

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM A MIXED-METHODS INVESTIGATION OF STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Undergraduate research is widely recognized as a meaningful practice that develops students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and science identity, yet student engagement remains uneven due to multiple factors. To address this issue, this mixed-methods study examines undergraduate students' engagement in research at a Vietnamese university, focusing on their attitudes, perceived support, and intentions to participate. Survey data (N = 164) and interviews (N = 8) reveal a clear divide between students' positive views of research outcomes and their ambivalence toward the research process. Although students believe lecturers are supportive, they report low comfort in seeking help, limited peer encouragement, and little awareness of institutional research policies. Students express moderate intention to conduct a research project but show strong reluctance toward presenting or publishing their work. The qualitative findings highlight psychological barriers, unclear pathways, and an outcome-oriented mindset. The study argues that current support structures are passive and insufficient. Institutions should implement more visible, structured mentorship to strengthen students' confidence and foster a more active undergraduate research culture.

Keywords: mixed-methods; research engagement; student attitudes; undergraduate research; Vietnamese higher education.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Undergraduate research engagement has emerged as a cornerstone of quality higher education, offering students opportunities to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills essential for academic and professional success. Research participation fosters deeper learning, enhances retention, and cultivates a sense of scientific identity and agency among students (Coleman & Graham, 2025; Trolan, 2023). Institutions worldwide increasingly recognize undergraduate research as a high-impact practice that contributes to student development and institutional prestige (Nguyen & Marjoribanks, 2021). However, despite its benefits, student engagement in research remains uneven across contexts due to a range of influencing factors.

Student engagement in research is shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, students' motivation, self-efficacy, and emotional readiness play critical roles, while externally, the learning environment, teacher-student relationships, and institutional support systems are pivotal (Li & Xue, 2023). Positive teacher behaviors and strong mentorship relationships significantly promote engagement, whereas negative behaviors and lack of environmental support hinder participation. Moreover, systemic challenges such as limited access to research opportunities, unclear pathways, and insufficient integration of research into curricula further complicate student involvement (Athnos et al., 2025; Zahro' et al., 2025).

Teachers also face considerable challenges in facilitating undergraduate research. These include time constraints, heavy teaching loads, lack of institutional incentives, and limited training in mentoring research projects (Irvine, 2025). For students, barriers include inadequate research skills, poor academic writing proficiency, limited access to resources, and low awareness of research opportunities (Nguyen et al., 2021). These challenges are particularly pronounced in developing contexts, where research cultures are still emerging and institutional priorities often favor teaching over research (Nguyen & Marjoribanks, 2021; Parajuli et al., 2020).

Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) exemplifies the aspirations and challenges of Vietnamese higher education institutions striving to build a research-oriented culture. While TDMU has made strides in promoting student research through policy initiatives and journal platforms, studies reveal persistent barriers. For instance, students at TDMU report difficulties in academic writing, lack of access to scholarly materials, and insufficient guidance in research methodology and formatting standards (Nguyen, 2021).

These challenges reflect broader systemic issues in Vietnamese universities. Many institutions still prioritize teaching over research, with fragmented research efforts and limited staff capacity for mentoring (Nguyen & Marjoribanks, 2021). Despite national policies encouraging student research, implementation remains inconsistent, and student motivation is often low due to unclear incentives and limited integration of research into the curriculum (Nguyen et al., 2021; Parajuli et al., 2020). To overcome these barriers, universities like TDMU must invest in faculty development, create structured research pathways for students, and foster a culture that values inquiry and innovation.

1.2. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following three research questions:

- What are the attitudes of Thu Dau Mot University undergraduates toward research?
- How do students perceive their social and environmental context (faculty, peers, and policy) as supportive research milieu?
- What are the students' intentions regarding research engagement?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vietnamese Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and Undergraduate Research Engagement

Vietnamese HEIs have articulated a vision to become integrated hubs for training, research, innovation, and community service, with policy moves toward autonomy, transnational education, and digital transformation; MOET's strategic documents and recent draft amendments signal broader autonomy frameworks, recognition of cross-

border programs, and emphasis on innovation capacity (MOET, 2023; Rajah & Tann Asia, 2025). However, case-study evidence indicates that many universities still exhibit emerging research cultures, where research remains subordinated to teaching, policy implementation is uneven, and staff workloads limit research engagement, including for students (Nguyen & Marjoribanks, 2021). System-level analyses similarly highlight the need to strengthen quality assurance, institutional autonomy in practice, and research capacity-building to translate policy ambitions into everyday opportunities for undergraduate research (Parajuli et al., 2020). These dynamics suggest that expanding mentored undergraduate research, clarifying institutional supports and incentives, and leveraging international partnerships could accelerate students' research participation in Vietnam's evolving higher-education landscape.

