Navigating Uncertainty: The Role of VUCA and BANI Frameworks in Educational Leadership Strategies

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ABSTRACT

In a world marked by a rapid change and unpredictability, educational leaders must respond to complex challenges with adaptability and strategic vision. The VUCA framework - Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity – provides a structured lens for navigating uncertainty by promoting vision, understanding, clarity, and agility. However, the emotional and psychological toll of constant change also demands the insights of the BANI framework – Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible- which addresses fragility, anxiety, and sudden disruptions. This article critically examines how the integration of VUCA and BANI frameworks can enhance educational leadership strategies in times of stability. It highlights the need for adaptive leadership, innovation, stakeholder engagement, institutional trust, emotional intelligence, and effective communication. Integrating the principles of VUCA and BANI enables leaders to build agile leadership models that support participatory decision-making, resilience, and psychological well-being. The article also considers future directions for educational leadership, advocating for multidisciplinary research into the practical applications of these frameworks. It calls for policy reform to address the evolving demands of education systems in volatile environments. By drawing insights from both models, this article argues for leadership strategies that priorities adaptability, well-being, and institutional stability. Together, VUCA and BANI offer powerful tools for navigating complex educational landscapes and achieving sustainable, meaningful outcomes.

Keywords: educational leadership, VUCA, BANI, leadership strategies

INTRODUCTION

In an era of rapid change and unpredictability, educational leaders (ELs) must manage complex challenges with adaptability and strategic vision. The VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) framework provides a structured approach to managing such conditions by emphasizing vision, understanding, clarity and agility. However, as challenges grow more intense and emotionally taxing, the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) framework offers a complementary lens. It addresses the psychological and systemic fragilities of contemporary crises. While both frameworks originated in military and business contexts, they offer timely insights for education systems facing mounting pressures from technological disruption, socio-political shifts, and global uncertainty. The VUCA framework helps leaders develop structured responses to the different types of situations, while BANI offers a more nuanced perspective that recognises the fragility of systems, the anxiety caused by rapid change, the non-linear nature of modern challenges and the incomprehensibility of certain disruptions.

In recent years, ELs are increasingly required to balance the dual imperative of maintaining institutional stability while fostering innovation. In addition, they are tasked to respond to the needs of different stakeholders and ensuring equal access to quality education. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark example, exposing the brittleness of traditional systems and the non-linear effects of disruption on student learning and well-being. In such volatile contexts, rigid leadership models often fall short, highlighting the need for emotionally intelligent, resilient, and adaptive strategies (Codreanu, 2016; Horney et al., 2010; Kaivo-oja & Lauraeus, 2018; Rimita et al., 2020).

The VUCA and BANI frameworks provide valuable lenses through which ELs can navigate the challenges and complexities of the 21st century. Research shows that effective leadership in VUCA situations requires adaptability and the ability to manage complexity (Nemashakwe & Kayawe, 2024). Similarly, the BANI framework highlights the importance of understanding systemic fragilities and psychological effects of fear in organisations (Tshetshe, 2025). When used together, these frameworks help ELs develop critical competencies to respond proactively to crises, support staff and students, and maintain stability in uncertain conditions. This integrated approach not only addresses immediate disruptions but also fosters long-term resilience and institutional stability. The purpose of this article is to explore how educational leaders can practically apply the principles of VUCA and BANI to enhance decision making, promote well-being and strengthen the responsiveness of their institutions in real-world setting. In doing so, it offers practical strategies for leading effectively in volatile environments and building future-ready educational ecosystems.

Vuca And Bani Frameworks

Vuca Framework

The VUCA and BANI concepts are an important tool for understanding and coping with the complexity and unpredictability of modern management tasks in education. The VUCA concept stems from the ideas of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in their 1985 book on the challenges facing leaders arising from a plethora of external factors and the implications of these challenges for organisational leadership (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). In the early 1990s, the United States Army War University adopted the term VUCA to describe the changing nature of warfare after the Cold War and emphasised the need for strategic leadership in unpredictable combat conditions (Barber, 1992). After the attacks of 11 September 2001, the concept gained wider recognition as military and security forces used it to describe the chaotic and rapidly evolving threats (Kaivo-oja & Lauraeus, 2018; Lawson, 2011). In the early 2000s, business leaders also took up the VUCA framework to explain the turbulent and uncertain business environment, recognising its relevance in navigating constant change and complexity (Johansen, 2007).

