

The Role of Agile Leadership in Fostering Innovation in UAE Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Strong leadership is essential to the success of projects and teams in organisations and educational settings. However, there are still many challenges in determining the significant effectiveness of agile leadership in enhancing innovation in the educational settings of the UAE. The paper explores the role of agile leadership in enhancing innovation in UAE educational institutions for sustainability through a systematic review of relevant literature. Here, I provide the results of a literature review that set out to give the agile community a comprehensive understanding of the researchers that have investigated agile leadership in educational settings. This systematic review found a total of 3 articles published between 2018 and 2023 that considerably advanced my understanding of agile leadership. The findings suggest that some researchers use agile leadership in advancing higher educational settings, while other studies offer a focus on innovation, culture, and agile leadership effectiveness in different organisations in the UAE and educational settings in various areas of the globe. The findings indicate the significance and crucial role of agile leadership in the development and enhancement of better educational settings in the UAE, but there is a need for increased focus on agile leadership research to get a deeper understanding of agile leadership.

Keywords: agile leadership, agile leaders, agile leadership in innovation, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership

1. Introduction

1.1. Background Information

The area of education in the UAE has recently undergone a change because of the developmental plans of the UAE, such as UAE Vision 2021 and the Centennial Plan 2071, to enhance the quality of education and the development of a knowledge-based economy (Russo et al., 2023). Such an agenda is relatively ambitious and would, therefore, need leadership that has the capacity to spearhead change and the ability to foster innovation with elasticity. Therefore, it is possible to state that agile leadership, which is characterised by its work in terms of flexibility, teamwork, and the consistent attainment of improvements in small steps, is the most suitable for fulfilling the educational improvement aim of UAE Vision 2021 and the Centennial Plan 2071, as per Morrison (2019). Unlike conventional top-down management structures, agile leadership fosters flexibility, which is paramount when dealing with the current and emerging challenges in the UAE's educational systems (Theobald et al., 2020). The study sought to find out exactly how agile leadership can foster innovation in UAE educational institutions. Through understanding these dynamics, the research gave insight on ways to adopt and practice agile leadership to enhance and improve the educational system and meet the national education agenda. The research also focused on filling the existing gap between practice and literature by considering the effectiveness of agile leadership in this region.

1.2. Problem Statement

The UAE has made considerable attempts, such as UAE Vision 2021 and the Centennial Plan 2071, that aim to enhance educational settings through a traditional style of leadership (Russo et al., 2023). These leadership styles remain inadequate for enhancing the state of innovations in educational institutes. The fast rate of economic development and the multicultural population require agile leaders who provide flexibility, promote collaboration, and foster innovation. However, there is limited awareness and implementation of agile leadership practices in these institutions, and they are not able to respond and create new solutions adequately (Özgenel et al., 2022). This research seeks to fill this gap by establishing how agile leadership can foster innovation in UAE learning institutions.

1.3. Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of the research is to explore the role of agile leadership in enhancing innovation in UAE educational institutions for sustainability, which is accomplished by the following objectives:

1. To determine the key characteristics of agile leadership to be considered in the UAE's educational system.
2. To analyse the impacts of agile leadership on innovations in educational systems for better outcomes.
3. To foster the theoretical understanding of agile leadership to improve innovations and practical adaptability of leaders and policymakers in the UAE.

4. To develop practicable recommendations for educational leaders to implement agile leadership in the UAE's educational system.

1.4. Research Questions

How the implementation of agile leadership fosters innovation in educational settings in the UAE to promote development and the national agenda of improvement.

RQ1. What are the key characteristics of agile leadership to be considered in the UAE's educational system?

RQ2. What are the impacts of agile leadership on innovations in educational systems for better outcomes?

RQ3. What is the theoretical understanding of agile leadership to improve innovations and practical adaptability of leaders and policymakers in the UAE?

RQ4. What are practicable recommendations for educational leaders to implement agile leadership in the UAE's educational system?

