

The Technician Commitment at York: One Year (and a bit) In

As part of the drive to develop **Career Pathways for Technicians at York**, the University became a founding signatory of the [Technician Commitment](#), a university and research institution initiative, led by a steering group of sector bodies, with support from the Science Council and the 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. The Commitment was formally signed by Brian Fulton on 07 April 2017, and the institution was tasked with carrying out a formal [self-assessment](#), and developing a [24 month action plan](#), which was signed by the Vice Chancellor and President and submitted to the Science Council at the end of June 2018.

The Technician Commitment Steering Group, chaired by Brian Fulton asked for a paper to assess where we are on delivering the strategic objective of developing **Career Pathways for Technicians at York** and embedding the Technician Commitment at York.

VISIBILITY

Ensuring technicians are **visible** within and beyond higher education and research institutions

Technicians at York have increased **visibility** within the institution: since a group of volunteer technicians took over the running of our technicians network, [TechYork](#), it is much more active, running events, conferences and branching out into organising cross-departmental training. York technicians have

also been asked to present at [regional meetings](#), featured in magazine articles, and we have had the first technician to feature on the [Technician Commitment's newly set up blog](#). York was one of the four institutions invited to contribute to the Technician Commitment: One Year In [video](#) and [report](#).

Technicians at York have begun to engage with **recognition** as part of the commitment. As is seen in many institutions, uptake of professional registration has been slow, although there are technicians who have successfully completed the process and act as [champions](#). TechYork arranged a workshop on professional registration and plan to run a follow up session with support from the Science Council.

RECOGNITION

Supporting technicians to gain **recognition** through registration

Career progression is at the heart of what we are trying to achieve through the Technician Commitment as only approximately one in ten technicians could see a career pathway at York. Through formal affiliation to the National Technician Development Centre ([NTDC](#)), we have developed new [grade role descriptors](#), aligned nationally to the Higher Education Technical Taxonomy ([HETT](#)). These descriptors have been made available to all staff at York: clear comparisons can be made across grades to show the progression required in skills and experience enabling development of career pathways.

DEVELOPMENT

Enabling career **progression** for technicians through clear pathways

Nationally the major strategic risk within the technical community is **sustainability** of skills and expertise. At York we have no information on the size of this challenge as we had no data on the skills held within the technician community. With the support of the NTDC we have run a [skills survey](#) of all [technicians within academic departments](#) to have a greater understanding of the potential size of this problem.

SUSTAINABILITY

Safeguarding technical skills across the organisation by **using** and **developing** expertise

IMPACT

Assessing the impact of **actions** to support the commitment

The initial self-assessment of the **impact of actions** was very well received with extremely positive feedback from the Science Council. A rather more challenging assessment will be carried out in **June 2020** when we will be required to self assess against the publicly available institutional action plan; with its SMART

objectives, and we will be asked to submit a new 36 month action plan, as well as comment on overall progress to achieve the vision of developing **Career Pathways for Technicians at York**.

Technician Commitment Action Plan: Progress

The University's Technician Commitment Action Plan is publicly available on both the [University](#), and the [Technician Commitment](#) websites; alongside other institutions' action plans and as such we can easily be challenged on progress, so we must be self-critical. A simple, strategic level SWOT analysis seemed to be the most appropriate methodology to use for this.

Strengths

A real strength of York is the high-profile visibility of our work on a regional and national level. Both Simon Breeden (SWB) and Lucy Hudson (LCH) have been appointed as Technician Commitment Self-Assessment reviewers as well as [Specialist Advisors to the NTDC](#). SWB and LCH have been advising a number of institutions on various aspects of activities around technician development: including Queen's University Belfast and Imperial College, London: we have been invited to speak at Technician Commitment signatory events (Tower of London) and present on behalf of the Technician Commitment/Science Council (University of Bradford). This has given York a significant national presence resulting in, amongst many other benefits, securing the Institute of Science and Technology National Technical Conference 2020 for York, (~300 delegates). Engagement with a significant core of technicians within academic departments is also a strength.



Weakness

Although there is good awareness of the Technician Commitment within the technician community at York, real engagement is still sporadic and focused predominantly in the Departments of Biology and Chemistry: in this regard the strength of SWB and LCH could also be viewed as a weakness. We are unclear as to high level awareness of the Technician Commitment, as there appears to be little alignment of the commitment with other strategic activities (for example, REF 2021, Athena SWAN, Professional@York). It is currently difficult to see how that institutional alignment would be attained as there is no mechanism to embed this across the organisation. It is also unclear who will formally lead on the self-assessment process that needs to begin now.

Opportunities

The high profile visibility of York means there are opportunities for us to lead regionally/nationally, and within the Russell Group in this arena, and so a regional N8+ consortium will be progressed. York should target becoming an [Employer Champion](#) with the Science Council within the next 12 months to publicly underscore its commitment to technicians, and strategic recruitment of apprentices (at least one per technical academic department) into the institution needs to be progressed. The IST 2020 conference (September 2020) is an opportunity to showcase to the sector York taking these opportunities.

Threats

The biggest threat to delivery on the Technician Commitment is the skills survey. Inviting technicians to engage with this survey, we have asked a question that we must be prepared to answer: we cannot allow this to stagnate or staff will become disengaged, possibly permanently. To satisfactorily close the feedback loop with technicians across all academic departments will be challenging as the (Faculty/Institutional) structures to manage this are currently not in place. The threat of organisational change coming immediately on the back of the skills survey is one that should be recognised and managed. The survey output is not yet known but undoubtedly outcomes will need investment of staff time and (training) budget which will require buy-in at all levels. This will take significant time out of those coordinating the feedback and so faculty buyout of time for colleagues is noted and appreciated.

Summary

York has made great strides in engagement with technicians in academic departments and in **recognising** and celebrating the value of this group of staff. Our national **visibility** brings opportunities for York to be at the forefront of positive change for an increasingly strategically important group of staff, and deliver the vision of developing **career pathways** for technicians at York, to ensure the **sustainability** of the workforce. To deliver the Technician Commitment at York will take hard work but will result in mutual gains for all.