

Technicians:

Providing frontline and vital support for student mental health and wellbeing

Mental health issues are on the rise across the UK higher education sector and recent reports state that one in four students are affected by a mental health condition.

The majority of technical staff are in student facing roles and, whilst their technical expertise and practical support is an essential part of the teaching and learning experience, the frontline nature of their roles means that they are also providing important but perhaps unrecognised pastoral support for students.

A collaborative team from the Technician Commitment, Science Council, Institute of Physics, Royal Society of Biology, Royal Society of Chemistry, University of Liverpool and University of Nottingham undertook a national survey in order to shed light on the important roles technicians play in student mental health and wellbeing. The survey attracted over 700 responses from technicians across a wide range of universities and research institutes.

This report offers an unprecedented insight into the ways in which technical staff in higher education support student mental health and wellbeing. It offers a number of recommendations to the higher education and research sector, individual employers and to technicians themselves in order to ensure that all involved are fully supported and appropriately trained.

Introduction

Student mental health

Mental health issues are on the rise amongst student communities in UK higher education (HE), with recent reports stating that one in four students have been affected by a mental health condition¹. The number of student suicides is increasing and the number of students dropping out of HE because of a mental health issue has more than trebled in recent years². Several surveys also suggest that mental health issues are substantially more prevalent in postgraduate research students (PGRs). Recent research highlights that rates of depression and anxiety are up to six times higher among postgraduate students compared to the general population³ and points to both university staff and postgraduate students having a higher risk of having or developing a mental health condition, compared to other working populations⁴.

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) tend to have counselling services which provide a range of services to staff, students and PGRs. Many are under strain, which may in part be related to waiting times for NHS counselling services, accessed via GPs⁵. Over the past few years, there has been increased recognition of the crucial roles that academic and student services staff can play in supporting students with mental health issues, and signposting students to further support. Universities UK recently advocated a 'whole university approach'⁶ to 'transform cultures and embed mental health initiatives'. Provision is being put in place to ensure that staff are equipped with the appropriate professional training to enable them to support students accordingly. For example, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England has produced a whole university framework for mental health⁷. While this is very positive, there has been very little focus or research to date on a community of staff across UK HE who support students on a frontline and regular basis – the technicians.

The technical community

Current data, whilst limited, suggests that there are over 30,000 technicians working across UK HEIs⁸. The technical community has a vast range of job titles – *technicians, skills specialists, technologists, experimental officers, laboratory managers* to name a few – and is recognised as being critical to the success of the UK's HE sector⁸.

A highly skilled workforce with a diverse range of expertise, technicians underpin the primary activities of HEIs, providing the technical excellence essential for research, teaching and knowledge transfer. Alongside this, many technicians are researchers and teachers in their own right. They also play a fundamental role in the development of technical skills that students require to pursue a career in research, academia and/or industry.

Frontline support

The majority of technical staff in HEIs are in student-facing roles and, whilst their technical expertise and practical support is an essential part of the teaching and learning experience, additionally, technicians can often be the first to get to know students more informally in their respective learning and research environments.

This frontline nature of their roles means that they are often the first to notice a student who may be struggling, and they might be the first staff member a student reaches out to. For example, in a research setting, it may be the technician who first becomes aware of a PGR student who hasn't been in the laboratory for a few days; who sees an experiment go wrong again (and again, and again); or who realises that someone is repeatedly working alone over weekends and out of hours. Consequently, they are providing important and often unrecognised pastoral support, contributing to students' personal, social and wellbeing needs. They also act as positive role models, supporting research team resilience and signposting to social and academic support systems. Alongside the role of academic colleagues, this pastoral care is crucial to providing students with routes to access the support they need.

Working together

The Technician Commitment¹⁰ is bringing much needed visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability to the vital roles that technical staff play in enabling research and innovation, and in inspiring and nurturing students. Through the Technician Commitment, the Science Council, Institute of Physics (IOP), the Royal Society of Biology (RSB), the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC), the University of Nottingham and the University of Liverpool are working together to identify and highlight the roles that technicians play in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing. Together, we aim to shine a light on, and lend help to, the presence and support that technicians bring to their HEIs. In addition to their vital technical skills, they provide support that is critical to the success of HEIs, and to the wellbeing of the communities within them.

