

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AND ITS ROLE IN ADDRESSING ANTISEMITISM IN AUSTRALIA

Executive Summary

This research report examines the current state of Holocaust education in Australia, with particular attention to its part in addressing contemporary antisemitism. It draws on in-depth interviews with Holocaust educators, scholars and museum professionals from Australia and internationally, and covers a wide range of Holocaust education contexts – including museums, university settings, secondary school programs, professional development for educators and research on Holocaust education itself.

The report captures a sector thinking carefully about its purpose, limits and responsibilities after 7 October 2023, amid rising antisemitism in Australia and heightened public debate about the Israel-Palestine conflict. It reflects on Holocaust education as a response to antisemitism, while also contributing to a clearer understanding of the relationship between Holocaust education and efforts to address antisemitism.

The findings clearly indicate that Holocaust educators are increasingly being asked to do much more than teach history – they're navigating polarised classrooms, responding to antisemitism, and supporting difficult conversations, often with limited resources and support. It shows that the burden of addressing antisemitism cannot sit squarely on the shoulders of Holocaust educators, and that the programs they teach must be deployed in very deliberate ways as part of the solution. The report also highlights the important contribution that Holocaust education can make to building understanding, critical thinking and social cohesion. It concludes with a series of practical recommendations for governments, museums, schools and educators to help strengthen Holocaust education and better support those working in the field.

Key Findings

The following key findings provide essential context for examining contemporary Holocaust education in Australia, and for understanding the challenges faced by those working and researching in this field. These include the challenge of reconciling the recent conflict in Gaza with current teaching and learning practices, while responding to the context of heightened antisemitic incidents and discourses following 7 October. They also bring attention to broader and longer-term conceptual, pedagogical and practical challenges in Holocaust education.

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AFTER 7 OCTOBER

The rise in antisemitism following 7 October has prompted significant reflection within the field of Holocaust education in Australia, with many educators and practitioners questioning its effectiveness and confronting a sense of uncertainty about current approaches. Participants raised concerns about gaps in practice, as well as their scepticism regarding whether decades of Holocaust education has resulted in measurable declines in antisemitic sentiment in Australia.

Many educators are facing growing pressure to address contemporary issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, while attempting to avoid politicisation and remaining aligned with their institutional missions. This has revealed a spectrum of approaches across the sector, alongside tensions about scope, responsibility and consistency.

PARTICIPANTS' UNDERSTANDING OF ANTISEMITISM(S)

Participants described antisemitism as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, which resists a singular definition and instead encompasses a range of attitudes, behaviours and expressions. Divergent perspectives emerged on key issues, including the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and whether antisemitism should be understood as a distinct form of hatred or as part of broader patterns of racism in Australia. Overall, participants emphasised the importance of conceptual clarity, recognising that different forms of antisemitism require distinct analytical and educational responses, and that how antisemitism is defined directly shapes how Holocaust education is approached.

WHY TEACH THE HOLOCAUST?

Participants expressed broad agreement that the Holocaust should be taught for its importance as a historical subject and its lessons for contemporary society. The range of learning objectives or aims identified by participants, including fostering social cohesion, developing critical thinking skills and promoting citizenship within a multicultural society, reflect broader trends toward the universalisation of Holocaust memory and education.

There was less consensus on its primary purpose and its role in addressing contemporary antisemitism. While some view Holocaust education as essential to this end, others questioned its effectiveness across the diverse forms that antisemitism takes today, emphasising the need for greater conceptual clarity and more targeted approaches. For many participants, Holocaust education was seen as one important tool among many, but insufficient on its own to address contemporary iterations of antisemitism.

MAKING HOLOCAUST HISTORIES RELEVANT IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA

Some participants highlighted the need to maintain the relevance of Holocaust education for the Australian Jewish community, which is largely shaped by the histories of the Holocaust and ongoing experiences of antisemitism. However, Holocaust education is also seen by many as most effective when it is outward-facing and relevant to non-Jewish, multicultural audiences, helping students see its connection to their own lives rather than as distant European history.

Educators emphasised adapting teaching approaches to diverse classroom backgrounds and using personal stories, especially survivor testimonies, to foster emotional engagement, though this is becoming more challenging as the number of Holocaust survivors declines. At the same time, there are concerns about over-reliance on Holocaust narratives to represent Australian Jewish identity or counter antisemitism, which can limit understanding of Jewish life and contemporary forms of antisemitism itself.

Participants also highlighted the need to balance universal lessons (e.g. connections to other genocides and human rights issues) with maintaining the Holocaust's specifically Jewish context. Overall, there is a need to ensure relevance by finding ways to connect historical events to present-day Australian society without inappropriately leveraging the histories of the Holocaust.

