

Studying history and its effect on students' political awareness: a case study of Saudi university students

Students'
political
awareness

131

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to address the importance and effects of studying history and Islamic history on students' political awareness.

Design/methodology/approach – To achieve the objectives of this study, a questionnaire was used. A total of 315 university students aged 17–50 years old participated in the study. These students represented three of the most influential universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Findings – The results revealed a strong, positive and significant correlation between the study of history and students' political awareness.

Originality/value – The findings of this study indicated that studying history and Islamic history leads to an increased level of students' political awareness. Therefore, studying history is important for university students to develop their political awareness and prepare them as future leaders.

Keywords History, Political awareness, Higher education, Islamic history, Saudi Arabia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

History is an organized record that links the realities of the past and helps prepare individuals to live in the future (Obeidat, 1985). As such, history plays a crucial role in our lives (Karlsson, 1999), while the study of history enables students to live more purposeful lives through greater self-understanding and personal growth (Berg, 2019; Durant, 2014; Bentley, 2007; McCully, 1978). There exists a certain fascination with the past that is fundamental to the human experience (Bradbury, 2020; Carr, 1961; Glassie, 1994; Ira Kreider, 1937). Through history, we can grasp how things change, begin to comprehend the factors that cause change and understand what elements of an institution or a society persist despite change. Therefore, history plays an integral part in how people understand their society, themselves, the people around them, as well as current political events. A civilized renaissance can only be achieved by drawing links between

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historical awareness and analysis of current events, and then building plans to establish awareness and knowledge for the new generation to bring about the desired changes (Issam, 2020). Students need to understand how the past has contributed to the shaping of international, national and local relations between societies, people and nations. A certain level of political awareness is required for students to understand many of the complex issues and problems facing the world (Rahman & Che Mohd Razali, 2019) and the study of history can lead to increased political awareness and help create good businesspeople, professionals and political leaders (Stearns, 1998). The ability to connect the past to the present and future is frequently regarded as crucial to preparing students and providing them with sufficient awareness for their future role as citizens in society (Seixas & Morton, 2013). Through history, students can develop the understanding that is required to separate truth from distortion, cultivate reasoned skepticism and counter the tendency to confirm their own biases. In a post-truth era of “fake news” and unprecedented access to information/disinformation, history education is more vital now than ever before (Wineburg, 2018; Collins & Stearns, 2020). In view of this, the present study set out to highlight the importance of studying history and Islamic history for students in the Saudi higher education context, and to identify the effects of the study of history on the development of Saudi students’ political awareness.

Literature review

Importance of political awareness

Political awareness is the individual’s recognition of political knowledge and information related to political issues, institutions and leaders at the global, national and international levels (Al-A’zzam & Abdullah, 2007; Kuotsu, 2016). Through the transfer of knowledge, for example, through studying the origins of political ideas or acquiring the requisite vocabulary for understanding political phenomena and processes, history can help students develop ways of thinking that promote political literacy (Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2015). Mastering historical thinking skills may also enhance students’ ability to develop and substantiate opinions with fact-based arguments and qualify them to participate in political and social discourses (Callaway, 2020; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Davis, 2009; Jordanova, 2006; Alghamdi & Achour, 2020).

Previous studies have explored the level of political awareness among students in higher education and the factors contributing to it. Abdelazim (2017) conducted a study in Saudi Arabia to assess students’ awareness of the national heritage and natural history of their nation. The results showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the students’ place of residence and their perception of the level of importance of the national heritage and the natural history of their nation. In an earlier study, Al Haweelah (2009) assessed Kuwaiti students’ political awareness and its relationship to social changes at the time. The findings showed an average level of political awareness among students in general, while the students of education colleges had a higher level of political awareness. In addition, female students were found to be severely lacking in political awareness and unprepared for engagement in political activities. In the United Arab Emirates, Al-Khaza’leh and Lahiani (2021) carried out a study aiming to investigate the level of political awareness among Emirati students and the role of the university in cultivating it. The study found that there was a considerably high level of political awareness among the university students. It also found that there were differences in the level of political awareness among students depending on their program of study, with students belonging in humanities having a greater level of political awareness. Similarly, Alsati and Al-Ghanem (2017) found that educational institutions play the biggest role in shaping students’ political awareness and practices. Through their educational approaches and activities and through their courses and curricula, educational institutions prepare students to be in charge of public affairs in terms of awareness, contribution and responsibility.

