



Sustainable Development in Dance Education: Building an Artistic Ecosystem in Thai Dance Higher Education

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Abstract

Dance education occupies a critical role in advancing sustainable development, especially in contexts where traditional art forms intersect with modern cultural and economic change. This paper investigates the current state of Thai dance education, using Department of Thai Dance, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU) as a case study, and explores how its reforms align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study adopts a qualitative approach, combining document analysis, interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions to examine institutional strategies and pedagogical practices. Findings indicate that Thai dance education faces multiple challenges: institutional pressures from state policies and quality assurance systems, heavy faculty workloads, declining student enrolment, and the demand for versatile graduates. Traditionally focused on producing teachers or performers, dance education must now respond to broader labour market and societal needs. The Thai Dance Department, SSRU has addressed these issues by restructuring its Performing Arts Creative Project into a three-stage process of skill assessment, creative work presentation, and academic output. This model ensures technical proficiency, fosters innovation, and strengthens scholarly contributions. The study discusses this reform through the lens of the *artistic ecosystem*, a framework emphasizing the interdependence of curricula, institutions, communities, and technologies. The SSRU case illustrates how dance education can balance tradition with innovation, expand cultural identity through creativity, and integrate community engagement with digital platforms. Ultimately, the research argues that sustainable development in dance education requires cultivating adaptable graduates, bridging academic and professional domains, and embedding dance education within a larger ecosystem of cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable development, artistic ecosystem, dance education, Thai dance higher education

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, higher education in the arts is undergoing profound transformation. Across the globe, universities and cultural institutions are rethinking the role of dance education in relation to broader social, cultural, and economic changes. The framework of *sustainable development*—first popularized in the 1987 Brundtland Report and now embedded in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—has become increasingly relevant to the performing arts (United Nations, 2015). Sustainable development in this context does not simply refer to ecological responsibility, but also to the preservation of cultural heritage, the promotion of inclusive and equitable education, and the fostering of creativity and innovation. Dance education is uniquely positioned to contribute to these aims, as it simultaneously embodies intangible cultural heritage, creative expression, and professional training. Recent scholarship emphasizes that education for sustainability must extend beyond the sciences and social sciences to include the arts, which cultivate imagination, empathy, and social connection (Hall, 2020; Pateraki, 2015). UNESCO (2003), in its *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, highlights dance as a vital domain where heritage is not only preserved but reinterpreted in ways that sustain community identity. Similarly, research on community-based dance groups suggests that dance can promote inclusion, wellbeing, and social cohesion—qualities directly aligned with sustainable development (Wise, 2023). In higher education, this means that dance programs must move beyond producing performers and teachers to preparing graduates as versatile professionals capable of contributing to sustainable cultural ecosystems.

In Thailand, dance education holds particular significance. Thai classical and folk dances are deeply entwined with national identity, state cultural policy, and the country's international image as part of its *soft power* strategy. Yet Thai higher education institutions

face mounting pressures: declining student enrollment in performing arts programs, rapid technological change, and an expanding set of responsibilities for faculty. As highlighted by Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU), *"the problem is repetitive creative dance pieces, skill for the classroom is not enough for the future career path, [and] single-skills do not meet the demands of the performing arts industry"*. These concerns reflect a broader crisis: if dance education does not adapt, it risks becoming marginalized within both academia and the labor market. At the same time, the expectations placed on universities have multiplied. Faculty members are now required not only to teach, but also to conduct research, preserve cultural heritage, generate income, and contribute to institutional rankings (Mookdawejitra, 2023). The workload of faculty members is "heavier and more diverse than ever before, stretching across teaching, research, administration, and community service. This systemic pressure can undermine creativity unless universities actively redesign structures to support sustainable development in the arts.