2.2. Attitudes towards Research Engagement

Recent studies consistently show that structured exposure to authentic inquiry can shift undergraduates' attitudes toward research from anxiety and perceived difficulty to greater relevance and positive affect. Course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs) and research methods courses reduce anxiety, increase perceived usefulness, and strengthen positive impressions of research over a semester, with pre–post gains observed across multiple cohorts (e.g., significant improvements on Attitude Toward Research subscales covering anxiety, difficulty, positive affect, and life relevance) (Brazendale et al., 2024; Wishkoski et al., 2022). Attitudes are shaped not only by pedagogy but also by sociodemographic and institutional factors: a large regional study of first-year university students reported more positive attitudes among women and private-university students, while skepticism about institutional research parameters suggested the need for clearer policies and supports (Ballesteros et al., 2024). Meta-analytic and review work around STEM and research-related courses further underscores those motivational and affective dimensions (e.g., research self-efficacy, perceived relevance) moderate achievement and engagement, implying that educators should explicitly cultivate students' researcher identities and link methods learning to application (Mao et al., 2021; Bayanova et al., 2022). Overall, attitudes improve when students encounter authentic, scaffolded research tasks, receive clear relevance cues, and experience reductions in anxiety through supportive instruction.

2.3. Social and Environmental Support

Social and environmental support, which comprises mentoring, peer networks, and family, roommate, or teacher support, plays an important role in enabling research participation and persistence. A meta-analysis of perceived social support and undergraduate achievement found a positive (albeit modest) association, with teacher support exerting the strongest effect relative to peer and parental support (Liu et al., 2024). Studies of socio-educational environments reveal that supportive contexts channel benefits via motivation: structural equation models show study motivation fully mediates the link between family, roommate, teacher environment and performance, highlighting the mechanism by which supportive climates translate into outcomes (Wang et al., 2024).

Within research-specific settings, mentoring quality predicts science identity and self-efficacy (two proximal determinants of research engagement and career intentions) especially when mentoring practices are culturally responsive (Moon et al., 2025). Multi-mentor competence also strengthens undergraduates' science personal and social identities, suggesting programs should deliberately involve both faculty and postgraduate

mentors and invest in mentor training (Avondet et al., 2025; Boysen et al., 2020). Beyond mentoring, institutional support (e.g., accessible research workshops, clearer entry pathways) lowers perceived barriers for first-year and underrepresented students, increasing rates of obtaining research positions (Amelung & Helmke, 2024). Conversely, barriers such as limited time, insufficient guidance, and scarce resources continue to suppress engagement in many contexts, reinforcing the need for systematic supports (Hou et al., 2025; Mahmood et al., 2025). Overall, the literature converges on the importance of high-quality, inclusive mentorship and supportive institutional ecosystems to help students envision themselves as potential researchers, access opportunities, and persist through challenges.

2.4. Intention and Likelihood

Intention to engage in research can be understood through social-cognition frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which posits that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) shape intentions that predict behavior. While many TPB applications are outside research per se, findings generalize attitudes and PBC are typically the strongest positive predictors of intention, with norms effects varying by context (Hagger & Hamilton, 2025; Xia et al., 2025). In academic technology adoption among university students, TPB constructs, including attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC, positively predict intentions, implying that similar levers (e.g., favorable attitudes toward research, supportive peer/faculty norms, and students' confidence in navigating research tasks) should increase intention to undertake research (Ahadzadeh et al., 2024).

Extended TPB models that specify antecedents (e.g., role models, family/friend support, professional ability, prior experiences) demonstrate how social influences and skill beliefs feed into attitude, norms, and PBC, thereby elevating intention and facilitating conversion to behavior (Duan, 2022; Bayona-Oré, 2023). Empirically, research self-efficacy, which is closely related to PBC, rises with prior experiences and mentoring, and is robustly linked to engagement and academic success; thus, interventions that build mastery experiences and supportive feedback are likely to move both intention and actual participation (Hill et al., 2022). Taken together, the evidence suggests that increasing undergraduates' positive attitudes toward research (e.g., via CUREs), normative support (e.g., visible faculty encouragement and peer communities), and especially PBC/self-efficacy (e.g., tiered skill-building and mentor scaffolding) will bolster their intention and likelihood to participate in research.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to provide a comprehensive understanding of undergraduate students' attitudes toward research. In this approach, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently but analyzed independently, with the results merged during the interpretation phase. This design was selected to leverage the strengths of both methods: the quantitative survey provided a broad overview of general trends and patterns among the student population, while the qualitative interviews offered in-depth insights into the underlying reasons and personal experiences driving those trends. By triangulating these distinct data sets, the study aimed

to corroborate findings and explain the complexities of student engagement that a single method might overlook.

