

Strategic Changes in Malaysia's Higher Education Environment: From VUCA to BANI

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous pressure on organizations worldwide, with higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia being no exception. The crisis forced a quick shift to digital education, initially as a temporary substitute for face-to-face instruction. After the pandemic, many Malaysian HEIs have continued using online and distance learning through various digital platforms. Although this approach worked well during the emergency, concerns remain about its long-term ability to maintain educational quality. Higher education now faces a highly volatile and unpredictable strategic environment, requiring adaptive and resilient institutional responses. Before the pandemic, the external environment was often described by the VUCA framework: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. However, the emergence of new virus variants like Delta and Omicron has made VUCA insufficient to fully describe current challenges. A newer framework, BANI: brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible, better captures today's strategic realities. This paper examines the relevance of BANI as a tool for understanding the evolving challenges faced by Malaysian higher education. It also suggests possible scenarios and adaptive strategies to ensure institutional sustainability. The study combines experiential insights with a review of relevant literature to offer a comprehensive analysis of the changing landscape of higher education.

Keywords: BANI, VUCA, Disruption, Higher Education Malaysia, Strategic Environment

Introduction

Malaysia's higher education sector is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by global disruptions, technological advancements, and changing socio-economic needs. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst, revealing systemic weaknesses and forcing institutions to quickly shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to remote and online learning methods. Although this transition maintained educational continuity, it also uncovered critical gaps in

digital infrastructure, educator readiness, student engagement, and quality assurance systems (UNESCO, 2020).

These challenges emerged within an already volatile and complex environment, traditionally framed by the VUCA model: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) have long grappled with rapid globalization, technological innovation, and policy reforms, notably those outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

However, the pandemic underscored limitations in the VUCA framework's explanatory power. In response, strategic thinkers have increasingly adopted the BANI model: Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible as a more nuanced lens to understand today's chaotic and emotionally charged realities (Farah Liyana Mohamad Halil et al., 2025; Cascio, 2020; Raworth, 2022). BANI captures the fragility of systems, the psychological strain on stakeholders, the unpredictability of outcomes, and the challenge of making sense of complex phenomena.

This paradigm shift from VUCA to BANI has significant implications for Malaysia's higher education landscape. Institutions must now navigate persistent digital divides, unstable funding structures, and global forces such as climate change, geopolitical tensions, and disruptive technologies (Aziz et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). These dynamics affect a wide array of stakeholders, students, faculty, administrators, policymakers, and industry partners, making strategic adaptation not just an operational necessity but a cornerstone of long-term sustainability and competitiveness.

This paper explores how Malaysia's higher education sector is responding to the transition from VUCA to BANI. It aims to redefine strategic priorities, operational models, and leadership approaches by analyzing disruptions and opportunities within the BANI context. The study offers adaptive strategies to build resilience and contribute to the development of a future-ready, inclusive, and agile higher education system.

Methodology

This study employs a reflexive and experiential approach, grounded in the author's professional insights and supported by a targeted review of academic literature and policy documents. Reflexive complexity and critical experiential inquiry are particularly suited to unpacking the multifaceted challenges facing higher education, where the researcher's positionality can enrich understanding (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 2017).

The analysis draws on institutional responses and strategic shifts observed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Key sources include the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), UNESCO's global education reports (UNESCO, 2020), OECD's post-pandemic education assessments (OECD, 2021), and conceptual frameworks such as VUCA and BANI (Cascio, 2020; Raworth, 2022). This hybrid methodology enables a theoretically informed yet contextually grounded discussion of the strategic environment confronting Malaysian HEIs. It also allows for the integration of emotional, psychological, and systemic dimensions—critical in understanding the transition from VUCA to BANI.

Strategic Environment

The strategic environment of higher education can be understood through two dominant frameworks: VUCA and BANI. Originally developed in military and business contexts, these models have been increasingly applied to education to interpret uncertainty and guide strategic planning (Farah Liyana Mohamad Halil et al., 2025; Menaria, 2024; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Cascio, 2020; Suzana Abdul Latif et al., 2020; Mahadi Abu Hassan et al., 2024). VUCA, introduced by Bennett and Lemoine (2014), describes environments characterized by rapid change, unpredictability, and complexity. It has informed Malaysia's higher education strategies for over a decade, particularly through initiatives in digitalization, internationalization, and policy alignment with national goals (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015; Zaini Ujang, 2009). In the Malaysian context, the BANI framework better captures the emotional and psychological toll of recent disruptions. It highlights the need for adaptive leadership, emotional intelligence, and resilient institutional cultures.

