Technician Commitment

TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT
ONE YEAR IN

NOVEMBER 2018

Denise, Senior Technician at the University of Nottingham.

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Lord Sainsbury awarding Outstanding STEM Technician to Henry Rae from the University of St Andrews at the STEM Inspiration Awards 2017.

FOREWORD

Lord Sainsbury of Turville,
Settlor of Gatsby Foundation

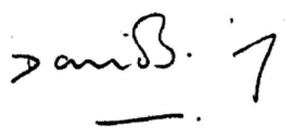
The Gatsby Foundation has been delighted to support, together with the Science Council, the Technician Commitment since its inception in 2017, and I am extremely pleased with the progress that has been achieved in the first year, which I think has exceeded everyone's expectations.

I am particularly pleased that the Technician Commitment has not been seen by signatories as a box-ticking exercise or as an empty pledge to simply publish on their institution's website. Nor have signatories seen the Commitment as just a tool to assist with career development opportunities for individuals or to improve the morale of the technician workforce through an empty gesture.

Instead, signatories have grasped the opportunity to use the Commitment's straightforward framework to address the four key pillars: visibility, recognition, career development, and sustainability of the technical workforce across all faculties, departments and disciplines. By tackling these key pillars, significant benefits can be achieved for research and teaching, for productivity and for collaboration across institutions.

I wish to pay tribute to each of the individuals and institutions that have worked so hard in this first year to ensure that the Technician Commitment got off to the best possible start. The drive and enthusiasm for the technician workforce has always been there at the grassroots level. Now through the Technician Commitment that understanding and appreciation is being much more clearly articulated from the Vice-Chancellor and Director level down.

Given the overwhelming support we have seen for the Commitment in its first year, I am confident it is going to bring real benefits to all those involved, and to those who have yet to sign-up I would simply say, why are you waiting?



Kelly Vere, Higher Education and Technician Commitment Lead at the Science Council, began her career as a Junior Medical Technician at the University of Nottingham.

TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT: ONE YEAR IN

INTRODUCTION

Kelly Vere,
Director of Technical Skills & Strategy, University of Nottingham and
Higher Education & Technician Commitment Lead, Science Council

Technicians, skills specialists, technologists – an innovative community with a vast range of job titles and individuals, as well as teams, who are critical to the success of the UK's universities and research institutes. A highly skilled workforce with a diverse range of expertise, they underpin the key activities of our universities and research institutes, providing the technical excellence essential to support research, teaching and knowledge transfer.

Alongside this, many technicians are researchers and teachers in their own right. Now more than ever, they play a key role in the development of the UK's future workforce – teaching and developing the technical skills students require to pursue a future career in research, academia and/or industry.

With the ever-increasing focus on research and teaching quality, and the extremely competitive nature of graduate employability, the role of the technician has never been more critical. Technicians are at the forefront of evolving technologies, providing academic and student colleagues with first-class technical support and enabling research and teaching of the highest quality on an increasingly international stage.

Historically, the technician's role in research and academia has not been sufficiently recognised, with their career and professional development needs often overlooked. The ageing technical workforce means that large numbers of highly skilled technicians are retiring every year, taking their knowledge and experience with them.

The UK now faces an identified shortage of technicians across all industries and sectors, which poses a serious threat to our contemporary strength and global competitiveness. Indeed, some estimates suggest that we need as many as 700,000 more technicians in the next decade in this country to keep up with demand across industry.

This report will divulge the origins of the Technician Commitment as well as the themes and challenges it seeks to address and improve. Universities and research institutes are invited to become signatories of the Technician Commitment and pledge action against the key challenges affecting their technical staff. Within a year of its launch, approximately half of the country's universities and research institutes had signed-up to the Technician Commitment. This is testament to the value these organisations place on their technical talent.

One year in, this report showcases some of the initial impact of the Technician Commitment and illustrates key themes that are emerging across the approaches taken by signatory institutions. A year after pledging their support to the Technician Commitment, signatories undertake a self-assessment exercise and submit a two-year action plan to the Technician Commitment Steering Board. Members of the Steering Board have reviewed in detail the first wave of self-assessments and action plans and the main findings from those are included in this report.

Signatories are defining their technical community and skill sets, ensuring an increased awareness of technical staff numbers and structures. Technical roles are being professionalised through accreditations and registrations. Learned societies, funders and many other stakeholders are increasing engagement with the technical community. There is a desire to safeguard the sustainability of technical roles and skills with the creation of new apprenticeship programmes to ensure a pipeline of technical talent. Many of the signatories have initiated programmes of work to identify and develop clear career pathways for technical colleagues linked to professional development opportunities, with some creating advanced progression paths to recognise and reward specialist technical skills.

Technical communities are being formed within and across signatory institutions, providing networking opportunities and forums to share ideas and best practice. Signatory institutions are finding new ways to formally recognise the contributions of technicians through internal and external awards and a number are working to ensure a consistent approach to authorship on research papers to include and recognise technical contributions. Many institutions have introduced or adapted organisational structures to drive the Commitment and to guarantee inclusion and representation of technical colleagues on institutional decision-making groups, boards and committees.

The shift in culture in the first year of the Technician Commitment, in terms of how technician roles across higher education and research are viewed, valued, recognised, developed and sustained, is undeniable. The Steering Board are delighted with the progress to date and look forward to continuing our work with all signatories to ensure that technical roles, skills and careers are afforded the esteem they so richly deserve.

KAvere

Jane, a senior knitwear technician at Nottingham Trent University.

