

**‘I feel nervous about teaching this...’  
Exploring the experiences of beginning teachers with  
‘difficult histories’ such as the Holocaust.**

Future of Education Conference 2026, Florence

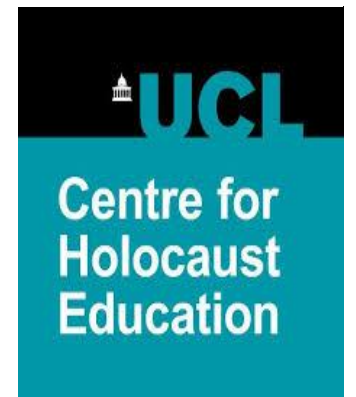
Tom Donnai, Senior Lecturer, PGCE History, University of Manchester

# Context: Who was involved in this project?

- A cohort of 17 trainee History teachers at the University of Manchester, who were surveyed and interviewed between 2022 and 2025 as their careers progressed



- Tom Donnai, Senior Lecturer and Course Leader for PGCE History, University of Manchester
- Dr Tom Haward, Associate Professor, UCL Centre for Holocaust Education



# Context

- Research shows that student teachers can often experience **anxiety** about teaching ‘difficult histories’ such as the Holocaust.
- Although the Holocaust has been a **mandatory** aspect in History teaching since 1991 for those following the National Curriculum in England, the lack of guidance or rationale has left many student teachers **uncertain** about how to teach it with sensitivity and rigour. The Holocaust is the only compulsory topic for students to study in school History between the ages of 11-14
- However, the way in which it is taught varies considerably and schools approach this topic in very different ways
- The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education has worked with around **22,000 student teachers since late 2009**, but research indicates almost **one fifth** of those with recent experience of teaching about the Holocaust have received **no formal specialist training at all**.
- The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education and the University of Manchester PGCE History course have a long-standing **partnership** in delivering Holocaust education, and this project focuses on the impact of that training, and the **changing perceptions** of ‘beginning’ History teachers over the first 3 years of their career

# Outline: Practitioner Enquiry

Practitioner enquiry has been defined as a process of systematically and intentionally examining our own practices:

‘Investigating our own practice in ways that are critical, rigorous, and intended to generate both local knowledge and knowledge that is useful in more public spheres’ (Cochran-Smith, 2005: 220)


It is the deliberate and intentional process to:

‘interrogate or inquire into [our own practices] systematically and to heighten one’s conscious awareness of one’s practices... and using that consciousness to redirect one’s practice and actually to change’ (Lyons, 2006: 166)

# Project outline:

- The research started in September 2022 and is ongoing – these are provisional rather than conclusional findings
- We interviewed PGCE History trainees at the start and end of their PGCE training year [2022-23] and collected questionnaire data. We subsequently interviewed some of the same PGCE trainees at the end of their ECT year [2023-24], at the end of their first year ‘in post’. A selection of participants was then interviewed in 2024-25, as fully qualified teachers.
- The aim of the research was to identify how attitudes to teaching the Holocaust changed over time, and what difficulties participants encountered

# Research overview



2022-23 (ITE)			2024 (ECT)
1 September	2 January	3 June	4 June
Survey & focus groups	Survey & focus groups	Survey & focus groups	Focus group

Longitudinal study

17 PGCE History students at the University of Manchester

5 data-collection points

3 teaching 'points' [full day sessions at UoM]



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# Research overview



Sept 2022 Stage 1	Jan 2022 Stage 2	June 2023 Stage 3	June 2024 Stage 4	June 2025 Stage 5
Survey & focus groups	Survey & focus groups	Survey & focus groups	Focus group	Focus group
Participants 17	Participants 17	Participants 17	Participants 6	Participants 6

