

INQUIRY INTO ANTISEMITISM IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Sydney Jewish Museum

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Legislative Council

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The Sydney Jewish Museum, founded by Holocaust survivors in 1992, is a centre of commemoration and remembrance, education and research. During its 32 years history, we have welcomed over 800,000 visitors, most of whom were students studying Modern History and the Holocaust. Our specialist collections and expert research and education staff ensure that the Sydney Jewish Museum is a modern and highly relevant museum, well equipped to comment with expertise on the rise of antisemitism, xenophobia, racism, hate speech and hate crimes in Australia today.

In a world of increasing polarity there is an urgent need for education programs that foster awareness of the social responsibilities that are intrinsic to Australian citizenship and that actively encourage critical thinking around the destructive and far-reaching consequences of undermining social cohesion. At the Sydney Jewish Museum, we believe that by engaging with current as well as historical issues, students will come to appreciate the diverse beliefs and values inherent in the mosaic of cultures and traditions that make up Australian society today.

Our permanent exhibitions and education programs highlight our mission and purpose: “We use the example of the Holocaust and Human Rights to examine prejudices, bias and actions in a society influenced by the media, power, authority, identity and gender. By discussing the actions of individuals and groups, our visitors come to understand the implications of ‘othering’ and discrimination and their power to change the narrative.

In Australia today, we are faced with the confronting reality that the fabric of civil society is fraying. We are seeing increased polarity, a rise in antisemitism, hate speech, and “casual racism” across all levels of Australian society. In the last year, according to the Executive Council for Australian Jewry, we saw a 738% increase of antisemitic incidents across the country. This highlights an urgent need to change the way that we are educating young Australians about the dangers of discrimination.

Students who come to the museum are largely from the Sydney basin. The Sydney Jewish Museum (SJM) educates approximately 35 000 students per year from across New South Wales and across diverse school systems and cultural and religious backgrounds. Our mission is to engage these students in an examination of Jewish culture, the contribution of the Jewish

community to the Australian landscape, and through a focus on the Holocaust, the dangers of racism, prejudice and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry.

The Sydney Jewish Museum's unique education programs are carefully crafted and built on best pedagogical practise. That is, whenever we welcome a school student into this museum, we are not simply teaching them about the Holocaust. We are providing them with a safely-in, safely-out educational program which uses the voices and the testimonies of Holocaust survivors to not only supplement their school curriculum, but also to encourage them to think critically about the society in which they live and their role within it.

Crucial to all the Museum's programs is a profound understanding of ethical issues students may encounter in their own worlds. Together with the Museum's history experts, participants have the chance to consider the roles played by individuals during the Holocaust, so they can better understand the range of ethical dilemmas that can arise today. This profound experience equips participants with the skills to critically analyse and question contemporary practices. Key outcomes of these evidence-based programs include an understanding of the need for leadership in complex and challenging situations, to consider the role of media and its impact on social cohesion, and to strengthen organisational culture of civil and social responsibility.

The Sydney Jewish Museum is a NESA (New South Wales Education Standards Authority) accredited provider of professional development programs for our state's teachers. The Museum's staff of 11 educators offer a range of highly regarded teacher training programs, specifically in Modern History. These focus on enhancing teacher's historical content knowledge, as well as providing new pedagogical strategies for exploring themes of *Power and Authority in the Modern World*.

Recent research has highlighted that heritage education is a powerful vehicle through which to work on such important aspects for the development of inclusion as identity, citizenship and cultural relations¹. In addition to this, scholars such as Maya Shalom and Zehavit Gross show that the use of first-person narrative in the classroom "can foster a high level of identification, empathy and lead to increased memory retention in students²". This makes the Sydney Jewish Museum ideally positioned and qualified to tackle these problems.

Our high school programs have been so successful, that we have begun to expand into accommodating primary-aged students and engaging them in Holocaust history and the history of human-rights, in an age-appropriate way. Indeed, evidence suggests that engaging students in Years 5 and 6 is a more effective way of instilling a values-based education

¹ Gómez-Hurtado, Inmaculada, José María Cuenca-López, and Beatrice Borghi. "Good Educational Practices for the Development of Inclusive Heritage Education at School through the Museum: A Multi-Case Study in Bologna." *Sustainability* 12, no. 20 (2020).

² Maya Shalom and Zehavit Gross, "The Link Between Memory, Narrative and Empathy in Teaching Difficult Knowledge in Holocaust Education," *Frontiers in Education* 7 (April 2022).

around the concept of social cohesion into young people³. In other words, targeting this age group is the best strategy to combat antisemitism.

The development of a new primary school program of this nature has been endorsed by Professor Emerita Suzanne Rutland, OAM, who has contributed to this project, saying: *“One of the significant problems in schools today is the bullying of children based on their religious beliefs. These draw on prejudice and stereotypes which can lead to fissures in our society, having a negative effect on social cohesion. It is important to address these negative views to ensure our schools are safe and inclusive and to reinforce students’ sense of belonging in our schools. Research shows that such prejudices develop at primary schools. Holocaust education is recognized as an important approach in demonstrating the disastrous impact of such negative views. A visit to the Sydney Jewish Museum can help our children gain a better understanding of these issues”*.

It is imperative that strong support is made available from the NSW State government if we are to develop new programs capable of attracting Primary schools to the Museum. The Museum’s research indicates that up to 20,000 new Primary school students each year could be educated at the Museum, specifically through the PDHPE syllabus.

In the not-too-distant future, over 55,000 school students a year could be using the Museum’s specialist educators to learn about the importance of civic responsibility, tolerance and social cohesion. The Sydney Jewish Museum is one of the state’s greatest tools for countering hatred, discrimination and racism, but we will need greater support to reach more students in both Sydney and across the State.

The Sydney Jewish Museum remains a beacon of tolerance, interfaith dialogue and human rights. The museum is largely run on funds generated by the Jewish Community each year and ongoing support by the state government would greatly assist to help defray some of our annual education costs, particularly when demands for our education programs is increasing.

Our Museum is uniquely placed to ensure our young people have the knowledge, leadership skills and confidence to challenge racism and prejudice and create a stronger and more tolerant Australia.

³ de Bruijn, Pieter, Claus-Christian W Szejnmann, Paula Cowan, and James Griffiths. “Transcending Moral and Emotional Engagement: The Use of Holocaust Heritage in Primary Education.” In *Holocaust Education in Primary Schools in the Twenty-First Century*, 129–44. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018.