THE TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT: AN OVERVIEW

The Technician Commitment is a university and research institute initiative, led by a steering board of sector bodies, with support from the Science Council and the Gatsby Foundation's Technicians Make It Happen campaign. 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. Early champions, Professor Sir David Greenaway and Professor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, supported the Commitment's launch on 31 May 2017 at which the 36 founding signatories were announced.

The origins of the Technician Commitment

The Technician Commitment derived from the need for representation and support for the technical profession on a sector-wide, collaborative, and aspirational level. Led by its steering board of sector organisations, the Technician Commitment has four key themes 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 theme, evaluating impact, takes the form of an institutional self-assessment and action plan, 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 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 the 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 has been essential.

Why the Technician Commitment?

Technicians are vital to the success of the UK's universities and research institutes. They are a highly skilled workforce with a diverse range of expertise, underpinning the key activities across organisations, and providing the technical expertise essential to supporting research and knowledge transfer. Despite the importance of technicians, their role is not well-recognised and their career and professional development often overlooked. The ageing technical workforce also means that large numbers of highly-skilled technicians are retiring every year, taking their knowledge and experience with them. The UK now faces an identified shortage of technicians, which poses a serious threat to our innovative strength and global competitiveness.

Across higher education and research, there is a clear need for greater coordination and collective action across the sector to improve the status and profile of technicians and to ensure the sustainability of the technical workforce in academia and research.

The Commitment calls on all Higher Education Institutions and Research Institutes to commit to action in four key areas affecting their technical staff and provides a framework to drive positive change for this vital and skilled community.

Visibility
Signatories will need to ensure that all technicians within their institution are identifiable and that their contributions are visible within and beyond the institution.

Recognition
Signatories need to support their technical staff to gain recognition through professional registration and/or accreditation.

Career development
Signatories should enable career progression opportunities for technicians through the provision of clear and documented career pathways.

Sustainability
Signatories should ensure the future sustainability of technical skills across their institution and that technical expertise is fully utilised.

The Technician Commitment Steering Board: ‘By the Sector, for the Sector’

In order to influence and drive positive change across the higher education and research sector, it was key that a range of stakeholders were engaged to lead the Commitment on behalf of the sector, for the sector. The Steering Board comprises of a number of organisations, ensuring the expertise of the Board spans the breadth and depth of the sector. Current members include:

- Gatsby Foundation
- Science Council
- Research Councils UK (UKRI)
- Medical Research Council (MRC)
- Universities and Colleges Employers’ Association (UCEA)
- Wellcome Trust
- King’s College London
- University of Nottingham
- Office for Students
- Advance HE
- Careers Research & Advisory Centre Ltd (CRAC)
- Chartered Institute for IT (BCS)
- Engineering Council

“The Technician Commitment has made me prouder. I wouldn’t have put myself at a leadership level, I would never have said a technician could do that - and I’m doing it.”

Nikki Savvas, Project Technician, Biology Department, University of York

The launch of the Technician Commitment resulted in widespread press coverage including an exclusive with Times Higher Education. The initiative saw strong support and further coverage on various social media platforms, with many signatory organisations taking to their channels to announce their support and commitment to their technical communities through their pledge to the Technician Commitment.

“A very successful launch of the Technician Commitment – a real buzz and energy.”

Anne-Marie Coriat, Head of Research Careers, Wellcome Trust

The Technician Commitment added and developed further content for the Commitment’s dedicated online resource, and visited a number of institutions to encourage support for the initiative and to help influence and drive positive change for the technical community.

September 2017 saw the inaugural event for signatory leads as part of New Scientist Live. This event was the beginning of the development of a vibrant and energetic community of practice, as well as a chance for the announcement of the second phase of signatory institutions, bringing the total number of signatories to 61 organisations in less than six months.

- **May 2017** – The Technician Commitment launches with 36 founding signatories at the 2017 Higher Education Technicians Summit at the University of Warwick
- **September 2017** – First event for Technician Commitment signatory leads at New Scientist Live
- **September 2017** – Second phase of signatories announced
- **April 2018** – Second signatory event held at the East Midlands Conference Centre
- **April 2018** – Third phase of signatories announced
- **June 2018** – Founding signatories submit Institutional Self-Assessments & Action Plans to the Technician Commitment Steering Board
- **September 2018** – Feedback disseminated to founding signatories
- **October 2018** – Second phase of Technician Commitment signatories submit Self-Assessments & Action Plans to the Technician Commitment Steering Board
- **November 2018** – Third signatory event held at the Tower of London
- **November 2018** – “The Technician Commitment: One Year In” report launched by Lord Sainsbury of Turville at a reception at the Tower of London

New signatories included the first dedicated arts institution (University for the Creative Arts - UCA), as well as the first agricultural institution (Harper-Adams University), an additional five Scottish signatories and the Francis Crick Institute.

“Laboratory research staff play an important role in research at the Crick and are pivotal to our long-term success. I am delighted to be involved in the Technician Commitment, and to be pledging support on behalf of the Francis Crick Institute in recognition of the contribution technicians make.”

Sir Paul Nurse, Director of the Francis Crick Institute

Notably, at this point, 20 of the 24 Russell Group universities were now committed to the initiative.

In April 2018, a third phase of signatory institutions was announced, bringing the total number of signatories to 66. This phase included the world renowned Wellcome Sanger Institute and the Medical Research Council Harwell Institute.

“Our members could not deliver world-class research, teaching and knowledge transfer without the work of skilled technical staff. The Technician Commitment will help ensure their contribution is fully recognised, and I am pleased that Russell Group universities have played a key role in driving this initiative forward.”

