



Legislation, Education and Ethnography: Dance Academics as Catalysts of Sustainable Heritage Practices in Greece

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This study examines the impact of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Greece's approach to safeguarding cultural heritage, focusing on traditional dance. By analysing legislative frameworks and ethnographic data, the authors explore the transition of dance from local communal dance to national heritage. The authors highlight the pivotal role of academics and university-educated dance teachers, as core heritage community that promotes sustainable heritage practices for dance and dancing safeguarding.

Keywords: Greek traditional dance, 2003 UNESCO Convention, dance teachers, dance academics, heritage management, dance heritage community

* Editors' note: authors' preferred version of abstract and chapter.

Introduction

Anchored within the transformative framework of the 2003 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (hereafter UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), this chapter examines Greek traditional dance at the intersections of legislative frameworks, ethnographic research and educational strategies. It situates dance as both a living cultural practice and a contested site of identity negotiation, considering its journey from local communal expression to a symbol of national heritage.

The aims of this investigation are twofold: to discuss the role of university-educated dance teachers as cultural intermediaries and pivotal agents within this heritage ecosystem, and to explore the broader implications of institutional structures in shaping sustainable cultural policies.

Safeguarding Cultural Heritage in Greece: From Material to Embodied Practices

The safeguarding of cultural heritage has been central to Greece's cultural strategy since the struggle for national independence (1821) and the state's formation. Law 10/1834, a pioneering legislative act in Europe, established the framework for protecting antiquities as collective patrimony. This law underscored the connection between Greece's diachronic cultural identity and the modern nation-state, institutionalising cultural heritage as a national priority. Over time, the initial material-focused orientation expanded, reflecting societal and academic transformations, to embrace intangible elements such as oral traditions and dance (Margari 2008, 2016a–b).

The foundation of the Ministry of Culture in 1971 marked the formal centralisation of cultural governance, though earlier legislation, including Laws 2646/1899, 5351/1932, and 3028/2002, signalled evolving approaches to heritage management. Law 3028/2002, in particular, redefined cultural heritage to encompass intangible elements (myths, customs, oral traditions, music, and skills), aligning national policies with global paradigms (Margari 2016a–b). This legislative evolution was informed by academic advancements, elevating traditional and folk culture within cultural strategy frameworks (Margari 2008).

International developments, such as the 2003 UNESCO Convention, further catalysed Greece's shift towards anthropocentric cultural policies (Margari 2008). The country's albeit limited participation in earlier global initiatives underscored its commitment to safeguarding intangible cultural expressions. This trajectory highlights the state's transition from preserving static artifacts to celebrating living traditions, synthesising historical imperatives and contemporary cultural narratives (Margari 2024, forthcoming).

In this evolving context, Greece ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention in 2006, fundamentally reshaping the perception and management of cultural expressions. The Convention prompted a reevaluation of national policy frameworks, emphasising the safeguarding of intangible elements (Margari 2016a–b). Actions to align with its provisions included revising operational frameworks, creating a National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and initiating nominations for UNESCO's international lists, such as the Representative List and the Urgent Safeguarding List as well as for the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices¹ (Margari 2008, 2024, forthcoming).

A decade after ratifying the 2003 UNESCO Convention, Greece achieved a significant milestone in 2016 with the inscription of a performative customary ritual, the Pontic “Momoeria” of the Twelve Days of Christmas (UNESCO 2016), on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.² This marked the first music and dance event to be recognised as universal cultural heritage, demonstrating a transformative shift in Greece's approach to safeguarding and promoting intangible traditions (Margari 2021, 2024).

At the same time though, the competitive environment triggered by the 2003 UNESCO Convention's implementation, introduced tensions. Communities often vie for the “exclusive nomination” of their cultural expressions, leading to selective national policies that marginalise certain groups or practices. This competitive dynamic underscored the challenges of balancing inclusivity and identity preservation in cultural heritage governance (Margari 2008). Thus, within this complex landscape, the role of experts – folklorists, anthropologists, and administrative scientists – has proved

¹ See: UNESCO 2003: 7 and Law 3521/2006, “Ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage”, *Government Gazette* 275/A, 22 December 2006: 3037–3043.