1.5. Research Significance

This research was useful in addressing the need for change in UAE educational institutions resulting from economic advancement and cultural diversification. In this way, the study was more specific and provided certain information about the ways in which agile leadership can be helpful in enhancing educational outcomes in the UAE. Agile leadership is appropriate for the UAE's educational goals, Vision 2021, and the Centennial Plan 2071 as it embraces flexibility, teamwork, and iterative methods (Theobald et al., 2020). The

results of the study provided practical recommendations for educational managers and policymakers in the UAE to enhance the applicability of strategies for making the education system more adaptive. Moreover, this research contributed to the existing literature by offering a literature-based study of the applicability and efficiency of agile leadership in the context of UAE education. This has not only enhanced the pool of academic knowledge but is also beneficial to other institutions in their attempt to achieve international standards. Moreover, the study sought to equip the UAE educational leaders with the knowledge and tools that enable them to foster the necessary change that will keep the nation's education system relevant and capable of supporting a knowledge-based economy (Morrison, 2019).

2. Literature Review

The literature review involved various theories and concepts of leadership and innovation, with a special focus on agile leadership, which has substantive theoretical underpinnings. To maintain conciseness and facilitate a comparison with studies on agile leadership, this brief narrative review concentrates solely on agile leadership literature rather than encompassing all leadership literature.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Key Characteristics of Agile Leaderships to Be Considered in UAE's Educational System

Agile leadership is a crucial managerial role, and it seems that any organisation's long-term growth and profitability depend on its ability to be responsive and innovative. Leadership

in agile settings focuses on flexibility, teamwork, and the process of constructing projects in stages (Özgenel et al., 2022). It emerged from the software development field, where there was always pressure to respond to ever changing requirements and a drive for improvement. Agile leaders are known for their capacity to lead the team, create a culture of growth, and make decisions promptly and effectively (Akkaya et al., 2022).

There are several distinct characteristics that distinguish leaders of agile organisations and teams as they facilitate change and innovation. These characteristics are essential for making the necessary changes to improve and adapt to the organisation's conditions.

2.1.1 Adaptability

The kind of leaders required in an agile environment assume a mentality that is flexible and open to change. This is due to the fact that they can easily adapt to the strategies and approaches they are employing in the reception of information and the environment. This versatility is very crucial, especially in environments that are characterised by a lot of changes, something that is referred to as volatility (Grass et al., 2020). This is because adaptable leaders ensure that their group is always prepared for new challenges and ready to exploit opportunities. This flexibility enables the administration to make changes to their strategies and methods to effectively respond to the needs of teachers and students for the improvement of educational institutions. By embracing flexibility and being prepared to shift when the need arises, agile leaders can develop a strong and flexible educational system that can operate effectively in the face of existing uncertainties and innovations.

2.1.2 Collaboration

These are team processes and team interaction-based, meaning that they promote and enhance the flow of information. This approach assists in engaging the entire team in contributing ideas on how to solve the issue (Özgenel et al., 2022). Agile leaders encourage the collaboration and involvement of teachers, administrators, and students and ensure that everyone gets to contribute their ideas and efforts. Such an approach not only improves problem-solving and innovation processes but also guarantees the effectiveness of educational strategies and consideration of cultural factors (Morrison, 2019). Thus, by using the resources and knowledge of the academic community, the leaders of educational organisations can establish a coherent and effective learning environment that corresponds to the vision of the UAE concerning educational development.

2.1.3 Empowerment

They encourage authority and provide freedom to their teams to make their own decisions. This empowers the team members and makes them feel that they are responsible for the project, which is a key factor in encouraging innovation (Morrison, 2019). In educational settings, agile leadership encourages administrators to find the most suitable approaches that will suit their students since they are all unique in their own way. It fosters personal responsibility and desire towards the task, leading to innovative approaches that might be useful for cultural and educational requirements (Özgenel et al., 2022). In decentralised decision making, educational leaders can take advantage of the talent within the team and

enhance the quality and availability of education in the UAE.

2.2.4 Iterative Development

Agile leaders encourage the use of an iterative process in solving a particular problem since the solutions are worked out in stages. This means that feedback can be given on a constant basis, thus minimising the chances of failure while at the same time promoting innovation (Kisno et al., 2022). In an educational context, the application of iterative development in curriculum design results in ongoing enhancements of the curriculum based on students' and teachers' feedback. This cycle of improvement does not only guarantee that the educational content is effective and relevant but also stimulates innovation since every improvement cycle is built upon the previous one, thus creating a culture of constant improvement in the educational system.

