

# THE SCENARIO OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN THE PRESENT VUCA WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

*Education serves as the base for the growth and development of any nation. The rapid changes in the environment led by globalization have influenced the higher education sector in numerous ways. The current environment described as VUCA, which indicates Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity is the new normal. The present paper attempts to illustrate the scenario of the higher education sector in the existing VUCA world. Besides, the study also aims to discuss the problems or challenges faced by university teachers, with special reference to the state of Assam. Both secondary data and an interview method were adopted based on a qualitative research approach. The constant shifting of the environment requires strong strategies to overcome the existing defects and deal with the upcoming challenges in the higher education sector.*

**Keywords:** Higher education, VUCA, Teachers, Universities, Assam

## Introduction

Education is the basis for the growth and development of any nation. An effective and efficient education system promotes productivity, creativity, and a sense of national identity. It also enriches the understanding of people by improving their thinking, skills, behavior, and overall growth. Higher education, one of the aspects of the education system of an economy, opens a pathway for greater opportunities and a better standard of living for any individual. Therefore, when it comes to teaching, it is well said, "Teaching is the one profession that creates all other professions." This indicates that the future of any professional, whether a doctor, engineer, scientist, nurse, police, or teacher, depends upon the knowledge disseminated by a teacher. To ensure a barrier-free and quality learning process, it is essential to maintain the healthy well-being of the teachers at a physical and psychological level.

Numerous radical changes in the economy that have characterized the 21st century have affected different social groups in various ways. The term "the new normal" commonly used in today's challenging world, depicts how fast the world is changing, altering every individual's work, home, and social life. These changes in the form of globalization and technological advancements have brought both boons and drawbacks for humankind. In simple terms, the present world can be described as a VUCA world,

which indicates volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The higher education sector is not left apart from the effects of the VUCA environment across the world in both a positive and negative way. The drastic reforms in this sector have impacted the teachers' mental health in the form of psychological distress, burnout, turnover intention, insecurity, etc. Therefore, the present paper attempts to illustrate the scenario of higher education in the current VUCA world. Besides, the study also aims to discuss the problems or challenges university teachers face in the VUCA scenario, with special reference to the state of Assam.

## Methodology adopted for the study

This study has adopted a qualitative research approach to explain the prevailing scenario of higher education and the problems teachers face in this VUCA world. Both primary and secondary data are used for analysis. Primary data is collected through interviews with 536 teachers selected from six universities of Assam on a random basis. The two oldest universities from each of the

### DHARITRI BAISHYA

*Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce,  
Doom Dooma College, Tinsukia, Assam*

### NAGARI MOHAN PANDA

*Professor, Department of Commerce,  
North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya*

three categories of universities, including central, state, and private universities, are selected for this study. The questions asked to the respondents are related to the challenges and issues experienced by the teachers in the universities in the VUCA world. Moreover, the secondary data are collected from the previous literature and are explained systematically.

**The VUCA world**

The notion of VUCA first originated in the United States Army War College, describing the turbulent situation that prevailed during the end of the Cold War. The acronym VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity which is familiar to every individual in today's challenging world. Volatility indicates a frequent, rapid, and unexpected change; uncertainty refers to a lack of predictability of issues and events; complexity refers to the multiplicity of issues creating chaos in itself; and ambiguity indicates a lack of clarity and the mixed meanings of conditions. The emergence of globalization in the 1990s, characterized by a wide range of revolutions, has spread the use of the term in various sectors, such as the financial markets. The changing nature of financial markets is the best example of VUCA. Moreover, the worldwide financial crisis of 2008 added to this turbulent situation resulting in several economic, political, social, cultural, and psychological consequences. One of the major attributes of the VUCA world is the change brought in by the introduction of technological innovations. On the other hand, the demographic shifts in the workforce, changes in the taste and preferences of customers, alternatives available to the customers, intensifying competition, and pressure to improve productivity with fewer resources are a few of the other realities that have to be confronted by the business leaders in an agile and strategic way (Millar et al., 2018).

