



Education Insights Thailand

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is designed to equip UK higher education institutions with the data and analysis to drive successful engagement and student recruitment strategies. Using the latest data from the most reliable sources, this market brief represents a window onto Thailand's student recruitment market, as well as the economic, demographic and policy factors that shape the country's higher education sector.

If you have further questions about this market or our other global services, please contact us at insightsandconsultancy@britishcouncil.org.

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INTRODUCTION

Thailand has made considerable strides in its social and economic development since the 1980s, from a largely agrarian, low-income country to a relatively diversified upper-middle-income economy. As its consumer class has grown and ties have strengthened with the West, the demand for English-language education has also increased. This has led to a rapid increase in the number of international schools and English-language programmes offered by private and public high schools, along with a rise in the number of Thai families sending children abroad for education, particularly for higher education. In 2016, UNESCO recorded a 14 per cent increase in the number of Thai students studying abroad since the previous year, two-thirds of whom were studying in countries where English is the main language. Enrolments in UK institutions have fluctuated between 6,600 and 6,800 over the past few years, with the UK overtaking the US as the top English-speaking destination for Thai students in 2012, based on comparable national statistics.

Despite the country's rapid development, significant investment in the quality of education and educational outcomes has only recently become a political priority. In 2018, passage of the National Education Bill signalled that education has become an important component of the country's broader development goals. This policy will result in the formulation of a long overdue national education plan, with the intention of improving teaching quality and institutional governance, as well as aligning new graduates' skills with the national development strategy. A new dual vocational education system aims to pair educational institutions with industry to train future workers. These changes will be presided over by a new Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation – a move that has been largely welcomed by university administrations. In 2017, a new government policy was introduced that has significantly eased the path for transnational education (TNE) – albeit only for programmes that are aligned with the national development plan and avoid excessive competition with Thai universities (local institutions are beginning to face financial pressures as enrolments decline in line with the falling student-age population).

On the political front the country has experienced repeated upheaval. The first election since the 2014 coup was held on March 24, 2019. The election reinstated and elected 500 members of the House of Representatives, with the full parliament voting for General Prayuth Chan-ocha as the 30th Prime Minister of Thailand in early June 2019. A coalition government is being formed at the time of this report's writing.

Thailand's economy, although relatively healthy, relies heavily on international trade and has fallen behind many other emerging Asian economies in terms of growth rate. Growth is likely to remain modest over the next three years – partly due to China's economic slowdown and US-China trade frictions – although forecasts may improve if the country can attain the political stability it needs to bring its plans for infrastructure and social development to fruition.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THAILAND AT GLANCE

Economic Environment



- Thailand reached upper-middle-income status in 2011 and is currently the second-largest economy in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It aims to attain higher-income status by 2036, although this will require significant reform and infrastructural development – and, importantly, sufficiently consistent policy on the part of the government to enact these.
- Thailand saw 4.1 per cent real GDP growth in 2018, slightly quicker than the 4.0 per cent rise posted the previous year, although growth is forecast to taper to 3 per cent in 2019 and to continue to fall over coming years, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit. The IMF has similarly cut its 2019 projection for Thailand to 3.9 per cent, citing the impact of trade tensions between the US and its key trade partners.
- High household debt, combined with stagnant household incomes, currently limits domestic consumption. High debt levels are partly a result of past policy, such as a car loan scheme designed to boost consumption and bolster the domestic car industry. Such detrimental policies have now been discontinued and the Bank of Thailand has also imposed limits on personal loans and credit card debt.

Political Environment



- The Kingdom of Thailand is a constitutional monarchy ruled by King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun, who took the throne after the death of his much-loved father in 2016. The monarchy is widely and constitutionally revered.
- Other than brief periods of rule by a democratically elected government, Thailand has been under military rule since 1947, involving 19 military coups since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The current government was installed via military coup in 2014. General Prayuth Chan-o-cha was installed as prime minister by an interim National Legislative Assembly and currently rules the country at the head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO).
- A general election was held on 24 March 2019 and the House of Parliament elected General Prayuth Chan-o-cha as prime minister on 5 June 2019.

Policy Highlights



- The government's current and 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–21) has shifted priorities from economic growth to social development, with economic policies that target efficiency, quality of life and sustainability.

- In May 2016, Thailand 4.0 was unveiled as an economic model to drive long-term national transformation through innovation, creativity and technology. This proposal expands the scope and reach of the agricultural and manufacturing-based policies of former models. The policy also aims to tackle social inequality and move Thailand's ranking in the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI) from 83rd in 2018 to within the top 50 countries in 10 years. Education reform is recognised as key to sustaining the country's development trajectory.
- Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) programme is a major component of Thailand 4.0. It will connect ASEAN with China and India via a network of roads, ports, high-speed train lines, digital parks and airports, including the new U-Tapao international airport, which is scheduled to be fully operational by 2023. The EEC will cover infrastructure and development projects in three provinces along the eastern seaboard over five years (2018-2023) at a cost of about US\$50 billion.

Education Priorities



- Educational reform under the current military government initially focused on access, with the junta extending free education from 12 to 15 years of schooling in 2016 by adding a provision for free pre-school attendance.
- The 2018 National Education Bill will lead to the development of a long-term national education plan, with aims of improving teaching quality, institutional governance and the alignment of graduates' skills with national developmental strategy. A new Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation has been established to oversee these changes.
- In May 2017, the Ministry of Education announced a new policy that encourages the establishment of overseas campuses of "renowned" foreign universities in Thailand. As an incentive, the policy grants exemptions from various taxes and restrictions, as well as relaxing visa regulations for overseas staff, and includes prospective campuses in the EEC. However, foreign providers are limited to priority subject areas that align with Thailand 4.0, in order to avoid competition with domestic institutions.

Country Risks



- Thailand's rapidly ageing population poses a major challenge to economic growth and the public finances. The country's old-age dependency ratio will increase to almost 30 per cent by 2030, at which point The Economist Intelligence Unit anticipates a significant negative impact on GDP from labour shortages. In response, the government has formed a National Pension Committee (NPC) and raised the statutory retirement age.
- According to Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board, laws and regulations have not kept pace with changes in the country; targets of good governance and administration remain unmet; and, while public services have expanded, progress is slow and quality could be improved.
- The threat of political instability may deter foreign investment and slow the government's ability to enact reforms.

