Technician Commitment

TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT

Progress and Impact

Foreword

We are delighted to share the findings of a recent independent review of the Technician Commitment. The Technician Commitment was established in 2017 to create a more positive culture for the technical community in higher education and research by working collaboratively across the sector to advance visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability of technical skills, roles and careers.

Since its inception the Technician Commitment has secured over 100 signatory and supporter institutions and unlocked significant inward investment into the community from signatory institutions, with many providing new financial and in-kind support to develop and deliver Technician Commitment related activities. The initiative has triggered cultural change at higher education and research institutions across the UK and leveraged several millions of pounds worth of external funding to support the higher education and research technical community through other sources/grants. Alongside this the Technician Commitment has established partnerships and engaged a range of learned societies and professional bodies to raise the profile of, engage and support the technical community.

There is of course more work to be done. The Technician Commitment is not yet five years old and we recognise that culture change like this does not happen overnight. We welcome the findings of this review and will ensure we build on these strong foundations to strengthen further the Technician Commitment's reach and effect on technical roles across the UK and ensure that the principles of the initiative become embedded in the everyday processes of these organisations.

The Technician Commitment is a collaborative endeavour that would not be possible without the input and contributions of many across the sector. We would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone that has worked collectively to get the initiative to this stage and we look forward to continuing our work together in the future.

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Chair of Technician
Commitment Steering Board

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Introduction

The Technician Commitment is a higher education and research initiative, led by a steering board of sector bodies, with support from the Science Council and the Gatsby Charitable Foundation. The Commitment aims to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technicians, technologists and skills specialists working in higher education and research, across all disciplines. Universities and research institutes are invited to become signatories of the Technician Commitment and pledge action against the key challenges affecting their technical staff. In recent years, a number of supporter organisations, including learned societies, professional bodies and funders have joined the initiative and developed action plans to increase their engagement with the wider technical community.

The Technician Commitment was established in May 2017 where the 36 founding signatories were announced. The Commitment now stands at over 100 signatory and supporter organisations.

The vision of the Technician Commitment is a *culture where technical careers are recognised, respected, supported, developed and aspired to as professional careers in higher education and research institutes.*

To fulfil this vision the Technician Commitment, together with signatories and supporters:

-   coordinates, drives and evaluates collective action across the higher education and research sector to ensure visibility, recognition, opportunity and sustainability for/of technical roles and skills

-   works to ensure that technicians are motivated, engaged and proud to be technicians and that others aspire to technical careers in the higher education and research sector

-   influences policy pertaining to technical roles and careers in the higher education and research

-   advocates technical skills and careers in higher education and research and is a nationally recognised source of sector expertise

Two fundamental aspects of the Technician Commitment are the requirement for sign-off by institutional leadership, ensuring senior level endorsement and full organisational support, and the nomination of an institutional lead, (examples include Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Heads of HR, Technical Managers and Technicians), who leads on the development of an action plan that focuses on how the institution will drive visibility, recognition, opportunity and sustainability for the technical community.

Technician Commitment 2021

Successes to Date

Since May 2017 the Technician Commitment has:

- Initiated and built the profile of the initiative from scratch. The Technician Commitment has rapidly become high-profile in its own right in the sector and sits alongside similar initiatives such as the Researcher Development Concordat and the Athena Swan Charter.

- Engaged and established a steering board of sector stakeholders to influence and drive positive change across the higher education and research sector, ensuring the expertise of the board spans the breadth and depth of the sector. The steering board leads the Commitment on behalf of the sector, for the sector and comprises of organisational representatives including UKRI, Wellcome, Advance HE, CRAC Vitae, UCEA, Engineering Council, Science Council and technician representatives from universities and research institutes.

- Unlocked investment by signatory institutions with many providing new financial and in-kind support to develop and deliver Technician Commitment related activities. It is difficult to put a direct sum on this unprecedented investment into the higher education and research technical community but it will be in the region of several millions. Examples include: the creation of new dedicated Technician Commitment roles at a range of institutions, new apprentice technician programmes at a number of signatories and increased training opportunities for technicians across all disciplines.

- Created an environment that has leveraged funding to support the higher education and research technical community through other sources/grants. Examples include an EPSRC grant of £0.5M that funded an Inclusion Matters project which examined equality, diversity and inclusion for the technical community, and a £5M Research England grant to the Midlands Innovation universities to advance status and opportunity for the technical community.

- Developed a strong and vibrant community of practice amongst signatory leads through biannual national signatory events. These events play a key networking role for the leads, as well as an opportunity for the Technician Commitment team to engage and gather insight from stakeholders. This has also led to self-organised networks and further events such as the Research Institute Technician Symposiums. The Technician Commitment has also partnered with Midlands Innovation to deliver the UK Higher Education Technician Summit (HETS). The HETS events are believed to be the largest conferences dedicated to the development of technicians in higher education and research in the world.