**The Higher Education Sector and the VUCA Scenario**

Higher education is currently facing its most difficult set of complications since its inception. In today's modern world, the higher education sector has to operate in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment. Institutional image problems, technological innovations, intensifying competition, changing demographics, funding reductions, budget pressures, enrolment volatility, etc., are a few of the issues that best describes this dynamic, complex, and evolving environment

encountered by the global higher education sector in the VUCA world (Wallace-Hulecki, 2017). There has been a conflict between traditional approaches and values with the new ideas and values in this sector. Education is no longer confined to the traditional role of teaching and learning but is also viewed as a tradable commodity by international decision-makers, policy-makers, and politicians. Learning has become borderless with the movement of educational services and products to other countries, similar to the movement of goods and general services. This has increased volatility and, as a result, competition in this industry by promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and marketing while compromising the quality of knowledge creation and dissemination (Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). The reduction in the public funds for supporting research and other teaching-related developments has forced to generate revenue through increasing tuition fees and creating partnerships with businesses and industry. For instance, a large-scale organizational change in the form of downsizing, restructuring, and funding cuts by the higher education authorities of developed countries such as Australia has given rise to job insecurity and uncertainty among its employees (Gillespie et al., 2001). Numerous global educational institutions are increasingly recruiting their employees on a contractual basis rather than permanently due to the need for more funds. This demonstrates how the higher education sector is undergoing an enormous transition in this rapidly changing environment of VUCA.

**Challenges faced by the University Teachers in the VUCA environment**

The teachers engaged in the universities are considered the most crucial drivers of the higher education sector. Compared to past generations, teachers nowadays have to operate under constant stress in a more volatile, unpredictable, complicated, and confusing environment (Gillespie et al., 2001; Kang & Sidhu, 2015). In the present day, teachers have to play the role of an effective leader to adapt and create new ideas into action in order to survive in a dynamic and competitive environment. University teachers, in particular, must be engaged in complex and multiple roles within their organizations and their family roles simultaneously. Furthermore, numerous educational reforms implemented in the higher education sector have further

created additional challenges for university teachers across the globe. In this demanding VUCA environment, academic freedom is being undermined by authoritarian management, intellectualism is being replaced by instrumentalism, competition has created an adversarial and hostile workplace, and work is becoming more intense (Meng & Wang, 2018; Tarbener, 2018).

Interviews with the teachers in the six universities of Assam have given insights into the highlighted problems or challenges the teachers to face in the present VUCA scenario. Most teachers have expressed dissatisfaction with the time pressure in the teaching profession. Teachers have reported undergoing excessive administrative tasks, community service, and meetings that overlap with their creative teaching and intensive research activities, increasing their work pressure and impacting their mental health. In addition to these activities, they also have to regularly keep themselves updated with new knowledge, indicating the presence of rising complexity in the profession. Inadequate promotional opportunities are reported as another major challenge the teachers face in the present study. The frequent and unexpected changes in higher educational policies, increase in contractual posts in place of permanent recruitment, demands in research productivity, lengthy formalities, and paperwork are a few of the factors responsible for such a challenge which significantly features the volatile, uncertain, and ambiguous picture of the higher education sector.

The university teachers have to continuously struggle with the notion of "publish or perish" to remain competitive in the VUCA world. The state's funds shortage is creating more complexity for the university teachers in conducting high-quality research in the study region. Moreover, the teachers, particularly in the higher age groups, have reported their inability to adapt to the VUCA condition brought forth by the evolution of e-learning concepts, resulting in a lack of clarity in its usage as they have already adapted to the traditional techniques of teaching. Teachers have also reported inadequacy of physical working conditions and infrastructure available for teaching and research activities, which is crucial for developing an enhanced work culture in the university setting to survive in a dynamic VUCA environment. This clearly implies the adverse effects of the VUCA environment on the university teachers of the study region.

## Conclusion

The prime purpose of this article is to explore the higher education scenario in this ever-changing and dynamic VUCA world by throwing light on the challenges faced by the teachers in the universities of Assam. Data are taken from secondary sources and face-to-face interviews with the teachers. With the performance measures becoming stringent, teachers are constantly required to strive to survive in the competitive work environment. There has been an increase in diversity and enrolment of students due to the expansion of the higher education market globally. Resulting in the need for teachers to learn the upgraded knowledge and skills, as the existing knowledge is becoming obsolete. Other reforms, such as strict assessment of every action of the teachers, are taking away the profession's autonomy. The constant shifting of the environment from normal to the new normal, i.e., VUCA, requires strong strategies to overcome the existing defects and deal with the upcoming challenges in the higher education sector. The present article will enable the higher education authorities such as statutory bodies, management committees, the state, and the university administration to take necessary actions to eliminate or reduce the challenges faced by the university teachers in the VUCA environment, particularly in Assam. The above-mentioned scenario necessitates the stakeholders of the higher education sector to preparedly step into this VUCA world to face the uncertainties of tomorrow and provide a helping hand in the task of nation-building.

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