Dr Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive of the Russell Group

The announcement coincided with the second event for signatory leads, where attendees continued to build links across organisations, share their progress to date and to learn from each other in terms of approaches and opportunities. Feedback from the signatory events continued to be incredibly positive, with attendees taking back new ideas, solutions and contacts to their respective institutions. Using positive action to secure success, a founding signatory of the Commitment, the University of Nottingham, shared their work to develop a strategy for over 700 technical colleagues to ensure status, profile and opportunity for them.

Other examples showcased on the day included the University of Liverpool, who shared their work to align the Technician Commitment to their Athena Swan activity to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion for their technical staff, the University of Birmingham, who showcased their newly announced Technical Academy launched in response to the Technician Commitment, and the UK Research Councils (UKRI) who presented on their work to develop and influence dedicated support and opportunity for technical research professionals.

“Listening to how each institution has progressed the Technician Commitment, I collected a lot of useful ideas. There was such variation of initiatives, collaborations and starting points and it was most helpful to share and learn together.”

Technician Commitment signatory event delegate

“The Technician Commitment benefited me because they got me this apprenticeship. Without it, the apprenticeship wouldn’t have been on offer, and I’m not really sure where I’d be without it!”

Rebecca Neil, Apprentice Workshop Technician, University of York

Interest has certainly been sparked across the sector. Through the work of signatories supporting and benefiting from the initiative, the Technician Commitment has already been able to drive positive change for individual technicians and their institutions. Groups of signatory institutions are coming together to begin to influence sector policy and driving activity beyond the higher education and research sector with professional bodies, learned societies and international organisations.

> “One of the other big issues we face as universities is sustaining the flow of people into these [technical] jobs. We need to make sure the conditions are right for them, that there’s a career structure, opportunities for developing their careers, and opportunities to move more between universities and industry.”

Professor Tim Softley, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Transfer, University of Birmingham

THE TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT LIST OF SIGNATORIES

from Phase 1, 2 and 3

- University of Aberdeen
- Anglia Ruskin University
- Aston University
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bradford
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- Canterbury Christ Church University
- Cardiff University
- University of Central Lancashire
- University of Chester
- Cranfield University
- De Montfort University
- University of East Anglia
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Essex
- University of Exeter
- Francis Crick Institute
- University of Glasgow
- Harper Adams University

- University of Hertfordshire
- Imperial College London
- Institute of Cancer Research (London)
- James Hutton Institute
- John Innes Centre
- Keele University
- University of Kent
- King’s College London
- Lancaster University
- University of Leeds
- University of Leicester
- University of Lincoln
- University of Liverpool
- Liverpool John Moore University
- London South Bank University
- Loughborough University
- University of Manchester
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- MRC Harwell Institute
- Newcastle University
- University of Nottingham
- Nottingham Trent University
- University of Oxford
- Oxford Brookes University
- Plymouth University
- Queen Mary, University of London
- Queen’s University Belfast
- University of Reading
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- University of Salford
- University of Sheffield
- University of St Andrews
- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde
- University of Surrey
- The Open University
- The Sainsbury Laboratory
- University College Birmingham
- University College London
- University for the Creative Arts (UCA)
- University of Warwick
- Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute
- University of the West of England, Bristol
- University of Winchester
- University of York
- Writtle University College

Self-Assessment & Action Planning

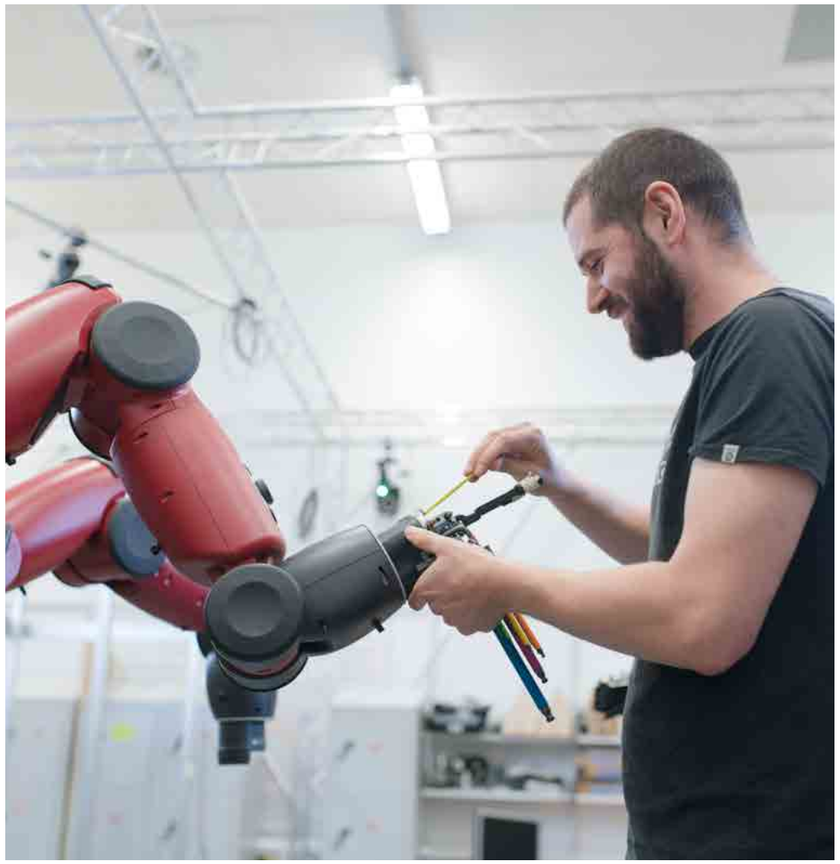
The themes of the Technician Commitment are: Visibility, Recognition, Career Development, and Sustainability. A fifth theme of Evaluating Impact takes the form of a self-assessment process, to be undertaken one year after an institution becomes a signatory and biennially thereafter. The self-assessment process enables the Technician Commitment Steering Board to gain an understanding of the position of each signatory institution and the measures that need to be put in place to ensure that signatories are making progress against the themes outlined in the Commitment. The self-assessment process asks for contextual information, progress to date and a detailed 24-month future action plan.