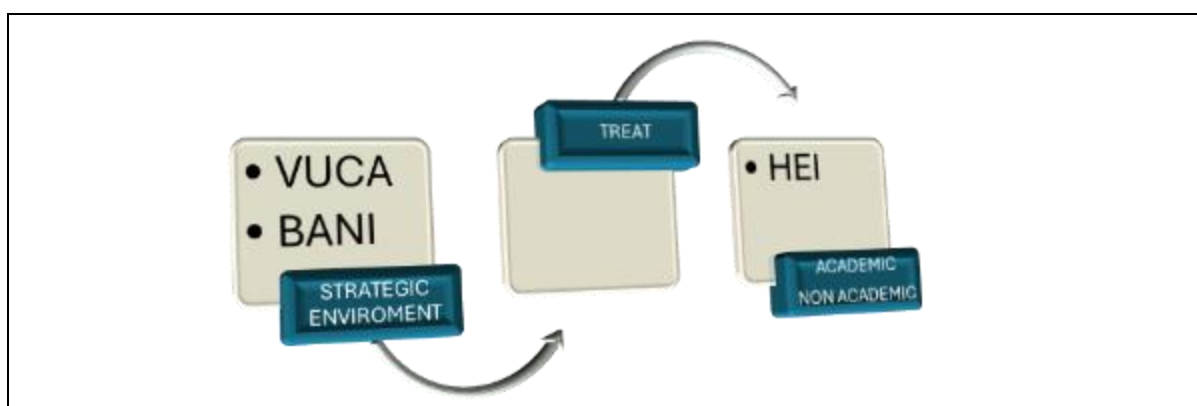


Figure 1: Strategic Environment of VUCA & BANI as a Threat for HEIs

VUCA: A Legacy of Strategic Turbulence

The VUCA model, popularized by Bennett and Lemoine (2014), describes environments marked by rapid, unpredictable change and interdependent challenges. In higher education, VUCA has been instrumental in shaping strategic responses to globalization, digitalization, and policy reform. Malaysia's higher education institutions (HEIs), guided by the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025, have long operated within this paradigm, emphasizing agility, innovation, and international competitiveness (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). VUCA's four dimensions are particularly relevant (Rimita et al., 2020; Suzana Abdul Latif et al., 2020; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014):

Volatility	Rapid shifts in technology and policy demand a clear institutional vision.
Uncertain	Incomplete information challenges forecasting and decision-making.
Complexity	Interconnected systems require coordinated, cross-sectoral responses
Ambiguity	Blurred cause-and-effect relationships necessitate flexible, adaptive strategies

However, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of VUCA. While HEIs responded quickly to disruptions, the crisis revealed deeper structural fragilities—particularly in digital infrastructure, pedagogical readiness, and institutional resilience (OECD, 2021; Mahadzir et al., 2022. Mahadi Abu Hassan et al., 2025). These challenges prompted a shift toward a more nuanced framework: BANI.

BANI: A Framework for Post-Pandemic Realities

Coined by Jamais Cascio (2020), the BANI model offers a more human-centered lens to understand the emotional, psychological, and systemic disruptions of the 21st century (Farah Liyana Mohamad Halil et al., 2025; Mahadi Abu Hassan et al, 2025; Menaria, 2024). It reflects the fragility of institutions, the anxiety of stakeholders, the unpredictability of outcomes, and the difficulty of making sense of complex events.

Brittleness	Systems that appear robust may collapse under stress. In Malaysian HEIs, outdated pedagogies and rigid administrative structures proved vulnerable during the pandemic (OECD, 2021; Raworth, 2022). Institutional resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt and recover, is now a strategic imperative (Cascio, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).
Anxiety	The pandemic intensified psychological stress among students and educators. Studies in Malaysia report high levels of anxiety, exacerbated by unclear policies and abrupt shifts in learning modes (Sundarasan et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2022). Organizational mindfulness and a growth mindset are essential to mitigate anxiety and foster adaptive capacity (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015; Zeng et al., 2023).
Nonlinearity	Small disruptions can trigger disproportionate consequences. For example, delays in digital policy implementation led to cascading failures in online learning delivery (Mahadzir et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). HEIs must embrace decentralized decision-making and adaptive governance to remain responsive (Jisc, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).
Incomprehensibility	In a world where patterns are elusive, leaders often struggle to interpret events or anticipate outcomes. Malaysian HEIs face fragmented data, competing demands, and rapid policy shifts that defy linear logic (Aziz et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Scenario planning and values-based leadership are critical tools in navigating this ambiguity (Cascio, 2020; Raworth, 2022).

