Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education
ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 39: March 2026
https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi39.1879

REVIEW

Democratising research engagement: ambition, evidence, and the stubborn realities of stratified higher education

Healey, M. (2025). *The research-education nexus: Engaging students in research and inquiry*. University of Westminster.

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KEYWORDS: research-education nexus, undergraduate research, students as partners, enquiry-based learning, learning development.

In *The Research-Education Nexus*, Mick Healey offers a provocative vision for higher education (HE) in which every student, from induction to graduation, participates in the co-creation of knowledge instead of merely consuming it. Commissioned by the University of Westminster, his report synthesises 25 years of scholarship, drawing on 65 case studies and 450 academic references. For administrators, faculty, faculty developers, and learning developers, this report provides compelling reasons and multiple pathways for embedding research into coursework, internships, and job-shadowing experiences across the student lifecycle. At the same time, Healey's arguments require scrutiny and thoughtful adaptation to ensure their applicability across diverse institutional contexts.

The report presents an expansive scope of 'research' encompassing enquiry-based learning, work-integrated learning, internships, and community-service work. It challenges the norm of limiting research opportunities to select groups of students who participate in postgraduate studies, Undergraduate Research Opportunity Programmes (UROPs), or Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experiences (CURE). Instead, Healey argues for research

opportunities to be woven throughout the curriculum so that all students, regardless of their degree programme or academic standing, have opportunities to undertake research. Research skills are positioned as a necessity for the twenty-first century, particularly in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world driven by rapid shifts in technology and industry. This broad, 'big-tent' definition of research and its deliberate democratisation run as a consistent thread throughout the report, linking students' research engagement to broader movements such as students as partners, knowledge exchange, and community-engaged learning. However, adopting this vision wholesale requires careful assessment. The following discussion raises questions that institutions and educators must answer for themselves as they implement the vision.

The first critique is conceptual. The report's expansive definition of research raises a pressing question: does all experiential learning constitute research? An internship at a policy organisation and a laboratory apprenticeship are not equivalent types of knowledge production, yet both are subsumed under the same definition. While each may involve enquiry, reflection, and applied learning, they differ significantly in their epistemic aims, methods, and standards of rigour. When 'research' becomes this capacious, it is difficult to specify what counts as research and why it matters, thereby risking the dilution of research as a distinctive scholarly practice into other modes of knowledge generation.

The second critique is evidentiary. Healey acknowledges a foundational challenge: Hattie and Marsh's (1996) meta-analysis found research and education (teaching) to be 'very loosely coupled' (p. xi). Yet Healey argues that strategic and intentional curricular design could strengthen the teaching–research relationship, such that improvement in one would lead to improvement in the other. This claim, however, is asserted more than it is empirically demonstrated. The report relies heavily on illustrative case studies, mostly from Western contexts, which describe initiatives and institutional innovations, but offers limited systematic evidence linking research engagement to specific learning outcomes. This absence of evidence may signal a broader gap in the literature rather than a shortcoming of the report itself. Nevertheless, the reader is left with persuasive examples but comparatively sparse evaluation of impact, making it difficult to assess the strength, transferability, and scalability of the proposed approaches.

The third critique is structural. Healey's vision implicitly assumes a level of curricular coherence that is rarely present in contemporary HE. In practice, most curricula are not designed as integrated learning journeys at programme level, but rather as a patchwork of distinct courses taught by faculty who exercise considerable autonomy and who may have limited opportunities and incentives to coordinate shared goals, sequencing, and progression of curriculum. Without sustained programme-wide alignment and cross-course dialogue, the expectation that research engagement will develop cumulatively from induction to graduation risks remaining aspirational. This structural reality complicates the implementation of a curriculum-wide research ethos and raises questions about the institutional conditions necessary for Healey's model to be realised at scale.