² For detailed information on the nomination processes and their impact on local heritage communities, see: Margari 2016b, 240–250; 2021, 599–646.

critical (Margari 2016a–b) primarily because these specialists assist communities in navigating through all the intricate bureaucratic processes, while advocating for recognition of their cultural practices as “intangible heritage of Hellenism” (Margari 2024).

Dance traditions, in particular, have emerged as critical sites of negotiation between heritage communities and public administration (see, for example, Koutsouba 2015; Margari 2008, 2016b). Dance instructors play a dual role for they actively transmit experiential dance knowledge as well as contribute to the nomination, management, and promotion of these local dance practices. (Margari 2021, 2024). Analysis of registrations in the Greek National Inventory and in UNESCO’s International Lists revealed and confirmed the profound influence of dance instructors on the nomination processes and subsequent management of intangible heritage elements. Ethnographic data also revealed these instructors to be a fundamental link in the interaction between communities, groups, and individuals and executive authorities (Margari 2021, forthcoming). Their contributions extend beyond the procedural, embedding themselves deeply in the sociocultural fabric that underpins heritage preservation. By navigating the complexities of community practices and institutional frameworks, they construct intricate social regulatory networks. These networks serve as conduits for cultural policy formulation, strategic planning, and the orchestration of executive actions, demonstrating the instructors’ unparalleled capacity to integrate localised cultural practices into broader heritage discourses (Margari 2024).

In order to advance this line of inquiry, our analysis incorporated both theoretical and methodological considerations aligned with the interdisciplinary nature of heritage studies. Specifically, we drew upon ethnographic methods grounded in long-term participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of dance transmission within both local and supra-local contexts. This approach allowed us to capture the lived experiences of instructors and participants alike while situating these experiences within the broader institutional and policy frameworks that shape intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, the study was informed by comparative perspectives drawn from established scholarship on heritage communities and intangible cultural heritage management (Council of Europe 2005; Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015; Kuutma 2019). By combining these theoretical and empirical strands, we sought to bridge the gap between the everyday realities of dance transmission and the formal mechanisms of safeguarding established by

UNESCO and national authorities. Such an integrative approach is crucial for understanding how dance teachers operate simultaneously as cultural practitioners, mediators, and policy actors within Greece's evolving heritage ecosystem. In our discussion that follows, the notion of heritage community as defined in the Faro Convention of 2005 is of especial relevance. According to this convention, issued in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, a heritage community is formed of "people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations". Furthermore, we also draw on and adapt the concept of "communities of practice" coined by the educational and social theorists Etienne Wenger-Trayner, Beverly Wenger-Trayner, Phil Reid, and Claude Bruderlein (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015, 2023; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015) to emphasise the experiential and social aspects of learning between a group of people in a shared domain over time – here, of course, that domain is Greek traditional dancing. We seek to highlight the significance of communities of practice in shaping the conditions under which dance is understood and approached as intangible cultural heritage in Greece, while also revealing the pivotal role of dance teachers in this process. We employ the Communities of Practice (CoP) framework to shed light on its vital contribution to the safeguarding and intergenerational transmission of intangible heritage. In the context of Greek traditional dance, the value of CoPs extends far beyond technical refinement or skill enhancement; they provide the enduring social structure, shared domain, and collective identity that enable the practice to thrive and remain meaningful. Given the central role of dance teachers, within these communities of practice, the inclusion of this concept in our analysis is not only relevant, but also essential.

Our research intention was to delve into the challenges that today's dance instructors face when acting as supporters of heritage communities, as allies of communities of practice and as facilitators between social partners (public administration and others). We selected to focus on the only certified teachers of Greek traditional dance who, according to current legislation, possess both pedagogical competence and scientific training, namely the graduates of the Departments of Physical Education and Sport Science (Margari 2021, forthcoming). Consequently, we focused on this group of dance teachers to investigate whether and to what extent the existing institutional structures can meet emerging needs through provi-

