

Inception to Impact

Seven Years of the Technician Commitment



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Foreword

Lord Sainsbury of Turville, settlor of Gatsby Charitable Foundation



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Since its inception in 2017, my charitable foundation, Gatsby, has been proud to support the Technician Commitment. In that time, its impact on the technical workforce in our research institutions and universities has been remarkable.

The initiative has triggered real cultural change throughout the higher education and research sectors, and you will read much about the Commitment's achievements throughout this report. Training aimed at technicians is now more commonplace and is frequently oversubscribed when offered nationally. Professional registration for technicians is now more accepted as an equivalency to traditional qualifications in job applications, and many institutes cover the cost of professional registration for their technical staff. A range of learned societies and professional bodies, including the Royal Institution and the Royal Society, have also established partnerships with the Technician Commitment.

The wider sector's support of the Technician Commitment has played a powerful role in securing many millions of pounds of additional funding to support the technician community, including the substantial support from Research England to establish the UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy (ITSS). The creation of the ITSS has allowed for a permanent and appropriate home for the Technician Commitment and Gatsby is proud to continue to provide support and partnership during this transition.

'For the sector, by the sector' is the ethos of the Technician Commitment and it has been critical to its success. The framework has enabled the voices of technicians to be heard during years of competing priorities for universities and research institutes. It has also been much more than just a 'talking shop' – it has delivered demonstrable and meaningful change in universities and research institutes across the country. I am confident that the passionate and committed team within the ITSS will carry that ethos on into this next exciting phase for the Technician Commitment.



GATSBY



Introduction

The emergence and subsequent momentum of the Technician Commitment, coupled with a shift in focus across the sector towards enhancing research culture have initiated a transformative journey for the technical community.

Since its inception, the Technician Commitment has gained support from over 120 signatory and supporter institutions, heralding significant inward investment into the community from these organisations. The Technician Commitment has seen many institutions offering fresh financial resources and in-kind assistance to foster the development and implementation of Technician Commitment related activities.

Notably, the initiative has catalysed a cultural shift within higher education and research institutions across the UK, while also leveraging substantial external funding, amounting to millions of pounds, to bolster support for the technical community through alternative channels and grants.

In tandem with this progress, the Technician Commitment has forged partnerships and engaged with a diverse array of learned societies and professional bodies, thereby elevating the profile of, and providing support to, the technical community. In collaboration with the Research England funded TALENT programme, and the newly established UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy, the Technician Commitment has positioned itself as a source of expertise on technical roles within higher education.

This status has been reinforced through the publication of 'hot topic' reports and policy advocacy with governmental bodies and organisations such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the Russell Group, the Royal Society of Chemistry, Wellcome, the Institute of Physics and the Royal Society amongst others.

While the tangible change in culture is undeniable, it is acknowledged that there is still a need for continued and sustained advocacy and action to further support, develop, and advocate for this indispensable workforce within higher education and research.

Background

In May 2017, the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, together with support from the Science Council launched the Technician Commitment. The Technician Commitment is a university and research institute initiative, led by a steering board of sector bodies. It aims to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability of 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.

The Technician Commitment has four key pillars that aim to help universities and research institutes initiate and drive positive practice to ensure that their technical communities experience increased *visibility; recognition; career development and sustainability*. A fifth pillar, *evaluating impact*, takes the form of an institutional self-assessment and action plan; an evaluation process co-created with the sector to ensure that signatory institutions can drive and monitor progress against each of the key themes. Signatory institutions nominate a lead to take the Commitment forward on behalf of the institution and are supported with a dedicated online resource and national events where they can share experiences and best practice.

Two fundamental aspects that the Technician Commitment require are: 1) sign-off by institutional leadership to encourage senior level endorsement and full organisational support and 2) the nomination of an institutional lead. Historically, perhaps due to the diverse nature of their skills and the depth and breadth of the technician community, a technical lead rarely existed at an institutional level. In order to drive change and build a national community of practice in this area, the nomination of an institutional lead by each signatory was seen to be key. In Spring 2024, the Technician Commitment stood at over 120 signatory and supporter institutions.

Since its inception, the Technician Commitment has unlocked significant inward investment into the technical 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 sector organisations, including funders, learned societies, professional bodies and unions to raise the profile of, engage and support the technical community.

The Technician Commitment has a collaborative ethos of **“by the sector, for the sector”**. In many ways, it is a culture change initiative, and its work aligns well with the recent sector focus and activities on what has been termed ‘research culture’. In 2017, although not widely recognised as a term, the higher education and research sector began to discuss the concept of research culture. The Royal Society spearheaded a series of workshops and events during that year, culminating in the publication of “Research culture: embedding inclusive excellence” in 2018¹. This publication defined research culture as “encompassing the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes, and norms within research communities, shaping researchers’ career trajectories and influencing the conduct and communication of research”.

This report revealed that many of the challenges affecting technical staff, as emphasised during the development and introduction of the Technician Commitment, were also prevalent among other staff groups within the higher education and research ecosystem. This highlighted the necessity of the Technician Commitment, which aims to promote and support universities and research institutes in their efforts to empower technicians, recognising their pivotal role in shaping the working culture within the sector. It also emphasised the urgency of improving the working environment for technical staff, aligning with the Technician Commitment’s core principles.

Driving Culture Change



Through research and insights

Since its inception, the Technician Commitment has released numerous collaborative sector reports addressing various aspects of the technician's role in higher education and research. Among these reports, one explored the vital role technicians play in supporting student mental health and wellbeing. It concluded that while technicians actively contribute to student support, their contributions often go unnoticed, resulting in inadequate training and development opportunities in this domain².

Another report examined equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within the technician workforce in UK higher education. Through secondary analysis of HESA data, the report provided insights into the demographics of the technician workforce and argued that EDI initiatives have primarily focused on the academic community, neglecting the technical workforce. The report called for increased awareness, enhanced data collection, and targeted interventions to address EDI challenges within the technical community. It highlighted issues such as the absence of senior women technical leaders, an aging technician population, and underrepresentation of technicians from minority ethnic backgrounds³.

Further sector reports have covered diverse topics such as funding mechanisms for technical staff, research culture, the impact of COVID-19 on the technical community across higher education and research, and the contributions technical staff make to knowledge exchange and health and safety.

Through profile raising initiatives

The Technician Commitment has sought to raise the profile of the technical community across higher education and research through a range of sector partnerships. In 2019, the Technician Commitment and Times Higher Education teamed up to create a brand new category for the Times Higher Education (THE) Awards, the 'Outstanding Technician of the Year'. Not only did this provide an opportunity to celebrate the skills and expertise of technicians across the country, it also ensured that technical skills and roles were celebrated alongside other eminent categories, putting them on a par with other roles in the sector.

The Technician Commitment has also joined forces with the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, offering technical staff from participating institutions the opportunity to contribute their expertise in facilitating the practical aspects of the lectures.

Past THE Award winners:

Barbara Kunz,
The Open University (2019)
John Waters,
University of Liverpool (2020)
Andrew Filby,
Newcastle University (2021)
Hong Lin,
University of Reading (2022)
Jason Daff,
University of York (2023)

Renowned as highly respected science presentations specifically tailored for young audiences, the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures bring scientific exploration to life every year. These engaging demonstrations serve to both entertain and educate viewers of all ages. They were established by the scientist Michael Faraday in 1825, who began his career as a technician.



Through influence and policy

As the Technician Commitment gathered momentum across the sector, the initiative gained the attention of the UK government. In January 2020, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the largest funder of research in the UK, joined as a signatory of the Technician Commitment. This signalled an expectation for research organisations receiving UKRI investment to acknowledge and value their technical workforce.

The Technician Commitment began to evolve a policy dimension, collaborating with policymakers in learned societies and utilising evidence from its research and sector reports. Initial policy work focused on post-Brexit immigration reforms to facilitate the recruitment of technical staff from the EU and beyond. Collaborating with various stakeholders, the initiative supported lowering the salary threshold for a skilled worker visa and advocating for the inclusion of the laboratory technician role on the shortage occupation list (SOL)⁴.

In July 2020, the UK government published its Research and Development (R&D) Roadmap⁵, aiming to revitalise the nation's entire science, research and innovation system. It emphasised the importance of the technical community, stating that their role in research and innovation has historically been undervalued but is now beginning to change, and cited the Technician Commitment.

A significant aspect of the R&D Roadmap is the People and Culture Strategy, released in July 2021, which focuses on three overarching areas: People, Culture and Talent⁶. This strategy included actions and planned activities that encompassed technical staff.

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) unveiled their Technician Commitment action plan in February 2021⁷. This, along with the launch of the UK government's R&D roadmap and the action plan from the UK's largest funding body, signalled a shift in how technical staff in higher education and research were considered in policymaking and funder strategies. Until this point, technicians, despite their vital role, had lacked visibility in policy discussions and documents.

The Technician Commitment has influenced policy pertaining to technical skills, roles and careers, and continues to advocate for the technical profession through the policy arm of the new UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy.



Through leveraging funding for innovative interventions

The Technician Commitment marked the inception of a transformative culture shift within the higher education and research sector for technical professionals. Through its expanding network of supporters and signatories, the initiative has fostered an environment conducive to collaborative efforts between funders and institutions. Together, they aimed to devise interventions addressing the key challenges identified by the initiative: visibility, recognition, career development, and sustainability.