3.2. *Participants and Sampling*

The participants for the quantitative phase consisted of 164 undergraduate students majoring in English Language at Thu Dau Mot University. Convenience sampling was utilized to recruit participants, targeting fourth-year students who were in the final stages of their degree program. This specific cohort was selected because they had likely encountered research methodology coursework or capstone projects, making their perspectives on the research process particularly relevant. The sample represented a cross-section of the graduating class, ensuring the survey data reflected the broader sentiment of the student body regarding research engagement and support. The participants' demographic information is given below:

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants (N=164)

| Category | | Count | Percent |
|--|--|-------|---------|
| Gender | Female | 134 | 81.7% |
| | Male | 30 | 18.3% |
| Primary plans after graduation | Seeking employment in Vietnam | 66 | 40.2% |
| | Applying for postgraduate studies abroad | 41 | 25.0% |
| | Pursuing a Master's degree in Vietnam | 25 | 15.2% |
| | I am not sure yet. | 32 | 19.5% |
| Part-time job | No | 49 | 29.9% |
| | Yes, 1-10 hours per week | 41 | 25.0% |
| | Yes, 11-20 hours per week | 57 | 34.8% |
| | Yes, more than 20 hours per week | 17 | 10.4% |
| Valid international English certificate (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL) | Yes | 33 | 20.1% |
| | No | 131 | 79.9% |

Source: Author's survey, 2025

For the qualitative phase, a subset of 8 students was selected from the larger cohort to participate in semi-structured interviews. These participants were also recruited using convenience sampling, based on their willingness to discuss their experiences in greater detail. While limited in size, this sample allowed for a "deep dive" into specific student narratives. The interviewees provided the necessary context to interpret the statistical gaps between student intent and action.

3.3. *Data analysis*

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify central tendencies and variations in student attitudes. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine the distribution of responses across the Likert scale, while Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) were computed to assess the overall level of agreement and the consensus for each item. Particular attention was paid to the standard deviation values, which consistently exceeded 1.0, signaling a high degree of polarization within the sample.

Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring patterns and distinct narratives that corresponded with the quantitative domains. An inductive approach was used to allow themes to emerge directly from student voices. These qualitative themes

were then compared against the quantitative statistical findings to assess convergence. This integration step allowed the researchers to explain why specific statistical phenomena occurred.

4. Results

This section presents the integrated findings of the study, drawing from the survey responses and the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews. The data are organized into three primary domains: students' attitudes toward the research process versus its outcomes, the perceived availability of social and environmental support, and the students' intentions to engage in and disseminate research. By triangulating the quantitative statistical trends with qualitative narratives, this section aims to explain not only what students feel about research but also the underlying reasons why these perceptions exist.

4.1. Attitudes toward Research

This section analyses quantitative data regarding the enjoyment, stimulation, and satisfaction derived from research activities, alongside qualitative insights that illuminate the lived experience of these statistics. The findings reveal a complex relationship where students differentiate sharply between the process of researching, which is often viewed as tedious or anxiety-provoking, and the outcome, which is highly valued for its external rewards and personal satisfaction.

Table 2. Students' Attitudes toward Research

| Item | SD | D | N | A | SA | Mean | SD |
|--|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------|------|
| Research is an enjoyable activity. | 10 6.1% | 30 18.3% | 60 36.6% | 50 30.5% | 14 8.5% | 3.17 | 1.13 |
| Research is a rewarding activity. | 5 3.0% | 15 9.1% | 40 24.2% | 70 42.7% | 34 20.7% | 3.69 | 1.05 |
| The process of researching (e.g., reading articles, collecting data) is stimulating. | 12 7.3% | 38 23.2% | 64 39.0% | 40 24.2% | 10 6.1% | 2.99 | 1.08 |
| The challenges of research (e.g., dealing with setbacks) are opportunities to learn. | 8 4.9% | 25 15.2% | 70 42.7% | 50 30.5% | 11 6.7% | 3.19 | 1.02 |
| The final write-up or presentation of research is personally satisfying. | 6 3.7% | 18 11.0% | 35 21.3% | 75 45.7% | 30 18.3% | 3.64 | 1.07 |

