

“WHAT JOB CAN I DO?”: ANXIOUS TEACHERS IN EMPTY CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

The continuous decline in Thailand's birthrate has disrupted population growth over the past 30 years. This impact is now evident, as hundreds of university classrooms sit empty. Lecturers find themselves with no students to teach, rendering them redundant in the workforce. This study aims to investigate university lecturers' concerns about job security. Survey questionnaires were distributed to 30 lecturers from four universities. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with six lecturers, two of whom were already unemployed. The findings revealed that lecturers expressed a neutral level of concern regarding potential layoffs. The unemployed lecturers are not facing significant struggles, as they receive strong financial support from home. However, the position of university lecturer is no longer seen as secure as it once was, and lecturers must prepare themselves for the employment uncertainties arising from the declining number of students.

Keywords: Empty classrooms, Lecturers, Decreased population

INTRODUCTION

Thailand used to witness a million births each year, but that was 30 years ago. In 2022, only 502,107 children were born in the country with an almost 70 million population, while the death rate

was recorded at 595,965. The population deficit increased to 93,858 last year. There were more deaths than births for the second consecutive year in the country's recorded history (Thairath, 2023). This sent

shockwaves among academics and country leaders as it indicated that the diminishing population meant a scarce workforce for the country's development.

Educators at all levels began to feel the impact. There were 445,364 seats offered for first-year students at 200 universities, but only 370,000 seats were taken (MGR Online, 2019). When classrooms are empty, lecturers become a financial burden for the school. There will be a significant impact on primary and secondary schools as well. Currently, there are 29,583 schools all over the country, but 14,958 of them have fewer than 120 students. Many of these will have no students, and closure is imminent (Noparak, 2022).

The population decline can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, there has been a decline in fertility rates over the past few decades. Economic development and urbanization have led to changing lifestyles, with more individuals pursuing higher education and professional careers. As a result, couples are opting to have fewer children or delaying childbearing. Furthermore, increased access to family planning services and contraception methods has contributed to a decrease in the number of births (Tangcharoensathien et al., 2018).

Other countries are experiencing the same phenomenon. Japan, for instance, has seen its fertility rate drop from 4.54 in 1947 to a record low of 1.26 in 2005 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020), leading the country to face an aging population and labor shortage.

One factor contributing to the declining population in Thailand is an aging population. The country is witnessing a rapid increase in the proportion of elderly individuals. Advances in healthcare, improved living conditions, and better access to healthcare services have led to increased life expectancy. This demographic shift, known as population aging, poses challenges for the country's social security systems, healthcare infrastructure, and labor market. The United Nations Population Division (2019) projects that by 2040, the proportion of people aged 65 and above will reach 25% in Thailand.

Even though the government is trying to encourage people to have babies with promised benefits, it still takes time. Addressing the complex issue of declining population requires a comprehensive approach that considers social, economic, and cultural factors (Kinsella & He, 2009). The reality is that university lecturers now feel the impacts nearest to them as many classrooms become empty and

they see their co-workers being dismissed from their jobs. They feel the uncertainty of their profession, and their future is insecure. This study surveyed their opinion about their worries, and some of them were interviewed so we can understand the issue deeply and comprehend how they are preparing themselves for this changing world.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to investigate the worries of university lecturers regarding their employment status. Additionally, it examined the lives of unemployed lecturers who are struggling outside the university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The origin of the oversupply of university seats was believed to occur after 1999 when Thailand encountered the financial crisis and was rescued by the IMF-International Monetary Fund, which required the government to remove financial support from government-owned universities. This action helped increase the country's financial liquidity amid all limitations. The government universities had to seek income by themselves, so they opened many marketable programs to attract more students,

resulting in increased income. However, many programs were opened outside the niche or expertise of the universities, leading to an oversupply of university seats across the country. With the decreasing birthrate nowadays, classrooms in 80 government universities are empty. Unwanted teachers were laid off to fend for themselves in the world (Thairath, 2018).

Many lecturers were not trained to prepare themselves for the changing world so they lose the job and struggle to find a job to feed themselves and their family. Legal suits were made against their university. The lengthy legal fight in court drained their finance as well as psychological strength. Their voices were heard in the news and social media about the unfairness of the unemployment and the problems they are facing after losing the job. However, the reality cannot be changed that the world keeps changing and human need to adjust or else perished.