In 2020, Research England and its partners announced a significant investment totalling £4.9 million towards a ground-breaking programme known as TALENT. This transformative initiative, awarded to the Midlands Innovation consortium of universities, spans from March 2020 to February 2025.

TALENT is designed to elevate the status and opportunities available to the technical community within higher education and research. It is achieving this through the implementation of novel research endeavours and practical interventions across three primary workstreams.

Firstly, TALENT published a strategic examination of the technical workforce through a national policy commission, providing valuable insights into its composition and needs⁸. Secondly, the programme has piloted five culture change interventions regionally, aiming to instigate tangible shifts in the working environment. Lastly, TALENT offers a tailored suite of technical training and development opportunities for the technical workforce, initially developed and tested at a regional level before nationwide implementation.

TALENT's national policy commission made a series of recommendations to the sector. One of these was for the creation of a new collaborative entity, to be called the UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy, that would build on the multi-stakeholder approach of the Technician Commitment, to represent and provide a conduit to the technical community, advising government, sector initiatives, funding bodies and other organisations. The new UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy was established in August 2023, with funding totalling £5.5 million from Research England, the Gatsby Charitable Foundation and partners.





Progress and Impact

Our community of signatory organisations

It has been a dynamic period of positive change for the Technician Commitment signatory community. Technician Commitment founding signatory organisations were invited to submit case studies detailing the progress and impact of the Technician Commitment within their institutions since its establishment in 2017.

In their own words, these case studies provide valuable insights into the journey of implementing and embracing the Technician Commitment's principles and objectives. From showcasing innovative strategies to highlighting tangible impacts on technical staff and the wider research and teaching community, these case studies offer an insight into the progress made and the transformative power of valuing technical expertise within higher education and research institutes.



Case studies – Visibility



University of Cambridge

The University of Cambridge has at least 1,300 technical staff spread over more than 150 departments. This dispersal combined with historic inertia means we have some unique challenges when it comes to implementing the Technician Commitment and resulting actions. It became apparent that many of the issues facing our technical staff were because the workforce was not well understood or visible and therefore had often been overlooked. Additionally, we became aware that despite being a founding member of the Technician Commitment, our technical staff were largely unaware of the initiative, what this might mean and how to be involved. Visibility therefore also included making technical staff aware of our aims and objectives and involving and engaging them.

Our first big step was establishing effective communications and setting up internal social networks and, most crucially a quarterly newsletter that has expanded to technical managers and research assistants and now circulates to 2,700 staff. From these foundations, we can reach technical staff and present them with news, event and training and development opportunities they may not have been aware of previously. Expanding on this, we have also started attending job fairs and outreach events representing purely technical roles. This means that hundreds of people in the local community and colleges are now aware of these roles.

We rely on the newsletter and a local contacts network to obtain volunteers for these events and projects which undoubtedly provide participants with new experiences and skills. One of the largest projects we have carried out is our 'Focus on Technicians'⁹ film project that looks at five diverse technical roles from across the University. We released these on the all-staff network and the first reached 3,500 views within a week. They are also used at other internal and external events and there is growing awareness of our roles both within and externally to the university.

This project was particularly impressive as most participants were volunteers enlisted from the newsletter who were moved to take part because they were aware of the issues facing us and agreed to participate despite being totally out of their comfort zone.



University of Essex

Since 2021, the University of Essex has significantly invested in technician-led projects that have enabled and empowered positive change across the institution. Using a range of internal and external resources, including Research England enhancing research culture funding, the university has funded nearly 80 different projects. Technicians can bid for time buyout, resources to undertake professional development, participate in travel and training events, undertake professional registration or qualifications, or purchase equipment that will improve their working quality of life. The open and responsive nature of the bidding process has empowered technicians to directly request and receive what they need to improve their skills or wider working environment.

Example projects include purchasing specialist diving equipment and training to undertake underwater research projects, international research and knowledge exchange visits, and professional training in specific technical skills.

Monika Steinke, a technician in the Department of Psychology, says:

“Financial support enabled my travel and time buyout so I could volunteer at the London Science Museum’s ‘Technicians: The David Sainsbury Gallery’. Using my knowledge to inspire young adults was very rewarding, and I connected with many other technician volunteers.”

Gregor Grant, technical manager in the School of Life Sciences, says:

“I received support to visit the University of Konstanz. It was fascinating to share best practices and to tour their state-of-the-art facilities. I’ve since had ongoing discussions with them on maintaining research infrastructure.”

Essex has funded a full-time Technician Commitment technical manager since 2023 to support wider Technician Commitment-related activities. Further funding has also enabled wider networking opportunities across the Eastern Arc universities (Essex, Kent, Sussex and University of East Anglia) with the inaugural (and technician-led) Eastern Arc Technician Network conference hosted at Essex in July 2023.



John Innes Centre

At the core of the John Innes Centre (JIC) lies a commitment to inclusivity and accessibility in science, a journey shaped by its role as a founding signatory of the Technician Commitment. Among the pillars of this commitment, JIC's emphasis on visibility stands out, reflecting its genuine efforts to make science a welcoming space for all.

A notable change has been the expansion of our Annual Science Meeting (ASM) to include an additional day devoted to accessible science talks. This move symbolises our desire to break down barriers and invite everyone, regardless of their role, to engage in scientific conversations. Our technical research and support staff led the organisation of an Accessible Science Day, overseeing event planning, coordination, promotion, and session moderation.

They also ensured diverse representation by facilitating presentations from various members, including technical support staff, students, post doctoral researchers, and group leaders.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to rethink how we connect, but it also sparked creativity. We moved our accessible science event online during this period, opening not just to our community but to schools as well. The enthusiasm from schools highlighted a clear demand for students to experience a conference environment, explore science roles, and ignite curiosity about science happening around them.

The impact has been remarkable, with our event experiencing consistent growth over the years, both in person and online. In 2023, we collaborated with neighbouring institutes — The Sainsbury Laboratory, Earlham Institute, and the Quadram Institute— to secure a Technician Commitment Collaboration Fund award. This expanded our reach, welcoming 166 staff from the four institutes in person, and strengthening bonds across our scientific community, with a further 200 individuals joining online from schools, universities and JIC Alumni.

This year, technical staff from biotech companies located on the Norwich Research Park will also be invited, further expanding networks, opportunities, and fostering connections for our staff.

Keele University

Since becoming a founding signatory in 2017 and establishing the Keele Technician Commitment Steering Group in 2018, one of our initial actions was to create a Technician Hub/Network. This hub aims to foster a collaborative community among technical staff, promoting visibility, shared learning, and mutual support. They determined the success measures would be:

- Bi-monthly meetings held across the university.
- Increased sharing of practice and resources.

2018-2020

To work toward this action, the Steering Group created a digital space for technicians to communicate and raise awareness of skills across the institution. This was created via Microsoft Teams and 71% of the technical community are now members with 10 thematic channels allowing discussion relating to specific projects, networking events, and much more.

During this period, seven Technician Network Hub events were held with a total of 121 attendances in the areas of Anatomy, Geography, Geology, Medical School, and Chemistry.

The steering group also hosted an Erasmus+ event supporting 16 visiting technicians from Eastern European countries to enable the sharing of teaching and research best practice.

2020-2023

Following the success of the previous Network Hub events, this action was carried into the 2020-2023 action plan. Over the last three years we have continued to facilitate Network Hub events, where technical staff from across the university host events showcasing their technical specialisms, equipment and working spaces. During this time, there has been a total of 14 Networking Hub events with a total of 288 attendances. Events have increased the sharing of good practice, equipment and resources.





The Campus Champion Networks:

- Give technicians a voice to build the visibility and impact of technicians with senior academic leadership.
- Empower technical staff from different disciplines to engage, interact, exchange knowledge, and challenge each other.
- Provide an informal space to share concerns and information outside of formal routes.
- Build a thriving community of technical staff and enhance health and wellbeing.
- Break down barriers associated with seniority and provide alternative perspectives.

King's College London

Background:

King's College London (KCL) has over 500 technicians spread over multiple campuses. The community is fragmented due to alignments with academic governance structures, limiting the potential for value creation between technicians.

Objective:

The technical leadership wanted to build local connections for all technical staff, to create a thriving staff environment and to promote process improvement, networking, wellbeing, and enhanced career development outcomes. The networks aim to enhance the visibility of contributions by technical staff across KCL. In 2021, Campus Technical Champions, volunteers from all disciplines and seniorities, were empowered to conceptualise and deliver a series of events to support the technical community.

Impact:

The perceived lack of benefits by technicians led to slow engagement, however, the impact of a few motivated individuals was transformational. Champions drove engagement through local promotion, endorsement of senior managers and used feedback to identify technical staff requirements. Local meetings enabled technical staff with high workloads to attend and as the community grew, the benefits spread quickly to increase participation.

The Campus Technical Champion Networks have increased the visibility and impact of technical staff across the organisation. Over 20 events have resulted in more than 600 interactions with technical staff, focusing on sustainability, facility management, wellbeing, and career development. Highlights include an inspiring discussion on embedding training outcomes in roles, and community gardening. The networks provide the campus Technical Champions an opportunity to build skills and enhance progression opportunities. The impact is recognised institutionally, and the Denmark Hill network received the Sponsor's prize at KCL's 2023 Research Management Awards. This recognises a team that have done something exceptional to advance the vision for a world-leading research environment. The success and impact of the Campus Champion groups has led to increased organisational support and a commitment to grow the networks across all KCL campuses.

