Teaching and learning about the Holocaust 80 years on: A study of student knowledge and understanding in England

Methodology

Introduction

This document outlines the methodology used in the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's 2025 national study with students: *Teaching and learning about the Holocaust 80 years on: A study of student knowledge and understanding in England*. Findings from this study are presented in a series of research digests, available from webpage: https://holocausteducation.org.uk/research/80-years/ A copy of the survey is also available on the webpage.

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Key points

- This research was a mixed-method study using both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- A survey was completed by 2,778 secondary school students from 21 schools across England.
- The survey explored students' historical knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust, where and when they had learnt about the Holocaust in school, where they encountered the Holocaust outside school (e.g. in films), what content about the Holocaust they had encountered online and how much trust they had in different sources of information.
- Data were also compared to the findings of a similar study conducted by Foster et al., (2016).
- Ten focus group interviews were also conducted with 58 students in 6 schools.

Context

What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? (Foster et al., 2016)

In 2016, the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education published its landmark national study with students. The research began in 2013/14 with a series of pilot studies to develop the survey content and protocols. Over 900 students took part in the piloting phase. The final content of the survey included numerous sections (see Foster et al., 2016, pg. 25) including substantive knowledge of the Holocaust, understanding of key words, and attitudes towards learning about the Holocaust. Most questions were multiple-choice, with a few open-ended questions. A total of 7,952 secondary school students (aged 11-18 years) from 74 schools across England completed the survey. Additionally, 49 focus groups were conducted across 17 schools with a total of 244 students.

The 2016 study remains the largest of its kind ever conducted in the world. However, worrying trends in recent years, such as lost learning due to the pandemic and the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation online, meant it was important to conduct another survey into students' knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust. As described below, the 2025 study, *Teaching and learning about the Holocaust 80 years on: A study of student knowledge and understanding in England*, had a smaller sample (n=2,778) because it sought to provide a 'check-in' on students' experiences of learning about the Holocaust and explore how things have changed since 2016.

Overarching research aims

A principal aim of the 2025 study was to investigate students' knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust, including exploration of prevalent misconceptions. The study also sought to examine if and how knowledge had changed over time, by comparing the findings with what was reported by Foster et al., (2016).

Additionally, Ofcom has reported that 13–14-year-olds spend an average of four hours online, with 40.0% of this time spent on Snapchat, 13.0% spent on YouTube and 9.0% spent on TikTok (Ofcom, 2025a). Moreover, teenagers are increasingly using AI and video platforms for learning and/or schoolwork (Ofcom, 2025b). Thus, another aim of the latest study was to explore the extent to which young people were using social media and video platforms to learn about the Holocaust and how much trust they placed in different sources of information.

Student survey

Development of the survey

The questions pertaining to students' historical knowledge of the Holocaust, as well as questions about where they had learned about the Holocaust inside and outside school (e.g. in films) were the same as the questions developed by Foster et al., (2016). In developing these questions, Foster et al., (2016) conducted a detailed review of research in Holocaust education, consulted with experts in Holocaust education and worked with teachers and students to check the accessibility of questions. Additionally, two large pilot studies were conducted with 900 students to ensure the questions were interpreted as intended and gathered reliable data.

It is acknowledged that in the case of the history-based questions, the survey could not ask about every aspect of this history; it is too vast and complex. As described by Foster et al., (2016, pg. 7), learning is not reducible to knowledge-acquisition. However, specific knowledge content is important because of the forms of understanding it can impede or allow.

> Our research does not document or record students' possession of individual facts or pieces of information for their own sake. Instead, our interest in the absence or presence of any particular area of knowledge relates to the specific forms of understanding – or meaning-making – that such knowledge allows.

(Foster et al., 2016, pg. 8)

In response to how young people obtain and interact with information nowadays, questions about students' engagement with social media and video platforms were added to the 2025 survey. This included their general use of social media and video platforms and when specifically looking for information about the Holocaust. Questions about how much trust they had in different groups and information sources were also included. Research has indicated interpersonal trust is related to numerous variables such as social cohesion (Ortiz-Ospina et al, 2024), but critically for the present study, the trust questions provided additional context when examining students' engagement with online content.

Final content of the survey used in the 2025 study

Demographic information

Students were asked a small number of demographics questions. They were asked about their year group, religion and ethnic group.

