

## In the news

### KEEPING THE LABS RUNNING

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted scientific research worldwide. Many labs were shut down in March and April 2020, owing to concerns about the safety of work in close quarters. Other facilities have been repurposed for COVID-19-related research, including work on supplying ventilators or PPE. Subsequent reopening of labs has required major changes in working practices and protocols. How have these challenges been borne by the technicians who support research facilities? Initial answers are provided by a report from the UK's [Technician Commitment](#), a university and research institution initiative. Recommendations from the report include greater recognition of the work of technicians, improved training opportunities, greater provision of flexible working models and their inclusion in the discussions about reopening the labs.

Over a thousand technicians across the UK were surveyed in late

May, with follow-up focus groups conducted in July. Respondents came from all scientific and technical disciplines, with 33% from the physical sciences and 4% from physics specifically. Of all technicians, 52% had been involved in shut-down efforts in their workplaces. While labs were closed, technicians remained busy. Only 15% were furloughed during lockdown, and 42% continued to provide onsite support, particularly those working with biological samples or complex equipment that was maintained on standby. 33% provided support to other areas of their institutions, such as helping with transitioning teaching to online platforms. 77% had participated in continuing professional development. Despite perceptions that technical roles are inherently tied to working in laboratories, 82% of respondents reported they could work from home, which suggests that future working arrangements for technicians could include more flexibility.



Credit: William Taufic / Getty

73% of technicians said they were (or would be) involved in the reopening of labs in their areas of work. Two thirds also expressed concerns over the transition to a 'new normal', predominantly about the difficulties in maintaining a safe work environment in facilities with limited space and poor ventilation. Technical managers reported frustrations with reopening task forces that did not involve technicians, whose hands-on knowledge would have contributed to the effectiveness of plans — and in at least one case, avoided decisions that led to costly damage to equipment. The report recommends that “[technicians’] expertise is essential and should be utilised wherever possible.”

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