The changing world made students not want to study in some programs that have little chance to make money after graduation. The programs with less students are statistics, mathematics, economics, physics, information technology management, computer science. Thai students considered them too difficult to study.

Some programs that are not popular nowadays were closed down such as anthropology, philosophy and history, as these will not make the graduates make much money after graduation. Lecturers in these fields will become useless for the university. The universities will keep or open the programs that entice the students to enroll. Meanwhile, some hot programs like nursing and medicine are wanted as the country becomes the aging society and the graduates will surely find the job.

University lecturers should be aware of the uncertainty of the job nowadays. They have to accept the truth or else they do not prepare for the unemployment they may have to face. One framework about the preparation for the changing world is VUCA and BANI. These two frameworks help organizations navigate and understand the challenges and complexities of today's business environment. Both frameworks provide valuable insights into different aspects of the business landscape, enabling leaders to develop strategies to thrive in uncertain times.

First described in 1985 by economists and university professors Bennis & Nanus (2007) in their book *Leaders: strategies for taking charge*, the challenges posed to management and leadership by various

external factors and what the consequences are for corporate leadership. In the early 1990s, the US Army War College's General Maxwell Reid Thurman responded to the collapse of the USSR with VUCA. VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity): VUCA is an acronym that describes the key characteristics of the current business environment. Each letter in VUCA represents a distinct element: 1) Volatility refers to the rapid and significant changes that occur in the business environment. It involves the unpredictable nature of market dynamics, emerging technologies, and global events that impact businesses. 2) Uncertainty reflects the lack of predictability and the inability to accurately forecast future events or outcomes. It arises due to various factors such as political, economic, and technological disruptions. 3) Complexity denotes the intricate and interconnected nature of today's business landscape. Organizations must deal with multifaceted problems, diverse stakeholders, and intricate networks of relationships. 4) Ambiguity refers to the lack of clarity and the existence of multiple interpretations or viewpoints. Decision-makers often face incomplete information and conflicting signals, making it challenging to make informed choices.

VUCA implies that organizations need to be agile, adaptable, and ready to embrace change in order to thrive in this complex environment. Leaders must cultivate a strategic mindset and develop flexible strategies to navigate the uncertainties and challenges posed by VUCA.

Cascio (2022) presented the updated framework – BANI – during an IFTF (Institute for the Future) event, where he is the distinguished fellow. In Cascio's view, the tools of the VUCA framework don't help us to understand what will happen. BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-Linear, and Incomprehensible): It represents another perspective on the challenges of the current business landscape. Each letter in BANI corresponds to a distinct characteristic: 1) Brittle signifies the fragility of traditional systems and structures. In an era of rapid change, organizations that are inflexible and resistant to adaptation are more likely to break under pressure. 2) Anxious reflects the emotional and psychological state induced by the uncertainty and complexity of the business environment. Organizations and individuals may experience anxiety due to the constant need to adapt and the fear of falling behind. 3) Non-Linear denotes the lack of clear cause-and-effect

relationships in the business landscape. Traditional linear thinking and problem-solving approaches may not be effective in addressing complex and interconnected challenges. 4) Incomprehensible represents the difficulty in understanding and making sense of the business environment. The complexity and rapid pace of change can make it challenging to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

BANI emphasizes the need for organizations to foster resilience, embrace ambiguity, and develop new approaches to problem-solving. It encourages leaders to build adaptable systems, prioritize learning and experimentation, and foster a culture that can thrive in a non-linear and uncertain environment.

Besides, Thailand has experienced a significant decline in its birth rate over the past few decades. Factors such as economic development, urbanization, and changing societal norms have contributed to this decline. The availability of education and employment opportunities, particularly for women, has led to a decrease in fertility rates. Moreover, increased access to family planning services and contraceptive methods has played a crucial role in controlling and reducing the number of births.

According to the National Statistical Office (2006) the total fertility rate in Thailand decreased from 6.3 in the mid 1960s to 2.1, the level needed to maintain a stable population, in the late 1980s, and decreased further to 1.5 in 2006.