Outbound Study Trend



- Demand for English-language education is steadily increasing. In 2016, UNESCO reported almost 30,000 Thai students studying abroad – a 14 per cent increase on the previous year. Two thirds were studying in countries where English is the main language. The UK is the most popular destination for higher education, according to comparable national statistics, followed closely by the US and Australia. Japan and Egypt also draw a significant number of students.
- Upper-secondary education in Thailand generally fails to leave high-school graduates at a sufficient level of attainment for direct enrolment in undergraduate programmes overseas, and most students study for further qualifications or complete foundation/pathway programmes.
- There is rising interest, both among students and Thai institutions, in dual degree programmes, which tend to involve two years of study in Thailand and one or two years of study overseas. Universities see these partnerships as helping to develop reputational prestige, international profile and connections, while retaining students who might otherwise have gone overseas for their entire degree courses.

UK Recruitment



- Thailand is the 9th largest source of non-EU students for UK universities, behind Singapore and ahead of Canada. In 2017/18, 6,785 Thailand-domiciled students were enrolled in UK HE institutions, up by 1.6 per cent from the previous year. Enrolments have not yet fully recovered from a gradual decline that began after the abolition of the UK post-study work visa in 2011/12.
- Thai enrolments in the UK are heavily skewed towards the postgraduate level (68 per cent in 2017/18), although undergraduate enrolments have posted stronger growth in recent years.
- Students are attracted to UK institutions by their historical reputations and high positions in respected university rankings, along with the opportunity to improve English-language skills. However, language proficiency requirements are also a deterrent for Thai students.

Student Supply



- Thailand is the world's third-most rapidly ageing country, with UN forecasts projecting that the elderly population will surpass the 0 to 14 age group by 2025. The undergraduate population is forecast to decline for another two decades. The impact on institutions of higher education is already being felt, with 20 per cent fewer applicants for public universities in 2017 than in 2010. Small- to medium-sized private universities are most likely to struggle, while others are looking to partner and internationalise to remain competitive.

Study Level and Subject Areas



- Thailand is a predominantly postgraduate market for the UK, but the number of undergraduate enrolments has risen over the past five years.
- Business and Administrative Studies is by far the most popular subject area among UK-bound students, accounting for 41 per cent of all Thai enrolments in the UK in 2017/18 and 44 per cent of new enrolments.
- Engineering and Technology is ranked a distant second in terms of popularity, with enrolments slightly skewed towards the undergraduate level. Mechanical, Chemical, Electronic, Civil and General Engineering predominate.
- Law is also popular at postgraduate level, although UK enrolments in 2017/18 were down by 20 per cent from the peak reached four years earlier.

Scholarships



- The Ministry of Science and Technology is the most active government agency in terms of providing scholarships for study overseas, followed by the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (IPST) and the Civil Service Commission (CSC). CSC-administered scholarships are primarily aimed at talent management and development of key skills in central and local government agencies, priority areas being physical sciences, engineering and life sciences.
- Of the 2,166 Thai students on overseas scholarships as of December 2018, the UK was the top destination (785), followed closely by the US (782), with Germany a distant third (134). Almost half of the scholarships fund study at doctoral level and the government reports difficulty in attracting suitably qualified candidates to fill the positions.
- Many government scholarships are bonded, meaning that students are required to return to Thailand to work for a specified period after graduation.

Drivers of Student Mobility



- The decision to study overseas is most commonly driven by the pursuit of higher-quality education and the prestige afforded by having attended an international institution, with overseas degrees and international experience perceived as a boost to employability.

Marketing Channels



- Thailand has a tech-literate youth population, with very high social-media usage. Many universities reach students through Facebook and Google advertisements.
- Parents are more likely to rely on word of mouth, but television adverts are an effective channel in the market. Education fairs are also well attended.

Barriers to Student Mobility



- Cost (and the perception of cost) is a key barrier to overseas study. The cost of living in the UK is perceived as very high, with few students aware of scholarship or bursary options.
- Many students struggle to attain the level of language proficiency required by overseas institutions.