Longitudinal study

17 PGCE History students at the University of Manchester

5 data-collection points

The 2022-23 data collection points followed training sessions from UCL



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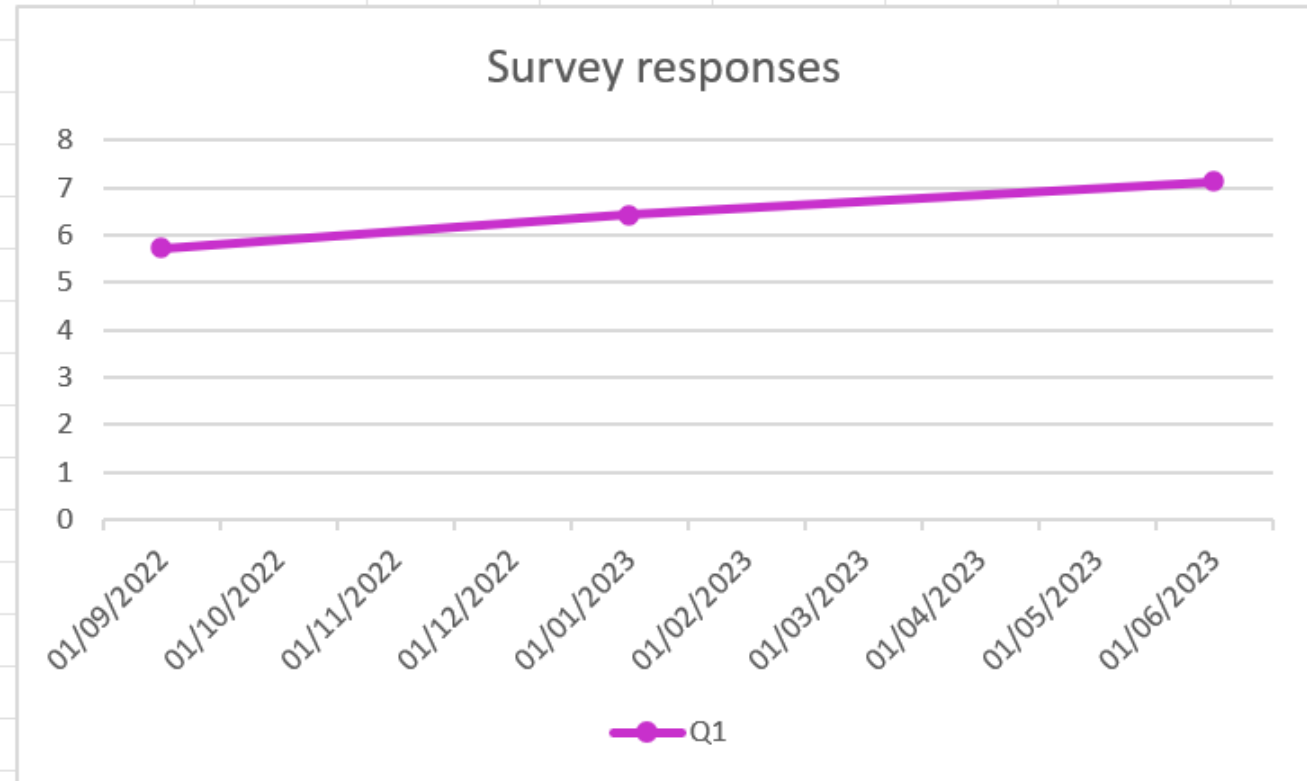


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# Results from 2022-23

## 1. I feel very confident and secure in my subject knowledge about the Holocaust

Collection date	29/09/2022	10/01/2023	16/06/2023
Q1	5.71	6.43	7.13
Q2	3.29	6.43	7.20
Q3	8.29	8.79	9.27
Q4	5.71	6.86	3.67



### To note

We see a steady increase in confidence regarding trainees feeling they have the 'requisite subject knowledge' over the course of the year