For the first time, this report outlines the extent to which technicians are supporting students in this way, and offers a number of recommendations to the higher education and research sector, individual employers and to technicians themselves, in order to ensure that all involved are fully supported. While it is essential that we value and invest in the skills and technical expertise of technicians, we also need to recognise the additional, traditionally unseen, pastoral role they play in actively supporting student wellbeing.

Methodology

In order to understand how the technical community across UK HEIs is engaged in support of student wellbeing and mental health needs, the team undertook a survey, hosted by the Institute of Physics and disseminated by e-mail and social media through the Technician Commitment, Science Council, Royal Society of Chemistry, Royal Society of Biology, Institute of Physics and via the Technical Managers in Universities and University Bioscience Manager Association networks^{11,12}. The survey consisted of 19 questions, exploring the

nature of the support that technicians are providing to undergraduate and postgraduate students, with a particular emphasis on the types of support and interactions technicians were having with students to support their mental health and wellbeing, and whether they had received any formal guidance or training to enable them to do this. The survey asked respondents about their experience of supporting undergraduate and postgraduate students over the past three years.

The survey opened on 21st January 2019 for six weeks.



Survey findings

The survey sample

In total, 735 complete responses were received from technicians from 49 UK HEIs. There is limited data on the number of technicians working in UK higher education, in part because the definition of a technician is contested and varies across institutions and because HEIs 'code' their technicians in staff data in different ways. Historical data suggests that there are 30,000 technicians working in UK HE equating to a response rate of 2.45% to this survey. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency⁹ (HESA) on staff coded under the Standard Occupational Code 311 for 'Science, Engineering and Production Technicians' suggests a response rate of 5.8%. It is recognised that there are limits to how much can be inferred from this survey in relation to national-level data and the national population of technicians.

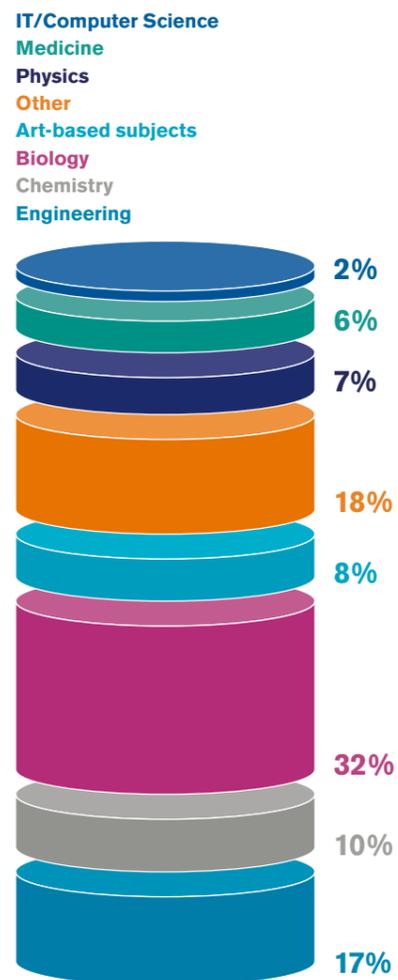
Respondents reflected a diverse range of subject disciplines with the highest proportion of respondents stating "Biology" as their subject discipline (Figure 1). The distribution of subject discipline (Figure 1) is broadly representative of national staff data for 2017-18 on technical staff by discipline⁹

The gender balance of respondents was near equal (48% female, 49% male, 0.7% self-described and 2.3% undeclared); this ratio varied according to subject discipline. There was a relatively equal distribution of responses across all age ranges (18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70+ and prefer not to say), with the highest response rate coming from 30-39 year olds (27% of the total 735 responses).

National data suggests that 40% of technicians in the UK are female and 24% of technicians are in the 30-39 year old age group⁹. The sample collected through this survey therefore has a distribution which reflects the broader UK population of technicians, according to the criteria of age and gender.

Figure 1 Distribution of respondents (total 735) according to subject discipline

Subject discipline



Providing pastoral care and support

Many respondents provided detailed free text comments relating to their experiences of supporting students with personal issues. Many made it clear that they were eager and enthusiastic to support students to have the best possible experience through their studies.