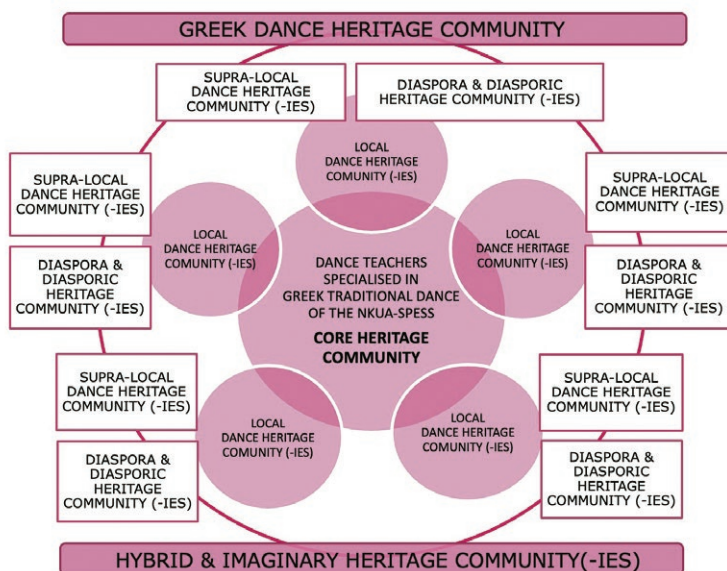


Figure 1. Dance heritage communities as approached in the framework of the Greek Dance-ICH project case study, exploring the pivotal role of dance teachers and academics.

sion of the necessary information and skills. In conducting research for the *Dance-ICH* project, we selected as our starting point the oldest research and academic institutions in Greece to be focused on ethnographic, educational and academic research and on archiving Greek traditional dance collections: specifically, the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (hereafter NKUA)-School/Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (hereafter S/DPESS). The dance teachers trained in the latter institution have specialised in Greek traditional dance and, we argue here, forge an important vibrant heritage entity connecting with and linking to many other dance practitioner and heritage communities in Greece. Indeed, we consider this group to constitute a “core heritage community” that interweaves with numerous others, in local, supra-local, diaspora/ic, hybrid as well as imaginary/imagined social contexts/environments.

While teaching, in all the aforementioned contexts/environments, its members support intergenerational dialogue, safeguarding and transmission of Greek traditional dance as living heritage across diverse contexts.

Figure 1 (previous page) provides a visual representation of the multi-layered relationships among the various social formations/communities that are interconnected through the activities of our core heritage community. This diagram helps clarify the broader ecosystem within which the core heritage community operates and the diverse types of engagement it maintains.

Greek Traditional Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Throughout the country, Greek traditional dance (Koutsouba 2020, 293–294) penetrates many diverse sectors be they social, economic, touristic, cultural, artistic, political, educational, or academic. Traditional dancing continues to be an integral, vivid part of life in Greece both in rural and in urban settings, manifest in various forms across participatory and presentational contexts; it contributes to economy through, for instance, innumerable dance clubs and associations; it functions as a touristic attraction and a form of entertainment; it is present in dance artistic creation as a dance genre *per se* and in communication with other Greek dance genres, as well as in political arenas serving either the respective national government or individual political parties; it is institutionalised in formal, non-formal and informal education; it has been recognised as a university subject since 1982, subsequently attracting research interest; and last but not least, it is institutionalised as a form of intangible cultural heritage (hereafter as ICH) following implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006. Thus, Greek traditional dance has many layers associated with people's dancing in various aspects of their lives.

Given our focus on ethnography, knowledge and academics, it is essential here to mention that, since 1909, in the sector of formal education (primary, secondary and tertiary), Greek traditional dance has been – and still is – taught as part of physical education. Moreover, for more than forty years now, Greek traditional dance has been recognised as a university subject in all Schools and Departments of Physical Education and Sport Science and its development as an autonomous subject at this level has been closely tied to the development of physical education as a discrete university discipline (Koutsouba 2021b, 2023).

The elevation of Greek traditional dance to the status of a university subject in 1982 signals the academic study of (Greek traditional) dance

through full programmes offered in the S/DPESS. This constitution is associated with:

1. the adoption of dance and Greek traditional dance as a subject at the university;
2. the establishment of Greek traditional dance as a Major at the university;
3. the development of new undergraduate courses (e.g. dance ethnography, ethnochoreology, dance history, dance notation, dance morphology and many others);
4. the first university positions on (Greek traditional) dance in Greece;³
5. the first PhDs in Greece on Greek traditional dance,⁴ the establishment of the first master⁵ and PhD programmes (2004) as well as postdoctoral research (2019) including dance in Greece;
6. extensive research, archives, publications, books and translation of books on dance and Greek traditional dance;⁶
7. collaboration with European research and academic projects such as the *Dance-ICH* project and Choreomundus-Erasmus Mundus Joint Master in Dance and Movement as Practical Knowledge and Heritage (acronym Choreomundus).