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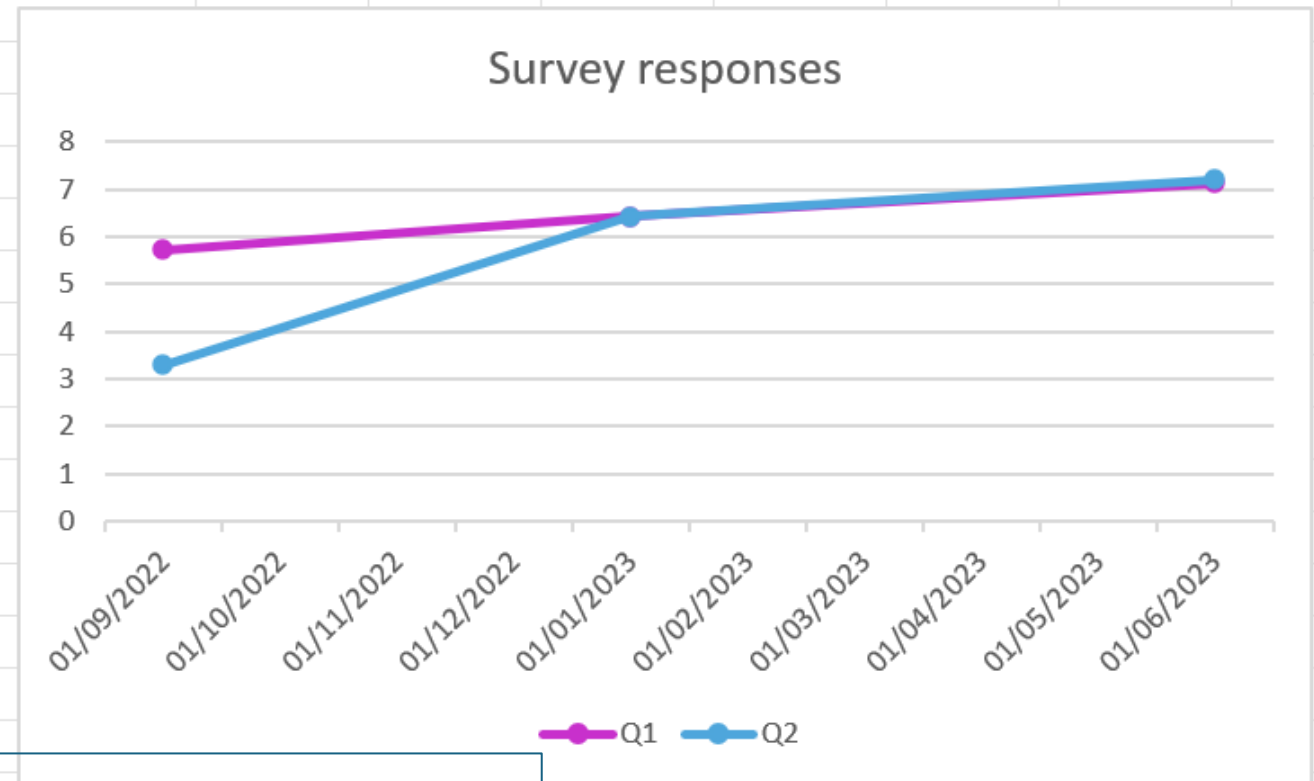


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# Results from 2022-23

1. I feel very confident and secure in my subject knowledge about the Holocaust
2. I feel very confident and secure in knowing *how* best to teach about the Holocaust

Collection date	29/09/2022	10/01/2023	16/06/2023
Q1	5.71	6.43	7.13
Q2	3.29	6.43	7.20
Q3	8.29	8.79	9.27
Q4	5.71	6.86	3.67



## To note:

This question focuses on pedagogy – there was far higher confidence in subject knowledge than pedagogy initially...however, we see a big shift in confidence after 2 terms



