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Navigating VUCA and BANI: Stories of Leadership and Learning in Assessment

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Abstract: Higher education professionals, particularly those working in assessment and educational quality, are leading through environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) and Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible (BANI). This session explored how we responded to these conditions through personal leadership narratives and a reflective observational framework. Drawing from participant experiences and metaphor-based storytelling, we examine the inner and outer dimensions of leadership in VUCA contexts. Using visual prompts, participants shared emotional responses to leadership moments, reflecting on resilience, self-doubt, exclusion, agency, and identity. The VUCA framework is expanded through a lens of personal development: volatility calls us to vision, uncertainty requires understanding, complexity asks for clarity and connection, and ambiguity invites agility and empathy. We also consider inward reactions to chaos, brittleness, anxiety, non-linearity, incomprehensibility, and how these can transform into bendability, compassion, neuroplasticity, and new networks. This session modeled reflective leadership development in action, recognizing that while we cannot always control the external environment, we can respond with intention and self-awareness. Through this shared work, we move toward a more connected, resilient, and values-driven approach to academic leadership.

Keywords: *VUCA, BANI, leadership, assessment, higher education, reflective practice, professional development*

Introduction

In an era defined by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) and Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible (BANI), higher education professionals engaged in assessment and educational quality are navigating dynamic environments that challenge traditional leadership models (Antonacopoulou, 2018). These professionals are not only tasked with ensuring academic excellence but are also leading through institutional transformation, social change, and technological disruption. This paper examines how conference participants at the 2025 Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) responded to VUCA/BANI conditions by engaging in reflective leadership practices and drawing on personal stories that illustrate emotional resilience, agency, and adaptive strategies.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual grounding for this session draws upon two interrelated frameworks that offer insight into the contextual and psychological dimensions of leadership in assessment and contemporary higher education: VUCA and BANI (Costa, Rouco, & Silva, 2024; Halil, Aziz, & Hassan, 2025). Originally developed in military and business contexts, the VUCA framework, an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, has become increasingly salient in academic environments, particularly for leaders navigating systemic transformation and institutional reform (Kornelsen, 2018). In this model, volatility necessitates the articulation of a clear vision; uncertainty calls for deeper understanding; complexity invites both clarity and connection; and ambiguity requires leaders to embody agility and empathy. These attributes function not merely as strategic imperatives but as adaptive capacities essential for sustained leadership effectiveness in unpredictable environments.

In parallel, the BANI framework, comprising Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible, offers a complementary lens that addresses internal states of being and emotional responses to disruption (Kruse, 2025). Where VUCA describes the nature of external challenges, BANI captures the subjective, often embodied, experiences of those navigating them. Systems that are brittle can become more resilient through intentional flexibility and bendability. Anxiety, as a response to heightened uncertainty, may be mitigated through empathy and emotional acceptance. The disorientation of nonlinear change is best addressed through neuroplastic thinking and cognitive flexibility. Incomprehensible contexts, which often overwhelm through their lack of coherence, are rendered more manageable when interpreted through diverse perspectives and strengthened by communal ties. Taken together, VUCA and BANI provide a robust framework for examining both the situational and psychological terrain in which assessment leadership is enacted.

Methodology and Activity Design

The session employed a narrative-based methodology designed to elicit introspective accounts of assessment leaders under conditions of stress, ambiguity, or transformation. Participants were invited to select a visual image that evoked a strong emotional memory related to a personal leadership moment. These images served as metaphoric entry points for storytelling within small, facilitated groups. The design emphasized reflective engagement rather than critique, privileging the internal meaning-making process of participants. The resulting narratives were rich in metaphor and grounded in lived experience, revealing emergent patterns related to identity, exclusion, emotional complexity, and persistence in the face of adversity.

Findings: Common Leadership Narratives from Assessment Professionals

Across the collected stories, five dominant thematic patterns emerged, each revealing how participants internalized and responded to the dual landscapes articulated by the VUCA and BANI frameworks.

