

Technician Commitment

Evaluating Impact through Self-Assessment & Future Action Planning

Organisation: Open University

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Profile of organisation.

The Open University (OU) is the largest academic institution in the UK and a world leader in flexible distance learning. Since it began in 1969, the OU has taught more than 1.8 million students and has almost 170,000 current students, including more than 15,000 overseas.

Over 70% of students are in full-time or part-time employment, and four out of five FTSE 100 companies have sponsored staff to take OU courses.

In the latest assessment exercise for university research (Research Excellence Framework, 2014), nearly three quarters (72%) of The Open University's research was assessed as 4 or 3 star – the highest ratings available – and awarded to research that is world-leading or internationally excellent. The Open University is unique among UK universities having both an access mission and demonstrating research excellence.

The OU has a 42 year partnership with the BBC and has moved from late-night lectures in the 1970s to co-producing around 35 prime-time series a year such as The Hunt, Exodus: Our Journey to Europe, Full Steam Ahead and The Big C and Me on TV, and Inside Science, The Bottom Line and Thinking Allowed on Radio4. Our OU viewing and listening events attracted 250m people in the UK last year which prompted more than 780k visits to the OU's free learning website, OpenLearn: www.open.edu/openlearn/

Regarded as the UK's major e-learning institution, the OU is a world leader in developing technology to increase access to education on a global scale. Its vast 'open content portfolio' includes free study units, as well as games, videos and academic articles and has reached audiences of up to 9.8 million across a variety of online formats including OpenLearn, YouTube and iTunes U.

For further information please visit: www.open.ac.uk

How the Open University defines its Technicians

The Open University is unique. It provides distance learning and therefore there are no undergraduates permanently on Site. The majority of our technical team support research activities, postgraduate students and on campus practical sessions.

The Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) technicians comprise of specialist Analytical Project Officers, Technical Project Officers, Laboratory Technicians and Laboratory Managers, all of whom play a vital role in the delivery of research and teaching excellence.

Our remit has recently extended to support the OpenSTEM laboratories which provide practical teaching in aspects of STEM to the distance learning community. Using remotely accessible hardware for laboratory and exploratory studies ranging from electronics to chemical synthesis and from microscopes to telescopes, students are able to access the various instruments and other remote controlled resources virtually anytime from anywhere with an internet connection.

We are in the second year of delivering a number of optional schools to deliver practical skills to students.

Number of technicians in the organisation and where they are based

A team of sixty three technical support staff:-

Three in the Biomedical Research Unit;

Four in the School of Life Health and Chemical Sciences;

Three in Electron Microscopy;

Eight in the School of Environment, Earth and Ecosystem Sciences;

Ten in the Ecosystem and Geobiology Laboratories;

Four in the Research, Design and Engineering Workshop;

Sixteen in the School of Engineering and Innovation;

Ten in the School of Physical Sciences;

Four in the Open Science Teaching Laboratories;

One Head of Laboratory Facilities.

Details of initiatives, programmes, activities which were in place for the technical community prior to becoming a signatory of the Technician Commitment.

- Technical staff were encouraged to apply for professional registration;
- STEM hosted a number of Science Council workshops;
- Monthly Laboratory Managers meetings held where literature and news from the Science Council was circulated and training requirements discussed;
- Regular Technical Team meetings Chaired by the Lab Manager for team. Concerns arising fed into the Lab Managers meeting;
- Internal and external CPD courses arranged:- H&S, equipment maintenance, techniques, workshops and conferences;
- Going the Extra Mile Awards (GEM) submitted throughout the year to acknowledge outstanding contribution above and beyond the remit;
- Merit Awards awarded once a year for outstanding technical performance.

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.