Some respondents stated that they had started offering support to students because they recognised the need.

"Not sure it is in the job description but is very much part of supporting students when you are working closely with them"

"I started doing it because I felt there was a need... I realised there was no one really to support the students if they had problems with their supervisors."

The survey asked technicians about the types of interactions they had with students:

1 Provision of pastoral support, formally and informally:

Of the total 735 complete responses received, 22% of respondents confirmed that they **provided pastoral support** for students. Of these, 6% said that this was a formal part of their role (for example as a part of their agreed role description), while 84% said that this was not a formal part of their role and 10% said they were unsure whether it was a formal part of their role.

"I do personal support as well as and when necessary but not in an official function, more in a human function, i.e. when students are in need [of] a supportive talk I am happy to spend the time that is needed while at work"

Some respondents acknowledged that it could be considered part of their 'generic' role description or as part of a health and safety role.

"I think it's in the job description as a generic term under health and safety, but it isn't specified any more than it is for any other admin or technical staff"

2 Discussion of a personal problem:

Of the total 735 respondents, 44% said that they had discussed a **personal problem** with an undergraduate student in the last three years, and 51% with a postgraduate student. 28% had discussed a problem with both undergraduates and postgraduates.

56% of those who had discussed issues either with undergraduate or postgraduate students were female technicians, suggesting that **women may more frequently approach students, or be approached by students, to offer support**, which could have implications for some disciplines where there are proportionately fewer female technicians, for example in physics and engineering disciplines.

3 Types of issues discussed:

Technicians were asked to describe the types of issues that undergraduate students had discussed with them. Figure 2 compares the relative proportions of respondent technicians who cited discussing issues defined across broad categories with either undergraduate or postgraduate students over the past three years.

Technicians who reported discussing issues with undergraduate students identified that illness was the most commonly discussed issue (Figure 2). The 'other' category (43 respondents) covered a very wide range of issues such as concerns about workload, course issues and future career plans. There were also many comments relating to much more personal issues such as drug and alcohol addiction, sexuality, bereavement and sexual assault.

“Difficulties with the course, fears about whether [students had] chosen the correct degree”

A similar picture emerged for those technicians discussing issues with postgraduate students.

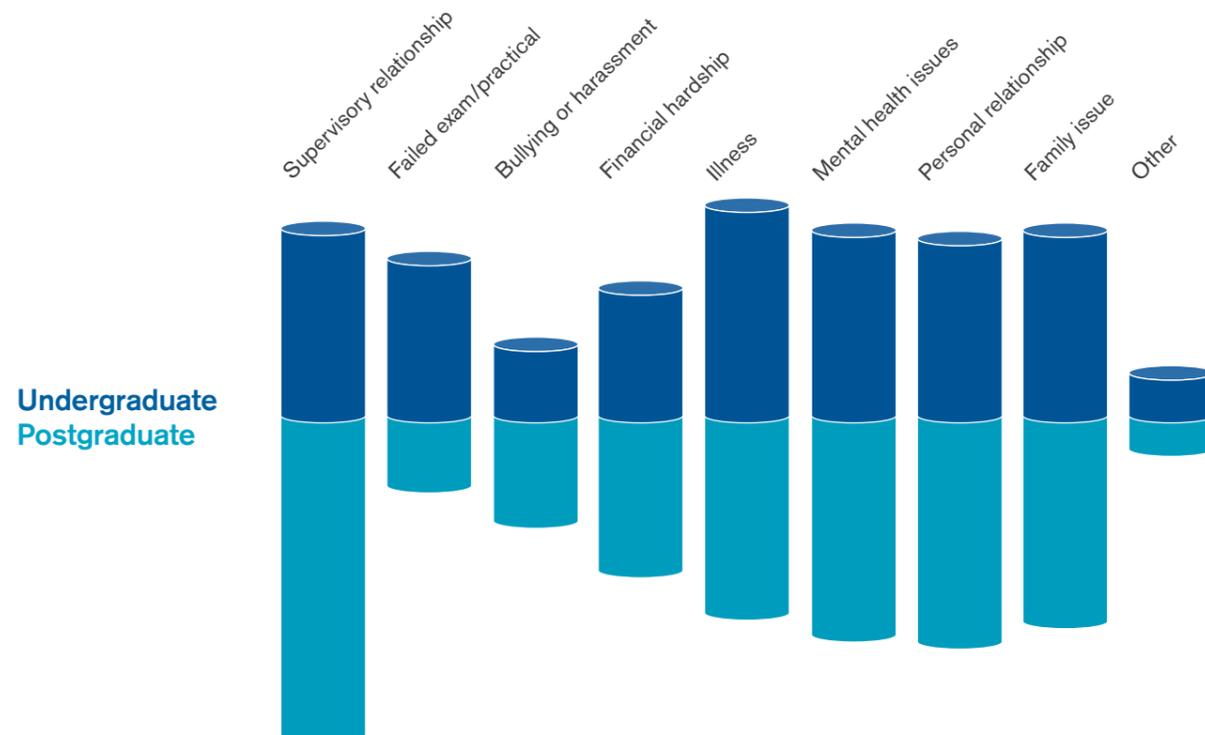
Supervisory relationship issues were the most common personal problems that postgraduate students discussed with technical staff, with 30% of respondents to this question citing this as an issue students discussed with them (Figure 2). Those technical staff who had discussed personal problems with undergraduate students also cited discussing issues concerning supervisory relationships, but to a lesser extent (19%).

