



A void within the global Leather sector: Closure of Lederinstitut Gerberschule Reutlingen

More than the loss of a school

Over the last 20 years many organisations that performed fundamental research into issues faced by the leather industry have ceased to exist, but LGR continued to cover this vital role. This was partially due to funding for it provided by German government departments, but also support by independent leather-orientated organisations in the form of the Federation of German Leather Industry, TEGEWA association of the chemical industry, the Baden-Wuerttemberg Ministry of Education, and the Municipality of Reutlingen.

Research was at a practical level, and the various investigations were mainly long term. This provided serious in-depth information of use to the sector. The Institute worked within major EU projects, with various branches of the United Nations, and within consortia with other organisations – all to address technical issues that affected the global leather industry.

The scope of investigations

A listing of research would include alternatives to salt for preservation, the effectiveness of fungicides in preservation,

the improvement of lightspot in dyeings, and the effects of ultra-sound in leather processing. In addition it covered the measurement/avoidance of aldehydes from leather, and measurement/effects of leather ageing. Environmental matters included pioneering work into the disposal of hazardous solid waste, low temperature combustion/pyrolysis of chrome containing wastes, the effects of chrome(VI) on human health, and structured investigations into the formation/avoidance of chrome(VI) in manufacture.

International obligations

LGR has been at the forefront of international forums and within organisations that have affected policy and direction for the industry. Staff have made numerous contributions at meetings that include ALCA, SLTC, IULTCS and regional seminars.

The annual LGR technical meetings were of especial value in providing up-to-date information – technical, engineering, legislative and health and safety issues - to suppliers to the leather industry, customers/end-users, but most importantly to the practical tanner. Benefits were gained by participants not

only from Europe, but from across the world; the interchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas was quite special and unique to these practically based professional meetings.

A void within a fragmented industry

Issues such as sustainable manufacture, environmental concerns, and animal rights and health and safety issues are moving to the fore. But the global leather industry does not have a single body to promote excellence or scientifically respond to emotive allegations.

In the last few years there has been a steep decline in long-term, structured scientific investigations. Moreover, it should be recognised that a re-orientation has occurred within research: there has been a shift from application towards desk top-type studies and reliance on earlier publications. Against this background not only has a major teaching institute been lost, but a pro-active professional team that has understood and served the leather industry at an international level for many years is being dispersed.

The loss is considerable. The leather sector needs to consider very carefully how best to protect, support and develop its remaining assets for the future. ☹

Leather education within LGR

Since its formation 56 years ago, more than 1,600 students graduated from LGR as "State-certified leather technical engineers". Almost half of these students came from more than 70 different countries around the world. Using their qualification, they have carried the competence and excellent reputation of LGR to the entire globe.

However, mainly as a result of decreasing numbers of students and the drastic reduction of the public funding to be expected as a consequence of this, LGR will be closing down within the next few months.

When the LGR was founded, there were about 30,000 people working in the German tanning industry. This now stands at less than 2,000 people, and this contraction process can be found across central Europe. In addition, there have been significant changes and restructuring processes in the field of the chemical supply industry. This has also had a negative influence on education and training needs in this area.

Until now LGR has been offering regular training schemes and courses in the field of leather technology, which includes; LGR-Compact course certificate in leather technology (semester 1), Certified Process Manager Leather Manufacture (semesters 1-2 – examination/approval by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry), State-certified Leather Technical Engineer (semesters 1-4 – State-certified examination), Various short courses in the leather processing industry, in-house seminars, Complementary courses in English and various advanced training courses.

Two years ago, an Articulation Agreement was developed between LGR and the University of Northampton/UK regarding a programme to become a Bachelor of Science in materials technology (leather). This is based on a 2-year course at LGR (State-certified Leather Technical Engineer) + 1 year BSc-Course at the Institute of Creative Leather Technologies (previously known as the British School of Leather Technology), The University of Northampton. This was possible because the LGR course is fully compatible with the ICLT curriculum.

This compatibility has ensured that any student undergoing training within LGR can continue their leather education at the University of Northampton. Arrangements for transfers to ICLT are already taking place. Formal closure of LGR takes place at the end of July 2011, with the presentation of certificates to the last LGR students.