

Brain Drain to Brain Gain: Give Them a Reason to Stay

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September 2025



Executive Summary

Thailand is facing a rising threat to its future workforce. Brain drain, the movement of skilled people abroad for better pay, opportunities and quality of life is easier than ever in a globalised world, and its effects on Thailand are already visible. As younger generations enter the job market, society and workplaces must recognise their changing needs and respond appropriately, as coupled with the country's demographic pressures, the need to keep and grow a strong workforce has never been greater. The question is clear, will Thailand make the changes needed to reverse brain drain, or will it keep watching its skills slip away.



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This report explains why people are leaving or not returning, and what can be done. It looks at pay gaps, workplace culture that still places emphasis on seniority, a shortage of roles in high-value sectors, and the pull of better benefits and faster learning abroad. It also indicates how Thailand can protect growth and stability when options are rising globally.

Current actions are limited. A single national initiative shows the issue is recognised, however, it fails to address those wanting to leave, and it is not designed at a large enough scale to make returning the chosen choice for most.

Proposed recommendations focus on making Thailand a place where skilled people can build a good career and life. Government should lift investment in research and modern industries to create high-value roles and apply proven ideas from abroad such as funded return fellowships that encourage the return of experienced Thais abroad. Employers should adapt culture to what this generation values by offering clear progression, space for ideas and innovation, alongside benefits that match changing needs. Together, these steps could make staying and coming back the chosen choice.

Brain Drain in Thailand: What is Happening?

An ageing society. A shrinking workforce. A political system filled with instability. And a rising proportion of Thailand's talents are voluntarily choosing to leave. But why should they stay? To earn lower wages in rigid hierarchies? To remain stagnant in environments with limited growth opportunities and constant instability? Today's generations have different needs, goals and aspirations, and Thailand must wake up and recognise this. Unless the system begins to truly value growth, opportunity, and stability, brain drain won't become brain gain. So here is the bottom line: Thailand must give its best and brightest a reason to stay, or risk losing the future.

Firstly, what is brain drain? The concept refers to the migration of skilled individuals from their home countries for reasons such as more career opportunities, higher wages, or an improved quality of life. Trends show an increasing threat to the nation's economic resilience, demographic stability and long-term growth¹.

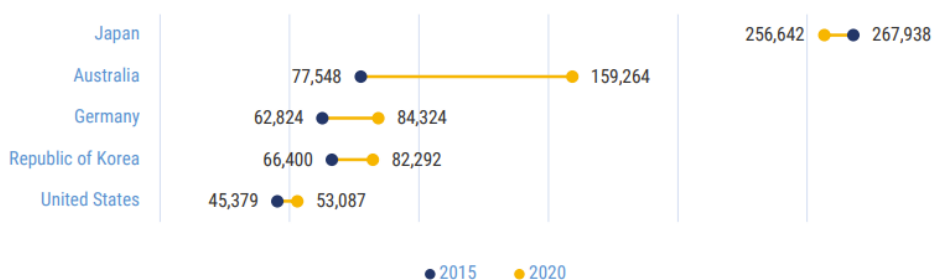
Emigration rates declined steadily between 2016 and 2019; however, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic reversed this trend extensively. Between June to July in 2020, the number of emigrants increased by 4 times the average, from approximately 500 to over 2,000 in a single month². Whilst these numbers may also include expats returning home amid the pandemic, the pattern continued through the following year, with annual emigration numbers climbing to almost 110,000 according to the Overseas Employment Administration Division.

The increase in emigration was also correlated with the rise of domestic protests in 2021³. Widespread disruptions occurred across the nation as the population, particularly the younger generation, demanded democratic change from military rule. This desperation for change was visible online. A Thai Facebook group called "Let's Move Abroad" rapidly grew to over half a million members in just four days, before being shut down by the government⁴. Other countries, such as Sweden, Japan, and Norway, used the moment to promote their labour rights, welfare systems, and career opportunities, aiming to attract Thai talent. This shows that the risk of brain drain is not only driven by the willingness of Thais to leave, but also by the active efforts of other nations to draw them away.

