

# bioFocus

**Mark Downs** reports on the vital role of technicians



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- advising Government and influencing policy.
- advancing education and professional development.
- supporting our members.
- engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences.

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**T**echnicians are the unsung heroes of many science based organizations, but their contribution is beyond question. They often have unique skills and expertise that underpin the ability of companies, schools, the NHS and universities to perform their roles successfully. It is not easy to define the term “technician”, as the Technician Council rapidly discovered after its inception in early 2010. The range of biology-based technicians is enormous covering general and clinical microbiology, animal husbandry, plant science, ecology and health care; the list is almost endless.

There has been concern for some time, that intermediate level scientists (for example new graduates) and technicians do not have clear career progression routes. There is also a sense that they lack the status of others within the science sector. These individuals support vital research, teaching and contract work, but are usually ineligible to apply for Chartered Biologist or Chartered Scientist status.

To try to address this, the Science Council, whose Board I joined last year, is currently developing a new registration scheme for technicians and intermediate level scientists. This scheme aims to raise the profile of technicians and to support a number of initiatives which will enhance learning and development opportunities. Stakeholders throughout the science community will contribute to the development of the scheme and registration criteria.

The Society of Biology is committed to the success of this registration scheme; biology is the most diverse of the sciences, and bioscience technicians work in vastly different disciplines and roles. The register will give technicians working in different fields a new shared sense of identity, and provide a much needed method to assess and recognize competence across a professional range that is perhaps broader than within other science subjects. Registration will enable us to work with partners to deliver more consistent advice and guidance about development opportunities, to share good practice, and to gather better data about the sector.

The Society of Biology already manages several professional registers: the UK Register of Toxicologists; the



International Register of Fetal Morphologists, and the Register of Eligibility for Qualified Persons. These registers are highly valued by members — they formally identify levels of competence and expertise, which are difficult to evidence by other means — and also by the industries and regulators of the relevant sectors they represent, as they support confidence and reassurance in the data that registered members generate and their interpretation of it.

I am delighted to say that the Gatsby Charitable Trust has agreed to support us in this endeavour. Over the next two years we will develop and firmly embed a system that will enable technicians and intermediate level scientists in the biological sciences to become early participants in the Science Council’s new registration framework. We hope this will help increase their status alongside the opportunity to offer better co-ordinated and rigorous continuing professional development.

In a structure that is very similar to Chartered Scientist, we envisage that the Science Council will issue registration licences to competent bodies which will in turn offer and manage professional registers. Wearing our hat as an umbrella organization for the learned society sector across biology, we hope to offer the opportunity for any biology technician to join, working with our members to promote the benefits and opportunities this should bring. Timescales are not yet fixed but after wide consultation in the spring, we will aim to launch the pilot programme as soon as possible in 2012.

In parallel, the NHS is looking at ways to develop the NHS career framework through its “*Modernising Scientific Workforce in the UK*” initiative. This will include the work of many technicians and the associated training and education needed to support them professionally. In looking at the Technician’s Register we will seek to work closely with the NHS to ensure as much synergy as possible.

Professional registers and the inherent responsibilities for their membership to abide by a code of conduct, including continuing professional development, have been a part of the historic career landscape for many of the professions. This new initiative alongside broader work on apprenticeships and sector skills gaps is set to be a major area of work for all professional bodies over the next five years and the Society of Biology is keen to take an early leadership role for biology.



**Dr Mark Downs, PhD, FSB**  
Chief Executive, Society of Biology