The acronym VUCA essentially summarises the diverse challenges that managers face in a rapidly evolving environment where traditional approaches may be inadequate (Johansen, 2007). The four different elements, which can occur individually or simultaneously, create an environment in which leaders should not only anticipate change to varying degrees and in different combinations, but also situations that are sometimes beyond the control of managers (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). However, due to the different contexts and situations of each institution, VUCA concerns do not pose the same threats to all organisations. Below is the brief explanation of the meaning of the individual terms:

i. **Volatility** refers to an unstable and unpredictable situation. A volatile environment can be dangerous because it is difficult to predict what will happen next. In the past, certainty, which is the opposite of volatility, was the salient feature of a stable world (Codreanu, 2016). According to Horney et al. (2010), a volatile environment arises when an unexpected event upsets an already established routine.

ii. **Uncertainty** is about the lack of predictability of events that could occur, characterised by a lack of knowledge (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Horney et al., 2010; Prakash, 2017). In this moment of uncertainty, the past is not a reliable indicator of the future, and predicting and planning what will happen next is an extraordinary challenge (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Codreanu, 2016).

iii. **Complexity** refers to the confusing problems and chaos that surrounds any organisation (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Horney et al., 2010). It is characterised by many interrelated parts and variables (Bawany, 2018; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). This is typically the case when there is a wealth of data and knowledge available, but leaders are overwhelmed by the sheer volume due to the complexity of the problem (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

iv. **Ambiguity** is used to describe circumstances that are unclear even though the information is available. Bennett and Lemoine (2014) explain that in an ambiguous situation there are numerous possible interpretations and there is no precedent to predict what will happen. It is also about the novelty or newness

of a situation, which typically revolves around a completely new product, market, innovation or opportunity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

A number of scholars have argued that the key to leadership success lies in a comprehensive diagnosis of the VUCA scenarios that occur at any given time and the appropriate response for each context (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Johansen, 2007, 2012; Johansen & Euchner, 2013). The ability to recognise each of the terms would be valuable because the solutions are different for each situation (Bawany, 2018; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Johansen & Euchner, 2013; Saleh & Watson, 2017). Baran & Woznyj (2021) also affirm that understanding each letter of the VUCA acronym provides leaders with a shared perspective on the difficulties and opportunities they face, thereby motivating them to take the necessary actions. Under VUCA conditions, it is a challenge to do the right things and find the right ways to do them (Kaivo-oja & Lauraeus, 2018).

Based on the VUCA perspective, the world offers not only problems but also significant opportunities for leaders and organisations. The literature on VUCA and leadership has shown that leaders need to see VUCA challenges as an opportunity to revise their leadership approaches, as traditional leadership methods are ineffective and often no longer viable in turbulent situations (Bawany, 2018; Codreanu, 2016; Horney et al, 2010; Johansen, 2007; Kaivo-oja & Lauraeus, 2018; Rimita et al, 2020). In such an atmosphere, leaders must move forward by embracing the confusion and turning the unknown into opportunities they can capitalise on (Johansen & Euchner, 2013). One of the most well-known positive VUCA frameworks or the VUCA Prime was developed by Bob Johansen (Johansen & Euchner, 2013) and consists of behaviours and skills that can be used as a blueprint model to help leaders and organisations create leadership plans to cope with the chaotic environment (Ramakrishnan, 2021; Bawany, 2018; Nandram, 2017). It is referred to as 'dilemma flipping', where leaders turn chaotic, confused situations into opportunities (Johansen & Euchner, 2013).