Strategic Implications for Malaysian HEIs

The transition from VUCA to BANI reframes how Malaysian HEIs must approach strategy. While VUCA emphasizes operational agility, BANI demands emotional intelligence, systemic resilience, and inclusive leadership. The Malaysia Education Blueprint remains a foundational guide, but its implementation must now account for the emotional and psychological dimensions of institutional change (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

Digital transformation, once a strategic goal, is now a survival necessity. Frameworks such as Jisc's digital transformation model emphasize the importance of leadership, stakeholder engagement, and cultural readiness in navigating this shift (Jisc, 2023). Moreover, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) warns against over-reliance on technology without addressing equity, governance, and pedagogical quality (UNESCO, 2023). In this context, Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) must prioritize strategic resilience by focusing on several key areas. First, they need to build resilient systems capable of absorbing shocks and adapting to unforeseen disruptions, particularly those related to digital infrastructure and policy volatility (Aziz et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). Second, cultivating adaptive institutional cultures that embrace uncertainty and foster innovation is essential for navigating the complexities of the BANI environment (Cascio, 2020; Raworth, 2022). Third, the well-being and mental health of students and staff must be recognized as strategic assets, requiring proactive support systems and psychologically informed leadership (Shahrulnauar

Mohamed et al. 2024; Sundarasan et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2022). Finally, sustained investment in inclusive digital infrastructure and governance is critical to ensure equitable access, operational agility, and long-term sustainability (UNESCO, 2023; Jisc, 2023, Norliah Kudus et al., 2025).

Key Organisational Factors Affecting HEIs

Institutional resilience in higher education requires more than academic excellence it demands robust organizational foundations. During the COVID-19 crisis, Gembong Baskoro (2021) emphasized that non-academic domains such as governance, student support, and administrative agility were disproportionately impacted compared to academic functions. This paper distils four critical organizational dimensions: stability, dynamism, leadership capacity, and strategic vision, and evaluates them against the BANI framework to identify vulnerabilities and stress points in Malaysian HEIs.

Organisational Dimensions in BANI Context

Institutions with rigid structures and outdated operational models were particularly vulnerable to collapse under stress, highlighting the brittle nature of the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) framework (Cascio, 2020; Raworth, 2022). In contrast, those that demonstrated dynamism marked by the ability to adapt swiftly to changing conditions were better positioned to maintain continuity. Institutions lacking flexible governance and robust digital infrastructure faced significant challenges in this regard (OECD, 2021; Mahadzir et al., 2022). Leadership capacity also played a pivotal role; institutions led by proactive and emotionally intelligent leaders were more adept at managing stakeholder concerns and navigating the anxiety and uncertainty inherent in BANI environments (Sundarasan et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2022; Mahadi Abu Hassan et al., 2025). Furthermore, a clear and forward-looking strategic vision enabled institutions to respond effectively to nonlinear disruptions and incomprehensible shifts within the education landscape (UNESCO, 2023; Jisc, 2023). These dimensions are visually represented in Figure 1.2, which maps BANI components against organizational factors, and Figure 1.3, which presents the author's evaluation of Malaysian higher education institutions under BANI conditions.