Substantive knowledge about the Holocaust

There were three knowledge questions requiring free-text responses. They asked students:

- Please describe in a few sentences what you think the Holocaust was.
- Who were the victims of the Holocaust?
- Who was responsible for the Holocaust?

Students were also presented with four statements about Nazi victims and asked to identify which group or group(s) they applied to. For example, after the statement, 'They could avoid Nazi persecution if they gave up their beliefs', the response options were: 'Jews', 'Jehovah's Witnesses', 'Roma and Sinti (Gypsies)' and 'Poles'. Students could select as many as they thought were appropriate to the statement.

The remainder of the substantive knowledge questions were multiple-choice questions with one correct answer. Each of these questions was accompanied by a multiple-choice confidence question. Students indicated their level of confidence in the answer they selected: 'I don't know the answer – this was just a guess'; 'I am not very confident in the answer'; 'I am fairly confident in the answer'; 'I am very confident in this answer'. The confidence questions provided an indication of what students thought they knew about the Holocaust, and this could be compared to the accuracy of their responses. Consequently, this approach gave insight into incorrect answers that were the result of knowledge gaps (i.e. students indicating the answer they selected was a guess). It also gave insight into fixed misconceptions (i.e. students indicating high confidence in any (incorrect) answers they selected).

Key words

As in the research by Foster et al., (2016), students were presented with five key terms: 'racism', 'antisemitism', 'Islamophobia', 'homophobia' and 'genocide'. For each term, they had to select the most appropriate description of what the term referred to.

Experiences of learning about the Holocaust

Experiences of learning about the Holocaust were explored through questions asking about students' encounters with the Holocaust in school and outside of school. Students were asked what year group they were in when they first learned about the Holocaust and asked to identify the subject(s) in which they had learned about it. There were a series of questions for students to indicate which books they had read about the Holocaust and which films/TV programmes they had watched. They were also asked if

they had heard a Holocaust survivor speak – in-person and/or on a screen. Additionally, they were asked if they had visited museums and/or sites of former concentration or death camps to learn about the Holocaust.

In a departure from the survey used in 2016, students were asked to indicate the social media websites and apps they had *deliberately* used to learn about the Holocaust and any social media websites and apps where they had come across Holocaust-related content *without* purposely searching for it. They were also asked if they used AI chatbots to learn about the Holocaust.

Other genocides

Students were asked if they had learnt about any of the following genocides or mass killings: Armenians (in the former Ottoman Empire), Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia (in the former Yugoslavia), Darfur (in Sudan), the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Attitudes towards learning about the Holocaust

Students were asked if they thought it was important for all young people to learn about the Holocaust, and could select 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know' in response. Students who selected 'yes' or 'no' were presented with a text box and asked to explain why they thought learning about the Holocaust was or wasn't important to learn about. Finally, students were invited to explain the impact that learning about the Holocaust had on them.

General trust

In a series of statements, students were asked to indicate how much trust they had in different groups and sources of information. The questions were informed by the World Values WVS-7 Master Questionnaire (Haerpfer et al., 2022). Students were asked to indicate how much they trusted their classmates, people in their neighbourhood, teachers, police, government, journalists, science, social media and AI chatbots. For each statement students could select 'not at all', 'only a little bit', 'quite a lot', 'a lot' and 'not sure'.

General use of social media and video platforms

Students were asked to indicate how often they used different sites and apps for social media, such as Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube. The response options were 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes' and 'often'.

Engagement with news and current affairs

A question introduction was developed which explained to students that: "The word 'news' can refer to many things. In this survey, please think of 'news' as information about important current events in the world, the country and/or your local area. News can be accessed through different media and platforms". Then, a series of questions to gauge how frequently students engaged with different types of news, adapted from

Mont'Alverne et al., (2022), was presented. Students had to think about the different ways they could find out about the news on social media, television channels, radio, tabloid press, and broadsheet media. For each one, students had to indicate their trust in it as a news source – 'not at all', 'only a little bit', 'quite a lot', 'a lot' and 'not sure'. Students also had to indicate how often, in general, they read, watched or listened to the news (via any news source). The response options were: 'never', 'very rarely', 'once or twice a month', 'once or twice a week' and 'everyday'.

