

A Review of HRD Strategies for Academics in Malaysia's Higher Education to Succeed in Unpredictable Environments: Taming the BANI Beast

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Abstract

Following unheard-of global shifts, Malaysia's higher education system is facing more and more BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) environments. Institutions and academic staff must embrace agile, adaptive, and emotionally intelligent strategies in place of traditional human resource development (HRD) approaches in these environments. The purpose of this review article is to investigate how HRD practices can be successfully modified to assist academic staff in flourishing in such uncertain circumstances. The goals are specifically to: (1) determine whether the BANI framework is applicable in the Malaysian higher education setting; (2) pinpoint HRD tactics that tackle emotional and cognitive complexity; and (3) suggest adaptable methods to improve academic performance and resilience. This study synthesises findings from 35 sources, including peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, and national policy documents published between 2018 and 2024, using a narrative literature review methodology. The development of emotional intelligence and resilience, the adoption of agile and flexible learning pathways (such as micro-credentials), the encouragement of adaptive and distributed leadership, and the creation of institutional mental health and psychosocial support systems are the four key HRD focus areas identified by thematic analysis. The results highlight the necessity of a paradigm change away from conventional, one-size-fits-all training models and towards comprehensive, human-centered HRD procedures. These tactics are crucial for institutional innovation and sustainability in addition to academic survival. Higher education in Malaysia can better equip its faculty to thrive in a time of growing complexity and unpredictability by adopting the BANI lens.

Keywords: Malaysian Higher Education, Academic Resilience, Human Resource Development, BANI Framework

Introduction

Every industry, including higher education, is experiencing more unpredictable environments as a result of the quickening pace of global change brought on by pandemics, technological disruption, climate change, and sociopolitical instability. To deal with such turbulence, institutions have historically relied on the VUCA framework (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous). Though insightful, this model frequently fails to address the psychological and emotional realities that people face during these uncertain times. As a result, a more human-centered model that captures the brittleness and stress-inducing characteristics of contemporary environments is the BANI framework—Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible (Cascio, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the flaws in Malaysian higher education's academic systems and called for a careful reassessment of institutional resilience and human capital strategies. Academic professionals had to manage work-life balance, develop new research strategies, and make the overnight transition to digital teaching under emotionally taxing conditions (Aziz et al., 2021). These requirements highlight the urgent need for effective HRD strategies that include technical training along with emotional resilience, adaptability, and well-being support networks (Norliah Kudus et al., 2023; Hamzah et al., 2022; Mahadi Abu Hassan et al., 2023, Shahrulanuar Mohamed et al., 2025).

In this regard, human resource development needs to change to become more proactive, strategic, and person-centred. Competency-based models have given way to more comprehensive frameworks that promote emotional intelligence, psychological safety, and agile leadership, in keeping with recent advancements in the HRD literature (McGuire & Garavan, 2021; Mahadi Abu Hassan et.al, 2025). Malaysian universities are encouraged to develop "global-ready" talent that is resilient, digitally literate, and adaptable to rapidly changing realities, as directed by national blueprints like the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education (2015–2025) (MOHE, 2015).

Furthermore, there is growing pressure on institutions to improve employee performance while preserving their wellbeing as they compete on a global scale. By incorporating adaptive strategies like digital upskilling, coaching for resilience, inclusive leadership training, and micro-credentialing, HRD plays a key role in this transition (Yunus & Kadir, 2023). Therefore, taming the BANI beast necessitates more than just surviving the mayhem; it also entails redesigning HRD systems to support academic success. The purpose of this review article is to examine and summarise the main HRD tactics used to help faculty members in Malaysian higher education institutions flourish in BANI environments. This paper offers practical insights for policymakers, HR professionals, and university leaders to future-proof their academic workforce by integrating strategic HRD practices with BANI realities.