A key point is that the Technician Commitment Steering Board does not seek to dictate how institutions promote a positive culture for the technician community. This is a matter for autonomous institutions and the technician, research and academic community to agree. The Steering Board recognises that one size does not fit all. It is expected that as a minimum, signatories publicly state their Technician Commitment signatory status and institutional action plan on a dedicated and discoverable webpage, along with their named point of contact. The Steering Board ask signatories to evidence that the 'technician voice' is present in the development and formation of institutional action plans. Finalised Action Plans are signed off at an institutional leadership level (e.g. Vice-Chancellor/President/Director level) to demonstrate institutional support. The Technician Commitment is a collaborative endeavour and the Steering Board support and facilitate the establishment and sharing of best practice demonstrated in the self-assessments and action plans.

Technician Commitment Signatories: A Supported Community

On becoming a Technician Commitment signatory, institutions are supported in a number of ways. The Steering Board supports and facilitates the establishment and sharing of best practice demonstrated in the institutional self-assessments and action plans. A vibrant community of Institutional Leads tasked with implementing the Technician Commitment in their respective institutions is emerging and the Steering Board aims to ensure a range of forums are available to enable peers to share expertise, good practice and experiences. Technician Commitment Institutional Leads are brought together at least twice a year at dedicated, facilitated events where they have the opportunity to network with other leads and hear short talks about organisations, project activities and best practice that may support them in driving their own institutional action plan. Signatories are also supported by a bespoke online resource that maps out current provision and opportunities across the sector, along with a staff team on hand to offer guidance, visits and support.

TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT: ONE YEAR IN



Sam, a Robotics Research technician at the University of Bristol.

"With so many organisations having signed up to the Technician Commitment, it's vital for anyone who is serious about their workforce to be part of this drive to change the culture around technicians within the UK."

Tertius Hough, Pathology Operations Manager, MRC Harwell Institute

ONE YEAR IN:
THE IMPACT SO FAR

In June 2018, the Technician Commitment Steering Board received self-assessment and action plan submissions from the founding signatories, who pledged their support for the Technician Commitment on its launch in May 2017.

The Steering Board were pleased to see that institutions had engaged positively and on reviewing the submissions some clear themes began to emerge.

ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

The submissions demonstrated that many institutions have introduced or adapted organisational structures to drive their Technician Commitment and to guarantee inclusion and representation of technical colleagues on institutional decision-making groups, boards and committees. Examples include the creation of institutional Technician Commitment Steering Groups, often chaired by a member of the institution's senior leadership team, increased engagement from senior leaders with the institution's technical community through forums, events and the inclusion of technical colleagues on institutional committees and boards, ensuring that technicians have increased visibility and voice across organisational structures.

Importantly, submissions showed that the Technician Commitment has driven an increased awareness of technical staff numbers and structures across institutions and prompted efforts to understand the scope of technical expertise across institutions. Technician Commitment activity is being aligned to sector-wide exercises, for example the Teaching Excellence Framework, the Research Excellence Framework and the Athena SWAN Charter.

CASE STUDY: University of Birmingham

Driven by the Technician Commitment, the University of Birmingham launched a university-wide initiative for its technical community, known as the Technical Academy in November 2017. The Technical Academy provides a structural and strategic framework for a new range of initiatives and activities for technical colleagues at Birmingham. The introduction of this initiative, dedicated to the technical community at Birmingham, demonstrates that the University of Birmingham has moved at great pace since becoming a signatory of the Commitment. There is a new university website dedicated to the Technical Academy and a programme of events extending to the end of 2019. The introduction of a 'Technical Directory' highlighting expertise across the university, and the creation of a new category for 'Technical Team' in Birmingham's staff awards demonstrates increased recognition for the University's technical skills and expertise. News and achievements related to the University of Birmingham's technical staff are celebrated through a new Twitter account (@UOBTechnicians).

CASE STUDY: University of the West of England

UWE Bristol have established a Technician Commitment Steering Group with membership from across the university to provide oversight of the development, implementation and monitoring of their Technician Commitment action plan. The Steering Group is chaired by a member of the University's senior leadership team, ensuring the necessary governance to deliver on their plans. A new leadership development programme has been initiated for technical staff, along with masterclasses for UWE Bristol managers, which provides excellent opportunities to ensure continued professional development of technicians at UWE Bristol.

CASE STUDY: University of Nottingham

A founding signatory of the Technician Commitment, the University of Nottingham have developed a new strategy entitled: 'Our Vision for Technical Talent' which will be launched to the wider university community in December 2018. Developed by Technical Managers and senior leaders from across the institution, the strategy is notable for having been developed to align with the University's wider aims and objectives and has clear themes and activities, all designed to ensure increased visibility, recognition and opportunities for their technical colleagues.

VISIBILITY & CULTURE

Signatories are defining their technical community and skill sets, ensuring an increased awareness of technical staff numbers and structures. Technical communities are being formed within and across signatory institutions, providing networking opportunities and forums to share ideas and best practice. Many institutions have hosted formal launch events for the Technician Commitment and are introducing annual internal conferences. Alongside this, the Steering Board noted that signatories were developing new ways of improving communications with their technical communities. Examples include the introduction of newsletters, websites and social media channels dedicated to the institution's technical community.