2.2 Impacts of Agile Leadership on the Innovations in Educational Systems for Better Outcomes

Innovation in educational systems involves introducing new strategies, approaches, methods, and tools into the practice of education to enhance the quality of teaching and learning outcomes (Ozkan et al., 2020). The education sector, especially in the UAE, has challenges and opportunities that can only be met by innovative solutions. Moreover, digital learning has changed teaching and academics. Advanced technology like learning management systems, virtual classrooms, and educational applications change learning and engagement. These technologies improve learning by delivering material tailored to

learners' requirements (Yalçın et al., 2021). Furthermore, differentiated teaching techniques are course delivery systems that consider students' needs, skills, and preferences. This is quite in contrast to the conventional approach of mass production, where the same information is released to all clients to enhance the performance of the students. The management of an agile organisation has the responsibility of establishing a culture that can support personalised learning, as it is a change process (Stray et al., 2020). Collaborative learning domains enhance student collaboration. These spaces encourage student cooperation, knowledge sharing, and problem-solving. Therefore, effective Agile leadership may improve educator-student connections and collaboration to create collaborative learning settings (Bushuyeva et al., 2019). Additionally, organisational leadership shapes education innovation. Managers and leaders may motivate employees to make changes. The literature emphasises leadership in educational transformation, focusing on technological advances and shifting paradigms (Kisno et al., 2022).

2.3 Understanding of Agile Leadership in Relevance to the UAE Educational System

The case of the UAE educational sector is an interesting aspect when it comes to the analysis of agile leadership and innovation (Bushuyeva et al., 2019). The rapid economic growth and the cultural diversities that exist in the country present both difficulties and possibilities for educational administrators. Vision 2021, for example, calls for the enhancement of a world-class education delivery system, and this cannot be achieved without adopting new strategies in teaching and learning (Russo et al., 2023). This is where

the application of agile leadership may be most useful in assisting educational institutions in the UAE to overcome these challenges and capitalise on potential opportunities. Through embracing change, teamwork, and improvement, agile leaders can champion the implementation of change that would improve the students' performance (Snoussi, 2019).

2.3.1 Challenges and Opportunities of UAE Educational System Leads to the Need of Agile Leadership

There are various challenges faced by the UAE educational system, which needs the establishment of agile leadership. Firstly, the rate of technological development demands that education institutions keep on changing and adopting new practices and tools, which is challenging for institutions (Lootah, 2022). In this way, institutions can benefit from leadership that promotes values like agility by keeping up with technological trends and implementing the appropriate solutions. Furthermore, the UAE is a culturally diverse region. This has a great impact on the UAE educational system, as there are students from different cultures studying in one common place, and it's challenging to meet the needs of every student in the population (Akkaya et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness of learning solutions that are individualised and sensitive to students' differences can be enhanced by agile leadership (Matsumoto, 2019). Other national policies and strategies, like Vision 2021, have also underscored the need to foster innovation in education for the production of a knowledge-based economy. With the help of agile leadership, it is possible to bring the practices of institutions in line with these national objectives and advance

educational ideas (Russo et al., 2023). There is vast room for enhancement in the educational settings of the UAE. The use of agile leadership can foster a culture of change and creativity. This improves teaching and learning by encouraging current approaches that boost student success (Matsumoto, 2019). The style of leadership that is agility also fosters collaboration and teamwork; this improves the degree of consensus regarding the learning environment (Akkaya et al., 2021). It also helps to modify the institutions and environment in which education is offered to align it with its purpose and significance. Thus, embracing the concept of agile leadership might aid the UAE educational institutions in tackling challenges and improving education innovation in an attempt to improve the performance and competitiveness of the UAE's educational systems, as described by Abo-Khalil (2024).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The research proposed will be based on the theories of transformational and distributed leadership, as the above theories are in line with agile leadership. Transformational leadership is a model where the leader seeks to meet this need by encouraging the followers to work harder and adopt change (Coulson-Thomas, 2019). This theory is especially applicable in the context of educational organisations because, to implement change and innovation, leaders have to encourage it among the faculty and learners (Poturak et al., 2020). In addition, distributed leadership is a way of leading where different levels of an organisation exercise leadership roles. As mentioned above, agile leadership entails the

sharing of information and responsibilities across learning institutions, and the approach used in this case fosters a sense of ownership (Liu et al., 2020). These theories will provide a good background when assessing the impact of leadership in promoting innovation in educational facilities in the UAE.