The decrease in population growth rate in Thailand has significant implications for the country's economy and social structure. A declining population can lead to labor shortages and a shrinking workforce, which can negatively impact productivity and economic growth. Additionally, the shift towards an aging population places a burden on healthcare and social welfare systems, as elderly individuals require increased healthcare services and support. To address these challenges, the Thai government has implemented policies to encourage childbirth and support families, such as providing financial incentives and improving maternity and childcare services. However, addressing the complex issue of declining population requires a comprehensive approach that considers social, economic, and cultural factors.

Thailand has also witnessed a decline in its death rate, indicating improvements in healthcare, living conditions, and overall population health. The country has made significant strides in reducing mortality rates through the expansion of healthcare services, advancements in medical technology, and improved public health interventions. According to the World Bank (2021), the crude death rate in Thailand decreased from 9.8 deaths per 1,000 population in 2000 to 7.3 deaths per 1,000 population in 2019. This decline reflects the country's success in providing better healthcare and preventive measures, leading to increased life expectancy and a lower mortality rate.

In summary, university lecturers should be aware of the changing world and the uncertainty of the socio-economic environment of the country and the world, so they can prepare themselves for these changes. If they are aware of this, the impacts of meeting all the changes in life, work, and psychology will not be too much to bear.

Conceptual Framework

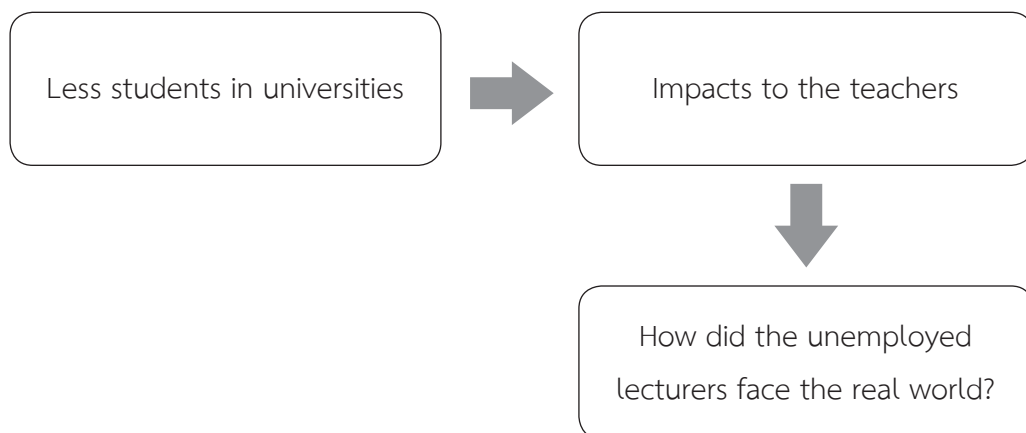


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. For the quantitative aspect, a set of online questionnaires was randomly distributed to 30 university lecturers. The questions were generally related to the level of their worry about their job security. For the qualitative aspect, in-depth interviews were conducted with six university lecturers selected through purposive sampling, two of whom were recently unemployed. The data obtained from these questionnaires was then analyzed alongside documentation concerning the unemployment of university lecturers.

RESEARCH RESULTS

I distributed the questionnaires randomly online to university lecturers and it was found out that the answers were from four different universities. Two of them are government-owned, and the rest belong to the private sector. Out of the 30 sets distributed, 29 were returned (96% return rate). All of the respondents have worked for over 10 years teaching at the university level. Only two of them are male. The respondents' agreement levels were measured using Likert's scale of 5 (1=lowest, 2=low, 3=neutral, 4=high, 5=highest).

Table 1 Lecturers' opinion about their job

(N = 29)

	Statements	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1.	I am worried about losing my job.	3.27	1.25
2.	I am worried about the family expenses.	3.62	1.01
3.	I have confidence that I can find a new job easily.	3.37	0.82
4.	I have confidence that my university will not lay off teachers.	3.17	1.31
5.	I feel secured in my job.	3.24	1.05
6.	I have faith in my team leader.	3.31	0.89
7.	I am happy to work with my team.	3.48	0.68
8.	I have confidence in the country's socio-economy that it can help me find a new job easily.	2.51	0.98
9.	I have outstanding professional skills that are wanted by the market.	3.37	0.67
10.	My job contributes a lot to the society and this country.	4.37	0.62

