

Evaluating Impact through Self-Assessment & Future Action Planning

Organisation: University of Exeter

Name of Institutional Lead: Dr Gail Reeves (Head of Technical Services)

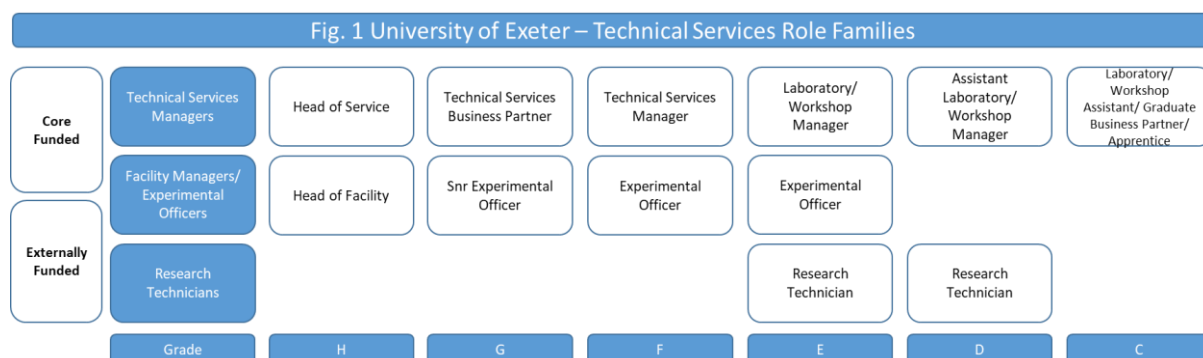
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Please provide an overview of technical staff structures in your organisation.

Technical Services (TS) at the University of Exeter provide a flexible and agile technical services staffing structure, to support research and teaching in five of the University's six colleges spread over seven sites in Devon and Cornwall. We are a predominantly STEMM facing service, but also provide support to disciplines in our Humanities and Social Sciences Colleges in the areas of Drama, Digital Humanities, Archaeology and the Graduate School of Education.

In 2015, technical staff at the University of Exeter were brought into single professional home and the role of Head of Technical Services was created. We therefore have insight into exactly how many technical staff are employed, in which roles, across the whole institution. This has many advantages operationally and for the visibility and professional development of our talented staff. Our single professional home for technical staff has enabled us to implement consistent role profiles and job descriptions, and to ensure consistency of responsibilities and grades across the whole service. This has embedded fairness across the service, but crucially this transparency in roles and responsibilities has also enabled many staff to successfully apply for roles on higher grades within TS, in other disciplines/facilities.

Our staff are separated into three technical job families (Fig. 1): (1) Technical Managers; (2) Facility Heads/ Experimental Officers (EOs); and (3) Research Technicians. In this structure, our Technical Managers support specific spaces and buildings and Experimental Officers support specialist equipment and facilities, including those embedded in departments and the University's core research facilities. Technical Services also provides a professional home for fixed-term research technicians and EOs employed directly on externally funded projects; these technical staff are managed by academic PIs and are also supported professionally and pastorally through our core TS structure.



Staffing Profile

Technical Services currently employ 233 members of staff (214.4 FTE), of which 33.5% are on fixed term contracts and 14.9% are part time. 73 technical staff (31%) are externally funded and employed as research technicians/EOs. The remaining 160 technical staff are funded by the University to support teaching and research activities in specialist spaces and facilities embedded in colleges. The number of staff by grade is shown in Fig 3. below and our gender profile by grade in Fig. 4. Across the whole service, 54% of the team are female and 46% are male.

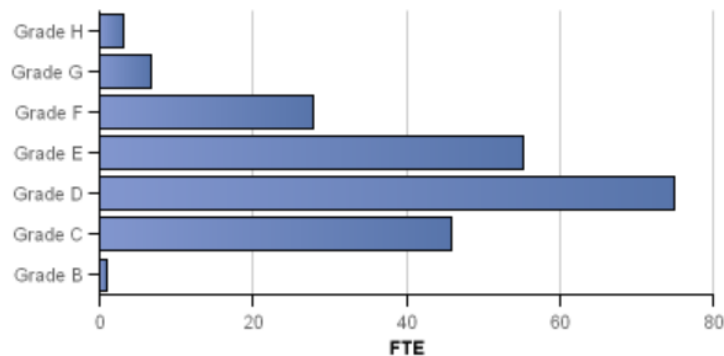


Fig. 3 Number of staff by grade in Technical Services.