Importance of studying history

In this paper, studying history refers to students' learning about historical events and developing sufficient knowledge that can help them understand current events (Joel, 2020). This concept is far from the sense of history to the historian, who serves as a reference in this science possessing the ability to write, classify, organize and evaluate the information.

Currently, few studies discuss the importance of studying history. In a recent study, Akengin and Cendek (2017) found that high school students enjoyed learning history and had positive opinions about their history grades. In an earlier study, Nyamwembe, Ondigi, and Kiio (2013) found that most of the students in Kenya had a negative attitude towards studying history. The study concluded that several factors influenced students' negative attitudes towards studying history such as the teaching methods, teachers themselves, the excessive amount of events and dates for memorization, and the availability of job opportunities related to the knowledge of history. In the United States, Berg (2019) conducted a study with 26 undergraduate students to investigate their notions and perceptions about history. The findings showed an appreciation and recognition of the purpose of history studies in academic and public settings. Similarly, Andrews, McGlynn, and Mycock (2009) found that there is a relationship between students' sense of national identity and their attitude towards history. To sum up, researchers have found that teaching approaches, the education environment, employment prospects and students' national identity are likely to influence their attitudes toward studying history.

In the Arab context, Alabidi (2021) found that many students do not appreciate the importance of studying history and hence avoid it. Instead, they focus on subjects that they perceive will be helpful for their future jobs and careers. Today, many Arab universities force academically weak students to study history, while they encourage high achievers to study medicine, engineering, programming and languages (Alabidi, 2021). In an effort to highlight the benefits of studying Islamic history, Tosh (2019) emphasized the importance of using historical knowledge in public debates and showed that historical knowledge can provide ready-made solutions for current problems. Using examples from past events in the region, Tosh (2019) attempted to emphasize the importance of returning to "reading history" to make appropriate future decisions. In the same vein, the present study sought to examine the significance of studying history and Islamic history for the development of Arab students' political awareness.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of studying history and Islamic history on students' political awareness. Following a quantitative approach based on the review of previous studies, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to university students in Saudi Arabia.

Participants

The study targeted students at three different Saudi universities using the snowball technique to recruit them. A total of 315 students responded to the online questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 17 to 50 years. Students participated voluntarily in this study. Majority of the respondents were female (64.4%). The respondents were from the history department (54.6%), political sciences (1%) and other faculties (44.4%). Most respondents had one to four years of studying at university (51.4%), while a further 40.0% had more than four years of studying and only 8.6% of respondents had studied less than a year at the university. Most respondents were studying for a bachelor's degree (61.9%). A further 22.2% were studying for a master's degree and 15.9% were pursuing their Ph.D. (see Table 1).

Data collection instrument and procedure

The study used an online questionnaire. The questionnaire included 20 items for the study of history and 15 items on student political awareness. The section on studying history looked

Table 1.
Demographic variables
of the participants
($N = 315$)

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	- Male	112	35.6%
	- Female	203	64.4%
Age	- 17-25 Years	97	30.8%
	- 26-29 Years	30	9.5%
	- 30-39 Years	110	34.9%
	- 39+ Years	78	24.8%
	- Bachelor's degree	195	61.9%
Educational level	- Master	70	22.2%
	- Ph.D	50	15.9%
	- Less than a Year	27	8.6%
Period of study	- 1-4 Years	162	51.4%
	- 4+ Years	126	40.0%
	- History	172	54.6%
Department/specialization	- Political Sciences	3	1%
	- Other	140	44.4%

at the extent students gain historical knowledge through reading books and documents about the history of the Middle East, Islamic history events, Muslim leaders in the past, memory of Muslims in the past, Islamic issues in the past, today and in the future. The section on political awareness aimed to investigate the extent to which students gain political knowledge through local and international news, reading about international issues (e.g. wars, political conflicts and ideological conflicts), and also watching and listening political programs and political talk shows.