The first theme, *emotional complexity and resilience*, was illustrated by a participant who likened their experience of assuming a demanding role with insufficient preparation to that of a "man on a log", a metaphor for balancing uncertainty with determination. The initial anxiety evoked by this situation, consistent with the BANI construct, was ultimately addressed through connection with institutional leaders and the cultivation of new support systems, aligning with the VUCA call for understanding and relational clarity.

A second theme centered on *structural barriers and identity*. One participant recounted navigating a curriculum redesign process without formal authority, encountering exclusion despite possessing the necessary skill and dedication. Their story exemplified a response to brittle and incomprehensible institutional dynamics, ultimately resolved through the establishment of personal boundaries and reclamation of professional agency.

The third theme highlighted the importance of *support and community*. Here, the metaphor of a "tractor" was used to describe a period of personal and professional upheaval, with the participant emphasizing how consistent support from colleagues and loved ones enabled them to persist. This narrative illustrated how individual responses to brittle systems can be reshaped through relational strength and community resilience.

A fourth theme, *navigating change and ambiguity*, was expressed through the image of a "dog in a top hat"—a symbol of appearing capable while internally feeling unprepared. This metaphor sparked reflection on imposter syndrome and the dissonance between external perceptions and internal readiness. In these cases, assessment leadership required embracing ambiguity with a sense of agility and honest self-appraisal.

Finally, the theme of *persistence in the face of injustice* surfaced through a story symbolized by an "isolated path." The participant described enduring exclusion and invisibility despite a robust record of leadership. Their experience underscored the emotional toll of systemic inequities and revealed how excellence, resilience, and a commitment to internal standards can persist even in the absence of external validation. The incomprehensibility and nonlinearity of their context were met with quiet perseverance rather than capitulation.

Discussion

These leadership narratives, from assessment professionals, underscore the significance of reflective storytelling as a means of professional development and collective insight. Through metaphor and emotional candor, participants illuminated how the dual pressures of external complexity and internal disruption are navigated within academic settings. The stories illustrated a profound need for empathy, community, and intentional reflection, qualities often overlooked in more transactional models of institutional leadership. By naming and exploring their lived experiences, participants were able to reframe challenges and reimagine their roles as both leaders and learners. One participant described the volatility of shifting accreditation requirements, another the anxiety of navigating institutional budget

cuts, and another the nonlinearity of unexpected faculty turnover mid-project. Through guided reflection and small-group dialogue, they reframed these experiences not just as barriers, but as opportunities to practice resilience, adaptive leadership, and collaborative problem-solving. For example, the participant facing accreditation changes reimagined their role not as a compliance enforcer but as a learning partner who could guide faculty in making assessment processes more meaningful.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this session have several implications for leadership development in higher education. First, institutions should embed reflective practices into professional learning programs, encouraging the use of storytelling and metaphor to cultivate emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Second, the formation of peer communities—particularly those grounded in mutual vulnerability and shared narrative, can serve as protective spaces that enhance resilience and innovation. Third, leadership training, particularly for assessment professionals, should include the capacity to recognize and intervene in instances of professional invisibility, with the aim of centering marginalized voices. Finally, in navigating environments defined by both VUCA and BANI conditions, strategic focus must be maintained. Institutions should prioritize work that provides mutual value for individuals and the organization, resisting unsustainable expansion and clarifying where investments of time and energy will yield the greatest collective benefit.

Conclusion

The complexities of assessment leadership in contemporary higher education demand more than technical competence—they require emotional resilience, relational depth, and strategic discernment. By attending to both the external conditions described by VUCA and the internal experiences framed by BANI, educational leaders can cultivate practices that are not only effective but humane. Through reflective storytelling and peer connection, professionals gain tools to navigate uncertainty, engage ambiguity, and foster communities of care. These are not merely adaptive strategies; they are necessary capacities for leading and learning in a world marked by constant transformation.

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