Against this backdrop, Thai Dance Department, SSRU provides an important case study. Established as the first Thai university to formally offer a Department of Thai Dance, SSRU has pioneered curricular reforms that seek to respond to both national and global challenges. In particular, its restructuring of the Performing Arts Creative Project course marks a shift from narrow, performance-focused requirements to a holistic model encompassing skill assessment, creative work presentation, and academic output. This three-stage process allows students to demonstrate technical mastery, engage in innovative performance making, and contribute to scholarly discourse. As Jirajarupat and Iamkrasin (2025) note, *"the division into Creative Works, such as Sunandha Cabaret and Sirena, and Academic Outputs highlights the program's dual focus on innovation and academic contribution"*. These reforms are embedded in the broader concept of an *artistic ecosystem*—a framework that applies ecological thinking to the arts by emphasizing interdependence between artists, audiences, institutions, communities, and technologies



(Hawkins, 2014). Within such an ecosystem, sustainability arises not from isolated efforts but from the dynamic interaction of multiple stakeholders. SSRU's Thai Dance Theses illustrate how universities can cultivate ecosystems that balance tradition and innovation, strengthen cultural identity, and prepare graduates for diverse professional futures.

Despite these innovations, dance education in Thailand still faces urgent questions. How can universities ensure that their programs remain relevant in an era of demographic decline and labor market uncertainty? What strategies enable the integration of tradition with contemporary practice without diluting cultural identity? How can institutions support faculty and students in ways that are both academically rigorous and socially meaningful? Addressing these questions is critical not only for the survival of Thai dance education but also for its potential contribution to sustainable development. By situating SSRU's reforms within global debates on sustainability and the SDGs, this study contributes to rethinking the role of dance education in the twenty-first century. It demonstrates that dance is not merely a cultural artifact to be preserved, but a dynamic practice that can foster innovation, social cohesion, and global dialogue. As such, the study offers insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners seeking to build sustainable artistic ecosystems in higher education

OBJECTIVES

This paper seeks to analyze how sustainable development in dance education can be conceptualized and operationalized through the case of Thai Dance Department, SSRU. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Examine the institutional and pedagogical responses implemented by Thai Dance Department, SSRU, Thailand.

2. Explore how the concept of an artistic ecosystem can guide sustainable development in dance education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design focusing on the Performing Arts Creative Project at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU). A case study approach is appropriate when exploring complex educational practices in depth and within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). It enabled the researcher to examine how institutional reforms in Thai dance education respond to national and global pressures of sustainable development. The research was conducted at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, SSRU, which is the first Thai university to formally establish a Thai Dance Department. Participants were selected purposively. Document study, interview, observation and focus groups were applied to ensure data triangulation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. TRANSFORMATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

The findings of this study reveal a multi-layered transformation within the Thai Dance Program at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU). These transformations span curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, community integration, and technological innovation, all of which contribute to establishing an artistic ecosystem that promotes sustainability.

Curriculum Reform and the Three-Stage Creative Project Model

One of the most significant findings concerns the restructuring of the Performing Arts Creative Project into a sequential three-stage process. As the capstone course of the program, the Creative Project requires students to integrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired throughout their studies – both theoretical and

practical—in order to produce a performance work. This course functions as a comprehensive assessment of students' competencies, abilities, and professional readiness before graduation and entry into the performing arts labor market. In the past, Thai dance students were required to choreograph a single dance performance of 8–10 minutes in length, accompanied by a handbook or creative research report, and to present the performance before a committee and the public. Over time, however, it became evident that these performing arts creative projects were often repetitive in format and limited in scope, demonstrating primarily the students' choreographic skills while neglecting their broader capacities. In reality, today's students possess diverse expertise, interests, and cross-disciplinary knowledge that extend beyond choreography alone. For this reason, the program has restructured the course and its assessment process into a three-stage model as follows:

1.Skill Assessment: Students are required to demonstrate competence across multiple domains—choreography, stage design, lighting, sound, costume, makeup, and production management—establishing their readiness as professionals in the performing arts.

2.Creative Work Presentation: Students develop and present a performance project that reflects their artistic identity and conceptual vision, integrating theoretical and practical knowledge.

3.Academic Output Presentation: Students produce an academic article or conference paper articulating the concepts, processes, and outcomes of their creative project, thereby bridging the roles of practitioner and scholar.

