All change! Graham Lampard spoke with Paul Richardson, the new subject leader for the British School of Leather Technology, about his hopes for the future of leather teaching

Published: 12 September, 2004

Twenty one years ago, as part of the old HND course, I was standing in L6 of the National Leathersellers' Centre giving my first lecture – about veininess, its causes and possible solutions.

On the face of it, little seems to have changed at BSLT in the intervening years. OK, they have a degree course instead of the HND but there is still the Leathersellers’ Certificate and the Pre-diploma course.

I was in a minority, a white student from the UK, and not from a tanning background. The UK industry was contracting from producing commodity leathers to specialised ones, and we couldn’t believe that Garnar Booth were in merger talks with Pittards.

However, appearances as we all know can be deceptive and as I found out from Paul Richardson, the new subject leader at the school, there are changes afoot.

‘The role of BSLT will change over the next few years because we are building links with other parts of the college (UCN). We have already linked in with fashion, for instance, as evidenced by our recent success at Pielespana’, (see Leather
UCN is also hoping to launch a degree in footwear and accessories, and the intention is to have some leather modules within that, possibly even to the extent of fashion students coming to the Leather Centre and the students completing the dyeing and finishing of leathers, which they will then use to make items. ‘It would allow them, the fashion students, to see the problems associated with achieving the correct shading etc’, Richardson said.

BSLT are also linking with UCN’s business school to offer a new MBA with leather technology. ‘This is going through validation later in the year and could be offered early next year’, Richardson commented. ‘It will include a couple of leather modules with the students doing a business-based project, so it will be for management trainees who want a little bit of the technical side, to get the best of both worlds.’

I wondered what the main priority was for the new head of school. ‘One of the changes I’d like to see is that, at the moment, we rely on the leather industry sending us students, when we should be present at careers fairs, persuading students to come here, training them up and sending them out to industry. The chemical industry, for instance, doesn’t expect BP or Shell to take on employees and send them on a degree course; it works the other way round. And so it should with us.’

This is a good point, but the question has to be asked why is there such a poor response from schools and further education colleges in the UK when it comes to recruiting students for the industry? Surely BSLT has everything going for it, a wide ranging course that requires diverse skills in chemistry, biology, biochemistry, physics, engineering etc. And plentiful jobs available: the lack of trained graduates is graphically illustrated when you read the figures – something like a quarter of a million trained leather technicians are believed to be needed in India alone.

‘What we have got to do is improve our marketing and profile. This is my number one priority. I have to make sure people a) know we exist and b) know what we actually do.’ Initially, this will probably involve BSLT staff visiting the tanning areas in the UK and talking about the training opportunities to the students in the local schools, so that they can come to the BSLT and train. They would then return to
Yeovil, for example, ready for Pittards to employ them. Richardson said they would also take someone from the local tannery to tell the kids what they do in the factory. ‘We need to introduce people into the industry and develop a pool of technicians that is available for the industry to use.’

My one concern is that with a declining number of students taking science degrees, or even A’ level sciences, is there the pool of students ready and willing to make a career in, what can frankly be described as, ‘a dirty, smelly and low-paid industry’?

There is also the question of student loans and whether it is better for a technician to find employment and then go on training courses via, for instance, day release or apprenticeships, than to study full-time and run up a large debt. What the industry really needs, I think, is a successful distance learning course, whereby the student is learning while on site and available for work; or away on a day-release course. But, given the paucity of day-release courses in main stream sciences these days, I guess that is a pipe dream that is unlikely to come to fruition.

However, there may be some light. Richardson comments: ‘The MSc in leather technology is being reformatted and is currently going through validation. We’ve re-written the whole course with new module titles and people will be able to carry out the work at their place of employment, or at home. At the moment, the modules will be sent as a hard copy on a CD, the main reason being that many of the countries we hope to involve have poor access to high powered computers and reliable communications can be a problem.

‘The student will do as many of the modules as they want, send the work back to us, and build up towards an intermediate qualification of a Post Graduate Certificate or Diploma or, when they’ve completed the course, an MSc. The problem with leather technology is that there is a significant practical element and this has been solved by making it one module. So, if someone wants to complete an MSc, they’ll have to find six weeks to come here and complete an intensive practical programme.’

Richardson added: ‘It is intended to replace the full time MSc course that currently runs and which has had poor attendance and disappointing recruitment since its inception.’ However, there is also the possibility of doing the distance learning
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A course at the BSLT. ‘They will come here and work through the distance learning material. So, we will give them the distance learning material and if they get stuck they can ‘come and talk to us’ or we’ll run tutorials on a regular basis.’ The true distance learning student, however, will have to rely on e-mail, phone calls or post when they get stuck. Richardson thought this would eventually be extended to other courses.

In another revamp, the BSc is being rewritten. ‘It’s been in existence for twelve years and, while it is constantly updated, UCN wants it to be part of its common academic framework, which means the modules within it will be available to students on other courses, and vice versa.’

Thus there is the possibility of majoring in leather technology with French and shoe design. Although the idea is still in the early stages, this seems an excellent idea, widening both the appeal of leather technology to non-leather students and producing students for the leather industry with a well-rounded degree.

Moving away from recruiting students, although part of the same equation, I wondered whether the BSLT was aware of the needs of the modern leather industry. ‘We have the leather industry advisory committee (LIAC) and the technical liaison group, but they do have a very high European bias, so I think the honest answer is probably ‘no’, Richardson admitted. ‘What we need to do is go out and talk to people, at fairs, and communicate with the worldwide industry and ask them what we should be doing with our resources.’