What is Happening?

Concrete data on the number of Thai nationals living abroad is limited, but estimates suggest that by mid-2020, over one million Thais were residing overseas⁵. The main destinations included the United States, South Korea, Germany, Australia, and Japan, with Australia being the fastest-growing destination. In 2023, an estimated 14,000 more Thais migrated to Australia than emigrated, marking significant increases in net migration compared to previous years.

Figure 7. Thai nationals living abroad as of mid-2015 and mid-2020

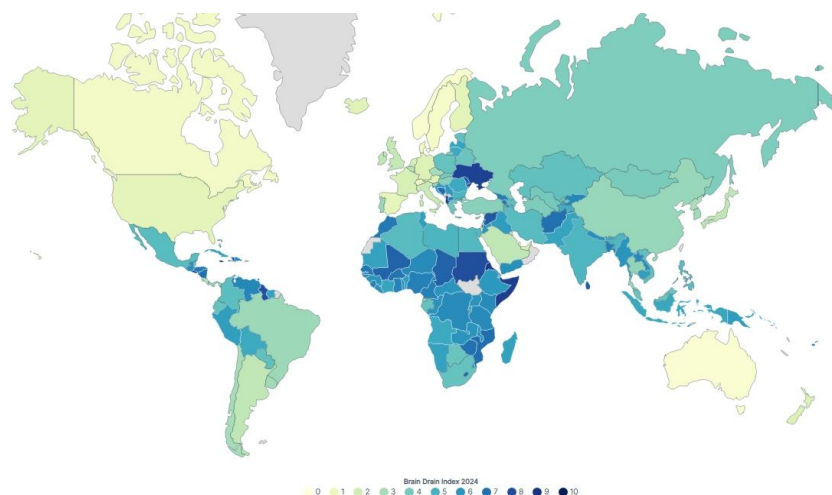


Source: Authors' compilation based on DESA, 2020)

<https://thailand.kom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbf137v/files/documents/2024-12/thailandmigrationreport2024.pdf>

Furthermore, survey findings indicate around 60% of Thais under 30 and nearly half of those with a Master's degree or higher are considering moving overseas⁶. This pattern is observed across most professions, with the preference to work abroad present in 19 out of 23 occupational groups.

Whilst Thailand's current brain drain index of 3.4⁷ is not at crisis levels compared to neighbouring countries, it is significant for a mature economy where brain drain should typically be lower. Coupled with Thailand's current demographic crisis, where increased productivity growth is crucial for economic advancement, losing skilled workers becomes an even large threat. In a globalised society where talent mobility is easier than ever, the urgent questions arise: What is driving Thailand's skilled workforce to seek opportunities elsewhere, and what will it take to motivate them to stay?



Why are they leaving?

The reasons behind Thailand's brain drain are multidimensional, involving both systemic issues and a misalignment between what the country offers and what today's skilled workforce seeks. Understanding these driving factors is essential to addressing the crisis.

Generational and Cultural Differences

A workplace culture characterised by respect, hierarchy and harmony, Thailand's culture has its own set of benefits. Harmony reduces conflict, whilst respect for seniority creates loyalty and ensures consistent service.

However, this traditional framework is failing to meet the expectations of today's skilled workforce. Traditionalist and baby boomer generations correlated success by security and long-term loyalty, where obedience held greater importance than individualism and age equaled authority⁸. By contrast, Gen Zs who are starting to dominate the workforce are fundamentally shaped by different values, seeking a professional identity shaped by autonomy, merit-based achievements and growth. They prioritise independence and creativity, and most importantly environments that allow them to learn, grow and lead regardless of their age or the number of years they have worked.

As such, this cultural and generational misalignment that is often present in workplaces across the nation becomes a significant threat. If organisations choose to continue this way, assuming seniority equals knowledge, they are guaranteed to lose the best of the workforce.

