Navigating VUCA: Strategic Leadership Competencies among University Administrators in Malaysia During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated an unprecedented crisis, exposing higher education institutions worldwide to a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. In Malaysia, university professional administrators were thrust into leading their institutions through these turbulent times, requiring the rapid adoption and deployment of strategic leadership competencies. This paper examines the key competencies of strategic leadership demonstrated by university administrators in Malaysia to effectively navigate the challenges of the VUCA environment during the pandemic. Through a systematic literature review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, this study synthesizes relevant research published between 2020 and 2023. The review covered three key academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using search terms such as "strategic leadership," "competencies," "higher education," "VUCA," and "COVID-19." The findings reveal critical competencies including adaptability, strategic thinking, crisis management, effective communication, and emotional intelligence, all of which were pivotal in enabling administrators to manage the abrupt transition to remote learning, safeguard the well-being of staff and students, and maintain academic continuity amidst widespread uncertainty. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of collaboration, innovation, and ethical decision-making as core competencies that facilitated resilience and sustainability in the face of complex and rapidly evolving challenges. These insights emphasize the need for sustained professional development and capacity-building to enhance leadership effectiveness in Malaysia's higher education sector and provide valuable implications for university administrators worldwide in preparing for future crises.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Professional Administrators, VUCA, COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

The concept of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) has become increasingly relevant in recent years, particularly in the context of higher education, where institutions are grappling with multifaceted challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst, intensifying VUCA conditions and exposing critical vulnerabilities in university administration. Health crises, uncertainties surrounding academic delivery methods, complexities in resource management, and ambiguities in long-term strategic planning were prominent issues during the pandemic (Mahadi Abu Hassan et al., 2023; Izhar et al., 2021; O'Sullivan & Comerford, 2020; Moser & Savicki, 2020). The rapid transition to remote learning highlighted the essential role of university administrators, who were required to swiftly adopt digital solutions, ensure academic continuity, and maintain inclusivity, often amidst limited resources and growing operational pressures.

In this volatile environment, the need for adaptive, strategic leadership became increasingly evident. Particularly in Malaysia, where systemic weaknesses in resource allocation, policy adaptation, and stakeholder engagement were exposed, the ability to navigate these challenges through effective leadership was paramount. This study addresses a critical gap in understanding how strategic leadership competencies can enhance organizational resilience in VUCA conditions, specifically within Malaysian higher education institutions. By focusing on the competencies required for effective decision-making and leadership in times of uncertainty, this research aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, institutional leaders, and educators, helping them develop leadership practices that foster sustainability and adaptability. The study advocates for a human-centred leadership approach that prioritizes emotional intelligence, collaboration, and ethical decision-making, proposing that these competencies are crucial for building more resilient and sustainable university structures. By identifying and contextualising these leadership competencies within Malaysia's higher education system, the research aims to contribute to the development of leadership models that can inform policy and practice in an evolving educational landscape (Mohammad & Ahmad, 2021; Wang, 2019).

Definition of Key Concepts

Strategic Leadership refers to the ability to envision and implement a strategic direction for an organisation. According to Yukl (2012), key elements of strategic leadership include the development of a shared vision, the setting of strategic goals, the formulation of effective strategies, and the alignment of resources to achieve institutional objectives. In higher education, strategic leadership is crucial as leaders must navigate an ever-changing environment. They are required not only to respond to immediate challenges but also to devise long-term strategies that ensure the sustainability and success of their institutions (Kunalan et al., 2022; Hairuddin & Inas, 2018). The dynamic and evolving nature of the higher education landscape amplifies the need for adaptive leadership that can manage both predictable and unpredictable changes.

