



Undergraduate students at the UK's Institute for Creative Leather Technologies (ICLT) after a series of tutorials from leather chemicals manufacturer Trumpler. Investment in education is also important to prepare new generations of leather technologists. CREDIT: WTP

Changes in leather education

There have been quite a few changes in leather education over the last 30 years, with the closure of some of the well-established European schools, the relocation of others, and the opening of new ones, particularly in Asia. In addition to formal leather education, a number of leather chemical companies are offering their own programmes and tanners themselves are looking at new apprenticeship schemes.

Whilst all of this is in progress, it is worth sitting back to assess what the leather industry really needs in terms of education for the future. It is clear there is a need for a great deal of flexibility; it is no longer sufficient to provide just the traditional two or three-year courses. These should continue to be available for those that want them, but there are many people looking for training on more specific topics, rather than on the whole leather manufacturing process. This includes people already working in leather-related industries, as well as those wanting to work in them. These people do not need to be able to fully understand all aspects of leather production, but instead want a better understanding of what they are using as a basic raw material. There are also those who only work in a specific part of the manufacturing operation and so require good training for that part of production and do not need to cover everything.

We can take the example of leather training within the University of Northampton in the UK, where they have already modified their programmes to accommodate much of the above. They work very closely with the fashion and design students at the university, offering them some leather training as part of their main course work. For those involved in full-time leather education, they have split the first year so that the students study processing from raw hide to the tanned stage in the first half, before looking at the post-tanning process in the second half. This allows anyone who just wants to specialise in either aspect to

attend for only half of the year. The university's Institute for Creative Leather Technologies (ICLT) is scheduled to move to new premises for the 2018/19 academic year and plans are in place to ensure it can still offer complete training on every part of the leather manufacturing process. They are also starting to offer this sort of training in other locations. This has started in Leon, in Mexico, for example, where there is a high concentration of automotive leather producers and a strong demand for improved education in order to provide these tanneries with the qualified technicians they need in the future.

In order to satisfy the needs of a more demanding supply chain and greater awareness at the consumer level, education programmes must cover more than in previous years. There needs to be a better understanding of all the raw materials used and it will also be necessary to carry out a broader study of the full environmental and social impact of the processing, not just at the processing site but across the supply chain. This includes what happens to leather articles once their useful life has ended.

If the leather industry fails to ensure that this is in place, they leave themselves vulnerable to those offering alternative materials, who may be better prepared to handle these issues. It should be possible with this broader approach to attract more recruits to the industry, something which many tanners have struggled to do in recent years.

The purpose of this article is not to appear in any way critical of those already involved in leather education. As can be seen, they are already aware of the need for change and are adapting as quickly as possible. It is intended to draw wider attention to the challenges faced in leather education and to encourage more participation by all those who have something to offer. It is a great opportunity to give something back to an industry that has offered exciting, rewarding careers to so many. ©