

Technician Commitment

Guidance for Completing the Self-Assessment & Action Plan

The Technician Commitment is a university and research institution initiative, led by a steering group of sector bodies, with support from the Science Council and the Gatsby Charitable Foundation's Technicians Make It Happen campaign. The Commitment aims to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technicians 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 themes of the Technician Commitment are: Visibility, Recognition, Career Development, Sustainability and Evaluating Impact. The fifth theme of Evaluating Impact takes the form of a self-assessment process, to be undertaken one year after an organisation becomes a signatory and biennially thereafter.

The self-assessment process enables the Technician Commitment Steering Group to gain an understanding of the position of each signatory organisation and the measures 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.

The Technician Commitment Steering Group does not seek to dictate how organisations promote a positive culture for the technician community. This is a matter for autonomous institutions and the technician, research and academic community to agree. 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

Group would like signatories to evidence that the 'technician voice' is present in the development and formation of institutional action plans. The Technician Commitment is a collaborative endeavour and the Steering Group will support and facilitate the establishment and sharing of best practice demonstrated in the self-assessments and action plans. A vibrant community of Institutional Leads tasked with implementing the Technician Commitment is emerging and the Steering Group aims to ensure a range of forums are available to enable peers to share expertise, good practice and experiences.

To support institutional action planning, please see Appendix A for examples of activities and initiatives that have been successfully implemented in a range of universities and research institutes. Additional details are available on the Technician Commitment's dedicated online resource, available at <http://technicians.org.uk/techniciancommitment/>. Cross referencing to other sector institutional reviews relevant to technicians is welcomed; for example, institutions may wish to reference Athena SWAN applications, Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) submissions and Research Excellence Framework (REF) environment statements where technicians have been explicitly mentioned.

Please note that finalised Action Plans should be signed off at an institutional leadership level (e.g. Vice-Chancellor/President/Director level).

For any additional queries, please contact k.ver@sciencecouncil.org or tracey.dickens@gatsby.org.uk.

Technician Commitment

Evaluating Impact through Self-Assessment & Future Action Planning of Sussex

Organisation: University of Sussex

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To provide some context, please provide a brief profile of your organisation (up to 250 words):

For over 60 years the aim of our courses, research, culture and campus has been to stimulate, excite and challenge. So from scientific discovery to global policy, from student welfare to career development, Sussex innovates and takes a lead. And today, in every part of society and across the world, you will find someone from Sussex making an original and valuable contribution.

Teaching and learning

The University of Sussex has 18,510 students (2019-20 full-time equivalent figures), of which around one-fifth are postgraduates. 65% of our student population are UK students and 35% are overseas students. Our goal is to deliver teaching and learning programmes informed by current research, attractive to students from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and which deliver skills for life.

Innovative research and scholarship

Sussex is a leading research university, as reflected in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). Over 75% of research activity at Sussex is categorised as world leading (4*) or internationally excellent (3*) in terms of originality, significance and rigour. Overall, the University was placed 36th (of multi-disciplinary institutions) by grade point average (GPA).

Our staff

Sussex has developed a reputation for innovation and inspiration, and attracts leading thinkers and researchers. In 2019/20 the University employed 3,395 staff which is equivalent to 2,615 full time employees. This incorporated 1,610 staff in a Teaching or Teaching and Research role (equivalent to 1,070 full time employees). Other staff were employed in Research only or Professional Services positions (HESA 2019/20). We have had three Nobel Prize winners, 12 Fellows of the British Academy and a winner of the prestigious Crafoord Prize on our staff.

Please tell us how your organisation defines its technicians:

Technical Services within the University of Sussex deliver a wide spectrum of skilled support for the delivery of teaching and research.

Technical staff at the University of Sussex are defined within the professional services, but are embedded within schools or areas to support specialist facilities, space and activities in laboratory, workshop, clinical and studio settings. IT staff are professionally homed in Sussex IT Services, however some specialist IT technicians are embedded within schools. Ensuring good links between both ITS and Technical Manager is underway.

Within Technical Services some staff are dedicated research technicians – externally funded on grants and usually on fixed term contracts. These staff report directly to their academic supervisors but are still professionally homed in Technical Services.

