



Reimagining Universities for Democracy and Sustainability through Global Citizenship Education (GCE)-Infused Language Education

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Patsriyanyong Sungroong *

This article examines how neoliberalism has reshaped higher education and with what consequences for graduates, society, and the environment. Drawing on examples from Thailand and international contexts, it argues for a shift toward a mission-oriented public value university that balances economic, social, and ecological priorities while renewing higher education's democratic role. It further proposes integrating Global Citizenship Education (GCE) into language education as a scalable curricular pathway capable of reaching most students and counterbalancing market-driven pressures. Situated in the Thai context, the article shows how tensions between civic responsibility and vocational, revenue-driven imperatives have narrowed the public mission of universities. By repositioning language education as a site for critical, ethical, and globally engaged learning, the article argues that universities can contribute more meaningfully to democracy, sustainability, and public value.

Academic Article

Abstract

Keywords

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* Lecturer, English Section, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University,
e-mail: patsriyanyong.s@ku.th



การทบทวนบทบาทมหาวิทยาลัยเพื่อประชาธิปไตย
และความยั่งยืนผ่านการศึกษาภาษา
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ภัทร์ศรียรรยงค์ สังข์รุ่ง*

บทความนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์ว่าแนวคิดเสรีนิยมใหม่ได้เปลี่ยนแปลงอุดมศึกษาไปอย่างไรและก่อให้เกิดผลกระทบต่อนักศึกษา สังคมและสิ่งแวดล้อมในลักษณะใดบ้าง โดยอาศัยตัวอย่างจากบริบทไทยและต่างประเทศ บทความเสนอความจำเป็นของการเปลี่ยนผ่านไปสู่ “มหาวิทยาลัยคุณค่าสาธารณะเชิงพันธกิจ” ที่สามารถถ่วงดุลมิติด้านเศรษฐกิจ สังคมและนิเวศ พร้อมทั้งฟื้นฟูบทบาทประชาธิปไตยของมหาวิทยาลัยให้กลับมาเด่นชัดยิ่งขึ้น นอกจากนี้บทความยังเสนอให้บูรณาการการศึกษาความเป็นพลเมืองโลก (Global Citizenship Education: GCE) เข้ากับการศึกษาภาษาในฐานะกลไกเชิงหลักสูตรที่สามารถขยายผลได้ในวงกว้าง เข้าถึงนิสิตนักศึกษาได้เกือบทุกกลุ่มและช่วยคานแรงกดดันจากกรอบคิดแบบตลาดในบริบทไทย ความตึงเครียดระหว่างพันธกิจด้านสาธารณะกับแรงผลักดันที่เน้นความเป็นวิชาชีพและการสร้างรายได้ทำให้บทบาทสาธารณะของมหาวิทยาลัยแคบลง บทความจึงชี้ให้เห็นว่าการวางการศึกษาภาษาให้เป็นพื้นที่ของการเรียนรู้เชิงวิพากษ์จริยธรรมและความเป็นพลเมืองโลก จะช่วยให้มหาวิทยาลัยมีบทบาทต่อประชาธิปไตย ความยั่งยืนและคุณค่าสาธารณะได้อย่างเป็นรูปธรรมมากขึ้น

บทความวิชาการ

บทคัดย่อ

คำสำคัญ

การศึกษา
ความเป็นพลเมืองโลก;
การศึกษาภาษา;
เสรีนิยมใหม่;
มหาวิทยาลัย
คุณค่าสาธารณะ;
ประเทศไทย

* อาจารย์ประจำสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ ภาควิชาภาษาต่างประเทศ คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์
ติดต่อได้ที่: patsriyanyong.s@ku.th

1. Introduction

Modern universities face a profound crisis of purpose as they balance their traditional roles as shapers of public opinion and democratic stewards with increasing pressure to conform to narrow, market-driven agendas. Historically, universities served as forums where ideas could inform civic participation and societal transformation, nurturing critical reasoning and the public mind. In the late twentieth century, global economic shifts and policy changes led to the adoption of neoliberal governance models that emphasized market efficiency, competition, privatization, and performance metrics, diminishing the university's emancipatory function by replacing the collective pursuit of knowledge with employability indicators and revenue logics (de Jong & Balaban, 2022; Rustin, 2016; Barnett, 2000; Harland, 2020; Brown, 2019; Schraedley et al., 2021).