Respondents were asked to rate each item using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree". The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms with an appended consent form. To determine the validity of the questionnaire, each question was reviewed based on feedback from three experts. The experts were Ph.D. holders in education and had significant experience in educational research in general and quantitative research in particular. The questionnaire was piloted with 40 students who were not part of the study sample and based on their responses, it was improved and finalized. The link to the final questionnaire was sent to the student respondents via social media.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 25. Correlation analysis was used to describe the statistical relationship between studying history and students' political awareness. Exploratory factor analysis was also used to reduce data to a smaller set of summary variables and identify the main factors influencing the study of history.

Results

Descriptive statistics for studying history

In this section of the questionnaire, students were presented with 17 statements and they were asked to indicate their level of agreement using a scale from "1" strongly disagree to "5" strongly agree. Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics for the items in this section. The highest mean value for item 16 "Respected Islamic history events make me optimistic" was $M = 4.30$, while the lowest mean for item 12 "The events of Islamic history are similar to what is happening today" was $M = 3.37$.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for studying history ($N = 315$)

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
1. History is important to me	4.13	1.227
2. Without knowing our history, we cannot understand who we are	4.15	1.210
3. I feel proud whenever I read history	4.10	1.209
4. History makes me confident	3.90	1.265
5. The past tells me who I am	4.25	1.166
6. I am more interested in the future than in the past	4.23	1.145
7. The past is important to me to understand the present and the future	4.19	1.192
8. Knowing about Islamic history helps me to understand what is going on now	3.95	1.212
9. Islamic history is a memory for all Muslims in the world	4.06	1.225
10. The events of Islamic history are similar to what is happening today	3.37	1.272
11. I have read a lot about the recent events in the Middle East as it is one of the outputs of the events of Islamic history	3.43	1.256
12. Islamic history has great relevance to my life today	3.70	1.231
13. I remember Khalid bin Al-Waleed as a good leader and fighter against the enemies	3.62	1.222
14. Respected Islamic history events make me optimistic	4.30	1.194
15. Islamic history is important to me	4.21	1.199
16. I feel history is very interesting. I enjoy learning about past events and how we conquered the problems, bringing us to who we are today	4.09	1.152
17. History teaches me about where I come from and creates connections to the past	4.18	1.111

Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics for the questionnaire items about political awareness. The highest means for political awareness were for item 1 “I am often interested in international news to understand what is happening in the world today” was $M = 3.96$ and for both item 14 “Knowing politics helps make you aware of what is happening around you” and item 4 “I read the news more often on digital devices (e.g. tablet, smartphone, computer)” was $M = 3.88$.

Factor analysis

Factor analysis is often used in research to explain a large number of measured variables (questionnaire items) with a small number of underlying factors (latent variables) (Henson &

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for political awareness ($N = 315$)

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
1. I am often interested in international news to understand what is happening in the world today	3.96	1.202
2. I analyze global issues together with my classmates in small groups during class	3.23	1.399
3. I only watch or listen to the news (e.g. radio, television and podcasts)	3.24	1.396
4. I read the news more often on digital devices (e.g. tablet, smartphone and computer)	3.88	1.296
5. I read the news more often on paper (e.g. newspapers and magazines)	2.60	1.452
6. I am often interested in political issues in my country	3.53	1.378
7. I am often interested in political issues in the world	3.32	1.324
8. I am often interested in political issues in the Muslim world	3.39	1.341
9. I am often interested in political issues in the Middle East	3.41	1.333
10. I regularly read websites on international political issues (e.g. wars, political conflicts and ideologies conflicts)	3.28	1.371
11. I am often interested in history, politics, and ideological issues in my country	3.49	1.334
12. I am often interested in history, politics and ideological issues in the world	3.27	1.338
13. Government and politics impact nearly every aspect of our lives	3.73	1.224
14. Knowing politics helps make you aware of what is happening around you	3.88	1.238
15. I am often interested in politics as politics is entertaining	3.36	1.403

Roberts, 2006). In addition, factor analysis is used to assess the validity of the measures that is the extent to which the constructs represent the original variables (Cortina, 1993; Henson & Roberts, 2006; Tabachnick, Fidell, & Ullman, 2007). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was calculated and it was found to be .949. The Bartlett test of Sphericity was found to be significant at $p = 0.000$, i.e. the variables are highly correlated to provide a reasonable basis for factor analysis.

