

April 2024

FAO: Emma McArdle
Project & Operations Manager
Technical Strategy & Operations
University of Exeter

Re: Technician Commitment – Self-Assessment & Action Plan

Dear Emma

We are delighted to write to signatories of the Technician Commitment following the recent stage three Self-Assessment and Action Plan submissions. Reviews were undertaken by a trained peer review panel, consisting of representatives from the Technician Commitment signatory community. All submissions received have now been assessed and the panellists are delighted to see the positive engagement and evidence of impact of the initiative.

Please find below the feedback from the reviewers of the University of Exeter submission.

1. **Comments on technical staff structures (to include any changes to these over the past 6 years in response to the Technician Commitment)**

The panel were incredibly pleased to read University of Exeter's (UoEx) submission and thank you for giving us the opportunity to do so. The team have submitted a well presented and comprehensive self-assessment and action plan supplemented with impactful reports and an impressive technical services strategic plan.

The University of Exeter was restructured in 2022 and report that the move of technical services to the Research Division has been positive although the panel were concerned about the impact on non-research focussed technical staff and what efforts have been made to make them feel included in the new Research Division.

There has been considerable progress made at the University of Exeter in raising the visibility of technicians and their roles by "going back to basics" by for example, reviewing and re-structuring of the technical services and re-naming their technical job titles. The team have been renamed and rebranded from technical services to "technical strategy and operations" and now have a clear strategy for the team to work towards. Effort has been put into standardising technical job descriptions across all faculties, with a focus on transferrable skills and competencies rather than technical specifics, which would encourage movement of staff around the organisation with a "squiggly career." Most importantly they have put the

word technician back into the job titles, removing manager where it is not appropriate. This excellent work has been overseen by the Technician Commitment working group.

Their 250 technical staff sit in academic facing areas only and there has been a separation from the more manual job roles which again is a positive move by showing technicians as distinct to professional services; a topic often discussed at sector level. Some indication of how this has been received would be useful as it could be used as an example of best practice for others to refer to when discussing in their own organisations.

The University of Exeter also detail how they are expanding their definition to include IT and digital technical staff including library and specialist staff in museums. This is a positive move and links with the technical specialist pathway being discussed at sector level currently.

It is both excellent and commendable that the institution has appointed a Director of Skills and Technical Services, who can really drive forward the service and aims of the Technician Commitment. The director is clearly having an impact already as evidenced by their impressive strategy document and strong stage 3 application.

2. Comments on governance, leadership and reporting lines of the Technician Commitment at the institution, along with details on how it is resourced, and information on how the organisation has engaged with the wider community within and beyond their institution. How has this developed since they became a signatory?

The Institution is very engaged with their technical workforce again driven and coordinated by director of technical skills which shows the positive impact having such a role has. The Technician Commitment Working group is described as having representation from all levels of technician, however later in the document there is no technical representation seen below Assistant Technical Manager – the panel wondered if assistant technicians, technicians and technical specialists could be involved in this work as well. However, it is good to see membership includes Organisational Development representation including an apprenticeships manager which will really help embed Technician Commitment work especially around career development.

The working group report to research and impact executive committee through their APVC for research and impact which means they have a voice and advocate in the senior leadership team which is vital to champion positive change for their technicians.

The group have a technical skills and strategy operational budget which they try to recover costs via grants and sponsorship. The panel would have loved to have seen more detail here as again this sounds like beacon activity that could be shared with the sector.

The Attribution Policy provides convincing evidence of impact across the institution. The culture at Exeter report again demonstrates engagement with their technical workforce.

The University of Exeter is very well networked externally both in GW4 consortium (Bristol, Bath, and Cardiff Universities) and with wider technical networks. They are expanding external networking further with the southwest network currently being created. All of this will really benefit all technical staff in the region through collaborative working and sharing best practice, especially as they are focussing their efforts to their perceived gaps relating to Technician Commitment and TALENT recommendations.

The panel were very pleased that technical support was specifically mentioned under their "People and Culture Strategy" in REF under each unit of assessment returned and specifically wish to congratulate you on this – well done!

The University of Exeter have done some fabulous work over the last few years and are clearly huge champions for the Technician Commitment, but the panel did wonder how much input 'technicians on the ground' have had into the process and if this could be expanded out further?