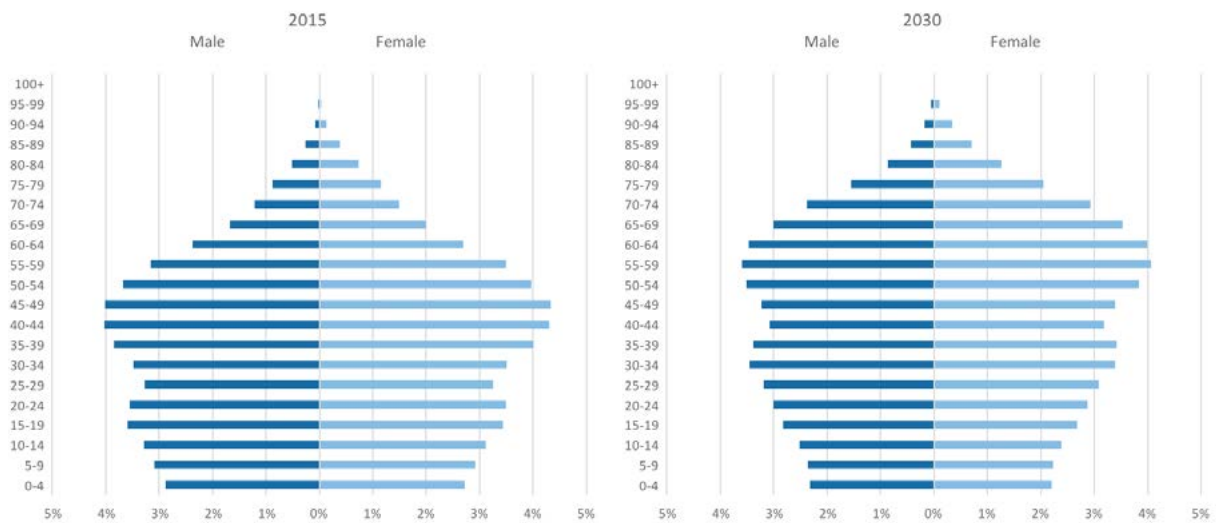
DEMOGRAPHICS

According to the UN, Thailand is the world's third-most rapidly ageing country. In 2017, the country was home to a population of 69 million. The percentage of the Thai population aged 65 or older has more than doubled over the last 20 years, from 5 per cent in 1995 to 11 per cent in 2017. Between 2012 and 2017, the average population growth rate was low, at 0.3 per cent annually. The country has a median age of 37.8 and a rising life expectancy of 75.5 years. In 2017, 14 per cent of the population were aged between 14 and 24 and 17.7 per cent were under 14 years old. The UN forecasts that, by 2025, the population of 15-to-64-year-olds will have reached its peak and the 65+ age group will surpass those aged 0 to 14.

Thailand is majority Buddhist (93.6 per cent at the 2010 census), with a small Muslim minority (4.9 per cent); this minority is largely ethnic Malay and is located in the far south of the country, where separatism has flared up in the past. While 75 per cent of the population are ethnic Thai, a further 14 per cent are ethnic Chinese and three per cent are ethnic Malay. Smaller proportions of the population are Mon, Khmer or belong to different tribal groups. The main language is Thai, which uses the Thai alphabet, although a Lao dialect is also widely spoken in the north and north-east and there are numerous tribal languages. Thailand hosts an estimated 3-4.5 million migrant workers, mostly from neighbouring countries.

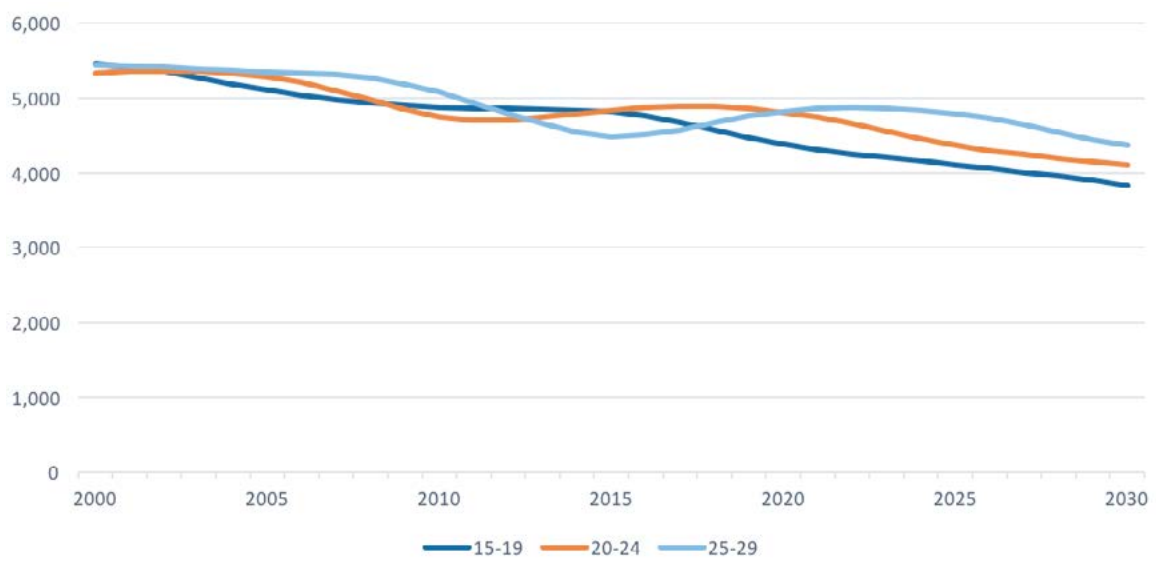
Thailand is still largely rural, with only 44.2 per cent of the population living in urban areas. Urbanisation has taken place more slowly than the East Asian average in recent years, and the World Bank reports that the urbanisation rate has declined to 1.8 per cent since the last census, compared to between 2.3 and 3.5 per cent in the previous decade. Although this has had a limiting effect on industrialisation and economic growth, the government regards maintaining active rural areas as important in preserving Thai culture. Bangkok, the capital, is the most populous city, with 8.3 million inhabitants. However, development is scaling up in other large cities, including Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) in the centre of the country, Ubon Ratchathani and Khon Kaen in the east and Chiang Mai in the north (NSO).

Figure 1 Thailand's Population Pyramid, 2015 and 2030



Source: UN WPP

Figure 2 Thailand's Student Age Population



Source: UN WPP

ECONOMICS

Before the 2014 coup, Thailand was already experiencing an economic slowdown. Social unrest, together with falling export revenue and tourist numbers, meant that real GDP growth had become more volatile. Economic contraction of almost 1 per cent in 2009 was followed by over 7 per cent growth in 2010, with further significant swings occurring until 2013. From 2007 to 2013 growth averaged 2.9 per cent per annum. Growth has since recovered, reaching 4.1 per cent in 2018. However, the World Bank and IMF have cut projections for 2019 to 3.9 and 3.6 per cent, respectively, citing the impact of trade tensions between the US and its key trade partners, and medium-term forecasts see a decline back to 3 per cent by 2021. These GDP growth rates are sluggish compared to many of Thailand's ASEAN neighbours. However, the country's current-account surplus remains healthy at around 10.6 per cent of GDP and its external debt, at about 30 per cent of GDP in 2017, is projected to remain relatively low over the medium term, according to the IMF.