VUCA challenges	VUCA Prime	Explanation
Volatility	Vision	Leaders can confront volatility with a clear and compelling vision, giving direction and stability to the organisation rather than being overwhelmed by rapid change
Uncertainty	Understanding	Instead of fearing the unknown, leaders can strive for a deeper understanding of the situation through active learning, open communication, and situational awareness
Complexity	Clarity	Leaders should focus on simplifying processes, prioritising and making informed decisions to manage complexity effectively
Ambiguity	Agility	Adaptability is the key when it comes to ambiguous situations. Leaders should remain flexible, experiment with solutions, and adapt quickly to new developments

Table 1: VUCA challenges and the dilemma flipping

BANI Framework

The BANI framework, on the other hand, was introduced by futurist Jamais Cascio in 2020 and offers a contemporary lens for understanding the complexity of the modern world. BANI was conceived as a response to the limitations of the VUCA model in understanding complex environments (Cascio, 2020). In his article, Cascio argues that, given modern realities, there is an urgent need to use a newer language to better understand the current landscape, assess the extent of chaos and find the right responses to different situations. In his view, such a framework would be the basis for exploring novel adaptive strategies that provide both leaders and their organisations with the tools to navigate the challenges of today's world (Cascio, 2020).

BANI reflects a world in which traditional structures are fragile, which can lead to increased fear and unpredictability. This framework addresses the exacerbated nature of today's challenges by highlighting four key characteristics: Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible. These characteristics represent a

paradigm shift in understanding modern organisational contexts and the chaotic environment in which we work. As a deliberate parallel to the VUCA framework, this framework is used to articulate the increasingly chaotic conditions that are unpredictable and incomprehensible (Cascio, 2020). This is due to the fact that current situations in the world are unfamiliar, surprising, and disorienting and can multiply the stress experienced by individuals (Cascio, 2020).

Each component of the BANI framework is presented below:

i.   **Brittle**: This term describes systems that appear robust but can collapse under duress. Organisations operating in the BANI world can easily collapse under pressure and unexpected changes. According to Cascio (2020), brittleness is an illusory strength. Educational institutions, for example, may appear stable, but their outdated technological infrastructure can fail and cause major disruptions when faced with unexpected events such as a sudden shift to online learning.

ii. **Anxious:** Anxiety is a key attribute of the BANI framework. It reflects the mental state of organisations or individuals due to the constant instability of the environment (Cascio, 2020). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, ELs, teachers and parents felt anxious as they were faced with constant changes in health guidelines and had to adapt to new teaching and learning methods under uncertain circumstances.

iii. **Non-linear**: Non-linearity means that outcomes are not always proportional to inputs and that small changes can have significant effects (Cascio, 2020). For example, the unexpected shift to remote or online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic was not a linear process. Schools faced unexpected issues, such as technological difficulties and readiness to adopt the new teaching methods. This shows that these disruptions can lead to significant consequences.

iv. **Incomprehensible**: This term describes a situation that is chaotic, senseless and difficult to understand. At this point, the human mind is no longer able to grasp the complexity of information and events in their entirety (Stöttinger, 2022). For example, educational leaders may find the rapid technological advances in education overwhelming, making it difficult to fully understand and make sense of these changes while managing other tasks such as student well-being.

The BANI framework has been identified as the product of escalation due to VUCA (Cascio, 2020). It is increasingly recognised as a model that describes a new world in which the old values and rules are no longer sufficient and applicable (Cascio, 2020; Stöttinger, 2022). In his article, Cascio (2020) has listed the human reactions that are appropriate when dealing with the BANI world because, in his opinion, the chaos in this world stems from the inability of humans to fully understand how to act when everything familiar becomes unfamiliar. Cascio (2020) proposes the concept of resilience, empathy, improvisation, and intuition or REII as responses to the BANI framework.

BANI	How to deal with BANI circumstances
Brittle	**Resilience** is necessary to withstand shocks. System resilience often means that resources (material or immaterial) are built up as a buffer for the unexpected
Anxious	**Empathy** is a recognition of the outcome of chaotic systems. It is the willingness to be kind and forgiving to others as well as to oneself.
Nonlinear	**Improvisation** is necessary for non-linear situations. The individual must be creative under pressure and have the ability to adapt quickly
Incomprehensible	**Intuition** is at its best when you are confronted with incomprehensible situations. Listening to your gut feeling or insights can be the way to survival and success

Table 2: BANI environments and the appropriate human responses

Both frameworks aim to describe the complexity of the modern environment, and yet there is a clear difference between them. For one, a comparative analysis has shown that VUCA emerged from military strategy, while

BANI emerged as a response to the evolution of 21st century complexity (Menaria, 2024). Furthermore, the VUCA framework provides a broad overview of the challenges faced by organisations, while BANI delves deeper into the psychological and systemic fragilities of the environment. The VUCA framework highlights the external conditions that impact organisations (Johansen & Euchner, 2013), while BANI emphasises the internal responses and fragility of systems (Cascio, 2020). The table below shows the transition from the VUCA to the BANI framework and how REII is the responses that are appropriate for the modern complexities in the nature of today's world.