Professional Administrators are defined as university administrators possessing specialised expertise and belonging to the governing body of an institution. These administrators play an essential role in shaping the strategic direction of the university, formulating policies, and managing resources effectively. As noted by Ahmad (2019), administrators in higher education institutions in Malaysia are classified by grades, with those in grades 41 and above

considered part of the top-level management staff. These administrators oversee various domains, including Information Technology (F), Social Sciences (S), Science (C), Finance (W), Engineering (J), Legal (L), among others. Although these administrators are not part of the academic faculty, they play a critical role in the institutional decision-making processes, particularly in areas supporting teaching and learning (Marshall, 2006; Graham, 2012). Their contributions are increasingly valued as universities face rapid technological advancements, demographic shifts, and evolving pedagogical needs, all of which require their strategic input to ensure the institution remains resilient and competitive in a changing environment.

Competencies of Strategic Leadership involve the knowledge, skills, and behaviours essential for leaders to effectively navigate complex and volatile environments. According to Katarzyna Bratnicka-Myśliwiec and Joanna Śliwa (2020), strategic leadership competencies include the ability to analyse intricate problems, think critically, communicate effectively, foster innovation, and build collaborative relationships. Furthermore, Morren, Travis, and Carvan (2015) assert that strategic leaders must also possess the ability to make informed decisions, manage change, and maintain strong interpersonal relationships. The competencies required of strategic leaders are especially pertinent in a higher education context, where leaders must balance the demands of academic integrity with the operational and strategic needs of their institutions.

VUCA World refers to a landscape characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, where leaders face rapid changes and unpredictable challenges. The term, originally coined by the US Army War College in the 1990s to describe the shifting global environment after the Cold War, has since been adopted by businesses, governments, and educational institutions to explain the challenges of the modern world (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). In a VUCA environment, leaders must navigate technological disruptions, demographic shifts, economic uncertainties, and evolving stakeholder expectations. The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the volatility and unpredictability of this world, compelling organisations particularly universities to swiftly adapt to unprecedented challenges (O'Sullivan & Comerford, 2020). In the context of higher education, VUCA conditions necessitate leaders who are not only reactive but proactive, able to foresee emerging trends and adapt strategies accordingly.

As universities transition into a post-pandemic world, understanding the competencies necessary for effective strategic leadership remains crucial. This research aims to identify the competencies that university administrators must develop to successfully manage the VUCA challenges they face, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to anticipate emerging trends, adapt to changing circumstances, and build strong relationships with stakeholders are among the key skills higher education leaders must possess to thrive in this complex and rapidly evolving environment. Transformational leadership, which prioritises collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement, is widely regarded as the most suitable leadership style for navigating the VUCA world (O'Sullivan & Comerford, 2020).

Methodology
This study aimed to explore the competencies of strategic leadership among university professional administrators in Malaysia, particularly in managing the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The

methodology involved a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify and analyze relevant literature on strategic leadership competencies in higher education amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic. The literature review was conducted through various online databases, such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search terms used included "strategic leadership," "higher education," "VUCA," "COVID-19," "competencies," and "professional administrators." The researchers screened and selected articles based on their relevance to the research objectives and the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The selected articles were analyzed and synthesized to identify the key competencies of strategic leadership relevant to the context of higher education in Malaysia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The researchers used a thematic analysis approach to identify and categorize the competencies into themes. Overall, the methodology of this study involved a systematic and rigorous review of relevant literature to identify the competencies of strategic leadership among university professional administrators in Malaysia in managing VUCA during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings and Discussion

The review identified several competencies crucial for university leaders to effectively navigate the pandemic's challenges and enhance institutional performance. The following table summarizes these competencies across different studies:

Table 1

Competencies of Strategic Leadership in Managing VUCA World

Competency	Abdullah et al. (2021)	Ibrahim, Ramli, & Muharam (2021)	Yusof, Ali, & Ali (2021)	Alvarez et al. (2020)	Kember et al. (2020)	Rose-Adams et al. (2021)	Dolan et al. (2021)
Strategic Thinking and Decision Making	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Communication and Interpersonal Skills	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Change Management	✓				✓		
Technology Management	✓		✓				
Crisis Management	✓				✓		
Empathy and Emotional Intelligence		✓		✓			✓
Flexibility and Adaptability		✓	✓				
Innovation and Creativity		✓		✓		✓	
Visionary Leadership				✓			
Collaboration				✓		✓	✓