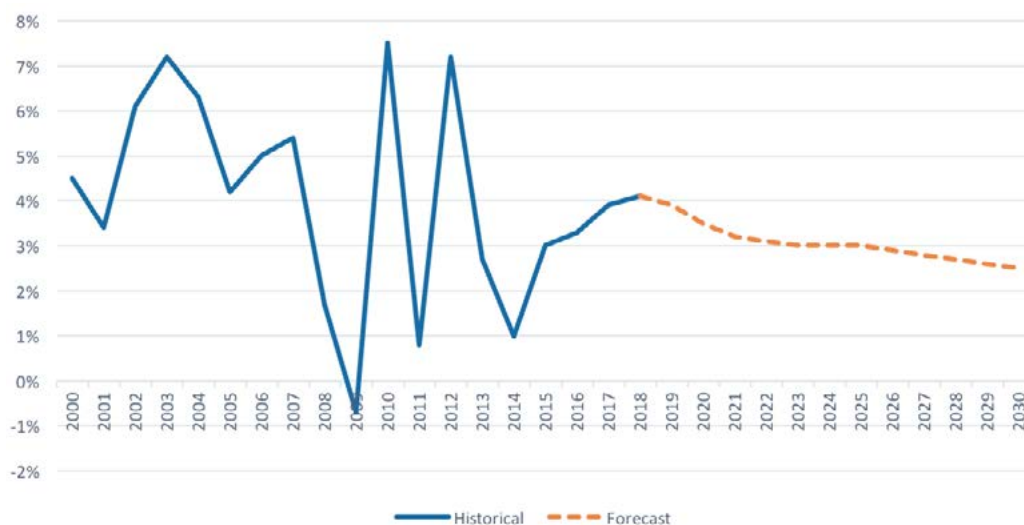
The economy has shifted from an agricultural base to a largely services and industrial base. Thailand's diverse services sector includes tourism, telecommunications, health and banking. The country is highly dependent on international trade, with exports accounting for about two-thirds of GDP. Major exports include electronics, agricultural commodities, automobiles and auto parts, and processed foods, with China and the US among its leading markets. The combined industrial (36.2 per cent) and services sectors (55.6 per cent) account for over 90 per cent of the country's GDP. While the agricultural sector contributes only 8.2 per cent of GDP, it employs about one-third of the labour force in predominantly small-scale farms.

The average exchange rate in 2018 was Bt33:US\$1, appreciating slightly to Bt32:US\$1 in Jan-May 2019. The Thai baht has been one of the stronger performing ASEAN currencies in recent years and has held its ground during currency crises, thanks to a strong current-account surplus (8.1 per cent of GDP) and the largest foreign-exchange buffer in ASEAN (74 per cent of GDP).¹

As indicated by its development policies and plans, the country is aware of the need to improve continually its global competitiveness, combat high household debt levels and address its ageing population to sustain economic growth. Overall, Thailand was ranked 38th out of 140 economies in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (2018), and 27th out of 190 in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business report (2019). For the latter, the country has moved quickly up the ranks in recent years; the latest report noted improvements as a result of the previous year's reforms, including streamlining bureaucratic processes and amending the regulatory framework.

¹Thailand Economic Monitor, World Bank, January 2019.

Figure 3: Real GDP Growth and Forecast

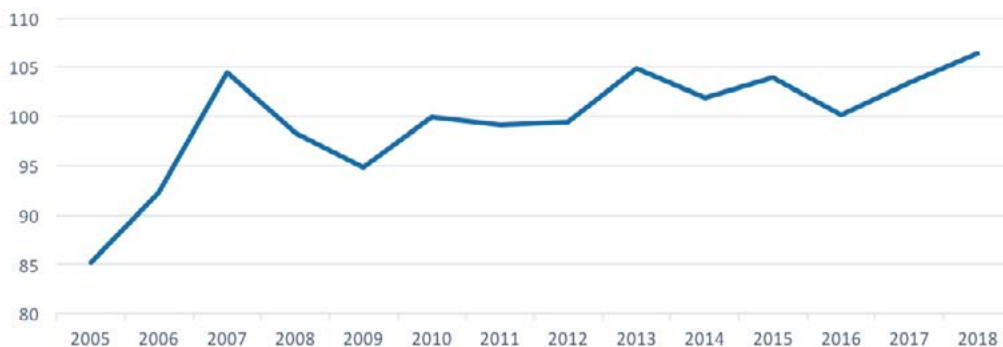


Source: Euromonitor

Inflation fell to 0.5 per cent in 2017 but is estimated to have risen to 2.4 per cent in 2018. The authorities’ plan to introduce a VAT and excises in 2020 are expected to slightly increase prices upon implementation.

Qatar ranks 30th out of 140 countries in the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) 2018 Global Competitiveness Index,² scoring high on ICT adoption and digital skills among the population but low on labour market measures such as workers right and labour market mobility. In the World Bank’s 2018 ‘Ease of Doing Business’ report,³ Qatar is ranked 83rd out of 190 economies, scoring high on: paying taxes, registering property and dealing with construction permits; but scoring low on protecting minority investors and enforcing contracts.

Figure 3: Real Effective Exchange Rate



**This chart shows the relative strength of the currency against a weighted average of foreign currencies, adjusted for inflation. The base value is defined to be 100 in 2010.*

Source: Bank for International Settlements

2 “Global Competitiveness Report”, World Economic Forum, 2018.
 3 “Doing Business 2018”, World Bank, 2018.

POLITICS & POLICYMAKING

The Kingdom of Thailand transitioned from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 1932. King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun ascended to the throne in 2016 following the death of his popular father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej. While the monarchy is constitutionally legitimate and publicly supported, a strictly enforced law of lèse-majesté dictates harsh penalties for insulting its members.⁴

The country has experienced only brief periods of rule by a democratically elected government, and has otherwise been under military rule since 1947, with 19 military coups since the 1930s. The current government was installed via military coup in 2014, when General Prayuth Chan-ocha seized executive power on behalf of the armed forces and dissolved the previous bicameral legislature. Prayuth was elected as prime minister by an interim National Legislative Assembly, which chiefly comprised security officers and civilians supportive of the military. He currently rules the country with an appointed National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). After the general election on 24 March 2019, he was voted in as the 30th prime minister of Thailand on 5 June 2019. As of this report's writing, a new coalition government is being formed and the NCPO meanwhile remains in charge of administering the country.