VUCA Prime		BANI REII
Volatility Vision	⟶	Brittle Resilience
Uncertainty Understanding	⟶	Anxiety Empathy
Complexity Clarity	⟶	Nonlinear Improvisation
Ambiguity Agility	⟶	Incomprehensible Intuition

Table 3: The shift from the VUCA framework to the BANI framework and the solutions

WHAT DOES VUCA AND BANI FRAMEWORKS MEAN FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

In today's education landscape, ELs must make high-stakes decisions amidst uncertainty, complexity, and rapid change. The VUCA and BANI frameworks have become critical lenses through which ELs interpret the rapidly changing educational landscape. In addition, these frameworks have also proven to be important analytical tools and offer unique perspectives on how ELs can navigate through the challenges. The VUCA framework, for example, was developed in response to rapidly changing global dynamics and emphasises the multifaceted nature of today's challenges (Johansen, 2007; Johansen & Euchner, 2013). This environment provides a structured approach to strategic foresight, forcing ELs to recognise and respond to the fluctuating situations that may impact their institutions - from technological advances to societal value shifts and evolving pedagogical demands (Baskoro, 2023; Bushyev et al., 2023). The volatility of the environment that accompanies policy changes, for example, requires leaders to be adaptive and proactive in their decision-making processes to ensure institutional stability.

Conversely, the BANI framework extends this perspective by emphasising the psychological and systemic vulnerabilities in the modern educational environment. When it comes to fragility, for example, ELs need to recognise how rigid institutional structures can falter under pressure, leading to potential institutional collapse. Fears in education can have various causes, including the rapid introduction of new technologies and curriculum reforms for which teachers and students are not properly prepared (Salun & Zaslavska, 2024). The non-linearity of educational challenges emphasises that outcomes are not always predictable and that small changes can have a disproportionate impact, requiring flexible strategies that allow for rapid changes in response to new information or crises. Furthermore, incomprehensibility speaks to the overwhelming amount of information and the complexity of decision-making processes amidst numerous stakeholders and conflicting priorities (Baskoro, 2023). The BANI framework emphasises people-centred leadership, which is necessary to manage the complexity of the world. This framework thus goes beyond traditional VUCA considerations by incorporating emotional and psychological dimensions, including fragility, pervasive fear, and the disjointed nature of knowledge diffusion in the postmodern age (Kiluange et al., 2024).

As articulated by Salun and Zaslavska (2024), the transition from VUCA to the BANI paradigm requires innovative responses to the complex and unpredictable challenges faced by educational leaders. This shift

emphasises the importance for ELs to cultivate agility and flexibility in their decision-making practises. Leaders who successfully integrate the principles of VUCA and BANI are better able to anticipate disruption and develop robust structures that enable their institutions to thrive even in the midst of chaos. This approach requires not only structural and procedural adjustments, but also a prioritisation of emotional and psychological systems. This prioritisation can alleviate the fears of those involved and promote stability within the institutions.

ELs who embrace the ideas of VUCA and BANI are indeed better able to manage the complexity and uncertainty of the current educational environment. This requires a strong commitment to continuous learning, reflection, and adaptation, which can ultimately lead to stronger institutional resilience. Understanding the implications of these frameworks helps leaders make informed decisions that prioritise the well-being of their educational communities while promoting sustainable innovation in teaching and learning (Bushyev et al., 2023). Furthermore, integrating the principles of VUCA and BANI into the practise of leadership serves as a lens and guide for educational leaders striving to promote resilience and effectiveness in increasingly uncertain contexts (Bushyev et al., 2023). The structure of VUCA forces leaders to consider agility and prediction in their strategic planning processes. According to Wang and Continuo (2024), effective educational leadership in a VUCA environment requires a deliberate focus on agility, foresight, and adaptability. However, the BANI situations require appropriate human responses as highlighted by Cascio (2020) who argues that the chaos of this world results from the inability of humans to fully comprehend how to act when things that are familiar to them become unfamiliar. He emphasises that coping with BANI conditions requires resilience, empathy, mindfulness, adaptability, transparency, and trust. These people-centred approaches enable educational leaders to promote stability and ensure that institutions remain responsive and resilient in the ever-changing landscape.