Source: Author's survey, 2025

The results show that students have a moderately positive, yet clearly divided, attitude toward research, distinguishing between the process and the outcome. They reported the most positive feelings for the outcomes, with "Research is a rewarding activity" ($M = 3.69$) and "The final write-up is personally satisfying" ($M = 3.64$) scoring the highest. This suggests students appreciate the sense of accomplishment and the resume-building nature of research. In stark contrast, they were ambivalent about the process itself. "The process of researching... is stimulating" was the lowest-scoring item ($M = 2.99$), falling just below the neutral midpoint and having the largest cluster of "Neutral" responses (39.0%). Similarly, "Research is enjoyable" ($M = 3.17$) was only slightly above neutral, indicating that many students find the day-to-day work of research tedious, even if they value the final product.

Students also expressed ambivalence toward the difficulties of research, with “The challenges of research are opportunities to learn” ($M = 3.19$) scoring only slightly above neutral. The largest response group for this item was “Neutral” (42.7%), suggesting that while students don’t view challenges with extreme negativity, they are not strongly embracing them as growth opportunities either. The standard deviations for all items were high (all > 1.0), indicating a lack of consensus among the participants.

The qualitative analysis reveals three primary themes: the pragmatic outcome, the process as a blocker, and the polarized experience.

Theme 1: The pragmatic outcome

The theme explains why students rated “rewarding activity” and “the final write-up... satisfying” so highly, while remaining ambivalent about the process. Participants’ satisfaction was overwhelmingly tied to the external utility of the final product, confirming the “resume-building” hypothesis.

I’m not going to lie, the day-to-day was a grind. Cleaning data for hours isn’t stimulating. But when I finally had that final 50-page report bound and finished? It was the most satisfying moment of my semester. (Participant 3)

The outcome is the reward. The process is the price you pay for the outcome. Anyone who says they ‘enjoy’ literature reviews is either lying or a genius. But I knew I needed a capstone project for grad school applications, so I did it. The reward is having it done. (Participant 6)

These quotes illustrate the quantitative findings perfectly. The reward and satisfaction are not derived from the work itself, but from its completion and its tangible value as a credential, which explains the high scores for outcome items.

Theme 2: The process as a blocker

In terms of research challenges, the participants did not frame them as learning opportunities; they framed them as sources of anxiety and barriers to the desired outcome. The students did not see them as positive, but simply as frustrating roadblocks.

Doing research is not stimulating, it’s tedious. It’s hours of searching for articles, realizing they aren’t the right ones, trying to figure out a citation manager... it feels isolating. The ‘process’ is 90% grunt work and 10% discovery. (Participant 1)

I got stuck before I even began. The proposal template, the citation rules... it felt like a maze. By the time I figured out the format, I had no energy left for the actual research. (Participant 5)

These quotes reinforce that procedural complexity functions as a barrier that drains motivation and reframes research as bureaucratic work, explaining the students’ uncertainty toward the research process and their tendency to value the final outcome over the journey.

Theme 3: The polarized experience

Finally, the interviews provided powerful evidence for the highly polarized conclusion, which was drawn from the high standard deviations (all > 1.0). The participants’ narratives clearly diverged into two groups: the pragmatic tacticians (the majority) and the inquisitive explorers (the minority). The pragmatic tactician (explaining the “difficult but necessary task” group):

You have to do it, right? It’s just a box to check for your career. The whole time, I was just thinking about getting to the end. I found the process tedious , but I valued the final product. (Participant 7)

The inquisitive explorer (explaining the “genuinely enjoys” group):

I was probably one of the few who ‘strongly agreed’ that the process is stimulating. I love the hunt... going down the rabbit hole of articles, finding a connection, and seeing the data come together. The setbacks are part of the puzzle. Honestly, the final paper was the boring part; the discovery was the fun part. (Participant 2)

Participant 7 and participant 2 perfectly illustrate the quantitative finding. The pragmatist perspective (participant 7) explains the modal ‘neutral’ and ‘disagree’ responses on process-related items, while the explorer (participant 2) represents the small, positive tail of the distribution.

The qualitative data confirms the quantitative findings by showing how students can simultaneously value the idea of research while being highly ambivalent about the act of research. The divided attitude identified in the survey data is not confusion, but a clear distinction: for most students, research is a pragmatic, outcome-focused, and “difficult but necessary task”.