This section of the survey also included two scales from Goyanes et al., (2023), with some items slightly adapted. Three adapted items from the *intentional news avoidance* scale were included (e.g. when I come across news, I move on to read, watch or listen to something else) and a fourth item was developed. Three adapted items from the *news finds me* scale were included e.g. I can be well informed about the news even when I don't actively follow it. Response options were: 'Strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. Three questions were also developed to measure the extent to which students actively engaged with news (e.g. I actively follow the news through newspapers, TV or radio).

Finally, students were asked the following open-ended question: Our world is currently facing many different challenges and problems. Out of all the problems the faces today, which is most worrying to you?

Respondents

The survey was advertised to UCL Centre for Holocaust Education teacher networks and through emailing all secondary schools in England. Sixty-five schools expressed an interest to participate, with 21 schools across England proceeding with the study. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the regions in which the schools were located. While schools from all regions of England participated, there was variation in the number of students completing the survey within each region. Schools were under no obligation to participate, and thus, this was a self-selected sample of schools.

Table 1. Breakdown of the location of participating schools

Region	Number of schools	Number of students in each region
North East	1	25
North West	3	650
Yorkshire and the Humber	3	559
East Midlands	2	228
West Midlands	1	55
East of England	1	245
London	4	388
South East	3	318
South West	3	310

In total, 2,778 students in years 8 to 13 completed the survey. As shown in Table 2, 83.9% of students were in Years 8 and 9 (aged 12-14 years). In recognition of the pressures on curriculum time including examination preparations, teachers were advised they could select the year group(s) they included in the research. Most teachers opted for Year 8 or 9 students to complete the survey, and this is likely to reflect the Holocaust being taught in these year groups as part of the history national curriculum in England (see Hale et al., 2023).

Please note that in analyses comparing data from Foster et al., (2016) with data from the 2025 survey, only Year 8 and 9 students who had learned about the Holocaust in school are used to enable valid comparisons.

Table 2. The percentage of students in each year group (n=2,778)

Year group	Percentage of students
Year 8	23.7%
Year 9	60.2%
Year 10	6.9%
Year 11	3.0%
Year 12	3.5%
Year 13	2.7%

The survey included a question about ethnicity, using the agreed list of ethnic groups that the government says should be used when asking for someone's ethnicity in England. These groups were used in the 2021 Census (Gov UK, 2025a). The findings are presented in Table 3. The results were representative of the national picture at the time the survey was running; in 2024/25, 68.0% of students reported their ethnic group as White, 13.8% reported an Asian/British Asian ethnic group, 6.9% reported being Black, Black British, Caribbean or African and 7.2% of students indicated Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (Gov UK, 2025b).

Table 3. Students' ethnic groups (n=2,693)

Ethnic Group	Percentage
Asian or British Asian	**10.5**
Bangladeshi	1.2
Chinese	0.7
Indian	2.7
Pakistani	2.9
Any other Asian background	3.0
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	**7.0**
African	4.6
Caribbean	1.4
Any other Black, Black British, Caribbean or African background	1.0
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	**6.6**
White and Asian	1.6
White and Black African	1.3
White and Black Caribbean	1.9
Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background	1.8
White	**69.8**
British, English, Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish	58.9
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0.6
Irish	1.3
Roma	0.6
Any other White background	8.4
Other	**6.2**
Arab	0.5
Other	1.4
Prefer not to say	4.2

Students were asked if they or their family belonged to a particular religious group. As shown in Table 4, almost half of students reported no religious affiliation. Just over a third cited Christian and 7.2% cited Muslim.

Table 4. Students' religious groups (n=2,685)

Religious group	Percentage
Buddhist	0.3
Christian	35.6
Hindu	2.2
Jewish	0.5
Muslim	7.2
Sikh	0.6
Other	0.9
Prefer not to say	3.9
No religion	48.8

Procedure

Prior to the study beginning, ethical approval for the study was gained from the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee. Ethics procedures included notifying parents about the research, ensuring informed consent and giving parents the opportunity to opt their children out for the research. Informed consent was also gained from the students. All students had learnt about the Holocaust in school before completing the survey, so they were familiar with the nature of this history. Students completed the survey anonymously and in school with a teacher present. They were advised to skip any questions they did not want to answer.