In this study, the questionnaire comprised twenty items for the studying history part. Based on the results of the exploratory factor analysis, three items were removed from the studying history set of items: “Thinking about the future is more important than thinking about the past.” (Item-2), “What is happening in the Middle East has strong relation to the Islamic history.” (Item-10) and “I like to learn about the past, I feel that it helps me understand why the world is the way it is today.” (Item-18). Following that, the studying history part comprised 13 items on the importance of history and four items on the importance of Islamic history.

Table 4 presents the results of the reliability statistics and exploratory factor analysis. Most of the factor loadings for the instrument exceeded 0.50, meeting the significance level of convergent validity. Furthermore, the research instrument was tested for reliability using Cronbach’s coefficient, as reported in Table 4, with scale reliability greater than 0.70 considered reliable (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 1998).

A method often used is the Eigenvalue method (Meerling, 1988), in which the Eigenvalues of the factors should be higher than 1. In multifactor subscales, total variance explained more than 60% is considered acceptable. Furthermore, in social sciences, a solution that accounts for more than 60% of the variance is considered acceptable (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2010). The factor loadings found as a result of Varimax vertical rotation are presented in Table 4. Factor 1 represents the maximum variance, i.e. 60.24%, and factor 2 accounts for 8.55% of variance.

No	Items	F1	F2	Alpha (α)
				0.957
16	Respected Islamic history events make me optimistic	0.850		
17	Islamic history is important to me	0.791		
6	The past tells me who I am	0.843		
4	I feel proud whenever I read history	0.750		
5	History makes me confident	0.722		
8	The past is important to me to understand the present and the future	0.760		
20	History teaches me about where I come from and creates connections to the past	0.778		
7	I am more interested in the future than in the past	0.806		
3	Without knowing our history, we cannot understand who we are	0.731		
19	I feel history is very interesting. I enjoy learning about past events and how we conquered the problems, bringing us to who we are today	0.721		
1	History is important to me	0.621		
11	Islamic history is a memory for all Muslims in the world	0.682		
9	Knowing about Islamic history helps me to understand what is going on now	0.589		
13	I have read a lot about the recent events in the Middle East as it is one of the outputs of the events of Islamic history		0.852	
15	I remember Khalid bin Al-Waleed as a good leader and fighter against the enemies		0.800	
12	The events of Islamic history are similar to what is happening today		0.776	
14	Islamic history has great relevance to my life today		0.724	
	Coefficient Alpha (α)	0.958	0.864	
	Eigen values	10.241	1.454	
	% of variance (total = 68.797%)	60.242%	8.555%	

Table 4.
Varimax rotated factor loadings of the studying history items ($N = 315$)

However, retaining a one-factor solution can lead to under-factoring, as it may cause a considerable error (Wood, Tataryn, & Gorsuch, 1996). Furthermore, the percentage variance explained by both factors was acceptable (68.79%). Table 4 shows that only two factors have been retained: the first factor is *the importance of history* (F1), the second-factor is *Islamic history* (F2).

Political Awareness. The questionnaire also comprised fifteen items for political awareness. After using exploratory factor analysis, no items were removed. The factor loadings found as a result of Varimax vertical rotation are presented in Table 5. Factor 1 represents the maximum variance, i.e. 60.83% and factor 2 accounts for 9.26% of variance. In Table 5 the percentage variance explained by factors was acceptable (70.09%). As can be seen from Table 5, only two factors were retained: the first factor F1_Political (F1_Polit) and the second factor F2_Political (F2_Polit). Most of the factor loadings for the instrument exceeded 0.50, meeting the significance level of convergent validity. Furthermore, the research instrument was tested for reliability using Cronbach's coefficient, which ranged from 0.76 to 0.95, exceeding the minimum of 0.6 (Hair *et al.*, 1998).