2.5 Research Gap

Based on the existing literature, there is a dearth of empirical studies addressing agile leadership in school and educational contexts, particularly in the context of UAE educational organisations. A literature review of the subject indicates that research conducted in other countries reveals that agile leadership is effective in promoting innovation and enhancing organisational performance, but there is a lack of evidence on how the concept can be applied in the UAE context (Abo-Khalil, 2024). However, there is scant research that offers practical recommendations for UAE educational leaders in terms of the difficulties and possibilities encountered when implementing agile leadership to achieve national educational objectives, including Vision 2021 and the Centennial Plan 2071 (Theobald et al., 2020). It is important to fill this gap by offering recommendations and strategies based on the evidence and specific context of UAE education with the purpose of improving the quality of education, fostering innovations, and contributing to the development of the country on the way to a knowledge-based economy.

3. Method

A systematic literature review follows a well-defined, repeatable procedure to conduct an

extensive analysis of a comparatively limited number of publications (Vallon et al., 2018). It is a very suitable method as the study had a precise research question, an appropriately focused topic (the effectiveness of agile leadership to foster innovation in educational settings in the UAE), as well as a limited amount of research to search. Since most information is available on agile characteristics in the context of organisational development and empirical research on agile leadership is published, I followed their guidelines when applying the systematic literature review method to my research questions (Vallon et al., 2018).

3.1. Purpose and Goal of SLR

The reason for considering the systematic literature review was to examine the understanding of the role of agile leadership in educational settings and provide insights for future research. It is adopted to offer guidance to practitioners for the successful application of agile leadership to enhance innovation and the development of the educational system in the UAE. The objective of the systematic literature review was to address particular research inquiries to elucidate existing knowledge and identify areas of deficiency in the understanding of the significance of agile.

3.2. Protocol

The systematic literature review was performed using Google Scholar as the source, as it includes articles, conference proceedings, and books regarding the aim of the research. Google Scholar offers coverage in all areas, so it gives links to scholarly papers, peer-

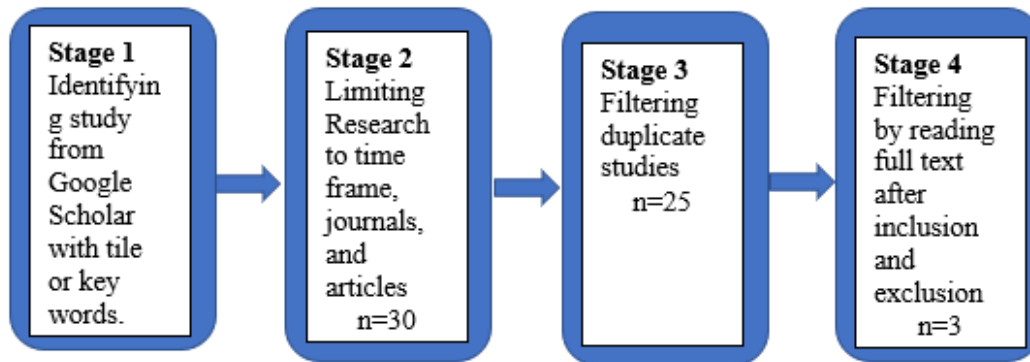
reviewed journals, conferences, and other research articles that meet the scholarly quality standard (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). This database includes only documents with abstracts and titles in the English language to facilitate the use of materials by people from other countries. Particularly, Google Scholar is a database of articles on educational leadership, innovative educational systems, and agile methodologies. It provides a vast amount of the required sources necessary to study the connection between agile leadership and educational innovation in the UAE context. They are articles from peer-reviewed educational leadership journals, peer-reviewed educational leadership conferences, and the initial literature on agile leadership (Abo-Khalil, 2024). This coverage also ensures that the review contains useful knowledge and empirical literature that might shed light on the possibility of using agile leadership to foster innovation in educational institutions in the UAE. Therefore, this review aims at employing Google Scholar to conduct a search for a variety of articles to review the existing literature that provides empirical evidence and the theoretical frameworks that can inform the application of agile leadership in the UAE educational setting (Martín-Martín et al., 2020). This approach is useful in ensuring that the findings are meaningful, relevant, and generalizable to the issues and opportunities of educational leaders in the UAE aspiring to enhance learning outcomes and align with UAE educational initiatives.