“Being spiked on nights out and drug issues”

The 'other' category (30 respondents) also covered a wide range of issues raised by postgraduate students related to disability, religion, isolation and financial difficulties.

“Often students will divulge information that they may not experience as a problem/challenge/issue but may well be one that they are not able to recognise...”

Figure 2 Personal problems technicians discussed with students



Supporting students with their mental health

A key aim of the survey was to understand how technicians are supporting students with mental health issues.

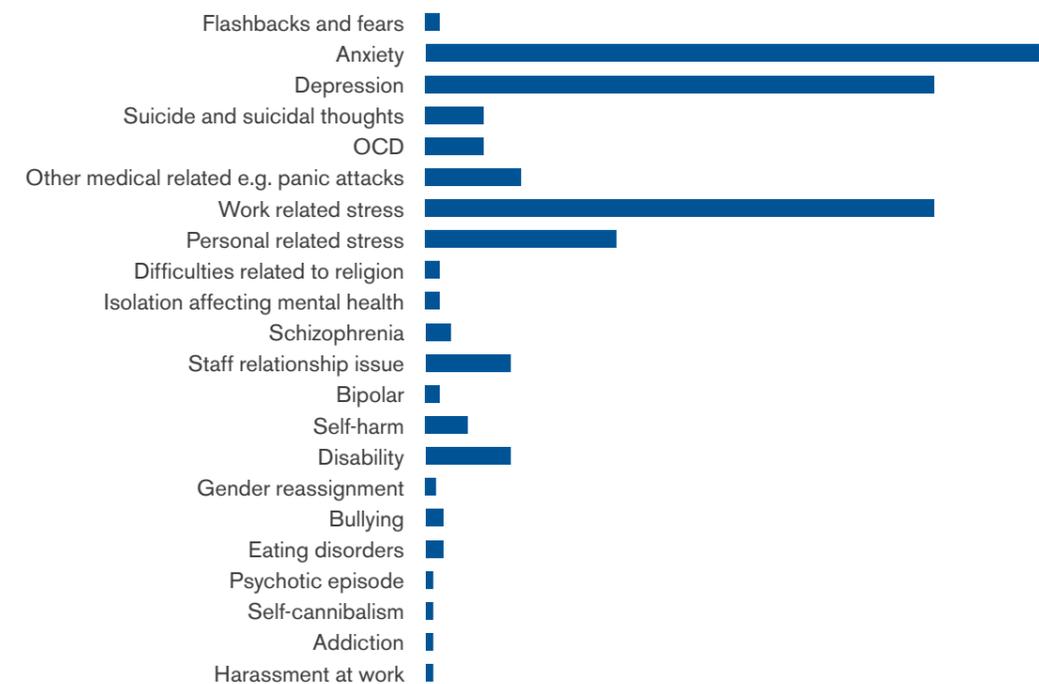
Of the total 735 respondents, 60% had been approached by an undergraduate or postgraduate student or had approached a student themselves to discuss issues particularly affecting student's mental health (issues grouped within the mental health category in Figure 2). Of these respondents, 23% said that they had received mental health training.

