

Security centres of excellence

Now top universities are taking on the toughest security challenges.

One of the most frightening statistics about security is not the number of different attacks now possible. Nor is it the number of attempted or successful hacks against corporations. It is how few successful breaches in security are actually reported or investigated – a mere 15% of cases, say experts.

There are many reasons for this. But often the problem is one of trust: Can the security company doing the investigation do what they say they can? How much will they overcharge while they're getting up to speed? Will they tell the truth about what they find?

It is no surprise that some organisations, at least, are looking for alternative investigators who are more interested in finding out what's happened than the bottom line and who have

the skills to solve the crime. What is a surprise is where they're finding them: universities.

"The key to our success is that we're flexible in terms of people's needs. As long as it's interesting, we're interested," says Andrew Blyth, principal lecturer at the University of Glamorgan's School of Computing. In common with universities such as Cardiff, which recently hit the headlines for exposing flaws in HSBC's online banking system, Glamorgan has been showing that academia is more than capable of helping public and private sector organisations with computer security.

Blyth says there are many reasons why his group has been sought after to help the police, the security services and other organisations. As well as rigorous scientific and classical train-

ing in computer science, the group is "an independent academic organisation."

Blyth's forensics lab originally grew out of his own interest in conducting forensic research. He approached companies whose needs coincided with his interest and before long he had built up a security group and a reputation for "the weird, whacky and wonderful". The group consists of five members of staff, three PhDs and three students with security MSc awards. As well as helping with the school's research, the work done by the group helps security in general, since the techniques developed get passed back to the security community, rather than kept as commercial secrets.

It also helps with the university's finances.