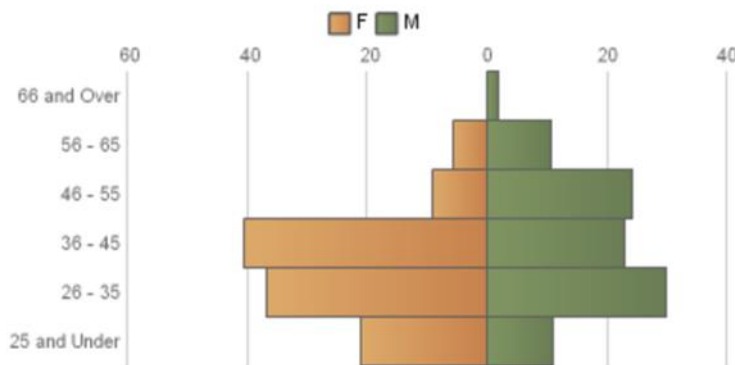
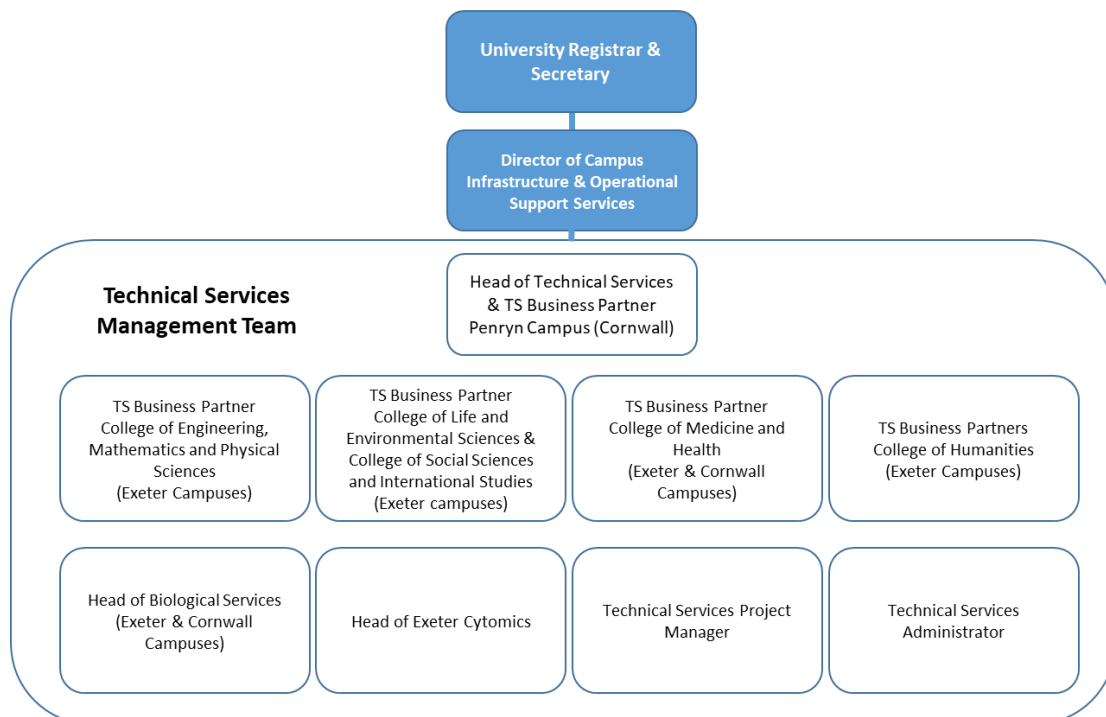


Fig. 4 Number of staff by age and gender in Technical Services.

Management of Technical Services

Our Technical Services operating model emphasises local matrix management between academic staff and technical services staff; coordinated at College level by Technical Services Business Partners. The Head of Technical Services reports to the Director of Campus Infrastructure and Operational Support Services (CIOSS) who is a member of the Vice Chancellors Executive Group (VCEG). The Technical Services senior management team is outlined in Fig. 2 below.

Fig. 2 University of Exeter – Technical Services Management and Reporting Structure



Please tell us about your institution’s approach to the Technician Commitment since becoming a signatory. Comments on governance and reporting lines, resources and wider community engagement are welcomed.