Lancaster University

Since signing the Technician Commitment as a founding member in 2017, technicians at Lancaster University continue to experience significant beneficial impacts of the Technician Commitment.

From the beginning, technicians have had the chance to contribute to the development and implementation of our action plan. This opportunity to influence priorities has led to the unintentional, but welcome, outcome of giving the technician cohort a sense of power, direction and purpose in the university, especially for those who may previously have felt disenfranchised or siloed.

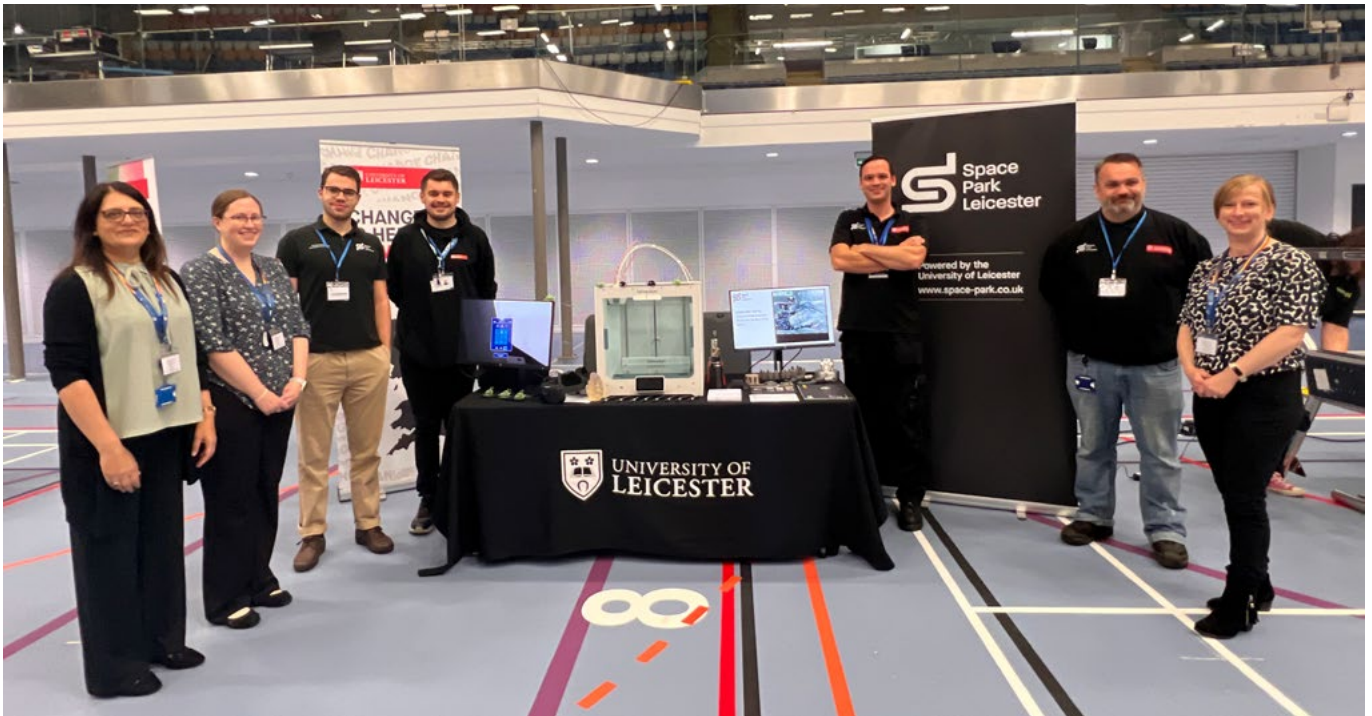
The initial work done on identifying exactly who technicians are within Lancaster University has benefited the workforce in several ways. The creation of a technician mailing list and a technician Microsoft Teams site has enabled communications to be targeted directly at the technician audience and has increased engagement with events and training opportunities. Additionally, there is now greater collaboration between technicians from different areas of the university who are now able to identify and network with each other.

The work of the Steering Group aims to raise the profile of technicians. For example, the development of the Lancaster Technicians webpage and the Technicians Career Framework project, has fostered greater understanding of the diverse skills and capabilities of the technical workforce in the wider university and has highlighted the value of our work to all aspects of university business. Technicians now have a place on decision making committees at all levels of the university. Having a technician voice on large strategic projects is not only accepted as necessary, but desired, and has become the norm. Technicians have had the opportunity to influence important projects such as the Curriculum Transformation Project, the Research Culture Project, Athena Swan Implementation Group and in all instances, project managers and leaders have proactively sought to include technicians.

Lancaster now has technical staff winners in award categories such as ‘Outstanding Contribution’ and ‘Apprentice of the Year’ which is evidence of the esteem our technical colleagues now hold. We recognised the need to develop and update essential technical skills, and this led to the creation of a dedicated Technician Training Fund in the Faculty of Science and Technology.

There is still work to do, however, institutional support to date has led to a marked improvement in the opportunities available to technicians and the value placed on their work by the wider university community.





University of Leicester

As a founding signatory of the Technician Commitment, the University of Leicester has made significant progress in enhancing the visibility of its technicians. Leicester has engaged in initiatives such as the TALENT roadshows, facilitating sessions on outreach, showcasing TALENT-funded Leicester technicians, and information sessions to senior leaders have been key activities over the last seven years that have significantly enhanced the visibility of technicians.

Introducing a regular annual conference for technical staff in 2018 provides a valuable platform for information sharing, idea development, networking and facilitating training opportunities. Additional dedicated feedback sessions enable the breadth of technical roles and voices to be reflected and facilitate future planning of events.

Recognising that further progress on the Technician Commitment needed dedicated support and focus through a strategic lead role, Leicester appointed a Head of Technical Services Development and Strategy in 2023. This role leads on the implementation of the TALENT Commission report recommendations. Direct engagement with various stakeholders, including the University of Leicester's Executive Board, regarding progress and future ambitions has generated active support for technicians across technical, academic, and senior leadership colleagues. The strategic lead ensures a technical voice is heard and included in strategic decisions.

Leicester has a regular 'Meet the Technician' feature in 'The Citizen' an internal mechanism for distributing news, views and events to University staff. Technicians are now included in key university committees, giving a voice at all levels throughout the institution. Leadership of and participation in external outreach activities (e.g., TechxFest) ensure recognition of technical staff beyond Leicester and the HE sector.

These activities, the strategic lead appointment, and senior leadership backing have and will continue to improve technician visibility. They are also vital to facilitating positive culture change that will enhance career development and sustainability of technical staff, not only at Leicester but across the sector.



Loughborough University

Loughborough University has demonstrated a strong commitment to enhancing the visibility and recognition of its technicians through various initiatives under the Technician Commitment. One of the main pillars is visibility and when Loughborough University signed originally, it was important to understand what visibility meant to our technicians. After consulting with our technicians, increased visibility was having a voice, whether that was around technical areas, teaching, research or wider university projects and themes. Technicians felt invisible.

Analysis of university decision making committees and groups demonstrated that technical colleagues were not being represented and without representation technical colleagues were not able to contribute or be seen. One of the main disadvantages of exclusion from these groups was that technical colleagues were siloed and left unaware of the wider university vision or ambitions, some of which they may have expertise or experience in to add value.

Fast forward to now. After talking to senior leaders about the benefits of inclusion of technical colleagues, there is representation for technicians on all main university groups and committees. This work has driven the need for technical visibility and voice on all strategic projects ensuring that technicians are consulted. The inclusion of technical colleagues on working groups, and strategic projects embeds technical visibility into the university leadership.

This step change from little visibility of technical colleagues to complete inclusion means that it has become normalised to include technical colleagues as stakeholders or members of strategic groups automatically.

On top of this, Loughborough University has implemented measures to ensure that technicians are included in institutional communications and recognition schemes. This involves featuring technicians in newsletters, websites, and social media channels to celebrate their accomplishments and promote their visibility within the university community. Additionally, the university has established awards specifically for technicians, acknowledging their amazing contribution.



University of the West of England

With the emergence of new technician roles across the wider organisation and in response to continuous feedback from healthcare students pre- and post-placements across a wide range of healthcare programmes, the concept for the creation of a third space environment was explored and co-designed. The Clinical Skills Lounge (CSL) and the support provided by the technicians resonates with Whitchurch's (2012) exploration of hybrid practitioners who worked across different (third) spaces, such as the skills and competencies required by students, but also provided the underpinning theory and holistic support.

Feedback from students that was captured during quality improvement cycles and via module/programme evaluations, highlighted positive interactions with technicians during simulation and practical sessions and the request for a space outside of the timetabled curricula where clinical skills could be practised.

The use of third-space learning environments, through the creation of a dedicated CSL and the provision of support through the Healthcare technician team has provided an opportunity to re-evaluate approaches to learning and assessment and promoted greater confidence in our students. This work has also supported the university's response and implementation of the Technician Commitment, promoting greater career development opportunities, and programme-level visibility and further encouraging skills mix within programme teams.

To date, the CSL has provided support for students to practice their clinical skills ahead of or following placements and also during their theoretical blocks across the university. Typical feedback received from students who have used the CSL includes a reduction in anxiety ahead of a clinical assessment (OSCE) and greater confidence with key skills before placement.

The University of the West of England, Bristol has been one of the founding members of the Technician Commitment since 2017 and has progressed different types of roles, visibility, identity and opportunities for technicians across many subject disciplines, including Healthcare, Science, Engineering and the Creative Arts.