‘We intend to re-introduce the Wednesday afternoon lectures, so allowing industry a forum to speak to the students about their aspect of leather production. And I feel that with the staff changes that have taken place recently, we have improved the balance of industrially experienced to academic staff.’

An area that must concern the hierarchy of UCN is that of competition. From being an exclusive ‘club’, the training of leather technology has taken off all over the world. Most leather producing countries now have some form of leather industry training, and so competition for BSLT is increasing.
However, Richardson is cautious: ‘I don’t think we need to compete with [other training schools], we need to collaborate with them. UCN is very careful about ‘franchising’ courses; the problem is maintaining quality. What we would sooner do is accredit other countries’ courses. We’d look at what they are delivering, the level they are delivering, and say ‘we will take your graduates into our courses at this level which may be final-year degree, for instance. The other thing we are doing, as mentioned, is going into distance learning.’

When I was training at the Leather Centre, especially in the early 80s, there was always an air of ‘them’ and ‘us’ about Nene College and the National Leathersellers’ Centre. However, that has changed: ‘The rector is extremely supportive towards us’, Richardson enthused, ‘for which we are very grateful. There is no suggestion that the Leather Centre’s days are numbered.’ An interesting comment, as it hadn’t crossed my mind that this might be the case.

In fact as was pointed out, BSLT gives UCN a ‘huge international platform’, something that Anne Tate, the rector, has recognised. She has attended fairs in both Bologna and Hong Kong and sits on the LIAC committee. Known for getting her way, it was rumoured that the leathers used for the UCN students’ outfits that won at Pielespana were given by a well-known tanner because of her negotiating skills!

‘UCN is currently in the process of applying for university status with full research and taught degree awarding powers, and one of the things that every university needs is courses that are unique. Here we have leather technology, lift technology, and waste management. From that point of view we are seen as unique’, Richardson said, as if to emphasise how the important of BSLT is. And with the push for university status, BSLT is also diversifying in its research areas. ‘It’s no longer purely leather, but includes biomaterials and the possibilities of growing skin by cell culture. I would like to mention that we have been very successful recently in gaining grants from both EPSRC, BBSRC and EU funded projects such as RESTORM.’

In these tough times, other revenue sources are needed and BSLT is expanding into these as well. One area is contract research for companies. Richardson gave an example of a product that is used in the textile industry and the company was interested in seeing whether it had an application to leather. They are running a six-week project at BSLT with a final-year student making the leather incorporating this product to see whether it has the desired effect. Just the sort of thing I did at BLC when I was there.
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‘This is something we’d like to expand as we’ve had two or three of these [contracts] and it’s another source of revenue. Another area of interest is contract tanning.’ The aim is to utilise the facilities available, making them more productive for the BSLT and UCN.

There is also, of course, consultancy: ‘We have a lot of experience here, and not only in the leather industry. For instance, my background is from analytical chemistry. In my time, I’ve analysed everything from nuclear power station effluent to food. Other members of staff also have experience outside the leather industry, so there is knowledge that we can sell’, Richardson commented.

This utilisation of staff and equipment extends to the range of analytical tools the BSLT has picked up over the past few years. Apart from the tannery, it has access to a new electron microscope and a differential scanning calorimeter, both of which can be hired out: ‘We hope to have further acquisitions, via grants for projects from the various funding bodies and so be able to build on this services side, generating much-needed income’.

The problem, again, is how to market these facilities? There are many local firms, quite big ones, who may not have such equipment, including Formula One companies for instance (and BLC), who use high technology materials, and who would jump at the chance to use an SEM or DSC. On the marketing side, one answer may be UCN’s business bridge, which links the college facilities to industry, certainly within the East Midlands region, and sells the technology that UCN can offer.

Finally, I asked Richardson how he’d like to leave the BSLT at the end of his tenure. ‘I’d like to leave the school thriving. When I came here 21 years ago, there was an intake of about 60 students a year. That has dwindled over the intervening years, but we are seeing an increase now and I’d like to see us continue that trend. We have to take our students from wherever the leather industry is strong and I need to make sure we are a service to the leather industry, providing what they want.’ So, the BSLT is not at all like the National Leathersellers’ Centre I first visited in 1983 and spent so many fruitful years attending. Much of the change is necessary to ensure that the leather industry worldwide continues to benefit from the training that many generations of leather technologists have been fortunate to receive – long may it continue.
Leathersellers award ceremony

The annual award ceremony was once again held at the Worshipful Company of Leathersellers in the City of London. While there are always absences by students who have returned to their home countries, there were a good number in attendance. The following lists them in the order in which they accepted their diplomas:

**Bsc Materials Technology (Leather), year three:**

Mohammed Tahir Khurshid, India

Charles Mwangi Ndung’u, Kenya

Arthur Steven Onyuka, Kenya

Dale Phua Jing Yuh, Singapore

Ramaganesh Singaravadivel, India

Junxiu Sun, China

Jeannine Vromans, Holland

**Msc Leather Technology**
Mohamad Mamun Alom, Bangladesh

Fernando Buxo Molist, Mexico

Joseph N Mbogo, Kenya

**PhD**

Ono Suparno, Indonesia

**Prize winners**

The Worshipful Company of Leathersellers award prizes to the three final-year BSc students who have gained the highest marks over the three years of their course: 1st Ramaganesh Singaravadivelen; 2nd Dale Phua Jing Yuh; 3rd Arthur Steven Onyuka. In addition there is also a Leathersellers prize for students taking their leather certificates and the winner of this prize was Chee Hoo Ong, Stahl Singapore.

The Leather International prize for the most promising overseas student went to Danny Ching Kwan Tse from Hong Kong.