

Degrees and Disillusionment: Thailand's Education Trap



“To truly unlock opportunity and a better future for all, Thailand must reimagine education as a pathway to skills, equity and meaningful success.”

The Dream That Became a Burden

In Thailand, a university degree is more than a credential. It is a sacred promise—sealed with hope, financed by sacrifice. Parents mortgage land, skip medical care, and cut daily comforts, clinging to a quiet belief passed down through generations: education is the way out. For decades, this belief held the country together. But today, that promise is beginning to break.

The labor market that once absorbed graduates with ease now turns them away with silence. Degrees, once tickets to prosperity, now risk becoming paperweights. The mantra “study hard, succeed surely” has faded into a bitter punchline—one that thousands of young Thais are now forced to repeat, jobless and indebted.

When the Numbers Don't Add Up

A university degree should unlock higher earnings. In theory, it still does. In practice, the returns are

shrinking. Bachelor's degree holders earn an average of 23,818 baht per month—just 47%

more than high school graduates. But once student loans, rising rents, and job insecurity are factored in, that gap quickly disappears.

In many sectors, vocational graduates now outearn their university-educated peers. The message from the market is clear: degrees alone no longer guarantee value. Skills do. Adaptability does. And increasingly, those skills are being acquired outside traditional classrooms.

Unemployment in a Gown

Behind every unemployment figure is a dream deferred. As of late 2024, over 121,000 unemployed Thais held university degrees—the single largest group among the jobless. These are not outliers. They are warning signs in a system that no longer fits the economy it was built for.

While industries like logistics, clean energy, and tech cry out for talent, universities continue to churn out graduates in oversaturated fields. What should be a launchpad has become a loop: unpaid internships, gig work, and endless job hunts—all while student loan bills pile up.

Behind the Degree, An Unequal Start

Not all degrees are created equal. Not even close. Beneath the surface of meritocracy lies a hierarchy few dare name: one's background, not just one's effort, shapes the real value of a degree.

Urban, affluent students often attend top-tier universities, pad their resumes with international exposure, and lean on family safety nets. Meanwhile, rural and first-generation students struggle through overcrowded lecture halls, outdated curricula, and weak job pipelines. The result? A credential may look the same—but what it unlocks can be worlds apart.

The Weight of Student Debt

Hope shouldn't come with a repayment plan—but in Thailand, it often does. Over 5 million people owe money to the Student Loan Fund. Nearly 3.5 million are still repaying.

Debt delays more than dreams. It postpones homeownership, family formation, and financial independence. What was sold as an investment has, for many, become a quiet liability—one that tightens just as adulthood begins.

A System Out of Sync with the Future

This isn't a story about entitled youth or bad choices. It is a system-level failure. Thailand built an education model for an economy that no longer exists. The world has changed—fast. Automation is replacing rote work. Global supply chains are fragmenting. Demand for green and digital skills is exploding.

But our education system still clings to an outdated mold: theory-heavy, exam-driven, prestige-obsessed. To move forward, we must:

- **Revalue vocational and technical education** as a first choice, not fallback
- **Realign university curricula** to meet real market demand
- **Reform student loans** to be income-based, humane, and responsive

These are not luxuries. They are survival strategies—for the system and for the youth it is failing.

Redefining What Success Looks Like

We must also unlearn what we praise. Success can no longer be measured only by suits, degrees, or office desks. It must be found in code, in caregiving, in craftsmanship. It must live in dignity, contribution, and opportunity.

Talent isn't confined to universities. It's in mechanic garages, rural co-ops, online marketplaces, and digital labs. The future belongs to those who are seen and supported—whatever path they walk.

Because in the end, education should not just produce graduates. It should produce futures.

And no society can thrive if its youth are disillusioned, indebted, and directionless. The future will not wait. And neither should we.

Thaksin Saeteaw
Thaksin.Saeteaw@bangkokbank.com

Strategic Outlook and
Transformation Management
Office of the President