

Georg Eckert Institute

for International Textbook Research

Past – Present – Future



GEORG-ECKERT-INSTITUT
FÜR INTERNATIONALE SCHULBUCHFORSCHUNG

I. History

Historical Roots

The Georg Eckert Institute originated sixty years ago after the Second World War when the university lecturer Georg Eckert organised initial talks with Germany's neighbours and former enemies about textbooks and the influence they have on international understanding. The inspiration for such talks, which were sponsored by UNESCO, could be traced back to the activities of the League of Nations in the interwar period. In order to lend them an appropriate institutional framework, Eckert founded the 'International Institute for Textbook Improvement' in Braunschweig in 1951, which was later to be renamed as the 'International Textbook Institute'. After the institute had been set up, Eckert organised a large number of bilateral and multilateral conferences in quick succession. These aimed not only to revise history and geography textbooks, but also to coordinate the exchange of textbooks between different countries. Very soon, the German organisers built up a collection of new and old textbooks from almost every European country and the United States, and later from Asia, Latin America and Africa. Thus Georg Eckert laid the foundation stone for the most comprehensive collection of textbooks in the world which, in the 1960s, was designated as a 'Special Subject Collection Library of the German Science Foundation' and as the 'Textbook Centre of the European Council'.

The pioneering achievements of the institute include the organisation of international textbook discussions as well as the foundation of several bilateral textbook commissions. These bring German academics and practitioners from the education sector together with their peers from former enemy states, who – with considerable success – identify images of the enemy, stereotypes and one-sided representations and work towards revising the textbooks accordingly. In 1951, the Franco-German Textbook Commission was formed, whose efforts led to the creation of the Franco-German History Textbook in 2006. Likewise, the joint German-Polish Textbook Commission, which was founded in 1972 and whose influence reaches well beyond the scope of textbooks, has contributed significantly towards reconciliation between these two countries. This commission is currently working, together with the Georg Eckert Institute, towards a joint German-Polish textbook.

The Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI) has existed in its present form since 1975. The primary task of the institute, as formulated by the state parliament of Lower Saxony in its founding statement, is to promote and provide a scientific basis for international understanding and reconciliation by maintaining balanced representations in textbooks. The founding statute extended the tasks of the institute to include comparisons of political representations in textbooks, and thereby established an additional research topic which includes textbooks designed for teaching politics, social studies, civic education and social science. The institute was not conceived to deal with didactics or with education as such, nor was it designed to answer the entire range of questions which arise in connection with textbooks. Instead, its task was and is to examine the objectification of representations in textbooks in an international context, and to promote a political culture based on recognition, empathy and peace; in this respect, the institute was to provide advice on a national and international level.

The formal inauguration of the institute in its present form in 1975, which ensured that it would be financed jointly by the governments of several German *Länder*, marked a legal watershed, which nonetheless did not affect the conceptual convictions and practical work carried out by its members. The reputation of the institute as a centre of peace research and its main fields of research remained unchanged. It continued to organise and lend scientific supervision to bilateral textbook commissions and international projects in which the main aim was to identify images of the enemy and stereotypical perceptions of the 'other'. In the 1970s and 1980s, the GEI drew up textbook recommendations on the basis of comparative content analyses and international scientific cooperation with historians, geographers, political scientists and specialists of teaching methods. Like the German-Polish (1976) and the German-Israeli (1985) recommendations, these recommendations triggered or influenced fundamental debates in the participating countries, and made a significant contribution towards promoting *détente* and mutual understanding. Moreover, these activities were and still are considered to be a model for applying similar measures throughout the world. The name 'Georg Eckert Institute' was and is synonymous internationally with the aim of improving textbooks via international cross-border dialogue between academic specialists, and with addressing core questions concerning the self-understanding of different societies. It is for this reason that internationally active actors in the field of education policy, such as UNESCO, the OSCE or the European Council, call on the support of the GEI.¹