Importantly, at the same time, Greek traditional dance maintained its performative nature, since dance practice comprises a key part of the curriculum as well as an ongoing artistic presentation. Last but not least, although there are Departments of Performing Arts and Fine Arts in Greece, which embrace experiential and procedural knowledge in their study,

³ Other newly emerging attempts either do not exist anymore or focus on other aspects of dance and/or do not offer a full programme in dance (see more in Koutsouba 2021b). Elias Demas elected Lecturer in 1992, Vasiliki Tyrovola as Special Teaching Staff in 1990 and Lecturer in 1998, and Magda Zografou as a Lecturer in 1991.

⁴ See, for example, Demas (1989); Zografou (1989); Tyrovola (1994). Two further PhDs were completed abroad: Loutzaki (1989) and Koutsouba (1997).

⁵ The master programme named initially “Laographia – Anthropology of Dance” and renamed to “Dance Studies” from 2015–2016 onwards. For the use of the term Laographia in English see Koutsouba 1997, 18–22.

⁶ The first five were published in the late 1980s–early 1990s by Athens University Press. These are: *Ethnochoreology* (Zografou and Tyrovola 1987), *Greek Dance* (Tyrovola 1988), *Theoretical Aspects of Greek Traditional Dance* (Zografou 1988), *Introduction to Greek Folk Dance-Greek Folk Dance Place* (Zografou 1991) and *Academic Notes for Dance Ethnography* (Zografou 1992). For the rest see Koutsouba 1997, 2010.

there is no similar comparable discrete Department of Dance in the country (see Koutsouba 2021b).

Dance and Greek traditional dance are now part of the curriculum in all four Schools and five Departments of Physical Education and Sport Science in universities all over Greece.⁷ The focus of this chapter, however, is on the S/DPESS of NKUA because, in terms of dance genres and courses taught together, as well as the number of academic staff, it has the longest and widest presence.

In this institution, dance and particularly Greek traditional dance hold an important position at both under- and postgraduate levels. The undergraduate programme includes courses on creative dance, improvisation, dances of the world, dance therapy and Greek traditional dance, as well as two majors, i.e. “Choreology: Greek Traditional Dance” and “Orchestiki”. The emphasis, however, is and has been on Greek traditional dance. During undergraduate studies one compulsory and one elective course are offered for all students, as well as a major for those wishing to specialise. As part of pursuing Dance as a major, undergraduates must complete a thesis, most of which (some 500 in 2025) constitute ethnographies on Greek traditional dance (Outsi-Demetriadi et al. 2015).

Since 2004, “Dance Studies” (previously known as “Laographia-Anthropology of Dance”) has constituted a pathway in the two-year research-oriented master’s programme “Physical Education and Sport Science”. This has resulted in many dance ethnographies on Greek traditional dance. In addition, dance can be studied during the three-year doctoral programme during which, from 2014 (when the first master students completed the programme) to the present day, fifteen PhD theses, mainly on dance ethnography of Greek traditional dance, have been completed. A two-year programme of postdoctoral research is also offered during which, since 2019, two of the three researchers have also conducted dance ethnographies of Greek traditional dance. Finally, the seven-months continuous professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning (LLL) course on Greek traditional dance, on offer from 2019, has trained around eighty Physical Education trainers within a span of three years.

There are at least two reasons to explain why the majority of student research, both undergraduate and postgraduate, produced at this univer-

⁷ These are at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the Democritus University of Thrace, and the University of Thessaly.

sity is centred on ethnographic studies of Greek traditional dance. First, the educational training of the original members of academic staff was orientated towards the human and social sciences, embracing, in particular, the methodology of ethnography. And second, most of the students come from the periphery of the country, the majority of these bringing their own dance knowledge of Greek traditional dance. Even if this is not the case with every student, it is most unlikely that they lack any experience of Greek traditional dance as a living expression (see for instance Koutsouba 2020, 2021a). Consequently, the students often opt to research their own communities/geographical areas where there has been little dance research undertaken.

