

8. Institutions of the European Union



Your aim

To introduce students to the various institutions of the EU and to enable them to familiarise others with the role of these institutions.



Learning Outcome

By the end of the lesson students will be able to describe the role of each of the major institutions of the EU and offer an explanation of how one or more of these institutions function.



Time

Double class period



Materials or Sources required

- » 'EU Institution' Cards
- » Resource Box for Display preparation. Can include flipchart sheets, markers, sellotape, glue, scissors, etc



Preparation

- » Photocopy the institutional cards, one for each group.



Link to investigating the European Union

- » Investigating the European Union I – Having Your Say in the European Union
- » Investigating the European Union II – The Irish in Europe
- » Investigating the European Union III – The Parliament



Link to Europe Alive

- » Alive Activity 3 – Who's Who in the EU



Potential Partner Activity

If the class created quiz questions on the EU institutions, these could be sent to the partner school to test their knowledge.

THE "EXECUTIVE"

The European Commission

The European Commission is the executive of the European Union and is appointed for a five-year term. The Commission currently consists of individuals nominated by the government of their own member state. Commissioners are generally people who have held high political office in their own states. Once appointed Commissioners are not expected to act as representatives of their own countries, but in the wider EU interest. Each Commissioner has a particular area of responsibility (Portfolio) e.g. agriculture, environment etc. The Commission has a staff of approximately 24,000 people. It is divided into different departments called Directorates General. The Commission headquarters is located in Brussels. The role of the Commission includes; making sure that EU treaties are obeyed by member countries, drafting proposals for new EU laws and spending the EU budget. The Commission has the right to refer cases to the Court of Justice if it thinks a member state is in breach of EU legislation.

REPRESENTING THE MEMBER STATES

The Council of the European Union

The Council of the European Union is the main decision-making body of the European Union, jointly with the European Parliament in many areas of policy. The Council speaks and acts for the Governments of the EU Member States. It comprises of one Minister from each member state and is therefore sometimes referred to as the Council of Ministers. The Council meets in different formations depending on the agenda; agriculture Ministers meet to discuss agricultural matters, finance Ministers meet to discuss economics etc. The presidency of the Council rotates between the member states. The government holding the Presidency draws up an agenda of its priorities for the EU during its time in office. It arranges and presides over all Council meetings.

The member countries heads of state, or heads of government, plus the president of the European Commission, meet together in what is called the European Council. It assembles a number of times a year to discuss overall EU policy and to review progress. It is the highest-level policy making body in the EU, which is why its meetings are often called 'summits'.

The role of the Council of the European Union includes passing European laws (jointly with Parliament), approving the EU budget (jointly with Parliament), developing the EU's common foreign and security policy (based on guidelines set by the European Council) and to coordinate co-operation between the national courts and police forces in criminal matters.

REPRESENTING THE CITIZEN The European Parliament

The European Parliament is the largest parliament in the world. There are currently 785 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), directly elected by the citizens of the EU every five years. (The number is to be reduced, starting from the parliamentary term, 2009 – 2014.) MEPs do not sit in national delegations but in one of eight political groups. The European Parliament meets one week each month in Strasbourg in plenary session. Most of the work of Parliament is done in one of its seventeen committees, which meet the rest of the month in Brussels. The role of the European Parliament includes enacting EU laws (jointly with the Council), approving the EU budget (jointly with Council), supervising EU spending and policies. Since the MEPs are chosen directly by the people of the member states, the Parliament is often thought of as a democratic supervisor of the other EU institutions. The Parliament can receive petitions from the general public and it debates and takes positions on matters of concern to EU citizens

IT'S A MATTER OF JUSTICE The European Court of Justice

The European Court of Justice consists of judges nominated by the member states and are appointed for a six-year term. The Court of Justice is currently made up of 27 Judges, one from each member state, and 8 Advocates-General. The Advocates-General are not judges but independent legal advisors to the court. Five of them are nominated by the five big EU countries, Germany, the UK, France, Italy and Spain. The remaining three positions are chosen by the other member states through a rotating schedule. The Court meets in Luxembourg, either as a full Court, in a Grand Chamber (13 Judges) or in chambers of three or five Judges. The role of the Court is to ensure that European Treaties are being observed. Its decisions are binding in all the member states and it has the power to fine states that do not comply.

THE EU BANK MANAGER The European Central Bank

The European Central Bank (ECB) manages the common European currency, the Euro, together with the national central banks of the euro area. Its main responsibility is to keep the value of the Euro stable by making sure that inflation stays below 2% per year. The ECB is situated in Frankfurt in Germany. It works in complete independence and the other EU institutions or the member state governments are forbidden to try and influence its decisions. The main decision making body of the ECB is the Governing Council, which consists of six members from the Executive Board plus the governors from the Central Banks of those EU member countries which have joined the Euro.

ADVISING THE POLICY MAKERS The European Economic and Social Committee

This committee, the EESC, is an advisory body, which represents the various sectors of 'organised civil society'. This includes trade unions, employers, farmers and other groups. The committee presents their views and defends their interests with the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. The committee is part of the decision making process and it must be consulted before decisions are taken on economic and social policy. There are 344 members, the numbers from each country roughly reflecting the size of that country's population. EU governments nominate the members but they work in complete political independence.

THE OVERSEER The European Ombudsman

The European Parliament elects the Ombudsman for a term of five years. His/Her role is to uncover maladministration i.e. if an EU institution fails to do something it should have done, or does it the wrong way. S/He acts as an intermediary between the citizen and the EU authorities. S/He can receive complaints from EU citizens, businesses, institutions or anyone legally living in the EU. Complaints must be made within two years of a maladministration being discovered.

THE LOCAL VOICE The Committee of the Regions (CoR)

This committee, the Committee of the Regions, is an advisory body composed of representatives of Europe's regional and local authorities. It ensures that these authorities have a say in EU policy-making and that regional and local identities and prerogatives are respected. The committee has to be consulted on matters that concern regional and local government, such as transport, education, regional policy, and the environment. There are 344 members on the committee. They are all elected local or regional politicians who have been nominated by their national governments but they work in complete political independence. The role of the committee is to put forward local and regional points of view on EU legislation. It does so by issuing opinions on Commission proposals.

MONEY MATTERS The European Court of Auditors

This institution was set up in 1977 and has its headquarters in Luxembourg.

The Court has one member from each EU country, appointed by the Council for a renewable term of six years. Even after further enlargement there will still be one member per EU country but, for the sake of efficiency, the Court can set up "chambers" (with only a few members each) to adopt certain types of reports or opinions. In their countries of origin, the members of the Court have all worked for an auditing institution or are specifically qualified for that work. They are chosen for their competence and independence, and they work full-time for the Court. The role of the court includes making sure that EU accounts are reliable, checking that EU funds are spent properly and reporting on EU spending.