New Challenges since the End of the Cold War

The political changes which took place around the world in the 1990s have given rise, both nationally and internationally, to fundamentally new social problems which required the GEI to further develop its activities. Three, in some respects opposed, developments have resulted:

1. Europe: The European unification process gained considerable momentum in the 1990s. At first, the gradual relativisation and breaking down of borders appeared to have largely brought to an end the problem of national stereotypes in textbooks. More significance began to be ascribed to topical questions which took into account the fact that (a) differences between perceptions are not only determined by nationality, but by other factors as well, and (b) some challenges transcend political borders and therefore require joint action and an exchange of ideas, which is meaningful, helpful and forward-looking. This is why the GEI began, on the one hand, to closely examine issues concerning cultural pluralism and conflicts between perceptions in international and supranational contexts. Efforts were focused primarily on European identities on offer in textbooks, which led, for example, to the expansion of and (in part) new orientation of the bilateral textbook commissions. The focus was no longer placed merely on conflicting national perspectives or on the history of conflicting relations, but on the way in which European integration affected the types of identities presented in textbooks, and on the comparative analysis of central issues. On the other hand, the GEI also engaged in capacity building, and supported several states in Central and Eastern Europe with the reorientation of historical, political and geographical education along with the development of corresponding teaching materials. These activities, which also applied to the new *Länder* emerging from the former German Democratic Republic, only partially followed the classical model of bi-

¹ In 1985 the Georg Eckert Institute was awarded the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education for its achievements in this field.

lateral and multilateral textbook 'negotiations' or 'commissions'. Instead, the new conditions of the 1990s gave rise to new topics, and required new forms of project work with intensive discussions in the form of seminars as means to transfer knowledge and skills. The aim was to encourage cooperation and scientific dialogue about new methodological concepts and issues which would give new impetus to and promote the democratisation of education while counteracting authoritarian tendencies. At the same time, the GEI attempted to raise awareness of the fact that the 'mental wall' between east and west might only be overcome if people active in education on *both* sides of the border made an effort to change attitudes.

2. New Conflicts/'New Wars': The outbreak of renewed conflicts in the Balkans and in some of the successor states of the Soviet Union dampened hopes that textbooks would reduce the need to study images of the enemy or crude prejudices. While some parts of Europe came ever closer together, some countries in the former Soviet bloc were beset by radical nationalist movements which had been repressed for several decades. National elites frequently stirred up ethnocentric resentment. Thus the traditional tasks of the GEI suddenly gained new relevance. However, the institute now faced the challenge of addressing ways of overcoming not only the effects of past wars, but also violent conflicts which, moreover, were no longer breaking out between states but rather *within* societies. The fact that the institute was regularly requested to provide advice, assessment and mediation in these situations was largely due to the extensive trusting relations it had built up behind the 'Iron Curtain' before 1989. Thanks to the 'moral capital' it had acquired during many years of hard work, the GEI played an important role in the process of building skills and transferring knowledge in Eastern and above all in South Eastern Europe. The institute operated as a specialist authority and mediator between the various parties by helping to ensure that textbooks were geared towards stabilising political relations; it emerged as an internationally recognised transfer institution for conveying knowledge in schools, even under such difficult conditions as in Israel and Palestine. The experience it has acquired in conflict and post-conflict situations has led other countries, in particular in Asia, to look to the working methods developed by the GEI as a model.

3. Plurality and Conflicts of Perception: The cultural dynamics and growing heterogeneity in societies exposed to the process of globalisation challenge policy-makers and practitioners in the field of education to address issues which have repercussions on textbooks. In this context, since the late 1990s, the GEI has gradually acquired skills and knowledge (such as 'world history' and 'sustainable development') which are appropriate to schools of the future. The GEI has also begun to address more complex intercultural concepts pertaining to mediation and learning which go beyond the scope of traditional and largely instrumental ideas and approaches. The same applies to the development of internet-based educational media. Indeed, the GEI reacted swiftly to the predicted shift in importance away from textbooks.