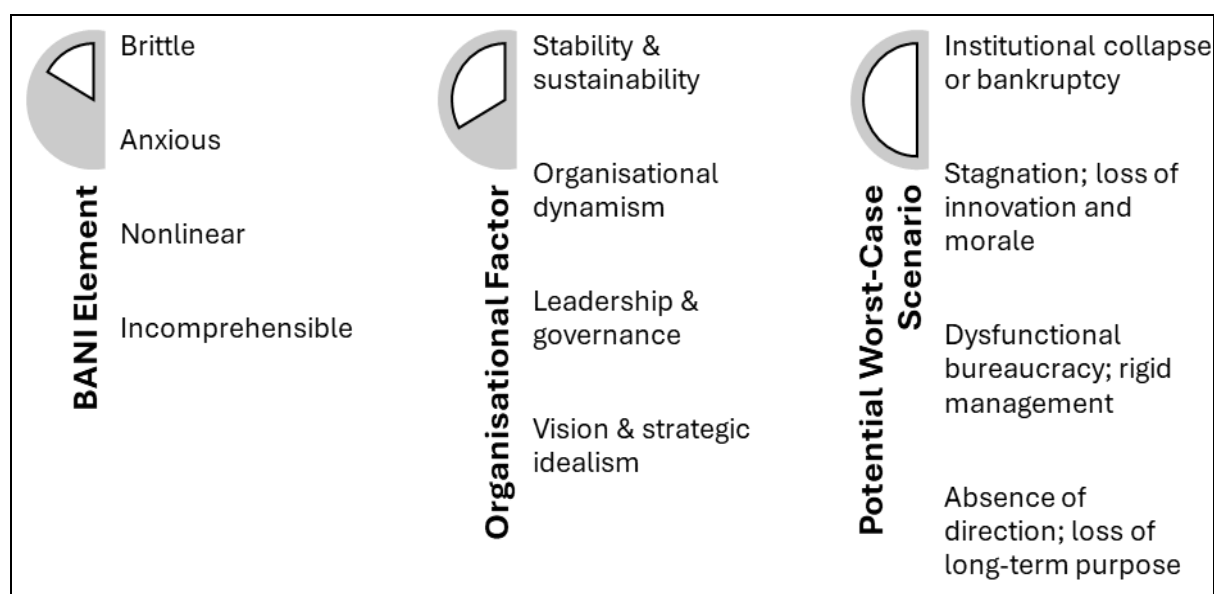


Figure 1.2: BANI Components vs. Organisational Factors

BANI Element	Organisational Factor	Observed Condition Among HEIs
Brittle	Stability & sustainability	Largely unstable; financial fragility
Anxious	Organisational dynamism	Generally stagnant; high levels of inertia
Nonlinear	Leadership and governance	Varies significantly by individual leadership
Incomprehensible	Vision and idealism	Highly dependent on board commitment

Figure 1.3 Author's Evaluation of HEIs in BANI Conditions

Assessment of BANI's Impact on Malaysian HEIs

This study evaluates the impact of the BANI framework on Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) in the context of pandemic-related disruptions. Findings from observational data and institutional reports indicate that many HEIs were ill-prepared for the brittleness revealed by the crisis, with operational instability, declining enrolment, and even closures particularly among institutions with limited financial reserves and digital infrastructure (Mahadzir et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). Private HEIs were especially affected, with 21 institutions ceasing operations due to financial strain and inadequate technological readiness (Mahadzir et al., 2022). The Ministry of Higher Education's 2023 tracer study further highlights disparities in graduate employment outcomes between public and private HEIs, pointing to deeper systemic vulnerabilities (MOHE, 2023). In contrast, institutions that had diversified funding sources, invested strategically in digital capabilities, and demonstrated agile leadership were more resilient, successfully maintaining student engagement and operational continuity amid the chaos (Mokhtar Abdullah et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023; Jisc, 2023).

Discussion

The complex issues that higher education institutions are currently facing are encapsulated in the BANI framework. Brittleness, anxiety, nonlinearity, and incomprehensibility are the four components of BANI, and each one presents unique risks that call for careful consideration.

Brittle Environments

HEIs that experience brittleness are those whose systems seem strong but aren't structurally resilient. When crises strike, universities that rely too heavily on traditional funding sources, physical presence, or antiquated IT infrastructure run the risk of collapsing. Due to abrupt changes in enrolment and instructional strategies, a number of private institutions in Malaysia experienced severe disruption or financial collapse. Universities with large reserves, blended learning platforms, and merger support, on the other hand, showed greater resilience (Mokhtar Abdullah et al., 2024; MOHE, 2023).

Anxious Environments

In higher education institutions (HEIs), anxiety has been especially prevalent among students and employees. Malaysian university students have high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, according to research done during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 20–30%, for example, reported moderate to severe anxiety, with rates disproportionately higher among those who were facing health issues, social isolation, or financial hardship (Sundarasan et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2022; Shahrulanuar Mohamed et al., 2025). This anxiety was exacerbated by the absence of flexible academic policies, comprehensive mental health support, and effective communication strategies in many HEIs, which led to institutional stagnation and a decreased organisational capacity for innovation (Mahadi Abu Hassan et al. 2024)

Nonlinear Environments

When relatively small triggers have disproportionate effects, this is referred to as a nonlinear disruption. For instance, during the pandemic, seemingly insignificant policy changes or unexpected campus closures brought entire institutional operations to a sudden halt. Navigating these obstacles required leadership agility; HEIs with empowered mid-level leaders and decentralised governance showed more flexibility and quickly adopted blended or hybrid learning models. Institutions with strict hierarchical structures, on the other hand, had trouble reacting quickly and effectively to changing conditions (OECD, 2021; Jisc, 2023; Norliah Kudus et al., 2024).