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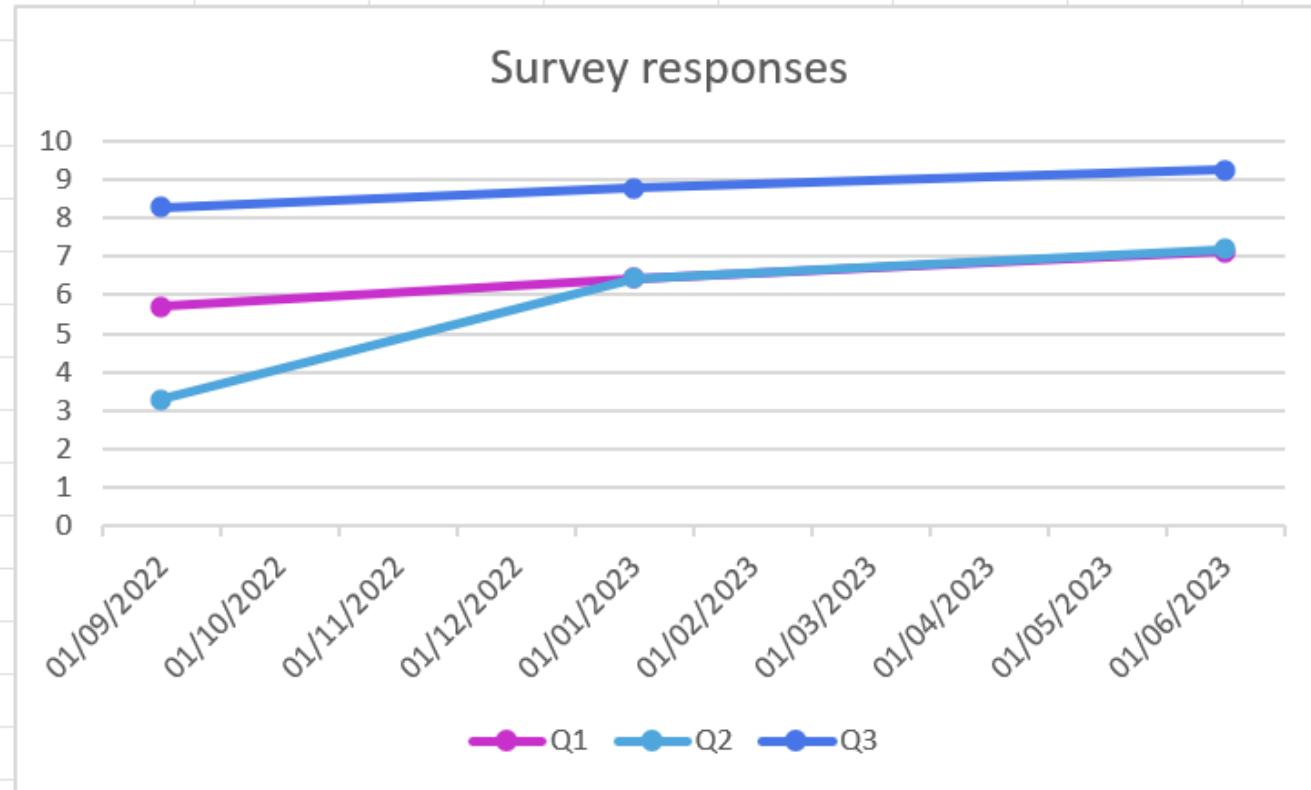


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# Results from 2022-23

1. I feel very confident and secure in my subject knowledge about the Holocaust
2. I feel very confident and secure in knowing how best to teach about the Holocaust
3. I am confident in being able to explain why the Holocaust should be taught in schools

Collection date	29/09/2022	10/01/2023	16/06/2023
Q1	5.71	6.43	7.13
Q2	3.29	6.43	7.20
Q3	8.29	8.79	9.27
Q4	5.71	6.86	3.67



## To note

A high proportion of trainees felt confident in being able to explain why the Holocaust should be taught from the outset