Over the years, the GEI has therefore proved itself to be a reliable international reference point for questions concerning textbooks, which provides and combines important research, transfer and services. Researchers and members of the public are welcome to visit the institute in order to use one of the most comprehensive collections of international textbooks worldwide. The textbooks cover the subject areas history, geography, political science, social science. The library also contains German textbooks, primers, syllabuses, registers of authorised textbooks and academic literature which is relevant to

these fields of research. Among the hallmarks of the GEI is the direct social relevance of the work it does, which fosters dialogue and collaboration between academic research, educational policy and educational practice. In response to social demand, the GEI produces above all textbook analyses, articles dealing with the work carried out in the institute, collections of conference papers, reports, assessments, statements and recommendations and, in some cases, classical forms of publications such as monographs. It also organises conferences, workshops or symposia. The strength of the GEI lies in its capacity to set up connections between people and institutions from different fields, which results from its unique position as a focal point for international networks of textbook research (in the fields of conflict and post-conflict societies, for example). The GEI is also reputed for its library services, its academic publications (including an international journal and book series), and its national and international consultancy services. The growing number of requests concerning transfer and services since the 1990s has meant that the seven experts employed in the institute have had to make compromises and cuts in their research and advisory output.

II. The Institute Today

The Georg Eckert Institute is currently undergoing a period of reorientation and change. On the one hand, international textbook research continues to be an instrument with which societies can use education in order to cope with transformation and deal with conflict – an instrument which is in high demand and appropriate to the times. The institute's achievements in the field of inter-state and domestic social conflicts have been adopted as a model and inspiration in many parts of the world, such as East Asia and South Eastern Europe. On the other hand, it is becoming clear that, if the institute wishes to continue to maintain the socially relevant and effective position it has had in the past, it will not suffice to merely continue traditional textbook research and textbook work. Types of knowledge and scientific approaches have undergone considerable change in recent decades. The trend towards instrumental approaches dealing with identification processes and the 'elimination' of prejudices and images of the enemy are beginning to give way to more complex approaches and methods. The GEI is therefore subjecting its activities in the field of transfer to scientific analysis and methodological control, in order to reinforce its research base. Moreover, the institute is beginning to examine in a new light the preliminary work it carried out in relation to current issues such as globalisation, growing heterogeneity and cultural dynamics in order to define new scientific fields which lie ahead. For example, it is addressing the fact that international tensions as well as conflicts between different groups within societies are triggered not only by social conflicts over the distribution and allocation of goods and wealth, but also (and with ever greater frequency) by battles for the recognition of collective identities. Textbooks continue to play a central role in this context: states and interest groups use textbooks to define not only what knowledge is to be passed on and what skills should be developed, but also where the borderlines between communities lie. Textbook analysis therefore provides a way of researching processes of identification, models of inclusion and exclusion, and therefore also 'integration' and its 'limits'. The debates about Islam or the specific issues concerning education in migration societies which have taken place in recent years show that the demands placed on textbook research as a means of cultural mediation and understanding have become extremely complex. Perceptions of the 'other' or the 'stranger',

about which the GEI produced some pioneering analyses in the 1990s, play a far greater role today, both in research and in the development of new textbooks. This is why the GEI urgently needs to build on and expand its tried and tested areas of work.

The following main topics currently have priority:

- the debate about integration by means of education in conflict and transformation societies, which is closely related to but also points beyond traditional textbook revision;
- the discussion about collective identity in Europe, and about the definition of 'Europeanness' and its historical roots;
- the mutual perception of European and Muslim-majority societies, and
- the question how to deal with plurality and 'difference', which derive from the global context while at the same time impinging on domestic social issues; this includes the analysis of contexts which are relevant to textbooks.