Incomprehensible Environments

The term "incomprehensibility" describes circumstances that call into question strategic vision and coherence. Organisations with a clear, values-based leadership style were better at navigating ambiguity. Even in times of crisis, morale, continuity, and institutional identity were maintained by boards and executive leadership with a long-term outlook. Notably, with the help of strong strategic clarity, a few mission-driven HEIs increased their operations despite financial limitations (UNESCO, 2023; Aziz et al., 2022).

Assessment of BANI's Impact on Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

This study applies the BANI framework to assess how Malaysian HEIs responded to pandemic-induced disruptions. Observational data and institutional reports reveal that many institutions were unprepared for the brittleness exposed by the crisis. Operational instability, declining enrolment, and in extreme cases closure was common among institutions with limited financial reserves and digital capacity.

Private HEIs, in particular, faced acute challenges. According to Mahadzir et al. (2022), 21 private institutions ceased operations during the pandemic due to financial strain and inadequate digital infrastructure. The Ministry of Higher Education's 2023 tracer study further highlights disparities in graduate employment outcomes between public and private HEIs, underscoring systemic fragility. Conversely, institutions with diversified funding models, strategic digital investment, and agile leadership demonstrated greater resilience. These HEIs were able to pivot effectively, maintain student engagement, and sustain operations despite the chaotic environment.

Discussion

Compared to the earlier VUCA framework, the BANI model offers a more nuanced and relevant lens for understanding the strategic challenges currently facing Malaysia's higher education institutions (Farah Liyana Mohamad Halil et al., 2025; Mahadi Abu Hassan et al., 2025; Menaria, 2024; Duarte & Syn, 2021). Each dimension of BANI—Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible—introduces distinct pressures that reshape institutional operations and leadership responses.

Brittle: The pandemic exposed the fragility of Malaysian HEIs, particularly in their operational stability. Institutions faced declining student enrolment, abrupt transitions to online learning, and uneven digital readiness among academic staff (Norliah Kudus et al., 2024; Ooi et al., 2021). The rapid shift to digital platforms created unprecedented disruption, especially for institutions lacking robust infrastructure or financial buffers. Government interventions, including technology grants and policy support for institutional mergers, helped mitigate some of these shocks (Junaid et al., 2022).

Anxious: Anxiety surged among students and staff, driven by health concerns, academic uncertainty, and financial instability. Studies show that 20–30% of Malaysian university students experienced moderate to severe anxiety during the pandemic, with higher rates among those affected by isolation or economic hardship (Sundarasan et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2021). This emotional strain dampened institutional dynamism, leading to risk-averse behaviours and reduced innovation during a critical period.

Nonlinear: Sudden lockdowns and policy shifts had disproportionate effects on HEI operations, complicating strategic planning. Institutions with agile governance and empowered middle leadership adapted more effectively to hybrid learning environments than those with centralized, rigid structures (OECD, 2021; Jisc, 2023). Decentralized decision-making and leadership flexibility emerged as key enablers of resilience.

Incomprehensible: The evolving strategic landscape challenged HEI leaders' ability to interpret and respond to complex realities. Institutions led by visionary boards and senior management were better equipped to navigate ambiguity, maintain continuity, and pursue strategic growth despite resource constraints (Norliah Kudus et al., 2025). Visionary leadership—marked by clarity, idealism, and adaptability—proved essential in steering institutions through the chaos of the BANI era.

Conclusion

Malaysian HEIs have faced extraordinary challenges navigating the VUCA environment, which was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to a BANI strategic context introduced new layers of complexity, affecting both academic and non-academic domains. The compounded pressures from both frameworks threaten institutional sustainability and effectiveness. Yet, amid adversity, institutions with strong governance, adaptive leadership, and flexible management structures demonstrated resilience and, in some cases, growth. This study underscores the critical importance of vision, leadership, idealism, and management agility in successfully navigating the BANI environment. The findings highlight that continuous innovation, emotional intelligence, and strategic adaptability are essential for overcoming the uncertainties and disruptions shaping the future of higher education in Malaysia.

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