Literature Review*Understanding the BANI Framework*

An alternative to the conventional VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) model that is more emotionally and psychologically sensitive is the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) framework, which was first put forth by Jamais Cascio in 2020. BANI emphasises the emotional strain and internal vulnerabilities brought on by unpredictable environments, whereas VUCA deals with external complexities and ambiguities. For

academics tasked with navigating fragile institutional systems, high anxiety from policy uncertainty, nonlinear decision-making, and incomprehensible technological transformations, BANI poses a significant challenge in the context of higher education, particularly in Malaysia (Farah Liyana Mohamad Halil et al., 2025; Zahari et al., 2023; Rahmat & Shamsudin, 2023).

HRD in Higher Education in Malaysia

Systematic attempts to enhance organisational learning, emotional health, knowledge, and skills are referred to as HRD. HRD in Malaysian universities has historically prioritised academic achievement and compliance training. Recent research, however, highlights a move towards holistic development that encompasses digital literacy, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing (Norliah Kudus et al. 2024; Mahadi Abu Hassan et al., 2024; Norliah Kudus et al., 2023).

Historically, Malaysian HEIs have adhered to the strategic frameworks described in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, which prioritises institutional autonomy, talent development, and worldwide prominence (MOHE, 2015). However, structural brittleness in academic governance, workloads, and career pathways has been revealed by the post-COVID era and ongoing geopolitical and technological disruptions (Roslan et al., 2021). These circumstances call for an HRD response that is specific to the psychological and strategic turbulence described by BANI.

Psychological resilience and emotional intelligence (EI) are becoming more and more recognised as critical academic skills. Emotional intelligence (EI), according to Goleman (2021), helps people deal with stress, adapt to change, and work together productively skills that are especially important in tense and nervous academic environments. According to Yusof & Ariffin's (2023) research, HRD interventions that prioritised emotional intelligence and well-being greatly enhanced Malaysian academic staff members' job satisfaction and adaptability. Furthermore, in times of crisis, mentoring and supportive leadership have been mentioned as protective factors against anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Khasawneh et al., 2021).

One important HRD tactic for addressing nonlinear and incomprehensible problems is adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership, according to Heifetz et al. (2009), is the ability to inspire others to take on challenging tasks and flourish in novel settings. This involves developing leaders in the academic setting who are receptive to new threats, cooperative in governance, and open to ambiguity. In line with international best practices, Malaysian HEIs like Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Malaya have implemented adaptive leadership models in their talent development initiatives (Shamsuddin & Omar, 2022).

Digital transformation and agile learning are two more important areas. While the pandemic's transition to online and hybrid learning models hastened digital fatigue, it also brought attention to the need for flexible professional development environments (Lim et al., 2022). Therefore, HRD strategies need to facilitate ongoing, modular learning, like just-in-time training and micro-credentialing. Modular training programs emphasising digital pedagogy and AI integration enabled academics to stay productive and creative in the face of non-linear policy and technological changes (Norliah Kudus et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2023).

As HRD responses to the anxiety and incomprehensibility aspects of BANI, psychosocial support systems like peer support groups, mental health programs, and institutional counselling have become more popular. Although institutional adoption is still uneven, the Ministry of Higher Education has started incorporating mental health awareness into staff development policies (MOHE, 2023). One important area for improvement is the efficient application of psychosocial HRD techniques.

All things considered, the literature confirms that an agile, human-centered, and emotionally intelligent HRD approach is necessary to manage the BANI environment in higher education. To prepare academics for uncertain futures, future HRD policies must embrace systemic transformation, emotional resilience, and adaptive mindsets in addition to functional training.

Methodology

The Human Resource Development (HRD) strategies that are pertinent to assisting academic staff in Malaysia's higher education institutions in adapting to and thriving in BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) environments are examined in this study using a qualitative, narrative-based systematic literature review (SLR) methodology. The need to synthesise and critically evaluate current research findings within the developing theoretical framework of the BANI framework is the justification for using an SLR approach. This review highlights the theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and emerging trends of HRD in volatile and unpredictable contexts because the BANI concept is still relatively new in academic discourse.