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

The recent conflict in Gaza has introduced new challenges for Holocaust education in Australia. This includes intensifying uncertainty, discomfort and hesitation among educators and volunteers to respond to questions from museum audiences and students, particularly in increasingly politicised classrooms and university environments. This has exposed gaps in educator confidence, training and guidance, as well as the emotional and professional strain placed on educators, staff and volunteers. The research underscores the need for greater support, clearer pedagogical frameworks and careful consideration of how (or whether) contemporary conflicts should be incorporated into Holocaust education across the diverse range of delivery settings.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES OF TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST IN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

The range of structural challenges identified include limited time, competing demands on educators and the complexity of the subject itself. These constraints, combined with the proliferation of antisemitism online and the overwhelming volume of online content about the Holocaust, can hinder effective teaching and risk reinforcing misconceptions if not carefully addressed.

A key concern was the gap between the mandated inclusion of Holocaust education in curricula and its inconsistent implementation, often due to a lack of clear guidance, training and defined objectives from the top down. For this reason, the report emphasises the need for stronger coordination and strategy to ensure consistent professional development and quality across regions. This aims to ensure greater support for educators, particularly in less resourced contexts, and more robust evaluation of current approaches.

Another concern raised relates to the risks of teaching the Holocaust poorly – particularly in curriculum-based educational settings where antisemitic incidents and discourses are evident. In secondary schools, for example, there is a need for training and safeguarding policies that address antisemitism as part of broader inclusion and antiracism frameworks to safeguard Jewish students. Antisemitism awareness cannot be addressed solely through curriculum teaching.

Recommendations

Informed by the key findings that emerged from conversations with stakeholders, these recommendations view educators as the experts in this field who know what they need to engage audiences and navigate challenges. The recommendations apply across all contexts in which Holocaust education occurs, with some applying to the sector as a whole, or speaking to the opportunity for cross-sector collaboration.

1. ESTABLISH A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK WITH SHARED GOALS FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION:

Establish shared aims and standards to allow for consistent yet tailored approaches in diverse contexts; and clearly define the rationale and relevance of Holocaust education in multicultural Australia, including its role in educating about or preventing antisemitism.

2. STRENGTHEN MULTI-ORGANISATIONAL NETWORKS TO DELIVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA: Develop a coordinated approach to create spaces for educators, researchers and institutions to share strategies, build mutual understanding and draw on collective expertise while maintaining their distinct roles.

3. EDUCATION AIMED AT ANTISEMITISM PREVENTION SHOULD BE DISTINCT FROM TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST: Develop antisemitism prevention education as a distinct focus; and ensure that Holocaust education is not the sole means to teach about antisemitism or improve broader cultural awareness of the Australian Jewish community.

4. TRAIN HOLOCAUST EDUCATORS ON HOW TO NAVIGATE COMPLEX DISCUSSIONS ON THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: Provide guidance for educators on how and when Israel-related discourse might become antisemitic, how to maintain space for criticism of Israeli Government policies and actions, and careful discussion of Palestinian experiences of victimhood; include guidance on how to engage and deal with questions on these topics thoughtfully and with care.

5. FACILITATE SPACES FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS AND QUESTIONS AMONG EDUCATORS AS PART OF TRAINING: Create interactive and collaborative spaces where Holocaust educators can raise concerns, ask challenging questions and identify gaps in their knowledge or practice; and create similar forums for other professionals and researchers in this field to help them better support educators, students and others.

6. PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT AND RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS: Provide resources and lesson plans such as those developed by [Holocaust Education Australia](#); increase opportunities for professional development; and create safe and supportive working environments for staff and volunteers.

7. MODEL SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST: Explore and evaluate team-teaching models that partner Jewish and non-Jewish educators and volunteers; and undertake further research into teaching approaches.

8. PRODUCE FURTHER RESEARCH ON HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA: Strengthen Holocaust education via continued commitment to research on pedagogy and impact, build an evidence base to support and guide its ongoing relevance and effectiveness; and support longitudinal research and evaluation mechanisms.

9. ADDRESS ANTISEMITISM IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: Explicitly address antisemitism in educational environments through broader safeguarding frameworks or policies, modelled and reinforced by leadership.

The key findings and recommendations of this report aim to support Holocaust educators, leaders, staff and volunteers to overcome the many challenges within this sector post-October 7. The research aims to promote the continuity of Holocaust education in the Australian context, in recognition of its important contribution to broader historical and cultural understanding, combatting racism and antisemitism, and building social cohesion.