Forensic Science and Crime Scene Degrees in the UK
Background
Skills for Justice works with employers across the Justice and community safety sector in the UK, to help them identify and develop the workforce skills they need to operate effectively and efficiently.

We were asked by employers to investigate Forensic Science degrees at UK universities because employers have told us that many of these courses are not supplying them with employment-ready graduates. We therefore spoke to a wide range of students, universities and employers making up around 85% of the UK Forensic Science sector. The full report can be found on our website at www.skillsforjustice.com.

The UK Forensic Science Sector
In 2007-08 there were around 8,950 people employed in Forensic Science occupations across the UK. Around 5,000 of these are employed by the Police Forces of England and Wales, with 552 employees in Scotland and 405 in Northern Ireland. The rest are employed in commercial Forensic Science service providers such as the Forensic Science Service, LGC Forensics, Forensic Access and Orchid Cellmark.

There has been enormous growth in the number of Forensic Science and Crime Scene courses over the past 6 years. This growth has not been specifically quality assured at subject level. Degrees are generally high quality but many are not relevant to the needs of employers delivering forensic science services in the Criminal Justice System.

Students
The number of students studying Forensic Science or Crime Scene degrees increased from 2,191 in 2002-03 to 5,664 in 2007-08.

- The number of students obtaining degrees increased by nearly four times
- Over the same period, there were on average, twice as many females as males studying Forensic Science or Crime Scene degrees
- The proportion of black and minority ethnic students studying Forensic Science or ‘Crime Scene degrees increased from 10% to 17%, making up 12% of degrees obtained in 2002-03 and 14% of degrees obtained in 2007-08.

Informed Choices
Despite a commonly held belief that TV programmes such as CSI, Silent Witness and Waking the Dead has caused an explosion in the growth of Forensic Science and Crime Scene degrees our research found that their influence is not as wide as people think.

We found that over two thirds of students said that an interest in studying science at degree level was the biggest factor in helping them choose a Forensic Science or Crime Scene degree. Only a third said that they were influenced by media or television. Less than a tenth sought advice from tutors at school/college.

Where students live and study was the biggest factor considered when choosing which university to study at. University reputation was only cited by just over half of students. Prospective students used the internet more than any other source of information when choosing their degree option. Friends and family was cited by less than a third and less than a fifth went to a careers fair.

There seems to be a mismatch with the amount of careers information, advice and guidance on offer to prospective and current students. A significant amount of public money is spent on providing these services and it is very important that they meet the students’ needs.

Factors that influenced the choice of a Forensic Science-related degree programme

- General interest in studying science at degree level
- Opportunity to specialise in Forensic Science at Degree level
- Prospect of working in Forensic Science post-graduation
- Media/TV/literature coverage of forensic science
- Having a nearby University that specialised in Forensic Science
- Research into specific occupational roles and degree requirements
- Friends/family
- Knowing someone who studied or works in this field
- Advice from tutors at school/college
- Other

1 http://www.skillsforjustice-limimatrix.com/
Quality versus Relevance

The Quality Assurance Agency for higher education has confidence in the quality systems in place for all UK Universities that offer Forensic Science or Crime Scene degrees. However, the crucial issue is the relevance of degrees to employers. 75% of students have career expectations of entering into a forensic science or a science-related occupation, therefore maintaining the relevancy of the course for employers is key.

Those students that need their degrees to be relevant to Forensic Science employers must be able to choose the right courses that will give them this opportunity. Those employers must also be able to find out which courses will produce graduates with the relevant skills and knowledge.

The best learner experience will be achieved only if the university department has an internationally renowned research base, particularly research that is funded by Forensic Science employers. Professor Jim Fraser of Strathclyde University has argued that "the publication rate of the largest UK producer of peer reviewed papers in forensic science roughly equates to one year’s publication output for a single department in one university. [This] clearly illustrates the immense gulf between forensic research and other disciplines."

Employer views

- Employers have a negative perception of the effectiveness of forensic science-related degrees and their ability to produce employment-ready graduates.
- Some employers feel graduates from pure science degrees are more ready for employment than forensic science-related graduates, as the content of pure science degrees is more relevant than in forensic science-related degrees.
- Many employers feel that links with Universities need to be improved and some feel that maximising opportunities to participate in research activity with universities would be important.

They said...

- "There are some really good graduates but often only have a surface appreciation of Forensic Science that lacks depth"
- "Graduates are largely disappointing. We are not seeing well-rounded students who are good at science and also good at written, verbal and presentational communication"
- "Forensic science degrees do not have enough science—it's the application of the science that is the job"

University views on supporting students to enter Forensic Science employment

To help prepare students to enter employment, most Universities undertake a range of activities to support students in their search for employment, such as ensuring they have some exposure to employers during their learning programme, helping students build Personal Development Portfolios, assisting with placement opportunities and offering help with CV construction, applications and references.

Student views

Almost all students feel that their university facilities, the course content, the opportunity to develop practical skills, the lecturing / teaching, the learning support, and research materials/sources available were very good or good.

They said...

- "Overall the course content offers the right balance of practical work and lectures"
- "Being taught by tutors who were at first within the forensic and policing employment is excellent. They draw on their experiences to put into the teaching"

-* Science and Justice, March 2009 (Volume 49, Issue 1)*
The 2009 DIUS research publication: Demand for Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Skills is a useful comparator for our research and it supports many of our findings.

A recent CBI report in 2008 suggested that there may be a mismatch in skills that employers of science occupations are seeking and the skills of STEM graduates. This supports our view that while degrees offered in the UK are of high quality they might not be relevant for employers.

What next?

Recommendations
Alongside the Forensic Science Society we have developed ‘Forensic Skillsmark’ - a quality mark combining the Society’s university accreditation scheme with our own Skillsmark recognition programme, to provide the UK with a single gold standard in forensic education and training. As the Forensic Science Regulator is setting Quality Standards for all aspects of the UK Forensic Science sector, we recommend that the Forensic Science Regulator adopts Forensic Skillsmark as the quality mark for learning provision in the sector.

In addition we recommend that
• Universities, QAA, Skills for Justice, HEA Physical Sciences, Forensic Science Society and Forensic Science employers work together to establish a subject benchmark for Forensic Science. Through this, we will be able to get a common understanding of what the core curriculum for degree is. Further accreditation by Forensic Skillsmark would allow employers to easily identify the universities and degrees that take into account the necessary course content.

• Further research is undertaken in the future, by interested parties, into the provision of Forensic Science related provision in Further Education.

• The UK Forensic Science Education Group, the Higher Education Academy, Forensic Science Society and forensic science employers, facilitated by Skills for Justice, should formalise their links through an appropriate agreement to ensure a process for forensic science employer engagement regarding IAG for school pupils, parents and University careers centres.

For more information
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