Of the total 735 respondents, 24% provided free text comments about their experiences of undergraduate students approaching them to disclose mental health issues and issues particularly affecting their mental health (Figure 3). Many technicians who reported proactively approaching a student cited concerns of a similar nature.

“Anxiety about coursework, exams and distress about not understanding practicals. Not being able to tell parents [about their] their mental health due to religious and cultural beliefs.”

“I've had one student inform me they were considering jumping in front of a train as they felt under so much pressure. Others have said they feel bullied at times by their supervisor.”

Figure 3 Undergraduate student mental health issues discussed with technicians





Are technicians appropriately equipped to support student wellbeing and mental health?

The responses to the survey questions highlighted above give an insight into the extent to which technicians are supporting student mental health and wellbeing. The survey went on to ask respondents if they felt appropriately equipped to offer such support.

Of the total 735 respondents, **57% responded that they never or only sometimes felt equipped to support students** with their personal problems, mental health, and with signposting to further support.

When asked if their employer offered training to staff in mental health support for students, many said yes. However, **43% said that they did not know and a further 11% of respondents recorded that there was no training offered.**

4% of respondents said they had taken training as it was mandatory and a further 1.5% said they had had training as part of their induction to their role. 12% said that they had undertaken training when they requested it.

Whilst training may be on offer in institutions, the majority of technicians had not undertaken it. Of the total 735 respondents, **68% had not had training or did not know if training was available, with 15% saying it was available but oversubscribed so they had not yet received it.** Others reported that training was available but only for academic staff.

“No, it was aimed at academic staff, not professional services/ technical staff.”

Respondents were asked what types of training technicians would find beneficial to better equip them to offer student mental health and wellbeing support. Whilst many did not know, of the total 735 respondents, 18% said that any basic level mental health training would be helpful. It was also acknowledged by 12% of respondents that **general information about institutional support available for students (including referral and signposting information) would be beneficial**; 24 (11%) said that Mental Health First Aid training would be useful.

It is important to note that respondents suggested that **face to face training would be preferred and training must be made available to accommodate workload and working hours.** Of the total 735 respondents, 13% also commented that the **mental health of staff is greatly overlooked, particularly those supporting students.**

“I have heard people talking about mental health first aid training. I think this or any training/ awareness of suitable signposting routes would be hugely beneficial.”

“If this type of training exists (I don't know) it is certainly not ever aimed at or promoted to technical staff, as we are not seen as teaching or having enough to do with students to need this - even though we do!”

Conclusions from survey findings

The responses to the survey suggest that technicians are in the position of supporting students across a wide and complex range of issues, from family relationships to supervisor issues, from physical ill health to mental health and wellbeing. Technicians are supporting students on sensitive personal issues, including bereavement, sexuality and sexual assault, often with very little formal recognition or training.

The survey data suggests that women in technician roles may be more likely to provide pastoral support to students than their male counterparts. Of the respondents who had been approached by, and/or had proactively approached, an undergraduate or postgraduate student to discuss a mental health or wellbeing issue in the last three years approximately **60% were female.** This raises considerations and concerns – which should be further investigated and discussed – in relation to disciplines that traditionally have more males in technical roles and in relation to the additional demands placed on women in these roles.

Technicians who took part in the survey appear to be playing an important part in supporting relationships between academic supervisors and their students.

Survey responses showed that the role technicians play in supporting student mental health and wellbeing is rarely formally recognised. Many technicians reported feeling ill-equipped to provide this support, particularly given the complex issues that students could present with.

This raises concerns around the apparent poor availability and accessibility of appropriate training for technicians, based on those who responded to the survey. Mental health and wellbeing training is often not mandatory but survey responses demonstrated that technicians are seeking this training, though many feel it is not targeted at them or are finding it to be oversubscribed and/or inaccessible.

It is also important to highlight that respondents pointed out that technicians' own mental health should also be considered, especially given the support roles they provide, and this should not be underestimated or overlooked. Many welcomed the recognition of their contributions to student mental health support.