The restructuring of the Creative Project into a three-stage model carries several critical implications for both the program and its graduates.

First, by requiring students to demonstrate competence across multiple technical and

artistic domains, the program ensures that graduates embody a holistic skill set. They are no longer limited to showcasing choreographic ability alone but are able to integrate knowledge of stagecraft, design, and production, which collectively elevate the overall quality of artistic outputs. Moreover, the multi-stage assessment addresses one of the most persistent critiques of performing arts education—that graduates lacked readiness for the labor market. The structured evaluation of practical skills guarantees a baseline of technical and professional competence. Graduates emerge as adaptable practitioners capable of contributing to diverse roles within the creative industries. Finally, the integration of academic writing into the Creative Project requires students to engage in scholarly communication. Producing articles or conference papers not only strengthens their research and analytical capacities but also positions them within wider academic and professional discourses. This dual emphasis on practice and theory enhances the credibility of performing arts education and contributes to the field's intellectual development.

This three-stage thesis model thus redefines the role of the capstone project—not as a single performance but as a **comprehensive professional training framework**, preparing graduates to enter multiple career pathways.

Transformation of Teacher Roles

The findings also indicate a significant shift in faculty responsibilities. Traditionally, instructors served primarily as transmitters of canonical dance forms, while students were expected to study and reproduce the movements accurately according to established conventions. In this model, the teacher's role was largely that of an evaluator, emphasizing the faithful replication of dance techniques in a manner considered correct, aesthetically refined, and aligned with recognized standards. In the *Performing Arts Creative Project* course, faculty members in the past mainly provided technical advice on choreography and costume design for the student's creative work. The reform,



however, repositions faculty as facilitators, mentors, and coaches. Their role now extends beyond the transmission and evaluation of canonical forms to guiding students through iterative processes of skill development, artistic experimentation, and sustained academic reflection. This change has several dimensions:

1. Mentorship Culture: Teachers now provide individualized guidance tailored to students' artistic trajectories. This allows students to explore diverse directions, ranging from traditional reinterpretations to contemporary and experimental works, thereby broadening the scope of creative inquiry.

2. Balanced Assessment: The new model emphasizes a combination of formative and summative evaluations. Rather than functioning solely as judges of final products, faculty actively support students' learning journeys by offering feedback that fosters growth throughout the process.

3. Professional Modelling: Faculty engage as co-creators and collaborators within both research and performance contexts. By modeling versatility, reflexivity, and critical inquiry, they exemplify the kind of professional practice they seek to cultivate in their students

The teacher's evolving role mirrors global trends in arts education, where the teacher is seen less as an authority figure and more as a mentor who empowers students to take ownership of their learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The redefinition of teacher roles has significant implications for professional development in higher education. By shifting from instructors to facilitators, mentors, and co-creators, instructors are required not only to guide students but also to continually enhance their own expertise. Teachers must update their knowledge in choreography, stagecraft, production technologies, and contemporary artistic practices in order to provide relevant and forward-looking guidance. This requires engagement with workshops, research, and collaborative projects that expose them to

evolving trends in the performing arts and creative industries. In addition, teachers are expected to model critical inquiry and adaptive learning, demonstrating to students how artistic practices can be examined, questioned, and transformed. This positions teachers not merely as transmitters of tradition but as active participants in the co-creation of new artistic and academic knowledge. Overall, the reform not only enhances students' educational experience but also elevates the professional standards of teaching staff. Teachers are challenged to embody the same adaptability, versatility, and commitment to excellence that they seek to cultivate in their graduates.

Community Engagement as Pedagogical Practice

Another key finding is the integration of community engagement into the thesis process. Rather than treating dance as confined to university spaces, SSRU actively positions it within broader communities. This occurs in several ways such as

Local and Urban Communities: Performances are staged not only for academic audiences but also in public and community settings, ensuring accessibility and social relevance.

Cultural Ownership: Students and faculty collaborate with communities to reaffirm that Thai dance is not a static heritage but a living practice. This approach empowers communities to see themselves as co-guardians of cultural traditions.