The fourth critique concerns labour, compensation, and authorship. When students contribute to faculty research—such as collecting data, generating bibliographies, conducting interviews, or running laboratory procedures—they produce value for academics' publications, for institutional research profiles, and for grant applications. Yet the question of compensation and labour recognition remains largely unaddressed. The report positions such engagement as an educational benefit for students, a framing that sits uneasily with its own rhetoric of partnership. This problem deepens when we consider authorship and credit. For example, under prevailing authorship conventions in Medicine, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines specify that data collection alone does not warrant authorship (ICMJE, 2025). Moreover, there is a wide range of disagreements between students and faculty as to what counts as authorship. A systematic review reported that students think authorship credit should be provided on labour-intensive research tasks in which they often engage, including data collection, data entry, statistical analysis, and writing up literature review and methods sections. In contrast, faculty attribute authorship credit for higher-level cognitive tasks, such as generating research ideas, determining research design, and writing the manuscript (Marusic et al., 2011). Given this disagreement over what warrants authorship credit, students may perform the labour that makes faculty research possible while appearing only in acknowledgements, if at all. Lock et al. (2021) and Cook-Sather et al. (2014) distinguish between students as 'assistants' versus genuine 'partners', where genuine partnership must be rooted in principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. While Healey's report aspires to genuine partnership, it insufficiently interrogates the structural norms and reward systems that continue to reproduce assistantship rather than partnership.

Consider, too, who can afford to engage with research that the author envisions? Research 'from day one' presumes a student and a faculty member who have time and resources available. What about the non-traditional learner working multiple jobs to re-enter education? Where will they find hours for undergraduate research? The conditions enabling such engagement—including time, financial security, and manageable competing obligations—are precisely what stratification denies to those whom widening participation ostensibly serves. Participation in high-impact practices remains inequitable: first-generation students, transfer students, and racialised minorities are least likely to participate (Kuh et al., 2017). Healey cites this evidence in his report; however, it is also important to emphasise that many students need additional support and resources to engage effectively in research.

Scaling undergraduate research without addressing adviser support and material conditions creates another mechanism through which advantage begets further advantage. The report also presumes that all academic staff and all institutions (including community colleges and teaching-intensive institutions) possess research skills and mentoring capacity, as well as the infrastructure required for research. In teaching-focused institutions, where heavy workloads, fixed-term contracts, and limited equipment are common, expectations for meaningful research may be difficult to meet. The emotional labour of mentoring, navigating individual differences, managing expectations, and supporting individuals who wear multiple hats as parents, workers, and students may require targeted strategies and the sustained supply of resources. Walkington (as cited in Healey, 2025) observes that mentoring transforms undergraduate research into a high-impact practice, a point Healey cites approvingly; however, the conditions enabling such mentoring are treated as merely implementation details.

The Research-Education Nexus will be essential reading for those setting a more promising vision in HE; however, it will require solving other unresolved issues. Several strategies are presented to turn *The Research-Education Nexus* into a reality. One such strategy is to develop communities of practice that engage a tripartite partnership in which students, learning developers, and faculty co-design interdisciplinary research projects. Another is to create systemic energy and reward systems to motivate faculty and students to undertake collaborative research projects. Other suggestions include strengthening leadership for cultural change, professional development opportunities in research and writing for teaching

faculty, and building research infrastructure. Learning developers have a particularly vital role to play by coaching students in key academic and interpersonal domains, including academic writing, paraphrasing, critical thinking, reflection, time management, and fostering trusting mentoring relationships between faculty and students (Briggs & Kantcheva, 2025). Working in close partnership with students and faculty, learning developers can support faculty in identifying the areas in which students need more support and resources, and co-create developmental strategies to address those needs.

Yet implementing these strategies also demands that we ask harder questions: whose labour makes the research possible, who bears the responsibility of mentoring, who receives credit when that research is published, what resources and support are given to learning developers, and how student–faculty–learning-developer partnerships can be sustained. Faculty and institutions pursuing this agenda will have to confront the stubborn realities of HE and undertake the difficult work required to make the soil fertile enough for the research–education nexus to grow in equitable and sustainable ways.

Disclosure statement

The author used the following generative AI tool in the preparation of this manuscript: ChatGPT 4.0 and Claude. The tasks performed by ChatGPT and Claude include language editing. The authors have reviewed the edits and ensure that it is complied with the journal's principles of AI use.

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