Exacerbating this issue is the rising number of students in Thailand's international education system, many of whom proceed to universities overseas. With almost 250 international schools and over 77,000 students enrolled domestically⁹, approximately 32,000 are currently pursuing higher education abroad¹⁰, due to better quality of education and greater facilities overseas. This international exposure further intensifies the cultural differences, making retention even more difficult.

Top destinations for education abroad include individualistic countries such as the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. Characterised by motivating personal achievement, independent thinking and self-reliance, these countries represent a clear departure from Thailand's collectivist environment, which stresses group harmony, standardised approaches and respect for authority.

As such, Thai students abroad are taught skills inconsistent with Thailand's society; they develop self-direction, spot problems, propose solutions, and speak up — behaviours less encouraged in traditionally deferential Thai settings. When these graduates consider returning to Thailand, they know they would face workplace cultures fundamentally different from those they have integrated into abroad, with these cultural differences compounding the existing generational divide.

If Thailand wants to reclaim this talent, its businesses must strategise. This means providing clear progression timelines, continuous learning and upskilling opportunities, and responsibilities that match the enhanced skillsets and international experience that the younger generation has come to expect. Without these adaptations, Thailand's most capable graduates will continue building their futures elsewhere, taking their foreign-acquired skills and knowledge with them.

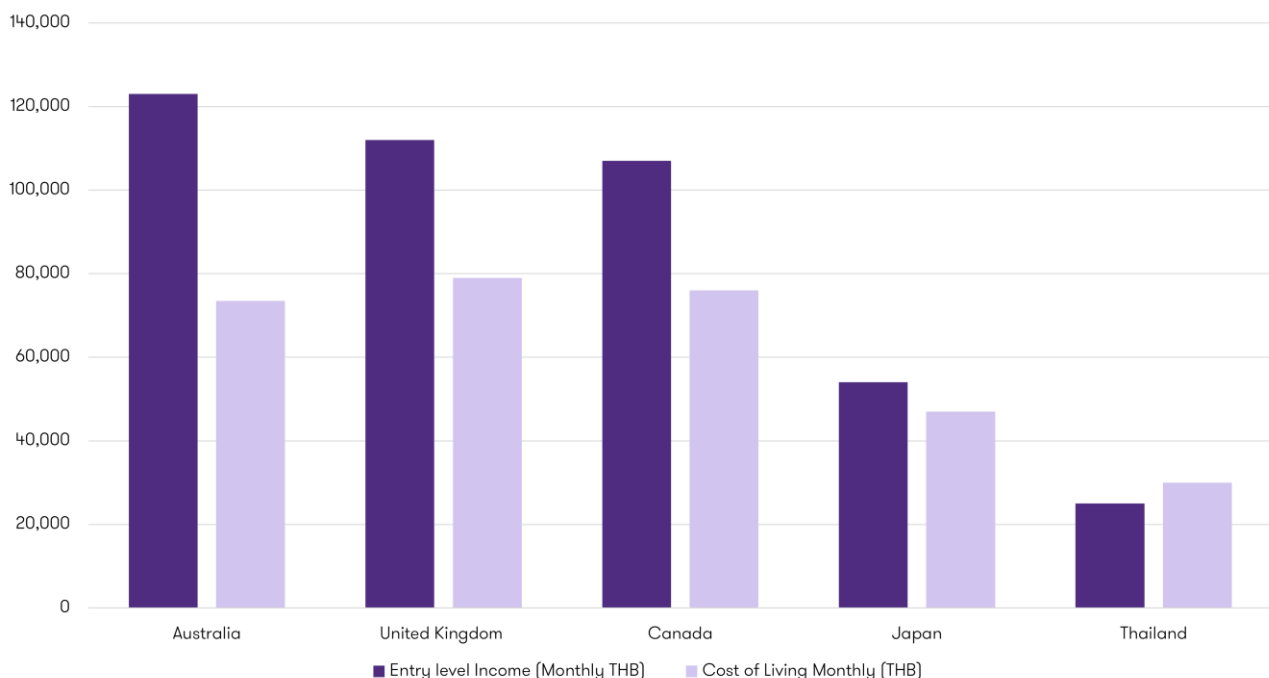
Why are they leaving?