In Thailand, as in many other contexts, these pressures are intensified by global university rankings and competitive benchmarking, which encourage institutions to prioritize measurable outputs, market visibility, and international branding. As a result, universities face mounting pressure to foreground employability, industry partnerships, and revenue generation, sometimes at the expense of their public, democratic, and sustainability-oriented roles. This article is a conceptual exploration that reimagines the university's public and global purpose through Global Citizenship Education (GCE)-infused language education, laying the groundwork for subsequent empirical research on how such curricula are implemented and experienced in practice.

Addressing a conceptual and practical gap in current discussions of Thai higher education, the article links debates on public value, sustainability, and global competence to the curricular role of language education as a scalable space for cultivating democratic participation, ethical reflection, and global responsibility (Darasawang, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Deardorff, 2020; Porto et al., 2018).

2. Transforming the University Mission for Social and Global Stewardship

In the post-war period, universities were widely understood as public institutions serving an educated and participating democracy, with expanded access framed as a civic entitlement rather than an elite privilege. In this sense, universities acted not only as providers of professional knowledge but also as democratic stewards: institutions responsible for protecting critical inquiry, nurturing civic participation, and serving the wider public good. In Thailand, this civic mission often took a developmental form, with universities contributing to agricultural modernization, community empowerment, and national progress (Rustin, 2016; Barnett, 2000; Hil et al., 2022; Kertpolser & Yamnill, 2021; Thongpanya et al., 2016).

Since the 1980s, however, neoliberal reforms have increasingly redirected public expectations. Universities that once foregrounded civic responsibility now align more closely with labor market demands, competitiveness, and entrepreneurial branding. Academic departments are often reconfigured to secure prestige, external partnerships, and measurable employability outcomes. This ideological shift has narrowed the meaning of higher education by encouraging universities to present themselves primarily as engines of workforce development (Schraedley et al., 2021; Morley, 2023; Hil et al., 2022).

Yet recognizing these pressures also opens conceptual and practical opportunities. If universities are not to be reduced to market-serving institutions, they must reclaim a broader mission centered on social and global stewardship. Reasserting this mission requires not only criticism of neoliberalism but also constructive proposals for how universities can organize teaching, research, and governance around public value, democratic life, and ecological responsibility.

3. Understanding the Impact of Neoliberal University Reform on Graduates and the Environment

Having traced how neoliberal reforms have eroded the university's civic mission, it is necessary to examine what this erosion has cost graduates and the environment. For several decades after World War II, higher education was widely imagined as a pathway to upward mobility and relatively stable professional employment. That settlement has weakened considerably, and universities now operate in labor markets marked by precarity, rapidly shifting skill demands, and uncertainty about the long-term value of narrowly vocational preparation (Bennett, 2018).

In Thailand and elsewhere, these pressures are visible in growing concerns about graduate underemployment, unstable entry-level opportunities, and mismatches between curricular design and changing labor conditions. These trends do not mean that universities are solely responsible for graduate insecurity. Rather, they illustrate the limits of defining university success too narrowly through employability metrics and short-term responsiveness to market demand. When universities are compelled to adjust curricula repeatedly to satisfy shifting industrial forecasts, they risk subordinating broader educational purposes to unstable economic priorities.

Environmental pressures reveal a parallel tension. A growth-driven model of development often treats ecological damage as an externality, while universities participating in commercially oriented research and innovation may find themselves reinforcing that logic unless sustainability is treated as a core institutional responsibility. In the Thai context, debates around air pollution, waste management, regional development, and resource-intensive growth make clear that higher education institutions cannot confine their role to supplying labor and expertise to the economy. They must also cultivate the knowledge, values,

and partnerships needed to address long-term public and planetary well-being (Morley, 2023; Chaiboonsri et al., 2023).