Case studies – Recognition

University of Exeter

The University of Exeter has been a signatory of the Technician Commitment since its inception. Through our action plans over the last seven years, we have taken great strides in improving the visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability of technical careers. This means that we recognise the institutional importance of the technical community which has led directly to investments in strategic technical leadership, such as with the recent appointment of a Director of Technical Strategy and Operations, and the development of a University Technical Strategy (Exe-Tech Strategy 2030: Innovation, Sustain, Nurture).

This strategy was built on the foundations and successes of the technical staff whose profile was raised through the Technician Commitment and the action plans, with two key focuses: 1) making improvements in research culture and 2) recognising attributions.



Notably, the Technician Commitment Working Group led a benchmarking exercise after the publication of the Midlands Innovation (MI) TALENT report, 'Research Culture: A Technician's Lens' to identify which recommendations should be prioritised. The outcome of this was our own report, *Research Culture: An Exeter Technician's Lens*. It has allowed Exeter to focus on tackling key issues such as accurately recognising technicians' work, providing clearly defined career pathways, and ensuring technicians' appropriate inclusion in research culture improvement initiatives.

This has directly resulted in the publication of our first dedicated Attribution Policy. This policy clearly defines expectations on appropriate and fair attributions to all contributors to research and provides examples. Using improved awareness and recognition as a result of the publication of this policy, we will improve our tracking and data collection of named outputs by technical staff so we can measure success.

The culmination of all this work has been drawn into Exe-Tech Strategy as one of the institution's key enabling strategies which will expand the work of the Technician Commitment to support a broader community of experts to see fulfilling and engaging technical careers.



Institute of Cancer Research

There are 450 highly skilled technical staff who play a crucial part in research achievements at the Institute of Cancer Research (ICR) and make the discoveries that defeat cancer. Before becoming signatories of the Technician Commitment in 2017, ICR already had a strong Scientific Officers Association (SOA) dedicated to supporting fellow technical staff, especially the lab-based scientific officer (SO) grades who are the majority of our technicians.

Signing the Technician Commitment and pledging, at an institutional level, to meet the best-practice standards supporting the careers of technicians, has enabled the ICR to fully support our SOA in enhancing and expanding their existing initiatives. These have an impact beyond the SO grades and are too considerable to list here but we will gratefully take the opportunity to feature a couple:

The SOA organised a Technical Conference showcasing the breadth and innovation of SO work and is now in its 11th year, with attendance increasing annually. Best speaker and best poster awards were introduced in 2017, and in 2022 two further awards were launched for 'Outstanding Science', nominated by Team Leaders, and 'Outstanding Contribution to Community'. Announcing and promoting these allows the ICR to further celebrate our technicians' achievements and their input into our research culture.

The Professional Registration programme, promoted and funded by the Scientific Officer Association, is now entering its third year. Participants are supported by events and a mentoring scheme, for which ICR Technicians reached out to partner institutions for input.

The programme will be enhanced over the next 36 months, with additional individuals funded by a Wellcome Research Culture grant, on which the SOA chair is a named grant holder. This grant will also fund delivery of two, cross-institutional Technical Career Development programmes, and the pilot Laboratory Technical Apprenticeship scheme, which has recruited eight Level 3 apprentices and aims to support and develop them towards technician careers. Technician voice, has and continues to feed into these programmes, which will equip individuals to grow into roles with management and leadership responsibilities and benefit research institutions across the sector.



University of York

When technicians at the University of York were asked what recognition at work meant for them, they often responded with phrases such as verbal praise, acknowledgement of a job well done, a small token of appreciation. In a bid to professionalise technical careers, the Technician Commitment had a greater ambition for recognition with professional registration and national awards. The Technician Commitment pledged support for technicians initiating two schemes for external awards, Papin Prizes and the Times Higher Education (THE) Awards' 'Outstanding Technician of the Year'.

These awards have given technicians employed at universities or research institutions the chance to apply for awards with kudos, which are on a par with long standing awards that our historic professional bodies such as the Royal Society of Biology, Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Physics (IOP) have awarded to academic colleagues for decades.

From our first action plan we identified recognition as a straightforward route to create engagement and achieve direct impact of the Technician Commitment for individual technicians, with the names of our technicians 'in lights,' celebrating their achievements.

We have had remarkable success with external awards, a true illustration of the high calibre technical community employed at York. Ian Helliwell won the inaugural Institute of Physics Technician of the Year in 2019; Bob Hide won the Papin Prize Lifetime Achievement Award in 2021; Jason Daff was awarded THE's 'Outstanding Technician of the Year' in 2023. None of the award winners thought they were remotely worthy of submission, as is the case with so many of our technicians.

Apart from attending a celebratory event, winning an award has a significant impact on the individual and their colleagues for a prolonged period. Awards bring a revitalised enthusiasm to everyday work, helping to professionalise technical careers. All our award winners have been invited to talk about their careers to the technical community, at conferences, and through outreach activities to inspire future generations.



Newcastle University

Seven years ago, Newcastle University took a significant step by signing the Technician Commitment, a move that has enhanced the visibility and recognition of its technicians. This has been a catalyst for change, transforming the support landscape for technical staff through increased visibility, recognition, development opportunities and sustaining of technical careers.

Technicians at Newcastle University have proven themselves to be indispensable to both research and teaching. Their involvement has sparked innovation and creativity across the university, working in collaboration with academics, students, and industry partners. With their specialist skills and expertise, technicians have contributed significantly to the university's research excellence, knowledge transfer, and real-world impact.

Their essential role goes beyond simple assistance; technicians have become integral to the university's achievements. For instance, their contributions have been recognised through prestigious awards like the Times Higher Education (THE) Awards' 'Outstanding Technician of the Year' and the Papin Prize at the UK Higher Education Technician Summit as well as some being members of UKRI panels. Furthermore, technicians have been instrumental in securing research council equipment grants.

A collaborative team of technical and organisational development specialists from Newcastle University delivered the Technician Partnership Conference in 2022. This event drew over 300 attendees from 22 universities and sparked a subsequent initiative to create a Yearbook of Technical Expertise within Newcastle University. This publication, a first of its kind within the organisation, documented over 80 technical specialist facilities, making them clearly visible and accessible to all.

In summary, signing the Technician Commitment has not only elevated the status of technicians within Newcastle University but has also showcased their critical contributions. This initiative has successfully shifted perceptions, recognising technicians as valuable, respected, and indispensable members of the university community. Their achievements and the recognition they have earned are a testament to the impact of the Technician Commitment over the past seven years.

Case studies

– Career Development

University of Bristol

The Technician Commitment has underpinned a transformation change across the University of Bristol's technical community in so many ways. Technicians have a significantly greater voice and positive influence in the delivery of our organisations' aims and a clearer identity and far greater recognition than was ever the case.

The most significant shift has been achieved through the creation and adoption of a Technical Career Framework.

We have been able to establish a technical specialist/expert pathway, recognising the specialist roles that many of our technicians fulfil and providing real career choices for staff to progress beyond what was once a 'glass ceiling'. People performing these roles are critical to our operations, whether enabling our teaching, research or core facilities. Technical roles are now a first choice for many who may have in the past had to look elsewhere for a fulfilling career.

The career framework has also helped us to identify and create critical leadership roles and relationships, for example Faculty Technical Managers and School Technical Managers who are connected, engaged and influential in making things work well. Our technicians now have clear professional line management, whether internally or externally funded.

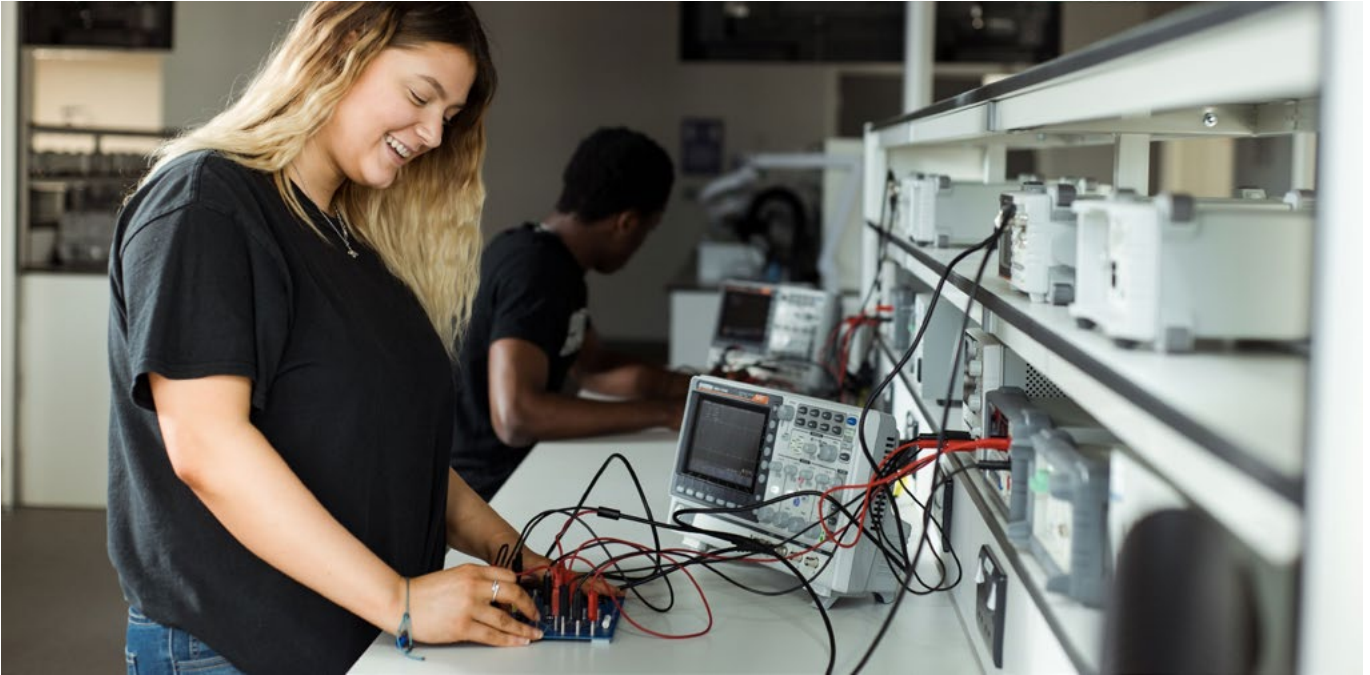


Our faculty technical leads are now 'at the table' and working with other senior managers to influence and shape the way we deliver our teaching and research activities.