Since becoming a signatory in 2018, our Technician’s Commitment Action Plan has been enacted and monitored by a Technician Commitment Committee, made up of volunteer technical services staff from a wide range of disciplines and geographic locations across our campuses. Individual staff have taken the lead on specific actions, and where needed, requests for resources and support have been escalated through to the TS management team so that the service-wide non-pay budget can be deployed in a targeted way in support of our action plan objectives.

Our Technical Services project manager has taken overall responsibility for the operational delivery of the action plan, organising meetings, and supporting technical staff with the administrative tasks needed to bring our action plan to life. For example, this has included bringing together teams to organise our annual conferences, publishing our TS newsletter, supporting staff with events and networking, and the administration of our service wide training budget to allow staff to attend conferences and training external to the University.

The Head of Service has also been given regular opportunities to publicise the importance of the Technician Commitment and the work of Technical Services staff at Exeter through presentations to the University’s Professional Services Leadership Team (PSLT) and Senior Management Group (SMG). The former is comprised of all Directors of Service and the latter all senior leaders at the University – both academic and PS.

This application and action plan has been submitted to and approved by the Vice Chancellor’s Executive Group prior to submission.

Please provide a RAG analysis on your institutional 24-month action plan indicating which activities you have undertaken and completed (green), which are in progress (amber) and which are still to be carried out (red). Please provide an explanation for those categorised as red.

Please refer to Appendix 1.

Please tell us how you evidence that your action plan has had/is having impact?

Evidence of the work we have undertaken to deliver our action plan over the last 2.5 years is included in Appendix 1. However, we have taken the opportunity to provide some highlights below:

Visibility and Recognition

As described above, we have a detailed understanding of our technical community at Exeter and work hard to ensure that the contribution technicians make to teaching and research is valued and recognised at every level in the University. Over 120 'Above and Beyond' awards were made to technical staff in the last academic year, with nominations put forward by Technical Services colleagues, academics and other professional service staff. Numerous technical staff have also been nominated for our Professional Services Recognition Awards and we were delighted in 2018 when Daniela Farina won in the 'Impact' category for her management of laboratory facilities in the Environment and Sustainability Institute. In the same year, Spencer Churchyard, stores assistant in the Living Systems Institute, was shortlisted for Hero/ine of the Year. Both were nominated by academic colleagues, demonstrating their visibility and the immense value placed on their contribution. Many technical staff have also been nominated by students in the annual teaching awards; we are delighted that Calum Beeson, Geology Laboratory Manager, won in 2018 for Most Supportive Member of Staff.

We are extremely proud that the contribution of our technical staff is also recognised in high-impact publications. Of note are a first author publication in *Cell* by research technician Mariann Landsberger, from the Westra- Van Houte research group, in the Environment and Sustainability Institute, and a *Nature Communications* article published this year by Prof Darren Nutting in Physics with three members of technical staff as co-authors – Hong Chang, Nick Cole and Adam Woodgate.

Career Development and Sustainability

We are proud of our track record in providing career development opportunities for our technicians, with 15% of our current staff having successfully applied for roles on higher grades within the University. We are committed to maintaining and improving our technician pipeline through a range of entry-level initiatives to attract and train talented technical staff – including apprenticeships, and through the University's Graduate Business Partner and Student Campus Partnership Schemes. Eight staff have successfully completed apprenticeships at level 3 and 4 and a further four staff are currently enrolled on apprenticeship programmes (ranging from level 3 to 6).

In 2018, we trialled development positions to enable progression from Technical Manager to Technical Services Business Partner. This was in recognition of the large jump in scope and responsibility needed to move into a college-wide Business Partner role. In 2018, two staff successfully applied for these development roles, and with a clear development plan in place made the full transition over a period of 18 months from grade F to G.

We also support our staff to register with professional bodies and to work towards a range of chartered qualifications – as evidenced in the case studies below. We also support two technical staff members every year to attend the Aurora programme – Advance HE's leadership development

initiative for women, and we fund an annual institutional subscription to HEaTED (Higher Education and Technician Educational Development) from the Technical Services budget.

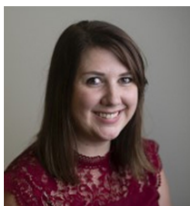
We have taken the opportunity to highlight several case studies of staff members below, illustrating their professional and career development journeys at Exeter. Our aim is to highlight how several strands of our Technician Commitment action plan have combined to enable these staff to progress their technical careers at Exeter.