CASE STUDY: Newcastle University

Newcastle University has taken quick action since becoming a signatory of the Commitment. The development of the university's Technician Commitment strategy, aligned to its strategic priorities, ensures this work is embedded across the university. The formation of the institutional Steering Group ensures voice, visibility and governance for Newcastle's Commitment and financial resource has been allocated to the group to further increase the impact of this work. The creation of sub-groups looking at specific elements of the strategy offers development opportunities for technical colleagues to drive activity. Of particular note is the work on equality, diversity and inclusion – Newcastle now have technical representation on the University's Athena Swan Self-Assessment Team.

Newcastle's submission offered examples of practice that demonstrate visibility and recognition for Newcastle's technicians. Highlights include the new Faculty-level Technical Manager posts, the invitation to technical colleagues to stand for Senate and a number of external awards and engagement in sector projects. The inclusion of technical staff in degree ceremonies is an excellent way of ensuring visibility and recognition of the technician's contribution to teaching and learning activities. It is very pleasing to see that, in response to the Technician Commitment, new apprenticeships have been created, to ensure that Newcastle has a pipeline of homegrown technical talent.

Tom, a research and teaching technician at the University of Manchester.

CASE STUDY: University of York

The University of York have a well-established technician network 'TechYork' who have hosted annual conferences for technicians every year for the past decade. The Technician Commitment self-assessment exercise was an opportunity to drive further activity. There is a move to highlight the key contributions of technicians to the senior management team via the institution's Technician Commitment lead. This is initially taking the form of a skills survey to better understand the key skills across York, identify any gaps and drive succession planning. Technical colleagues have been given ownership of the TechYork network and have engaged and accelerated progress with the delivery of two events in the past six months. York have also created Professional Registration Champions, encouraging peer-to-peer support between colleagues. The University is utilising the Apprenticeship Levy to train new apprentices and Levy funding for apprenticeship programmes for existing staff is being explored. The University of York submission demonstrated how becoming a signatory of the Technician Commitment can enable an institution to align varying positive strands of activity with a common framework of principles to accelerate progress.

SUSTAINABILITY AND PROFESSIONALISATION

The Technician Commitment is driving the professionalisation of technical roles through accreditations and professional registration, challenging stereotypes and ensuring that technician roles are viewed as professional careers within higher education and research. Technicians are being encouraged and supported to gain professional registration (through the Science Council, Engineering Council and BCS professional registers) in recognition of their technical skills and expertise. In a number of cases, institutions are offering funding for registration and membership fees, a demonstration of their commitment to technical careers and professional development. Many institutions are ensuring that technical colleagues have access to accredited courses that allow technical staff to gain Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), in line with their academic colleagues, enabling both development and recognition of the teaching practice of technicians across the institution. Many signatories have begun to include professional registration and/or HEA Fellowship within their recruitment processes, signalling the importance placed on recruiting high quality, skilled technical staff to their institution.

An increased awareness of technical skills has led a number of signatories to look strategically at the expertise of technicians across their institution. The Technician Commitment has ignited a desire to safeguard the sustainability of technical roles and skills and has driven the creations of new apprenticeship programmes and increased development opportunities to ensure a pipeline of technical talent.

CASE STUDY: Imperial College London

On becoming a signatory of the Technician Commitment, Imperial College London set to work to create a Technician Commitment Steering Group with clear reporting structures to their Provost's Board. Their submission included a comprehensive list of new activity, aligned to the key themes of the Technician Commitment, demonstrating accelerated progress since becoming a signatory. Two particular areas to highlight were the inclusion of a technician in their Provost selection process and the successful MBE nomination of a technical colleague. Financial support for professional registration showed a commitment to investing in technical careers and professional development, while the development of a new online Technicians' Portal ensures access to resources, development activities and news for Imperial College's technical community.

"We need to think carefully on how we maintain and sustain the pipeline of technical skills essential to our success as over 9,000 technicians work [within the Russell Group]. The Technician Commitment stands as a call to recognise the very real contribution our technicians make to the life, success and achievement of our universities".

Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli, Chair of the Russell Group

RECOGNITION AND VALUE

The submitted self-assessments and action plans showed that signatory institutions are finding new ways to formally recognise the contributions of technicians through internal and external awards. A number are also working to ensure a consistent approach to authorship on research papers to include and recognise technical contributions. Many of the signatories have initiated programmes of work to identify and develop clear career pathways for technical colleagues linked to professional development opportunities, with some creating advanced progression paths to recognise and reward specialist technical skills.

CASE STUDY: University of Bristol

Since signing the Technician Commitment, the University of Bristol have appointed a Strategic Technical Lead who has a university wide portfolio of activity and clear links to the University's senior leadership team. The University has also developed a Technical Leaders Group, demonstrating the University's commitment to giving technical colleagues increased voice and visibility. New digital resources, created by and about apprentice technicians, have been developed to raise the profile of technical staff to inspire a new generation of technicians. The University was recently awarded Science Council Employer Champion Status in recognition of their drive to ensure that technical colleagues have opportunities and support to achieve professional registration in recognition of their technical skills and expertise. A new and pioneering career framework, which extends technical careers through to professorial equivalence, has been developed to recognise that advancement in a technical career is possible through advanced specialist technical skills.