3.3 Search Process

In the Google database, I searched my targeted articles with search terms such as title of

topic, abstract, or keywords. This approach helped in ensuring that there was adequate literature covered as much as possible. The search was performed from April 2018 to 2023 to embrace the most recent research on agile leadership in educational settings. This time period was chosen to include only recent findings and avoid including outdated studies that may not be useful or scientifically authentic. Initially, the search provided a wide range of papers, further narrowing them down to journal articles and conference proceedings written in English, yielding 50 searches. The earliest articles on agile methods appeared in the late 1990s. However, I did not include any pre-2015 literature because it was either prescriptive or had limited data, and I was unable to find any studies that addressed agile leadership. I was able to see the evolution of the subject throughout this time frame. Additionally, I restricted the search parameters of Google Scholar to the topic areas of educational institutions and innovation management because my goal was to investigate agile leadership within the fields of information systems and educational development. These constraints resulted in the development of 25 publications. After that, the articles were screened by looking at their abstracts, which led to a total of three studies (Figure 01). Then, the papers' abstracts and, if necessary, the full papers were carefully read to make sure that the study met the established criteria for inclusion and exclusion (see Section 3.3). The duplicate versions of the same study were then removed. Because empirical research was lacking, experience reports were incorporated.

Figure 01. The Process of Filtering Studies for the Final Analysis



3.4 Data Collection

Searches were carried out following Figure 1. At step 3, all 50 studies were fully downloaded. Metadata for each study was maintained in a spreadsheet, including the author, title, publication date, abstract, and keywords. I used a search method similar to Vallon et al. (2018), categorising research as "relevant," "irrelevant," or "maybe relevant" to reduce the number of studies outside of scope. The author evaluated the papers designated as "maybe relevant" and decided whether to include or exclude them from the review. Overall, this method resulted in the final collection of studies for inclusion in the review (Petersen et al., 2015). The final collection of studies totalled five, which were then evaluated. Figure 1 shows the method and results of each phase.

3.5 Quality Evaluation: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

3.5.1 Inclusion

The study was eligible for inclusion if it was: (i) a study focusing on key characteristics

of agile leadership; (ii) conceptual, theoretical, or empirical studies; (iii) studies published during 2018–2023; and (iv) only English language-based studies.

3.5.2 Exclusions

The study was excluded if: (i) the study focused more on other leadership styles than agile leadership; (ii) blogs, editor reports, or poster studies; (iii) there was a literature base before 2015; and (iv) studies were used as samples.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedure

To analyse the data, I thoroughly examined the research and recorded its concepts, findings, and contributions in a spreadsheet. The following information was extracted: (i) Title and authors; (ii) Year and type of publication; (iii) Reference (iv) Abstract (v) Research aims and questions (vi) Research method (vii) Source country of empirical data (viii) Study findings (ix) Theories used (x) Future work (xi) Notes. I used Petersen et al.'s (2015) principles to create a topic-related classification. The classification enabled academics to develop theoretical categories for agile leadership. I then determined and examined the theoretical contributions.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of Studies

The completed studies were grouped according to the year of release (Table 2, Appendix). Table 2 outlines the research methodology, study setting (the nation where data was gathered for findings or conclusions), and publishing source (a conference or journal

article). The distribution of reviewed papers from 2018 to 2023 is shown in Table 1. There was no significant research done on the subject of agile leadership in the UAE before these years. 33% (1/3) of the papers for my research topic were published in journals, whereas 66% (2/3) were published in systematic studies. Just three studies total from five years of study were published, with 66% of them being systematic papers on agile leadership.

Table 01. Number of Studies Per Year

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Studies	0	2	0	0	1	0

In the selected set of three articles, (n = 1) is a mixed-methods approach, (n = 1) is a systematic study, and (n = 1) is a quantitative study. In some studies, standard approaches like surveys and interviews were used to acquire the data. Additional data-collecting information, such as project documentation and observation, was also used in the mixed study. Repertory grids are a novel technique for data analysis that was utilised in only one study. Research on agile leadership is conducted in a number of nations, as evidenced by the research study context, which provides information about the place of origin of the study data

4.2 Role of Agile Leadership

Based on the research questions, I divided the findings into three sets;

Agile Leadership for Innovation

The research by Abdelhamid and Sposato (2019) entitled ‘The Role of Organisational

Learning in *Creating an Agile Workforce in Dubai* also shows that agile leadership improves innovation by encouraging learning and change. The findings show that agile leaders in the SMEs of Dubai ensure that their organisations adapt to flexibility, which is helpful in the VUCA world. Therefore, it is critical to establish that organisational learning interventions, whether formal or informal, are important in building the competencies required for achieving workforce agility. The leadership style of agile leadership fosters employee engagement in decision-making processes, which makes the employees come up with new ideas and be in a position to develop new ways of handling change, hence leading to continuous innovation and competitive advantage within the educational sector.