Meanwhile, a variety of economic plans and models emphasise social development, with policies that target efficiency, quality of life and sustainability, rather than growth based around agriculture and manufacturing. These include the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–21) and the 20-year National Strategy (2017–36), along with Thailand 4.0: an economic model unveiled in 2016 that aims to invest in the long-term transformation of the country through innovation, creativity and technology. These new plans will require significant investment into upgrading human capital and improving the education system, particularly in areas of science, technology and research. The government aims to encourage greater urban and economic zone development; and to strengthen international development co-operation. Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) will see work start on a network of roads, ports, airports, high-speed trains, digital parks, and freight (ADB) in three manufacturing-focused provinces along the eastern seaboard (Chonburi, Rayong and Chachoengsao), connecting ASEAN with China and India. A new international airport is scheduled to open in 2023.

⁴ [Thailand lèse-majesté: UN urges amendment to law](#), BBC News, 19 June 2017.

EDUCATION

Pre-Tertiary Education

In Thailand, education is free and compulsory from the ages of 6 to 15. Children today can expect to receive around 13 years of education on average – almost twice the level attained by the adult population (7.3). Pre-primary education was made free in 2009, though it is not compulsory. Primary enrolment is near universal and Thailand has achieved most of its UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including adult and youth literacy of close to 100 per cent and secondary school completion of 85 per cent, according to UNESCO. Secondary pupils can opt for either academic or vocational programmes. Vocational education may be entirely school-based or operate on a dual model in partnership with companies. A recently introduced upper-secondary curriculum aims to encourage the study of vocational subjects.

While access to education in Thailand is greatly improved, learning outcomes remain fairly weak by international standards. In 2017, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked Thailand 59th out of 72 countries, lagging far behind regional neighbours such as Vietnam, Hong Kong and China.⁵ Infrastructural development is also patchy: just 45 per cent of schools have basic sanitation facilities and only 60 per cent have access to drinking water. Gender-based education policy has successfully focused on women and girls; boys currently score lower on educational indicators and learning outcomes from the secondary to tertiary level. Language proficiency, including English proficiency, remains a challenge and has been highlighted by the new government as an essential skill. In 2015 schools began to adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Private-sector education has developed to fill the gap, with over 4,000 private schools recognised by the Ministry of Education. Thailand also has 181 international schools.⁶ The government has encouraged the expansion of this sector as part of its internationalisation strategy and plans to create a regional education hub.

Higher Education

Thailand had 175 higher education institutes (HEIs) in 2018, including 9 public universities, 26 autonomous universities, 38 Rajabhat universities (former teacher training colleges), 20 community colleges and 42 private universities. The education sector accounts for one of the largest shares of the Thai budget each year, although the higher education sub-sector has also needed to rely substantially on other sources of funding, including real estate, commercial research and business operations, such as running hospitals. Given new development plans that prioritise education, this funding system may change in the coming years. Well-established universities have recently tended to become autonomous to attain greater decision-making power, while still receiving government funding for research.

Thailand's National Statistics Office reports that the HE system serves just over 2 million undergraduate students and 180,418 postgraduate students, which makes the enrolment rate in postgraduate programmes high, at 9 per cent. Given the country's aging population, the undergraduate population is forecast to decline for another two decades.⁷

According to the Council of University Presidents of Thailand, around 2.5 million applicants competed for public university places prior to 2010 and, by 2017, this figure had fallen by 20 per cent.⁸ Meanwhile, the number of students applying for places at private universities has also fallen sharply, with two universities closing in 2017 as a result of low enrolment numbers.⁹ Significant challenges loom for small to medium-sized institutions. In some cases, falling enrolment

5 [Thailand: Education reforms as elusive as ever](#), Asian Correspondent, May 2017; [A lesson for the Long Term](#), The Economic Intelligence Unit, 8 May 2018.

6 [Southeast Asia's fierce growth of private international schools](#), Study International, 13 March 2017

7 [University Challenge](#), Bangkok Post, 12 August 2018.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

numbers are spurring institutions to internationalise and focus on producing ‘innovative’ graduates in order to remain competitive. According to OHEC, Thai universities offer over 1,000 international programmes in English, including in collaboration with universities in Australia and the UK. The number of officially registered joint degree programmes (two years in Thailand and two years abroad) more than doubled between 2012 and 2015.¹⁰

The main teaching language is Thai, although international institutions and programmes may operate in a foreign language. Secondary-school exams, together with individual university entrance requirements, determine university admission. In recent years, there have been calls to change this system to ensure equal access and reduce examination pressure and costs, since students largely require private tuition to achieve the necessary exam results. Tuition fees are charged at all institutions, but are considerably lower in the public sector, and a government student loan scheme is available.

While a greater number of Thai universities featured in the 2019 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, the country’s best institutions faltered. Mahidol University, widely considered the country’s best, fell from the 501-600 band to the 601-800 band. The country’s oldest institution, Chulalongkorn University, dropped from the 601-800 band to the 801-1,000 band, along with five other institutions.

The pressure on high school teachers has encouraged an approach that produces high scores in exams, to the detriment of advanced skills such as critical thinking and technological proficiency, and this has impacted higher education outcomes. Thailand was ranked 97th in the Global Competitiveness Index 2017-18 for critical thinking in teaching. Commentators have also blamed poor university governance and the absence of a long-term development plan for the ill-preparedness of graduates entering the workforce and for the shortage of qualified graduates in technology and vocational fields.¹¹

¹⁰ [International programmes proliferate at universities](#); University World News, 16 November 2018; Transnational education in Thailand: [What does Thailand’s new TNE policy mean for UK universities?](#) British Council, 7 June 2018.

¹¹ [Thailand: Proposal to upgrade higher education commission to full ministry gains ground](#). Study International, 2 February 2017.

Figure 5 Thailand's HE



Source: National Statistical Office

Key Education Policies

Educational investment and reform have played an important role in Thailand's transformation into an upper-middle-income economy within a few generations, particularly as a result of the 1999 National Education Act. However, there is currently considerable inequality between schools, particularly those in rural and urban areas. The curriculum was moderately revised in 2008 to take more of a learner-centred approach. Wide-ranging educational reform was announced prior to the 2014 coup, aimed at increasing the skills of the population and positioning Thailand as a regional education hub. Progress has since stalled and the curriculum does not currently equip graduates with the skills necessary to further Thailand's development plans.¹² In its 2017 education review, the OECD and UNESCO stressed that the country requires a long-term educational reform strategy that transcends political cycles. A poll from the country's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) in 2015 singled out the education system as the national institution in most urgent need of reform.