The findings of this study, based on a systematic literature review, have identified several key competencies of strategic leadership that are crucial for university professional administrators in Malaysia to effectively navigate VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) environments, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These competencies include:

1. **Visionary and Adaptive Leadership**: Strategic leaders in higher education must possess the ability to foresee changes in the educational landscape and adapt quickly to these shifts. This involves anticipating emerging trends, setting clear strategic directions, and formulating effective responses to volatile conditions (Abd Razak & Daud, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many university leaders demonstrated adaptive leadership by implementing new policies, transitioning to digital platforms, and maintaining operational continuity.

2. **Effective Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Skills**: The complexity and uncertainty inherent in VUCA environments demand that leaders make sound decisions swiftly, often with limited information. The ability to analyze complex situations, assess risks, and make informed choices was highlighted as a critical competency (Yukl, 2012). This was particularly evident during the pandemic, as university administrators had to make rapid decisions about campus closures, online learning, and safety protocols.

3. **Emotional Intelligence and Human-Centric Leadership**: Emotional intelligence, including empathy, self-awareness, and relationship management, is vital for leaders managing the well-being of staff and students in a crisis. The pandemic underscored the importance of understanding the emotional and psychological needs of stakeholders, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment (Mohammad & Ahmad, 2021; Wang, 2019).

4. **Strategic Communication and Collaboration**: Effective communication is essential for leaders to convey strategies, expectations, and changes clearly to all stakeholders. This competency also includes the ability to collaborate across departments and institutions to align resources and achieve shared goals (Moser & Savicki, 2020). During the pandemic, transparent communication helped mitigate uncertainties and build trust within the university community.

5. **Innovation and Creativity**: Leaders who foster a culture of innovation and creativity are better positioned to navigate ambiguity and drive transformative change. The ability to generate new ideas, experiment with novel approaches, and embrace technological advancements is a core competency for managing disruption (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). Universities that adopted innovative teaching methods, such as hybrid learning models, were able to sustain academic quality and student engagement during the crisis.

Impactful Suggestions

1. **Develop Competency-Based Leadership Development Programs**: Universities should implement targeted leadership development programs that focus on building the identified competencies of strategic leadership. Such programs should include training in adaptive leadership, scenario planning, crisis management, and strategic thinking. Establishing mentorship and coaching programs can also help emerging leaders gain practical insights from experienced administrators.

2. **Enhance Digital and Technological Competencies**: The pandemic highlighted the importance of digital readiness and technology integration. University administrators should receive continuous training on emerging digital tools and technologies to support online and hybrid learning models. Building digital competencies will enable leaders to

make data-driven decisions and leverage technology for academic and administrative purposes.

3. **Promote a Human-Centric Approach to Leadership**: University leaders should prioritize emotional intelligence and well-being initiatives for staff and students. Establishing mental health support services, promoting work-life balance, and creating an inclusive institutional culture can enhance morale and reduce burnout. Leaders should adopt a people-first strategy to foster a sense of belonging and engagement within the university community.

4. **Strengthen Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations**: Higher education institutions should actively seek partnerships with industry, government agencies, and other educational organizations. Such collaborations can provide access to resources, facilitate knowledge exchange, and create opportunities for joint research and innovation. By building strong networks, universities can become more resilient and agile in responding to future VUCA challenges.

5. **Adopt a Continuous Improvement and Feedback Mechanism**: Establish a robust feedback system that allows leaders to assess the effectiveness of their strategies and leadership approaches. Collecting regular feedback from students, staff, and other stakeholders can provide valuable insights into areas of improvement and inform future decision-making. This process will also help university administrators remain agile and responsive to changing needs.