Planning the review, finding pertinent literature, assessing and choosing studies, and extracting and synthesising data were the four main stages of the review process. During the planning stage, the research questions and objectives were established based on the main question: Which HRD techniques have been found or suggested to promote academic adaptability and resilience in BANI-driven settings in Malaysian higher education? A thorough search was carried out across a number of scholarly databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect, to guarantee a strong and pertinent corpus of literature. Combinations of keywords like "BANI framework," "HRD strategies," "academic resilience," "Malaysian higher education," "adaptive leadership," "mental health in academia," "organisational agility," and "digital transformation in universities" were among the search terms used. Results were expanded or narrowed as necessary using boolean operators (AND, OR). In order to capture both pre- and post-pandemic perspectives and highlight relevance to the BANI era, the time frame chosen for this review was 2015–2024.

Sources had to meet the following requirements in order to be included: (1) be peer-reviewed journal articles, academic reports, or policy papers; (2) concentrate on HRD practices in higher education settings; (3) provide insights into the Malaysian or Southeast Asian context, though comparisons with other countries were also taken into account; and (4) directly relate to one or more BANI framework dimensions. Articles that were anecdotal, blog-based, or lacked empirical or theoretical rigour were eliminated based on exclusion criteria.

Following abstract screening and full-text assessment, 62 pertinent sources were chosen from the original pool of 248 articles. A thematic coding matrix based on HRD themes and the main

BANI framework dimensions—such as resilience building, adaptive learning, emotional intelligence training, digital skills development, well-being support systems, and transformational leadership—was used to extract data. The data was coded and organised using NVivo software, which allowed for content categorisation and pattern recognition.

A thematic analysis approach was used to synthesise the findings, emphasising emerging strategies, recurrent themes, and contextual nuances. The review also looked at how HRD practices matched institutional HRM guidelines and national education policies, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education (2015–2025). This study provides a comprehensive view of the changing HRD environment in Malaysia's higher education sector in the face of BANI disruptions by combining sources from academic research and policy documents. In the end, this approach made it possible to comprehend in depth and with context how Malaysian universities can create HRD systems that are more emotionally intelligent and agile in order to overcome the difficulties presented by BANI environments.

Results and Discussion

In order to handle the difficulties presented by the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) environment, Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented a number of crucial HRD strategies, which were identified in this review. Four main themes emotional resilience, adaptive leadership, digital agility, and psychosocial support organize the findings, which are compiled from recent research, institutional reports, and policy documents.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Emotional Resilience

The growing emphasis on emotional intelligence (EI) training for academic staff is among the most important findings. To improve faculty members' emotional self-awareness, empathy, and stress management, institutions like Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka have instituted focused workshops. Particularly during times of policy change and digital transformation, these programs reportedly increased teaching satisfaction, enhanced interpersonal collaboration, and increased tolerance for ambiguity (Yusof & Ariffin, 2023; Norliah Kudus et al., 2023). The BANI context's inherent anxiety and brittleness were found to be significantly mitigated by emotional resilience.

Distributed and Adaptive Leadership

The strategic move towards adaptive leadership practices at a number of public universities is also highlighted in the review. To address nonlinearity and incomprehensibility in governance, leadership development modules now place a strong emphasis on distributed leadership, agile decision-making, and the collaborative development of institutional visions (Farah Liyana Mohamad Halil et.al 2025; Shamsuddin & Omar, 2022). These strategies have proven particularly successful during the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery periods that followed, allowing academic leaders to stay on course while negotiating changing governmental regulations and varying student needs.

Learning Ecosystems and Digital Agility

The shift of HRD to a digital-first paradigm is another important finding. Many institutions have invested in micro-credentialing platforms, modular learning programs, and just-in-time

digital upskilling initiatives to ensure academic staff remain agile in the face of rapidly evolving technologies (Ahmad et al., 2023). By facilitating rapid adaptation to new resources and instructional techniques, these strategies assist academics in managing nonlinearity. But issues like staff members' uneven levels of digital literacy and digital fatigue still need to be addressed.

