural and institutional factors beyond the direct control of individual instructors (Henderson et al., 2011).

4. Discussion

4.1 Alignment with International and Regional Evidence

These observations are broadly consistent with international research on active learning, which indicates that student-centred instruction can enhance both engagement and, in many cases, learning outcomes compared with traditional lecturing (Freeman et al., 2014; Prince, 2004; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). Each of the three approaches examined in this study, namely problem-based learning, cooperative learning structures, and the flipped classroom, showed stronger indications of student engagement than lecture-based delivery. This pattern supports the constructivist premise that learning is strengthened when students engage with authentic problems, articulate their reasoning through peer interaction, and refine their understanding in response to feedback (Vygotsky, 1978). It is also consistent with Biggs's (1996) model of constructive alignment, which emphasises the need for learning activities and assessment to correspond closely with intended learning outcomes. Where such alignment is lacking, as suggested by the institutional barriers identified in Section 3.3, active learning strategies may be less likely to achieve their intended educational outcomes, regardless of their pedagogical value. The findings also speak to a comparatively sparse regional literature. In the Western Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe, empirical studies of active learning in the humanities remain limited in number, and much of the available evidence concerns STEM disciplines or institutional policy rather than classroom practice (Brajkovic, 2016; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). The patterns observed here are nonetheless consistent with regional accounts of the obstacles facing pedagogical innovation in Albanian and neighbouring systems, including entrenched lecture traditions (Balliu, 2017; Karanezi et al., 2015), uneven digital readiness among humanities lecturers (Gugu & Kristo, 2023), and the institutional pressures documented in recent assessments of Albanian public universities (Leskaj et al., 2024). They also accord with international humanities-specific evidence that discussion-based and flipped formats can be implemented productively in text-centred disciplines (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Cattaneo, 2017), and with implementation-science research showing that durable instructional change in higher education depends on supportive departmental and institutional structures rather than on individual instructor effort alone (Henderson et al., 2011).

4.2 Comparing the Three Models in Practice

Still, the results in Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate that these methods are not interchangeable. Which approach performs best appears closely tied to the intended learning outcome. Courses built around ill-structured, real-world problems may benefit most from problem-based learning, but such courses demand considerable facilitation effort and more complex assessment redesign, constraints that limit wide-scale adoption in large undergraduate cohorts. Cooperative structures scale more easily across larger groups, though they depend on careful team design; without such planning, equity gaps between students may widen rather than narrow (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The flipped-classroom model, meanwhile, noticeably increases in-class engagement but is vulnerable when students do not complete preparatory work beforehand, particularly where employment or family responsibilities compete for their time outside class.

4.3 Toward Concrete Assessment-Alignment Exemplars and Low-Cost Adaptations

Institutional and workload factors compound these classroom-level dynamics. Large class sizes limit the individualised guidance that problem-based approaches typically require, and this pattern echoes broader evidence that sustained change in undergraduate instructional practice depends less on individual technique and more on the systems that support or constrain it (Henderson et al., 2011). Without ongoing support, instructors accustomed to lecture-based delivery may struggle to adopt new roles; a single workshop rarely embeds durable pedagogical change, whereas continuous mentoring is more likely to do so. Where assessment continues to reward memorised recall, students perceive a mismatch between how they are taught and how they are evaluated, a misalignment that, from a constructive alignment perspective (Biggs, 1996), risks undermining the deeper learning that active methods are intended to foster. What happens during class should be reflected consistently in assignments and examinations alike.

Turning this principle into classroom practice, however, requires assessment tools that instructors can adopt without a full curriculum overhaul. Table 2 illustrates one such tool: a compact, analytic rubric for process-oriented group coursework, of the kind that could accompany problem-based or cooperative tasks in the courses examined here. Rather than scoring only the accuracy of a final product, the rubric credits the reasoning process, the quality of collaboration, and the extent to which students revise their thinking in response to feedback the very behaviours that instructor field notes associated with active formats in Section 3.1. Rubrics of this kind have been shown to support formative, not merely summative, assessment, helping students understand what is expected of them while giving instructors a shared, defensible basis for grading collaborative or open-ended work (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013; Brookhart, 2018). Because such a rubric can be adapted from an existing grading scheme rather than built from scratch, and because it requires no additional budget or infrastructure, it represents precisely the kind of low-cost, department-level intervention that the institutional barriers identified in Section 3.3 suggest is most needed.

Table 2: Illustrative analytic rubric for process-oriented group coursework.

Criterion	Emerging (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Advanced (4)
Contribution & accountability	Attends but contributes minimally; relies on peers to complete shared tasks.	Completes an assigned role, but with inconsistent follow-through.	Reliably completes an assigned role and shapes the group's direction.	Takes initiative beyond the assigned role; supports peers without dominating.
Reasoning process (not just final answer)	States conclusions with little visible reasoning or evidence.	Offers some reasoning, but steps are incomplete or loosely linked to evidence.	Shows a clear chain of reasoning, explicitly linked to evidence or course material.	Reasoning is explicit and well-evidenced, and anticipates alternative interpretations.
Collaboration & peer engagement	Works largely in parallel with peers; little genuine exchange of ideas.	Responds to peers' ideas mainly when prompted by the instructor.	Builds on peers' contributions unprompted; asks clarifying or challenging questions.	Synthesises differing viewpoints within the group; helps resolve disagreement productively.
Reflection & revision	Submits initial work with no visible revision.	Makes minor, surface-level revisions after feedback.	Revises reasoning or approach substantively in response to feedback or new evidence.	Documents how and why thinking changed over the course of the task, including false starts.