Our career framework also underpins personal career development, where all roles and competencies are visible through the 'technical role types information toolkit'.

Not least, the framework also identifies clear entry routes into technical careers and includes Technical Apprentice roles, helping us meet our future skills needs and increasing the diversity of our technical staff population.

Engagement with the Technician Commitment enables us to share our ideas and experience and to learn from the good work of others. We are now part of a technical community right across the UK and beyond.



Canterbury Christ Church University

In our efforts to foster the technical community at Canterbury Christ Church, we are proud to highlight some advancements and developments.

Expanding our technical team from 37 roles in 2018 to 45.5 in 2024, highlights not only our commitment to recognising their invaluable contributions, but also increased technical capabilities across the institution. Our recognition programmes ensure that we celebrate the expertise, dedication and achievements of our technical staff, guaranteeing that their efforts are duly acknowledged and appreciated.

Helping our technical team advance in their careers and develop personally is a key part of our commitment. In 2018, there were no standardised job descriptions and requests for higher graded technical roles were often met with multiple questions and often queries of whether the jobs requested at higher pay grades should be academic.

Through a career framework exercise and creation of technical job descriptions across the pay scales on management and technical expertise pathways we have opened the door to progression and recognition of technical skills within the existing workforce. This has led to significant progression within the team. From 34 technicians at a Grade D level in 2018, we now have 18.5, indicating upward mobility and role diversification. However, we have not finished, and we are currently working on a transparent progression process for longstanding technicians based on technical skill development. We are also creating material to help staff to understand where to direct their personal development if they would like to progress on technical or management roles.

Moving forward, we remain dedicated to fostering a culture where recognition, empowerment, support, and opportunity are not just ideals but tangible realities for every member of our technical team. Together, we will continue to build a community where technical excellence thrives, innovation flourishes, and every technician is encouraged to reach their true potential.



Cranfield University

Cranfield University demonstrates its commitment to the career development at all levels of its technical staff through supporting and encouraging participation in a range of personal and professional development activities. These activities align to the revised career pathway for technical staff which was launched in 2022 with pay grades for technicians now extending to professorial equivalent.

Increasing levels of recruitment of apprentice technicians since 2017 (23 currently in post) and more recently, piloting a Science T Level placement in 2024, illustrates our sustainable approach to our early career technical talent pipeline. Through a range of higher and degree level apprenticeships (e.g. Senior Leader, Post-graduate Engineer), mid-career and senior technicians have been supported to continue their development to support their career trajectories.

Over 120 places have been taken by Cranfield technicians on TALENT-run workshops since 2020. Our technicians have participated in a range of TALENT programmes such as the Technical Career Coaching Programme, with aspiring technical leaders enrolled on Leadership Programmes such as Preparing for Technical Management and Leadership and the newly launched Executive Programme in Strategic Technical Leadership. A key priority for both technical development and our EDI objectives has been supporting women in technical roles through attendance on programmes such as Women as Leaders and the Herschel Programme for Women in Technical Leadership and this continues to gain momentum.

The development opportunities have had an impact on the careers of technicians, with several technicians progressing through the revised career pathway.

Natalia Gregorek, IT support specialist who attended the Technical Career Mentoring Programme in 2022 said:

“The programme’s guidance and support enabled me to propel my career towards my long-held dream of working in IT leadership. I transformed from a self-doubting individual into a mentor, inspiring my team members to invest in their own career growth. I have successfully transitioned from a disorganised individual to a well-managed professional, efficiently balancing my workload while dedicating time to personal projects and continuous skills development.”



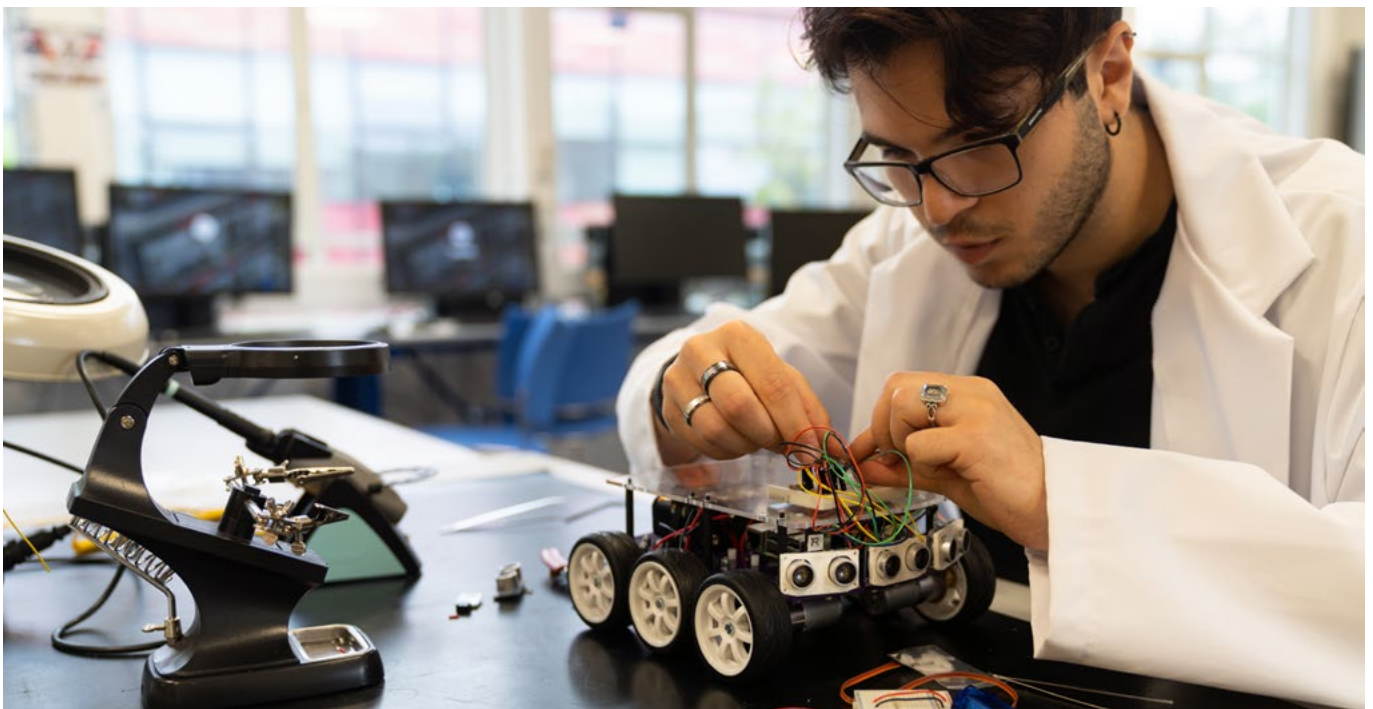
University of Hertfordshire

Through the Technician Commitment, the University of Hertfordshire (UH) was able to successfully implement two new career progression pathways for technical staff members. Ideas and strategies on implementation of career pathways were gained from discussions with representatives from universities across the UK at Technician Commitment conferences. This networking allowed the Technician Commitment lead from UH to get an idea of how other institutions were planning on implementing change. Once a best practice was formulated, the Technician Commitment team worked with HR to formalise two non-managerial pathways. These include the technical specialism and technical teaching routes.

The technical specialism pathway has allowed technical staff to progress up to two grades through deep technical knowledge and insight into a given specialism or process. This approach has allowed us to retain our top technical staff who would have otherwise left due to career stagnation, a problem which plagues many universities. This pathway also allows us to invest more confidently in technically complex equipment. In previous years it was not uncommon for technical staff be trained to a high standard on equipment only to leave for an employer who would pay more. This has greatly reduced, given the access technical staff now have to higher grades.

The technical teaching pathways formally allow technical staff to teach aspects of practical modules to students with no need for a secondary contract. While this approach has aided in staff retention, its true benefit has been significant reduction on the use of visiting lecturer contracts. This has saved the institution significant amounts of money by allowing the technical staff to teach the skills that they are passionate about to our students. Our signatory status in the Technician Commitment made this possible. The four pillars of the programme have all had a significant, positive impact on the University of Hertfordshire. In particular, the career development pillar has made a world of change for technical staff.