The integration of VUCA and Bani structures into decision-making and strategic planning is not just an exercise in theoretical application; it represents a profound shift in the way ELs approach the complexity of the modern educational environment. By basing their strategies on collaboration, adaptability and emotionality, education leaders are better able to navigate the uncertainties of today's rapidly evolving landscape and ensure that their institutions remain sustainable, relevant, and resilient in the long term. Incorporating the principles of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) and BANI (brittle, anxiety, non-linearity, incomprehensibility) into educational leadership is fundamental to fostering resilience and adaptability in modern educational environments. Education leaders should develop strategic approaches that not only respond to the current climate of uncertainty, but also proactively prepare their institutions for future challenges.

In short, ELs can utilise a range of strategies based on VUCA and BANI structures to improve the resilience of their institutions. By combining the strategic adaptability of VUCA with the emotional intelligence focus of BANI, ELs can promote a comprehensive approach to leadership strategies. Recognising the interplay between the two frameworks improves institutional stability, stakeholder confidence and long-term success in an unpredictable world.

Implications of Vuca and Bani Frameworks for Educational Leaders' Strategies

The implications of the VUCA and BANI frameworks reflect a fundamental shift in the way educational organisations need to realign their strategies and practises to meet the new challenges. ELs must adopt adaptive strategies that balance long-term institutional goals with immediate demands while fostering a culture of resilience, flexibility, and inclusivity (Couture & Murgatroyd, 2024). Agile governance models support this by promoting decentralised decision-making and iterative problem-solving, enabling leaders to respond swiftly to change and learn from experimentation (Heifetz et al., 2009; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational institutions adopted flexible online learning models. These models allowed leaders to rapidly adjust course content, learning formats, and support structures in response to shifting public health guidelines, demonstrating how agile approaches can help maintain continuity while navigating unforeseen challenges. By embracing such strategies, educational leaders can ensure their institutions remain adaptable and capable of addressing both immediate crises and long-term goals (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

In a VUCA environment, ELs must develop crisis management strategies to respond effectively to external disruptions such as political instability, technological advances, and global health emergencies (Rath et al., 2021). The ability to make quick and informed decisions is critical, especially in situations where

unpredictability undermines traditional hierarchical decision-making structures (Shoemaker & Laberge, 2021). Scenario planning and risk assessment have been shown to be important tools for managing uncertainty, ensuring that institutions are prepared for abrupt change (Ramírez & Wilkinson, 2016). For example, leaders facing budget cuts due to economic downturns must act with foresight (VUCA) to allocate resources while maintaining academic integrity. Effective leaders mitigate uncertainty by fostering an organisational culture of preparedness that ensures their institutions can respond quickly to challenges.

BANI contexts, on the other hand, bring additional challenges, particularly in terms of the psychological strain that uncertainty places on students, educators, and stakeholders. Anxiety and stress increase as individuals try to make sense of complex, rapidly evolving situations (Kiluange et al., 2024; Weiner et al., 2021). To mitigate these mental health challenges, ELs should prioritise mental wellbeing by fostering an environment that emphasises emotional intelligence, empathy, and transparent communication (Harris & Jones, 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). As Harries and Jones (2021) highlight, leaders who adopt empathy-centred approaches—such as providing safe spaces for dialogue, recognising emotional struggles, and offering targeted support—can significantly enhance the emotional resilience of their school communities. By addressing the emotional dimensions of BANI contexts, leaders help maintain institutional stability and individual wellbeing amid uncertainty.

In response to the complexity and uncertainty that this environment brings, four key strategies emerge: fostering innovation and adaptive leadership, leveraging technology for strategic decision-making, cultivating stakeholder engagement and institutional trust, and prioritising emotional intelligence and communication practises. These strategies are not just theoretical answers, but practical approaches that enable leaders to create an agile, responsive, and supportive learning environment. These strategies are critical to developing a leadership approach that meets the demands of modern educational environments characterised by VUCA and BANI dynamics.