- Developed and rolled-out a self-assessment and action planning process for signatory institutions. A year after being announced as a signatory, institutions are requested to submit a self-assessment and a two-year action plan. An independent peer review process has been developed to provide constructive feedback on action plans. The feedback is a very positive process and is about supporting and encouraging institutions. Following completion of the two-year action plan, institutions are asked to provide evidence of impact to date and complete a further three-year action plan.

- Established partnerships and worked directly with a range of supporting learned societies and professional bodies to raise the profile of, engage and support the technical community. These include the Royal Society, the Royal Institution, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Institute of Physics, the Royal Society of Biology, the Institute of Science and Technology and the Institute of Animal Technology. As a consequence, and with Technician Commitment support, these organisations have all developed their own Technician Commitment action plans to engage and support technicians across all sectors. Initiatives include dedicated events, new technician awards, training programmes, policies to ensure inclusion of technicians in research outputs and honorary fellowships for technicians.

- Advocated technical roles and careers through identified opportunities. Examples include working with Times Higher Education to create a high-profile award to celebrate technicians in the sector, establishing placements for technicians to work on the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures and articles on technician careers in publications such as Nature and Chemistry World.

- Developed a dedicated web presence for Technician Commitment resources, news and content and driven the creation of new websites at signatory and supporter institutions to ensure technical colleagues are visible to the external community.

- Advocated for inclusion of technician development in sector assessment exercises and funding calls.

- Established itself as a source of expertise on technical roles in higher education through the publication of 'hot topic' reports and policy work with government and organisations such as the Russell Group, Wellcome Trust, Academy of Medical Sciences and the Royal Society. Examples include 'Equality, Diversity & Inclusion: A Technician Lens' and 'Technicians: Providing frontline and vital support for mental health and wellbeing'.

- Complemented the work of other Gatsby technician initiatives such as the Technicians Make it Happen campaign by providing opportunities for technicians from signatory institutions to feature in the campaign and represent the technician community at engagement events such as New Scientist Live and the Big Bang Fairs and supported the development of content for the upcoming technician gallery at the Science Museum by facilitating access to technical facilities and expertise across the Technician Commitment community.

- Built a strong, visible presence on social media.

- Provided funding opportunities to signatory organisations to work collaboratively to advance and enact the aims of the Commitment.

An Independent Review

Since its inception, the Technician Commitment has created an environment where technical skills, roles and careers have increased visibility, recognition and development opportunities, and the importance of the sustainability of these roles and skills is beginning to be recognised and addressed by the signatories. Whilst it is important that institutions sign up to the initiative, it is more important that they deliver.

To gain an understanding of the progress to date, along with the views of the technical community on the impact of the initiative, in 2021 the Technician Commitment commissioned York Consulting to undertake an independent review of the Technician Commitment and its impact.

This evaluative study involved scoping and review of action plans, an in-depth examination of 30 self-assessment reports, a survey of technician leads, a survey of technicians, and the development of four case studies.