University of
Hertfordshire **UH**



University of Manchester

One aspect of the University of Manchester's (UoM) Technician Commitment Action Plan was to review support for technical staff career development. The initial approach was to evaluate current available schemes in terms of how they functioned in support of technical staff. The Manchester Gold mentoring programme is a scheme aiming to support staff career development by creating mentoring partnerships. The programme has successfully supported over 1,100 staff since 2016, but with underrepresentation from technical staff. The UoM Technician Commitment Leadership Team (TCLT) recognised the need to apply a technicians' lens to how the programme connected with individuals and ensure that technical staff were fully able to benefit and engage with the programme.

Working with colleagues from the Learning and Development team members of the TCLT were able to change the application form to be more relevant to technical staff, provide introductory workshops specific for technical staff, and update the criteria for mentee:mentor matching to allow technical staff to connect to a technically focused mentor. The changes implemented in 2022 were accompanied by a promotional campaign encouraging *all technical staff, at any grade, and at any stage* of their career to engage with the programme. The combination of the changes and the promotional campaign have had a positive impact, with a significant increase in the number of technical staff registered as both mentors and mentees.

Positive feedback from technical staff.

“I personally participated in the programme for the first time as both mentor and mentee. I found it very rewarding and am now wondering why it took me so long to get involved in the first place.”

“The Manchester Gold Staff career mentoring programme opportunity came at a time where I felt I could use some support, and some inspiration and direction for my career. Whilst on this programme a new position came up in my department. Having a mentor at this time was really beneficial for me as I was able to gain immediate support for applying for this position. Overall, the programme gave me a huge confidence boost, knowing that my career is moving forward. I would recommend this to anyone who feels they could use some support in their role”





University of Surrey

Over the last 3 years, 46 technicians at the University of Surrey have been promoted to or secured a new internal role of a higher grade. There has been a large focus on ensuring that technical colleagues are being supported across the university under the career development pillar of the commitment. This has taken form in several different ways across the university to ensure that technical colleagues are being supported in developing towards their career aspirations.

Across the university, local management have supported a number of technical colleagues with obtaining qualifications in courses that support them within their current role and develop them for the next role in their career. In these situations, the university has supported the courses financially and by enabling suitable time to engage with the learning.

As an example, the university was proud to support four technicians from Physics and Veterinary Medicine through the Herschel Programme for Women in Technical Leadership.

At a faculty level, the Faculty of Engineering & Physical Sciences held events throughout May 2023 for Learning at Work Week and then, alongside the Faculty of Health & Medical Sciences, held events throughout September 2023 for Staff Development Month. The events consisted of a combination of workshops and seminars, focusing on topics such as 'Raising your profile and influencing upwards', 'Sustainability at work', 'Building resilience', 'Personal development and career progression', 'Technical Skills' and many more. Both the faculties saw high attendance with positive feedback from colleagues.

Additionally, our annual Technician Day event gives our technical staff an opportunity to meet other technical colleagues and see what their roles entail as well as increasing their knowledge of the Technician Commitment.

The university is committed to continuing to support the development of its technical staff.

University of Warwick

Job Families, Development Opportunities and Promotional Pathways

As a founding Technician Commitment signatory, the University of Warwick (UoW) Steering Committee was tasked with designing an initial 10-point action plan spanning the breadth of the four pillars of the Technician Commitment and taking onboard feedback from our technical community.

Within the career development pillar, we committed to creating a transparent Technician Job Family framework enabling clear opportunities for progression through to professional-grade equivalent (FA9 at UoW). Rolled out across UoW in 2021, this provided up-to-date generic, job profiles specifically for technical staff. Technical roles were matched to the job family, with an opportunity to review individual roles that did not align to the generic descriptor. This enabled technical staff to see what is expected at each level and what skills and experience they might need to develop to take advantage of opportunities that arise.

To support the Technician Job Family project, our technical staff have benefited from unparalleled access to bespoke learning and development courses, covering specific topics, technical leadership and management, as well as placements and a conference/training fund. Much of this is enabled through the TALENT programme, which UoW secured from Research England alongside our Midlands Innovation partners in 2020, and the EPSRC supported Warwick Analytical Science Centre (WASC), funded by EPSRC. Additionally, we have worked alongside peers and UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) to enhance opportunities for Research Technical Professionals (RTPs). Through supporting our technical staff as principal investigators (PIs) and co-investigators (Cols) on proposals, we have had significant success. At the start of 2024, we have had five different technical PIs over a 15-month period, securing over £4 million of UKRI funding across three research councils.

In 2023, we launched our Technical Specialist Promotional Pathway Pilot¹⁰ that now enables technical specialists to be promoted on individual merit, right up to professor-equivalent, whilst retaining their specialism. The process includes clear guidance, expectations and examples, along with personal support and workshops. The first successful cohort will be announced in summer 2024. To support our talent pipeline into the future, we have created both a Director and Deputy Director of Technical Strategy, with responsibilities from hosting T Level work-placement students, expanding our apprenticeship programmes, to providing new opportunities for technical generalists, specialists and technical management staff.





University College London

The Technical Skills Development Hub

Since signing the Technician Commitment in 2017, UCL established a Technical Staff Project aimed to progress our Technician Commitment action plan. A Technical Managers Group (TMG) and a Technical Staff Project Steering Group was formed to develop strategies and initiatives to improve the visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability of technical professionals at UCL. The term 'Technical Professionals' is used to describe a wide range of roles at UCL, including but not limited to technicians, research professionals, team-science professionals, workshop engineers, research software engineers, data scientists, research nurses, clinical trial managers and informaticians.

Following our University Management Committee's (UMC) endorsement, we established the Technical Skills Development Hub (TSDH) as the organisational home for Technical Professionals providing central support and strategic oversight of technical career development, technical skills management and the attraction and retention of technical talent. The Hub provides a platform for the Technical Managers Group (TMG) to coordinate initiatives between faculties and central departments. Significant achievements since then include:

- Improved training & development offers
- Improved engagement with internal and external stakeholder groups
- Improved communication and networking within the technical professionals community and also the UCL-wide community
- The launch of the 'Technical Professionals Career Framework'

- Development of an appraisal form tailored to technical professionals
- Development of Authorship/Fair attribution guidelines, recognising technical professionals for their research outputs
- An annual technical staff showcase
- Publication of the Technical Staff Survey report and recommendations
- Creation of a 'Technical Professional of the Year Award' at UCL.

The TSDH is now the home for the Technician Commitment at UCL, helping UCL remain an employer of choice for technical professionals by developing strategies to recruit and retain top technical talent and offering fulfilling technical careers.

Case studies

– Sustainability



Aston University

In terms of sustainability of technical staff, Aston University recognises that, without technical staff teaching, research and clinical activities could not be undertaken, in fact, there have been times in the past in which losing the technical staff led to a loss in understanding how to operate complex equipment or how to undertake complex experiments in the laboratory. Therefore, Aston has taken on apprentices (gaining qualifications with Solihull College) to support our technical workforce.

Alongside that Aston, has taken on T Level students from Solihull College and South and City College to introduce 16-18 year old students into the world of technical careers but also to build our pipeline of technical staff as well.

The impact of this has been great as this has enabled the technical staff to share their knowledge and experience with the T Level students and apprentices who have found the experience rewarding so far. This has also allowed our technical staff's knowledge to be appreciated by not only the next generation, but also by the university, which in turn has made our technical staff feel hugely valued. For them, this has allowed the apprentices to gain invaluable experiential knowledge which would be very hard to gain via other traditional means.

For our T Level students, they have gained a better understanding on how a technical member of staff undertakes their role and the impact they make on the scientific community but also the local community as a whole.

We have also seen the impact internationally where we have collaborated with the University College Copenhagen to take on our first international technical placement, which has allowed our technical teams to work with other universities not just within the UK but abroad too, which has been very rewarding for our technical staff.



Newcastle University and University of Northumbria

Technicians launch inter-university collaboration

The merging of technical networks from Northumbria and Newcastle universities is a new initiative bringing together the highly skilled and often very specialised technical communities who provide the vital expertise that underpins our teaching and research.

We know that we are stronger working together, and working together also opens more opportunities for individuals, our universities, the city, and the region. Working together, we can improve the breadth and depth of technical skills for colleagues, improve equipment sharing and expand our capability and capacity to further our institutional goals in teaching and research. It helps us recruit local talent, develop and upskill existing colleagues and retain all that valuable expertise in our regional ecosystem.

In October 2023, we organised a launch event that was attended by almost 200 technical colleagues from both universities. The launch was a first step for each of the institutions' technical communities to find out more about each other and the roles we fulfil in our universities. It was also about looking at the equipment and technical expertise that exists in our two communities, and how we can access them to work more collaboratively and overcome common challenges.

Following the event, we have had a strong demand for setting up special interest groups which draw on the strengths of both academic and professional services colleagues but with a particular focus, e.g. grant application writing support for technicians that will ultimately help both institutions respond to equipment grant calls.

The network also addresses environmental sustainability and demonstrating value for money with strategic equipment purchases. We need to be sure that if we are purchasing a sophisticated piece of equipment, researchers from across the city and in the region can access it or its services so that we are using it to its full capability and capacity.

We have had a fantastic response to the first joint network event, with many suggestions for taking the work forward. We have already agreed to share ideas on developing a Technician Career Pathways model and to work together to provide industrial placements for T Level students in the city.