Wages and Work-Life Balance

Another factor that pushes Thai individuals to move abroad is the wage differences between Thailand and the destination countries, as the latter are often more economically developed and provide higher incomes for the same roles. Whilst these developed countries often have higher living costs, the net financial benefit for skilled workers remains higher.

Numbers reveal this. For example, in Bangkok the legal minimum wage is around 400 Baht a day¹¹, whilst university graduates at an entry level position earn around 20,000-to-25,000 Baht monthly¹². With average living costs at 30,000 Baht a month excluding rent, this is not enough for people to survive, let alone save money.

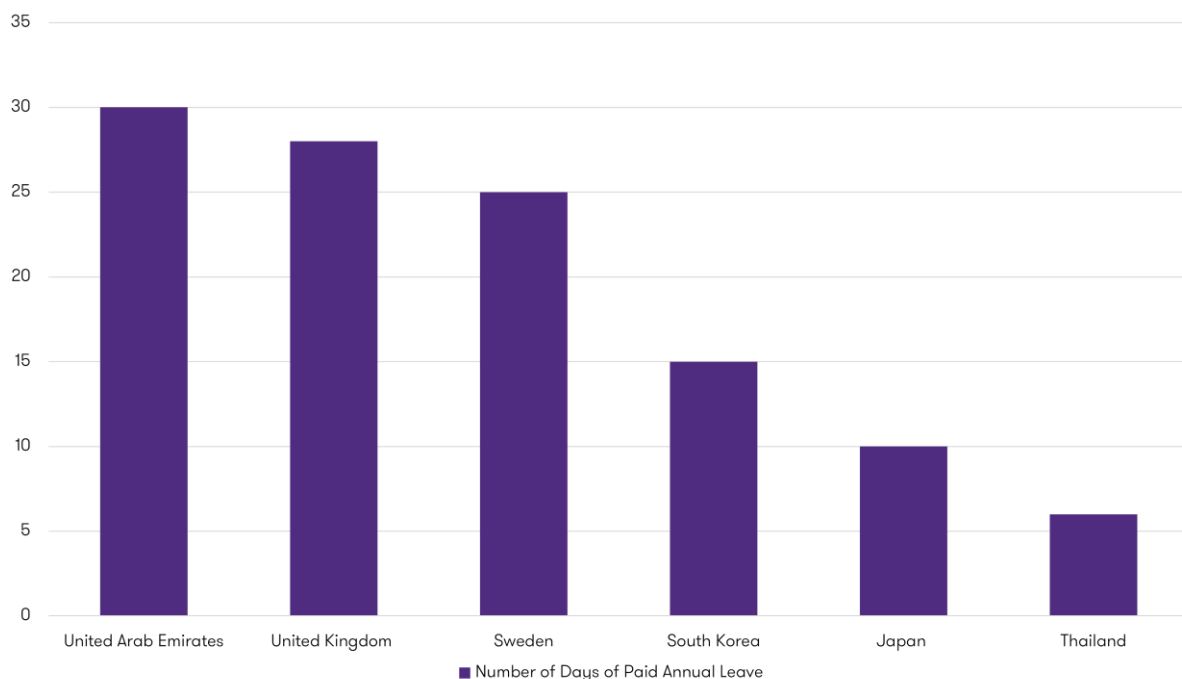
By contrast, Australia provides graduates with an average salary of around 5,900 Australian Dollars monthly¹³, with living costs including rent averaging around 3,500 Australian Dollars¹⁴. This adds up to roughly 2,000 Australian dollars saved or available as disposable income, equivalent to 40,000 Baht — nearly double a Thai graduate's entire salary. Similar patterns are seen across other high-income nations. Therefore, even after accounting for higher expenses, skilled workers in Australia retain significantly more savings and disposable income than in Thailand.