This report presents an overview of the findings from the review. The full report of York Consulting's findings can be found on the on the Technician Commitment website.
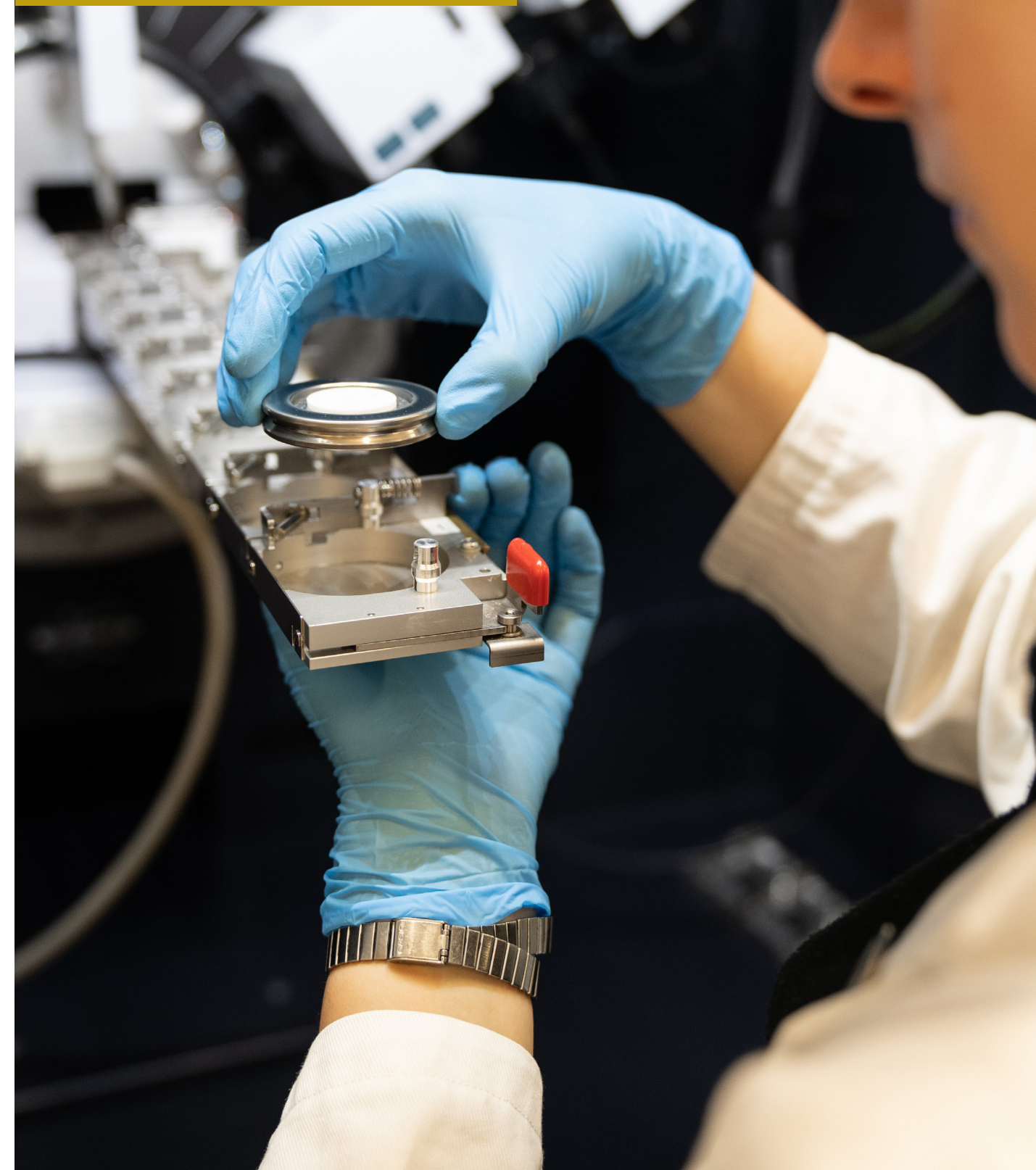
SUSTAINABILITY

1 in 5 technicians surveyed agreed that sustainability of technical skills and expertise of technicians had improved within their institutions because of the Technician Commitment
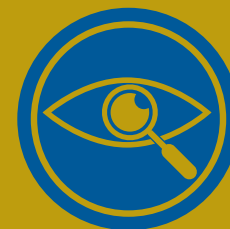
VISIBILITY

More than 1 in 3 technicians surveyed agreed that they have felt technicians are more visible internally at their institution because of the Technician Commitment

Technician Commitment 2021

Executive Summary

The review found that the aims of the Technician Commitment to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technicians working in higher education and research are clear and well understood. Overall, there is excellent evidence of impact and pace of change on the pillars of visibility and recognition, although this impact is yet to be fully felt in all signatory institutions. Given that a number of the institutions surveyed are recent signatories to the Technician Commitment, and are still early in their journey, this is to be expected.

The pillars of career development and sustainability show evidence of good progress, but pace of change is perceived to be slower. Naturally, institutional and sector practices around processes and structures that support career progression, pathways and sustainability of skills will take longer to embed. Recent government policy developments, for example, the publication of the government's R&D People and Culture Strategy, support this change in culture and the Technician Commitment is working with collaborative organisations and signatory institutions to continue to drive positive change.

The importance of networking, specifically signatory events, and the sharing of good practice between Technician Commitment signatories and supporters was cited as extremely positive activity. The Technician Commitment is a community-led endeavour and feedback reflected this approach.

Structures and Processes

Signatory institutions have put in place a range of governance structures to support action planning and delivery linked to the Technician Commitment, including steering groups and dedicated resources. Several have created new Technician Commitment coordinator roles to oversee the development and implementation of action plans.

The sector is supportive of the effectiveness of the structures and processes that enable the delivery of the Technician Commitment. The institutional self-assessment and action plan based submission and peer review process has been received positively. Further guidance and/or /mentoring, particularly for new signatories, was recommended.

There was a clear demand amongst Technician Commitment signatory leads for a wider understanding of the institutional changes implemented by other institutions at a national level. A centralised communication platform for all signatory institutions to enable more informal, regular networking and act as an environment for shared learning was advised. This should be based around a reimagined website that acts as a resource hub. The community advised that the most effective options for increasing informal networking via a Technician Commitment led platform needs further consideration.