There is so much potential to be unlocked. Through this network, it is hoped we can really start to raise awareness of the outstanding skills and expertise that exist in our community of technicians and the crucial role they play in the wider R&D landscape.

University of Nottingham

The University of Nottingham has a diverse technical base of the highest quality in terms of skills, knowledge and expertise. Their vision is to ensure that their technical staff are world-class and that the University of Nottingham is the employer of choice for technical talent. They are committed to attracting, developing and retaining the highest-quality technicians.

The University of Nottingham is a proud founding signatory of the Technician Commitment, with the inception of the initiative spearheaded nationally by the University's former Vice-Chancellor Professor Sir David Greenaway. The university of Nottingham's Technician Commitment is led by the Technical Services Managers Committee (TSMC), chaired by Professor Sam Kingman, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the Faculty of Engineering. Under his leadership, the TSMC ensures the delivery of the University of Nottingham's Technician Commitment action plan, with quarterly meetings providing strategic direction and oversight.

The university's Vice-Chancellor Professor Shearer West CBE unveiled the inaugural institutional "Vision for Technical Talent" strategy in December 2018, signalling a significant milestone in the approach to supporting technical staff across the institution. This comprehensive strategy outlined various initiatives undertaken since signing the Technician Commitment, including expanding the Technical Services job family progression pathway to levels 6 and 7, aligning with the university's Research and Teaching (R&T) and Administrative, Professional, and Managerial (APM) job families. Additionally, the introduction of a Technical Skills and Conference Fund ensured support for technical staff in developing their expertise. The University of Nottingham Technician Network continues to foster collaboration and learning opportunities across the institution, while placement opportunities offer technical staff valuable experiences in other academic and research settings nationwide.

To ensure transparency and engagement, the university hosts regular update events, such as the 'Six Month In' and 'One Year In' gatherings, providing colleagues with insights into the progress made by the TSMC and senior leaders.

In 2022, the Vision for Technical Talent was refreshed, to align with the second Technician Commitment self-assessment and action plan submission. Notable achievements include the creation of Faculty Heads of Technical Services roles, continued advocacy for the fair attribution of technical staff in research outputs, the development of 50+ technical staff in securing Advance HE Fellowships in recognition of their teaching expertise, and securing significant funding for initiatives like the EPSRC-funded exploration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in the UK technical community, and leadership and hosting of the Research England funded TALENT Programme and UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy. The university was the first to create an institutional strategic technical lead position, and through a combination of practical initiatives, policy development, and advocacy, continues to demonstrate its commitment to supporting and empowering its technical workforce.

A new Technical Services Innovation Programme launched in 2024, will drive innovative ways of working to further support and develop the university's technical community.



University of Nottingham

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA



The Open University

The Faculty of STEM at The Open University was amongst the first cohort of universities to sign up to the Technician Commitment. We have since been awarded the status of Employer Champion by the Science Council in recognition of valuing our technical staff and actively encourage them in their Continuing Professional Development.

In July 2019, to address technical sustainability, STEM appointed three apprentices to join the Laboratory Technical Team. The Level 3 Laboratory Apprenticeship is a nationally recognised work-based training programme preparing apprentices for a wide range of laboratory-based roles. Their skills are developed primarily at work and supporting training sessions delivered on-site. Completion of the apprenticeship allows the apprentices to become a Registered Science Technician (RSciTech).

The apprenticeship takes two years followed by a consolidation year. Despite the pandemic all three of our first cohort completed their apprenticeship with distinction. We are delighted that one of them subsequently applied for and was successful in securing a permanent role on the team.

To release analysts from some of the basic day-to-day routines which are essential for the smooth running of the laboratories, we submitted a case to engage a second cohort of apprentices. Basic day-to-day tasks are ideal for apprentices to get to know the inner workings of the labs and gain a good understanding of what is needed to maintain a lab. This frees up existing staff capacity, which is partially re-invested in training/mentoring of the apprentices, as well as other activities, such as continuing professional development or additional responsibilities that further career development.

Our apprentices are mentored by technicians with a wealth of experience and knowledge, instilling expected behaviours and work ethic. Health and safety is introduced from day one and soon becomes second nature. We are convinced that this is the way to develop the next generation of laboratory leaders.

Queen's University Belfast

Technician Apprenticeship Programme

Advanced Level Apprenticeships have not been widely adopted by Northern Ireland universities despite being delivered extremely successfully in universities in Great Britain. Due to funding uncertainties, these apprenticeships appeared to be unobtainable to Northern Ireland universities, resulting in a missed opportunity in addressing an aging technical workforce and succession planning gaps.

Discussions between Queen's University and Belfast Metropolitan College to develop a Technician Apprenticeship Programme began in February 2020, but the pandemic temporarily halted plans. When conversations resumed in 2022, challenges were addressed, specifically the perception that Queen's, as a public body, was unable to pursue Advanced Level Apprenticeships. Confirmation in February 2023 clarified Queen's eligibility for AppsNI funding as a non-profit institution, followed by the welcome introduction of all-age apprenticeships in September 2023.

In November 2022, a Technician Apprenticeship Programme at Queen's was approved by the University Management Board, resulting in successful recruitment for nine positions, across Engineering & Physical Sciences and Medicine, Health & Life Sciences. Additionally, Information Services recruited five Level 3 apprentices.

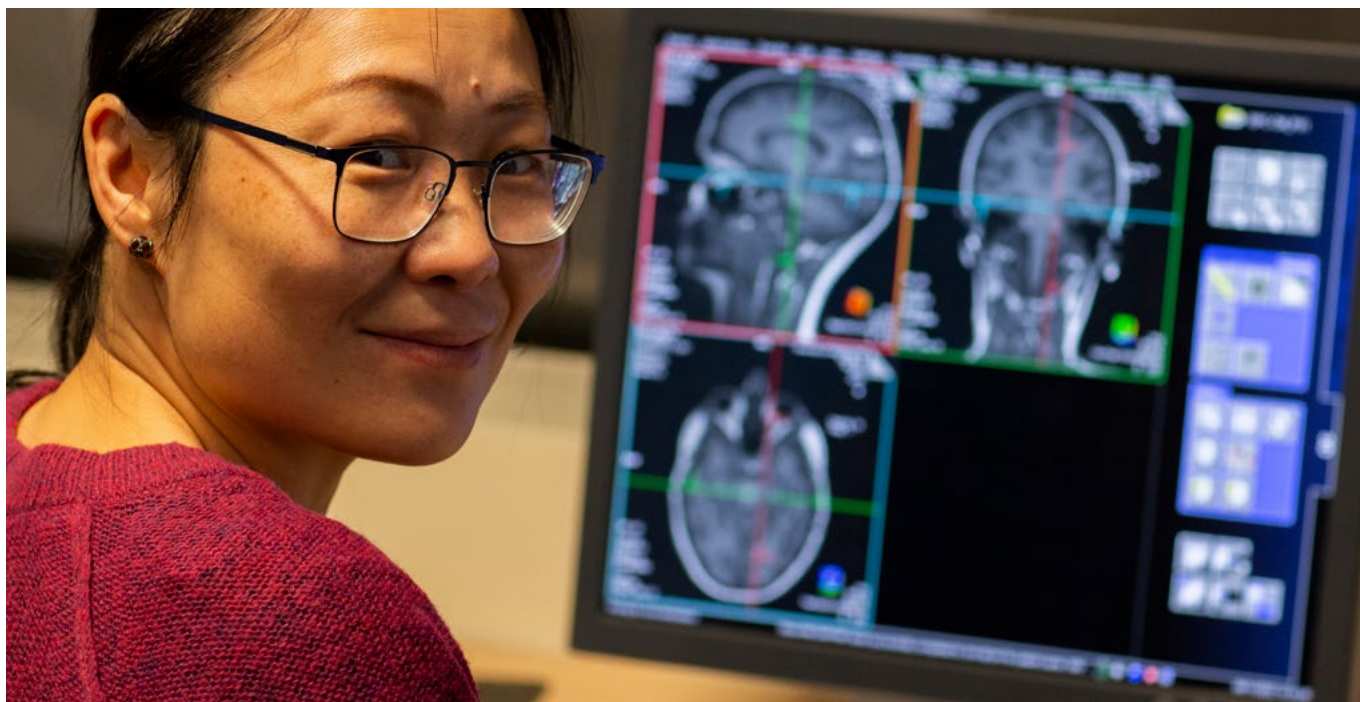
Queen's apprentices operate within four frameworks: Scientific Technologies, Engineering, Creative Media (Film), and Information Technology, focusing on competency-based qualifications, complimented by work-based learning.

Despite the challenges, the development of the Technician Apprenticeship Pilot has been an extremely valuable aspect of the Technician Commitment, garnering positive responses from schools, indicating growing interest in integrating apprenticeships into future plans.

Following a visit by Moira Doherty, Head of Skills and Education in the Department for the Economy, NI, she praised the diversity, passion, and knowledge of Queen's apprentices. She acknowledged Queen's recognition of the importance of apprenticeships from both employer and training provider perspectives, commending the partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College.

Queen's University's Technician Apprenticeship Programme represents a significant step toward addressing workforce challenges, with promising prospects for future expansion and profound impact on Queen's technical workforce.





