

Connecting with Europe



A sensible response to political problems of an increasingly international nature or a corrupt and wasteful shambles? The European Union, and the role it plays in our lives, is one of the ‘hot’ issues of our time. In this article Chris Rowe introduces a new project aiming to give young people a direct influence on European policy.

The European Union is made up of 25 countries with a joint population of 450 million and is the world’s largest single market. Although the EU has a number of institutions, the only directly elected body is the European Parliament. There are 732 MEPs in the European Parliament, each elected to represent the views of European citizens on the laws proposed and decisions taken at European level. The EP’s budget for the year 2005 is €1,180,452,197 to cover staff costs, buildings, MEP’s travel allowances and expenses and costs stemming from the international nature of the European Parliament.

78 MEP’s are elected from the UK, representing large regions as opposed to local parliamentary constituencies. UK MEPs receive a wage of £59,095, the same as Members of the UK Parliament. European rules state that Euro elections are held under the Proportional Representation (PR) system, giving smaller political parties a greater chance of success.

As these facts and figures attest, the EU is, at the best of times, a challenging subject to understand, but the statistics are only half the story. Our views on the EU are often wrapped up in a series of emotive, elemental debates, and any discussion examining the topic has to end in that simple, but unanswerable question – what does being British mean? Couple this with the extraordinary rise of Eurosceptic political parties and a national press offering a diet of scare mongering headlines – ‘Euro threat to kill the British Banger’ is a personal favourite – it is little wonder educators are having trouble unravelling the subject.

Context

In my experience young people often feel a sense of amputation with Europe and European issues. It has been difficult to adequately bring the subject to life within the classroom, falling, as it does, between exciting local issues and wider global topics. Learners generally seem to have inadequate knowledge of European issues, often expressing ‘Eurosceptic’ views, taken directly from negative, routinely inaccurate media coverage. Many young people (and citizens in general) believe the EU to be both interfering and self-serving.

As with so many current social and political issues, much of the general negativity towards Europe is caused not only by a lack of accurate information but also a lack of ‘hands on’ positive experience. We have repeatedly seen the impact active, experiential Citizenship education can have on reversing these trends.

Concept

The concept of this project is simple yet unique – to give groups of young people an opportunity to influence the decisions of the European Parliament. The hope is that by involving large groups of young people in a thorough learner-led research we can demonstrate the legislative uses and favourable aspects of the EU.

Learners from two institutions – Richmond College and Aylesbury High School – are participating in the project. Students initially met with Jean Lambert, Green MEP for London, discussing exactly what influence EuroLearners could have and what issues would be relevant for focus.



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This meeting gave students an idea of European policy direction and a series of possible research subjects were discussed. The learners felt that they had to give priority to an issue that would get young people talking, leading them to bravely focus on the hottest subject of all – immigration. The policy focus chosen relates to economic migrants travelling from countries outside the EU.

A questionnaire was designed, inviting young people to share their views on the subject. Questions included the merits of a point-based immigration system and the procedure for economic migrants who do not enter the workforce. The students also asked for the birthplace of respondent's parents, in the hope that they will be able to determine if this has any influence on immigration opinion. The questionnaire has been distributed to hundreds of students from a range of courses, ensuring the results are both balanced and credible.

This consultation process will culminate in a series of policy plans. These plans will highlight the concerns and hopes of young people in the London and south-east region and will be presented to Jean Lambert, who will raise the issues in the European Parliament. It is hoped that the student research will be directly debated by MEPs. Whilst we do not expect the MEPs to blindly follow whatever the learners' research indicates, we hope

they will truly take the research opinion into account when making policy decisions.

The European Parliament,
Strasbourg, France.

This will be the largest known consultation of its kind, giving young people from across the region a real opportunity to influence European policy. In this way the EuroLearners effectively become a powerful lobbying group, armed with accurate and credible market research that simply cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

I hope that the project is a chance for young people to connect with European issues in a balanced and engaging way. The project model ensures as wide an influence as possible, and encourages institution-wide participation. The EuroLearners central objective – young people influencing policy decisions at a European level – is both unique and ambitious, although eminently achievable. This will be a genuine opportunity to encourage engagement with European issues, connecting young people with the political and social aspects of this evermore important subject.

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Sources:

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Straight Bananas?, AEEU, October 2001