

**The British
Psychological Society**
Promoting excellence in psychology

Supplementary guidance on the roles and contributions of psychology technical staff

October 2014

AHΨD
ASSOCIATION OF HEADS OF
PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENTS

 **ATSiP**
Association of Technical Staff in Psychology



**The British
Psychological Society**
Partnership & Accreditation

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Purpose of this document

The Society's accreditation standards outline a requirement that programmes are supported by appropriate technical staff. The current standards specify that technical / computing staff comprising at least one full-time equivalent should be in place to support students' experimental and practical work, as well as providing any more general support. They also recognise that a variety of approaches to deploying such staff are utilised by departments across the country, and so stipulate that whilst there should be the equivalent of one FTE technical staff that is dedicated to psychology, shared or distributed arrangements are also acceptable provided that the education provider is able to demonstrate their overall equivalence to the required standard as represented by the standard of the student learning experience and the scholarship attained.

This document is intended to provide supplementary guidance to education providers concerning the range of approaches that are in use and the different contributions that technical staff may make to the overall work of a Psychology department. It is not intended to be prescriptive, but invites institutions to consider the advantages and challenges associated with different staffing models as part of their efforts to ensure that the specialist technical support that students and staff need is accessible when and where they need it. It has been developed as the result of joint working across the Society's Undergraduate Education Committee (UEC), the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments (AHPD), and the Association of Technical Staff in Psychology (ATSiP).

This document refers to *Psychology Technicians*, although in practice a range of job titles are in use across the sector in addition to Psychology Technician. These include Head or Lead Technician, Departmental Superintendent, and Experimental Officer.

What do Psychology technicians do?

Surveys undertaken by both AHPD (2013) and ATSiP (2012), and experience gained through the Society's accreditation process, highlight the broad range of knowledge and skills required to effectively support the experimental and practical work in which both students and academic staff are engaged. As noted above, there is wide variation across the sector regarding the specific job titles and organisational arrangements that are in place. However, some key commonalities may be noted.

Psychology Technicians take responsibility for supporting laboratory and other experimental work. Although the work may involve some general IT maintenance, the focus lies with subject-specific technical input to student provision, especially in relation to research projects. The latter may include: software programming; experimental script workshops; set-up and co-ordination of specialist experimental equipment such as EEG, eye-tracking and echoic facilities; purchase, maintenance and management of specialist equipment and associated budgets; and, importantly, oversight of health and safety risk assessments in laboratory areas. On this basis, education providers will be asked to articulate their model of technician support if there is a sharing of responsibilities between central (generic) or Faculty / College support services, and that which may be more appropriately provided by specialist staff within the Psychology unit.

In addition to their technical support function, technicians play an important role in relation to teaching, learning and research development. For example, this may include: the development of new technology or the novel application of existing technology to enhance the student experience and their development of research skills, or to resolve problems in relation to these; the development of new materials or systems to support the student research experience; provision of support to lecturing or other staff within the department; project management skills, including leading a team and liaising with key stakeholders both internal and external to the department; and dissemination or publication of aspects of their technical work.

What facilities and equipment do Psychology technicians typically support?

There is an expectation that students on accredited undergraduate and conversion programmes undertake practical work across the curriculum areas outlined for the purposes of the Graduate Basis for Chartered membership of the Society. Typically, then, departments provide access to, and Psychology technicians support, the following:

- **Statistical analysis packages** such as SPSS.
- **Online experimental design packages such** as E-Prime or MatLab, or simulation packages (e.g. driving simulator).
- **Psychophysiological response measures** such as brain scanners of different types (e.g. EEG), BIOPAC, eye trackers, and movement recorders.
- **Observation and video recording systems** used to support the observation and recording of qualitative research, and coding (e.g. NVivo).
- **Psychometric tests** which may be housed in a departmental test collection that is often curated by psychology technical staff.
- **Digital equipment** e.g. PCs, portable eye-trackers, printers and audiovisual equipment.

It should be acknowledged that the range of facilities and equipment for which support will need to be provided will vary dependent on the teaching and research specialism(s) within the department in question.

What different organisational arrangements may apply?