Community engagement as revealed here serves not only as an outreach activity but as a **pedagogical tool**, embedding social responsibility and cultural relevance into the learning process.

4. Integration of Technology and Digital Media

The findings also reveal that SSRU has begun integrating technology into creative and academic outputs. For example:

Sunandha Cabaret: a creative cabaret performance produced by a group of Thai dance students. The performance interweaves narratives of palace history with the university's long-standing openness to gender diversity, culminating in its present status as the nation's leading Rajabhat University.

Rak Long Khu: A mixed-media dance drama that combines Western choreography with digital projection and stage design, demonstrating how students can innovate by blending traditions with contemporary media.

Sirena: A contemporary performance drawing on Western mermaid mythology, blending modern dance vocabulary with creative hairstyling and makeup design to produce a strikingly immersive visual experience.

Paksa Himmaphan Makeup Design: A thesis project emphasizing advanced makeup artistry, where mythological Thai creatures are reinterpreted through digital imaging and stagecraft.

The integration of digital technology reflects an acknowledgment that sustainability in the arts also depends on visibility and accessibility in a digital era. It allows Thai dance to remain relevant to younger, technologically literate generations while expanding audiences across geographic boundaries.

2. ARTISTIC ECOSYSTEM AND THE THREE PILLARS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The findings of this study demonstrate that SSRU's reforms in Thai dance education can best be understood within the framework of an *artistic ecosystem*. An artistic ecosystem refers to the interdependent network of artists, institutions, communities, and technologies that together sustain creative practices (Hawkins, 2014). When viewed through the three pillars of sustainable development—economic, social, and environmental sustainability—SSRU's

innovations reveal both achievements and areas for further development.

Economic Sustainability: Multi-Competency and the Creative Economy

The economic dimension of sustainability concerns not only institutional survival but also the employability of graduates. SSRU's three-stage thesis model—skill assessment, creative work, and academic output—ensures that students acquire diverse professional skills beyond performance alone. This aligns with the government's emphasis on cultural industries as part of Thailand's *soft power* policy and with

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Research on the socio-economic value of dance curricula supports this approach. Kim and Yoon (2022) found that public willingness to pay for dance education in Korea reflects its broader value to society, highlighting dance not only as cultural enrichment but also as economic capital. SSRU's Performing Arts Creative model, by combining creative production with academic research, provides measurable outputs that can similarly justify funding and policy support. As UNESCO's *Framework for Culture and Arts Education* (2024) emphasizes, recognizing cultural and creative skills within formal education is essential for securing decent work in the creative economy (UNESCO, 2024).

Social Sustainability: Community Engagement and Inclusive Identity

Social sustainability in arts education entails ensuring that cultural practices remain accessible, relevant, and socially cohesive. SSRU integrates community engagement into the thesis process, reframing dance as a living cultural resource shared by local and campus communities. This approach resonates with UNESCO's (2003) call for safeguarding intangible heritage through active community participation.

The community dimension of SSRU's theses is evident in performances like *Sunandha Cabaret*,



which celebrates cultural heritage while addressing themes of diversity and LGBTQ+ inclusion. Such projects illustrate how dance education can foster social dialogue and identity negotiation. They align with **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)** by strengthening cultural participation in both urban and academic settings.

Scholarly evidence further supports this. Wise (2023) shows that community-based dance groups enhance belonging, inclusion, and wellbeing, underscoring the social role of dance in building resilience. By embedding these values into curricula, SSRU contributes not only to artistic excellence but also to social sustainability—positioning dance as a driver of cultural vitality and civic participation.

Environmental Sustainability: Ecosystem Thinking and Innovation

At first glance, dance education may appear distant from environmental sustainability. Yet SSRU's reforms reveal indirect but meaningful contributions. The very notion of an *artistic ecosystem* reflects ecological thinking—interdependence, resilience, and adaptation—principles parallel to those in environmental sustainability (Hawkins, 2014).

Moreover, SSRU's emphasis on digital and mixed-media performances, such as *Rak Long Khu* and *Paksa Himmaphan Makeup Design*, reduces reliance on resource-intensive staging by integrating digital scenography. This contributes to efficiency and aligns with **SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)**. Beyond efficiency, digital dissemination also allows broader access, reducing the environmental footprint associated with repeated physical productions.