Sources: Indeed, AUM Global, PKF Thailand, Medium, Relocate.me, Glassdoor, TalentUp

Why are they leaving?

This financial advantage is particularly important for young professionals today who not only prioritise security but also value the ability to have disposable income for lifestyle pursuits and increased work-life balance. A survey findings indicate that a work-life balance sits as one of the top factors that Gen Z looks for in employees¹⁵. European countries satisfy this preference, with its legal minimum being four weeks of paid annual leave¹⁶, and the UK at around 28 days¹⁷. Comparatively, Thailand's legal minimum is 6 paid days after one year¹⁸, and while most private firms offer more, the gap remains wide, especially as employers abroad allow for extra leave to be bought¹⁹.



Sources: GOVUK, AYP, Conde Nast Traveler, FactoHR, Korean Labor Law, Skaud

Coupled with higher pay, this means more money each month and more time to use it. Therefore, if Thailand fails to offer similar incentives and benefits, its people could increasingly choose places that do so. In a globalised society, better pay, longer leave and flexibility are playing a greater role to determine where skilled talent decides to go.

Why are they leaving?

Opportunities

Beyond financial considerations, Thailand's limited career advancement opportunities in key sectors exacerbate the talent shortage with many individuals wanting and choosing to leave. The technology sector for example highlights this challenge, remaining underdeveloped in Thailand despite its rapidly growing global demand.

Data from the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) showed that although nearly 20,000 graduates annually complete a degree in computer science, the number of those graduates who join the IT industry is below 3,500²⁰. Although changing career preferences may partly explain this, the discrepancy between job supply and graduate demand is a significant contributing factor. Consequently, if many graduates in this field are unable to utilise their skillsets, this can motivate them to seek opportunities in more developed markets in meeting their needs, amplifying brain drain.

Research and development reveals a similar story, as funding constraints limit the growth of the field within Thailand. Spending on R&D has been consistently falling, from 1.32% of Thailand's GDP in 2020 to 1.21% in 2021 and 1.16% in 2022²¹. Further, Thailand has just over 1,800 researchers per million²², compared to averages of above 5000 in high-income nations²³. With less funding and fewer researchers, Thai professionals in R&D face limited projects, outdated facilities, and slower career progression. Why stay when you can do meaningful research abroad with better resources and faster advancement?

The problems go beyond just research and technology. Thailand's economy, whilst creating jobs in tourism, medical services, agriculture and more, has generally failed to achieve success within advanced and in-demand sectors today, including biotechnology, AI, design and arts. This is especially concerning as in a globalised world that is more interconnected than ever through social media and mass communication platforms, there is an increased awareness for the Thai workforce to see, compare and apply to opportunities meeting their needs globally. Thus, if Thailand wants to maintain its brightest workforce they must offer appropriate opportunities, as unlike previous generations, they will not simply settle for options available around, and failing to meet their needs will make leaving a tempting course of action.



44.7 Million workers
will be required in 2037



40.7 Million Thais will
be of working age in 2037

Strategies for future talent retention

Understanding brain drain and the factors driving it raises the question of how Thailand plans to respond. Currently, the only direct initiative that has emerged is a tax break programme aimed at bringing Thais back from overseas.

Under this scheme, individuals with at least 2 years of overseas experience and a Bachelor's degree will pay a maximum income tax of 17% for 5 years after returning, compared to the normal maximum of 35% for those earning 5 million baht or more annually²⁴. Employers will also benefit from this programme, whereby they will be able to 1.5 times their hiring expenses for these professionals. Registration is set to begin at the end of 2025, with incentives effective until 2029. The government estimates the scheme will bring back around 500 individuals, at a tax revenue cost of about 120 million Baht over 5 years.

By offering clear incentives toward repatriation, this initiative highlights Thailand's recognition of the problem and its willingness to take action. However, the projected figure of 500 returnees is extremely low when set against the scale of the problem. By 2037, the economy will require 44.7 million workers but is expected to have only 40.7 million working aged people²⁵, and more than a million Thais already live abroad. In that context, 500 returnees per year will be nowhere near enough to solve the issue. Limiting the scheme only to those who register is also restrictive, as it risks excluding those who might consider returning but are unaware of the programme, or who find the process too complex. If the aim is to attract people back home, the process must be simple and seamless.

