

Science Community Focus

TSN ROKS: A transformative initiative for Research Technical Professionals

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Technical staff play a vital role in supporting the UK's research and innovation landscape, yet they have historically faced challenges related to visibility, recognition, sustainability, and career development. Since the launch of the Technician Commitment in 2017, the significance of technical professionals in driving research and development has become increasingly evident. Established with backing from the Science Council and the Gatsby Foundation, this initiative has highlighted the crucial contributions of technical staff while advocating for structured career pathways. Over 120 universities and research institutes have since pledged their support and committed to addressing these challenges within their technical communities.

Research Technical Professionals (RTPs) often encounter isolation in their specialised fields, with limited opportunities to build peer networks or access tailored professional development programs. The Technology Specialists Network (TSN) was created in response to these challenges following discussions at a TALENT Commission parliamentary reception. Founded by representatives from nine institutions, TSN was developed to establish a cohesive, nationwide framework that supports RTPs in their professional growth. Initially supported by the Research England-funded MI TALENT Programme, TSN transitioned to the UK Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy (ITSS) in August 2023.

The inaugural TSN event, held at the University of Edinburgh in April 2023, demonstrated strong demand for such an initiative, attracting 150 research technical professionals from 50 different higher education and research institutions. Feedback from attendees highlighted the value of networking and the opportunity to share experiences and best practices. One participant shared "I loved the networking opportunities and realising that my problems were shared with many others. A bonus was then to then also learn new working practices to adopt". The second annual event was held in Bath, with all 200 places filled and a waiting list in operation. The third TSN conference, scheduled to take place in York on 29–30 April 2025, has already filled the 225 places.

TSN has since grown into a thriving community, with over 450 members across UK universities and research institutes. In April 2024, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) awarded £1.8 million to TSN as part of its £16 million Strategic Technical Platform funding. The resulting project, TSN 'Research Technical Professional Opportunities, Knowledge and Skills' (TSN ROKS), provides structured training and developmental opportunities tailored to RTPs across the UK.

A holistic approach – The three pillars of TSN ROKS

The TSN ROKS project delivers a wide range of resources for RTPs through three themed work packages, each designed to enhance career development, networking, and knowledge exchange.

Building career pathways and inspiring talent

The first pillar focuses on establishing clear career pathways and attracting new talent to RTP roles. A key initiative is the undergraduate summer placements programme, which provides students with hands-on experience in technical roles. In summer 2024, five students across four research groups and three institutions participated in the programme, engaging in real-world scientific and technical challenges. Feedback from participants highlighted the impact of these placements in exposing students to previously unconsidered career paths.

"This placement has been eye-opening for me. The experience really broadened my perspective and showed me how much I enjoy the hands-on aspect of science." shared one student. "If universities promoted the work of technology facilities through social media or integrated it into career workshops, more students would discover these kinds of careers."

Dr Peter O'Toole, an undergraduate summer placement host and a founder of the TSN, says: "Hosting summer studentships is multiply positive. Firstly, it is simply great to help inspire scientists of the future... the summer studentships also enable a core facility



Dr Peter O'Toole

to prioritise aspects that are otherwise difficult to justify or commit significant time. Thus, the studentships also have a positive impact within the core itself. We are hoping to expand our offering of placements in the second round of studentships in Summer 2025."

Additional activities in this area include an Outreach Fund, offering up to £6,000 to RTPs to develop hands-on outreach initiatives, and engagement with Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) through seminars, career panels, and mentorship opportunities focused on RTP career pathways.

Enhancing skills and developing new abilities

The second workstream aims to equip RTPs with the skills and knowledge needed to excel in their roles. Workshops on facilities finance and instrument costing introduce participants to financial models that support the sustainability of research facilities. The initial event, delivered in collaboration with the UK Research Facility Coordinators Network, was oversubscribed, with all 48 places immediately filled and a waiting list in place. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many participants reporting an increased understanding of costing models and financial strategies.

Another initiative within this workstream focuses on grant proposal writing. A dedicated workshop scheduled for January 2025 received over 50 applications for just 20 spaces, highlighting the strong demand for this support. These sessions guide RTPs through the entire grant-writing process, from selecting project teams and navigating funder guidelines to ensuring sustainability and equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) considerations.

In response to feedback from the RTP community, TSN ROKS also offers training sessions on environmental sustainability for research facilities, EDI initiatives, and leadership development. The demand for leadership training was so high that a second session was scheduled to accommodate more technical professionals.

Boosting RTP visibility and facilitating knowledge exchange

The third pillar is dedicated to raising the profile of RTPs and fostering collaboration across institutions. One key initiative is the peer-to-peer facility days, where RTPs receive funding to host showcase events, providing colleagues from other institutions with the opportunity to tour facilities, share expertise, and discuss advanced methods and technologies. These events are designed and led by the host RTPs, ensuring relevance and value to the wider technical community.

Another initiative, the equipment-sharing programme, enables RTPs to access specialised equipment and expertise across institutions. By utilising the ITSS Technology Capabilities Showcase, TSN ROKS provides funding for RTPs to collaborate and share technical resources, thereby expanding access to cutting-edge technology and knowledge.



Dr Ian Hancox

Dr Ian Hancox, one of the founding members of TSN says: *“Expert technical teams are essential for maximising the potential of cutting-edge research equipment. By financially supporting access to facilities and technical knowledge, we can accelerate and add value to world-class research and allow new partnerships to grow.”*

Additionally, the International Conference Fund supports RTPs in attending global conferences, facilitating knowledge exchange, and promoting UK technical expertise. Recipients of this funding are required to share their learnings with the broader RTP community upon their return, ensuring that the wider network benefits from their experiences.

A lasting impact on the RTP community

TSN ROKS represents more than a series of initiatives; it is a transformative movement within the RTP community. With a strong foundation in place, the programme is set to expand, further embedding RTP visibility, career development, and peer support within the research landscape.

As TSN ROKS continues to grow, it aims to evolve into a dynamic, demand-driven initiative that adapts to the needs of research technical professionals while keeping pace with the evolving research environment. By providing tailored training, networking opportunities, and career development resources, the project empowers RTPs to make lasting contributions to UK research and innovation.

RTPs are encouraged to engage with TSN ROKS by attending events or applying for funding opportunities. As the programme expands, continued participation will be instrumental in ensuring its long-term impact, supporting technical professionals in their careers, and strengthening the UK’s research and innovation ecosystem.

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