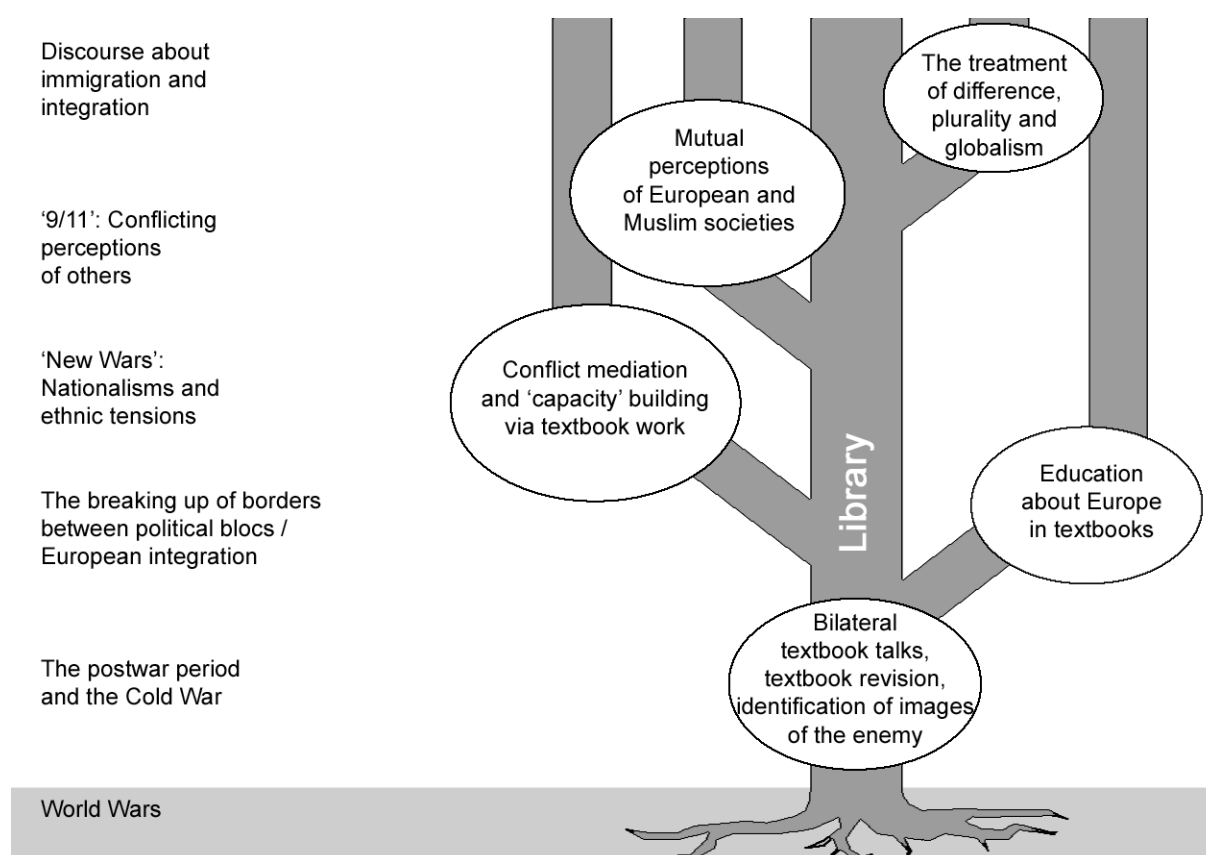


Figure 1. Main Areas of Current Activity at the Georg Eckert Institute

These main topics are a key to the reorientation of the GEI, which first began in 2006/07 and is still ongoing. The present aim of the institute is to:

- reinforce the new main topics in addition to the existing core areas, while underscoring new aspects of the 'traditional' field of textbooks and conflict;
- lend greater focus to (and partly expand) the scientific profile of the institute, and above all to provide the transfer and service areas with a solid research base;

- c) give greater support to young research scholars;
- d) increase the coherence of projects and the funding acquired for research on a competitive basis;
- e) restructure the departments of transfer and service while encouraging closer cooperation with research both of the GEI and of cooperation partners.