Within the ‘core’ technical team, which is funded by the University, there are two main job families (following the implementation of the technical Review, estimated completion 1st Aug 2022):

- (1) Specialist – responsible for the direct operation of specialist research facilities and equipment.
- (2) Management – including senior managers, managers and supervisors who are responsible for managing teams of technicians supporting broader aspects of research and teaching, but still with some specification in the work they undertake (e.g. science, biology, engineering, media, etc).

Entry-level positions work across both job roles and can progress up through either route. Some staff have also made successful transitions between the two roles in the course of their career progression up the grades.

Work has and is being undertaken to make sure there is an effective management structure in place to ensure that the skills and experience, professional development needs and profile are represented at a senior level by staff with appropriate knowledge, experience and expertise.

How many technicians are there in your organisation? Please provide some information on where they are based and/or how they are structured (in terms of subject/discipline/department):

There are currently c. 120 FTE technical staff employed by the University of Sussex. They support a diverse array of areas across seven schools/areas.

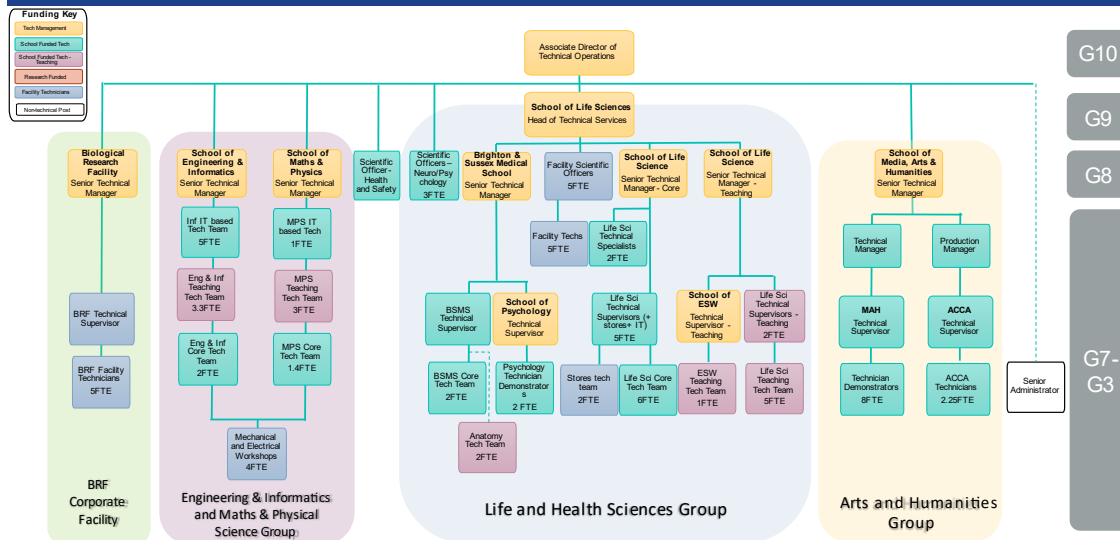
There are 95 FTE University funded posts and ~25 FTE research funded posts. This equates to salary costs of c. £3.8M for School funded posts and c. £1M of research contribution for research funded posts. Casual members of staff are also employed, however we are looking to ensure there are at least some annualised hour contracts for these staff.

The range of expertise, and skill base, is reflected in the breadth of grades, from Grade 3 to Grade 9 encompassing basic core support through to highly skilled bespoke “Scientific Officer” type functions.

The specialist areas the Sussex Technicians support include biochemistry, neuroscience, psychology, chemistry, medical research, genome damage and stability, mechanical workshops, microscope facilities, engineering, electronics, thermofluids, media, film, drama, music and more.

A schematic of the new structure for Technical Services across the University is below. This structure has been approved the Council of the University, after engagement with the schools and with technicians. This structure is set to be realised as of the 1st of August 2022. Four main groups of technicians have been identified and it is aimed that these groups will be closer aligned following the structure change. This will help ensure greater visibility between schools/areas and ensure suitable line management for technical staff.