RECOGNITION

1 in 3 of technicians surveyed agreed that technicians were more recognised within their institutions because of the Technician Commitment

CAREER

1 in 5 technicians surveyed agreed that career development for technicians had improved within their institutions because of the Technician Commitment

Activities and Achievements

The community citied significant impact as evidenced by increased visibility of technicians both internally within home institutions and externally through web presence and social media. Recognition of technicians within signatory institutions has been demonstrated by their involvement in decision making committees within organisations, internal awards and news articles celebrating many achievements. Many signatory institutions have also updated research publication or authorship policies to reflect the need to recognise technicians' contributions. Several have also supported professional registration for technicians - they have promoted schemes; offered practical support through workshops and mentoring schemes; provided funding for the process itself; and celebrated new technician registrants. They have encouraged staff to nominate technicians for internal and external awards; have created new technician categories within existing internal award programmes; or increased promotion of existing reward schemes.

Many of these awareness raising, collaborative and structural actions have supported some positive changes for the visibility and recognition of technicians. This includes providing a communication route and voice for technicians; improving understanding of the technical workforce; giving technicians some identity and recognising their contributions (including in supporting the response to the COVID-19 pandemic); and facilitating collaboration. However, feedback from the surveys and case studies suggests that recognition and an improved sense of community are yet to be delivered for a number of technicians.

Sustainability initiatives are mostly centred around the development of technical apprenticeship programmes. Career development is clearly critical to technicians across the sector and there has been an increase in engagement with continued professional development (CPD) activities and technical training through involvement with the Technician Commitment. Awareness of career development challenges and opportunities has increased. In several signatory institutions career pathways have been developed and a wider dissemination of this good practice would be well received by the sector. Career development is critical to the perceived success of the Technician Commitment: this appears to be the single most important measure of success for grassroots technicians and whilst there is good evidence for progress in some institutions this needs to be embedded and expanded across the sector.

Outcomes and Impact

There is evidence that the Technician Commitment is resulting in positive outcomes for a number of individual technicians. Around one third of technicians themselves agreed that they have more pride in their work, are more motivated and have greater aspirations. Some specific outcomes for individuals include obtaining professional registration; receiving awards in recognition of their achievements; accessing improved CPD and personal development opportunities; feeling more part of a community, more recognised and having more influence within their institution; and in some cases, individual roles have been recognised and upgraded.

These outcomes are not, however, being consistently achieved and there is a need for this practice and influence to be extended and embedded fully across all signatory institutions. At an institutional level progress on visibility and recognition is recognised by leads but less so by technicians themselves. This demonstrates a need to support leads in disseminating this across their institutions. There are several examples of excellent practice in this space.

The impact on career development and sustainability is recognised more by leads than technicians but is viewed by both as very much a work in progress in terms of impact. The development of career pathways and frameworks is an excellent start, and with many different institutions now making significant progress the sector is beginning to see real change in this critical area. Those leading the charge into this space need to ensure they operationalise their career pathways but also help and support other institutions to achieve real and lasting change for technicians across the sector.

Facilitators and Challenges

Some notable facilitators of the progress made by some signatory institutions towards improving the visibility and recognition of technicians include:

- dedicated resources being assigned to the Technician Commitment

- collaboration as a key driver for the culture change required – through networks and events, effective communication mechanisms, engaging with 'grassroots' technicians, and securing senior engagement

- Signatory institutions being able to integrate with other major initiatives and engage with national bodies.

Challenges impacting on the ability to affect and drive cultural change at institutional and national level include:

- the COVID-19 pandemic which has resulted in the diversion of resources and delays over the past year and in some cases weakened oversight of the Technician Commitment initiative in signatory institutions

- inconsistent engagement of groups of technicians which can act as a barrier in some cases

- a lack of perceived tangible action and progress made amongst some signatory institutions

- the challenge faced by signatory institutions in tackling the perceived career ceiling for technicians.

Conclusions

A range of governance and support has been put in place to develop the Technician Commitment at institutional, regional and national level; and considerable activity has been undertaken to raise awareness and enhance collaborative and organisational structures. Th ere is the potential to develop more focused evaluation measures of the change being achieved at institutional level; and to enhance practice sharing at regional and national level. The latter should focus on the types of initiative being delivered within individual institutions and what works well.

Change and individual outcomes are evident, particularly in support of the visibility and recognition themes, with many technicians reporting improved pride, motivation and aspirations. Mixed feedback across groups of technicians highlights the considerable challenge continuing to be being faced, notably in relation to the culture change necessary to address the perceived career ceiling for technicians.

A more explicit focus, and greater resource and time is required (at institutional, regional and national level), to develop the career structures and environment that technicians work within. This is across subject and research specialisms; geographical locations; and responsibility levels.

Collectively, much has been delivered in a short space of time and the foundations are in place to ensure full enactment of the Technician Commitment's vision to ensure a culture where technical careers are recognised, respected, supported, developed and aspired to as professional careers in higher education and research institutes.

Acknowledgements