Fostering innovation and adaptive leadership

Innovation is a crucial component of leadership in VUCA and BANI contexts. The transition from VUCA to BANI requires leaders to embrace innovation and adaptive leadership. In VUCA environments, innovation is often driven by external pressures, such as new technologies and changing societal needs (Torrance et al., 2022). Educational leaders need to introduce a culture of creativity and risk-taking and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and co-creation among faculty and students (Gartner & Drucker, 1987). In BANI contexts where traditional solutions may no longer be viable, leaders must apply non-linear thinking and fluid decision-making processes that prioritise adaptability over predictability (McKenzie, 2023).

Adaptive leadership concepts, such as that proposed by Heifetz et al. (2009), emphasise the importance of fostering resilience through continuous learning and stakeholder engagement. Leaders who embrace adaptability are better able to manage disruption and implement sustainable change (McCarthy, 2024). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational institutions shifted to hybrid learning models, demonstrating how adaptive leadership allows for rapid response to unexpected challenges. These initiatives showed that flexible approaches enabled institutions to learn from trial and error while maintaining continuity (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Leveraging technology for strategic decision-making

Technological integration is another important strategy for navigating the VUCA and BANI environment. Digital tools and data analytics can support real-time decision making, increase institutional efficiency and improve student engagement (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Educational technology platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of information and enable institutions to respond flexibly to changing circumstances (Vishwakarma & Pandey, 2024; Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024).

For instance, University Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA) developed a comprehensive dashboard using Microsoft Power BI to monitor student enrolment in its Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs. This dashboard provided real-time insights into student attendance, academic progress, and resource allocation across multiple campuses. By leveraging this data-driven approach, UMPSA's leadership

could promptly identify performance trends, reallocate teaching support where necessary, and implement targeted interventions to improve student retention rates. This proactive decision-making exemplifies how data-informed leadership enhances institutional resilience and agility (Isa et al., 2024)

In addition, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in education offers new opportunities in the education landscape. Predictive analytics can identify at-risk students early, while personalised learning platforms can tailor academic content to individual needs (Jedaman et al., 2024). Institutions that embrace these tools foster a culture of continuous improvement and adaptability—key traits for navigating uncertainty.

Cultivating stakeholder engagement and institutional trust

An important implication of VUCA and BANI for educational leadership is the need to foster resilience and confidence among staff, students, and stakeholders. A resilient educational environment equips individuals with the skills and mindset they need to thrive during adversity (Couture & Murgatroyd, 2024). In VUCA settings, transparent communication helps maintain clarity, while BANI-driven anxieties demand psychological safety and inclusive practices. Educational leaders must model resilience through optimism, trust-building, and proactive professional development focusing on adaptability and crisis management (Masten et al., 2021). This includes promoting environments where people feel safe to raise concerns and take risks.

Stakeholder engagement is another critical component. Effective educational leadership in volatile environments requires participatory decision-making processes that empower faculty, students, and community members (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024). Open channels of communication and inclusive leadership practises help to alleviate the anxiety associated with uncertainty and create a sense of common purpose and trust within institutions (Roblek et al., 2023). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions adopted resilience-focused initiatives such as mindfulness sessions, mental health check-ins, and leadership webinars to help staff and students manage stress while adapting to sudden changes in learning delivery (Bass & Riggio, 2006; McCarthy, 2024).

The role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and communication

While digital tools provide strategic insights, human-centric leadership remains equally vital in navigating the emotional and relational complexities of the VUCA and BANI environments. Emotional Intelligence (EI) has emerged as a critical competency for leaders operating in these contexts. Leaders with high EI exhibit self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills—qualities that help them manage interpersonal dynamics and foster a positive institutional climate (Goleman, 2017). In the Malaysian higher education context, EI has been found to significantly support collaborative leadership and effective teaching practices, especially in challenging situations (Mamat & Ismail, 2021).

By prioritising trust and psychological safety, emotionally intelligent leaders encourage open dialogue, inclusive decision-making, and a culture of mutual respect. Mamat and Ismail (2021) highlight that when university leaders practise EI, it leads to improved staff relationships, better classroom management, and more adaptive responses to institutional challenges.