Scholars argue that dance education can cultivate environmental awareness through ecojustice and ecological aesthetics. Foster (2023) proposed that an *Eco Justice approach* in dance encourages students to connect artistic practice with environmental ethics, while Sun (2023)

described ecological aesthetics as fostering harmony between human creativity, society, and nature. While SSRU has not yet formalized these practices, its ecosystem orientation provides a foundation for embedding environmental consciousness into curricula.

The analysis of SSRU's reforms illustrates that sustainability in dance education emerges not from isolated innovations but from the integration of multiple dimensions into a coherent *artistic ecosystem*. This ecosystem functions as a dynamic system where curricula, institutions, communities, and technologies interact in ways that sustain artistic practice while addressing the three pillars of sustainable development—economic, social, and environmental. Bringing these dimensions together, the study proposes that a sustainable artistic ecosystem for dance education should incorporate:

1. **Versatile Curriculum Design** – embedding technical, creative, and academic competencies to prepare graduates for diverse roles.
2. **Institutional Support Structures** – redefining faculty roles as mentors, ensuring adequate resources, and recognizing arts outputs in quality assurance.
3. **Community Partnerships** – treating communities as co-creators in cultural practice, ensuring relevance and accessibility.
4. **Digital and Environmental Awareness** – using technology to expand reach while embedding ecological consciousness into performance and pedagogy.

This integrated model reflects the **ecological metaphor** of sustainability: just as ecosystems thrive through diversity and balance, so too can dance education flourish when tradition, innovation, community, and environment are interlinked. As Pateraki (2015) notes, dance can act as a bridge between cultures and inspire dialogue for sustainable futures. Thai Dance SSRU's experience shows that when higher education embraces ecosystem thinking, dance

becomes not only a cultural artifact to preserve but also a living practice that contributes to broader societal resilience.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to explore how sustainable development can be advanced in dance education through the case of Thai Dance Department Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU). The aim was to analyze the challenges facing Thai dance education, examine institutional and pedagogical responses, and situate these within the broader framework of an *artistic ecosystem* aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through document analysis, interviews, observations, and focus groups. The study revealed four main areas of reform: (1) curriculum restructuring of the Performing Arts Thesis into three stages – skill assessment, creative work, and academic output; (2) transformation of faculty roles into mentors and facilitators; (3) embedding community engagement as part of learning and performance; and (4) integration of digital technology and innovative practices.

These reforms demonstrate how Thai Dance Department, SSRU has repositioned dance education to address contemporary challenges such as declining enrollment, labor market demands, and the need for cultural preservation alongside innovation. The findings also show how the program contributes to the three pillars of sustainable development: building versatile graduates to meet economic needs, engaging communities to support social sustainability, and promoting ecological awareness through ecosystem thinking and digital practices.

In conclusion, SSRU's case highlights that sustainability in dance education is achieved through systemic reform and integration, rather than isolated initiatives. By aligning curricula, pedagogy, and community practice within an artistic ecosystem, dance

education can continue to preserve cultural heritage while preparing graduates to contribute to society in diverse and meaningful ways.

RECOMMENDATION

As the researcher, I propose that future studies should extend the exploration of sustainable development in dance education beyond the single case of SSRU. Comparative research across different institutions and cultural contexts—both in Thailand and internationally—would provide valuable insights into how artistic ecosystems are developed and sustained in diverse settings. Further investigation is also needed into the long-term trajectories of graduates, particularly how multi-competency training equips them to participate effectively in the creative economy and to adapt to shifting labor markets. In addition, I recommend more focused research on the integration of eco-aesthetic and ecojustice perspectives within dance curricula, as these approaches can strengthen the environmental dimension of sustainability and enhance awareness among students. By pursuing these directions, future research can build upon the findings of this study to offer deeper theoretical contributions and practical implications, ensuring that dance education continues to evolve as both a guardian of cultural heritage and a driver of sustainable development.

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