New Organisation Chart – Simplified University Technician Structure



Technicians provide a wide range of support functions across the University. From research and teaching support, to outreach, public engagement, and knowledge exchange. Below is a list of the areas technicians are employed and a list of the facilities they support and manage;

Life and Health Sciences Group

- [School of Life Sciences](#)
- [Brighton and Sussex Medical School](#)
- [School of Psychology](#)
- [School of Education and Social Work](#)

Engineering, Informatics, Maths and Physical Sciences Group

- [School of Engineering and Informatics](#)
- [School of Maths and Physical Sciences](#)

Arts Group

- [School of Media, Arts and Humanities](#)
- [The Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts](#)

Technicians also support and manage a range of specialist facilities supporting research and teaching, including;

- [Biomedical Research Facility](#) (corporate facility)
- [Wolfson Centre for Biological Imaging](#)
- [Mass Spectrometry](#)
- [Nuclear Magnetic Resonance \(NMR\)](#)
- [X-ray Crystallography](#)
- [Electron Microscopy Imaging](#)
- [Cell Culture and Tissue Bank](#)

Please provide details of initiatives/programmes/activities that were already in place for the technical community within your organisation prior to becoming a signatory of the Technician Commitment:

Visibility:

Visibility initiatives at a University level tend to be aimed at all staff regardless of role or job family. These include:

- The University of Sussex externally facing website (www.sussex.ac.uk) and job vacancy site (www.sussex.ac.uk/about/jobs).
- Internal communications, Professional Services comms
- In some areas, faculty-based technical staff are named as co-authors on research papers, although this practice is more common in specialist research-focused roles and less so for laboratory technicians.
- Some senior technical staff are members of Senior Management and Leadership Teams, although this is variable across the University.
- Technical staff are sometimes introduced as part of the induction process for new starters/students (internal visibility)
- School or faculty strategy documentation sometimes covers technicians (internal visibility).

Recognition:

There has been no significant University wide mechanism for encouraging or supporting professional registration for technicians. It has been more of a local level decision and has led to a variable number of staff working towards or achieving professional registration, but overall low numbers. We attribute this to a lack of dedicated time to complete applications as well as no University wide initiative aimed at technicians.

Recognition of Personal Excellence:

Technical staff can (and have been) recognised through the University's internal award schemes, including:

- **The Sussex Education Awards:** The Sussex Education Awards are a unique opportunity for the University to say thank you to individual members of staff or teams, who have had, or are having, a positive impact on student's experience at Sussex. Technicians have been included in the nominees and winners of these awards for the past two years.
- **The Discretionary Pay Review** is a monetary award for outstanding achievements from staff across all levels and type of role.

Career Development:

As with all staff, technicians have a job description, outlining their job purpose, key accountability, responsibilities and a person specification.

Job descriptions for vacant roles were available via our jobs site, however these had not been reviewed across the University for a while.

These job descriptions were used for appraisal, Personal Development Plan (PDPs), recruitment and career development conversations. Technical roles are evaluated using HERA Job Evaluation methodology. Career progression is achieved via an application for a new or vacant role at a higher level or through the re-grading of an existing role, when the size and scope of a role increases based on the requirement of the school or area they work.

Training: The University's training includes; Leadership and Management training, IT and systems training, LinkedIn learning and Health and Safety eLearning. Specialist and bespoke technical training is offered internally by technicians or academic staff or booked through external training providers. Technicians also attend conferences and trade shows if required as a part of their role. Funding for training is localised in department, school and directorate budgets and access to financial support is varied across the University.

Appraisal and Personal Development Plan (PDPs): All technical staff were and are expected to have an annual appraisal. This provides an opportunity for staff to discuss their career development and aspirations with their line manager and may also inform a decision about recognition. Line managers and appraisers should always have attended appraisal training.

Sustainability:

The sustainability of a technical role or service has been variable across the University. There are a number of reasons for this, but mainly this depends on the size of a technical team or support service. Teams can vary from individual technicians to 5-6 supporting specific core duties. In the latter case it is clearly a possibility to identify points of failure and plan succession, whereas for a service reliant on a single technician this potentially becomes more difficult without a view across the broader University.