4. Advancing the University as a Creator of Public and Global Value

Rather than treating universities as institutions that merely repair failures left by markets, a mission-oriented public value approach frames them as proactive partners in shaping social and economic outcomes. Instead of simply fixing deficiencies left by private action, this approach sees academic institutions as co-creators of value who work with the state, civil society, and markets to achieve outcomes that sustain human and planetary well-being. In this perspective, value is understood as something co-created by public institutions, communities, and markets, and measured by improvements in social, cultural, and ecological conditions rather than by profit alone (Mazzucato et al., 2024).

For universities, the model implies three major transformations. Research must address grand challenges such as climate resilience, health equity, and digital inclusivity through cross-sector collaboration. Teaching programs should cultivate civic and ethical competencies rather than merely serving extractive market logics, while governance should become more participatory by incorporating community representation and academic expertise.

A useful illustration can be drawn from the case of a national nursing shortage. Under a neoliberal logic, an institution might respond through fast-track vocational programs offered at maximum fees, treating education largely as a commodity. Under a public value logic, however, health would be embedded in a wider mission that includes preventive care research, community-based health networks, and collaboration with local government on public wellness. The result is not simply the production of labor, but a program that serves public purpose and strengthens trust between citizens and knowledge institutions.

Humanities and language education are equally important sites for the creation of public and global value, especially because they offer one of the most plausible curricular spaces for cultivating Global Citizenship Education (GCE). Public value can be realized not only in socially visible sectors such as health, but also in disciplines often dismissed as secondary because they are not immediately market-facing. Within the Thai context, humanities and language education demonstrate how non-market disciplines can generate intellectual, cultural, social, and economic value: language programs can work across fields such as hospitality and tourism to foster ethical communication and cross-cultural empathy in line with intercultural citizenship principles (Porto et al., 2018), and in some higher education settings language curricula emphasize intercultural literacy and broader social responsibility in ways that align with the view that intercultural competencies are foundational to peaceful, just, and inclusive societies (Deardorff, 2020).

From this perspective, language faculties should not be treated as peripheral to the public value university. They are among its most scalable and strategic sites because language learning can produce economic benefits while also supporting intercultural understanding, dialogue, and educational diplomacy. In Thailand, English proficiency has been associated with wage premiums in both local and multinational banking contexts, suggesting that language education can yield tangible economic returns alongside broader civic and cultural contributions (Edgerton, 2016). Language learning also supports outward cultural dialogue and international diplomacy (Porto et al., 2018; Risager, 2007).

Taken together, these examples show that language education produces value across economic, intellectual, ethical, and intercultural domains. Language classrooms offer a particularly powerful curricular space in which the public value mission of the university can be translated into everyday teaching and learning through GCE. Humanities and language education are therefore not supplementary but central to this vision.

Ultimately, the public value university is a civic project rather than a reactive one. Higher education should shape markets in support of justice and sustainability instead of merely adapting itself to market demand. Through institutional missions that coordinate research, teaching, and partnership, universities can move beyond employability rhetoric and help construct societies in which knowledge, democracy, and ecology remain connected (Mazzucato et al., 2024).

5. Building the Public Value University in Thailand and Beyond

Emerging practice in Thailand and elsewhere suggests that this public value orientation is not merely aspirational. Universities are increasingly involved in interdisciplinary environmental research, public-health initiatives, green-skills development, and collaborative projects with communities and local agencies. These examples show that Thai universities are not devoid of public purpose; rather, many are already experimenting with forms of socially and ecologically responsive practice across different disciplines and institutional contexts (Chaiboonsri et al., 2023; Chulalongkorn University, 2025; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2024; National Science and Technology Development Agency, 2022).

This point matters because Thai higher education is not devoid of public value, nor are humanities and language education uniquely virtuous. Valuable work already exists, but it often remains fragmented, localized, or limited to particular faculties and partnerships. The broader challenge is how to expand such practices across the university in ways that reach most students and shape institutional missions more systematically.

One promising pathway lies in curricular reform. Unlike specialized projects that remain confined to particular programs, curriculum can operate at scale. In the Thai context, required language and English

courses represent one of the few institutional spaces that can reach students across faculties and disciplines. This makes language education especially significant for thinking about how public value and global citizenship might be cultivated more widely within the university.