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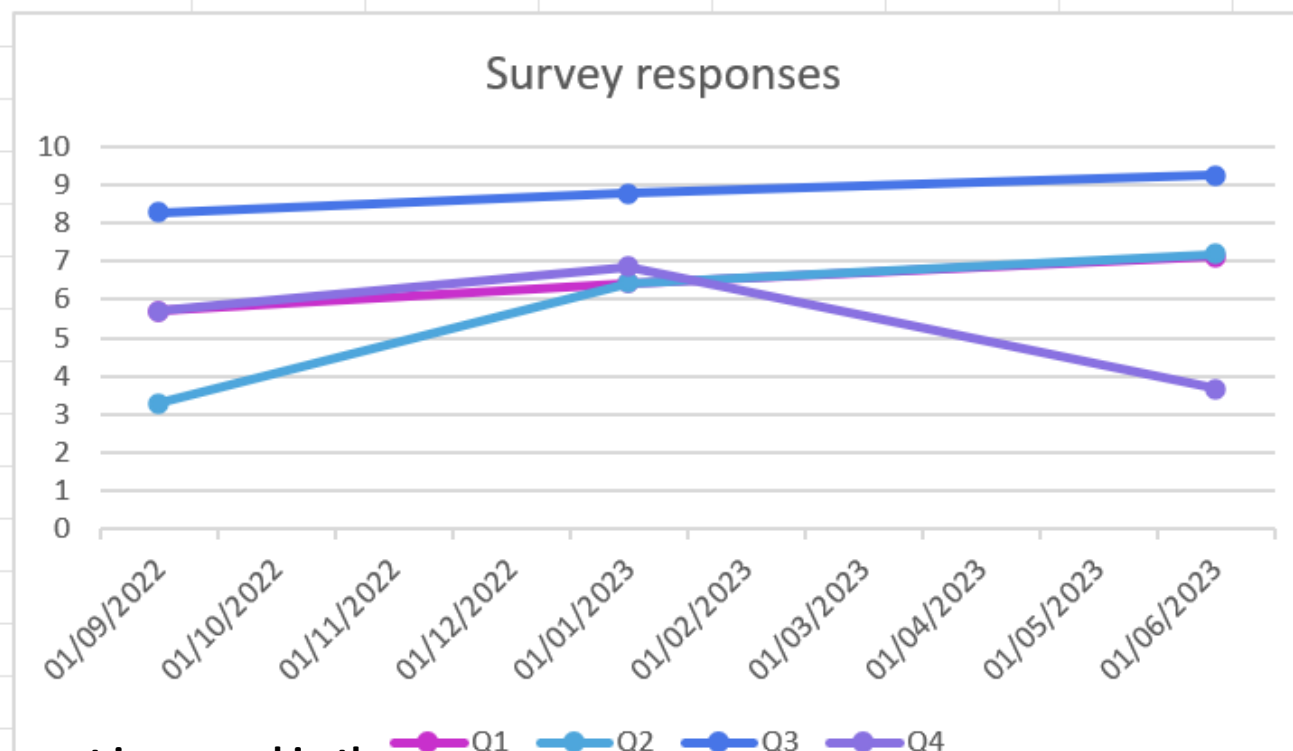


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# Results 2022-23

1. I feel very confident and secure in my subject knowledge about the Holocaust
2. I feel very confident and secure in knowing how best to teach about the Holocaust
3. I am confident in being able to explain why the Holocaust should be taught in schools
4. Overall, at the moment I feel anxious or concerned about teaching about the Holocaust to young people

Collection date	29/09/2022	10/01/2023	16/06/2023
Q1	5.71	6.43	7.13
Q2	3.29	6.43	7.20
Q3	8.29	8.79	9.27
Q4	5.71	6.86	3.67



## To note

It is interesting that anxiety levels about teaching the Holocaust increased in the autumn term, before falling in the summer term. The training they receive from UCL likely highlights the complexity of the topic and 'knowing more' leads to more questions and concerns about teaching the topic

## Results 2022-23

### What aspects (if any) of teaching about the Holocaust do you feel comfortable about?

September 2022	January 2023	June 2023
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Explaining historical facts/events (13)</li><li>2. Explaining the importance of teaching it (5)</li><li>3. Explaining why the Holocaust happened (3)</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Explaining historical facts/events (5)</li><li>2. Explaining the importance of teaching it (5)</li><li>3.= Using individual narrative (5)</li><li>3.= Using 'storytelling' approach (5)</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Explaining the importance of teaching it (8)</li><li>2. Explaining historical facts/events (6)</li><li>3. Finding appropriate resources (4)</li></ol>

\* Open response question

### To note

- Confidence in 'explaining historical facts and events' dropped notably after September.
- By the end of the year, students felt more confident in explaining the importance of teaching about the Holocaust



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# Results 2022-23

## What concerns or anxieties about teaching about the Holocaust do you have?

September 2022	January 2023	June 2023
<p>1. How to explain things sensitively (13)</p> <p>2.= Ensuring teaching is age-appropriate (5)</p> <p>2.= Doing the topic 'justice' (5)</p> <p>2.= Needing secure subject knowledge (5)</p>	<p>1. How to explain things sensitively (4)</p> <p>2.= Ensuring teaching is age-appropriate (5)</p> <p>2.= Doing the topic 'justice' (5)</p> <p>2.= Needing secure subject knowledge (5)</p>	<p>1.= What to include in a Scheme of Learning (with limited time) (4)</p> <p>1.= Needing secure subject knowledge (4)</p> <p>3. Students joking / being disrespectful (3)</p>