CASE STUDY: University of Warwick

Since becoming a signatory, the University of Warwick has worked to ensure positive action for its technical community. Particular areas to highlight in their submission include the creation of a new 'TechNet' website to disseminate information and training opportunities and a fund to support professional registration for technicians. Warwick launched its Technician Commitment to the technical community with an event featuring talks from senior leaders and representation from external organisations, including a diverse range of professional bodies, reflective of Warwick's technical skills and roles. The development of new Technician Job Family Profiles is encouraging, and Warwick aim to ensure a technical career pathway that advances to professorial equivalence. The University of Warwick is investing in its apprenticeship programmes in areas such as manufacturing, engineering and physics and is seeing an increase in new apprenticeships.

CASE STUDY: John Innes Centre

The John Innes Centre have clearly defined processes and procedures for career development. Internal structures exist for the profiling and recognition of technical careers alongside a history of internal and external awards and accolades. A dedicated network is in place for technical colleagues (known as Research and Support Staff – RSS) and relevant external organisations are invited to come and present to staff so that they are able to see a range of opportunities to develop their career. 'Accessible Science' talks are organised and hosted by the technical community, offering excellent development opportunities. RSS staff also have the opportunity to undertake post graduate qualifications, are represented on key internal committees and members of the technical community are volunteering to build cohorts of practitioners who are sharing their skills and offering informal mentoring.

WORKING & LEARNING TOGETHER

The Technician Commitment Steering Board is delighted with the positive engagement from signatories since the launch of the initiative. A very encouraging development is the creation of new regional and national collaborations across signatory institutions, helped along by the Technician Commitment signatory events held in September 2017 and April 2018. Within a year of its launch, it is positive to see that the Technician Commitment is driving new regional and national partnerships and innovative ways of working to ensure positive change for the technical community across higher education and research.

CASE STUDY: University of Liverpool, University of Nottingham, John Innes Centre & the Science Council

The Technician Commitment has driven a new collaboration between the University of Liverpool, the University of Nottingham, the Science Council and the John Innes Centre who are working together to look at equality, diversity and inclusion within the technical workforce. The collaboration recognises that the themes of the Technician Commitment have strong synergy with the key principles of the Athena SWAN Charter. Through presentations and workshops at a number of conferences, this collaboration is championing how Athena SWAN and the Technician Commitment can work together to drive positive change. From work already undertaken, using both quantitative and qualitative data, it is evident that issues are consistent across the sector. These include gender bias in certain discipline areas/job families and significant gender disparity at senior technical levels. Research is underway to explore challenges particularly around recruitment and career progression to allow for root cause analysis, and to spark discussion to identify possible interventions at both a local and national level. The University

of Nottingham, together with partners including the Science Council and the University of Liverpool was recently awarded significant 'Inclusion Matters' funding from the Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council to explore this further and to develop, implement and review new and innovative interventions.

CASE STUDY: Midlands Innovation

Midlands Innovation is a research and innovation partnership, combining the collective excellence of eight universities in the heart of the UK.

As a partnership founded on supporting research excellence, Midlands Innovation has recognised that ensuring recognition and opportunity for its technical community helps them to achieve their aims. Midlands Innovation have a strong history of supporting technical colleagues, founding the biennial Higher Education Technicians Summit and Papin Prizes in 2015. In 2017 all eight members of the Midlands Innovation partnership became founding signatories of the Technician Commitment. The Midlands Innovation universities have over 2100 technical staff working in their institutions and the Technician Commitment has led them to embark on a programme of activities designed to increase the visibility of their technical workforce, to recognise its excellence and to develop collaborative approaches to supporting its career development. They have established a Technical Staff Strategy Committee which brings together technical managers from across the partnership to support their institutional responsibilities under the Technician Commitment and to explore ways in which the consortium can collaborate to further support their technical staff. The Midlands Innovation Technical Placement Programme, which offers individual technicians the opportunity to visit organisations across the partnership to learn new skills and techniques will launch in late 2018.

CASE STUDY: Institute of Cancer Research

The Institute of Cancer Research (ICR) are a founding signatory of the Technician Commitment. Since pledging their commitment to the initiative, they have undertaken a range of new activities including an internal Technician Commitment launch event, a professional registration showcase, and the introduction of the 'ICR Annual Scientific Officer Award'. Following attendance at the Technician Commitment signatory events, ICR have made strong links beyond the institute and are collaborating with Technician Commitment signatories in and around London, including King's College London, Imperial College London, the University of Reading and the Francis Crick Institute to explore collaborative opportunities to drive regional development activities for technical colleagues.

DRIVING SECTOR ACTIVITY

A key indicator of the impact of the Technician Commitment over the past year is the level of engagement with organisations across and beyond the sector. The Technician Commitment has been able to drive and influence positive action around technical skills and roles, working with learned societies, funders and many other stakeholders to increase engagement and dialogue with the technical community.

CASE STUDY: Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) is a national funding agency investing in bioscience research and training in the UK and a supporter of the Technician Commitment. BBSRC have been working for several years to support research technicians and technology and skills specialists in academia to maximise their potential. Key outputs following a survey of the biotechnology and biosciences technical community were published in the journal Nature entitled 'Forge a clearer path for technical careers' in 2016. Following this the BBSRC have made a commitment to research technical professionals to ensure identity, parity and inclusivity and career development opportunities.

CASE STUDY: Research Councils UK (UKRI)

UKRI representatives sit on the Technician Commitment Steering Board. In 2017, the UK Research Councils published a 'Statement of Expectations for Technology / Skills Specialists' to ensure that technical colleagues funded through Research Council awards and investments are well supported as equal members of research teams, and have access to appropriate career development and progression.