3. Comments on the RAG analysis provided

The RAG analysis provided is comprehensive and evidences a significant amount of work by the institution across the themes of the Technician Commitment. The institution has been successful in delivering their 2021- 2023 action plan, with twenty-six actions categorised as green and one amber. This is without doubt a tremendous success and they should be congratulated for formulating a realistic detailed action plan and then delivering it.

It is of note that action ten being amber was not a failure to deliver but an action that is still ongoing. Indeed, rolling out professional recognition across all HEIs is observed to be slow progress and something the sector needs further work with The Science Council on to help push this out in their Institutions.

For action point two we were impressed with the newsletters and ask you consider putting these on an external facing site for other organisations to engage with. For action point three: we would have liked to have seen evidence on technicians receiving recognition as contributors / authors on papers along with some narrative on how attribution is being monitored since the guidelines have been produced.

Some further narrative on how your technicians' views are heard and noted would be good although the technicians' advocates scheme sounds good– the technician lunches for example are a great idea - are they open for all staff and students to attend or is it for other technical staff only?

Overall, the panel are extremely impressed with this submission; so much progress has been seen in the work of the Technician Commitment at Exeter and huge congratulations to you all.

4. Comments on how they have evidenced how their action plan has had/is having impact

We very much appreciated how the actions were matched to TALENT recommendations which made it easy for the panel to refer to the bigger picture. We also enjoyed the quotes given but felt it would have been useful to know who and in what role was giving the feedback to understand the impact of the quotes.

The Research Culture Exeter lens document was a fantastic way of showing engagement as was the additional evidence around technician awards and prizes.

The newsletters also evidence the splendid work along with the stories and blogs the technicians themselves have written on activities they have attended such as the UK-ITSS Technician Commitment Herschel leadership programme. It would be great to know if there has been any progression seen from those staff that have been through the programme.

The plan to work with HR to review the PDR process and revisit the training and development needs is a positive move and demonstrates how Exeter are really changing things for the better.

There is a lot of detail around impact given in the application via several resources and thank you for providing it. Exeter have invested in their technical services and its clearly having an impact.

5. Comments on of how the institution is enacting the recommendations of the TALENT Commission (<https://www.mitalent.ac.uk/theTALENTcommission>)

The institution has visibly mapped to the recommendations throughout in the action plan reflection and an additional section is also included. Having the Director of Technical Skills in place has really had an impact and many recommendations have been met or are well on their way to being addressed. They demonstrate they understand the importance of the TALENT recommendations.

We would have liked to have seen their technical staff EDI data along with some narrative around any actions to address any issues / gaps and then seen these actions translated through put into their future action plan under sustainability (of technical skills).

6. Comments on the Institutions 36-month action plan

The panel liked the colour coding and clarity of how the action plan is laid out. We would have liked to have seen a lot more detail under each strategic goal on how exactly it was going to be delivered and by whom, although detail around measuring impact is a good thing to include. There are several actions in their strategy document, could this have been lifted into the 36-month action plan / mapped in some way? We know the institution has a lot of excellent plans and ideas but linking the two and detailing how these are going to be

delivered is still very much needed along with who will help deliver them.

At first, we were not sure about the environmental slant detailed under Sustainability, which relates to sustaining the technical workforce and technical skills. However, sustainability frameworks such as LEAF and My Green Labs are an excellent way to upskill technical staff to deliver and expand into in such areas and this area is only going to become increasingly more important over the next few years.

We would have liked to have seen more detail around outreach activities, and details on T-level and apprenticeships such as numbers and targets to appoint over the next three years.

Exeter have been very proactive in their work around the Technicians Commitment. They have strong leadership and management which has enabled them to deliver on the previous plan and submit a well-structured and progressive 36-month action plan to carry things forward. There are some fantastic successes which you should be proud of and share with the wider technical community.

Overall, this is an excellent report and action plan, indeed the University of Exeter should be congratulated on their success and thank you for the opportunity to review this submission.

Congratulations on your positive progress. We look forward to continuing to work with you throughout the implementation of your Action Plan and to supporting the on-going development of technicians at University of Exeter to further increase visibility, recognition, opportunity and sustainability of this vital community.

In recognition of this submission, the University of Exeter will be presented with an Award of Impact at the forthcoming Technician Commitment Signatory Event, taking place on 15 May 2024. If you would like to attend please email Carly Dellar (carly.dellar@nottingham.ac.uk) for further details.

Helen Pain

Dr Helen Pain MBE CSci CChem FRSC
**Chief Executive, Royal Society of Chemistry
& Chair of the Technician Commitment Steering
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& Strategy and Technician Commitment**