Correlations

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations for the study variables are presented in Table 6. Coefficient alphas for study variables were as follows: studying history (0.957), the importance of history (0.958), Islamic history (0.864) and political awareness (0.951). All coefficient alphas were above 0.70 which is acceptable (see Cortina, 1993).

Table 6 also shows that a significant and positive relationship was found between studying history and students' political awareness ($r = 0.565$, $p = 0.000$). The results indicated that the students' increased interest in studying history led to an increase in

No	Items	F1_Polit	F2_Polit	Alpha (α)
				0.951
1	I am often interested in international news to understand what is happening in the world today	0.788		
4	I read the news more often on digital devices (e.g. tablet, smartphone and computer)	0.758		
6	I am often interested in political issues in my country	0.712		
7	I am often interested in political issues in the world	0.651		
8	I am often interested in political issues in the Muslim world	0.646		
9	I am often interested in political issues in the Middle East	0.666		
10	I regularly read websites on international political issues (e.g. wars, political conflicts and ideological conflicts)	0.654		
11	I am often interested in history, politics and ideological issues in my country	0.734		
12	I am often interested in history, politics and ideological issues in the world	0.647		
13	Government and politics impact nearly every aspect of our lives	0.794		
14	Knowing politics helps make you aware of what is happening around you	0.853		
15	I am often interested in politics as politics is entertaining	0.728		
2	I analyze global issues together with my classmates in small groups during class		0.738	
3	I only watch or listen to the news (e.g. radio, television and podcasts)		0.652	
5	I read the news more often on paper (e.g. newspapers and magazines)		0.830	
	Coefficient Alpha (α)	0.958	0.761	
	Eigen values	9.125	1.389	
	% of variance (total = 70.094%)	60.833%	9.261%	

Table 5.
Varimax rotated factor loadings of the political awareness items ($N = 315$)

students' political awareness. A significant and positive relationship was found between the importance of history and students' political awareness ($r = 0.524, p = 0.000$). The results indicated that increasing students' knowledge on the importance of studying history may help increase students' political awareness. Also, a significant and positive relationship was found between Islamic history and students' political awareness ($r = 0.547, p = 0.000$). The results indicated that the increased interest in studying Islamic history led to an increase in political awareness. Taken together, the statistical analysis of the students' responses to the questionnaire showed that the study of history has a strong relationship and a direct effect on increasing the level of political awareness of students in Saudi universities.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the relationship between studying history and political awareness among university students at Saudi universities. Studying history was found to be positively related to the political awareness of students. The results of this study support previous studies that studying history positively affects the development of political awareness.

Previous studies found that studying history helps students gain political awareness because it provides them with a way to understand the world (Issam, 2020). By studying history and politics side by side, one learns how to analyze and untangle the past to tackle the problems facing society today (University of Leicester, 2020). Through learning history, students can develop competencies to think chronologically and have knowledge of the past to better understand and explain the process of development and change of the society to discover and foster national identity in the life of the world community. Learning history also makes students aware of the diversity of life experiences in each community and the different perspectives on the past to understand the present and build knowledge and understanding to deal with the future (Depdiknas, 2006). Given the importance of the study of history, it comes as no surprise that it strengthens students' political awareness and provides them with a clear picture of the background of their present life. Historical knowledge provides a comprehensive understanding of the development or trends as these occur in various nations. Thus, by studying history students gain a broader understanding of life from different aspects such as historical, cultural, social and political (Rusvitaningrum, Agung, & Sudiyanto, 2018).

The present study showed that there is a strong positive and significant correlation between studying history and the political awareness of students in Saudi universities. Several studies supported this result. Studying history has been found to develop students' understanding and thought about the human condition (Beer & Blyth, 1991). When a student takes history as a mandatory subject, he/she may have a strong drive to understand and increase his/her level of political awareness. Conversely, a student studying history as an elective subject will have a decreased motivation, which directly affects his/her level of awareness (Hagler, 2014). History studies can also give students ample opportunity to appreciate the interrelationship of cause and effect and to judge the relative importance of different causes (de Marco & Medley, 1989). Being knowledgeable of local history informs the people about the community's political, social, economic and cultural phases (Walker, 2015).