Recruitment and Apprenticeships:

Recruitment to technical roles follows a standard university procedure, whereby the roles and job description are identified and appropriately graded and then advertised via the jobs website. There is increased pressure on technical teams while roles are vacant for extended periods.

Some apprenticeships have been established in technical services, but there have been instances where these individuals have left upon completion of their course as no suitable role is available for them.

The Technician Commitment aims to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technical staff across higher education and research. Please tell us of any initiatives your organisation has put in place to address these themes since becoming a signatory of the Technician Commitment:

Technical Review

Sussex is currently undertaking a Technical Services Review, which looks to ensure the support in place matches what the schools and areas require. As part of this review, elements of the Technician Commitment have been interlinked with the plans for change.

This includes a review of line management arrangements for technicians, a Skills, Roles and Responsibilities Survey of all technical staff in partnership with the National Technician Development Centre (NTDC), rewriting of job descriptions to align across the University and set up defined career pathways.

Visibility:

The Steering Group for the Technical Review and Technician Commitment have membership from the Press & Communications office, which has allowed us to use Internal Communications, forums and technician specific email accounts to communicate and disseminate information to technical staff.

We have established a dedicated Technician webpage on the University webpages, allowing for more visibility of technicians as well as information on what they do, where they are based, the types of support they offer and the work we are doing on the Technician Commitment.

Our Technician Commitment Steering Group has a mix of academic, professional service and technical service membership. The aim of which is to help shape the service in line with academic demands but has also had significant benefits by increasing awareness and engagement among academic colleagues to the contribution technical staff make to research and teaching.

Recognition:

Technical Expertise;

New roles created to reflect technical specialists and expert careers as part of the technical job family and in the technical career framework. – e.g. Scientific Officer posts.

Career Development:

Establishing a clear and consistent career framework with technical roles identified at all levels in the organisational structure, aligned to other Job Families. All new technical roles are aligned to our job description framework, and all new roles in the technical review will have been approved by a relevant technical manager.

We are establishing clear full and dotted line responsibilities, so that all technicians are line managed by Technical Managers. Ensuring consistency in policies and procedures, as well as establishing career development lines.

Our technical career framework identifies pathways to technical specialist/experts as well as for technical managers and leaders.

Become a partner of the National Technician Development Centre (NTDC) to allow our technicians to access their career development tools.

A central training fund for technicians has been established, awarded based on an annual mini competition. This fund also pays for the partner fees for the NTDC and help with an annual technician conference which we hope to establish as part of the action plan. This can also be used to support professional registration, training and other career development opportunities.

Sustainability

We have undertaken a Skills Survey for all technicians across the University in partnership with the National Technicians Development Centre (NTDC), giving insight into the skill gaps of the technical cohort. The outputs from this survey continue to be assessed and future work on the Technical Commitment will include this information.

We wish to establish a clear framework around employing apprenticeships in technical service to help ensure successional change, retention of skills and minimal pressure on other members of staff if a period of vacancy occurs.

Please provide a 24-month action plan, detailing future plans to ensure your organisations addresses the themes of the Technician Commitment and details of how impact will be evidenced: (this may be detailed here or attached to this document as an appendix):

See separate spreadsheet outlining action plan

Please evidence how the ‘technician voice’ was present in the development and formation of the institutional action plan:

Throughout the work of the Technical Review several ‘town hall’ meetings were held to discuss plans and current ways of working. In addition, Technical Managers and Supervisors were engaged to discuss how the Technician Commitment could be actioned and how this would be undertaken.

The Steering group for the Technician Commitment at Sussex has representation from a technical manager or supervisor from each area there are technicians in the University.

Please confirm that your Technician Commitment status and action plan is published on your organisation’s website and provide the relevant URL here:

Yes - <https://wwwstage.sussex.ac.uk/staff/technicians/technical-commitment>



Signed (Technician Commitment Nominated Institutional Lead)

Date: 25/03/2022



Signed

(Technician Commitment Signatory – Leader of Institution)

Date: 30/03/2022