4.2. Social and Environmental Support

This section investigates the ecosystem surrounding the student researcher, specifically focusing on the roles of faculty, peers, and institutional policy. It assesses the gap between the perceived willingness of lecturers to provide support and the actionable comfort students feel in seeking it. Additionally, it explores the impact of peer culture and the visibility of institutional resources. The analysis highlights a critical actionability gap, where psychological barriers and a lack of clear communication undermine the effectiveness of available support structures.

Table 3. Social and Environmental Support

| Item | SD | D | N | A | SA | Mean | SD |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------|------|
| My lecturers would support me if I wanted to pursue a research project. | 5 3.0% | 15 9.1% | 40 24.4% | 70 42.7% | 34 20.7% | 3.69 | 1.09 |
| My peers would encourage me to get involved in research activities. | 25 15.2% | 50 30.5% | 60 36.6% | 25 15.2% | 4 2.4% | 2.59 | 1.05 |
| I am aware of institutional policies that encourage undergraduates’ research. | 40 24.4% | 55 33.5% | 50 30.5% | 15 9.1% | 4 2.4% | 2.32 | 1.03 |
| I feel comfortable approaching lecturers about possible supervision. | 25 15.2% | 40 24.4% | 50 30.5% | 35 21.3% | 14 8.5% | 2.84 | 1.20 |

Source: Author’s survey, 2025

The results highlight a significant disconnect between students’ perceptions of passive faculty support and their awareness of active support structures. Students feel strongly that their lecturers would be supportive, with “My lecturers would support me” receiving the highest mean score (M = 3.69) and a clear majority (63.4%) agreeing or strongly agreeing. However, this perceived goodwill does not translate into student action, as “I feel comfortable approaching lecturers” scored below neutral (M = 2.84). This suggests a critical psychological barrier: students believe help is available, but they are too hesitant to ask for it. Furthermore, the perceived social environment is not

conducive to research, as peer support was rated negatively ($M = 2.59$), with 45.7% of students disagreeing that their peers would be encouraging.

This actionability gap is compounded by a severe lack of awareness regarding formal support systems. The item “I am aware of institutional policies” received the lowest mean score by a wide margin ($M = 2.32$), with a majority (57.9%) of students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This indicates a major communication failure between the institution and its students. It is also notable that all items had high standard deviations ($SD > 1.0$), indicating that student perceptions of the support environment are highly varied and inconsistent. Overall, while students believe lecturers are supportive in theory, this support is undermined by a lack of student comfort, low peer encouragement, and a near-total unawareness of institutional pathways.

Two key themes emerged from the interview analysis: the psychological barrier and invisible structures.

Theme 1: The psychological barrier

This theme directly addresses the actionability gap identified in the survey. It explains why students can strongly agree that “lecturers would support me” ($M = 3.69$) while simultaneously disagreeing that they “feel comfortable approaching lecturers” ($M = 2.84$). The barrier is not faculty willingness, but students’ hesitation, rooted in a fear of being perceived as a burden.

I know my lecturers are supportive. They always say, ‘My door is open.’ But that feels like it’s for, you know, a problem with a grade or a question about the homework. Showing up and saying, ‘I want to do research, but I don’t know what about’... that feels like you’re asking for a huge, time-wasting favor. They are just so busy. (Participant 8)

You feel like you need a perfect, brilliant idea before you can even email them. It’s intimidating. You don’t want to look stupid or unprepared. So you just... don’t go. (Participant 3)

Participants’ comments revealed that the entire research support system from policies to peers is either nonexistent or completely invisible to them.

I have no idea. Is there funding? Are there workshops? Who knows? I’ve never seen an email about it. If the university does encourage it, they’re doing a terrible job of telling us. (Participant 6)

My peers? No. That’s not what we talk about. We talk about exams and internships. If I said I was doing research, they’d be like, ‘Oh... cool?’ but they wouldn’t get it. It’s not a normal thing to do. There’s no ‘research culture’ among students at all. (Participant 2)

Participant 6’s quote directly confirms the “major communication failure”, framing resources as invisible. Participant 2’s quote explains the low peer support score, suggesting that research is seen as an abnormal, isolating activity rather than a shared, encouraged one.

Theme 2: Invisible structures

This theme explains the bottom-performing items: the severe lack of awareness of formal support ($M = 2.32$) and the lack of peer encouragement ($M = 2.59$). Participants’

comments revealed that the entire research support system from policies to peers is either nonexistent or completely invisible to them.