Agile Leadership for Educational Reform

In the systematic review by López-Alcarria et al. (2019) on the application of agile methodologies in education, they note that agile practices contribute to the improvement of the development of sustainability competencies. The study also revealed that agile processes like Scrum and Kanban create a learning environment that is complex and fluid and promotes critical thinking, collaboration, and innovation. The methodologies that are based on iterative processes and feedback incorporated within them enhance the performance, satisfaction, and motivation of the faculty and the students. The results indicate that through the implementation of agile education, it is possible to foster the formation of responsible and sustainable citizens by including competencies that are vital in handling the uncertain and complex environment, regulating emotions, and embracing

systemic thinking to align education with the current and future needs of society.

Agile Leadership to Manage New Challenges and Improve Socio-Economic Development

The study by Lootah (2022) explored the positive outcomes of the application of the concept of agile leadership in addressing new problems and increasing socio-economic development. The leadership model that is supported by agile is flexibility, quick decision-making, and adaptability, all of which are vital in responding to rapidly changing development environments. It encourages the process of incremental change and innovation and promotes effective cooperation between different departments and teams, which helps organisations adapt quickly to the changes in the market and new opportunities. Agile leaders are capable of sharing leadership and supervision responsibilities while at the same time guiding the employees to ensure that they perform their best, thus improving organisational performance and, consequently, socio-economic performance.

5. Discussion

I conducted a systematic review of the literature on agile leadership in the Google Scholar database between 2018 and 2023 in order to answer the research questions. A final batch of three studies was produced by the systematic literature review, and these were analysed. Based on the results of the systematic literature review, it can be understood how agile leadership fosters creativity and improved performance in various contexts; these implications can be easily applied to the UAE educational system. Abdelhamid and Sposato (2019) described it as learning and the process of adjusting to new environments, as they

noted that it assists organisations to operate optimally. With reference to the UAE educational institutions, this approach can be applied to build an environment that is flexible and adjusts to the learners (Abdelhamid and Sposato, 2019). Leaders in schools and universities can adopt agile principles and support the professional development of teachers to constantly update their knowledge of effective teaching practices and the use of technologies. This will improve teaching quality and students' involvement in learning, hence improving their performance.

In the selected systematic literature review, López-Alcarria et al. (2019) also claimed in their study that the application of Scrum and Kanban increases the level of higher cognitive functions, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. If these methodologies are adopted in educational settings in the UAE, they can enhance both teacher and student outcomes. These methodologies can be used by leaders with flexibility to ensure that education is a process that is always in progress, with feedback being given frequently (López-Alcarria et al., 2019). This is not only advantageous to the students as it improves the learning process since the students will be more involved and also improve their thinking ability, but also to the teachers since it will improve their decision-making and work culture. This requires the educational system to remain dynamic in order to meet the needs of the students, which is in line with agile principles.

Lootah (2022) also highlights that agile leadership is useful in the advancement of socio-economic development since it encourages flexibility, collaboration, and improvement.

Within the context of UAE education, the concept of agile leadership can help in achieving the nation's goals for educational development, including Vision 2021 and the Centennial Plan 2071. Thus, the implementation of the principles of agility in educational institutions will allow them to quickly adapt to changes in policies and the needs of society and make the curriculum and teaching methods innovative and modern (Lootah, 2022). This flexibility will enhance institutional performance and equip students with the ability to be productive in the knowledge-based economy that the UAE government seeks to foster. It is, therefore, crucial to have agile leadership to ensure that education outcomes respond to the national development agenda, thereby improving the socio-economic fabric of the country.

6. Conclusion

The research conducted through a systematic literature review explored that adopting agile leadership in education will enhance institutional performance as well as equip students to function effectively in a knowledge-based economy, hence promoting the national development agenda of sustainable development and innovation. Future studies can examine the effectiveness of applying agile leadership frameworks in the context of UAE educational organisations in a specific region, with an emphasis on the effects of such changes on learners' achievement, teachers' training, and the correspondence to the UAE educational strategic plans in a particular area of the UAE to make the study more applicable.

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Appendix

Table 02. Studies Included in Review with Publication Date

Sr#	Study	Research Approach	Study Context
S1	Abdelhamid and Sposato, (2019)	Mixed Method	Dubai, UAE
S2	López-Alcarria et al., (2019)	Systematic Review	Spain
S3	Lootah (2022)	Quantitative	Dubai