Schools could opt to complete the survey online or on paper – both versions were identical. The secure application REDCap was used to host the online survey. A researcher manually input data from the paper surveys into an SPSS database. All data was stored and processed securely in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Numerical data was analysed using SPSS. The focus of this analysis was to describe trends in data, for example highlighting prevalent misconceptions. Complex analysis and testing for statistical significance were not conducted because the nature of the questions made this sort of analysis inappropriate. For example, calculating aggregate scores on scales to generate total knowledge scores would mean that important information about specific knowledge gaps and misconceptions would be lost.

Finally, the content of responses to open-ended questions were carefully coded for content. Firstly, responses from 2025 were analysed using the pre-existing coding

frameworks from 2016 to enable valid comparisons between studies.[1] However, as described in the findings of the research digests, it was apparent that some students in 2025 were responding differently to students in 2016. This meant within the 2025 sample there was a greater proportion of responses that did not align with any of the pre-existing codes. Subsequently, additional analyses were performed to explore the different ways in which students in 2025 responded to these questions.

Focus groups

Development of the focus groups

To gain deeper understanding of the survey data and trends, focus group interviews were conducted with secondary school students. The discussions covered several areas:

- Where and when students had learnt about the Holocaust in different subjects and year groups at school.
- Students' views on the extent to which it was important to learn about the Holocaust in school.
- If and/or how learning about the Holocaust had an impact on them.
- Students' knowledge and understanding about the historical details of the Holocaust.
- If and/or how they had learned about the Holocaust outside of school, such as from museums, books and films.
- Students' experiences of seeing Holocaust-related content online, both when deliberately searching for this content and when coming across it accidentally.
- Students' experiences of using AI chatbots, such as ChatGPT, to learn about the Holocaust.

A semi-structured approach was used, where the researcher posed questions drawing on the topics above to help guide the discussion, but students were encouraged to contribute anything they felt was relevant.

Participants

Ten focus group discussions across six schools, were conducted with secondary school students. Schools that took part in the survey were invited to participate in the focus group element of the research, and four of these schools opted to do this. The researchers also contacted schools in the Centre's teacher networks, and from this process, recruited two further schools. In terms of location, one school was in the North East, one school was in the North West, one in the West Midlands, one in the South East, and two schools were in London.

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[1] In 2016, inductive coding was conducted to derive codes directly from the content offered by students.

Overall, 58 students participated in the focus group discussions, 24 boys and 34 girls across different year groups:

- One focus group with five Year 8 students
- Six focus groups with a total of 34 Year 9 students
- Two focus groups with fourteen Year 10 students
- One focus group with five Year 11 students.

Conducting the focus groups

Ethical approval for the focus group element of the research was gained from the UCL Institute of Education's Research Ethics Committee. Initially, schools were contacted with information about the study. School leaders who were interested in facilitating the research reviewed the procedures of the study and gave permission for the research to be conducted at their school. Parental opt-in consent was used. This involved the researcher providing detailed information for parents, who then had to return a permission slip to the school if they agreed to their child participating. Students were also given a detailed information document in advance of the focus groups taking place to help them decide if they wanted to participate. Only students who wanted to take part (and who had parental permission) were involved – that is, they were all volunteers.

Each focus group included between four and eight students. The duration of the discussions was 30-45 minutes. Each focus group began with the researcher explaining the aims of the discussion and reminding students of the information in the ethics documents they received. This included that their participation was voluntary, they could leave at any time without giving a reason and they only had to contribute to the discussion if/when they felt comfortable to.

Students were reminded that the researcher would keep the full content of the discussion confidential and only use short anonymous quotes in research outputs with their permission. Students were asked not to repeat what was discussed in the focus group with others outside the group. However, because confidentiality could not be guaranteed given others might repeat what was said, students were told to only share information they were comfortable for others to hear. Safeguarding information was explained to students, in particular that if anyone mentioned they or someone else was at risk of harm, their teacher would talk to them about it and explain what would happen next.

The researcher facilitated the focus group, and a teacher was present in the room but generally did not contribute to the discussions. The focus groups were semi-structured, using a series of questions to help guide the topics of discussion, with students able to elaborate on their responses and/or mention additional information they thought was relevant. The discussions were audio-recorded with the permission of students.

The discussions were typed up verbatim into anonymised transcripts. The transcripts will be coded for content and thematic analysis conducted over the coming months.

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