Reforms implemented by the military government initially focused on access to education, rather than the quality of outcomes. Nevertheless, 2018 was a bumper year for education. The Cabinet passed the National Education Bill, which mandated a comprehensive national education plan, established a fund to upgrade the quality of teachers and teacher-training institutes and gave greater autonomy to state schools so they could operate more independently.¹³

¹² Thailand: Education reforms as elusive as ever. Asian Correspondent, May 2017.

¹³ Cabinet pushes through three new bills on education. The Nation, 26 October 2018.

A new dual vocational education system will pair educational institutions with industry to train the country's future workers. Finally, and importantly, a new Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation was recently established, comprising four existing agencies: the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), the Science and Technology Ministry and the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). Key targets include an increase in the number of vocational study and work-based learning opportunities and producing around 115,000 skilled workers over a nine-year period, in line with the 20-year National Strategy and the Thailand 4.0 industrial policy. The reform is also being co-ordinated to fulfil estimated labour demand for the EEC (in Chachoengsao, Chon Buri, and Rayong provinces), and the need for the Kingdom to support foreign investments, especially in the aerospace and high technology industries. The government has published guidelines for foreign schools and universities to establish campuses in EEC area and to remove various legal and bureaucratic barriers to allow education experts and teachers from abroad to work in the EEC zone.

International Education

Outbound Study

Demand for English-language education has steadily increased in Thailand, as seen in the rapid growth in international schools, the number of private and public high schools that offer English programmes, and the tendency of Thai families to send children abroad for study – particularly for higher education. For example, in 2017 the Institute of International Education (IIE) found that more than half of Thai students studying in the US were enrolled in higher education programmes. According to US government statistics, many Thai students will enrol in an intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) programme before enrolling in a full academic programme.¹⁴ In 2016, UNESCO reported almost 30,000 Thai students studying abroad – a 14 per cent increase on the previous year. Two-thirds were studying in native English-speaking countries. Interviews by the British Council with agents and universities found that Thai students are becoming more interested in joint and dual degree partnerships, although the overall level of awareness remains low. Students generally see the partnerships (often involving two years in Thailand and two years overseas) as a lower-cost and more flexible alternative to a full overseas degree programme.¹⁵

Costs are largely borne privately, although successive governments have offered financial support to 5,000-6,000 undergraduate students each year across a number of schemes, including via its civil service commission. In most such cases, students are required to return to Thailand to work after graduation.

Before beginning undergraduate programmes overseas, Thai students usually need to attain further qualifications, such as GCE A-levels, or complete bridging programmes. The Thai upper-secondary qualification (the Mathayom Suksa 6) is broadly equivalent to GCSEs or Australian secondary graduation exams.

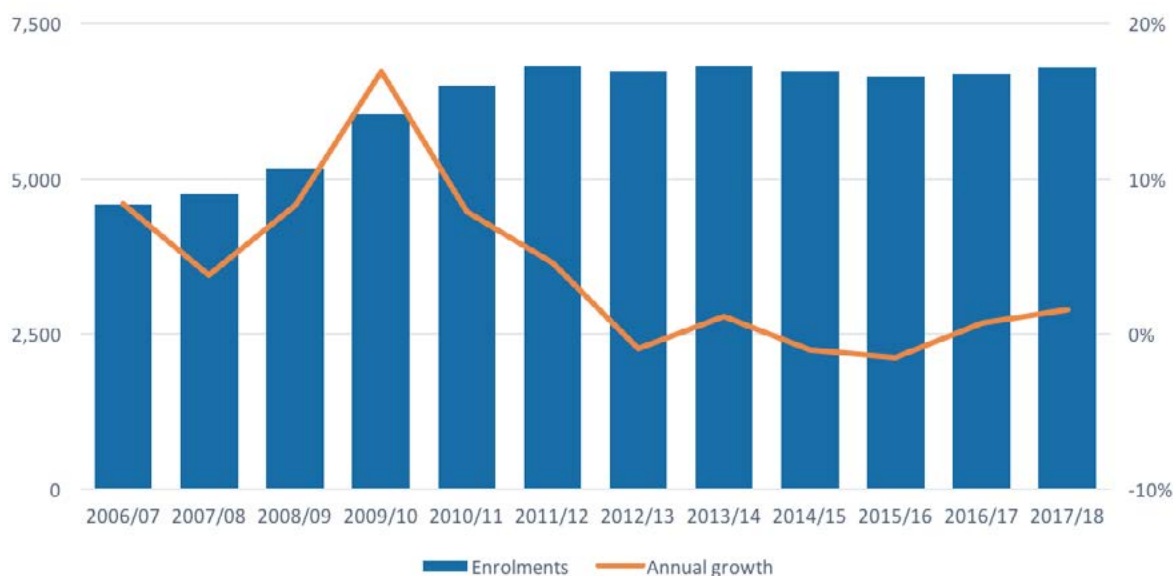
¹⁴ Thailand – Education Services, Export.gov, 24 July 2018; Thailand takes action to improve education standards, Oxford Business Group.
¹⁵ What does Thailand's new TNE policy mean? British Council, 7 June 2018.