History is generally helpful for such professions as law, journalism, diplomacy, politics and teaching. More broadly, the historical study develops analytical skills, comparative perspectives

Table 6.
Correlations between studying history, the importance of history, Islamic history and political awareness

Subscales/Variable	M	S.D.	Alpha (α)	1	2	3	4
1. Studying history	79.98	18.339	0.957	1			
1.1. Importance of history	65.86	15.37	0.958	0.981**	1		
1.2. Islamic history	14.12	4.12	0.864	0.808**	0.677**	1	
2 Political awareness	51.77	15.63	0.951	0.565**	0.524**	0.547**	1

and critical judgment modes that promote thoughtful work in any field or career (Podany, 2008). Every political issue and structure has historical roots. By studying history and politics side by side, one will learn how to analyze and untangle the past to tackle the problems facing society today (University of Leicester, 2020). History is the repository of political events. Many of the world's problems today find that they have been raised in the past; the historical incident may repeat at different times, places and people. History provides more than that; it gives us the origins of today's problems. Historical knowledge increases its role in analyzing political events and international relations. Here, history is mixed with political theory as political events are still the material basis in the historical structure (Arab Post, 2016).

Islamic history represents a key to understanding political problems and introduction to the laws available to solve these problems. Since historical events and political processes interact with each other, this interaction results in making appropriate decisions and managing crises. Political science concerning history helps determine the type of political decisions taken and the extent of their application to reality (Arab Post, 2016). The Islamic golden age is traditionally dated from the mid-7th century to the mid-13th century when Muslims established the largest empires in history. During this period, artists, engineers, scholars, physicians, poets, philosophers, geographers and traders in the Islamic empires contributed immensely to agriculture, economics, sciences, technology, sociology, political sciences, philosophy, industry, law and literature. They preserved earlier traditions and added inventions, discoveries and innovations. At the time, the Muslim world became a major intellectual center for sciences, philosophy, medicine, sociology, psychology, culture and education (Tahir, Abubakar, & Kabara, 2015). So for Arab student so is learning about Islamic history reinforces their understanding of their roots and their sense of identity.

Conclusion

This study aimed to shed light on the importance of studying history and Islamic history and identify their effects on students' political awareness. To achieve these objectives, a questionnaire was used to collect data from 315 Saudi university students. The study found that studying history positively related to the political awareness of students.

However, this study was limited to a relatively small sample of students in Saudi universities. Thus, it would be interesting if the study could be extended to other Arab and Muslim countries, as the study of history and Islamic history in Arab nations gives sufficient awareness to the next generation who will have the ability to secure, preserve, develop and inherit it. It would also be interesting if the study could be extended to university academics, administrators, politicians and decision-makers as they are the ones that can put adequate emphasis on the study of history in academic curricula.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for university students. It is important for universities to open communication channels and encourage discussion among decision makers with students and teachers to find mechanisms and strategies that may help increase the level of students' political awareness. Teachers can be trained on how to present the history course in an attractive way for students and help them to enjoy the course and benefit from it. Teachers may also place importance on this issue by asking how they can evaluate and reward the students who have good achievements. Through the curriculum and education system, the university has a great responsibility in providing students with programs that help them increase their political awareness and prepare them as future leaders. The education system should prepare students to accomplish their desired goals. University management should provide a history room that offers history activities and make it attractive for students. It should provide a library in each faculty that includes different types of historical books, stories and documents. This will give students opportunities to perform scientific research and increase their level of historical information. It should also offer and organize competitions to encourage students to study history.

Studying the past could help students live better in the present and prepare for the future. Moreover, studying history aims to develop and increase the level of political awareness among students that will prepare them as future leaders. Therefore, educational policymakers and practitioners should pay special attention to students' self-identity, awareness and political awareness in particular and the context in which it is formed when seeking to train an inclusive national identity in the classroom.

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