6. Global Citizenship Education as a Driver of Public and Global Value

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) refers to educational approaches that prepare learners to engage critically with global challenges, develop intercultural competence, recognize structural inequalities, and act ethically within local and global communities. Within a public value framework, GCE helps position higher education not only as preparation for employment but also as preparation for responsible participation in democratic, intercultural, and sustainable futures (Deardorff, 2020; OECD, 2018; Porto et al., 2018).

Emerging scholarship on integrating GCE within English and other language programs strengthens the case for viewing language education as a site of institutional renewal. English and language classrooms can move beyond linguistic proficiency as an end in itself and instead foster intercultural understanding, critical reflection, ethical reasoning, and awareness of global interdependence. In Thai higher education, this possibility is especially important because English remains one of the few curricular spaces that reaches students across faculties, allowing learners from different disciplinary backgrounds to engage with shared questions about sustainability, democracy, inequality, and intercultural communication (Carroll, 2024; Baker & Fang, 2020; Darasawang, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2012).

Language education also offers pedagogical advantages for GCE. As English teaching shifts away from grammar drills and decontextualized exercises toward communicative, content-based, and project-based approaches, classrooms can become spaces for examining climate justice, human rights, migration, development, and cultural diversity. English additionally functions as a major medium through which students access global debates, policy texts, academic resources, and transnational dialogues. For these reasons, GCE-infused language curricula can provide a practical and scalable way for universities to align linguistic development with public and global value (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2014).

In Thai higher education, however, communicative reform has often remained stronger in policy discourse than in everyday classroom practice. A more precise way to describe the reform proposed here is communicative-content language teaching, in which communicative tasks are organized around substantive global issues rather than limited to mechanical interaction patterns. Such an orientation better links language development with critical engagement and civic learning (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2023).

7. Implications for Implementing GCE in Thai Classroom Ecologies

Implementing GCE within Thai university classrooms requires grappling with existing classroom ecologies characterized by hierarchy, teacher authority, and limited opportunities for overt democratic participation. Many students are accustomed to large, lecture-based classes in which teachers retain strong authority, questions are limited, and assessment emphasizes correctness over deliberation or critique. These classroom realities do not make GCE impossible, but they do mean that curricular integration alone is insufficient.

GCE-infused language curricula therefore need to be paired with pedagogical approaches that gradually reconfigure classroom power relations. Drawing on critical pedagogy, language educators can design tasks that redistribute epistemic authority, such as dialogic discussions of global and local issues, student-led inquiry projects, reflective writing, collaborative problem solving, and multilingual explorations of community narratives. Such practices do not eliminate hierarchy overnight, but they can create safer spaces for students to exercise voice, negotiate meanings, and participate more actively in democratic forms of learning.

At the program level, sustained initiatives are needed to support and evaluate GCE integration. These may include collaborative curriculum review across courses, professional development for language instructors, institutional support for materials and assessment redesign, and mechanisms for gathering student feedback on their evolving sense of agency and global citizenship. This article focuses on conceptualizing the university's public and global purpose through GCE-infused language education; future empirical studies are needed to examine how such initiatives are enacted in Thai classrooms, what challenges emerge, and how iterative changes can be made over time.

8. Conclusion: Toward University Stewardship for Global and Local Value

Universities that anchor their mission in collective well-being are better positioned to respond to the intertwined crises of employability, environmental degradation, and weakened civic discourse. Reimagining higher education in this way does not require abandoning economic engagement, but it does require rebalancing institutional priorities so that teaching, research, and governance serve democratic life, sustainability, and social responsibility alongside labor-market concerns.

Within this broader reorientation, Global Citizenship Education (GCE)-infused language education offers a particularly significant pathway because it can reach large numbers of students across disciplines while linking linguistic development with ethical reflection, intercultural understanding, and engagement with shared global problems. In this sense, language education becomes not a peripheral service subject but a central arena through which universities can renew their public role. Future research on

the perceptions and practices of university executives, faculty, and students will be important for understanding how this transformation can be realized and sustained across diverse institutional contexts.

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