As a result, a large amount of ethnographic data on Greek traditional dance has been gathered over the years, particularly after the establishment of the master's and PhD programmes, a situation which is still ongoing. These ethnographies, as well as contact with students from all over Greece, have resulted in a deeper and substantive knowledge of Greek traditional dance.

This cultural knowledge has then been transferred to the dance class, first of all within the university environment. It is also diffused via the graduates in schools, local government bodies, dance clubs and associations, dance and theatre schools, cultural centres, and other professional and educational contexts in Greece and abroad. Furthermore, many graduates return to their communities/geographical areas where they empower and/or even revive dance and dancing. This traditional dance knowledge is also disseminated through the NKUA's Centre of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning. Furthermore, it is circulated in the Dancing Group of Greek Traditional Dance to all the students of the S/DPESS of NKUA, as this is a dancing group open to all the students and graduates of the S/DPESS of NKUA. The Group gives performances in cultural events and on other occasions of an academic nature (S/DPESS, NKUA, other Universities) as well as in broader contexts (e.g. municipalities, peripheries and others).

In conclusion, the S/DPESS of NKUA – and its predecessors – constitutes an academic institution that for decades has placed a special and strong emphasis on Greek traditional dance. Its long and deep experience of the study, research, archiving, teaching and presentation of dance related practices as “living traditions” (Torp 1990), has doubtless contributed to the establishment of a robust framework for the identification, collection, conservation, preservation, dissemination and international cooperation

of Greek traditional dance as a living cultural heritage practice. Moreover, its activities have shaped and ameliorated the roles of dance researcher, dance archivist, dance teacher, dance artistic director, choreographer or/and dancer as facilitators of dance heritage communities in many and different ways. A principal outcome through their graduates' strategic influence would appear to have been the promotion of Greek traditional dance as living ICH. But, is this in actual fact the case?

The Academic Specialist of Greek Traditional Dance: A Multi-faceted Role

Our research findings suggest that the NKUA-S/DPESS-trained dance teachers who have specialised in Greek traditional dance may be considered, as both a core heritage community and as a supra-local heritage community. This particular core heritage community is composed of over 2,500 members whose knowledge and expertise, although cultivated in S/DPESS, NKUA in the region of Attica, have been disseminated and sustained across Greece and abroad.

Beginning in 1983/1984 and until the present day, its staff, students and graduates have formed the largest scientifically qualified community in Greece, which has now expanded within the country and abroad. Moreover, this core heritage community mediates between local, supra-local, diaspora, diasporic, and hybrid dance heritage communities as well as in communities of practice. Thus, in the new environment, as formed after the 2003 UNESCO Convention, its members faced new challenges as they were asked to play a decisive role in the sustainability and resilience of traditional dance and dance practices in Greece. More specifically, through multiple roles (dance ethnographers, researchers, archivists, teachers, artistic directors, cultural brokers-managers, etc.), members of this heritage community contribute to the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission as well as to the revitalisation of various aspects of Greek traditional dance. They therefore act as catalysts of dance as living ICH in Greece.

Consequently, our main focus in this academic study, based on qualitative research findings, was to highlight, document and analyse their contemporary and future challenges and needs. In this way, the members of this core heritage community operating also as a supra-local one would

acquire a more effective response to the new demanding environment; an environment that reflects the novel sociocultural context, which appears to be shaped by the practices of the heritagisation of folk culture. In particular, we examined their challenges and needs as revealed when they interact, as a core heritage community, with multiple other heritage communities in local, supra-local, diaspora/ic and hybrid social contexts/environments (see Figure 1).

In the context of the *Dance-ICH* project, we collaborated closely with the members of this core heritage community to plan and implement research projects, actions and practices. These fostered the knowledge, skills and attitudes of this community so as to promote dance as living ICH in the modern environment, be that academic, social-cultural, educational, artistic, economic or political. Within this framework, particular emphasis was placed on applied, multi-sited ethnographic research and its interconnections with the practice of public ethnography. The focus was to deepen our understanding of the synergy between these domains, specifically examining the role of these core heritage community members in sustaining and fostering the resilience of dance and dance practices as living heritage.

