RESEARCH INSTITUTES: HOHENSTEIN INSTITUTE



View from the castle

The Hohenstein Institute, now based in the town of Bönnigheim in Baden-Württemberg, is a group of four organisations that has worked its way up from humble beginnings to become, together, one of the most important research institutions, not just in Germany, but in the global textile industry.

Hardly a week goes past without news emanating from the Hohenstein Institute with details of new research that can, potentially, help companies right across the textile and apparel supply chain improve their offering to customers.

Recent examples include progress on tracking down the causes of smelly feet, ways of improving bedding so that people can sleep more soundly, methods for testing textiles that claim to be skin-friendly, and even an idea of using fabric that emits tiny amounts of gas to construct anti-microbial clothing.

The organisation still has its headquarters in Germany but, in recent years, a total of 19 branch offices have opened up in 16 countries, with two each in China and India to reflect faithfully the developments in the apparel and textile industry that have taken place over the last two decades. The headquarters are still the jewel in the crown though. This is a family business, and Professor Stefan Mecheels, current chief executive, is the third generation to run it.

His grandfather, Professor Otto Mecheels, was the founder, setting the first Hohenstein Institute up in 1946, immediately after World War II. He was a professor in textiles at the University of Mönchengladbach, but his career was curtailed by damage the university buildings had suffered during bombing raids. He recalled a castle that had stood in his home town, Bönnigheim, and returned south to see if it was still there and, if so, if he might be able to set up a new institution there.

The Institute for Hygiene and Biotechnology has been an independent department since 2005 and offers a wide range of services in the fields of medical and hospital textiles and textile hygiene.

Hohenstein Institute

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He bought the castle and set up a school for textile engineers, technicians and chemists, running it like a small, private university, while also offering laundry and testing services to local manufacturers to ease the age-old problem of cash-flow. Dr Jan Beringer, who today is director of textile services and the innovations department, explains that, until the 1960s, the basic role that the Hohenstein Institute carried out was as an educational institution, helping students from all German-speaking countries prepare for a career in textiles.

At the end of that decade, Otto Mecheels stepped down and handed the leadership of the institute to his son Jürgen. From that point on, Dr Beringer explains, testing and research gained more and more importance, not least because, by this time, the beginning of the 1990s, the numbers of students were substantially down because textile jobs had begun to shift to other parts of the world. The current CEO took over from his father in 1995 and took the difficult decision to close the school down, leaving the Hohenstein Institute to devote itself almost entirely to testing and research. The organisation is now going out into the international market, building itself up as an international testing and research centre, with Asia, as mentioned above, playing the most prominent role. As well as the branches in India and China, there are installations in Cambodia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Thailand.



One of the specialisms that the Hohenstein Institute has developed in recent years is testing and certification of the Oeko-Tex Standard 100.

Hohenstein Institute



Under one roof

Four independent organisations operate on behalf of their clients under the umbrella of the Hohenstein Institute. They are:

- The Institute for Clothing Physiology, which has the aim of opening up new market segments for the entire textile industry through application-based research and development of innovative products and processes.
- The Research Institute, which offers a broad range of tests and certifications to more than 4,000 client organisations across the world.
- The Hohenstein Textile Testing Institute, which offers a wide range of services for industry and the retail sector. The core services include a comprehensive range of quality tests for textile materials, clothing and bedding.
- The Technical Academy, which offers basic and advanced training seminars, workshops and conferences for the entire textile and clothing industry and related sectors of the economy.

"It's basically that wherever textiles are produced, we have a representative, someone who knows the local language and culture," says Dr Beringer, "although we still carry out all our testing in Germany to ensure high quality. We have competitors who have laboratories to carry out testing in Asia, but I can tell you that we have, after testing the same products at our headquarters, drawn very different conclusions in some cases from the ones those Asian laboratories have published."

This does nothing to lessen the Hohenstein Institute's need to be global. For example, one of the specialisms the organisation has developed in recent years is testing and certification of the Oeko-Tex Standard 100, which aims to satisfy the requirements consumers make of modern garments. The standard also takes into account the complex production set-up of the textile industry in the twenty-first century. As a global organisation, the Hohenstein Institute believes it has a good understanding of the way labour practices, management philosophies and government legislation work in different parts of the world.

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