CASE STUDY: Broadening the Definition of Researchers

The Concordat to Support the Career development of Researchers was launched in 2008 to provide a framework to support the career development of researchers in UK universities and research institutes. In 2017, the Concordat Strategy Group announced an independent ten-year review to evaluate the progress made in implementing the principles and what policy interventions would be required to ensure an effective research system.

Professor David Bogle, Chair of the Independent Review panel, and Pro-Vice-Provost of Doctoral School, University College London presented the panel's findings and recommendations at the Vitae Researcher Development International Conference on Monday 17th September 2018. A key outcome is the recommendation to broaden the definition of 'researchers' to be inclusive of all staff engaged in research, including technicians who play such a vital part in UK research and innovation.

CASE STUDY: Institute of Physics

As a supporter of the Technician Commitment, the Institute of Physics (IoP) were keen to increase engagement with the technical community across physics related disciplines. The Institute worked with the Technician Commitment to host their inaugural event for technicians in March 2018. Founded in 1874, this was the Institute's first such event dedicated to technicians in its 144 year history and offered an opportunity for technicians working in physics and related areas from around the country to meet each other and the IoP, and to help the IoP shape its support for the technical workforce.

Attendees were treated to a presentation by David Wilkinson, visiting fellow at Nottingham Trent University and former project manager in the UK Home Office Scientific Development Branch. This presentation highlighted some of the areas of physics research and commercialisation in which technicians play an instrumental role; from drug sensing honeybees to instrumental components of the ATLAS experiment at CERN. The event included a consultative workshop on IoP activities for the technical community, during which the Institute received feedback on the issues facing physics technicians on a daily basis. Based on this feedback, the IoP is now developing an action plan on how to ensure visibility, recognition and opportunity for the physics technical community.

TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT: ONE YEAR IN

CASE STUDY: National Technician Development Centre

Launched in January 2018, the National Technician Development Centre for Higher Education aims to tackle the shortage of specialist technical skills in the higher education sector. Funded by the Office for Students and the University of Sheffield, it will provide higher education institutions with access to information, expertise and tools that will enable them to create a sustainable future for their technical staff and services. The Centre is a strong advocate of the Technician Commitment and aligns much of its provision to the key themes of the initiative.

CASE STUDY: WISE Awards – Celebrating Female Technicians

WISE is the campaign for gender balance in science, technology and engineering. They host an annual awards event to recognise inspiring organisations and individuals actively addressing the core concerns of WISE: promoting science, technology, engineering and mathematics to girls and women. Following the launch of the Technician Commitment, WISE developed a new category for their annual awards – the 'WISE Technician Award' to be awarded to a role model who will inspire other women to go in to a technician role and help to raise the profiles of female technicians across the UK.

ADVANCE HE

SUPPORTING THE TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT

Alison Johns, CEO, Advance HE

The contribution of professional technicians across higher education is critical, from driving and supporting teaching and learning, to nurturing and building foundations for ground-breaking research. Now, more than ever, it is crucial that their vital contribution is recognised so that the next generation of technicians are inspired to work in higher education.

Recent research shows that the UK needs 70,000 new technicians a year across all sectors. In higher education specifically, data shows that approximately 40% of current technicians are aged 50 or over, meaning that without concerted effort to support and sustain technical expertise, we will lose many highly skilled individuals once they retire.

Advance HE is working to ensure that the sector's skilled technicians get the recognition and opportunities they deserve through the Athena SWAN Charter and the increasing uptake of Higher Education Academy (HEA) Fellowship status by the technical community. In the recent HEA review of Teaching Excellence Framework submissions, institutions awarded Gold, Silver or Bronze referred specifically to the value of the contribution of technicians and how HEA Fellowships denote their support and recognition of technical colleagues.

Advance HE recognises the importance of the sector's technical community and wants to see that technicians have the opportunities to develop their careers and are given the right support for them to flourish – the Technician Commitment is an ideal framework to provide this and we strongly back this initiative. We will ensure continued support for institutions in providing recognition and development opportunities for their valued technicians.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE TECHNICIAN COMMITMENT – REFLECTIONS FROM THE STEERING BOARD

The success of the Technician Commitment in its first 12 months is thanks to a host of organisations and individuals who have gone above and beyond what was expected. It had always been our intention that the first year of being a signatory, from the point of signing the Commitment to submitting self-assessments and action plans, would carry no expectation of significant action "on the ground"; rather the year would be a time for each institution to undertake an honest self-assessment of its current position against the different themes of the framework. The institution would then draw up their action-plan against their own identified areas of need.

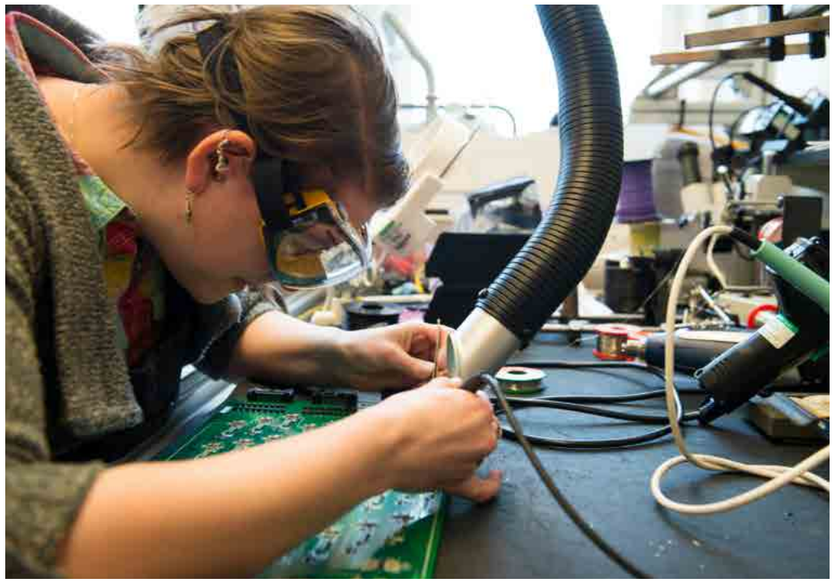
However, on reviewing the first wave of action plans and self-assessments, the Steering Board are hugely impressed with the outstanding progress that has been achieved in the initiative's first year – both within institutions and across the sector more widely. The rich engagement with the themes of the Technician Commitment is testament to the value institutions place on their technical communities.

