The Technician Commitment and Developing a Technician Community of Practice in the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences

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Queen’s University signed up to the Technician Commitment as one of the founding signatories in May 2017. Since then, with the support of the University, the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences (FMHLS) technical staff have formed a self-driven technician community.

The Technician Commitment is a national initiative supported by stakeholders including the Science Council, Advance HE and the Gatsby Foundation and is designed to promote four key themes of Visibility, Recognition, Career Development and Sustainability. The Technician Commitment highlights technical expertise which exists in the Higher Education (HE) sector. This initiative addresses the need to support the technical community within HE institutions and to develop and safeguard our future technician community and technical skills. Additionally, signatories self-assess and evaluate the impact of action plans to help review progress relating to the Technician Commitment key themes and are regularly audited by the Science Council. Currently there are over 75 institutional signatories pledging to support technical staff and address issues identified within the Technician Commitment.

A University-wide Technician Community

Queen’s recently established a Technician Commitment Steering Group (Institutional Lead, PVC Professor Mark Price; Technical Lead, Gillian Riddell; University Technicians, Senior Academics, People & Culture and Unite representation) to implement the Technician Commitment within our institution. In January 2019, the Vice Chancellor, Professor Ian Greer, attended the first QUB University Technician Event pledging his support to back the Technician Commitment. The University currently employs approximately 250 technical staff members, each providing a vital role in the delivery of teaching and research at our Russell Group University.

Starting a Technician Community of Practice in FMHLS

140 technical staff are presently employed in the FMHLS undertaking a range of technical roles in education, research and Core Facility and Technology Units. Technical staff are often in a student-facing environment and contribute in many ways to student learning support, e.g. giving advice in the purchase of chemicals and consumables for research and education, providing technical knowledge and demonstration in experimental protocols and IT, problem-solving around technical issues, training in the use of scientific equipment, facilitating and teaching in laboratory practical classes and giving instruction in Health and Safety.

In March 2018, a group of technical staff came together, through self-selecting membership, to form the first FMHLS Technician Committee, chaired by Professor Alan Stitt. Since then, the Committee has worked to promote the values of the Technician Commitment initiative for all FMHLS technicians, including launching a dedicated FMLHS Technician Commitment website which can be found at http://www.qub.ac.uk/about/Leadership-and-structure/Faculties-and-Schools/Medicine-Health-and-Life-Sciences/TechnicianCommitment/.
The Committee launched this Technician Commitment Faculty-wide initiative with a Technician Event in June 2018 that included talks from the Science Council, Institute of Science and Technology, HEaTED and the University of Newcastle. Reaction from this gathering of Faculty technicians, getting together for the first time, was overwhelmingly positive. Feedback from event attendees included a need for more technician networking opportunities and further information on the core pillars of the Technician Commitment with requests for support and access to achieve these.

Professional Registration for Technicians

Professional Registration supports professional recognition, development and proven competencies. There has already been success with a number of FMHLS technical staff achieving Professional Registration status. FMLHS technicians have supported each other to work toward attaining Professional Registration such as becoming a Registered Science Technician (RSciTech), Registered Scientist (RSci), Chartered Scientist (CSci), or becoming a STEM Ambassador and, most recently, applying for an Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA). We recognise we are all at different stages of our careers and as such have adapted to form various groups and workshops, from meeting in person at lunch-times to forming social media platform forums, in order to help each other attain these achievements regardless of career stage.

Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy for Technicians

Laboratory technicians contribute to student learning in a variety of ways including translating the scientific theory given to students in lectures into practice at the laboratory bench. However, it is possible that technical staff facilitating the laboratory learning environment may be unaware of educational philosophies or teaching methodologies, even though they are most likely putting elements of these into practice by virtue of their own expertise and laboratory teaching skills.

Recent discussions between FMHLS technical staff and Karen Fraser (Centre of Educational Development [CED] Educational Developer) regarding recognition of technician teaching practice led to a well attended AFHEA Information Session held in March 2019 for FMHLS technical staff interested in attaining this Higher Education Academy (HEA) accreditation. CED already has an accredited AFHEA course aimed at Post-Doctoral staff. Technicians worked together with Karen at the session and tailored the existing AFHEA course to suit the teaching needs of technical staff and the course will pilot this summer.

Technician Commitment Ahead

This is an interesting time for all technicians across the University as technical staff have increased opportunities to engage and share best practice with their peers and continue to develop a self-improving technician community with support from technical colleagues and the University. We look forward to increasing technician networking along with further University engagement and support for learning and development, professional accreditation, improving technician contribution visibility and addressing recognition within our research and teaching.