Effective communication complements EI in managing uncertainty. In volatile environments, leaders must deliver messages that are clear, consistent, and aligned with institutional goals. Transparent and empathetic communication reduces anxiety, builds trust, and enhances engagement among staff and students (Chawla & Lenka, 2018; Goleman, 2017). Moreover, when leaders model vulnerability and communicate authentically, they strengthen team cohesion and improve shared decision-making processes (Bhattacharya et al., 2021).

For example, a polytechnic in southern Malaysia faced declining staff morale due to ongoing curriculum changes and resource constraints. The principal initiated a series of weekly listening sessions where faculty could express concerns and propose solutions. By actively listening and following up on feedback, the leadership team rebuilt trust, boosted staff engagement, and enhanced cross-departmental collaboration. This human-centred leadership approach exemplified how EI and transparent communication can sustain morale and drive collective resilience

in uncertain conditions (Mamat & Ismail, 2021).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As education systems become increasingly interconnected, awareness of global trends and contextual factors is essential for leaders seeking to implement effective reforms. The integration of VUCA and BANI principles goes beyond local leadership practises and influences broader education policy. As educational institutions become increasingly interconnected, leaders must take a global perspective and incorporate insights from fields such as psychology, organisational behaviour, and technology to address emerging challenges (Jedaman et al., 2024).

In addition, leaders must be adaptable, emotionally intelligent, and technologically agile to maintain the resilience of their institution. Continuous research is essential for refining best practises in VUCA and BANI leadership. Through a balance of structured responses and people-centred leadership, educational institutions can not only survive but thrive in an increasingly unpredictable world. Continuous professional development and research initiatives will be critical in helping education systems adapt to new challenges and ultimately improve outcomes for both teachers and students. Looking ahead, it is important to follow ongoing research on the applications of VUCA and BANI in the educational context. While both frameworks offer valuable perspectives for leadership, further studies can shed light on best practises for implementation and on the measurable outcomes of their application. In particular, research should focus on exploring how educational leaders can practically integrate VUCA and BANI strategies in different school settings - from primary school to university - and in different regions (Vishwakarma & Pandey, 2024).

It is also crucial that future research incorporates different methodological approaches. Quantitative studies could measure the direct impact of leadership strategies based on the VUCA and BANI frameworks on student and teacher performance, institutional resilience, and stakeholder satisfaction. In addition, qualitative research, such as case studies and ethnographies, could provide deep insights into the lived experiences of educational leaders operating in a VUCA and BANI environment, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of leadership practises. Longitudinal studies that track the effects of leadership strategies over time would also make an important contribution to the knowledge base, especially to understand the long-term effects of emotionally intelligent leadership and adaptive decision making in volatile environments (Masten et al., 2021). Furthermore, comparative studies across different educational contexts— - e.g. urban vs. rural schools or institutions in developing vs. industrialised countries — could provide valuable insights into how institutional resilience and leadership strategies vary based on cultural, economic, and socioeconomic factors (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024).

By taking these methodological considerations into account and examining different educational contexts, future research can better inform the development of leadership practises that are adaptive, resilient, and contextually relevant in the face of VUCA and BANI challenges.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, the integration of the VUCA and BANI frameworks provides education leaders with a comprehensive perspective through which they can address the diverse challenges of modern education. VUCA emphasises the importance of strategic agility, innovation, and the ability to respond effectively to rapid change. BANI, on the other hand, emphasises the psychological and emotional complexities that leaders must deal with, such as fear, non-linearity and incomprehensibility. Taken together, these concepts require leadership that is both adaptable and empathetic. To succeed in this environment, educational leaders must adopt a mindset of continuous learning and reflective practise while leveraging technological tools such as real-time data analytics and artificial intelligence to make informed, flexible decisions that improve institutional resilience and responsiveness.

Equally important is the cultivation of people-centred leadership practises, especially emotional intelligence (EI) and effective communication. Leaders with high EI foster trust, psychological safety and a culture of collaboration in which staff and students feel valued and supported. Transparent, authentic communication reduces uncertainty and builds collective trust, even in times of institutional stress or change. By combining

strategic foresight with emotional depth, educational leaders can create an environment that is inclusive, innovative and sustainable. This dual focus not only ensures sustainable success, but also promotes the well-being of all stakeholders, ultimately leading to better outcomes for teachers and learners in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

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