### To note

- Students were most concerned about how to explain things sensitively at the start. This concern decreased over time.
- Towards the end of the year students were increasingly concerned about curriculum planning and how to manage student behaviour

\* Open response question



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## Results – Stage 4 interviews, June 2024 [End of first year of employment as History teachers]

- Some interesting findings from analysis of interview data
- Many of those interviewed expressed **frustration at the practises and curriculum at their employment schools**, citing constraints on teaching time
- **Lack of autonomy** also a recurrent theme – trainees were frustrated at not always being able to implement and enact their own training and improve how their schools taught the Holocaust
- Some were also **frustrated by student misconceptions** about the Holocaust, and the failure of the curriculum to address these misconceptions [eg Boy in the Striped Pyjamas used as a teaching resource]

# Research findings: stage 4 focus group, June 2024

“...The training made me re-evaluate what I know about the Holocaust and how I perceived it.....I think for me going forward in terms of teaching it is going to be important to select what to include, because there’s so much more to it than I realised previously”

Amit, ECT, NW England June 2024

“ It’s important to understand that the students arrive to the classroom with many misconceptions, and these stem from film, popular culture, and literature. As teachers we need to address this early on. Films like the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and Schindler’s List are powerful, but also problematic”

Penny, ECT, NW England June 2024

“It was a shock when I started my new job.....seeing that there were only two lessons allocated to the Holocaust, especially after the training that we’d done. I was quite shocked to be honest, to see such a small scale of the time dedicated to it. I would definitely like to allocate more time to it but that isn’t my decision right now”

Brian, ECT, NW England June 2024



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# Some reflections

- at the start of their PGCE course student teachers express significantly more confidence in their own **knowledge and understanding** of the Holocaust than in the **pedagogical approaches** they might adopt in teaching about it. Over the year **this difference narrows**
- Trainees showed significant levels of concern about how they might do the topic **‘justice’** in their teaching
- Trainees also show a particular concern about how they might engage with students **‘sensitively’**
- Toward the end of their PGCE year, trainees became increasingly concerned with **curriculum-planning** and **student behaviour**
- After their first year teaching, ECTs had quite different experiences in teaching the Holocaust. For some there was frustration at the **limited time** they had to teach it. Many expressed having a **lack of autonomy** over what they could teach.

# Research findings: stage 5 focus group, June 2025, [end of second year of employment]

- More interesting developments after analysis of data, with some **distinct themes** emerging
- Participants seemed to be **more accepting of time limitations** for teaching the Holocaust, perhaps because they had a greater appreciation of the need to prepare students for examinations
- Participants also seemed to reflect on the teaching of **other complex and sensitive histories**, and the challenges of 'what to include' in a History curriculum
- Those interviewed seemed to have **greater autonomy** as teachers and appeared to be making more decisions about how to approach the teaching of the Holocaust within their departments
- Finally, participants seemed to be **more confident** in teaching the Holocaust and many had correctly predicted some of the challenges they might face. With three years of experience teaching this topic [2022-2025] those interviewed generally felt that they had strong enough **subject and pedagogical knowledge** to approach the topic with confidence.

# Research findings: stage 5 focus group, June 2025, [end of second year of employment]

“The problem is that you can’t include everything and do everything in depth, there just isn’t enough time. We get, at most, 50 hours per year with our KS3 students – and we have to cover two hundred years of history. So spending a full half term on the Holocaust just isn’t possible”

Brian, ECT, June 2025

“...this year I’ve had a lot more kids pushing back and asking why we aren’t studying other genocides alongside this. I’ve had to have more difficult conversations about why we learn this but we don’t learn about that”

Xavier, ECT June 2025

“It’s been easier implementing some of my ideas on pedagogy and lesson design for sensitive and complex topics like this, I think now that I’m a bit more established there is more trust in me to drive curriculum change and planning”

Penny ECT June 2025

“I feel like I’ve got the tools to teach it better now. I can anticipate the difficult questions, and I feel more authentic and confident when talking about it. That’s definitely down to experience and improved subject knowledge”

Amit, ECT June 2025

Any questions?