The respondents' level of worry about losing their job is neutral ($\bar{X} = 3.27$), while their concern about family expenses is slightly higher ($\bar{X} = 3.62$). When asked about their confidence in finding a new job, their confidence level remains neutral ($\bar{X} = 3.37$), indicating that their confidence is not high. They express uncertainty about whether their university will lay them off or not ($\bar{X} = 3.17$). Their trust in their university is neither high nor low. The respondents' feeling of job security is also neutral ($\bar{X} = 3.24$), indicating that they do not feel entirely secure in their positions. When asked about their trust in their team leader, it remains neutral ($\bar{X} = 3.31$), suggesting

a moderate level of trust. Their satisfaction with staying on their team is also neutral ($\bar{X} = 3.48$). Statement No. 8 is particularly interesting, as it indicates that their trust in the country's socio-economy is low ($\bar{X} = 2.51$). This sentiment may be influenced by the recent change in government following the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused economic slowdown worldwide. Their confidence in their professional skills is neutral ($\bar{X} = 3.37$), indicating that it is not particularly high. Statement No. 10 reveals their belief that their job contributes to society and the country ($\bar{X} = 4.37$), which is a high level of belief.

In-depth interviews with the lecturers

Six university lecturers were subjected to this semi-structured, in-depth interview. Among them, four (Lecturer A, B, C, and D) are currently employed, while the remaining two (Lecturer E and F) were recently unemployed. All participants expressed a significant level of concern about their job security and future prospects. The interview comprised four questions: 1) Are you worried about your job and future? 2) Do you have confidence in your professional competence to secure a new job if necessary? 3) What are your thoughts on the role of a university lecturer in the present day? 4) What impacts have you experienced in your life following unemployment (only applicable to the unemployed)? Here are some excerpts from the interviews.

Lecturer A expresses his concerns: *"I'm worried about my future as I'm nearing retirement. My health is not good, and my child is still in school while my wife does not have an income. I need to continue working for many years to support the family. ... We have fewer students at the university, and we even laid off 11 teachers last year. This shows that the problem is real, not just a threat. ... The fear of losing my job is overwhelming because we do not*

have enough students to teach. I can feel the fear in my team easily. We have started to quarrel sometimes, as if we wanted to decide who should be kicked out and who should be kept. The atmosphere is negative. ...I don't have any confidence that I can find a new job if I am let go. I might end up becoming a taxi driver, who knows?...All my friends at the university must feel the same uncertainty about their jobs. Having fewer students at the school upsets all of us. Talks of being laid off have become our daily norm. The fear is palpable, and it's not good for our morale. The worst thing is that I've never had a Plan B for my future." Teacher A is currently teaching at a government university. He is 58 years old and holds a PhD.

Lecturer B shares her perspective: *"I don't fear losing my job much because my program still has a lot of students. I believe programs with fewer students will experience much more fear. However, if I were to lose my job right now, I am certain I could easily find another because I possess skills and experiences that others don't. ... The job of a university lecturer is no longer secure due to numerous disruptions. Students may opt not to attend university and pursue degrees through other means. ...The quality of education at the university*

is also questionable, as teachers are often preoccupied with other tasks and lack time for students. The government's misguided priorities continuously divert teachers' attention away from student support, resulting in fewer high-quality graduates entering the job market. Additionally, there is a lack of passion among teachers nowadays, as many do not prioritize student welfare." Lecturer B, aged 55 and holding a PhD, previously worked as a cabin crew for 12 years. She currently teaches at a government university.

Lecturer C: "My program has been closed because there are no students. I've been transferred to another program that I don't like much. I had already prepared myself for the possibility of losing my job. However, I consider myself lucky that my family has a small business, so I can assist them if needed. I don't worry much about finding a new job. ...Working as a university lecturer nowadays is not secure due to problems like low birth rates and declining enrollment. The job that used to be good in the past is not so anymore. Additionally, the benefits for teachers are low. For example, we have to cover all medical expenses without any assistance from the university. ...I also have concerns about the process for selecting supervisors. I have a difficult boss here, which has made

me unhappy with my job." Lecturer C, aged 52, plans to resign in the next two years to assist her family's business.