The Open University is an Employer Champion and as such:-

- Provides the time for staff to apply for professional registration during worktime and facilitates this process through Science Council led workshops. We promote the use of a mentoring system to offer mentoring opportunities for staff who have achieved professional registration to mentor new applicants through the application process. This encourages an informal peer community as candidates go through the process. STEM Staff Development funds the registration fees.
- Ensures a comprehensive program for CPD is in place and encourages engagement with this to ensure retention of professional registration. Staff have access to a wide range of external and internal courses. Staff are encouraged to attend at least two external professional networking events a year which are relevant to their discipline. Those staff in specialist safety roles attend annual CPD to ensure that their specialist knowledge is up to date. We encourage and support technical exchange visits with colleagues at other Higher Education Institutions to further expand the development opportunities available to our technical staff. The STEM Faculty holds a budget for staff training purposes and we have internal support to organise development events. Colleagues identify learning requirements and report progress in annual appraisal discussions. We have started to formally document participation in training activities through our internal software system to improve individual CPD records.
- We formally recognise our staffs achievements by way of internal communication channels such as the Faculty Newsletter and OU Life to highlight and celebrate staff who have achieved professional registration. The Executive Dean highlights all achievements at the annual Support Staff Conference. The Open University has an annual Merit Award scheme. 20% of Support Staff are awarded each year. This takes the form of either one off payments for outstanding achievement, an incremental pay increase to those who have sustained an achievement. Additionally team awards are strongly encouraged and these take the form of a social activity. Going the Extra Mile awards (GEM) can be awarded throughout the year for work above and beyond. GEMS are to be awarded to recognise staff who have achieved professional registration.
- Technical Staff in the STEM Faculty are encouraged to apply for professional registration by their Line Managers. We have hosted a Science Council visits and presentations with regards to the registration process. These are well attended and well received. Our Directors of Teaching and Employability Services are currently working with the Science Council to explore how to showcase professional registration to Open University undergraduates who are working in STEM roles. Over time we anticipate the involvement of successful staff registrants in online workshops for students considering this step. We are keen to roll out registration opportunities to all scientific and engineering staff across the organisation.
- The STEM Faculty is currently discussing succession planning challenges and possible solutions. The challenge is to persuade busy teams to accept that mentoring apprentices is a long term, valuable investment. We are to be awarded three apprentices and are in the process of planning an exciting schedule for them;
- As an Employer Champion we promote the Faculty of STEM as a Science Council Champion and include professional registration as desirable in the further particulars

of new posts. We anticipate that registrants will use the competence framework in their annual appraisal discussions.

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:

Theme	Activities
<p>Visibility</p> <p>Ensure that technicians within the organisation are identifiable and that the contribution of technicians is visible within and beyond the institution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instigate a consistent policy to ensure that where technicians have contributed to research outputs they are acknowledged or named as authors; • Technical conference to highlight expertise and equipment available to research; • Ensure that the Lab Support web page is reviewed and current; • Produce a regular e newsletter.
<p>Recognition</p> <p>Support technicians to gain recognition through professional registration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nominations to external award schemes that recognise the contribution of technical staff; • State in future job adverts that applicants should have or be working towards professional status.
<p>Career Development</p> <p>Enable career progression opportunities for technicians through the provision of clear, documented career pathways</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development opportunities, signposted to technicians and aligned to career pathways.
<p>Sustainability</p> <p>Ensure the future sustainability of technical skills across the organisation and that technical expertise is fully utilised</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate succession planning for technical roles including the analysis of technician profiles to ensure future sustainability of skills within the organisation; • Secondment/placement programmes for technical staff to develop new skills; • A technician trainee/apprenticeship programme to commence autumn 2018.

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

Circulation of action plan to all technical support requesting feedback and input.

Moving forward set up a technician focus/steering group to input future Technician Commitment ideas.

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

<http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/stem-faculty/laboratory-support/employer-champion-science-council>

Signed: 

Technician Commitment Nominated Institutional Lead

Date: 4th July 2018

Signed: 

Technician Commitment Signatory, Leader of Institution

Date: 11th July 2018