6. **Embed Strategic Leadership Competencies into Institutional Policies**: Universities should integrate strategic leadership competencies into their organizational policies and performance appraisal systems. This alignment will ensure that all administrators are evaluated based on their ability to demonstrate these competencies, thereby reinforcing a culture of strategic and effective leadership across the institution.

Implementing these suggestions can enhance the capacity of university leaders to manage VUCA environments more effectively, ensuring the sustainability and resilience of higher education institutions in Malaysia and beyond.

Conclusion
The findings from this systematic literature review underscore the urgent need for university professional administrators in Malaysia to possess specific strategic leadership competencies to effectively navigate VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) environments, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid and unpredictable shifts triggered by the pandemic highlighted the vulnerabilities within higher education systems and emphasized the critical role of leadership in managing crises. As institutions faced unprecedented disruptions from the transition to remote learning to the rapid reorganization of teaching methods and campus operations strategic leadership became the cornerstone for resilience. The need for adaptive leadership, effective decision-making, and the ability to swiftly adjust to new circumstances has never been more apparent. Indeed, the competencies required for successful strategic leadership in such volatile contexts include a blend of visionary thinking, clear communication, emotional intelligence, and collaboration, all of which enable university administrators to maintain academic quality, support the well-being of staff and students, and safeguard institutional stability during crises (O'Sullivan & Comerford, 2020; Mohammad & Ahmad, 2021).

The pandemic's aftermath has reinforced the necessity of cultivating these competencies to prepare for future uncertainties. As higher education institutions emerge from the pandemic, the role of strategic leadership must evolve to address not only the immediate challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis but also the long-term implications of ongoing societal changes, such as technological advancements, shifting demographics, and evolving educational demands. Research indicates that the VUCA world is increasingly characterized by rapid technological changes, political shifts, and global interconnectedness, all of which present new challenges for university administrators (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). For instance, the increasing reliance on digital learning platforms and the need for data-driven decision-making require university leaders to develop advanced technological and digital competencies (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). To meet these challenges, university administrators must continuously invest in leadership development programs that foster not only technical expertise but also critical soft skills such as emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration (Wang, 2019; Hairuddin & Inas, 2018).

Moreover, fostering a culture of innovation and strengthening strategic partnerships are essential strategies to enhance institutional resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the necessity of universities being agile and forward-thinking, capable of innovating in teaching and learning methodologies to maintain academic engagement and ensure business continuity. The introduction of hybrid learning models and the rapid adoption of digital tools were vital in ensuring educational continuity during lockdowns (Moser & Savicki, 2020). However, these changes also highlighted the need for universities to establish long-term strategies for integrating technology into education, not just as a temporary solution but as an integral part of the pedagogical landscape. In this regard, strategic leadership must prioritize partnerships with industries, governments, and other academic institutions to facilitate knowledge exchange, access additional resources, and foster collaborative research initiatives. Such partnerships can provide the necessary support to enhance institutional capacity, innovate curricula, and strengthen the workforce's digital and leadership skills (Kunalan et al., 2022).

The study also highlights the importance of adapting leadership frameworks that are responsive, adaptable, and capable of thriving in increasingly complex environments. Policymakers, educators, and university administrators must develop leadership models that promote flexibility, innovation, and a forward-thinking mindset. The integration of strategic leadership competencies into university policies, performance evaluations, and development programs will help ensure that administrators are equipped to handle future VUCA challenges effectively (Yukl, 2012). This approach will cultivate a leadership culture that prioritizes long-term institutional sustainability, student success, and staff well-being.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reinforce the view that strategic leadership is no longer an optional skill but a fundamental requirement for university administrators aiming to navigate the complexities of a post-pandemic world. The ability to combine strategic vision with agile decision-making, human-centric leadership, and collaborative efforts will define the success of higher education institutions in overcoming future challenges. This study's insights serve as a crucial guide for shaping leadership frameworks that not only address current crises but also anticipate future disruptions, ensuring that institutions remain resilient, adaptive, and capable of thriving in an increasingly unpredictable global landscape.

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