Sam Bailey – Laboratory Manager (Sport and Health Sciences) & Facilities Coordinator (Mireille Gillings Neuroimaging Centre)

Sam joined the University of Exeter in 2012 as a Lab Assistant in the department of Sport and Health Sciences (SHS) on our St Luke's Campus. In 2015 he successfully applied for a secondment opportunity in the College of Medicine and Health and spent two years as a manager in the Learning Support Research Centre, also at St Luke's. In 2017 Sam returned to a full time role as Laboratory Manager in SHS and a year later enrolled on a Level 6 apprenticeship course studying Applied Business Management, leading to a Chartered Management qualification. Most recently Sam has successfully applied for a part time role back in the College of Medicine and Health as Facilities Coordinator for the newly established Mireille Gillings Neuroimaging Centre. He now balances two roles in SHS and CMH.

Sam told us: "During my time working in Technical Services, I sought to develop and progress by undertaking extra qualifications. I have been supported by both my Line Manager and Technical Services to receive funding, undertake courses such as a degree in Applied Business Management and to complete the ILM Level 3 Leadership and Management qualification, both of which have helped me learn and develop management skills to support my career progression."



Sara Honey – Technical Services Manager (Centre for Medical Mycology)

Sara joined the University in 2010 as a Laboratory Assistant in the Biosciences Departmental teaching laboratory. She briefly moved to a role in industry in 2015 before returning to Exeter the same year as Assistant Laboratory Manager in the Medical Sciences and Imaging teaching laboratories on our St Luke's campus.

During her time as Assistant Lab Manager Sara became actively involved in a wide range of events and initiatives in Technical Services. She was a founding member of the Technician's Commitment Committee and represented Technical Services at Exeter at a range of external and outreach events, including the Big Bang Fair, New Scientist Live and the Technician Commitment Signatory event in 2019. Sara achieved Registered Scientist with the Institute of Science and Technology in 2018 and that year went on to successfully apply for the role of Technical Services Manager for the Centre for Medical Mycology, making the transition from a teaching to a research focussed environment. Sara has also played a lead role in the organisation of our last two Technical Services Conferences and is currently working towards Chartered Scientist status with the IST.

Sara told us "My advice to other technicians is to be proactive in building a strong network of contacts. Technical Services staff at Exeter cover a broad range of disciplines and skillsets – use this to make connections, support each other and encourage mentor-mentee relationships wherever you can. These relationships have been invaluable to my career progression."



Georgina Murray – Sequencing Technician (Exeter Sequencing Service)



Gina joined the University of Exeter's Sequencing Service in 2017 as a Laboratory Technician Apprentice working towards a level 3 BTEC. She subsequently achieved a distinction and went on to successfully apply for a permanent role at the University in the sequencing team. Gina has continued with her studies and is now enrolled on a level 5 Laboratory Scientist course with South Devon College. Gina's specialist skills allow her to support sequencing projects on the MiSeq and NovaSeq 6000. She undertakes DNA sample preparation following protocols including; Nextera XT, NEB Ultra and 1S Swift and is in the process of starting to undertake RADSeq, RNASeq and TruSeq sample preparations.

Gina is now an integral member of the team in the sequencing service; we feel exceptionally lucky to have such a dedicated and talented member of staff and look forward to seeing her career flourish.

Gina told us "When I started my Apprenticeship back in 2017, I had no previous knowledge or understanding of DNA Sequencing. It was as much of a challenge for my colleagues to take me on, as it was for me starting a role with no knowledge! I have had incredible support over the past 3 years, and that support structure has most certainly contributed to my recent achievements. I have just started a Higher Apprenticeship to expand my knowledge and to gain the relevant qualifications for me to progress further. No two days are the same, and I am still gaining new practical and theoretical skills daily. I cannot wait to see where this opportunity takes me in the future."