UK Recruitment

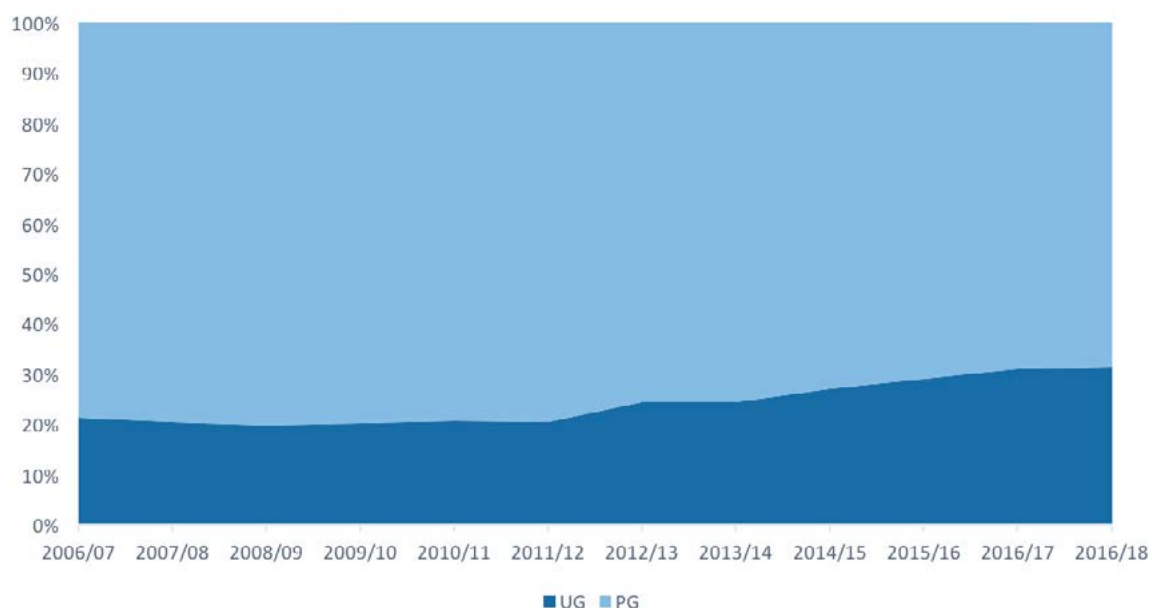
Thailand is the UK's 10th largest non-EU recruitment market (measured by total enrolments), with 6,785 students enrolled in 2017/18, according to HESA. Recent indicators point towards slight growth for the UK sector: new enrolments rose by 2 per cent in 2017/18, and UK study visa issuance meanwhile inched upwards by 1.1 per cent in 2018. While Thailand is predominantly a postgraduate market for the UK, undergraduate enrolments have grown more quickly since the 2011/12 academic year, with the proportion of undergraduate enrolments steadily climbing to 32 per cent in 2017/18, up from 21 per cent six years earlier.

Research carried out by the British Council at education fairs in Thailand indicates that perceived quality of education is the main driver for applications to UK institutions among Thai students. UK qualifications are well regarded among employers and the second-most common driver is career advancement, followed by the desire to improve English-language skills and gain international experience. Barriers include perceptions of high cost, particularly living costs, with few students aware that UK universities offer scholarships or bursaries. Language requirements are also prohibitive, with many students struggling to qualify for the level of proficiency required. For younger students, proximity was also found to be a consideration, as parents perceive Australia and New Zealand as more viable options. Restrictions on working while studying in the UK also play a role. Growth in the TNE market, and in dual degree agreements between Thai and British universities, may further raise the profile of UK institutions.

Figure 6 Thai Students in the UK



Source: HESA

Figure 7 UK Enrolments from Thailand – Undergraduates vs Postgraduates

Source: HESA

Subject Area Demand

Domestically, Business Management and the humanities have long been the most popular subjects among students. Enrolments in science-based subjects, particularly Engineering and Computer Science, are rising but remain modest by comparison.

UK enrolments from Thailand are dominated by postgraduate Business & Administrative Studies, which accounted for 44 per cent of all new Thai students entering UK HEIs in 2017/18. Engineering & Technology ranks a distant second, followed by Law and Social Studies (primarily driven by the subcategory of Economics). Computer Science experienced strong growth in new enrolments at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in 2017/18.

A 2018 US Commercial Service briefing reported that the most popular programmes among Thai students in the US in 2017 were Business Administration, Computer Science, Engineering and Mass Communication.¹⁶ It also observed a growing demand for qualified pilots and aviation industry specialists, given the country's plans to become a major hub for aviation maintenance, repair and overhaul.¹⁷

¹⁶ Thailand – Education Services, Export.gov, 24 July 2018.

¹⁷ Ibid.

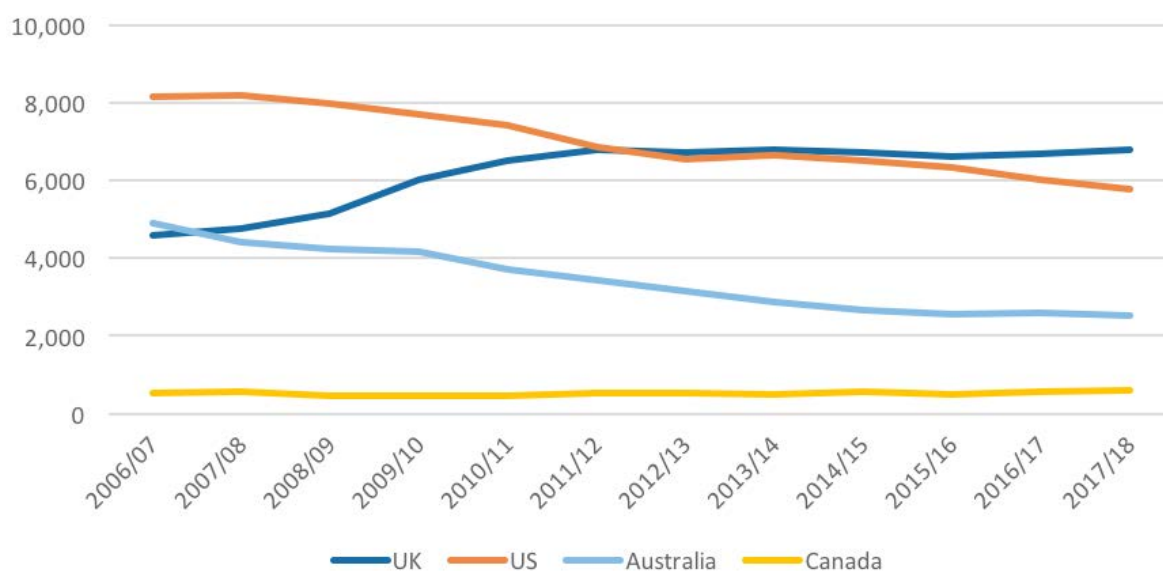
Figure 8 Change in New UK Enrolments by Broad Subject Area