When I saw the question about ‘institutional policies,’ I think I laughed. I put ‘Strongly Disagree.’ I have no idea. Is there funding? Are there workshops? Who knows? I’ve never seen an email or a poster about it. If the university does encourage it, they’re doing a terrible job of telling us. (Participant 6)

My peers? No. That’s not what we talk about. We talk about exams and internships. If I said I was doing research, they’d be like, ‘Oh... cool?’ but they wouldn’t get it. It’s not a normal thing to do. There’s no ‘research culture’ among students at all. (Participant 2)

The quotes above directly confirms the “major communication failure”, framing resources as invisible. They explain the low peer support score, suggesting that research is seen as an abnormal, isolating activity rather than a shared, encouraged one.

Ultimately, the qualitative data confirms that while students believe faculty are willing to help, this goodwill is rendered inert by powerful psychological barriers and a total failure of institutional communication. Support is perceived as a passive willingness rather than an active system (pathways, policies, peer culture), which explains the deep disconnects in the survey data.

4.3. Intention

This section evaluates the behavioural intentions of students regarding their future engagement with research. It contrasts students’ willingness to participate in research projects against their hesitation to engage in dissemination activities such as presenting or publishing. By examining the decline in intention as the level of academic commitment increases, this section identifies specific barriers to scholarly output. Furthermore, it explores the paradox of why students who are hesitant to publish themselves remain highly likely to recommend research activities to their peers.

Table 4. Intention and Likelihood

| Item | SD | D | N | A | SA | Mean | SD |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------|------|
| I intend to pursue research before graduation. | 20 12.2% | 30 18.3% | 40 24.4% | 59 36.0% | 15 9.1% | 3.12 | 1.25 |
| I would apply to conduct a research project. | 20 12.2% | 30 18.3% | 44 26.8% | 60 36.6% | 10 6.1% | 3.06 | 1.22 |
| I plan to present my research findings after completing a project. | 20 12.2% | 46 28.0% | 50 30.5% | 40 24.4% | 8 4.9% | 2.80 | 1.15 |
| I plan to publish my research findings after completing a project. | 31 18.9% | 55 33.5% | 45 27.4% | 28 17.1% | 5 3.0% | 2.50 | 1.10 |
| I would recommend doing research to peers. | 6 3.7% | 20 12.2% | 40 24.4% | 68 41.5% | 30 18.3% | 3.58 | 1.09 |

Source: Author’s survey, 2025

The analysis reveals a moderate but hesitant level of commitment, which declines as the required commitment becomes more academic. Students showed a mild inclination to participate, with “I intend to pursue research before graduation” (M = 3.20, SD = 1.25) and “I would apply to conduct a research project” (M = 3.10, SD = 1.22) hovering just above the neutral point; for instance, only 45.1% (n=74) agreed or strongly agreed with intending to pursue research. This intention weakened significantly for dissemination, showing ambivalence toward “I plan to present my research” (M = 2.80, SD = 1.15) and clear hesitation for “I plan to publish my research” (M = 2.50, SD = 1.10), which had the

lowest agreement at 20.1% (n=33). Interestingly, despite their own lukewarm intentions, students held a much more positive view of its value for others, as “I would recommend doing research to peers” (M = 3.70, SD = 1.05) was the highest-rated item, with 60% (n=98) agreeing or strongly agreeing. The high standard deviations (all > 1.0) across all items indicate a significant lack of consensus, with student intentions being highly varied.

The interview analysis reveals two themes: the dissemination barrier and the credential imperative

Theme 1: The dissemination barrier

This theme explains the sharp decline in mean scores from “I intend to pursue research” (M = 3.12) to “I plan to publish” (M = 2.50). Participants described publishing not as the natural conclusion of their work, but as a separate, high-stakes, and intimidating process reserved for faculty.

When I saw the question about ‘planning to publish,’ I put ‘Strongly Disagree.’ That’s terrifying. It’s not for us. That’s for my supervisor, for ‘real’ academics. I’m just an undergrad; my work isn’t ‘publication-worthy,’ and I’d be scared of the rejection. (Participant 4)

I’ll do the project, and I’ll present it in class if I have to. But publishing? That’s a whole different level. My lecturers said it can take a year or more just to get reviews back. I’ll be graduated by then. It’s just not part of the undergraduate timeline; it’s a career-level commitment. (Participant 7)

These quotes provide a clear explanation for the quantitative findings. The intimidation (Participant 4) and the structural mismatch (Participant 7) create a powerful barrier to dissemination. This also explains the paradox of why many students would recommend doing research while having no intention to publish. They are recommending the experiential learning activity (the project), which they value, but they are simultaneously rejecting the professional academic output (the publication), which they find inaccessible and intimidating.