“What about technical staff mental health and wellbeing?”

“I think it is vital that this issue is being addressed as more and more students are presenting with mental health problems and the technicians are always their first port of call”

“I believe the technician's role is not appreciated in this area, students often find it easier to talk about their concerns to us than to academics. Often issues come in conversation as we are working side by side with students in a slightly informal manner.”

Recommendations

The responses from this survey highlight the important and potentially overlooked contributions of technicians in providing pastoral care and supporting student mental health in UK HE. The following recommendations are made to the higher education and research sector, individual institutions and to technicians themselves in order to ensure that all involved are fully supported.

To professional bodies, membership organisations and networks:

- Further recognise and advocate for the technical community through your support of the Technician Commitment. Communicate the opportunities available to your members and within those, ensure signposting to relevant information and support resources for technicians, such as The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust and Student Minds.
- Offer guidance and training for technical staff on mental health issues, resilience and wellbeing through the provision of appropriate, timely and accessible training and support resources for technicians.
- Work with your technical community to enable the development of discipline specific support networks, while enabling the most efficient sharing of cross-discipline relevant resources, best practice and lessons learned, and embedding a dialogue about mental health issues and support throughout.

To HEIs:

- Recognise and gain further understanding of the extent to which technical staff are providing pastoral care for students and supporting student wellbeing and mental health across your institution.
- Raise awareness of the specialist support services available to students in the institution and the appropriate escalation routes for effective signposting.
- Ensure technicians have access to training for supporting students and are made aware that this is available for them as a staff group. At the very basic level this may take the form of free online resources or in-house training. Ensure time is available for technical staff to access this training. Consider the constraints on part time staff and those committed to timetabled practical classes to ensure accessibility.
- Where appropriate, formally recognise the pastoral support aspect of technical roles.
- Consider mental health and wellbeing in Technician Commitment action plans so that effective strategies for supporting the wellbeing and mental health of staff and students are disseminated throughout the organisation.
- Ensure that technical staff managers are appropriately trained and are supporting their staff and considering their mental health and wellbeing effectively.
- Ensure technicians are aware of the support available to them personally both within and beyond the institution e.g. on campus staff counselling, contracted employee assistance programmes, professional body support.

To technicians:

- Recognise that you may already, or in the future, be called on to provide mental health and wellbeing support to students. **Address whether you feel able and willing to do so** and if so to equip yourself, find out what training is available to you both within and beyond your organisation and engage with it. Visit www.technicians.org.uk/techniciancommitment for an overview of useful resources in this area.
- Find out what specialist support is available to students in your own institution to ensure you are able to effectively signpost students to further support.
- Ask your professional networks/ bodies what support is available and advise them of your community needs.
- Be aware of your own mental health and ask for support when you need it.
- Be aware of the implications of mental health and wellbeing on technical colleagues, support each other and share information.
- Talk about mental health – help to reduce the stigma.

It is important to note that the results of our survey provide a snapshot of the experiences of a small sample of technicians. Institutional and individual experiences may of course differ from those depicted, and as described on page 4 of this report, the definition of technicians' roles is broad and varies across HEIs. Additionally, and importantly, as described on page 3, the collaborating organisations also recognise that other academic, research and support services staff also play an important role in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing and further work is needed to document and support these people, as well as those in technical roles.



Acknowledgements

The collaborating organisations wish to express their gratitude to every single technician who took the time to complete the survey and share their experiences. The significant number of free text responses demonstrated that they were keen to share their stories and that this is an important issue to them given their roles in supporting students across UK HE.

Appreciation is also extended to colleagues at the Institute of Physics for their support in hosting the survey on their online platform, and to the Technician Commitment Signatory community, Technical Managers in Universities (TMU) and University Bioscience Managers Association (UBMA) for their support in survey dissemination.

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This report was authored by a collaborative team from the University of Nottingham, University of Liverpool, Institute of Physics, Royal Society of Biology, Royal Society of Chemistry and the Science Council, in conjunction with the Technician Commitment.

For enquiries please contact the project team via the Science Council.

 www.sciencecouncil.org

 enquiries@sciencecouncil.org

 020 3434 2020