Support for Psychosocial and Mental Health

Mental health and well-being are a prominent and expanding area of HRD intervention. Peer support groups, mental wellness apps, and on-campus counselling have all been introduced as a result of the Ministry of Higher Education's (2023) mental health action plan. The BANI framework's defining characteristics of anxiety and emotional volatility have been partially addressed by these initiatives. However, institutional uptake varies amongst HEIs, with some lacking the staff or infrastructure necessary to provide long-term assistance.

The review identified a number of crucial HRD tactics used by Malaysian academic institutions to deal with the difficulties presented by BANI environments. These tactics support academic staff members' emotional health and agile leadership while also fostering their resilience, adaptability, and inventiveness. The table below provides a summary of the results:

Table 1

Academic HRD Strategies in Malaysian Higher Education in BANI Settings

BANI Characteristic	Challenge	HRD Strategy	Impact
Brittle	Overreliance on rigid systems; vulnerable to disruption	Leadership agility training and crisis simulation workshops	Improved institutional flexibility and scenario planning
Anxious	Mental stress, job insecurity, uncertainty	Mental health support, coaching, and resilience training	Enhanced emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms
Nonlinear	Unpredictable academic demands and outcomes	Flexible career pathways and adaptive performance metrics	Increased motivation and innovation in teaching and research
Incomprehensible	Complex technology and unclear information flows	Digital literacy and AI upskilling programs	Improved tech adoption and confidence in digital pedagogy

Discussion

The results confirm that, in reaction to the disruptions brought about by BANI, Malaysian higher education is shifting towards a more human-centered and holistic HRD model. A paradigm shifts from conventional, technical skill-based HRD models to one that is dynamic and emotionally intelligent is represented by the integration of EI, adaptive leadership, digital agility, and psychosocial well-being. However, there are significant differences in how these strategies are implemented across institutions, frequently based on cultural preparedness, funding availability, and leadership vision.

Additionally, by highlighting emotional, psychological, and non-linear issues that transcend VUCA's structural focus, the BANI framework offers a more sophisticated understanding of environmental pressures. Institutions are better prepared to prepare scholars to not only

survive but also flourish in unstable and uncertain educational environments by integrating HRD with BANI's features. The long-term effects of these HRD initiatives on student outcomes, academic performance, and institutional resilience should be investigated in future studies. Creating evaluation frameworks to gauge HRD efficacy in BANI settings would also be advantageous.

Conclusion

The operational and developmental landscape of higher education in Malaysia has been drastically altered by the shift from a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) to a BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) world. This review has shown that in order to meet the demands of an academic environment that is becoming more delicate and emotionally taxing, Human Resource Development (HRD) strategies need to move beyond traditional capacity-building and technical training models. The review's main conclusions imply that HRD in Malaysian universities is starting to adopt more comprehensive strategies that give priority to digital agility, emotional intelligence, adaptive leadership, and mental health assistance. In order to help academics deal with the brittle and nonlinear pressures of institutional change, policy instability, and technological disruption, these strategies are not only pertinent but crucial. Additionally, programs like psychological resilience training, distributed leadership, and micro-credentialing are showing themselves to be important facilitators of the development of a more human-centered, responsive academic culture.

The review also shows that implementation is still inconsistent across institutions, frequently due to a lack of leadership ability, cultural inertia, and resource constraints. To make sure that HRD strategies continue to be in line with the changing demands of the BANI era, higher education policymakers and university administrators must place a high priority on institutional preparedness, digital access equity, and ongoing evaluation procedures. Adaptive tactics alone won't be enough to tame the BANI beast; academia as a whole must adopt a more flexible, empathetic, and systemic agile mindset. Malaysian academics are in a strong position to not only endure but also prosper in this new age of uncertainty if the proper HRD frameworks are in place.

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