Theme 2: The credential imperative

This theme explains the study’s most striking paradox: why students strongly agreed they “would recommend doing research to peers” (M = 3.58), which is the highest-rated item in the entire section, despite having only moderate intentions to pursue it themselves (M = 3.12) and low intentions to publish (M = 2.50).

The interviews revealed that students recommend research not as an intellectual passion, but as a mandatory “rite of passage” for professional survival. They view it as a critical competitive advantage that their peers cannot afford to miss.

I tell all the juniors: ‘Just do it. Get it on your CV.’ It’s not about whether you enjoy it. It’s that if you don’t have it, and the guy next to you in the interview does, you lose. I recommend it 100%, just like I recommend taking hard classes. It’s a necessary box to check. (Participant 1)

It’s strategic. When I say I recommend it, I don’t mean ‘Oh, it’s so fun, you’ll love it.’ I mean it’s a differentiator. It separates the serious students from the rest. Even if I struggled with my project, I’d still tell my friends to do one because it proves you have grit. (Participant 6)

This theme clarifies that the high “recommendation” score is driven by extrinsic motivation, not intrinsic enjoyment. Students view research as a “credential imperative”, which is a difficult but essential badge of honor that signals competence to future employers. This aligns with the quantitative data where students value the outcome (M=3.69) more than the process (M=2.99), leading them to recommend the “outcome” to their peers as a career necessity.

5. Discussion

5.1. Attitudes toward Research Engagement

The study’s findings reveal a split attitude profile: students value the outcomes of research (e.g., “rewarding”, “personally satisfying”) while remaining ambivalent about the process (e.g., literature reviewing, data cleaning), characterizing it as tedious and isolating. This pattern aligns with studies showing that carefully designed, authentic research experiences can shift affect from anxiety toward perceived relevance and positive impressions over a semester (e.g., CUREs and research methods courses) (Brazendale et al., 2024; Wishkoski et al., 2022). However, unlike those pre-post improvements, my cohort’s neutral-toned ratings on process items suggest limited exposure to structured, scaffolded inquiry, potentially explaining the weaker affective gains relative to cohorts embedded in CUREs. This echoes meta-analytic evidence that affective constructs, particularly research self-efficacy and perceived relevance, moderate achievement and engagement, implying that process-focused scaffolding is essential to move students beyond outcome-focused pragmatism (Mao et al., 2021; Bayanova et al., 2022).

Sociodemographic patterns reported elsewhere (e.g., more positive attitudes among women and private-university students, coupled with skepticism about institutional parameters) offer context for the wide dispersion observed in the author’s survey, indicating heterogeneous perceptions of research value and difficulty (Ballesteros et al., 2024). In EFL contexts, process ambivalence is often magnified by language demands (reading dense scholarship, academic writing, technical conventions), as evidenced at Thu Dau Mot University where students cite report-writing and language proficiency as persistent hurdles (Nguyen et al., 2021). Whereas the literature shows that attitudes can improve with authentic, supported inquiry, my results suggest that, without visible scaffolds and language-sensitive design, students will remain outcome-driven but process-averse.

5.2. Social and Environmental Support

Quantitatively, students believe lecturers would be supportive yet hesitate to approach them, report low peer encouragement, and show near-total unawareness of institutional policies, which is an actionability gap compounded by communication failures. This mirrors broader evidence that teacher support is the strongest social-support correlate of achievement, but its benefits depend on students’ ability to activate that support (Liu et al., 2024). Studies of socio-educational environments further show that support exerts effects via motivation, suggesting that institutions must translate “open-door” goodwill into meaningful and practical support (Wang et al., 2024). In research-specific contexts, mentoring quality, especially culturally responsive mentoring, predicts science identity and self-efficacy (Moon et al., 2024), while multi-mentor competence (faculty and

postgraduate mentors) bolsters identity formation and persistence (Avondet et al., 2025; Boysen et al., 2020).

My data's low peer encouragement parallels reports that first-year and underrepresented students perceive research as inaccessible, but that structured, student-led workshops can reduce barriers and raise placement rates (Amelung & Helmke, 2024). Conversely, the barriers cited in comparable Asian contexts (e.g., time constraints, insufficient guidance, scarce resources) remain salient, matching students' descriptions of busyness and fear of "being a bother" (Hou et al., 2025; Mahmood et al., 2025). Collectively, prior studies imply that support must be active and structured: make mentors visible, lower the initiation threshold, and cultivate peer research communities. The study's findings confirm that merely signaling support is insufficient without social mechanisms (e.g., peer cohorts, mentor matching, and policy messaging) designed for easy uptake.

