

Holocaust Education at Australian Universities in the Twenty-first Century: Challenges and Opportunities

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IN THE PAST DECADE, THE NUMBER OF UNIVERSITY COURSES ON THE HOLOCAUST HAS dramatically increased to meet growing student demand. Every large university in Australia offers Holocaust related courses, covering basic historical overviews of the topic, as well as representation in film, literature and museums. Units also cover the Holocaust in a comparative perspective with other cases of genocide and gross human rights violations. The new generation of students brings its own issues. For example, many see the Holocaust in simplified terms of good and evil; others have grown up inured to virtual violence yet unable to comprehend real historical violence. Meanwhile, today's history lecturers are being asked to rationalise their courses: in other words, to teach more content in less time and to do so in ways that minimise real student contact. This presents a challenge for educators to address the complexity of a subject such as the Holocaust, especially when there is often a demand to include other cases of human rights abuses in courses, which further restricts the space teachers can devote to the study of the Nazi Holocaust.

The following roundtable article grew out of a workshop recently held at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) on the teaching of the Holocaust across

Australia's tertiary institutions.¹ Participants were asked to present their methods of teaching, including the various disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches they use and to focus on the challenges they face in teaching such sensitive materials. This workshop also provided a forum for university lecturers to share strategies and compare ideas. Representatives of the major universities, including UNSW Sydney, Deakin and Flinders, attended the workshop.² Participants discussed questions of how courses should be structured; problems of accessibility for an increasingly diverse student cohort; the new challenge of the 'post-witness era'; ethical issues of representation; and how to problematise comparative genocide in dedicated Holocaust courses, among other issues.

The present roundtable article includes contributions from seven lecturers who attended the workshop and who are representative of tertiary institutions across the country. Each contributor was asked to give a brief discussion of current teaching practices followed by a more detailed reflection upon key challenges in the teaching of the Holocaust to contemporary university students. As the reader will see, each approached the task in their own way. The piece concludes with expert comment by Dr Andy Pearce (University College London), a specialist in the field of Holocaust education.

A public panel event with experts in Holocaust and genocide education, including professors Colin Tatz and Konrad Kwiet, was held at the Sydney Jewish Museum following the scholarly workshop. The large audience in attendance comprised a diverse range of high-school teachers from the Sydney metropolitan area. High-school students are a significant, but not the sole, cohort in Holocaust education. The Holocaust exhibitions at the Sydney Jewish Museum and the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne are frequented by both high-school and university students. The increasing numbers of student visitors to these institutions demonstrates the interest of the teaching community in the subject.

Given this interest, the aim of this article is twofold: It seeks to showcase our current tertiary teaching practices, but also to start a discussion about Holocaust education at Australian Universities and associated institutions in the twenty-first century. The experiences outlined in this roundtable demonstrate that Holocaust-related courses remain relevant and compelling to the generation of Australian students born after the year 2000. Meeting this need with compelling and comprehensive courses in a rapidly changing tertiary environment can only be achieved through rigorous and ongoing evaluation and debate. The following contributions are conceived as an entry-point for these vital conversations.

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² Unfortunately, limited funding prevented us from inviting more participants from Western Australia.

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