	Total new UK enrolments in 2017/18	Undergraduate			Postgraduate		
		New UK enrolments in 2017/18	Change from previous year	5-year trend	v	Change from previous year	5-year trend
Business & administrative studies	1,990	215	-4.4%		1,775	5.7%	
Engineering & technology	375	165	10.0%		210	-2.3%	
Law	335	20	0.0%		315	1.6%	
Social studies	235	65	0.0%		170	-17.1%	
Creative arts & design	165	60	-20.0%		105	5.0%	
Languages	145	110	-4.3%		35	-30.0%	
Computer science	125	35	75.0%		90	28.6%	
Medicine & dentistry	95	40	-20.0%		55	37.5%	
Biological sciences	95	40	0.0%		55	-15.4%	
Subjects allied to medicine	85	30	0.0%		55	0.0%	
Physical sciences	85	25	-28.6%		60	0.0%	
Architecture, building & planning	70	20	0.0%		50	11.1%	
Education	65	5	-		60	20.0%	
Mathematical sciences	55	15	50.0%		40	-20.0%	
Mass communications	55	15	0.0%		40	14.3%	
Historical and philosophical studies	35	10	0.0%		25	25.0%	
Agriculture & related subjects	25	5	-		20	0.0%	
Combined	20	20	-20.0%		-	0.0%	
Veterinary science	-	-	-		-	0.0%	

Source: HESA

Competitor Activity

Figure 9 Thai Enrolments in Major English-Speaking Study Destinations



Sources: HESA; IIE; Austrade; StatCan

United States

Just under 5,800 Thai students were enrolled in higher education in the US in 2017/18, a decline of 12 per cent from five years earlier. Enrolments in programmes at the degree level or above are slightly skewed towards the undergraduate study (54 per cent), and this was the only level at which Thai enrolments grew in 2017/18. Many Thai students are self-funded and enrol at universities that offer ESL and English-intensive programmes before enrolling in academic programmes.¹⁸

Australia

Thailand once ranked among Australia's top ten sources of international students, but recruitment numbers at the HE level have declined steadily over the past decade. Today Thailand is the 18th largest sending market to Australia with enrolments down by 20 per cent from five years earlier. British Council surveys of student perceptions in Thailand have found that British and US universities are perceived as offering a higher quality of education than those in other English-speaking countries.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Canada

Despite the introduction of attractive post-study work policies, Canada's enrolments from Thailand have remained relatively small, reaching 552 in 2016/17.

Transnational Education

TNE in Thailand is still relatively undeveloped, especially compared to the country's outbound student numbers. According to the most recently published list of programmes, there was a total of eight active joint degree programmes and 79 dual or triple degree programmes at Thai HEIs in the 2015/16 academic year. Fourteen of these partnerships involve UK universities.

At present, the main mode of TNE delivery in the country is through joint and dual degree programmes. Thai universities have the power to award their own degrees without external approval, and this also applies to joint or dual degrees. However, OHEC reserves the right to "acknowledge" degrees awarded by Thai HEIs. Only acknowledged degrees are recognised by Thai public bodies, including the civil service and the public education system. In practice, universities always submit new degree programmes to OHEC for acknowledgement – this not only gives their students the widest possible range of career opportunities, but also indicates the quality of their courses.

Acknowledgement of a new degree programme is based largely on a curriculum review and whether that curriculum meets OHEC's Curriculum Standards Criteria, which are published for each subject area. Other government requirements include informing OHEC of the partnership within 30 days of its approval by the University Council, and assessment of the programme every three years to ensure that teaching and curriculum standards are being met. The results of this assessment should be submitted to OHEC, which can withdraw acknowledgement of the course based on these results (although it cannot directly order the course to close).

Beyond this acknowledgement, the Thai government has little involvement in the administration of universities' joint or double degree programmes. Tuition fees are set by the university councils and are not regulated by OHEC. Joint or double degree programmes can be offered at any level, based on any model (2+2, 3+1, etc.), and can be established in any part of the country.

In addition to OHEC's own acknowledgement, some courses in the country are accredited by relevant professional bodies such as the Council of Engineering. Similar to the case in the UK, this accreditation is not legally required in order for an institution to offer a degree, but it is essential for students in terms of professional recognition. According to one Thai university interviewee, meeting the requirements of the Council of Engineering accreditation was significantly more challenging than gaining approval from OHEC for the same course.

In 2017, Thailand's minister of Education announced plans to encourage "high-potential" overseas universities to establish branch campuses in Thailand. These campuses can be set up either independently or in co-operation with a local Thai HEI. Under the new policy, branch campuses can receive expedited approval under the process set out by Article 44 of the Thai constitution, which allows the government to promulgate laws without going through the normal legislative process, for reasons including "the sake of the reforms in any field". Approvals are judged by a committee headed by the minister of Education. (Our full 2018 report on Thailand's developing TNE opportunities can be found [here](#).)

Incentives for the establishment of branch campuses are decided on a case-by-case basis but are expected to be at least as attractive as those extended to non-profit private HEIs, which include exemption from taxes such as corporate income tax. Additional incentives for institutions that are set up in the EEC include exemptions from restrictions on foreign land ownership, relaxed visa measures for overseas staff and lower rates of personal income tax for employees.

One important restriction on branch campuses under the new policy is that they may only offer subjects related to the industries prioritised by the Thailand 4.0 policy, which aims to develop high-value and high-technology sectors. The overseas university should also be a “renowned foreign higher education institution”, a status that is not explicitly defined but that mainly depends on the university’s position in international rankings such as those published by QS or Times Higher Education.

So far, two new branch campuses have received approval under the new policy: a co-operation between Carnegie Mellon University (US) and King Mongkut’s Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, and a solely operated branch campus of National Taiwan University.