Lecturer D expresses, "My level of worry is around 40%. It's not significant because I currently hold an important position that requires high skills, which not just anyone can replace. I possess specific skills that others don't have, so I know I am valued by the university at present. ...The role of a lecturer nowadays is not as appealing as it once was. We frequently see colleagues being let go due to declining student numbers. It's disheartening to witness friends losing their jobs, but it's a reality we must acknowledge. ...To secure your position, you must continuously enhance your skills to become indispensable. ...Even if I were to be let go for some reason, I am confident I could find a new job without much difficulty due to my high level of expertise in my field." Lecturer D, aged 58 and holding a PhD, currently serves as the head of a PhD program. She considers herself a workaholic, highly self-motivated, and a goal-driven professional.

Lecturer E shares, "I don't worry much about being a teacher because I have several options for making a living. I don't necessarily have to be a university lecturer. ... It's evident nowadays that the job of

a university lecturer is insecure due to the declining number of students, attributed to the decreasing birth rate, right? ...Out of necessity, I left my job to take care of my family. I find myself happier now than I was as a lecturer. I don't even have plans to search for a job at the moment. It's not a pressing matter for me. Despite having no income, I am not worried as our family still has some assets to support our lifestyle." Lecturer E, aged 53, recently resigned from a government university and opted to reside with her family in a beachfront home in southern Thailand. Almost every day, she takes leisurely walks on the white sandy beach with her family members. Additionally, she pursues a PhD as a hobby.

Lecturer F expresses, *"My university dismissed me. I had dedicated ten years of hard work to them, and this is what I received in return. Teaching at the university was my life's passion. Now, my heart is shattered, and I have no desire to return to that job. Fortunately, my family can provide financial support, but I must bear the pain of this broken heart alone. ... The reason for my dismissal? I lacked an academic title. It wasn't just me; dozens of others were also let go at the same time due to this requirement. Everyone shares the sentiment that it's unjust treatment*

from the university they deeply love. This policy needs to be revised." Lecturer F, aged 48, is currently employed at her family business and has no intention of applying to any universities.

RESULTS CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Before the research started, I anticipated that most lecturers would be overwhelmingly worried about losing their jobs. This perception stemmed from the prevalent news and social media discourse, all indicating that university lecturers would soon face job losses due to the declining number of students. The atmosphere within my program and other programs at my university was also filled with fear. However, when I administered the questionnaires and conducted interviews, the results did not fully support my belief. The findings indicated that their worry was at a neutral level, as reflected in all questionnaire responses. The fear level was not as high as I had expected.

They expressed concern about their family expenses at a neutral level. Their confidence in finding a new job was also at a neutral level. Many of the respondents' statements fell within the neutral range. However, upon closer examination, it was noted that some figures

were higher than others. For instance, their worry about family expenses was at a neutral level ($\bar{X} = 3.62$), while their confidence that the university would not lay off teachers was slightly lower ($\bar{X} = 3.17$). This suggests that they lack confidence in their university, with 3.17 being the lowest within the 'neutral' range, nearly touching the 'low' level threshold of 2.0. This reinforced my belief that they do not trust their university. Moreover, almost everyone I interviewed mentioned knowing someone who had been laid off by the university and expressed fears that they might suffer the same fate. One interviewee recounted losing 11 co-teachers who were dismissed from the university last year. The layoffs shocked everyone, as none of them had applied for academic titles on time, as stipulated in their contracts, resulting in the university council voting to terminate their contracts. One undisclosed factor contributing to the declining job security is the decreasing number of students. University management needs to reduce the number of teachers accordingly. While they may cite contract violations as reasons for dismissal, they do not recruit new teachers to replace them. Additionally, when some teachers reach the retirement age of 60, the university does not recruit replacements, as the management aims to reduce the number of teachers.

Suchatchawee Suwansawat, Chair of the Council of University Presidents of Thailand, declared that over 120,000 seats in universities were vacant in the academic year 2019, stating, "Very soon, our universities will face a crisis" (MGR Online, 2018).

Respondents expressed satisfaction with their team at a neutral level ($\bar{X} = 3.48$), indicating that they are still content working with their team. However, when asked about their trust in their team leader, their opinions were at a neutral level ($\bar{X} = 3.31$). I included the 'leader' in the question because the leader can be a decisive factor in retaining or terminating employment. Many studies have highlighted the significant influence of leaders on employees' decision to leave organizations. This is supported by Gibson & Petrosko (2014), who found that trust in a leader directly affects job satisfaction and the intent to leave the job.