The research revealed that the core heritage community members played a catalytic role in the reception and comprehension of dance and dancing as well as their associated practices. Through their teaching and public presentation of dance, they highlighted its dynamic nature and cultural significance. We noted, however, that gaps existed in the management of dance and dance-making as cultural heritage, particularly within the framework of UNESCO's 2003 Convention. This was primarily due to the fact that, while these core heritage community members were invited to act as facilitators and cultural managers in supporting local, supra-local, diaspora, diasporic and hybrid heritage communities with which they engaged, they often lacked the essential skills and resources required to meet the demands of state cultural administration. From this perspective, we initially focused on enhancing the capacities of these core heritage community members through targeted training sessions. Subsequently, we monitored the outcomes, providing comprehensive support across all facets of re-contextualising dance and dance practices as living cultural heritage.

By concentrating on performing dance practices – spanning storytelling, research, archiving, education and performance – and engaging in case studies with specific dance communities that interact with this core heritage community, we observed substantial reinforcement across all di-



Figure 2. 'Participatory dance event' Dance -ICH, Greek Traditional Dance Hall, School of Physical Education and Sport Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 9 May 2025. Photo: Maria I. Koutsouba.

mensions. For specific dance communities as well as the core heritage one, which were closely intra- and interrelated, we emphasised the documentation, promotion, and dissemination of ethnographic data, ensuring their integration into contemporary dance environments, whether educational, performative, archival or/and research-based. Awareness-raising initiatives and workshops were conducted, activating social agents and fostering a range of actions aimed at safeguarding and promoting Greek traditional dance and its practices as living heritage for the Greek community at large and as a national intangible heritage element of Hellenism.

Additionally, in this framework emphasis was also laid on illuminating and defining the new roles of dance researcher, dance archivist, dance teacher, dance artistic director, choreographer and dancer, who were called upon to act as facilitators for all kinds of dance practitioner groups and dance heritage communities. As research findings underlined, through these new roles, the members of all the above-mentioned dance heritage communities were enabled to become more involved with their cultural dance heritage. Thus, they were able to cope with dance and dance practices effectively as living ICH of the twenty-first century, connecting present, past and future.



Figure 3. Dance-ICH workshop, Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens. Academy of Athens East Hall, Athens, 15 December 2023. Photo: Zoi N. Margari.

The framework of the *Dance-ICH* project stimulated us to work closely with this core heritage community, implementing new theoretical and laboratory courses (notably, Cultural Heritage: Institutional Environment and Heritage Policies, Cultural Management, Cultural Heritage Tourism and the like) alongside the old courses (such as Ethnochoreology, Dance Notation, Greek Traditional Dance Morphology, Greek Traditional Dance Didactics) but now approached through the lens of cultural heritage management and study. Thus, as suggested by the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2018) dance as living cultural capital and “as a resource to be safeguarded, enhanced, and promoted by encouraging synergies with contemporary creation” was approached in new terms in the Greek academic environment, focusing on communities and bottom-up approaches to ensure its sustainability and resilience.

Conclusion

As our starting point in this research, we focused on academics and scholars and their role in safeguarding Greek traditional dance. Specifically, we examined dance teachers from the NKUA-S/DPESS who specialise in Greek traditional dance, considering them to be a core heritage community. Our study explored their pivotal role and influence within the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century. Recognising the importance of adopting new participatory approaches to cultural management, we concluded that, with appropriate support, these specialist scholars can serve as activators for the resilience and sustainability of dance heritage.

Through the design and implementation of targeted actions, such as the *Dance-ICH* project, and with people and dance heritage communities at their heart, it appears feasible to stimulate access and engagement, and to promote audience development, focusing on local, diaspora, diasporic, and supra-local heritage communities, elders, young people and children, as well as on marginalised individuals. Above all, this study has underlined the significant and long-term impact of academics, teachers and scholars who contribute their knowledge, experience and expertise. It has, furthermore, identified and addressed the challenges that face this core heritage community in the wake of Greece's adoption of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. Through existing and newly developed strategies, both institutional and individual, the ongoing cultivation of an integrated approach will help to ensure the lasting value and sustainability of the intangible cultural heritage of Greek traditional dance.

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