Therefore, even though the first wave of signatories were tasked solely with getting their house in order and putting a plan together, the fact that the majority have forged ahead and already made significant changes highlights that what is expected of signatories is achievable.

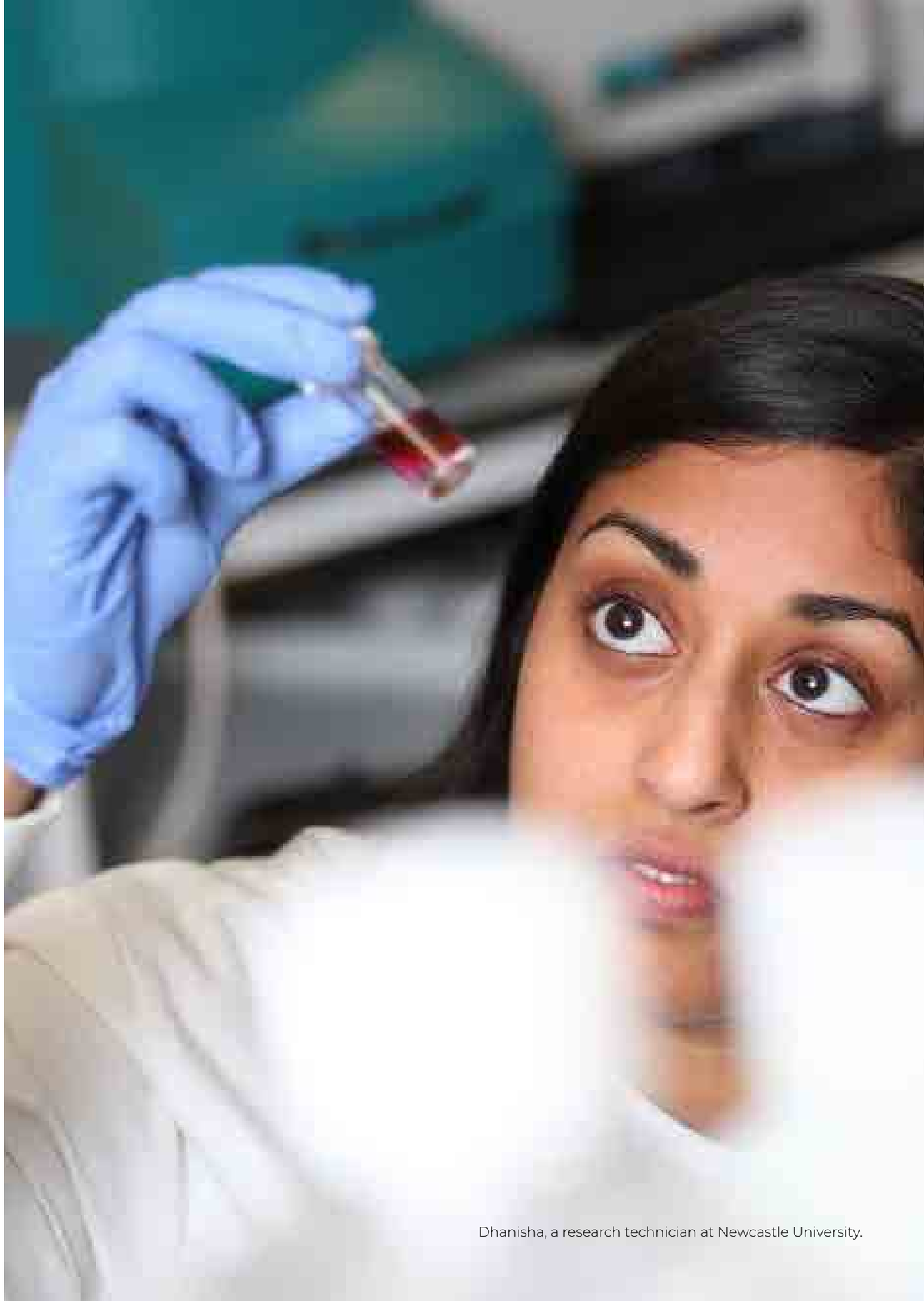
The vision of the Steering Board is that in several years the Commitment will be unnecessary; that the practices put in place become the norm and are simply incorporated into business as usual. However, we still need to reach a critical mass of signatories developing and enacting their action plans before we can be confident that our vision can be realised.

With this in mind, it is important to place on record our huge thanks to each institution that has signed up in year one and to the organisations and individuals that have supported them. To all those that are in the pipeline to join the Commitment, or are in the middle of considering whether to support it, we encourage you to take note of what has been achieved already by those institutions featured in this report – most were getting on with what was set out in their plans long before they were formally submitted to the Steering Board.

The Technician Commitment, at its heart, is about supporting and empowering institutions to learn from and share with others, 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.



Claire, an Electronics Technician at the University of Manchester.



Dhanisha, a research technician at Newcastle University.

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