Departments across the UK utilise a variety of different organisational arrangements in relation to their technical staff, ranging from wholly localised support that is based within and managed by psychology, to more generic provision that is drawn from faculty or wider university resources. More typically, though, a blend of these two ends of the spectrum is used. It is not for the Society to be prescriptive about how universities might wish to organise and deploy their staff, but there is an expectation that the benefits and challenges associated with different models are considered, and that staff identify ways of overcoming those challenges that are most applicable to their provision. In particular, there is a need to ensure that whatever support arrangements are in place are readily accessible and meet the needs of both students and staff.

Localised support

- Survey data suggest that locally-based, readily accessible, specialist technical support has a positive impact on the psychology student experience.
- Staff and students benefit from technicians' good knowledge of the GBC curriculum (they are often Psychology graduates and Graduate Members of the BPS), and from their ability to be responsive to specific needs and problems.
- Where technical staff are effectively integrated into the overall academic and support staff team, and are involved in the work of the department on an ongoing basis, there is often greater opportunity for distributing workload in a way that enables academic staff to be relieved of tasks that centralised support staff may not be able to take on.
- More integrated, localised staffing models provide greater opportunities for Psychology technicians to be involved in developmental rather than solely functional support work.
- There can be risks associated with loss of expertise and knowledge through restructuring of localised resources, for example where these are relocated to central services.

Centralised support

- The availability of a larger pool of centralised support staff can offer access to a broader range of experience and knowledge, although providers will need to ensure that the means of access to such support meets the Psychology department's needs.
- Survey data suggest that non student-facing functions can often be provided more effectively by centralised staff.
- Whilst larger departments operating a localised support model would typically have more than one member of technical staff to call upon, for smaller departments centralised staffing models can provide greater scope for cover when staff are absent (e.g. leave, sickness).
- However, survey data suggest that centralised support staff can sometimes lack understanding of the specific needs of psychology departments, and this can lead to academic staff needing to spend more of their time explaining particular tasks to ensure that the support they need is in place.

- The technical staff available need to have knowledge and skills that are relevant to the specific facilities and equipment used by staff and students. Survey data indicate that whilst the provision of centralised general IT support is normally effective, difficulties can be experienced in relation to a lack of specific knowledge of experimental software and hardware.
- Departments should also consider how best to build ongoing relationships with key support staff where centralised arrangements are in place.

Other factors for consideration

- Staff feel less isolated and better supported when working as part of a team, whether this is as part of the wider Psychology team (if localised), or as part of a wider technical staff team (if centralised) – or both.

How will this document be used in the accreditation process?

This document is intended to sit alongside the Society's accreditation handbook, and to provide universities with an overview of the various factors they should consider when making decisions regarding the nature and structure of technical support they provide to their Psychology provision. It would assist UEC reviewers if departments could consider the following questions when completing self-evaluation questionnaires for both partnership reviews and visits, and resource reviews. It would also be useful to include examples of how the factors outlined in this document are effectively addressed. Reviewers will be encouraged to consider these when evaluating the adequacy of technical support staffing that is described in such submissions.

- How many technical and/or IT staff are employed?
- In what context are they employed (e.g. locally, centrally)?
- What are their roles, responsibilities and job titles?
- How many are dedicated to supporting Psychology staff and students? [By dedicated, we mean that supporting Psychology staff and students is their only role, i.e. they are not responsible for providing technical support to staff or students outside of Psychology]
- To whom do these staff report?
- Where are they physically based (i.e. within the department or elsewhere)?
- What additional central resources can be called upon, and how is this organised?

How is the contribution of Psychology technicians recognised?

The Society is keen to recognise the valuable role that Psychology technicians play in supporting research within their departments, and would encourage staff to apply for the annual Technical Support in Psychological Research Award, which is offered by the Society in collaboration with ATSiP (see www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/awards-grants/rb-bpsatsip-technical-support-psychological-research-award/bpsatsip-technic). The deadline for nominations is 1 February each year, and the award is presented at the Society's annual conference.

A further annual award recognising outstanding support for the student learning experience in Psychology departments is offered by the Higher Education Academy, again in collaboration with ATSiP.

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