Letter from the management board - Proposal for opening up of EEPG

Dear EEPG members,

With this letter the Management board and the Director of the EEPG would like to address the following issues and ask for your opinion:

1. how the EU and local politicians are actively intruding into publishing business.

2. and why, despite the long-standing history, traditions and close cooperation among EEPG members, we are now talking about opening up the EEPG to more members in countries where we already have one member.

Please take a minute to read this letter. There is a question at the end that we would like you to answer.

The European Educational Publishers Group has its roots in the late 20th century when publishers from European countries came together to form an organisation with clearly defined aims:

- to form a close cooperation,
- share ideas and best practice scenarios,
- work on high-standard educational materials and promote excellence in textbook industry.

One of the founding principles of the organisation was - and remains up to date - “one member per country” ensuring that EEPG members can be partners in various projects and discuss them freely. We are very proud of our past achievements and success stories, and we truly believe that EEPG has helped several of our members with advice, support and concrete help to overcome difficult situations.

However, the rapidly changing political, economical and technological developments of the 21st century have shown that cooperation on pan-European principles takes different sizes and shapes. What seemed to be a relatively calm and predictable educational environment can suddenly become a zone of swift political decisions affecting the industry employing thousands of people. Copyright issues, open educational resources (OER) and markets being damaged or destroyed through global technology companies are just some of issues that are debated by educational organisations, EEPG being among them. The EEPG Management board has been following the tendencies on a European and global level and we see some alarming signals. We feel that publishers need a strong lobby to counteract these worrying tendencies.
We therefore propose to focus on the opening up of EEPG and abandon one of the principles of EEPG, namely, “one member per country”, as of 2014. Let us list the main points that we would like to draw your attention to:

1. In the beginning of 2014, the EU opened up some large funding programmes (for instance, the Erasmus+ programme covers 14,774 billion € for 2014-2020) but a careful reading of reference materials suggests that all materials produced in these projects should be made available to the public in digital form and freely accessible on the Internet under open licenses (see, e.g., Erasmus+ guide p 12, 27, 94). EEPG encourages its partners in taking part in such programmes and competitions, however, EEPG is against OER in general as they may be a very strong signal to a destroyed market.

2. We see that similar political decisions are adopted in different EU countries that have a significant negative impact on the publishing industry. In 2012 Management board and Director of EEPG supported Zvaigzne ABC (Latvia) when the Ministry of Education and Science announced plans to go for a single textbook per subject and rapid digitalisation – none of the these ideas came into force, however, the market was destroyed in 2013 when MOE banned the use of workbooks in schools. In autumn 2013 the Management board of EEPG participated in discussions in Poland when a similar situation came up there. As of March 2014, it is believed that Poland will go for one official state supported/approved textbook per subject starting September 2014. EEPG takes much effort to influence local authorities against such unreasonable decisions. The Management board of EEPG has investigated that there is not a major organisation representing educational publishers on a European level and EEPG could become exactly this - as we strongly believe that textbook publishers have already shown that they can adapt to the market of the 21st century. However, we insist that competitions should be fair and open on all levels.

3. The education sector has always been interesting to technology companies, however, there is an increasing tendency to see rapidly growing startups and smaller tech companies entering the school market with content like applications and games, often for free. This raises the question of their funding as well as the pedagogical value of such materials. Many publishers, EEPG members being among them, also produce and provide high quality digital solutions, but often can’t compete against OER or global tech companies.

4. It is the EEPG management board’s and the director’s belief that the EEPG will become a much stronger organisation by opening up. It will give us a greater political influence - everyone would agree that it has a greater impact if an organisation consists of 100 members from 25 countries than 20 members from 20 countries. To reach politicians on a EU level the EEPG already cooperates with several organisations, however, we believe that educational publishers must have their strong representative voice there as
well. Politicians on different levels should be made aware of the fact that their often unreasonable decisions may destroy the textbook publishing industry which has gradually evolved into a much broader one of learning materials, solutions and support – a truly educational industry. It should also be remembered that most publishers provide teacher trainings, etc. thus having a significant social function as well. By destroying high-quality learning materials, it is very plausible that the standards of education will soon decrease, leaving a negative impact on society as such which needs well-educated workforce.

5. Starting in 2014 we have introduced several changes (newsletter, website and topic-based network meeting to name a few) into the EEPG as our goal is to work to satisfy all our members. EEPG works within its allocated budget, however, one point for opening up our numbers is that participation costs could be decreased.

6. Moreover, the 21st century has shown that cooperation takes more varied forms than in the 20th century when the EEPG was established and the rule “a member per country” was introduced. Who exactly are “competitors” and “partners”? Borders between countries have blurred, companies have merged, once-competitors are now sister-companies, content providers may become service providers – these are just some possible scenarios.

The Management board and the director of the EEPG would like to invite each and every member of the EEPG to take an active part in the current debate for opening up our organisation. We encourage a wide range of opinions and would consider all points “against” as well – it is in our common interests to make EEPG a strong organisation that is both respected on a EU political stage - as well as help a member who needs a picture of a ripe bio banana for their Biology textbook.

We kindly ask to provide your answer to the following questions with a short comment, if you feel so:

*What is your view on the current situation? Do you support opening up of European Educational Publishers Group and abandoning “one member per country” principle?*

With our warmest wishes,

Management board and Director of EEPG