Note. Adapted for illustrative purposes from general principles of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) and formative rubric design (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013; Brookhart, 2018).

Assessment reform of this kind, however, addresses only one of the barriers identified in Section 3.3; large class sizes and fixed classroom layouts require complementary, low-cost, classroom-level adaptations. Evidence from other resource-constrained settings suggests that

active learning need not depend on smaller classes or renovated rooms to take hold. In large-enrolment courses, instructors have introduced structured think-pair-share exchanges within an existing lecture slot, used skeleton handouts that require students to complete key steps of an argument during class rather than copying it passively, and rotated peer-facilitation roles so that a subset of students leads small-group discussion each session, distributing the facilitation burden that would otherwise fall entirely on the instructor (Allen & Tanner, 2005). In settings that share the constraints faced by the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali”, including overcrowded classrooms, limited institutional budgets, and uneven access to learning-management platforms, instructors have adapted flipped-classroom preparation through free messaging applications already familiar to students and have reorganised existing fixed furniture into informal collaborative clusters rather than relying on purpose-built active-learning spaces (Das et al., 2025). These adaptations require little or no capital investment and depend primarily on instructor time, supported by departmental recognition of classroom redesign as a legitimate component of teaching practice.

4.4 Regional Context and Limitations

These findings should be interpreted in light of the specific characteristics of Albania’s higher education landscape, which differs in important respects from the contexts in which much of the existing research on active learning has been conducted. The South-Eastern European context, and the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali” in particular, illustrates that transforming student learning requires more than the adoption of new classroom techniques. It also depends on the extent to which physical spaces support interaction, institutional incentives encourage pedagogical innovation, and assessment practices recognise student engagement. Such conditions may be limited when teaching shifts towards student-centred formats, a pattern documented not only in the present institutional context but also across Albanian and neighbouring higher education systems (Gugu & Kristo, 2023; Brajkovic, 2016; Celo & Dumi, 2012; Leskaj et al., 2024). Several limitations should be acknowledged. As noted in Section 2.1, this study is a reflective case account rather than a formally sampled empirical survey. The figures reported in Section 3, including the approximate participation counts described in Section 2.3, are illustrative composites intended to characterise recurring patterns rather than statistically validated effects and therefore do not support firm causal claims. Because the composites were constructed and, where documented, adjusted by the instructor-author, the possibility of expectancy bias in their interpretation cannot be excluded, although the pre-specified adjustment criteria and contemporaneous field notes described in Section 2.3 were designed to constrain it. Because the study was conducted at a single institution, the findings cannot be assumed to generalise to other Albanian or regional universities, although the patterns observed may be relevant to comparable contexts elsewhere in the Western Balkans (Balliu, 2017; Karanezi et al., 2015). Future research using validated instruments, larger and systematically sampled cohorts, and triangulation with classroom observations and student achievement data would help determine whether the patterns identified in this study are sustained under more rigorous empirical conditions.

5. Conclusion and Practical Recommendations

This reflective case study examined problem-based learning, cooperative learning structures, and the flipped classroom in undergraduate courses at the University of Vlora “Ismail Qemali”. Although lecture-based delivery remains dominant, the transition towards active, student-centred strategies was associated with higher levels of self-reported engagement. However, the implementation of active learning is not automatic, as overcrowded classrooms, limited faculty training, and rigid assessment formats continue to constrain pedagogical change. Outcomes therefore appear to depend not only on the instructional method adopted but also on the

institutional conditions that support or constrain its implementation. Based on these observations, three phased priorities emerge for practice and policy.

At the classroom level, instructors are encouraged to begin with small-scale, low-risk interventions, such as structured think-pair-share activities or skeleton handouts within existing lecture formats, rather than adopting problem-based learning in full at the outset. Such incremental changes are more feasible than wholesale course redesign and can be implemented within individual class sessions without additional financial resources (Allen & Tanner, 2005).

At the departmental level, department heads should support pedagogical change through continuous mentoring and peer classroom observation rather than relying solely on one-off training workshops. This support should be complemented by concrete assessment-alignment exemplars, such as the process-oriented rubric presented in Table 2, to ensure that assessment criteria remain consistent with changes in instructional practice (Biggs, 1996; Panadero & Jonsson, 2013).

At the institutional level, assessment policies and classroom infrastructure should evolve alongside teaching practices. Examinations that continue to prioritise memorisation may undermine active learning regardless of classroom-level efforts, while lecture-oriented classroom layouts can restrict interaction-based activities. Where financial or spatial constraints limit full classroom redesign, low-cost adaptations, including flexible seating arrangements within existing rooms, rotating peer-facilitation roles, scheduling adjustments that provide longer periods for collaborative work, and the use of messaging platforms already familiar to students for flipped-classroom preparation, can partially address these limitations (Allen & Tanner, 2005; Das et al., 2025).

Change is most likely to endure where policy, assessment, and physical space are aligned with the intended pedagogy. Beyond Albania, this case illustrates how active learning takes hold in South-Eastern Europe, not solely through classroom technique, but through its interaction with institutional examination practices, faculty support structures, and the design of learning spaces. Examining this interaction across a wider set of Albanian and regional universities, and with the more systematically sampled data called for in Section 4.4, would strengthen and extend the contextually grounded insight offered by this single-institution case.

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