In order to put this programme into practice, the institute (in some cases, radically) modified the structure of the library and research department in 2007. Current projects and promising long-term projects for the future have initially been combined in thematic clusters in order to guarantee greater coherence and transparency, but also to encourage synergies between the various projects. The three work areas correspond to the main topics outlined above. A fourth work area, which explores educational media in the age of globalisation, has also been set up. Since 2007, there has also been an entirely new department of 'Communication and Transfer' which collaborates with all departments within the institute. Its role is to ensure that the institute is able to develop and implement projects which rely on information technology to provide knowledge transfer and services to external users.

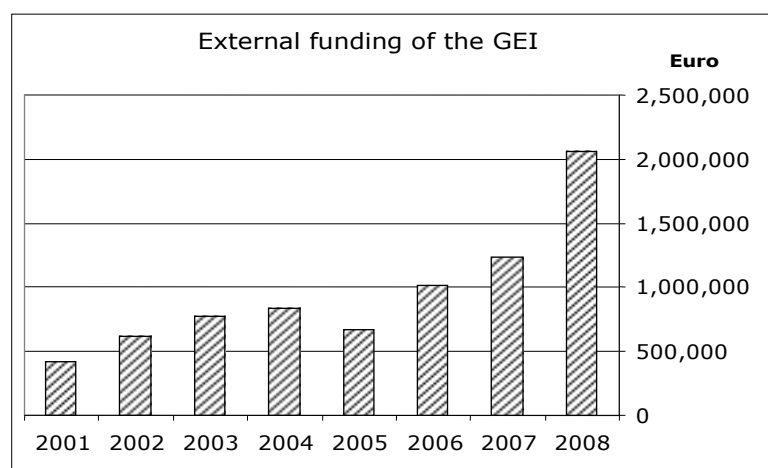


Figure 2. Annual external funding of the GEI (2001-2008)

Structural changes alone did not suffice to implement the above-mentioned goals; it was also necessary to call upon experienced specialists and seek ideas for new projects. Thus the Georg Eckert Institute has reinforced efforts to acquire external funding over the past eighteen months, and in some cases placed emphasis on new research concepts.

Since then, fifteen new, highly qualified scholars, most of whom are doing doctoral and postdoctoral research, have joined the team of researchers. They have strengthened the multidisciplinary orientation of the institute, introduced new topics or new theories and methods, and created conditions in which further fields of research may be developed in the coming years (dealing, for example, with the empirical research into the reception and effects of educational media).

An Appraisal: The Current Image of the GEI

The Georg Eckert Institute is at present an internationally active centre and close-knit network for the comparative research of textbooks. Its speciality lies in the field of national identities, collective models of interpretation, and images of the self and the other. The institute offers consultancies concerning textbooks to national and international politicians, organisations and practitioners specialising in the field of education, and thereby provides a wide variety of services and transfer opportunities whose success can be measured in proportion to the large number of requests received each year. Since the institute can look back on several years of experience as an international point of inter-

section for textbook research, the GEI is also in a position to provide vital services to academic research. These are of special importance because the GEI specialises in research on the intersection between different fields, with a corresponding multidisciplinary structure of a kind which cannot be found in universities. Such a broad-based international interdisciplinary field, which is nonetheless numerically small in scope, is dependent on a 'physical centre' and an environment which is conducive to producing research. This is precisely what the GEI offers, with its newly created work areas, its academic events, new transfer projects based on information technology, as well as its internationally reputed research library, its international scholarships and guest house.

The successful completion of the assessment of the institute, which the Scientific Commission of Lower Saxony (WKN) carried out in 2004 and which guarantees that the institute will become a member of the Leibniz Association, lent considerable impetus to and guaranteed the sustainability to the process of reorientation of the GEI. The Leibniz Association will provide a favourable framework with which to implement the present plans and visions which the Georg Eckert Institute developed and adopted in its medium-term research and work programme, which covers the period up until 2015. The focus on socially relevant research problems, and the tried and tested combination of academic research, transfer and services, means that the GEI fits well into the context of the Leibniz Association, to the benefit of both institutions.