Most importantly, whilst tax incentives may motivate some, it does not address the deeper systematic issues and push factors such as wages, career opportunities, political instability and work culture, factors which drive individuals away in the first place. Additionally, the scheme fails to address those who actively want to move abroad, as highlighted by the popularity of the "Let's Move Abroad" group.

Policy Recommendations

In facing the challenge and potential threat of brain drain, Thailand must implement strategies that will make significant improvements, addressing short and long-term factors contributing to talent loss.

Strategies for future talent retention

Government Measures

Firstly, the government must acknowledge the urgency of this issue and modify its approach. Suppressive measures, such as shutting down the “Let’s Move Abroad” group, will only increase the intent to leave by reducing trust between the population and government. What if the government instead tried to communicate and engage more effectively with the young population? What if they asked people why they want to leave and how it could be better for them to stay? Young people today are speaking up and speaking out, and they want to be heard. Listening and adapting to their needs should be the government’s first order of business, as censoring social media to maintain control of opinions is an ineffective and outdated framework.

For its long-term strategy, Thailand should take inspiration from countries that have managed to reverse brain drain. For example, India has strengthened its research environment by creating research parks at the Indian Institutes of Technology and allowing top foreign universities to establish local campuses, so that students can access international-quality education at home²⁶. Additionally, fellowship programmes such as Ramalingaswami²⁷ and Ramanujan²⁸ have offered competitive salaries, research funding, and opportunities in leading institutions for Indians abroad to promote brain gain.

China has also created recruitment programmes such as the Thousand Talent Plan, which aims to attract those in the fields of science and technology, particularly of Chinese descent, who have studied or worked overseas. This effort aims to reverse brain drain with competitive salaries, research funding and housing benefits²⁹. Singapore’s Public Service Commission Scholarship funds students to study either domestically or abroad in exchange for a set number of years of public service³⁰. This approach raises the skills and education levels of the workforce while ensuring that the benefits are reinvested back into the country.

Overall, the countries that have turned brain drain into brain gain share common strategies: They build R&D, strengthen education, and create incentives for talent to stay or return. Thailand is not doing this. Funding for R&D has been falling year after year, education funding for Bangkok public schools is lower than the city’s waste collection budget, and the only incentive being implemented is a tax break expected to bring back just 500 people. This is far from enough. Thailand needs to start offering real reasons for people to return, while actively communicating with them and adapting workplace culture to meet their expectations. The country still has time, but if meaningful action is delayed much longer, Thailand’s brain drain will turn into a crisis that cannot be reversed.

Brain Drain to Brain Gain: Strategies to keep them

Private Sector

Businesses can also play a crucial role in mitigating brain drain. Employers need to recognise what motivates today's professionals and provide the opportunities they seek to learn, grow and make an impact. Companies should set clear timelines for career progression, invest in training and upskilling, and create environments that encourage creativity, ideas and innovation.

Actively recruiting Thai professionals abroad can also be an advantage, as many return with broader skillsets gained from international education and work experience. Recruitment drives should be paired with relocation support, competitive salaries and flexible benefits such as additional leave and hybrid work options. These can make staying or returning to Thailand a far more attractive choice.

Ultimately, retaining talent is not just about pay. It is about building workplaces that reflect the needs of a changing workforce. If businesses adapt to match these expectations, then brain drain has the potential to shift into brain gain.

For help developing or implementing these strategies, get in touch with Grant Thornton in Thailand. Our experts can assist with everything from ideation to implementation and can even handle outsourced administrative tasks to let your organisation focus on its core activities. For more information, please visit our website at www.grantthornton.co.th, or contact Chris Cracknell, Chairman of Grant Thornton Thailand, at Chris.Cracknell@th.gt.com.

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