University of Reading

The Technician Commitment initiative has been transformational for technical staff at the University of Reading. Until 2017, our work took place behind the scenes. With the launch of the Technician Commitment, we were suddenly visible in a community of like-minded colleagues with whom we could share and incorporate good practices and jointly champion the cause of technical staff. Visibility of our organisational structure and career pathway became of interest to some colleagues across the sector. We, along with other universities who were engaged in similar developments, supported and contributed to changes amongst our peer organisations.

At Reading, we have implemented good practice from other signatories, who in sharing their policies relating to acknowledgement of technicians in publications, have helped us to make our contributions visible. Similarly, through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) being a signatory, our involvement in grant applications is now evident and we are applying for funding in our own right.

Through the London and South-East Technician Commitment Network, founded by Stephen Franey, King's College London, in 2018, we have a vibrant regional community. Supported by the Technician Commitment Collaboration Fund, we have organised conferences where technical staff at all levels across our universities have come together, giving visibility to our skills and achievements.

The creation of a new award category, sponsored by the Technician Commitment, enabled senior laboratory technician Hong Lin to win the 2022 Times Higher Education (THE) Awards' 'Outstanding Technician of the Year', in recognition of her key role in some of Reading's biggest science breakthroughs.

Following an Advance HE Athena Swan Professional, Technical and Operational (PTO) Staff Sub-Group, technical staff are fully embedded into the transformed Athena Swan Charter. As a consequence, we were able to apply and became the first PTO Directorate to be awarded a Silver Athena Swan Charter Mark.

The Research Institute Technician Group

The Technician Commitment was established in 2017 with 36 founding signatories pledging to increase the visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability of technical careers. The Technician Commitment has always supported technicians in higher education and research. Twice yearly signatory events serve as valuable platforms for knowledge exchange, fostering collaboration, and staying updated on new initiatives and sharing in best practice within the community. It was at that first signatory event in 2017 that the idea of the Research Institute Technician Group (RITG) was formed.

In those early days, research institutes often found themselves as the only non-university voice at a table full of universities and it was eye opening to hear about the issues faced by technicians in higher education, with different job families and career pathways for academic and technical roles. At the research institutes, there is not this same distinction, although we do share many of the same issues around visibility, recognition, and career development. Forming the RITG provided an important support network, with an institute focus.



Our first meeting was in 2018 and had representatives from John Innes Centre, MRC Harwell, the Francis Crick Institute, and Wellcome Sanger Institute. We realised that a lot could be gained from collaborating, sharing good practice, and raising awareness of research institute technicians.

Now the group has expanded to include Babraham Institute, Institute of Cancer Research, MRC Laboratory of Microbiology, MRC Laboratory of Medical Sciences, the Sainsbury Laboratory, the Earlham Institute and Science and Technology Facilities Council. The group meets online once a month and meetings are themed around the pillars of the Technician Commitment with members sharing ideas and initiatives, providing support and sharing best practice and challenges. The RITG has an established newsletter, LinkedIn group and X account.

We have held three conferences, the first in 2019 at the Francis Crick Institute, coinciding with their public exhibition celebrating the work of technicians. The 2021 conference was held at MRC Harwell, and we are very grateful to the Technician Collaboration Fund for their support. In 2021, the Research Institute Technician Awards (RITAs) were launched, and 63 technical staff were nominated over 5 categories, and all received a certificate of nomination.

In 2023 the conference was held at the Wellcome Genome Campus and the RITAs (sponsored by UKRI) were expanded to 6 categories with 130 technicians nominated. The 2025 conference will be held at the John Innes Centre.

Technical careers are diverse and in the seven years since the Technician Commitment was established, many positive changes have happened. Looking to the future, collaboration and sharing best practice will continue to push boundaries and drive a culture change for all technicians.



University of Strathclyde

Apprenticeship to Leadership: nurturing talent and sharing skills

As with most other universities, here at Strathclyde we have found that our technical workforce is an aging workforce. Some of our technicians have been with us for many years, some beginning their career as 16/17 year old apprentices and staying with us until retirement.

This has benefits and drawbacks. In terms of benefits, it shows that staff value the work environment, terms and conditions, and opportunities for development and progression. For the institution, it allows us to nurture our staff and harness the skills, knowledge and experience gained over many years. The drawback is that we can lack “new blood” into technical roles in the institution to help us gain knowledge and understanding from outside the HE sector, and not being able to recruit younger staff until colleagues retire, causes issues around succession planning and having a sustainable technical workforce in the future.

We must find a way of encouraging young people into the sector, so that our mature colleagues can share their expertise with the younger generation. The invaluable wealth of skills and knowledge risks dissipating as individuals retire from the workforce. Over the next decade, we anticipate a minimum of 25% of our technical workforce will retire.

Here at Strathclyde, we are trying to overcome some of the issues of succession planning and sustainability by developing our apprenticeship programme and leadership programmes. The university operates its own dedicated assessment centre, actively recruiting young people into various modern apprenticeship programmes, and offering employment opportunities upon completion. We work closely with local colleges who provide academic development, while we provide the hands-on work experience. As an integral aspect of the support provided to our young participants, our seasoned staff actively assume mentoring and leadership responsibilities within the departments.

When taking on this supportive leadership role, existing staff are offered the opportunity to take part in our Institute of Leadership and Management accredited programmes, to ensure promotions align with competence and expertise. Our technicians predominately complete the Technical Leaders programme which is fully mapped to the ILM level 3 Award in Leadership and Management and can then progress to our Leading for Strategic Outcomes programme which is mapped to the ILM level 5 Certificate in Leadership and Management.

Here at Strathclyde, we work hard to foster the growth of both our emerging talents and experienced team members. We feel that our apprenticeship and leadership programmes are vital to enhance the sustainability of our technical workforce into the future.





Our supporter organisations

Driving culture change across the higher education and research sector requires engagement with all stakeholders, and it was clear from the outset that a number of sector bodies who did not directly employ technicians were keen to help progress the Technician Commitment. Such sector bodies are invited to become formal supporters of the Technician Commitment and submit an action plan outlining how they will use their influence and reach to deliver the principles of the Technician Commitment.

Initially these were scientific professional bodies, but this has now evolved to include employer organisations, organisations that support research activities in the sector, and we recently welcomed our first union member. This sector level support has proven invaluable in helping both the Technician Commitment and institutions themselves deliver the changes over the last seven years and we will look to grow the number of supporters in the coming years.

Supporting organisations include:

- BiolmagingUK
- GuildHE
- Henry Royce Institute
- Institute of Animal Technology
- Institute of Physics
- Institute of Science and Technology
- Research Libraries UK
- Royal Microscopical Society
- Royal Society
- Royal Society of Biology
- Royal Society of Chemistry
- UK Dementia Research Institute
- Unite the Union
- Universities UK



International signatories

The Technician Commitment, TALENT Programme, and the UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy have gathered significant interest globally. Notably, in 2023, the University of Sydney achieved a historic milestone by becoming the first international signatory of the Technician Commitment, followed by the Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Programme later that year and Munster Technological University (Ireland) in 2024.

The progress made in the UK over the past seven years presents a unique opportunity to facilitate a global exchange of experiences and best practices. This exchange can empower international organisations in enhancing their technical workforce development efforts. Initiatives currently under exploration at a global level include establishing an online platform for sharing best practices, experiences, and expertise in technical skills, roles, and careers within higher education and research.

Additionally, there are discussions about organising a future Technical World Congress to further facilitate collaboration and innovation in the technical sphere worldwide.



Joined February 2023



Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Programme

Joined November 2023



Joined March 2024

The future

Our new home at the UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy – Dr Helen Pain MBE



It is hugely satisfying to see just how significant the impact of the Technician Commitment has been in the last seven years, and briefly reflecting on the Steering Board's thoughts articulated in the 'One Year In' report (2018), it is clear that this community was more than ready to start the journey back in 2017 and what a journey it has been! The signs were already there in 2018 that the community was going to over-deliver. The first year of the Technician Commitment was envisioned to be a self-reflection year, but the founding signatories had already made progress on delivering culture change for technicians in their home organisations. This make-it-happen approach has continued throughout the last seven years resulting in a culture shift for technicians in the sector, one that we are extremely proud to be a part of.

Seven years on, the vision of the Steering Board has not changed. We hope that in several years' time the Commitment will be unnecessary and the good practices put in place will become the norm and incorporated into business as usual. However, whilst we have made enormous progress in reaching the critical mass of signatories necessary to achieve our vision, there is still more to be done.

As a Steering Board, we are very grateful to the Science Council for providing a supportive home for the Technician Commitment from its inception. As a result of the Science Council's operational support, the Technician Commitment was able to create the environment and culture to facilitate the successful launch of the Research England funded UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy (ITSS) in August 2023, now the new home of the Technician Commitment. We are confident that the power of the technician community generated over the last seven years, with the active support of the ITSS team, will ensure the long-term future of the Technician Commitment.

Finally, reflecting again on the 'One Year In' report, the final thoughts of the Steering Board captured then apply today as much as they did six years ago:

The Technician Commitment, at its heart, is about supporting and empowering institutions to learn from and share with others. This is not just about how to support and acknowledge their technical workforce, but also how to get the very most out of every one of their technicians, technologists, and skills specialists so that our universities and research institutions remain world-class, competitive players, in a 21st century global context. It will be exciting to see what emerges from signatories in the coming years and months.

Acknowledgements

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Home of the

Technician **Commitment**

The Technician Commitment is hosted by the UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy.

Learn more at:
www.techniciancommitment.org.uk
www.itss.org.uk

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