Respondents expressed low confidence in the country's socio-economic environment, with confidence levels at a low level ($\bar{X} = 2.51$), the lowest number in the survey. This reflects their lack of trust in the country's socio-economy at present. This lack of trust may stem from the recent change in government following the general elections and the country's slow recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly affected world trade, the economy, and job

security, as confirmed by Naseer et al. (2023). The pandemic is considered the worst global phenomenon since WWII.

Surprisingly, their confidence in finding a job and their belief in their professional skills are both at a neutral level ($\bar{X} = 3.37$). In fact, the two statements in the questionnaires are somewhat similar. This may stem from the fact that all of them hold at least a master's degree, with many respondents being PhD holders, indicating a high level of proficiency in their field. They would not be overly concerned about finding a new job if the need arose.

The most notable change in respondents' opinions was regarding their job's contribution to society and the country, which was rated at a high level ($\bar{X} = 4.37$). This strongly indicates their faith in the significance of their work. By believing that their job contributes positively to society, they derive a sense of satisfaction, aligning with the findings of Moynihan et al. (2015) who noted a correlation between workers' sense of contribution and their happiness levels. When individuals believe their job is making a difference, it enhances their job satisfaction.

The results from the interviews are intriguing. Out of the six participants, three hold PhDs, while one has recently resigned to pursue a PhD as a personal

endeavor. Another one was recently dismissed by the university. Notably, three of them hold PhDs, indicating financial stability, as pursuing a PhD in Thailand typically requires substantial financial investment, suggesting these individuals are financially well-off. Moreover, obtaining a PhD signifies a high level of professional expertise in their respective fields, as it is the highest level of education attainable. The PhD holders also likely enjoy higher incomes compared to other teachers. It's understandable why most of them express little concern about their job security, as they are already considered elite members of society. Some even have family businesses to fall back on in case of job loss. Without strong financial support, attaining a PhD in Thailand would be nearly impossible. Additionally, most government universities provide financial support for teachers pursuing PhDs, with the expectation that they return to teach upon completion.

However, one interviewee, Lecturer A, expressed concern about job security, citing proximity to retirement age and familial responsibilities. Interestingly, those who left their jobs for different reasons or were dismissed did not experience significant financial strain, indicating strong support from their families.

Lecturer F claimed that she and her colleagues were dismissed due to a lack of academic titles. She was supposed to attain the position of ‘assistant professor’ as indicated in her contract. When she failed to do so, her contract was terminated. In 2022, there were 14,604 Assistant Professors, 6,692 Associate Professors, and 869 Professors in Thailand (Higher Education Commission, 2022). The requirements for each rank were clearly outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation, and most universities regularly provide training to help teachers meet these requirements. Attaining academic titles is not an insurmountable challenge.

The concepts of VUCA and BANI remind us to be vigilant about the constant changes in our environment. As teachers, we must prepare ourselves for potential job loss and actively seek opportunities for professional development to remain competitive. By continuously upgrading our skills, we can increase our confidence in finding new job opportunities, if necessary. One interviewee expressed concern about a scarcity mentality among team members, where resources are viewed as limited, leading to unhealthy competition. Covey (1999) advocated for an abundant mentality, where team members treat

each other equally and celebrate each other’s successes. By fostering a supportive environment, individuals can thrive and achieve their goals.

From the perspective of university management, an imbalance in the institution’s accounts necessitates action. With declining student numbers, some faculties and staff may no longer be needed. Laying off employees may be necessary for the university’s survival, as maintaining a balanced budget is crucial. Additionally, universities typically require lecturers and staff to continually advance academically to remain competitive. Dismissing those who fail to meet these requirements ensures that the institution remains dynamic and competitive in the academic landscape.

CONCLUSION

The decreasing population in the country has led to empty classrooms in many universities in Thailand. Lecturers have become redundant and their roles diminished. Countless teachers have been laid off across the country. Lecturers no longer view their jobs as secure or enticing, despite their love for the profession. Witnessing their colleagues lose their jobs has instilled worry in them. The BANI world has become a reality for teachers, and

they must prepare themselves for an uncertain future, or else their families will face difficulties. It's time for university lecturers to be vigilant about their lives and futures. If they haven't formulated a plan B yet, now is the time to do so.

Limitation: The opinion survey was conducted with a small sample of university lecturers, and the interviews with six lecturers were conducted for the author's convenience. To obtain more credible information on the issue, a larger-scale study is recommended.

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