TSL review: **Life Sciences**
Evidence Submission for SOC 3111
Submitted by Universities UK International (UUK) and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA)

Overview

UCEA surveyed member higher education institutions (HEIs) based on the MAC's stage 2 call for evidence questionnaire. UCEA's survey was structured around the occupations at RQF levels 3- 5 previously identified by HEIs for possible inclusion on the Temporary Shortage List (TSL). Laboratory Technicians (SOC 3111) are consistently identified by HEIs as critical to the delivery of life sciences research, clinical activity and laboratory-based teaching.

Survey responses show **strong and widespread support** for retaining SOC 3111 on the TSL. Around **two-thirds of respondents** selected SOC 3111 as an occupation that should remain on the TSL. This includes multiple respondents who selected the role but did not provide additional free-text detail, indicating broad agreement by HEIs on its importance across the higher education (HE) sector.

The consistency and strength of support for this occupation is significantly higher than for most other roles highlighted by HEIs in the survey.

Drivers of shortage

Responding HEIs consistently report that shortages of laboratory technicians are driven by a combination of structural and market factors and highlighted the following:

- Persistent shortages of laboratory technicians with specialist technical and regulatory skills needed to undertake complex analysis and specialised techniques and the skills/experience to provide senior technical oversight.
- Strong competition from industry, commercial laboratories and the NHS
- Limited domestic recruitment pipelines and long training lead-in times
- Increasing technical complexity of laboratory environments, including specialist equipment and digital systems
- Reliance on technicians to maintain safe, compliant and effective laboratory and research operations

Several HEIs noted that shortages are structural rather than cyclical, driven by an ageing workforce and insufficient early-career pipelines.

Employer action

HEIs report sustained efforts to address technician shortages, including participation in the **Technician Commitment** (see brief summary below and attached information),

investment in apprenticeships, internal progression frameworks, targeted upskilling and training.

Responding HEIs consistently emphasised that while these actions are necessary and ongoing, they are **long-term mitigations** and have not been sufficient to address immediate or medium-term gaps in specialist laboratory roles.

Technician Commitment

The Technician Commitment was launched in 2017 and aims to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technicians working in HE and research, across all disciplines. HEIs and research institutes are invited to become signatories of the Commitment and pledge action to tackle the key challenges affecting their technical staff. To date the Technician Commitment has gained support from over 140 signatories and supporting institutions.

Recruitment trends and outlook

Responding HEIs report long-standing recruitment difficulties over the past decade. Demand is expected to remain high or increase due to:

- Growth in life sciences research activity
- Expansion of specialist laboratory and clinical facilities
- Rising regulatory and safety requirements

Several HEIs reported repeated re-advertisement of vacancies and prolonged time-to-fill.

The UK's drive to attract global research talent and expand high-tech scientific infrastructure will further increase demand for technical support roles.

Impact of removal from TSL

Removal of SOC 3111 from the TSL would significantly constrain universities' ability to recruit essential laboratory staff, with knock-on impacts for:

- Research delivery and externally funded projects
- Laboratory-based teaching and clinical training
- Health, safety and regulatory compliance
- The UK's life sciences research capacity and competitiveness

Technician roles are becoming more specialised, driven by advances in scientific instrumentation, digital laboratory systems and high-complexity research methods. These trends mean that even with targeted training, domestic recruitment alone is unlikely to meet future workforce needs and it is essential that HEIs can fill these roles from both the domestic and international market.