III. Prospects

The Georg Eckert Institute is currently developing new skills with which to develop three new fields of work within the next five to seven years – fields which are indispensable to modern textbook research dealing not only with discourse, but also with cultural and social practices.

First, the institute will inquire into the relation of the interpretations and knowledge conveyed in textbooks to the identities offered to young people via other educational media and actors in schools. Studies carried out within the work area 'Education in the Global Age' (set up in 2009) will explore ways in which such questions, concerning the relation between identities and knowledge in both textbooks and other educational media for example, may be incorporated into and effectively expand the scope of research carried out by the institute. The same applies to the exploration of social contexts in which textbooks are negotiated, produced and implemented. However, before expanding the activities of the GEI to cover research topics dealing with other educational media used in or in relation to school education, which is part of the institute's medium-term plans, detailed discussions about concepts, methods and academic qualifications pertaining to specific disciplines must take place.

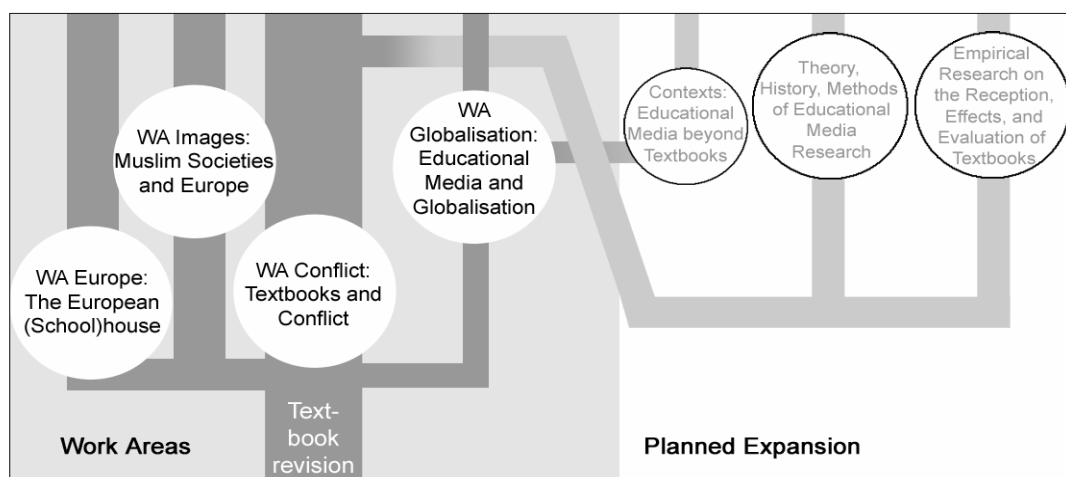


Figure 3. Existing work areas and the planned expansion of the Georg Eckert Institute

Second, there are plans to set up a work area to deal with the 'History, Theory and Methods of Educational Media Research'. Based on the existing personnel and collection of textbooks, this work area will circumscribe what has hitherto been treated in a variety of disparate contexts, and lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork as well as historical points of reference which are commensurable to each of the relevant fields of research.

Third, the institute will strive to pursue empirical research into the reception, effects and evaluation of educational media. This research should not be confined to the effects of textbooks based on revised concepts, but also cover the processes and means by which these concepts are negotiated. This should therefore entail scientific reflection about the very mediation projects which the GEI carries out.

A Vision: The Future Profile of the GEI

By lending further support to research, by thoughtfully expanding the areas of research, by further expanding activities in virtual space at the intersection between various disciplines and institutions, by reinforcing and stabilising the institute's role in a regional research association, and by improving its infrastructure (by building additional premises, for example), the Georg Eckert Institute, along with its research library, will evolve into an internationally reputed and effective centre of competence for the comparative research of textbooks and their social contexts. Moreover, it aims to become a key point of reference for research about other educational media, above all those used in schools. Academic excellence and social relevance which combine quality with user-friendly services are the main criteria to which the institute will adhere during the course of its medium-term programme until 2015.