5.3. Intention and Likelihood to Do Research

Students' moderate intention to start a project dropped sharply for dissemination (presenting and publishing), which many viewed as "not for undergraduates." This trajectory is consistent with Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) evidence: attitudes and perceived behavioral control (PBC and self-efficacy) typically dominate intention formation, whereas subjective norms vary by context (Hagger & Hamilton, 2025). My data suggest positive attitudes toward doing a project, but low PBC for sharing it publicly. Students perceive publishing as high-stakes and misaligned with undergraduate timelines. Similar TPB applications in academic adoption show that attitude, norms, and PBC jointly predict intention, implying that raising dissemination self-efficacy (co-authorship, undergraduate venues, scaffolded conference abstracts) could move students from intention to behavior (Ahadzadeh et al., 2024). Extended TPB models identify antecedents (e.g., role models, social support, prior experiences) that augment attitude and PBC, facilitating conversion from intention to action (Duan, 2022; Bayona-Oré, 2023). Consistent with research on self-efficacy, prior exposures and mentoring predict confidence and engagement; thus, tiered mastery experiences (mini-studies, class symposia, and departmental working papers) may build dissemination PBC in TESOL settings where language and genre demands are pronounced (Hill et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This mixed-methods study reveals a critical disconnect between students' recognition of research as a valuable outcome and their deep-seated ambivalence toward the research process. Students are pragmatically motivated, viewing research as a difficult but necessary task for their careers, yet they find the process itself to be intimidating, tedious, and isolating. This internal conflict is dangerously compounded by a university environment that, while passively supportive, fails to provide the active, visible, and psychological-safe structures necessary for engagement. Consequently, students perceive an actionability gap (believing faculty are willing to help but feeling too intimidated to ask) and an invisibility problem, where formal supports are unknown. This culminates in a dissemination barrier, where students see research as a project to complete but not as a scholarly contribution to share, effectively limiting their potential and their academic identity.

6.2. Implications for Stakeholders

The findings suggest a need for a systemic shift from a passive “open-door” policy to one of active, structured engagement. The invisibility of institutional support is a critical communication failure. Passive support is ineffective. The university administrators must actively market its resources, fund undergraduate research, and create visible, low-stakes pathways (e.g., undergraduate research fairs, paid summer assistantships) that signal a genuine institutional commitment.

The psychological barrier is real and will not be overcome by simply “having an open door.” Faculty should proactively demystify the research process. This can be done by integrating small, scaffolded research tasks into existing coursework, explicitly detailing the steps to start a project, and sharing their own research struggles to normalize setbacks as part of the process, not a sign of failure.

The perception of research as an isolating and tedious activity suggests it is poorly integrated into the student experience. Research methods courses should be redesigned as process-first workshops that move beyond theory to hands-on application to normalize research as a core part of the academic journey.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study should be interpreted with its limitations in mind. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a single institution; therefore, the specific attitudes and barriers identified may reflect a unique local culture and may not be generalizable to all universities. Furthermore, the qualitative sample was small and relied on volunteers. These participants may have held stronger opinions (either positive or negative) than the general student population, and their insights, while deep, cannot be considered representative of all student experiences.

6.4. Recommendations for Future Studies

Future research should first seek to replicate these mixed-methods findings at different types of institutions to establish the broader prevalence of the psychological barrier and dissemination barrier. Intervention-based studies are needed to test the solutions proposed here: for example, a study could compare student engagement in departments applying a passive support policy, with those that implement a proactive mentorship program. Finally, a longitudinal study tracking students from their first year through graduation would provide invaluable insight into when these perceptions are formed and whether early, positive interventions can effectively shift attitudes from seeing research as a pragmatic chore to a passion.

6.5. Conclusion

This study concludes that undergraduate English majors exhibit a paradoxical pragmatic ambivalence toward research, valuing its professional outcomes and resume-building power while viewing the process itself as tedious and anxiety-provoking. Although students perceive faculty as willing to help, a critical actionability gap exists due to psychological barriers and a severe lack of awareness regarding institutional support, which prevents effective engagement. Consequently, while students widely recommend research to peers as a necessary strategic credential, their own engagement remains superficial, characterized by a sharp decline in the intention to disseminate or publish their findings. Universities should foster visible, structured support to lower initiation

thresholds and build students' self-efficacy. Faculty and departments should demystify the process by creating low-stakes dissemination venues (class symposia, working papers) so that students progress from doing projects to confidently sharing and publishing their work.

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