Steve Spaul – Technical Services Business Partner (College of Engineering, Mathematics and Physical Sciences)



Steve joined the University of Exeter's Clinical Research Facility in 2012 as a Research Technician working alongside UoE and NHS colleagues to deliver technical services support to the EU-funded "Diabetes Research on Patient Stratification (DIRECT)" study. In 2017 he became a member of the Institute for Science and Technology (IST) and began work towards becoming a Registered Scientist, which he achieved the following year. In 2018 he successfully applied for a secondment opportunity as Laboratory Manager in the newly established Living Systems Institute, where he was responsible for delivering the technical operations to laboratories supporting 27 research groups across three science colleges. In the same year Steve became a mentor and assessor for the IST and has held multiple workshops at Exeter for staff interested in professional accreditation. In 2020 Steve successfully applied for the role of Technical Services Business Partner for the College of Engineering, Mathematics and Physical Sciences and is currently working towards Chartered Scientists status with the IST.

Steve told us "I have found Technical Services an excellent environment to develop my skills and knowledge alongside providing a service to my academic colleagues. The encouragement from my managers and leaders in Technical Services has helped me to achieve my goals. Each opportunity and apparent set back has helped me to move forward and in turn I have tried to encourage my own team. In this way, Technical Services continues to develop the University of Exeter's technical staff, whether in terms of role, grade, skillset or personal growth."

Please provide details of any additional initiatives/programmes/activities aligned to your Technician Commitment that are not covered in your original action plan.

Appendix 1 documents a range of activities that were not articulated in our original action plan, but which have been initiated by the Technician Commitment Committee since 2018. In addition, there are several recent initiatives that are of note and highlighted below:

Governance

In order to improve the visibility of our operations, our organisational effectiveness and our work towards the Technician Commitment we have recently changed our Technical Services Steering Group to become an Academic Advisory Group. This advisory group is now chaired by one of the University's Pro-Vice Chancellors and includes academic representatives from each college. This change in governance will improve the alignment of Technical Services with the Colleges' academic research and teaching strategies. Importantly this will also facilitate participation and visibility of Technical Services in the upcoming development of the renewed University Strategy.

The TS Academic Advisory Group has also been invited to feed directly into the University's Research Operations Group and subsequently into termly reporting to the University's Research and Impact Executive Group (RIEG). RIEG is chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Impact and Director of Research Services. This change in governance is in recognition of the importance of technical services in maintaining and developing excellence in research.

Communications

Communication across the whole of Technical Services has previously been a challenge but since the move to working over MS Teams during the COVID-19 pandemic, we now have fortnightly all-staff meetings. We regularly have over 80 attendees and it has provided the Head of Technical Services with an opportunity to be more visible and to communicate service-wide updates and initiatives on regular basis. Feedback has been extremely positive, and we are committed to keeping these all-staff meetings in the calendar bi-weekly from now on.

We have also worked hard to refresh our Technical Services newsletter and our new-look newsletter was launched in October 2020. It contains updates and success stories from across the service along with job vacancies and opportunities for training and professional development.

Competency and Training

During 2020, we have been working to improve our competency and training tool for technical staff (CATTTS), with a particular focus on health and safety and management effectiveness. We now have a framework matrix by role and grade for all positions in our service. This framework outlines the clear transition between grade in scope and responsibility for both H&S and management, in a way that is consistent across the whole service. The framework will be rolled out in early 2021.

We are constantly looking for ways in which we can attract talent into Technical Services at Exeter, and we are currently exploring ways in which we can provide placements for students working towards the newly formed T-level qualifications in science and engineering. Discussions are in an early stage, but we are hoping to develop a pilot programme in 2021 in the Exeter Cytomics Facility led by Dr Raif Yuecel.

Please provide a 36-month action plan; detailing plans to ensure your organisation continues to address 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). Please evidence how the 'technician voice' was present in the development and formation of the 36-month action plan.

Our 36-month action plan contained in Appendix 2 has been developed with contributions from across the whole service, during a series of workshop events, held over MS Teams during October and November 2020. In total we held eight workshops, which in turn focussed on the themes of visibility and recognition and then career development and sustainability. These workshops were repeated, so that as many staff as possible could attend. Small break out groups were facilitated by senior staff, who recorded suggested actions and feedback. These contributions were all captured and are consolidated within this document and truly represent the voice of our technical community at Exeter.

Please confirm that your Technician Commitment status and 3-year action plan is published on your organisation's website and provide the relevant URL here:

WE WILL ADD THIS ONCE APPROVED BY VCEG.

Technician Commitment

Signed.....(Technician Commitment Nominated Institutional Lead)

Date:

Signed.....(Technician Commitment Signatory – Leader of Institution)

Date: